Universe Falls

by MiniJen

Summary

What would happen if the Crystal Gems had settled down in a place other than Beach City, a little backwoods town just west of weird...? What if, upon coming to Gravity Falls for the summer, Dipper and Mabel were to befriend Steven and Connie? What kind of magical, mysterious adventures would they have? And, how would they fare against the combined threats of merciless Homeworld Gems and a certain triangular demon? Find out what happens when Magic and Mystery meet in Universe Falls...

Notes

Now, what this essentially is is a crossover of both shows, if both shows took place in the same universe (hence the AU part). While several of the chapters will be fun little one-shots, there will be an overconnected plot, which will hopefully tie the preexisting plots of both shows together perfectly (that is unless something happens in one of these shows to completely throw me off (which wouldn't surprise me at this point, especially considering
how Gravity Falls is going), but if that happens, I'll work around that). And it will be kinda intense at some points, not gonna lie. But, we'll get to that when it comes. For now, enjoy the prologue (which, as the chapter states) takes place way before the actual story does.
(hint: use the caesar cipher to decode...) ;D
Oregon, 1843

The Crystal Gems had always loyally followed their respected leader anywhere she led without question. They had followed her into battle against their former Homeworld. They had followed her into the unknown after the war, in her resolve to eternally protect the earth from harm. They followed her on all of their countless treks across the planet over the past several centuries.

Which was why it wasn’t such a ceremonious event when they found themselves wandering the thick forests of a territory that the humans had only recently dubbed “Oregon”.

Even though it had been midday when the Gems had entered the woods, the towering canopy of lush pine trees shielded a great deal of light from the forest floor. The path they were taking was a relatively new one, as told from its rugged boarders and footprints and wagon tracks that told of recent travel upon it and seemed to be what they were following. A rather unsettling breeze wafted through the light needles of the trees, whistling in tune with the chirping of the birds and the buzzing of insects. Aside from the sparse natural lighting, an array of summer fireflies also danced loftily through the trees, giving the forest both an enchanting, yet undoubtedly mysterious vibe.

The sudden hooting of an owl perched upon a nearby branch was what caught Pearl’s attention specifically as she kept close behind Rose, never straying too far from her beloved liege as usual. Garnet and Amethyst marched single-file behind her, the former keeping up a firm, resolute pace and the latter meandering about in wide-eyed curiosity. Pearl herself at long last tore her eyes away
from Rose’s cascading pink ringlets in front of her, to the eerie low lighting of the woods all around them, a frown crossing her features as she tried to reason what purpose their esteemed leader had in bringing them to such a seemingly empty place.

Pearl quickened her pace a bit to keep up with Rose, her lithe legs not missing a step as she held her hands close to her, trying her best not to let her worry show. And yet, she couldn’t help but feel apprehensive all the same. Pearl had always been one to air on the side of caution in most situations, her carefulness and precise nature often being both a strength and a weakness depending on the task at hand. And yet, even with her fretful traits aside, the white Gem had picked up on the obvious. Something was strange about these woods, something that she couldn’t quite pinpoint. Neither her nor the other Gems could reasonably admit to sensing the presence of any rouge Gem monsters in the area, which was what their usual targets were. But if that was the case, then why had they even wandered out this far away from human civilization in the first place?

“Um… Rose?” Pearl finally spoke up, unable to retain her bubbling curiosity any longer. She reached a hand up towards her superior’s shoulder, but she quickly retracted it as a spark of the usual excitement and nervousness that came along with so much as even touching her illustrious Rose Quartz ran through her. “Are you sure we’re heading the right way? We’ve been wandering these woods for hours and we haven’t spotted a single sign of… well, whatever it is we’re supposed to be looking for.”

“We’re heading the right way,” Rose assured in her silky, melodic voice, her tone unusually serious as she kept her sights solely on the path ahead. “I can feel it.”

Pearl raised a confused eyebrow at this, but before she could press as to what Rose meant, Garnet, who usually used what few words she spoke sparingly, ventured the question instead. “Feel what?” she asked, her tone as stoic and calm as usual.

“We’re close…” Rose said, hiding the small hint of apprehension in her tone well as her luxurious curls twisted gracefully as she walked. “Of course, you all remember me telling you about the rumors of… anomalies that humans in this part of the continent have been spreading around? Well, I have reason to believe we’re heading towards the source of such strangeness.”

“Anomalies?” Amethyst spoke up, her tone emanating her obvious confusion. The youngest and smallest Gem of the bunch, Amethyst had no qualms about letting her curiosity be known, especially when it came to human-related affairs. After all, humans were such fascinating, often hilarious creatures; spectating them was something of a sport for the small purple Gem. “As in… Gem monsters?”

Rose shook her head, taking in a deep breath as he dark eyes scanned the forest ahead, feeling the chill on the wind even more than her companions did. She was admittedly more sensitive to such things than other Gems; she always had been. She could feel that there was an imbalance of energy all around them, in the air, in the ground, in the very flora and fauna that surrounded them. And under her sworn duty to protect the earth, she was determined to find out what was causing it.

“No…” she said solemnly, still not turning to face her fellow Gems. As she spoke however, Garnet found her attention briefly diverted away from her leader. Amethyst sauntered past the taller Gem casually, while she stopped for a brief moment, her head turning with the breeze as it blew past her. The rustling of the trees percolated her attention, and though she almost summoned her gauntlets, she refrained from doing so unless Rose called for action.

But even so, Garnet hid her own bewilderment well underneath her glasses as she noticed a lone tree, peeking out of the woods amongst countless others. The tree had been a long time withering, no longer fostering any pine needles but rather decaying, brittle branches that rustled with the
almost morose wind. However, what caught Garnet’s eyes the most was the visage that had been crudely caved into its dead bark. It was a triangle, large and lonely amidst the rest of the peeling wood, a piercing, rounded eye marked into its center. Though Garnet had never been one for superstitions, even she couldn’t deny that she felt a small shiver run through her form as she felt its strange scrutiny almost physically, even if logic deemed such a thing absurd. What wasn’t absurd however was the fact that Rose’s beliefs seemed to be proven true upon seeing the one lone word painted underneath the triangle in large, rugged, blood-red letters:

BEWARE

Garnet kept her focused gaze upon this disturbing sight as Rose went on, her words echoing well with the warning on the tree. “I fear that something much more sinister lurks around here…” she said, keeping her professionalism up even despite her ominous words.

Upon hearing such troubling information, Amethyst turned her glance towards Garnet behind her, who still had her gaze fixated upon the tree that was just out of the purple Gem’s line of sight. “Hey, Garnet?” she asked, her voice but a whisper as she looked up at the towering Gem expectantly. “You ok? You look like you’ve seen a ghost or somethin’.”

Garnet was quick to turn her attention back towards the rest of the group at this; thankfully, Pearl and Rose were still on the move, the white Gem softly whispering her concerns to their leader all the while. That was a good thing; after all, whatever the warning on the tree meant, the tall Gem was almost certain that Rose knew something about it, perhaps it was even related to why she had brought them here in the first place. Which was why Garnet saw no need to make Amethyst, who was much more carefree and innocent having not fought through the Gem war, worry about a warning that, as she tried to caustically reason, might not even have any bearings.

“It’s nothing,” she said succinctly, yet easily, picking up the pace as she walked on and left the marked tree behind. Amethyst let out a huffy sigh of disappointment, knowing that she was often left out of the loop because of her relative youth compared to the other Crystal Gems, but all the same, she let it go, pressing on close behind Garnet.

However, it was only a few moments later that the entire line came to a sudden halt behind Rose. The pink Gem stood before what looked to be but a mere wall of trees, yet clear, crisp daylight was peeking out from behind them. “Gems…” she spoke, her voice soft yet careful as she addressed her wards. Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl all held their breaths, anxiously awaiting whatever she was about to tell them.

Rose’s full pastel lips perused into a frown as she took another small step forward, placing her hand against one of the trees as she strained her eyes to look at whatever lay beyond them. All three of the Gems could hear their leader take in a sharp breath, something that put them even more on edge than the ominous atmosphere of the darkened forest did.

“What?” Pearl asked in a breathless whisper, finally working up the nerve to place her hand on Rose’s shoulder. “What is it, Rose? What do you see?”

“A town,” Garnet spoke for Rose, not even needing to look through the tree line thanks to her special abilities in foresight.

“Yes…” the pink Gem confirmed with a small nod, pushing aside a branch that was blocking both their path and their view. Rose was the first to pass through the small hole out of the forest she had made, and though the other Gems were a bit more uncertain, they all eventually followed suit after her.
“We’re here…” Rose said resolutely as they all stood on the other side of the woods, now drenched in the golden sun of the Oregon afternoon instead of the eerie shadows of the woods. The air was much more natural and refreshing here, laced with the sweetness of summer and the hints of what felt like a new beginning.

All four Gems stood upon a high hill that slanted down into a vast open valley. Expectedly, the entire area was awash in thickets of pine trees, which the Gems had grown used to seeing on their exploration of Oregon thus far. However, what attracted the most attention were the dual cliffs on the far edge of the valley, a few miles away from their position. The imposing cliffs stood adjacent to each other, towering high over the valley that was nestled in their large shadows. Both cliffs oddly looked as though they had been cleaved straight through the middle, giving them clifftops the illusion that they were floating to the point that one would wonder how they had not crumbled apart. A large waterfall cascaded down from the far side of the right cliff down into a large, pristine lake, which was fed by a twisting river that snaked through the valley. Within the valley itself were a few sparse, primitive, relatively new human dwellings, showing that civilization was present here, even if it was clearly in its infancy.

“Whoa…” Amethyst whispered, her eyes wide as she clung onto the skit of Rose’s gown and peered out at the valley with wide, excited eyes. “This place is HUGE!”

“This is it?” Pearl asked, frowning caustically as she surveyed the area, unimpressed by the small human settlement before them. “But… there’s hardly anything here…”

“So it would appear…” Rose mused, though unlike Amethyst and Pearl, both her and Garnet refused to believe that there was nothing in this largely untamed valley. “But there’s much more to this place…” The pink Gem’s determination to discover more prompted her onwards, heading down into the valley and whatever secrets awaited them there. “I can feel it…”

And so it was that the Crystal Gems followed their leader once more, even into this unknown frontier, none of them able to guess that ultimately become the place they would come to call home. And of course, all four of them embraced themselves for whatever might come, just as they always did before embarking on a new mission, as they passed under the brand-new sign that gave all travelers a simple greeting as they entered, the Gems included:

“Welcome to Gravity Falls!”
Chapter 1: The Shack Below

Chapter Summary

In which Dipper and Mabel are rebellious, over-curious little shits and Stan is conspicuously shady

Chapter Notes

Ok, so here we go jumping right into the present! Now, before we begin, allow me to make it clear that this is an AU, and as such I will be doing some... retconning of cannon to both shows. Basically, all you really need to know for now is that A. I will be combining the characters of both SU and GF all into one place (everyone lives in GF) and 2. As far as the canon of GF goes, by the point of this chapter, the events of Tourist Trapped have already happened, save for one MAJOR exception: Dipper has not found Journal 3 yet, as that is coming in a scene later on. And so, now that you're in the know, let's get started! (hint: still using the Caesar Cipher)

PBVWHUB KLGHV LQ WKH VKDFN EHORZ
HYHQ PRUH WKDQ ZKDW BRX NQRZ

Present Day

The Mystery Shack was among the stranger of oddity-based tourist attractions in eastern Oregon. From the outside, it appeared to be nothing more than an over-advertised, ramshackle shack nestled amidst the densely forested border of Gravity Falls. The combination house-museum-gift shop had certainly seen better days across the decades; its sloping roof fostered more than enough patches of wild moss to count amidst the weather-worn shingles. Its log exterior, though giving off an appropriate rustic appearance, had clearly faded from the freshness it had once known. Even the large sign perched upon the roof showed its age, with its chipping discount yellow paint and the stubborn “s” in “Shack” that refused to ever remain hammered in place for very long.

Any savvy traveler would most likely wonder what the appeal of such a seemingly rundown place would be, but for the more nuanced tourist, the allure of the Mystery Shack came in its very simplicity and novelty. Somehow, the shack managed to not only make a profit, but a surprisingly large one at that, though that could easily be attributed to the high prices of museum tours and cheaply-made souvenirs. The attractions housed within the shack itself were certainly bizarre in concept, even if most of them were either staged or fake. But all the same, they did well to draw in and entertain the gullible masses that frequented the shack, and those same visitors usually never hesitated to buy into the unique local lore and legends glorified by the variety of exhibits, nor did they hesitate to buy into the knick-knacks and curios sold there.

Expectedly, the shack’s proprietor, Stan Pines, had been happily raking in the generous profits of his roadside attraction for years now. Among the people of Gravity Falls, the self-proclaimed “Mr. Mystery” had a longstanding reputation for being a skilled con artist and an unrepentant fraud, but
none of the impressionable incoming summer tourists needed to know that as far as he was concerned. As long as he was making money, Stan was content, even if most of his revenue was brought in from the often over-exaggerated myths and hoaxes that seemed to constantly be pouring out of Gravity Falls. The tourist trap business was a lucrative one, and it was a lifestyle that Stan had grown accustomed to, perhaps even comfortable with the predictability of it.

That is, until the summer his great niece and nephew came to stay.

Stan had never particularly been a “family man”, having lived in the shack alone for the past thirty years. However, despite his own better judgement, he had agreed to take on the task of summer caretaker for the twelve year old twins, largely with the intent of having two more hands to help out at the Mystery Shack on top of Wendy and Soos.

Of course, neither Dipper nor Mabel had been that enthusiastic about being forced out of the house by their parents and onto a nine hour bus ride to spend their entire summer in the backwoods town of Gravity Falls, simply for the sake of, as their parents had put it, getting some “fresh air”. Well, that was almost entirely true; while Mabel optimistically saw any excursion as a grand adventure, Dipper was a bit more begrudging over the fact that they had to work in their great uncle, or “grunkle’s”, tourist trap, filled with low-budget exhibits that he had seen right through the day they arrived.

And yet, what neither of the Pines twins had known prior to their arrival in Gravity Falls was that it was certainly a unique place, filled with wonders and mysteries far beyond the ones that Stan passed off for show at the Mystery Shack.

In fact, they had already encountered such strangeness as early as their second day there. The twins had barely even had time to orient themselves to their new surroundings, they had both been thrust into the rumored weirdness of Gravity Falls upon discovering the existence of gnomes living deep in the forest. However, they might not have ever made that discovery if the little men had not literally pulled together and conspicuously presented themselves as Mabel’s new “boyfriend”. And despite Mabel’s initial enthralment with her first summer romance, it quickly shattered upon the gnomes revealing themselves and their desire for a new queen. Of course, Dipper had not hesitated in rushing to his sister’s rescue, and both of them held their own quite well in escaping and outsmarting the leviathan monster the gnomes had assembled into. But in the end, this strange conundrum had confirmed that there was suspicious, perhaps even supernatural activity in Gravity Falls, a fact that intrigued Dipper, who had always had an interested in mysteries and conspiracies, even more than Mabel, who much preferred to live in the moment and cheerfully enjoy every second.

And yet despite their adventurous second day, the twins found that their third day in Gravity Falls was already turning out to be significantly less harrowing and fantastic. It was already midmorning, and thus far, Dipper’s expectations for a strange happening or bizarre adventure had not been met. And, at the slow pace the hours were going by as him and Mabel wasted them away merely working in the shack, it didn’t look like any such excitement would happen soon at all.

Mabel grinned brightly to herself as she aimed her grappling hook to the far wall of the gift shop, shutting one eye so she could focus better on her target, a simple wooden sign posted to a support beam. The grappling hook itself was relatively new; it was something of a gift from Stan, who, in a rare act of affection, had allowed both of the twins to take one item from the shop free of charge the previous day. This act of good will had not been lost on either Mabel, who had gladly chosen the grappling hook out of the anticipation of the adventures she could have with it, or Dipper, who had simply picked out a new cap, a white and blue one with a printed pine tree on it, to replace the one he had lost in their earlier faceoff against the gnomes.
But regardless, business at the shack was slow this morning, and so, since Stan didn’t seem to particularly mind, Mabel had taken to practicing with her new toy after finishing up her chores. And so she stood in front of the counter, her tongue slightly peeking up out of her mouth as she narrowed her eyes at her target, taking into consideration that her brother was sweeping the floor rather close to him. Yet she was confident that she wouldn’t hit him; after all, she had been using the grappling hook since yesterday. She already considered herself to be a “grappling professional” as she had put it.

And yet, what Mabel still wasn’t used to was the amount of force that the hook always shot out of the barrel. The hook propelled forward with a soft bang, drawing Stan’s attention away from the money he was counting up from behind the counter, even though Wendy, who was engrossed in the latest issue of Avoid Eye Contact Monthly, still kept her gaze fixated on her magazine. Due to her lax footing, Mabel was unable to keep herself from stumbling backwards after the hook was released, causing her to lose control of her aim, though she giggled in amused surprise nonetheless.

By this point, the trajectory of the hook had gone haywire, missing the target sign by a wide margin. Instead, it veered towards the right, or more specifically, towards Dipper. Luckily, however, the moment he saw the heavy metal projectile darting towards him, he had the wits about him to duck instead of panic, dropping his broom to the floor as the hook narrowly zipped over his head and crashed into the stained glass window behind him. Needless to say, the window shattered dramatically upon impact, resulting in an explosion of glass that landed both outside of the shack and inside.

His heart still pounding with adrenaline from being put in sudden danger once again, Dipper slowly rose to stand once more and turned to inspect the damage of the broken window. Indeed, the entire orange and yellow glass pane had been obliterated, with only a few spare shards still clinging onto the window frame even as Mabel began to retract the hook back towards her.

“Mabel!” Dipper chastised his sister’s recklessness as he turned towards her with an exasperated frown.

“Heh,” Mabel laughed in embarrassment, noticing the slightly aggravated look that Stan was giving her as well for breaking his window. “Sorry, bro-bro! I guess this thing packs more of a punch than I thought!”

“You’re just luck I don’t care enough about public safety to take it away from you,” Stan said with little empathy, straightening the pile of dollar bills on the counter in front of him before addressing Dipper. “Make sure you pick up every last piece of that broken glass, kid! I don’t want some tenderfoot coming in here and trying to sue me because they ‘cut their foot’ or something.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dipper said as he rolled his eyes, unphased by his uncle’s usually miserly ways. “I’m on… it?” He found himself trailing off, however, as he turned back towards the window, the sight outside of it catching his eye now that the colored glass that had once obscured it was gone.

A large, tall, easily-inclined hill stood beside the Mystery Shack on its left side, its base being only about a mile or so away. Like most of the natural settings of Gravity Falls, the hill was blanketed with a forest of pine trees, however, only on its back half. The other side was more like a cliff, its solid, stony surface standing straight and narrow, devoid of any signs of vegetation save for a view vines and patches of moss. What did take up most of the cliff face was a towering, imposing statue of what appeared to be an eight armed woman. The statue’s form was mysterious, yet elegant, its hair an abundance of masterfully carved, twisting curls. It seemed to have two faces, one resting atop the other like a mask, though both were set in neutral expressions, its four unseeing empty eyes set upon the town in an almost watchful gaze.
Whatever its purpose was, it looked to be quite old, with a few cracks in its otherwise pristine form and moss clinging to its chest, torso, and many arms. In fact, it appeared to missing three of its hands, with only one of them spread out and open towards the sky and the other four converged near its navel around something that was still blocked behind one of the window frame's few remaining glass shards. But even so, the statue’s unique appearance aroused immediate curiosity in Dipper. Of course, this wasn’t the first time he had seen this statue since his and Mabel’s arrival in Gravity Falls. After all, anyone with eyes could see the enormous woman from anywhere in town, really. But amidst being chased by and defeating a collaborative gnome monster, this was the first time he had really gotten a chance to look at it and already countless questions about the odd statue were filling his mind. Who was it a statue of? Who built it? How long had it been there for? And most importantly, why was it even there?

“Hey, Grunkle Stan?” Dipper asked, only turning away from the window slightly. “What’s the deal with that weird statue up on the hill?”

Before Stan even had a chance to react to this question, Mabel enthusiastically jumped in, looking towards the statue outside the window as well. “Oh! You mean the eight-armed GIANT woman?!” she asked, her eyes alight with excitement. “She’s so gorgeous! I love what’s she’s done with her hair!”

“Huh?” Stan looked towards the statue as well, a look of uneasiness briefly crossing his features, though neither Dipper nor Mabel noticed it before he returned to his usual sarcastic scowl. “Oh, that huge broad? If by gorgeous, you mean she’s a giant eyesore that distracts all of the photo-snapping tourists I could be getting rich off instead, then sure; she’s absolutely beautiful.”

“Yo, dude,” Soos cut in as he came to stand near the window himself, having overheard the conversation while straightening the shelves. “They say that these three magical ladies live up there, protecting the town from monsters and stuff. No one really sees them that much, but they’re sorta like guardian ninja babes, ya know?”

Though Dipper was a bit more skeptical in believing a fantastical rumor like this, Mabel was much more open to buying into it as she rushed towards the window herself. “Whoa!” she exclaimed brightly, pushing past her brother as she pressed against the window, tip-toing around the broken glass still lying on the ground. “They sound so cool! I wanna go up there and meet them!”

“Oh, come on…” Wendy said, rolling her eyes as she finally glanced up from her magazine. “You guys don’t actually believe that dumb rumor, right?”

“It’s not a rumor,” Soos protested as he shook his head. “I read about it on this blog online, and as we all know, everything on the internet is completely 100% true.”

Wendy was silent for a moment or two as she gave Soos a concerned look, before laughing off in her nonchalant way. “Whatever you say, man…” she said, returning her full attention to her magazine once more.

“Well, if a group of ‘magical’ women doesn’t live up there, then what does?” Dipper asked in confusion as he glanced over the statue once more.

“It doesn’t matter,” Stan said dismissively. “The only thing you kids need to know is that hill is off limits.”

“What?” both Dipper and Mabel asked in unison as they exchanged a confused glance.

“But why?” Mabel continued on in clear disappointment, her hopes of meeting the three mystical
female guardians diminished upon hearing this.

“Because,” Stan said, his tone unyielding and succinct. “I said so.” He paused for a moment to gauge the twins’ expressions, only to see that neither of them were buying such a lame excuse. “And… uh… because it’s… dangerous up there, or something. Yeah, that’s right. So don’t let me catch you two fooling around up there. After all, I promised your parents that you’d both get home at the end of the summer in one piece. You wouldn’t want to make your Grunkle Stan a liar, would you?”

“You mean even more of a liar than you already are?” Dipper deadpanned as he crossed his arms, knowing well about Stan’s tendency to frequently fabricate the truth.

Stan shot his nephew a rather harsh glare for that snide comment, but he didn’t try to argue it. “Just stay away from that hill, ok?” he asked in aggravation, clearly not willing to hear any more protests on the matter. “Now, that’s enough standing around and yapping! I’m not paying you all to stare out a broken window all day!”

“You’re not paying me or Mabel at all,” Dipper pointed out, much to Stan’s continued annoyance.

“Not if you keep back sassing me like that, I’m not,” Stan said in clear frustration as he headed out from behind the counter and towards the exit into the rest of the house. “I’m going to my office, and I expect all that glass to be off the floor by the time I get back.” And with that, Stan took his leave, though his aggravated mutterings could still be clearly heard. “Take the kids for the summer, they said! They’ll be no trouble at all, they said! Why I oughta-”

His voice eventually trailed off, leaving the four remaining employees of the Mystery Shack to their own devices. Wendy continued to pour over her magazine as Soos returned to straightening up, while both Dipper and Mabel lingered near the window a bit longer, both of them taking one last longing look towards the fascinating statue.

“I wish Grunkle Stan would let us get closer to it…” Mabel sighed wistfully. “I bet there’s all sorts of neat stuff up there!”

“What’s his deal with that place anyway?” Dipper asked suspiciously. “It almost sounded like he was afraid of it…”

“Eh, I wouldn’t worry too much about it,” Wendy interjected, giving the twins a reassuring grin as she relaxed even more now that Stan was gone by leaning back in her chair and putting her boots up on the counter. “He probably just doesn’t want you guys to get hurt.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right, Wendy…” Mabel said with a frown, though Dipper could clearly tell that she was still disappointed, a sentiment he shared very much at the moment. After all, the statue was incredibly intriguing based on its aesthetic appearance alone, and he couldn’t help but be curious about its nature and purpose. Something had to be up there, considering how avoidant Stan seemed to be about it, going as far as to even call it dangerous. And even if it was, Dipper was determined to get to the bottom of it. After all, he wasn’t the kind to just step back and let a mystery like this go.

“Hey, Mabel,” Dipper whispered to his sister as he pulled her aside, checking to make sure that Stan was completely out of earshot. “I feel like there’s something about that statue Stan doesn’t want us to know. Wanna go check it out?”

“Well, duh!” Mabel said with a wide grin that quickly turned into a sudden frown. “But… Stan told us to stay away from it…”
“Oh, come on, I’m sure he was just over-exaggerating,” Dipper scoffed, knowing that Stan was hardly ever serious about anything. “It’s just a statue; how bad could it be?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Mabel said, her chipper manner returning as she glanced out the window with newfound excitement, not letting a mere warning impair a possibility at an adventure. “And don’t worry, Dipper! If we run into any trouble, I got the grappling hook covered!” she exclaimed, holding said object out though thankfully not aiming it anything this time. But even so, Dipper took an instinctual step back as he eyed the hook nervously, remembering what had happened the last time she had used it.

“Uh… yeah…” he said with an uneasy frown. “Why don’t we just… leave that here this time?”

“What? No way!” Mabel said with a daring grin, not about to let her grappling skills go to waste. “Just you wait, bro; this grappling hook will save our lives someday!”

“Yeah, or put them in even more danger…” Dipper muttered to himself sarcastically.

“Now, c’mon! We have a giant woman to explore!” Mabel said, even more enthusiastic about the investigation they were about to begin now than her brother was, especially as she thought about the chance at getting a glimpse at the town’s rumored, supposed, elusive guardians. Which was why, without any further deliberation, Mabel grabbed Dipper by the arm, startling him and practically dragged him out of the shack so they could embark one of their first of many mystery-solving, discovery-making adventures.
Chapter 2: The Temple Above

Chapter Summary

In which Steven is a pure cinnamon roll, the Gems are the Gems, and Connie's ready for adventure

Chapter Notes

Ok, so here we have the second chapter, but before we dive in, I have a few things to say. Now, this chapter (as far as the SU canon is concerned) takes place after all these episodes I'm about to list. If the episode is not on the list, then it hasn't happened as far as this story is starting up at, so be aware. Those episodes that have already happened are: Gem Glow, Cat Fingers, Steven's Lion, Bubble Buddies, Steven the Sword Fighter, and Giant Woman. Keep that in mind as we move forward, and there will be no worries! Now, onto the chapter (pst, use the Caesar Cipher again)

PDJLF DELGHV LQ WKH WHPSOH DERYH

DQG JHPV ZKR DUH OHDUQLQJ KRZ WR ORYH

The Crystal Temple was something of a landmark of Gravity Falls, if a towering statue of an ethereal, two-faced, eight-armed giant woman could be considered a landmark. All of the residents of the town in the valley that rested in the shadow of the temple were quite used to its presence, at it had been there for generations, silently and stoically watching all that lay in its unseeing gaze. Most viewed the temple as merely a piece of the town's history, even if a great deal of them had no idea where it had come from or why it was even there. Of course, there were countless rumors that often circulated surrounding its presence, but most of them had very little weight, such as the theory that the statue was actually secretly sentient or that it had been there for thousands of years. It had come to be viewed as yet another unique facet of Gravity Falls, an already strange little town in and of itself, and as such, it often went unnoticed by most of its residents as they carried on in their daily lives.

Amidst the myths and mystery behind the temple, the three beings who were said to inhabit it were just as enigmatic. In fact, those who did know of their existence knew very little about them, which was intentional on their part. After all, the Crystal Gems largely kept to themselves whenever they could, even more than they had used to when their outgoing, human-affectionate leader was still around.

The Gems had faithfully followed Rose Quartz’s request to remain in Gravity Falls even after she departed from them nearly twelve years ago now, despite the fact that so many memories of her remained there. After all, she had led them there over one hundred years ago and together, they had all made the ultimate decision to settle down for a few centuries and investigate the strange happenings that seemed to gravitate towards the town. Gravity Falls had barely been but a fledgling settlement when they had happened upon it, and since then, they had watched it grow
into the small, quaint, yet modern town it was today. Throughout their time there, Rose’s goal, above all else, had been to uncover the underlying secret behind why Gravity Falls seemed to be such a hotspot for supernatural anomalies, unlike any even any of the Gems had encountered in their centuries of existence. She had reasoned to her fellow Gems time and time again that in doing so, they would be able to better protect the humans that not only lived in the area, but potentially the rest of the world at large. However, in the end, she had never reached a definite conclusion; for instead of finding satisfaction in solving one of the greatest mysteries of all time, the leader of the Crystal Gems found it in another place instead.

The other Gems, save for perhaps Garnet, could have never anticipated the result of Rose’s relationship and ultimate romance with a man by the name of Greg Universe. Greg had been a young musician when he had first encountered Rose while performing a concert in Gravity Falls, at which the pink Gem had been the sole attendee. And in an indescribable, almost magical way, the simple human man and the illustrious Gem warrior were attracted to each other from the moment their eyes first met. Rose and Greg’s romance had been brief, but beautiful. Their love, lauded by Garnet, laughed at by Amethyst, and loathed by Pearl, had ultimately culminated in what was perhaps the richest way a couple could show it: the decision to bear a child.

Unfortunately, despite their well intentions, this choice did not come without its consequences. Going in, Rose had come to the realization that, because of her status as a Gem and the fact that she was incapable of naturally bearing a child like a human woman, the only way her baby could survive was under one condition. She had to sacrifice her own Gem, and therefore her physical essence, so the infant could be brought into the world, even if it would be without her. The deciding process had been long and tremulous, but in the end, both Rose and Greg agreed to the most selfless choice of action—they would have a baby together, regardless of what they both knew they would lose. The Gems had all been adamantly against this choice at first, especially Pearl, but after some coaxing from Rose, they eventually learned to accept it. In the end, the Crystal Gems lost their beloved leader, and in her place, they were to help Greg bring up her half-human, half-Gem son.

Steven.

Needless to say, for the first few years, the Gems were somewhat distant from both this new addition in their lives, as well as the human world in general, keeping themselves busy with fighting off Gem monsters as opposed to chasing anomalies as Rose once had. It was an easy way to distract themselves from the uncomfortable truth that she was gone, most likely never to return. And yet, what the other Gems, who had all been so close to Rose and so miserable to see her pass, could have never guessed was that they would ever grow to actually become as fond of Steven as they did. Even though he spent the first few years of his life living with Greg in his simple van, the Gems couldn’t help but let themselves be charmed by the bright, cheerful, ever-growing child every time they saw him, to the point that Garnet herself eventually suggested to Greg that they build a house addition onto the temple, so that Steven could live there until he was able to actually use his Gem to access the temple. After all, one of Rose’s last requests had been for the Gems to teach Steven how to use his Gem, which he had inherited from his mother, supposedly with most of her powers as well. It was only fair that they honor her final wishes in any way they could.

And thus far, progress had indeed been made between both Steven and the Gems. Of course, Steven had a lot to learn about Gems and Gem heritage, largely because he had grown up enveloped in human culture instead thanks to Greg. In fact, as much as Steven had to learn from Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl about how to use his Gems and grow into his role as the newest Crystal Gem, the inverse of this was also interestingly true. After all, following Rose’s passing, the Gems had intentionally isolated themselves away from humanity, partially blaming it in its entirety for their former leader’s conscious and selfless decision to have a child. And yet, as they stepped
up to fill the role as Steven’s caretakers in conjunction with Greg, all three of them gradually found themselves immersing themselves in the world that Rose had once tried to encourage them to be a part of. Needless to say, it was a learning experience for all four of them, as was the still budding connection between Gems and humans at large, but Steve, energetic and optimistic just as his mother was before him, was willing to meet Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl halfway just as much as they were willing to do the same for him.

Despite the fact that Steven had at long last succeeded in summoning Rose’s iconic shield at least once, the Gems were still hesitant about allowing him to accompany them on missions. After all, he was still just a kid, and half human at that. The last thing any of them wanted was to see him get hurt. Occasionally, if their objective was a low-level threat or simple fetch quest, they would allow him to tag along, much to Steven’s excitement, but even when they deemed a mission to dangerous for him, he was just as content to patiently await their return.

In fact, he had been doing exactly that for the majority of the morning. After waking up relatively late to find that the Gems had already departed on a mission, Steven had taken to making himself a simple breakfast of waffles and sliced fruit before settling down to watch a few rerun episodes of *Crying Breakfast Friends*. And yet, as used to being left alone in the house as he was, Steven couldn’t help but anticpatingly await the Gems’ return, constantly keeping an eye on the warp pad as time ticked by. In fact, his excitement for his guardians’ arrival soon got the better of him, to the point that he decided that he would present them with a playful, pleasant surprise upon their entry.

Knowing that the Gems could be back at any moment, Steven rushed down the stairs from his bedroom loft, carefully positioning himself behind the wall on the far side of the house so that he would not be visible from the warp pad. After testing out his hiding spot once by taking cover behind it to ensure it concealed him, Steven peeked around the side of the wall, grinning eagerly as he trained his eyes on the warp pad, wanting to be ready to spring his surprise the moment the Gems arrived.

And fortunately, he didn’t have to wait too long. The telltale tunnel of light that signified the incoming warp stream enveloped the warp pad, giving Steven just enough time to slip behind the wall with a quiet laugh, more than prepared to catch the Gems off guard with his sudden greeting.

The Crystal Gems warped into the temple with all of their usual flare, though it was slightly dampened by Pearl sending a disapproving glare Amethyst’s way. And as soon as the light faded from the warp pad, she wasted no time in verbally asserting her frustrations to the purple Gem as she often did.

“Amethyst!” Pearl ranted, her tone impatient and huffy. “Must you always be so careless!? That monster nearly got away because of your recklessness!”

Amethyst let out a bored sigh as she rolled her eyes at the taller Gem’s usual ranting, placing her hands on her hips as she gave a sarcastic retort. “Hey, at least I was having fun beating that creepy thing senseless, unlike some other Gems…”

Pearl took this remark with offense as she scoffed haughtily, crossing her arms as she glanced away bitterly. “Regardless, it’s a good thing I was there to reign you in, as usual,” the white Gem admonished.

“Oh, please…” Amethyst groaned in annoyance. “You weren’t even the one who poofed that monster; it was Garnet who-”

“That’s enough,” Garnet finally cut into the argument upon mention of her name, her tone as patient and calm as usual as she held her hands out to put an end to Pearl and Amethyst’s
quarreling. The other two Gems immediately respected their leader’s command as they both gave
her looks of confusion, unable to discern what her covered gaze was currently focusing on.

Much to Pearl and Amethyst’s ongoing bewilderment, Garnet’s neutral expression suddenly shifted
into a small smile as she looked out into the house, her tone softening a bit as she spoke. “Nice try,
Steven,” she said with a hint of amusement in her mysterious tone.

A burst of brief disappointment filled Steven upon being called out, and yet he hesitantly poked his
head around the wall with a defeated grin, his surprise mildly ruined at best. “Aw, Garnet!” he
exclaimed with mock disheartenment, only somewhat surprised that the tall Gem had prematurely
discovered him. “How’d you know I was here?”

“Lucky guess,” Garnet said vaguely, still grinning as she casually adjusted her shades.

“Yo, Steven!” Amethyst greeted with a newfound grin as she leaped off the warp pad, the other
Gems following suit as they call came to meet Steven halfway as he left his failed hiding spot.
“How goes it? What are you planning on getting into today?”

“Me and Connie are going down to the Mystery Shack,” Steven said enthusiastically, eager to
show his newest, and by far closest friend to what was perhaps his favorite locale in Gravity Falls.
“Can you guys believe she’s never been there before?”

“Yes,” Garnet said flatly as she crossed her arms.

“I just don’t understand what it is about that place you find so fascinating, Steven,” Pearl pondered
with a slight frown. “You know we fight infinitely more interesting things on a daily basis than the
fake… attractions they have at that old rundown shack.”

“Aw, c’mon, P!” Amethyst said as she came to stand beside Steven, sharing his wide grin. “Don’t
be such a prude! The Mystery Shack has some freaky awesome stuff in it! Right Steven?”

“Yeah!” Steven readily agreed, having been a frequent visitor to the Mystery Shack enough to
know its odd exhibits well. “Like the sascrotch!”

Pearl was silent for a moment upon hearing this as her pale cheeks lit up in an awkward blush.
“Yes…” she said uneasily, glancing away from the chipper pair. “Well… Still, I’m not sure how I
feel about you going down there all the time… Especially considering the fact that its owner isn’t
the most… trustworthy man…”

“What?” Steven asked with a confused frown. “Oh, don’t be silly, Pearl! Mr. Pines is the best. One
time, he even gave me a half-eaten candy bar just to get me to leave the shack! What a guy!”

Pearl’s frowned deepened as she exchanged a concerned glance with Garnet, who kept up her
relaxed, unyielding front as usual. “How thoughtful,” the tall Gem deadpanned, something that
elicited a giggle from Amethyst and a groan of exasperation from Pearl.

“I know, right?” Steven agreed wholeheartedly, reminding all three of the Gems of his consistently
open, kind, trustful, if not a bit silly, nature, something that often made them think of how warmly
his mother used to act.

Before the conversation could carry on any longer, a sudden knock on the door interrupted it.
“That’s Connie!” Steven cheered excitedly before calling out to her friend on the other side of the
screen door. “Come in!”

Connie was quick to do so as she entered into the house, her grin just as cheerful as Steven’s as she
stepped inside. “Hey, Steven!” she greeted warmly, also sending a respectful nod to the Gems. “Are you ready to go?”

“You bet I am!” Steven said heartily, already racing for the door. After all, there wasn’t a moment to waste; he had been waiting to take Connie to the Mystery Shack for quite some time now, so that she could get the same sense of wonder and enjoyment out of the humble tourist attraction that he did. Steven and Connie had been tightly-knit friends for several months now, ever since an accident involving a Gem-produced magical bubble on Steven’s part. Ever since then, the two of them had only grown closer and closer, united by their common interests and excitement about all things Gem-related. Connie in particular valued their close bond, for before she met Steven, she had never really had a friend before thanks to her parents constantly moving from place to place. Fortunately though, it seemed as though Connie and her family were going to stay put for a while, living in a small suburban area just outside of Gravity Falls and a convenient enough distance away from the Crystal Temple, much to Steven’s delight. After all, every moment they spent together was an endlessly fun experience, whether they were faced with something new and exciting in relation to Steven’s partial heritage as a Gem, or if they were just spending a day out and about on the town, like they plans for today were.

“Now, be careful you too!” Pearl called out cautiously after Steven as he hurried out with Connie. “Don’t get into any trouble down there!”

“But have fun,” Garnet said with an easy smile, trusting that Steven and Connie would mind themselves just fine.

“Yeah, and don’t forget to stop by the ‘Outhouse of Mystery’ for me!” Amethyst added with a sly laugh as the kids went outside onto the porch.

“‘Outhouse of Mystery’?” Connie asked Steven with an amused grin once they were outside.

“Yeah!” Steven confirmed, referring to his extensive knowledge of his favorite tourist trap. “It’s right next to the bottomless pit.”

Connie laughed in response to this as her and Steven headed over to Lion, who was curled up into a large, sleeping, pink ball of fluff near the door. “You know, based on everything you’ve told me about it, this Mystery Shack place sure does sound… well, mysterious!”

“It’s so cool, Connie!” Steven gushed, his eyes alight with enthusiasm as he climbed up onto Lion’s back. “I’m sure you’ll love it. There’s stuff in there you won’t believe until you see it!”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Connie giggled as she graciously accepted Steven’s hand in helping her up onto Lion behind him.

“Now, c’mon!” Steven said as he glanced down at Lion, who was still heavily snoozing, regardless of the two children on his back. “Wake up, Lion! Let’s go!”

Though Steven wanted his soft pink animal companion to instantly be roused and ready to race down the hill, Lion merely responded to his command with a passive yawn, readjusting his large paws to cover his face as he continued to sleep. Steven laughed good naturedly at this, knowing that the gentle giant only occasionally listened to him, most of the time opting to be stubborn and apathetic instead. But all the same, Steven had appreciated and loved Lion from the moment they first encountered each other in the desert, which had ultimately led to the somewhat working companionship they currently had.

“Ok, then…” Steven said, glancing back at Connie with a bashful, somewhat embarrassed grin. “I
guess we’ll go when Lion’s nap is over…”

“That’s ok,” Connie assured in clear amusement. “I have all day to hang out now that its summer vacation.”

“Summer… huh?” Steven asked in obvious confusion, unfamiliar with the term.

“You know, when school gets out for the summer?” Connie asked with a frown, wondering how Steven had never heard of such a common concept before.

“I’ve never been to this—how do you say?—‘school’” Steven said, using air quotes with the word school. “What is it?”

“Wait, you’ve never been to school?” Connie asked, even more bewildered.

“Nope,” Steven said with a shrug. “Is it like some sort of snow-covered mountain that has to be shut down in the summer because all the snow melts?”

“I wish,” Connie laughed, amazed at his innocence about the subject. “Well, while we wait for Lion to wake up, why don’t I tell you what school actually is…?”

“Yeah!” Steven said with an excited nod, more than ready to learn about the foreign concept that was “school”, at least until their slumbering ride finally awakened to get them down the hill and to their destination. “And then, when Lion does wake up, off to the Mystery Shack we go!”
Chapter 3: First Meeting

Chapter Summary

In which our Mystery Kids meet and adorable friendship building ensues

Chapter Notes

Ok! So here we go with chapter 3, which includes our first meeting between Dipper & Mabel and Steven & Connie! Hooray! I honestly don't have a ton to say about it, so I hope you enjoy it! (oh, btw if ya'll wanted to comment on this story, I would greatly appreciate it!) Now, let's get started! (hint: Caesar Cipher again!)

PDJLF DQG PBVWHUB PHHW DJDLQ

As it turned out, the hill behind the statue was much steeper and more unkempt than it seemed from afar, something that Dipper and Mabel quickly discovered as they began to scale it. There was no defined path along the forested incline, and so the twins tried to create their own as they hiked straight up it. And for the most part, they managed to keep to that straightforward, unofficial path, except for when Mabel strayed from it for a brief instance to chase after a squirrel that she claimed was “impossibly cute”.

“Come on, Dipper!” Mabel called back to her brother, noticing that she had taken the lead as they got closer to the top of the hill. “Hurry up! I wanna meet those magical ladies Soos was talking about!”

“H-hold on!” Dipper exclaimed breathlessly, practically running to keep up with Mabel’s pace, which, considering they were on a relentlessly uphill trek, was certainly starting to wear him out. “I… I’m on my… way!” His exhaustion getting the better of him, Dipper finally had to pause and catch his breath as he doubled over, clearly overwhelmed by the thick summer heat of the afternoon.

“Seriously? You’re tired already?” Mabel asked with a teasing laugh as she leapt up onto a nearby rock and grinned down at him from above. “See, this is what happens when you spend all your time with your nose in a dumb book instead of out having fun like I do! You’re out of shape!”

“No, I’m not!” Dipper protested amidst recovering, though Mabel was as privy to his embarrassment over his lack of stamina. “This hill is just a lot… steeper than I thought it would be!”

“Yeah, whatever you say, slow-poke,” Mabel said with a good-natured laugh. “I guess I’ll just have to put you on the ‘Mabel Pines Approved Work Out Plan’! When paired with ten packets of sugar each morning, it’s guaranteed in pump you up with endless energy, or your money back!”

“You’ve been spending too much time with Grunkle Stan,” Dipper said as he laughed at Mabel’s unique brand of humor, finally pressing on as he caught up with her. “So, do you really think a
group of magical women live up here?” he asked her as they edged closer to the top side by side.

“I hope so!” Mabel exclaimed with a hopeful grin. “That would be so cool! Way cooler than my ‘boyfriend’ turning out to be a bunch of gnomes, at least.”

“And hopefully less unexpectedly dangerous,” Dipper added, remembering how they had almost been bested by the clan of little men the previous day. “But even if these women aren’t real, I’m sure we’ll find something interesting up here. It only makes sense considering how weird this town’s turning out to be.”

“Heh, you’re the weird one, you dork,” Mabel joked, giving her brother a small punch on the arm.

“Not any weirder than you are,” Dipper retorted with a smirk, watching as his point was mutely proven by Mabel finishing up the impromptu craft project she had been working on for the past several minutes, a shish kabob composed of pinecones, leaves and mushroom caps all skewered on a long stick.

“We’re both weird!” Mabel proclaimed enthusiastically, swinging her “nature kabob” around for fun. “That’s what makes us so great!”

“Yeah,” Dipper agreed with a small laugh, taking pleasure in his sister’s effervescent personality and how it bolstered their already impeccably strong sibling bond. However, the warm sentiments between the twins were soon broken as a strange rustling in the nearby tree line caught Dipper’s attention.

“Mabel, did you hear that?” he asked, his tone suddenly tense as he placed a hand on his sister’s shoulder in order to get her to stop walking. After all, they were treading on unknown territory and though it could very well be nothing, Dipper believed it was always better to err on the side of caution instead of throw it to the wind.

Mabel poised an ear towards the forest and listened intently for a moment or two before scoffing Dipper’s concerns aside. “What? You mean the wind?” she asked, having heard the rustling as well, though she didn’t believe it to be anything important. “Or maybe it’s that adorable squirrel again! I bet he wants another hug!”

“But I’m serious, Mabel. That rustling was too loud to be the wind.”

“So… what? Do you think it’s some huge, scary monster or something, waiting in the woods to gobble up two kids for dinner?” Mabel asked, her tone jokingly overdramatic as she picked fun at her brother’s usual paranoia. “Well, to be honest, you’d be dinner. I’d be dessert ‘cause, like I said earlier, ten packets of sugar a day!”

“Come on, Mabel, this is serious,” Dipper stressed, somewhat aggravated over how Mabel liked to play things like this off unserious way. “What if there really is something in there?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Mabel said with an unconcerned shrug. “It’s probably just-” She was abruptly cut off, however, by the sound of a startled shout breaking through the trees nearby.

“Lion, wait! Where are you going?!” the unknown, yet concerned voice called out from the woods closer to the cliff face. However, before either Dipper or Mabel had a chance to react to it or even wonder who it was, they were both taken by complete surprise to see a large pink blur emerge from the thick woods. And even more surprising was that, in the brief millisecond in which it was rushing straight towards both of the twins, this blur was actually, beyond all explanation, a large
Both Dipper and Mabel let out simultaneous cries of shock and fear upon seeing the pastel beast that was racing for them at a frightening speed, neither of them having ever anticipated encountering a lion of all things in the woods of Oregon. What they failed to see in the midst of their panic over possibly being mauled by this monster were the two figures mounted upon its back, both of them holding on for dear life as their ride inexplicably trailed off their original downhill course.

Regardless, the lion was undeterred as it bounded towards the frightened twins, viewing them as little more than unwarranted trespassers on its turf. Though Mabel had quick enough reflexes to leap well out of the lion’s path before it could pounce on them both, Dipper was not so lucky. Before he could escape out of its range, the pink beast pounced upon him, knocking him to the ground with little effort. Mabel gasped in fear and worry upon seeing her brother be taken down, and Dipper was in a state of absolute panic as he desperately tried to wriggle out from underneath the lion’s heavy paws pressed against his wrists. The lion growled and barred its deadly teeth as it glared down at its catch, and while Mabel was more than ready to leap into action to try and save her brother despite her fear of the strange creature and Dipper was ready to accept his fate at the maw of this pastel beast, a miraculous intervention prevented both of these things just in time.

“Lion! Stop that!” the same youthful voice that had preceded the lion’s appearance called out disapprovingly. “What have I told you about attacking people? It’s rude!”

Dipper was both immensely relieved and admittedly confused as the lion thankfully did as it was told and backed off, allowing him to finally release the anxious breath he had been holding in throughout this near-death experience. Mabel didn’t hesitate to rush to his side and help him off the ground, though the lion continued to keep them both in its distrustful gaze as it upheld its tall, prideful posture.

“Hey, are you guys ok?” one of the two people who were seated on lion’s back asked as they both peeked around the beast’s magnificently poofy mane, finally allowing the twins to see that they were actually kids, both about their age. Sitting closer to the front was a young boy with a somewhat stocky build, short, bushy dark brown hair, wearing jeans and a dark pink shirt bearing a star upon it. His wide, innocent eyes were filled with concern as he frowned at the twins, while at the same time petting the lion’s neck soothingly in order to calm it down. Behind him sat a girl who looked to be just a bit taller than the boy, with darker skin, weight-length dark brown hair, clad in a simple white top and teal shorts, a pair of maroon-framed glasses perched upon her nose.

“Um… yeah…” Dipper said a bit breathlessly as him and Mabel exchanged a look of equal bewildermment upon seeing a kid only about as old as they were tame such a savage beast. “Thanks…?”

“You’re welcome!” the boy replied with a cheerful smile. “Sorry about that though; Lion can get kinda… overprotective sometimes…” He let out a slightly embarrassed laugh at this, giving the beast an affectionate pat on the head, though the lion simply brushed the gesture off boredly.

“This is your lion?” Mabel asked, her eyes wide with amazement as she quickly broke out into an excited smile now that the pink beast had calmed down to the point of it being harmless. “You’re so lucky! And he’s so cute!”

“You do remember how he nearly killed me just a few seconds ago, right?” Dipper asked giving his sister a skeptical frown as he opted out of joining her in getting closer to the large pastel creature. Though the lion initially growled as it watched Mabel get closer, but upon being admonished by the boy yet again, it was quick to refrain and begrudgingly let her get close enough.
to stroke its luxurious mane.

“Aw…” Mabel gushed as she pressed her face into the lion’s mane. “He’s so soft too! Like a walking cloud of cotton candy, but with teeth!”

“I know, right?” the boy asked with a wide grin as both him and the girl slid off of the lion’s back. “He makes a great pillow too!” he exclaimed with a laugh as he gave the pink beast another friendly pat. “I’m Steven, by the way. You’ve already met Lion, of course,” he said, giving a smile to his pink companion. “And this is my friend, Connie,” he said, referring to the girl beside him.

“Nice to meet you!” Connie greeted politely. “Even if it was by accident.”

“I’m Dipper and the girl losing herself inside your, uh… lion’s mane is my sister, Mabel,” Dipper said, grinning in slight amusement at Mabel, who was still completely entranced by Lion’s silky fur.

“So SOFT!” Mabel exclaimed to prove her point, even if her words were muffled as she continued to press herself into the pink beast’s mane. Unlike before, Lion had come to simply ignore the presence of both twins as he stoically sat down, closing his eyes in an attempt to resume the rest that it had been begrudgingly roused from thanks to Steven.

“So what are you two doing up here all by yourselves anyway?” Connie inquired curiously.

“Yeah,” Steven added, wondering the same thing, considering the fact that it wasn’t often he encountered anyone on the hillside. “The only thing up here is the temple, and if you wanted to go there, then there’s a much easier way than climbing up the hill, you know.”

“Temple?” Dipper asked, his interest peaked.

“Yeah, the temple!” Steven said, throwing his arm out towards the cliff face, or rather the statue itself. “It’s where me and the Crystal Gems live!”

“Crystal… what?” Dipper asked, however, before his question could be properly answered, Mabel finally broke free from Lion’s mane, taking in a deep breath to reclaim lost air.

“Too… much… softness…” she exclaimed between heavy breaths, having nearly suffocated herself amidst the pink giant’s warm, velvety fur. Regardless, she was still enchanted by the now-very relaxed pink beast as she proceeded to give him an affectionate scratch on the ear, which Lion readily accepted.

“Whoa!” Steven exclaimed excitedly as he looked to Mabel with stars in his eyes. “I love your sweater! It’s kinda like my shirt!” he said, pointing to the article of clothing in question and showing that Mabel’s sweater was somewhat similar to it their dark pink color and their star designs, though the sweater bore a shooting star to be precise. “Well… kinda…” Steven said with a shrug.

“Yeah, I guess it is!” Mabel agreed with a wide smile. “I love you like it! All of my sweaters are handmade by yours truly. You know, if you really wanted one, I’d be more than happy to make one for you, free of charge!”

“Oh yeah!” Steven exclaimed enthusiastically. “Maybe you could even make matching ones for you and me! Or me and Connie! Or all four of us!”

“Oh my gosh!” Mabel practically squealed with joy over the prospect of getting to design so many new sweaters. “That sounds so awesome! Then we could all be sweater buddies!”
By this point, both Mabel and Steven were completely caught up in their overactive imaginations concerning this matter, and though both Connie and Dipper were mildly amused by this, the former was ultimately the one to break it up in favor of more practical concerns. “Wait, wait, wait,” Dipper said, interrupting the sweater-centric conversation as he looked to Steven. “A minute ago you said something about… Crystal Gems? Who are they?”

“Oh, right!” Steven said, still smiling as he was always eager to talk about the Gems to anyone who would listen. “The Crystal Gems are Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl, and me! We use magic from our Gems to fight monsters and protect humanity and stuff.”

“So… the rumors about magical guardians living up here are actually true?” Dipper asked a bit skeptically, unsure if Steven was actually being serious or not.

“Believe it or not, they are,” Connie confirmed with a small smile. “Steven’s proof of that.”

“Aw, yeah, well…” Steven began a bit bashfully, giving Connie an embarrassed grin. “I’m only half magic. My dad’s a human, but my mom was a Gem. See?” To show the twins what he meant, he lifted his shirt up a bit to reveal the rose quartz gem upon his navel.

“Whoa…” both Dipper and Mabel said in equal awe upon examining the pink gem.

“Unbelievable…” Dipper muttered in amazement upon realizing that the gem was actually real and not just a decoration.

“Sparkly…” Mabel whispered with a stunned expression, her eyes reflecting the shine of Steven’s gem as it glistened in the afternoon sun. “What does it do?”

“The Gems tell me that my mom used to use it to do lots of stuff,” Steven said as he lowered his shirt once more. “But… I’m still learning how to use it. So far I’ve used it to make a shield and a bubble. In fact, the bubble was how me and Connie met!”

“Uh… yeah,” Connie said with a slight laugh at the memory of their initial meeting a few months ago. “We got trapped in it for several hours and we nearly drowned at the bottom of the lake. Other than that, it was a pretty good day.”

“Plus, we beat a giant worm monster and saved the town!” Steven added proudly.

“Heh, yeah, this town has some weird stuff going on in it,” Connie said, knowing that the aforementioned worm monster wasn’t the only anomaly that her and Steven had encountered in Gravity Falls since their meeting.

“Finally! Someone else notices how strange this place is!” Dipper exclaimed, excited that he was not alone in thinking that Gravity Falls was a noticeably odd little town. “I’ve been saying that since we got here. We’ve been here less than a week and already we’ve faced off against a bunch of gnomes stacked together into a giant monster.”

“I learned a valuable lesson there,” Mabel said with a joking frown. “Never go out with gnomes in disguise.”

“Oh, you guys met the gnomes?” Steven asked with interested, having encountered the little men in the past since he’d lived in Gravity Falls all his life and had plenty of time to casually happen upon its stranger facets. “Yeah, they can get a little crazy when they don’t get what they want… One time they stole my donut and I spent all day chasing them down to get it back! The weird thing was they didn’t even want to eat it; they wanted to use it as a wheel for the little gnome car they were building. It was actually kinda cute, even if I never did get that donut back…”
“So you two have only been in Gravity Falls for a few days?” Connie asked inquisitively. “Did you just move here?”

“No, we’re only here for the summer,” Dipper clarified. “We’re staying with our Great Uncle Stan down at the Mystery Shack.”

“Wait, Mr. Pines is your uncle?” Steven asked with a gasp of surprise. “That’s so cool! The Mystery Shack is one of my favorite places in Gravity Falls, along with the temple… and the lake… and the Big Donut… and Funland Arcade… and Greasy’s Diner… and-”

“I think they get it, Steven,” Connie interrupted with a giggle. “What a coincidence, though. We were just on our way down to the Mystery Shack before we ran into you guys.”

“And we were on our way up here to check out the giant eight armed woman!” Mabel said, referring to what her and Dipper now knew to be some sort of temple thanks to Steven. “Isn’t that crazy? It’s almost like… fate, or something!”

“Or it was Lion just going through his rebellious stage,” Steven said with a laugh as he playfully pressed his hands against the sides of his companion’s fuzzy face. Lion retaliated to the sudden interruption from his standing nap however with a simple long lick, soaking Steven’s face in salvia and causing him to recoil in slight disgust. “Aw, Lion!” Steven exclaimed as he pushed Lion away, chuckling along with Connie, Dipper, and Mabel over the pink beast’s ornery behavior. “Gross!”

The four kids continued to laugh over the humorous scene, none of them thinking too much about the comradery and roots of friendship that had just been planted between them all. And another thing that none of them would have ever thought to think about was that Mabel had, in a way, actually been right in joking about fate being the thing that had brought them all together. None of them could have known, upon that innocent, seemingly accidental first meeting upon the hillside on that early summer’s day, of the adventures they would have, the challenges they would face, the mysteries they would solve, the magic they would discover, or the bonds they form together.

After all, the summer had only just begun.
Chapter 4: The Journal

Chapter Summary

In which Dipper finds a creepy-ass journal and tries and fails to keep it a secret

Chapter Notes

Ok, so this one took a while, but here it is! It was a TON of fun to write though, especially since I'm bringing in the journal (even if they're all three dead now in canon RIP journals) but whatever. If you like, please don't forget to leave me a comment telling me what you think! Let's get started!

VRPH WUXVW QR RQH
RWKHUV WUXVW HYHUBRQH
ILQGLQJ RXW ZKR BRX FDQ WUXVW
LV DOO SDUW RI WKH IXQ

It was amazing how easily all four kids had managed to forget their original objectives and destinations upon their chance encounter with each other. Steven and Connie had long since forgotten their original intent to go down to the Mystery Shack upon delving into conversation with Dipper and Mabel, and likewise, the twins had all but abandoned their goal of investigating the statue in light of Steven providing them with inside information about the mysterious temple. None of them minded the distraction however; even in the short time the two pairs had known each other, they had already struck up a strong camaraderie, laying the foundations for what would no doubt be strong, long-lasting friendships.

“So, if you guys are twins, which one of you is the older one?” Connie asked Dipper and Mabel inquisitively, both her and Steven sitting with their back against Lion, who was reclining in a lazy slumber on the ground. The twins had taken to sitting on the ground across from them as they continued to converse, with Dipper still being a bit wary of the pink beast after their first somewhat dangerous encounter, even if Mabel found the gentle giant absolutely adorable regardless.

“I'm the oldest,” Mabel jumped in with a proud grin, glad to be able to claim that this was one thing she had the advantage in over her brother.

“Only by like, five minutes,” Dipper reminded her, knowing that this was a point that she often enjoyed teasing him about.

“Man, you guys are so lucky,” Steven said somewhat wistfully. “Being twins must be so cool!”

“For the most part, it is,” Dipper said, sharing a warm smile with Mabel.

“Yeah, when we’re not driving each other crazy!” Mabel exclaimed mischievously as she playfully pulled the front of Dipper’s hat down so it covered his face. Though somewhat startled, he couldn’t help but laugh along with her, something that both Connie and Steven couldn’t help but
“But seriously, you sound like the lucky one, Steven,” Mabel said once that bout of levity had passed. “I mean, not only do you have an incredibly fluffy, pink pet lion, but you get to live with three mysterious magical women inside an even bigger mysterious eight armed woman! You guys must do all sorts of amazing things!”

“Well… the Gems do,” Steven said with a half-hearted smile. “I go on missions with them sometimes, but only when they think it’s not ‘dangerous’. But most of the time, I just hang out in the temple or around town, or I go down to the Mystery Shack.”

“Oh gosh, the shack!” Dipper exclaimed with a frown, realizing that they had wildly lost track of the time as the afternoon sun continued to sink ever lower across the sky. “Mabel, we’ve got to head back. Stan’s going to get suspicious if we’re gone for too long.”

“Aww, come on,” Mabel scoffed with little concern. “We’ve only been up here for like… an hour or something. Besides, Soos and Wendy are covering for us, remember?”

“If you guys need a ride down to the shack, we’d be more than happy to give you one,” Steven offered. “We were headed down there anyway, and Lion can seat four if he really needs to!”

Lion partially opened his eyes upon hearing his name as he sent an annoyed glare the twin’s way. Though Mabel giggled in amusement at this, Dipper shifted a bit uncomfortably under the stoic creature’s bored gaze, not too keen on the idea of utilizing him as a method of transportation. “Uh… I think we’ll be fine walking,” he said somewhat avertedly, ignoring his sister’s huffy sigh of disappointment.

“Oh! Or—or we could always race down the hill!” Mabel suggested with a daring grin, already hopping up off the ground.

“Yeah!” Steven agreed enthusiastically as he also stood. “First one to the Mystery Shack wins!”

“Wins what?” Connie asked with a laugh as she accepted Steven’s hand in helping her off the ground.

Considering they were the main proponents for this impromptu race, Mabel and Steven exchanged a brief glance before somehow reaching the exact same conclusion. “First place!” they exclaimed unanimously, both of them grinning jokingly as they innocently stated the obvious. Connie frowned in slight confusion at this response, but Dipper simply smirked and shook his head as he likewise stood up.

“Honestly, we should have seen that coming,” he jokingly said to Connie, who couldn’t help but chuckle along with him as they watched Steven and Mabel affectionately send Lion off. The pink beast didn’t protest as he slowly rose to his feet and magnificently leapt off, heading back towards the temple and leaving the kids to their race.

“Oh, everybody ready?” Steven asked as all four of them lined up and prepared to race down the hill. “Set… go!”

Upon his word, all of them propelled forward, Mabel and Connie leading the way as they sped down the hill faster than either Steven or Dipper were capable of running. For Mabel, her seemingly endless energy served as a great advantage in this race, though Connie’s speed largely came from her own innate physical ability, as well as her growing tennis skills. Thanks to the steep incline of the hill, Steven found that he was doing more falling than running as he quite frequently tripped over his own feet and tumbled down the hill, though he still trailed behind the girls quite a bit, though it was clear he was having fun no matter how many times he fell. Dipper, on the other
hand, was carefully trying to avoid falling as much as Steven was by jogging instead of outright running, largely because he was still somewhat worn out from his and Mabel’s initial journey up the hill.

“Hey, Dipper!” Mabel called back to her brother with a teasing grin as she glanced behind her to see how far behind he was. Her and Connie were neck and neck for the lead, with Steven still basically rolling down the hill instead of running and Dipper lagging relatively far behind them all. “Looks like you’re gonna need my workout plan after all if you ever wanna catch up!”

Dipper didn’t call out a response to this amidst pressing onward to keep up, but he did accept Mabel’s taunting as a challenge and pushed himself to run faster, throwing his former caution to the wind. However, he had only been sprinting for about a minute or two before his foot caught onto a stray rock positioned on the path, tripping him up instantly. Mabel couldn’t help but laugh as she watched her brother inevitably tumble to the ground, though she was quick to turn her attention back to the race when she realized Connie was gaining the lead. Unable to properly break his fall, Dipper rolled down the hill until he roughly collided with a nearby tree a moment later, letting out a gasp of pain and surprise as he did so. He realized with frustrated exasperation that there was no hope in catching up with the others, including Steven, as he used the tree in support for helping him stand up.

However, as he placed his hand against the tree, Dipper couldn’t help but notice there was something off about it; its bark felt nothing like wood, but rather metal, as could be deduced from its hard, cold exterior. Confused and intrigued, he gave the tree a tentative knock, listening closely to hear that the tree did indeed make a strange metallic noise. Upon further investigation, he soon discovered that the tree itself wasn’t composed entirely of metal, but rather, a small section of it was, as if it were a panel of some sorts. His curiosity getting the better of him, Dipper ran his hand over the metallic surface once more only to discover that there were small, relatively well-hidden hinges on one side of it, as if it were some sort of door. And sure enough, after a bit more probing, he managed to feel out the edges of the panel, and with a little bit of a struggle, he actually ended up prying it open.

The panel creaked open to reveal a small, dust-ridden compartment hallowed out in the tree. It looked as though it hadn’t been touched in years, which, Dipper figured, was most likely the point. After all, why would someone go to the trouble of creating putting a secret window in a random tree like this in the first place if it wasn’t for the sake of hiding something? And yet, the only thing inside of the compartment seemed to be an outward-facing button, surrounded by a few smaller buttons and what appeared to be letters engraved into the metal walls, though they were completely indecipherable. The button itself was in the shape of a hand, though oddly enough it appeared to have six fingers, and upon its palm was a symbol that looked somewhat akin to a rose, with thorny vines spiraling around it, its deep pink coloration a stark contrast from the stoic grey metal of the hand.

As cryptic as the hand switch was, Dipper couldn’t deny that he was now more interested than ever in figuring out what its purpose was. Cautiously, he peeked around the tree to see that Mabel, Connie, and Steven were still racing, all three of them having advanced past the base of the hill as they continued rushing for the Mystery Shack. He couldn’t help but feel the slightest bit of selfish excitement about the fact that they hadn’t happened upon this secret with him, for whatever mysteries the switch might uncover, he was about to unlock them on his own. And so, with curiosity eating away at him, he reached forward and pressed the button, watching with anticipation as it sunk into the compartment until it wouldn’t go down anymore.

Dipper spun around in surprise when he heard a soft rumbling sound behind him, only to see that a piece of the grassy ground seemed to be moving only a few feet away from him. The patch of earth
slid back to reveal what looked to be a small dugout, apparently opened up in response to the switch being pressed.

“What the…?” Dipper muttered to himself in confusion as he approached the square hole in the ground, kneeling down so he could get a better look. Much like the tree compartment, the shallow dugout looked as though it had been abandoned for decades, large cobwebs spun in each of its corners and a thick layer of dust resting upon the lone object that rested in the center of the hole: a book.

Raising an eyebrow at the dirt-covered tome, Dipper reached inside the dugout and lifted the withered book out, easily blowing the dust from its cover to reveal more details about it. Despite its apparent age, the book was sturdily bound, with a rugged, somewhat tattered burgundy leather cover and rounded golden corners. However, what was by far the most intriguing feature of the book was the fact that it shared the same design of the six-fingered hand from the switch in the tree, shining in gold against the red leather as a bold number three was marked upon it in black.

Dipper carefully placed the book on the ground as he looked around once more to check for any prying eyes. He wasn’t entirely sure why he was suddenly so paranoid about someone else finding out about this book, but at the same time, he believed that whatever it was, it was an important discovery, one that definitely deserved more looking into. He slowly crept open the front over of the book to reveal a pastedown inscribed only with the words “Property of…” The name of the supposed owner of the book had been torn away, quite possibly intentionally, though there was no way to be sure. Resting upon the first page of the tome was a circular eyepiece, attached to the binding via a cord, which Dipper tentatively picked up and examined for a moment before turning his attention back to the book itself.

Upon turning the page, he found what seemed to be a journal entry, headed with the date “June 18”, but oddly enough, there was no year. However, that didn’t deter Dipper from reading what was rather elegantly inscribed on the tattered, time-weathered page: “It’s hard to believe it’s been six years since I began researching the strange and wondrous secrets of Gravity Falls, Oregon.” Already immediately intrigued, Dipper quickly skimmed the rest of the page before he began to flip through the rest of the journal, finding that things only got more interesting from there. The browning, crinkled pages were filled with sketches and photographs of all sorts of unheard of oddities, from floating eyeballs to cursed doors to zombies and nearly everything in between. Alongside the detailed descriptions of these anomalies were what appeared to be countless codes and cryptograms, most likely hiding away even more information.

“What is all this?” Dipper asked in bewilderment over the strange contents of the journal as he picked the up and rose to stand. He continued to leaf through it as he started down the hill once more, walking rather than running, not even noticing as the square hole in the ground and the panel in the tree both closed on their own accord, as if they had never been opened at all. He finally stopped flipping through the journal upon coming to a page that was characterized by a message scrawled towards the bottom in frantic, bold letters that simply read “TRUST NO ONE”. Dipper frowned in sudden apprehension upon reading this, and, wanting to know the reasoning behind this pointed warning, he read over the upper page aloud. “Unfortunately, my suspicions have been confirmed. I’m being watched. I must hide this book before HE finds it. Hopefully, she’ll understand and still be willing to help me.”

“Remember, in Gravity Falls, there is no one you can trust.”

Upon reading this, Dipper slowly closed the book and silently mused over everything he had seen within it thus far. The journal seemed to very much confirm that Gravity Falls was home to many strange creatures and occurrences, which mirrored his own beliefs about the strange town.
Certainly, if he held onto it, then he’d have access to whatever knowledge the author of the journal had uncovered about the mysteries of Gravity Falls, knowledge that, for the most part, seemed comprehensive, almost encyclopedic. And yet, even despite his initial excitement over having made such an interesting discovery, he couldn’t help but recall the journal’s ominous warning as he headed back towards the shack, wondering if, in light of all of the strangeness that seemed native to Gravity Falls, it held any weight at all.

“No one you can trust…”

The race essentially ended in a tie, with both Mabel and Connie reaching the shack at the same time. Regardless, both girls laughed good-naturedly as they both caught their breath after having ran down the hill nonstop.

“Wow, Connie!” Mabel exclaimed with an impressed grin as they both leaned against the side of the shack to rest. “You’re pretty fast!”

“Thanks!” Connie accepted her compliment with a bashful laugh. “I guess all that tennis practice paid off. Oh, look! Here comes Steven!” she said with another chuckle as they both watched Steven trudge his way towards them exhaustedly, his clothes covered in grass stains and his skin sporting several minor cuts and bruises from having fallen so many times. However, he was clearly no worse for wear as he was still grinning brightly, obviously in good spirits despite the fact that he came in third.

“Woo…” he said breathlessly as he stopped and took a much needed rest. “How are you guys able to run so fast? I couldn’t keep up with either of you no matter how hard I tried!”

“It’s all about stamina,” Mabel said with a playful grin as she pretended to flex her muscles. “And I got oodles of that!”

“So this is the Mystery Shack?” Connie asked as she glanced up at the building her and Mabel were standing in the shadows of.

“Yep!” Steven said with a broad grin. “And it’s even cooler inside! You and Dipper must have so much fun working here, Mabel!”

“Eh, it’s ok,” Mabel said with a shrug. “My only complaint is when Grunkle Stan gets mad at me for trying to give things away for free in the gift shop. I mean, these tourists come all this way and pay so much money for the tour; they deserve a little something extra for their trouble! Speaking of trouble, where’s Dipper?”

Steven and Connie both shrugged, neither of them knowing where Dipper was since he had fallen so far behind during the race. Mabel frowned with slight concern for her brother as she glanced towards the path that cut through the woods and led to the hill only to have her question be aptly answered as she spotted Dipper heading towards the shack, completely engrossed in flipping through what appeared to be some kind of book.

“Hey!” Mabel greeted in her usual excitable way as she rushed towards her brother, Connie and Steven trailing not too far behind. “What do you know? Looks like you actually found your way down the hill after all, even if you were way behind the rest of us!” She giggled jokingly as she reached him, before taking notice of the book he was still intently focusing on. “Ooo! What’cha reading? Some nerd thing?”

Dipper’s attention was pulled away from the journal as he realized Mabel was reaching for it, but
he was quick to pull it away and hide it behind his back out of sudden fear. “Uh, it’s nothing!” he stammered, knowing that this was a rather pathetic way of trying to brush the matter aside, but as caught off guard as he was, he had no time to think of a better excuse about the journal.

“‘Uh, it’s nothing!’” Mabel mimicked as she teasingly imitated her brother before breaking out into a sly grin. “What? You’re actually not gonna show me?”

Knowing that he could never get away with hiding anything from Mabel, Dipper relented and held the journal in front of him once more, allowing her to see it better. By now, Steven and Connie had reached them and were able to see the journal in full view as well.

“Wow…” Steven said with curious interest as he looked over the journal, intrigued by the mysterious six-fingered hand upon its cover. “What a cool looking book! Where’d you find it?”

“In a secret compartment up on the hill,” Dipper said before he suddenly realized something. “Wait… Steven, you said you live inside the statue… How have you never seen this before?”

“I dunno,” Steven shrugged, knowing for certain that this was the first time he had ever seen this book before. “But it sure does look interesting!”

“You have no idea,” Dipper said with an excited grin as the others gathered around him to get a better look at the contents of the journal itself. “It’s amazing! Whoever wrote this book apparently researched Gravity Falls for several years, and according to them, this place has this whole secret dark side.”

“Whoa…” Mabel said in awe as Dipper leafed through the book, showing off some of its varied entries on the hidden secrets of Gravity Falls. “Shut. Up!”

“This is incredible…” Connie mused as she adjusted her glasses. “It’s like some sort of encyclopedia about mythical creatures! Does anything in here actually exist?”

“Who knows?” Dipper said, even if he fully did believe that the journal’s information was on the mark. “But get this; after a certain point, the pages just… stop, like the guy who was writing it just… mysteriously disappeared.”

“Maybe he died?” Connie suggested, basing her guess off of the fact that the journal did look like it was pretty old.

“Or maybe he was abducted by aliens!” Mabel offered with a dramatic flair.

“Or maybe he’s still be out there somewhere!” Steven said optimistically, already as completely caught up in the mystery of this journal as Dipper was. “But then… why would he hide his own book, especially on the hill? I wonder if the Gems know anything about this… We could always-”

“There you kids are!” Stan’s gruff voice called out from the Mystery Shack as all four kids turned to see the proprietor of the Mystery Shack standing upon the back porch with his arms crossed and his expression impatient. Dipper was quick to tuck the journal away in his vest upon Stan’s arrival, not too keen on the idea of wanting to share the discovery of it with anyone else. Not that he thought Stan would do anything but pass the journal and its content off as mere nonsense. “You two have been gone for almost two hours! I was starting to think that you both had fallen off the face of the earth.”

“Hi, Mr. Pines!” Steven greeted Stan with an enthusiastic grin as he run up to him, the others following not too far behind.
“Oh, geez,” Stan said with a sigh of annoyed exasperation, having gotten accustomed to dealing Steven’s overt cheerfulness. “Just what I need: more hyperactive childhood innocence. As if Mabel didn’t have enough of that.” Coincidentally, Mabel happened to prove Stan’s point as she attempted to chase after Gompers the goat, only to trip and fall flat on her face, though she was quick to pick herself up off the ground and let out a hearty laugh all the same.

“Mr. Pines, this is my friend, Connie,” Steven said, still smiling as he introduced Connie, who had come to stand next to him. “I brought her here so she could experience the wonders of the Mystery Shack for herself!”

“Nice to meet you, sir,” Connie said with a polite nod.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Stan said dismissively as raised an expectant eyebrow at Steven. “But you remember what I told you about coming around here without any money, right kid? You know I don’t give free tours for anyone, not even those two goofuses,” he said, referring to Dipper and Mabel.

“It’s true,” Dipper affirmed caustically. “When we first got here, he charged us both ten dollars before we could even step inside the shack.”

“Hey, be grateful,” Stan said as he shot a warning look towards his great nephew. “I gave you both the family discount. But for you, Universe, it’s full price of admission. Same goes for your friend.”

“Oh, don’t worry!” Steven exclaimed, setting Connie’s sudden worry over having not brought any money with her to ease. “I remembered this time!” After a moment or two of digging through his pockets, he produced a crumpled wad of money and handed it to Stan. “Here you go, Mr. Pines! I saved all that up by helping my dad out at the car wash!”

Stan was hardly listening as he quickly counted through the small pile of cash before deeming that it was indeed sufficient. “Ok, fine,” he relented, stepping out of the way as he tucked the money into his suit. “You two can go on in. But don’t touch anything you can’t afford to buy!”

Steven and Connie shared an excited grin at this as they both rushed into the gift shop. However, Stan was quick to sidestep to stand in front of the door before Dipper and Mabel could follow. “Alright, you two; spill it,” he said with knowing suspicion as he gave them both a sided glance.

“Spill what?” Dipper asked with a frown of confusion.

“Where’d you two run off to for two hours?” Stan rephrased the question, briefly glancing up towards the statue as a guess as to where they might have gone. “I couldn’t get the information out of Soos or Wendy; guess you kids were smart in getting them to cover for you after all.”

Dipper and Mabel exchanged a sudden nervous glance upon hearing this, both of them thinking that Stan was already well aware of their unauthorized adventure. As to how they might have been busted when both Soos and Wendy had remained confidential was beyond the twins, but even so, neither of them were too keen on the idea of getting in trouble over something that they saw as completely insignificant.

“Oh, we didn’t go anywhere,” Dipper lied as casually as he could, which, in fact, wasn’t very casual at all. “We… we were just hanging out around here.”

“Yeah!” Mabel chimed in. “We totally didn’t go up towards the statue of the giant woman even after you told us not to, if that’s what you’re thinking.” She continued to smile innocently upon saying this, not even noticing her brother face-palm in exasperation over how she had just
completely and thoughtlessly shattered their cover.

“Do you two knuckleheads really think I didn’t know you wandered up there against my orders?” Stan asked, his tone still as sardonic as ever. “I mean, the fact that you bumped into that Universe kid is proof enough.”

“Wait… so you knew Steven lives up there?” Dipper asked, puzzled over why Stan might have claimed that the hill was dangerous when it seemed to be quite the opposite really, save for the fact that the journal had been secreted away there. “Then why’d you insist that we stay away from it?”

“Yeah, there wasn’t anything dangerous up there at all!” Mabel said with a befuddled frown. “Only Steven and his adorable pet lion!”

As if on cue, Steven poked his head out of the door to the shack, sporting his usual bright grin. “Hey, aren’t you guys coming in?” he asked, ignorant to the fact that he was breaking up a conversation.

“You bet!” Mabel said with a smile as she blissfully began to head inside, not heeding the veil of tension that still seemed to hand between her brother and her grunkle.

Knowing that his pressing questions wouldn’t be answered now even if he tried asking them, Dipper followed after Mabel and headed into the shack, but not before casting one more glance behind him at Stan, who simply urged him on inside with his usual stoic scowl. Obviously, he knew more than he let on about the statue, but whatever he did know, he was insisting on hiding it under a layer of cynicism and dismissiveness. Based on his mysterious avoidance on the whole matter, Dipper couldn’t help but wonder for a brief moment if Stan knew anything about the journal, but he quickly brushed such overly suspicious thoughts aside. After all, Dipper reasoned, Stan couldn’t possibly be harboring any hidden knowledge about the true nature of Gravity Falls.

Right?
Chapter 5: Gem Glow

Chapter Summary

In which the Gems get their asses handed to them and are saved by four children

Chapter Notes

Ok, so this one took a while, but it's a TON of fun in my opinion! After all, it features action, the Gems being awesome, and everyone else being hilarious, so what's not to love (I'm very tired btw so)

WKH URVH TXDUWC JHP VKLQHV DJDLQ
D VWXUGB VKLHOG WR SURWHFW QHZ IULHQGV

As Steven had hoped, Connie was duly charmed by the various bizarre artifacts and exhibits on display at the Mystery Shack. Having been on the tour countless times before, he was able to perfectly replicate it for her from memory, though to differentiate it from Stan's usual deadpanned delivery of it, Steven made sure to spice it up with his own humorous, impromptu additions. Connie got a good laugh out of hearing Steven attempt to come up with his own explanations as to how such oddities as the "six-pack o'lope" and the "cornicorn" came to be, even if she knew there were all completely fabricated. But they were both having fun in exploring the museum together, and that was really what mattered in the end.

Both Connie and Steven emerged from the museum and into the gift shop at the end of the self-guided tour in good spirits, chatting enthusiastically about all they had seen. Dipper, Mabel, and Stan were already there from having entered in through the gift shop entrance, and the twin's grunkle had wasted no time in putting them both back to work to make up for the two hours they had spent scaling the hill. Though both Dipper and Mabel begrudged the fact that Stan rarely gave them a break, they both perked up somewhat upon the arrival of their two new friends.

"Hey, you guys!" Mabel exclaimed with a chipper smile as soon as Steven and Connie stepped into the gift shop. "How'd you like the museum?"

"It was great!" Connie said with an amused grin.

"And mysterious as always!" Steven said with a faux dramatic tone, something that prompted Stan to roll his eyes at as he took inventory on the other end of the shop.

"Yo, Steven!" Soos warmly greeted the younger boy, who was a frequent regular to the Mystery Shack, as he reentered the gift shop from the rest of the house. "It's been a while since you've come down here, dude."

"Yeah, how's it hanging, man?" Wendy asked as she gave him a cool grin from her spot behind the counter.
"Soos! Wendy!" Steven exclaimed, giving the handyman a hearty high-five and sent a friendly nod in the cashier. "I'd like you both to meet my friend, Connie."

A round of introductions was exchanged between Soos, Wendy, and Connie, but before the conversation could go any further, Stan abruptly interrupted it. "Alright, so you kids paid your way and went on the tour," he said dryly to Steven and Connie. "Now if neither of you are gonna buy anything, get out. Loitering is against the rules."

"What rules?" Dipper asked, knowing that the Mystery Shack had no established policies of any kind, save for its strict ban on refunds of any kind.

"My rules," Stan said unyieldingly. "And according to my rules, its either buy or bye!"

Steven and Connie exchanged frowns of dismay at this, especially as the former checked his pockets for any more money only to find that they were completely empty save for a few sparse wads of lint. Neither of them wanted to leave so soon; after all, they were still enjoying their visit to the shack, even if their tour had ended. To have to nip their visit in the bud so early, especially considering they had only just met Dipper and Mabel, filled both Steven and Connie with visible disappointment to say the least.

"Oh, come on, Mr. Pines," Wendy argued, having always had a soft spot for Steven and his excitable ways. "Let them hang out. It's not like they're not hurting anything."

Of course, as soon as Wendy said this, Steven happened to accidentally knock over the postcard display rack while leafing through some of them. "Sorry!" the boy exclaimed, flustered as he began scooping the fallen postcards off the ground as Soos hurried over to help him. Stan merely let out an exasperated groan and face-palmed at this. He already didn't have a particular penchant for children in the first place, hence his initial hesitation in taking in Dipper and Mabel for the summer, but he found Steven's wide-eyed optimism and innocence a bit hard to swallow. Not to mention those three enigmatic women he lived with…

However, just as both Steven and Connie were about to make their case to Stan to convince him to let them linger just a little longer, a sudden, completely unexpected crash reverberated from outside, rattling the entire shack's foundation. The abrupt quake roughly threw Dipper, Mabel, Steven, and Connie to the ground, and Soos only barely managed to maintain his balance by steadying himself against the ice cream freezer at the last moment. Wendy was nearly knocked out of her chair behind the counter and by some miracle, Stan remained standing without the need for any sort of support until the ground finally stilled.

"What was that?" Dipper asked in bewilderment as he cautiously picked himself up off the ground before helping Mabel do the same.

"Maybe it's the giant anthropomorphic groundhogs emerging from their underground city to finally claim the surface as their own!" Soos exclaimed in sudden panic.

"Soos, how many times to I have to tell you? There are no giant groundhogs," Stan said caustically, repositioning his fez atop his head after it had been knocked askew by the earthquake. "The groundhog that stole your sandwich last week was regular-sized."

"But what if the smaller ones are just their spies!?" Soos protested, though no one had a chance to offer a rebuttal to this logic before the ground subtly rumbled once more, though this time, it was accompanied by shouting coming from outside.

Though their words were indiscernible from inside of the shack, Steven instantly recognized the
yelling voices as he jumped to his feet in excitement. "It's the Gems!" he exclaimed, knowing that he had heard Pearl shout something first, followed by Amethyst and then Garnet. He guessed that they were dealing with whatever had caused the shaking earth, and, wanting to help them, he rushed for the door with Connie trailing off after him out of worry that he might get hurt.

"Come on!" Mabel exclaimed to Dipper with a daring grin, grabbing his hand before he could protest and dragging him to the door so they could see what was happening outside.

"Kids, wait!" Stan called out after them, but they were already out the door before he could stop them. The proprietor of the Mystery Shack grumbled to himself in aggravation as he headed for the door himself, both Soos and Wendy opting to curiously follow to see what the ruckus was about. Stan didn't particularly want to get involved in whatever disaster was going on outside, but it looked as though he had to in order to ensure that the kids didn't get into any trouble. Well, any more trouble.

Steven, Connie, Dipper, and Mabel burst out of the shack and onto the porch to find a sight that made all of their jaws collectively drop. The lawn surrounding the Mystery Shack was littered with strange almost insect-like creatures. They had long, green, slinking bodies, upheld by five legs on each side, and pincher-like tails. Their heads were mainly just sets of large, clamping jaws, their singular eyes somehow resting in the backs of their open mouths. They skittered about the area directionlessly, most of them completely oblivious to the kids' presence save for the one that had been closest to the porch when they came out. Clearly acting on primal instinct, the creature in question reared up on its hind legs in self-defensing, letting out a hissing cry at the four humans staring at it with shock before spitting out a glob of green acid-like liquid their direction.

All four of them gasped in frightened surprise as the most likely dangerous substance arced towards them. Steven was quick to leap out of the way, though in doing so, he managed to fall off of the porch and into the grass. Connie was far enough out of its path that she evade it by sidestepping away, but Dipper only managed to escape from being hit by it thanks to Mabel, who thankfully had the wits about her to pull her brother out of the line of fire just in the nick of time. The burst of corrosive fluid struck the corner of the porch squarely, instantly eating away at the once-firm wooden surface and creating a sizable hole.

"Whoa…" Dipper breathed a sigh of relief, recognizing just how close the acid had been to hitting him. "Thanks, Mabel."

"Anything for you, bro-bro!" Mabel said with a smirk, glad that she had been able to come to his rescue yet again.

"These things are so cool!" Steven exclaimed with a fascinated grin as he sat up on the ground and gauged the size of one of the creatures, seeing that they were only a bit smaller than him. However, he didn't have much of a change to get a closer look as the same one that had attacked them all moments ago set its sights solely on him, pouncing towards him with acid still dripping from its maw. Steven let out a frightened cry as he attempted to shield himself with his arm, but thankfully, before the creature could land upon him, it was abruptly halted.

The monster was skewered to the ground by a long, thin, white spear, its spiraled tip piercing the creature through its middle evenly as it convulsed wildly for a moment or two before going limp. Its body unexplainably disappeared only a second later in a puff of smoke, leaving nothing behind at all, not even the spear as it also vanished with a glimmering flourish.

In the immediate wake of the monster's demise, three feminine figures landed in front of the shack from above, their dismount simultaneous and admittedly impressive. Steven let out a delighted gasp at their arrival and Connie shared his relief, but all Dipper and Mabel could do were stare at
them, agape with awe, neither having never seen women like these newcomers before. The tallest
one of the bunch stood at around seven feet with a solid, steady build and dark maroon skin. Her
hair was a black, thick, cubical afro, her eyes were shielded behind a pair of opaque triangular
shades, and she was clad in a sleek black and magenta body suit that matched her pair of powerful
battle gauntlets as she stood firm with her fists clenched and ready for action. Standing alongside
her was a slightly shorter, very slender woman with porcelain white skin with very short peach-
colored hair and a noticeably pointed nose. She wore a sleeveless light blue top, tied around the
waist with a sash, and short tan leggings, and she held a spear that was identical to the one that had
slayed one of the creatures moments ago, her grip on it quite tight with anxiety as she looked down
at Steven with concern. The final member of the group was significantly shorter, though she was
still a little taller than Steven, with a stout, thick build. Her skin was of a light shade of purple and
her messy, lighter lavender hair fell almost down to the floor, some of it spilling over one of her
eyes. Her outfit consisted of a mauve tank top with off shoulder sleeves, black leggings with star
cutouts on the knees and white boots and she wielded a multi-tailed gem-encrusted whip, its long
tail slung over her shoulder as she flashed a casual grin.

"Sup', Steven?" the shortest woman asked, her tone lax even as she deftly spun around and lashed
her whip out, instantly downing the creature that had attempted to launch a sneak attack upon her.

"Amethyst! Garnet! Pearl!" Steven exclaimed with an admiring grin. "What's going on?"

"Steven, go back inside," Garnet said authoritatively, her tone as calm and stoic as ever.

"What?" Steven asked with a frown of disappointment, having already jumped at the chance to aid
the Gems in a mission, especially since this one had fortunately happened to come to him. "But I
wanna help you guys!"

"We appreciate your enthusiasm, Steven," Pearl said with a frown. "But these centipeedles are a
little more than you're used to handling. Until you learn to control the powers in your
gem, we'll take care of protecting humanity, ok?"

"Aw…" Steven sighed, wishing that the Gems would trust him with more responsibilities instead
of being so overprotective of him.

"Hey!" Stan shouted indignantly as he emerged from the shack along with Soos and Wendy.
Though the two younger employees were just as surprised to see the scampering centipeedles as
the kids had been, the shack's owner simply scowled at the sight in annoyance, as if seeing such a
bizarre sight didn't faze him at all. "What in the sweet name of money is going on out here?!"

The Gems reacted with little surprise to such a harsh reception, though while both Pearl and Garnet
met Stan's impatient gaze with looks of dry cynicism, Amethyst offered him a wry grin. "Yo,
Stan!" she greeted nonchalantly. "It's been a while, huh?"

Though he wanted to uphold his front of bitter stoicism, Stan couldn't help but crack a small, subtle
smirk upon hearing this. "Sure has, Amethyst," he said with the slightest hint of a laugh in his tone,
before it quickly turned harsh again as he turned to the other two Gems, silently demanding an
explanation.

"Don't worry, Stan," Pearl said indifferently as she forcefully thrust her spear into an unfortunate
centipeedles that happened to pass in front of her. "We weren't able to contain these centipeedles
before they escaped from the temple and migrated down here, but we'll take care of them so you
can go back to… whatever it is you do."

Stan's already sour glower deepened upon hearing Pearl's condescending tone, but before he could
let loose a snappy retort, Garnet was already calling the Gems to action once more. "Let's do this," she said evenly, taking up a brief battle stance before leaping high into the air to take on the centipeedles horde from a different position. Pearl and Amethyst did likewise, each of them going to a different side of the shack in order to eradicate the creatures as efficiently as possible.

"Wait up, you guys!" Steven exclaimed, still waiting to help even though he had already been turned down. Not even sparing a second thought about the potential danger he was rushing into, he hurried after his teammates, hoping to be of some use to them even though there wasn't much he could really do.

"Steven!" Connie exclaimed in sudden fear as she also leapt off the porch and ran after him, knowing that she was even more defenseless against these monsters than he was, but still, she didn't want to see him get hurt.

In the aftermath of observing all of this, Dipper and Mabel exchanged a bewildered glance, neither of them really sure what to make of the unfolding situation. The centipeedles still meandering about aimlessly paled in comparison to the ethereal beings who were combating them. Beyond all initial skepticism, the elusive guardians that Steven had called the "Crystal Gems" were real, and yet, what intrigued and confused the twins the most was the fact that their grunkle apparently had some level of familiarity towards them. Then again, it did make sense in hindsight considering that the Gem's temple and the Mystery Shack were so close to each other. By that logic, Stan and the Gems were essentially neighbors, though based on the former's apparent distain towards the trio of warriors, as well as limited interaction that the twins had seen between them, their relations were most likely anything but smooth.

"Alright, everyone," Stan said rather dismissively, already turning to head back inside the shack. "You heard 'em. They got this infestation of… whatever these things are covered, so we can all go kick our feet back and relax. Well, I can. You all can get back to work."

"Don't you think we should help them?" Mabel asked with a concerned frown as she glanced over to the action taking place just a few feet away.

Stan didn't answer immediately, instead opting to watch with muted amusement as Pearl was knocked into a nearby tree by one of the centipeedles' thrashing clamped tails. "Like I said, they're handling it just fine," Stan said stoutly. "Now, let's go inside. These things are an eyesore. Get it? Eyesore? 'Cause they only have one eye!" Regardless of the fact that no one else joined him, he let out a wholehearted laugh at his own pun as he entered the shack, with Wendy, Soos, Dipper, and Mabel begrudgingly following not too far behind.

A layer of disappointment leveled throughout the gift shop as the door swung shut with a succinct bang. It didn't take Soos or Wendy too long to return to their usual tasks, even if they didn't expect any visitors to the shack in light of the monster infestation outside. Dipper and Mabel, however, were a bit more restless. It took every once of willpower they had to keep themselves from peering out the broken window at the battle waging against the Gems and the Centipeedles outside, lest Stan admonish them for their curiosity. Yet neither twin could deny they were worried for their new friends. While the Crystal Gems looked as though they were more than capable of fending for themselves against any threat, Steven and Connie were most likely in over their heads in this struggle. And while neither Dipper nor Mabel believed they'd fare much better against such obviously dangerous creatures, they still wanted to be of some help in protecting the shack instead of simply sitting back and waiting for the threat to be neutralized.

"Man, this stinks," Mabel pouted as soon as Stan had left the room and was clearly out of earshot. "There's a huge magical fight going on right outside our door and we're not even allowed to watch
"Why does Grunkle Stan seem to have such a problem with them anyway?" Dipper asked, referring to the Crystal Gems. "I mean, they did come all the way down here to help get rid of those monsters. They can't be too bad, right?"

This question went unanswered as another abrupt quake rattled the shack. Outside, the Gems were quick to pause their attacks against the centipeedles in an attempt to keep their balance and figure out what was causing this new tremor. Steven and Connie, on the other hand, immediately fell in the midst of the heavy rumbling, who had been trying their best to keep up with Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl, even if they were flagging behind out of exhaustion.

"What was that?" Steven asked as he picked himself up off the ground before helping Connie up, even though the earth was still softly trembling underneath them.

Connie let out a gasp of surprise as she rose to stand and happened to glance up towards the temple. "Look!" she shouted as she pointed up to the clifftop, not only directing Steven's attention there, but the Gems as well.

Perched atop the temple was a massive centipeedle, far bigger than all of the others with a long body that stretched out several feet. Its maw was also wider and more narrow, though its mandibles appeared to be even deadlier as it reared up onto several pairs of its many legs and let out an ear-splitting screech, its thick, untamed white mane flaying out wildly behind it. It had only one eye, similar to the smaller centipeedles, and as it set its sights down upon the Gems down in the clearing far below it, it let out another fierce battle cry.

"It's the mother!" Garnet shouted, clenching her gauntleted fists tight in a battle-ready stance.

"You were right, Garnet!" Pearl exclaimed as she looked up to the giant centipeedle with wide eyes. "These centipeedles did come from a mother! We have to make sure it doesn't get into the temple!"

"So, if we get rid of the mom, then all these smaller guys will disappear, right?" Amethyst asked, lashing her whip out in preparation.

All eyes were on Garnet, whom everyone hoped had the answer to this question as her intel usually proved to be infallible, but this time, she simply shrugged. "Worth a try," she said succinctly, as ready to fight the fearsome centipeedle mother as Amethyst and Pearl were.

The Gems were about to leap into action against this new central threat, but before they could, they were halted by Steven, who was attempting to rush forward alongside them. "Wait, you guys!" he exclaimed a bit breathlessly. "Let me come!"

"Steven, get back in the shack!" Pearl demanded in clear exasperation. "You too, Connie. This situation just got infinitely more dangerous with that mother here and neither of you need to be involved in this. Now, please-"

Before Steven could even try to put forth any protests, the centipeedle mother let out one more loud screech before it propelled itself into the air, flinging itself away from the temple as gravity pulled it down towards the shack, or more specifically, towards the Gems. Thankfully, Garnet had the wits about her to leap into action immediately, quickly gathering both Steven and Connie into her arms as she leaped out of the mother's projected landing zone, saving them both in the nick of time before the creature dismounted heavily, causing a rumble to ripple across the ground once more.
By now, Dipper, Mabel, Soos, and Wendy were all gathered around the broken window to see the giant centipeedle, which was about as tall as the shack itself when it rose to its full height. All four of them watched in agape awe as the Gems engaged it in battle, Amethyst and Pearl leading the charge as Garnet joined them after depositing Steven and Connie on the porch of the shack, where it would be safer. The centipeedle mother widened its maw for a moment before it began to unleash a steady stream of acid, one that the Gems quickly leapt out of the way of as it scorched the earth where they had once stood. Thinking quickly, the Gems took to the tree line, all three of them taking cover behind separate trees as they attempted to strategize. Unfortunately, their momentary retreat did not go unnoticed by the centipeedle mother, which was targeting them as it reared its head in their direction and prepared to spit more acid their way.

"Whoa, that thing is nasty!" Wendy said with disgust upon seeing the acid still dripping from the centipeedle's mandibles.

"Yeah, it's a good thing we're safe and sound here inside the shack where it can't possibly get to us!" Soos said with assurance, however, his belief of security was almost immediately proven wrong as the centipeedle mother lashed out, spitting a wide barrage of acid out in the hopes of hitting the Gems, though a few drops of it managed to fly towards the shack, or more specifically the window they were all peering out of. They all gasped in sudden fear as the deadly green substance launched their way, and, in an attempt to avoid it, they all quickly ducked away from the window as the acid landed, burning away the few remaining shards of glass that remained around the window.

As soon as they figured the immediate danger was averted, Soos and Wendy stood and resumed watching the fight with immense interest, but before Mabel could join them, Dipper held her back.

"Mabel, listen," he said, lowering his voice down to a whisper just in case Stan happened to be eavesdropping. "I know Stan told us not to get involved with all of this, but I can't help but feel as though we should."

"Yeah," she nodded in agreement with an expression of worry. "What if that huge bug destroys the Mystery Shack!? Where will I store all my sweaters then?!" Dipper rolled his eyes at his sister's rather trivial concern, but he allowed her to continue nonetheless. "We gotta do something, Dipper! Steven and his friends need our help!"

"That's exactly what I was thinking," he said, taking a brief glance towards the gift shop entrance to make sure the coast was still clear. "But what can we do against something like… that?!!" he asked, motioning to the centipeedle mother right outside the window.

Both twins pondered this problem for a moment or two, neither of them really knowing how to deal with a creature like this. A pack of angry gnomes was one thing; an acid-spewing behemoth was another thing entirely. And, it was that exact train of thought that incidentally gave Mabel an idea.

"Oh! Oh! Oh! I got it!" she exclaimed excitedly. "Maybe there's something about that monster in that old book you found!"

"Mabel, that's a great idea!" Dipper said with an equally enthusiastic grin, knowing that with its wealth of knowledge, certainly the journal would have at least some information on an unnatural creature like this.

"What can I say?" Mabel said with a satisfied shrug. "You're not the only one with brains in this family."

"Come on!" Dipper said as he grabbed Mabel by the arm and rushed out of the gift shop and into the den so they could examine the journal with in private. Mabel took first watch to make sure that
Stan wouldn't come barging in to find them doing exactly what he had told them not to do as Dipper began to leaf through the journal in search of anything that appeared to be remotely similar to the monster outside.

"Ok, let's see here..." Dipper said as he quickly flipped through the journal's crinkled pages, carefully focusing on the illustrations specifically to see if he could spot a drawing of the creature that was still rampaging as fiercely as ever. "Ghosts... zombies... invisible cows... anthropomorphic bushes..."

The ground suddenly rumbled once again as the centipeedle mother continued to throw its weight outside, reminding both twins that time was of the essence in finding a way to get rid of it. "Uh, you might wanna hurry it up, bro!" Mabel exclaimed with a frown as she peeked out a nearby window to see the centipeedle spitting acid at the row of trees the Gems had taken refuge behind, quickly burning them down to nothing more than brittle stumps. Steven and Connie were nowhere to be seen, but it could certainly be assumed that they were still out there and still in just as much danger as the Gems themselves.

"I'm working on it!" Dipper exclaimed defensively as his search grew more frantic. And while the next several pages he glanced over were useless to the current situation, sure enough, he soon happened upon exactly what they were looking for. "Aha! Here it is!"

Mabel was quick to join her brother in examining the page that had a very accurate drawing of one of the smaller centipeedles on it, though they both figured that if there were details on the little ones, then certainly the same information could be used on a super-sized one. "A common type of Gem monster, centipeedles can be identified by their pincher-like tails and their singular eyes," Dipper read the entry on centipeedles aloud. "The acid they spit is highly corrosive and highly toxic; avoid at all costs."

"Does it say anything about how to get rid of them?" Mabel asked, realizing that the journal was only telling them stuff they already knew.

"Let me see..." Dipper said, skimming the rest of the entry silently for a moment or two before finding a piece of pertinent information. "Centipeedles originate from a central mother, who must be defeated to eradicate the rest of the horde all at once. Like most Gem monsters, the centipeedle mother will poof away upon being badly damaged and must be contained in one of the Crystal Gems' bubbles to prevent regeneration."

"What does that mean?" Mabel asked in clear confusion. Dipper simply shrugged as he continued reading, not knowing what it meant himself, though he figured it wasn't immediately important.

"The centipeedle mother can be defeated through largely any method, though it should be noted that an effective way of stunning it is through electrocution."

"Electrocution!" Mabel exclaimed with a bright grin. "So all we gotta do is find a way to shock the mom and it'll explode! Bzzrt!" She playfully poked her brother's arm as she gleefully imitated an electrical noise, even if Dipper wasn't as outright elated at this discovery.

"It didn't say electrocuting it would defeat it," he said as he closed the journal and tucked it away inside his vest once more. "It said it would stun it."

"Stun, defeat, same thing," Mabel said with a shrug. "But we gotta go tell Steven so he can let those Crystal Gems know!"

"Hold it, you two!" both twins were completely startled as Stan entered the room, a firm scowl on
his face as he glowered down at them with his arms crossed. "You knuckleheads weren't thinking about going back outside, were you?"

Dipper and Mabel exchanged an apprehensive glance, knowing that, yet again, they had been caught red handed by their grunkle, who was apparently more perceptive than either of them had originally thought. "We… uh…" Dipper began, though Mabel was quick to cut in.

"We weren't really thinking about it as much as we were… going to… just… do it?" she ventured with a sheepish grin, realizing that she had failed to come up with something clever.

Stan sighed in aggravation as he pinched the bridge of his nose tiredly. "You two just don't know when to give up, do you? Why do you kids insist on giving me a headache?"

"Why do you insist on being so mysterious all the time?" Dipper asked, tired of Stan never giving them any direct answers. "What do you have against the Crystal Gems?"

Stan scoffed upon hearing this question, though it was clear that it had taken him off guard. "I don't have anything against those three," he said, rolling his eyes. "I just don't appreciate it when they drag their disasters onto my property."

"So… this has happened before?" Mabel asked with a frown.

"Well of course it has!" Stan said, clearly growing frustration with this interrogation. "We live five minutes away from each other for crying out loud! They're always causing trouble around here, claiming that they're just 'protecting humanity' or whatever. All three of them are nuisances, including that Steven kid who hangs around with them, and I wish you kids would just take after me for once and steer clear of them."

"But we know how to get rid of the monsters outside!" Mabel protested. "Don't you want the Gems to defeat them and keep the shack safe?"

"All I want is those Gems out of my hair," Stan said stubbornly, not about to budge on his firm stance at all. That is, until Dipper came up with an argument he was certain would wear their miserly grunkle down.

"You know, Grunkle Stan, as long as those monsters are outside, they're going to scare tourists away from the shack," he said a bit leadingly as Mabel, already knowing where her brother was going with this, did her best to stifle a smirk.

"So what?" Stan asked indifferently.

"So… until someone gets rid of them, you won't be making any money," Dipper said, knowing that cash was by far Stan's weakness.

It only took Stan a moment to relent upon hearing this, but he still did so begrudgingly nonetheless. "Fine," he said, waving them away to go tell Steven and the Gems what they somehow knew. "But just this once. We are not making this a habit this summer."

The twins shared a triumphant grin as they turned to hurry out before Stan changed his mind, but right before they could rush out the door, he stopped them once more. "Wait, kids," he said, prompting both of them to turn around in sudden nervousness that he was going to renig on his choice. However, he did the exact opposite as he instead flashed them a daring, surprisingly encouraging grin. "Make those eyesores pay for messing with the Mystery Shack."

Though quite surprised by this sudden affirmation, both Dipper and Mabel smiled and nodded, a
sudden, newfound understanding formed between them and their stubborn old grunkle as they boldly headed outside into the thick of the fray.

Steven and Connie paced around on the shack's porch anxiously, both of them racking their brains for some sort of plan or idea. Thankfully, the smaller centipeedles were paying them no mind as they huddled against their mother, who was still relentlessly attacking the Gems. The only reason why the two youths had stayed upon the porch instead of rushing forward to help was because Connie had somehow managed to convince Steven that they needed a plan before they tried to aid the Gems. The only problem they faced was trying to actually come up with said plan.

"Maybe if we found a huge rock and threw it at the monster…" Steven began relaying his newest idea, though Connie was quick to shoot it down using practical thinking.

"Steven, even if we could find a rock like that, how would just the two of us pick it up and throw it at that thing?" she asked with a frown.

"We could get help!" Steven exclaimed, hopeful. "We could ask Mr. Pines, and Soos and Wendy! And Dipper and Mabel too! Where did they all go?" he asked, having not even realized that they had all gone inside in all of the chaos.

"We're right here!" Mabel exclaimed with a dramatic flair, taking advantage of the perfect timing as her and Dipper emerged from the shack and onto the porch.

"Great!" Steven exclaimed with an excited smile. "You guys are just in time! Now we just gotta find a big rock so we can throw it at-"

"Uh, I don't think any rocks will be needed, Steven," Dipper said as he pulled out the journal. "We figured something out."

"You mean that book has information on that thing?" Connie asked, intrigued.

"Yeah!" Mabel quipped enthusiastically. "It says all we gotta do is give it a good shock and it'll be out of our hair for good!"

"Awesome!" Steven said, already more than ready to leap into action. "We should tell the Gems! I bet they know a way to shock it!"

"But how are we going to get past that thing?" Dipper asked apprehensively, watching as the centipeedle mother unleashed another wave of acid on the trees the Gems were hiding behind.

Everyone pondered this problem for a moment or two before Steven took charge. "I got an idea!" he exclaimed, leaping off of the porch. "Everyone! Follow me!"

Though the Gems never liked to admit it, they weren't faring well in this battle. They had fought centipeedles in the past before, but they had only managed to take down a mother once in the past, with Rose Quartz bravely leading them in the charge against the massive monstrosity years ago. Now, however, Rose was gone and Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl were left to fight the centipeedle mother on their own, or, more accurately, hide from it, which was what they were doing as they continued to retreat deeper into the nearby forest as the mother's acid continued to obliterate more and more trees. The only thing the Gems could really take solace in as their minds frantically rushed for a plan was the fact that both Steven and Connie had actually listened to them and remained on the porch instead of brazenly trying to take on the centipeedles themselves.
All three of the Gems cringed as the mother hissed and spit out even more corrosive fluid, already starting to wear down the tree line they were currently hiding behind. "What are we going to?" Pearl exclaimed in a panic amidst the sound of the decaying trees behind them. Even though the question was directed at her, Garnet simply clung onto the quickly burning tree she had once used as shelter, before she suddenly used her formidable strength to rip it out of the ground, roots and all, and hurl it at the centipeedle mother. The monster squarely caught the tree in its large jaws however, and it easily obliterated what was left of it upon chomping down.

"You know, we could really use Steven's shield right about now!" Amethyst huffed as she glanced out from behind the tree that was concealing her, only to immediately press herself against it once more to avoid being hit with acid.

"Yes…" Pearl said, her tone someone forlorn as she recalled how Rose had used that very same shield to protect them countless times in the past. "But it's for the best that he stays safe and out of the way. After all, who knows what would happen if he-"

"Hey!" Steven's voice suddenly shouted boldly as the centipeedle mother was struck with a small pebble from behind, diverting its attention away from the Gems at long last. "Leave them alone!"

Immediately, all three Gems peeked around the trees they were taking cover behind, fear and panic filling them as they saw their young charge standing ready to face off against the centipeedle mother alongside Connie and two other children the Gems were not familiar with. But all the same, Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl weren't about to let Steven, or anyone else for that matter, get hurt on their watch.

As the centipeedle mother turned its massive head and its acid-dripping maw to face them, Steven, Connie, Dipper, and Mabel all immediately realized they had made a mistake. Though it was nearly impossible to read the creature's expression thanks to its singular eye, it was still easy to tell it was irritated by its body language alone. The centipeedle mother let out another piercing screech as it began to slink towards them with its many legs, thankfully not opting to spit acid at them this time and instead go for a more direct attack.

"Ok, so maybe I should have thought this idea through more!" Steven exclaimed a bit sheepishly as all four of them began a collective, hasty retreat in order to put some distance between them and the monster.

"You think?!" Dipper retorted, glancing over his shoulder to see that the centipeedle mother was indeed gaining on them in strides, its jaw continually clamping open and closed threateningly.

"We have to save them!" Pearl exclaimed worriedly as she prepared to emerge from behind the tree. However, before any of the Gems could really do anything, the centipeedle's huge pincher-tail snapped closed across the tree line, cutting several of the trees in half as the Gems narrowly avoided meeting the same fate by ducking down behind them first.

"Can we save ourselves first!?" Amethyst asked pointedly, just as clueless about what to do as before.

"Steven! What do we do!?" Connie shouted fearfully as her, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel continued to hurry away from the centipeedle mother as fast as they reasonably could.

"Uh… Well…" Steven stammered as he desperately tried to come up with a new plan, but it was difficult considering the only things filling him now were fear and adrenaline.

"What we need right now is a huge thunderstorm!" Mabel said, keeping pace with the others even
though she could easily run faster. "Maybe then we could get lucky enough for a lightning bolt to strike that monster right in its giant eyeball!"

"Good luck with that," Dipper scoffed, knowing the chances for a thunderstorm at that moment were nigh impossible. "There's not a cloud in the sky!"

"Wait, no!" Steven exclaimed with a sudden grin. "She's right! A storm's exactly what we need right now! And I know exactly who can bring the thunder and the lightning! If you know what I mean."

Connie, Dipper, and Mabel all gave him a look of absolute confusion, not catching his drift at all, but then again, Steven didn't really need them to. All he really needed was to catch the Gem's attention, which, he figured, considering their current predicament, wouldn't be too terribly hard.

"Hey, you guys!" he called out to the Gems, who were scrambling to come up with a strategy that wouldn't put the kids in any more danger than they were already in. However, this did not go unnoticed by the centipeedle mother, who let out a shrill hiss before it spat out another stream of acid, which all four kids managed to frantically leap out of the way just in time.

"Steven!" Garnet called upon seeing this, quickly rising to stand even though the mother's pinchers were still snapping aggressively. Thankfully, the steadfast leader of the Gems managed to catch them just in time and, though she was clearly struggling against their great force, she somehow found the strength to hold them off and push them back. "Go!" she shouted to Amethyst and Pearl, commanding them to aid the kids in any way possible. The other two Gems didn't hesitate to heed her order as they leapt into action, already racing to the fray with their weapons at the ready.

"You guys, listen!" Steven called out as he picked himself up off the ground in the aftermath of the centipeedle mother's attack. He paused for a brief moment to gather his bearings once more as he realized Amethyst and Pearl were on their way, with Garnet still holding back the monster's pinchers, and Connie, Dipper, and Mabel were still recovering from the mother's attack several feet away from him. However, it was clear that the latter group was the centipeedle's new target, as it began to rear up and prepare another stream of acid to launch their way. Steven took in a frighten gasp as he realized that, even despite their usual speed, Pearl and Amethyst wouldn't make it in time to rescue them, and thanks to their close proximity to the shack, they were relatively cornered with nowhere to run. Which was why, as the centipeedle mother began to spit its fresh stream of acid at his unprepared friends that Steven, half on instinct and half because he had no better ideas, recklessly threw himself directly into the line of fire.

"Steven!" all three Gems practically screamed in absolute horror as time seemed to both speed up and slow to a crawl all at once. None of them were able to stop the centipeedle mother from unleashing its acid upon the kids, but what no one, not even Steven himself had been expecting was the nearly-blinding pink glow that enveloped the entire area. And, when the light faded a bit, they were all met with a surprising sight.

Steven, Connie, Dipper, and Mabel were the first ones to notice that the centipeedle mother's acid had been averted away from them, having struck the surface that had suddenly and miraculously appeared between them and the centipeedle: a shield. The circular pink shield bore a spiral, thorny design that rounded out to a central rose design, and its entire surface seemed to shimmer beautifully even as the remnants of the centipeedle's acid dripped down it. The kids all stared at it with their jaws dropped and the Gems themselves paused as they looked upon it in both relief and amazement, but no one was more awed that Steven, who was simply trying to wrap his head around the fact that he had somehow managed to summon his shield for the second time ever. He glanced down to see that his gem was glowing underneath his shirt, keeping his shield's integrity
up, even if he had no idea how this was even happening in the first place. After all, it wasn't like he had been trying to call upon the shield at all; he had merely been trying to keep his friends safe, regardless of the cost.

"How are you doing that?" Dipper asked Steven in bewilderment, having made the connection between the shield and his steadily glowing gem.

"Uh… I'm… not really sure…" Steven said with a shrug, still holding his arms open wide in hopes that the shield would stay longer, however, it was already starting to fade away, leaving them vulnerable to the centipeedle mother's wrath once more.

"Steven!" Amethyst and Pearl exclaimed in unison, having broken out of their initial shock to begin their pursuit once more.

"Oh, that's right!" Steven said, suddenly remembering the task at hand as his shield unceremoniously disappeared. "Guys! You have to shock the monster!"

"Shock?" Amethyst asked with uncertainty. "As in... electrocute it?"

"What?" Pearl scoffed, also not buying it. "But how do you know-"

Before Pearl could even finish her question, the centipeedle mother suddenly let out a piercing cry as its entire long body jolted with an electrical charge, its white mane sticking straight up as it attempted to backpedal in pain. Everyone turned to see that Garnet had already heeded Steven's advice, despite Pearl and Amethyst's doubts, as an electrical current flowed from her gauntlets and into the centipeedle's pinchers, painfully coursing through the rest of its body. "Gems! Weapons!" she commanded firmly, letting the resistant electricity do its job as she leaped high into the air to join her teammates. "Let's go," Garnet said as all three Gems stood together, prompting them to leap into action.

The centipeedle mother continued to writhe in stunned pain as the kids watched with amazement as all three Crystal Gems pounced upon it. Amethyst was the first to launch an offensive as she smoothly coiled her whip around its neck and wrangled it down, allowing Pearl to squarely wedge one of her spears between its wide open jaws to keep them from shutting. From there, Garnet landed the final blow, all while the mother was still incapacitated, by pounding away at the eyeball at the back of its throat with a single, unforgiving punch.

With one final agonized scream, the centipeedle mother suddenly burst in its entirety, its long body poofing into a cloud of smoke that quickly faded away to reveal all that remained of the dreaded beast: a small, lone, round green gem. All of the smaller centipeedles immediately vanished away as the gem bounced down on the ground, rolling until it landed underneath Garnet's foot. The leader of the Gems lowered her hand to it, using magic to surround it in a maroon glow that soon turned into a small, translucent bubble that had the gem contained inside. Garnet's expression remained as stoic as ever as she brought the bubble up to her level, before merely waving her hand to somehow make it disappear from sight once and for all.

"That was so cool, you guys!" Steven cheered as he ran up to the Gems, whose weapons disappeared at will now that the danger was averted. "That monster didn't know what hit him! … Or her… Or whatever it was."

"Thank you, Steven," Pearl said with astute satisfaction in a job well done. "But I doubt we can take all of the credit for this victory."

"Yeah!" Amethyst chimed in as she gave Steven an affectionate noogie. "You summoning your
shield was awesome! And how'd you know that thing about electrocuting it? It worked great!"

"I owe that to my new friends, Dipper and Mabel!" Steven said with a wide grin as he glanced behind him to see the twins approaching with Connie, all three of them having taken the time to catch their breaths after the dangerous ordeal they had narrowly survived.

"Hello," Garnet greeted the twins amicably enough, despite the fact that she was as monotone as ever. "We are the Crystal Gems."

Before either Dipper or Mabel could introduce themselves in return, Steven eagerly jumped on the impromptu idea that suddenly occurred to him, and as a response, he burst into a zealous song. "We'll always save the day!" he sang cheerfully as he came to stand amidst the Gems, who, much like Connie and the twins, gave him curious looks. "And if you think we can't, we'll always find a way!"

By now though, the Gems were catching onto what he was doing as Garnet joined her own melodious voice in. "That's why the people of this world…" she continued as Steven cued her in, with Pearl and Amethyst jumping in to harmonize perfectly to the bouncy tune.

"Believe in—" Steven sang on with a huge grin before pointing to the Gems to take it away.

"Garnet," the leader of the Gems sang as she took up a pose of authority, showing off the maroon gemstones upon both of her palms.

"Amethyst," the purple Gem chimed in lightheartedly, pulling down her top just a little to expose her own gem more.

"And Pearl!" the white Gem trilled elegantly as she gestured to the gem resting on her forehead.

"And Steven!" Steven wholeheartedly shouted the last lyric of the song as he lifted up his shirt to reveal the pink gem on his stomach, completely overjoyed that the Gems had aided him in his unplanned serenade.

Though the sudden break-out into song had come completely out of nowhere, Dipper, Mabel, and Connie all laughingly applauded it, having enjoyed it all the same. Already more than excited about finally getting to meet the rumored "magical women" she kept hearing so much about, Mabel raced ahead of her brother to greet the Gems, shaking each of their hands excitedly, even if they were a bit perplexed by her enthusiasm. "Hiya! The name's Mabel! And that's my brother Dipper! So do you guys beat up giant monsters like that all the time?"

"Well, I wouldn't say all the time…" Pearl mused, taking what Mabel had said a bit too literally. "On a daily basis would be more accurate."

"It's all in a day's work in keeping you humans safe," Amethyst said with a casual, somewhat teasing grin.

"So… what exactly are you?" Dipper asked the Gems a bit warily after finally joining Mabel, knowing that if the Gems didn't refer to themselves as human, then they had to be something… other than human.

"Didn't you hear the song, kid?" Amethyst asked rather sarcastically. "We're the Crystal Gems!"

"And they always save the day!" Mabel added cheerfully, with Steven ready to leap in and begin a
refrain of the song, though before they could, Dipper was quick to cut in and rephrase his previous question.

"But, you guys aren't actually... gem-gems, are you?" he asked, thinking such an idea to be preposterous, though he wasn't exactly sure how else to phrase it.

"Simplified down to our most basic forms, actually, we are," Pearl clarified eloquently, unable to deny that she appreciated this young human's curiosity. "Unlike humans, we don't have organic beings. Our bodies are actually projections generated by our gemstones," she explained, motioning to her own gem.

"So... you're basically like holograms... but with mass?" Dipper asked inquisitively, still trying to wrap his head around this somewhat bewildering concept.

"Exactly!" Pearl said with a nod and a grin. "That's a perfect way of putting it."

"Hey, Garnet," Amethyst chuckled impishly as she elbowed the Gem leader. "Nice mass."

"I know," Garnet said with a small, amused grin as she adjusted her shades.

"Dipper and Mabel are staying here at the Mystery Shack for the summer," Steven informed the Gems. "Mr. Pines is their great uncle!"

"Huh, Stan's never mentioned that he has a niece and nephew before..." Amethyst mused, though she was still smirking lightly. "Your uncle and us go way back," she said a bit jokingly to the twins, though Pearl merely brushed her comment off with a scoff.

"No we don't," the white Gem said as she crossed her arms with slight distain. "Just because you like to go off gallivanting with Stan and getting into trouble every now and again doesn't mean we do, or that we even support such unruly behavior. Right, Garnet?"

"I'm not involved in this," Garnet said succinctly, smartly choosing not to stoke the fires of another potential argument between her teammates. However, they were thankfully interrupted before one could even begin, as Stan ironically enough emerged from the shack to see that his yard was finally clear of monsters, though, much to his dismay, not of Gems.

"Hey! Speak of the devil!" Amethyst greeted him with a rowdy laugh. "We took care of your little pest problem for ya!"

"I can see that," Stan said, though he still did glance over the area once more to make sure no centipeedles who might threaten his chances of making money remained. "So... what? Do you three want me to pay you or something?" he asked, hating to even pose that question, for even if the Gems did request monetary retribution, he would go out of his way to find a way to avoid giving it.

"Oh, no, thank you," Pearl said rather coldly, turning her nose up a bit at the offer. "We have no need for any of your human currency. We simply take pride in protecting all members of the human race from any threat. ...No matter who they might be."

Stan scoffed bitterly upon hearing the white Gem's biting remarks as he mimicked her proclamation under his breath, though she didn't hear it as she turned to Steven instead. "Now, come along, Steven," she said with a much more complacent tone. "It's getting late. Time to say goodbye and head back to the temple for the night."

"Aw... already?" Steven asked with a frown of disappointment as he glanced up at the sky and did
notice that it was starting to turn shades of pink and violet with the setting sun.

"Actually, I should be heading home too…" Connie said with a frown, knowing that her mother would get after her if she was out too late. "But maybe we can hang out again tomorrow!"

"Yeah!" Mabel cheered enthusiastically. "And maybe we could go check out that temple you were telling us about, Steven!"

"Oh, yeah!" Steven exclaimed, already fully on board with this plan as he turned to the Gems to ask for their permission. "Can they? Please?"

Garnet simply shrugged, despite the fact that Pearl was about to protest. "I don't see why not," she said evenly.

The kids all shared their happy reactions to this, with Steven and Mabel openly cheering and high-fiving to show their excitement as both Dipper and Connie simply laughed in amusement at their equal verve. Their celebrating was soon ended, however, as the Gems called for Steven once more and Connie begrudgingly took her own leave to go home.

"Bye, you guys!" Steven bid farewell to the twins with a bright grin as he trailed behind the Gems back to the temple. "See you later!"

"Bye!" both Dipper and Mabel called back with equal friendly smiles, despite the fact that, in light of the eventful day they had, they were both very worn out. As soon as Steven and the Gems were gone, both twins tiredly plopped down on the ground to take a much needed rest as they sat back-to-back in the newfound calm of the evening. Or at least they did for about a minute before Stan abruptly broke through that calm.

"Alright, you two," he said gruffly as he crossed his arms and glowered down at his niece and nephew. "You 'saved the day' or whatever, so I'm sure two busy-body little 'heroes' like you would have no problems helping fix up the damage those monsters caused."

Dipper and Mabel wearily looked over to the shack to see what their grunkle was talking about, and indeed, it did look a little worse off than it had been before, with several spots in its wooden exterior having been burnt through thanks to the centipeedles' acid and a few of the porch's beams having been crashed into during the earlier battle against them. However, neither twin was too keen on getting up at the moment at all, much less do any sort of manual labor.

"Ugh, Grunkle Stan, do we have to?" Dipper moaned, trying his best to project exhaustion so that Stan might go a bit easier on them.

"Yeah, we're so tired!" Mabel added, letting out a big, albeit somewhat fake, yawn.

"So what?" Stan asked unsympathetically. "I'm tired all the time. Doesn't keep me from getting things done. Besides, you two are young; you should be chock full of energy! Now get on in here and help clean this mess up! I would have had the Gems do it, but I'm sure Pearl would have gone into this big long spiel about how it's 'above them' or some garbage like that." Stan continued to complain about the Gems to himself as he headed on inside, leaving the twins to follow him in. However, they didn't do so immediately, instead opting to take at least one more moment of rest and, oddly enough, reflection over everything that had just happened in the last several hours.

"That was crazy," Dipper said, still trying to process the events of the past day alone, including meeting Steven and the Gems, finding the journal, and narrowly escaping death at the maw of the centipeedle mother.
"Yeah," Mabel agreed, though she was grinning to herself. "But you gotta admit; it was a ton of fun."

"It was," Dipper said with a small laugh, unable to deny that even as dangerous and hectic as the day had been, when it came right down to it, he had still enjoyed himself. "What do you say the chances of the entire summer being like this are?" he asked his sister as he rose to stand and extended a hand to her to help her do the same.

"I'd say they're pretty good," Mabel grinned as she accepted her brother's hand and stood, hoping that the rest of the summer would wield just as much action and intrigue as this day alone had. And indeed, both twins were firmly certain that as long as Steven and the Crystal Gems were around, then this summer would hold plenty of untold adventures and daring escapades in store for them all.
Chapter 6: The Legend of the Giant Woman

Chapter Summary

In which Pearl and Amethyst argue, the kids go on a monster hunt, and Stan misses hanging out with the twins (but his aim is getting better!)

Chapter Notes

Ok, so this chapter is ridiculously long, but oh well. That's what happens when you write episodic chapters! So this here is a lovely little combination between Legend of the Gobblewonker and Giant Woman, and I think it turned out rather well! So enjoy! (and review if you please!)

The mail often arrived quite early to the Crystal Temple, and though Steven usually slept through its delivery most mornings, this particular morning, he was up with the sun to anxiously await its arrival. The Gems had been on a mission when he woke up and hurriedly and excitedly prepared for the day before rushing down the path from the house to the mailbox, eagerly waiting beside it for the mail to come.

"Hey, Mr. Postman, bring me a post!" Steven cheerfully sang to himself to pass the time, keeping a careful watch on the woods surrounding the temple for any signs of the mailman. "Bring me the post that I love the most!"

Steven was just finishing up his song when the postman in question emerged along the path that came from town, just as he had been hoping for. "My song came true!" he exclaimed, bouncing up and down in excitement. "Hi, Jamie!" he greeted the young mailman enthusiastically. "Do you have a package for me today?"

"Hey there, Steven!" Jamie said with a friendly grin as he arrived at the mailbox, though he was quick to open his mailbag and begin to ruffle through it. "Let me see what I've got here… Hm… Did you order a loaf of bread with a stamp on it?" he asked as he pulled out exactly that.

"No," Steven said, shaking his head as he partially wondered why someone would mail order a loaf of bread.

"Did you order a jury summons for R.J. Finkle?" Jamie asked as he pulled out an envelope and briefly read over the label.

"No, that's not me, I'm Steven!" the boy said, growing more and more anxious. After all, he had patiently waited almost two weeks for shipping and handling on the package he had ordered; he figured it was about time for his waiting to finally pay off.
"Oh, right, right, Steven!" Jamie said with a laugh at the boy's verve as he pulled a rather bulky package from his bag. "Here it is, Steven Universe!"

"Yes!" Steven cheered as he gladly took the package. "This thing is gonna help me save the world!"

"Really?" Jamie asked, raising an eyebrow. "It says it's from Wacky Sacks Supply Company."

"Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl think I shouldn't go on magic adventures with them because I don't know how to use my Gem powers yet," Steven explained.

"That seems reasonable," Jamie mused, still smiling.

"But there are other ways I can help," Steven insisted as he grinned down at the box in his arms. "With a Wacky Sack?"

"Exactly!"

"Do you know how you can save my world?" Jamie laughed as he pulled out a signature pad and held it out to Steven. "Sign here, please."

"Sure thing!" Steven agreed as he quickly scribbled his name onto the pad.

"Thanks," Jamie said as he put the pad away once Steven was done. "Barb yells at me if I don't get signatures."

"That's awful!" Steven said with genuine sympathy, though he was soon distracted by a sudden burst of light emitting from his house behind him. "Oh! The Gems are back! I gotta go! Thanks, Jamie!"

"Wait, Steven!" Jamie called out after the boy, who was already bounding up the stairs to the house with his package in hand. "What is a Wacky Sack?"

The mailman's question went unanswered as Steven burst into the house, only to stop in the doorway as he took in the disarray before him.

"Hello, Steven," Garnet greeted calmly, white feathers randomly poking out of her slightly disheveled afro. Steven didn't even have time to ask the Gem leader what had happened before he was abruptly distracted by Pearl and Amethyst's bickering in the kitchen.

"Amethyst, we do not need that!" Pearl scolded, her hands on her hips as she watched Amethyst attempt to squeeze a large egg covered in light blue stars into the fridge. "It's not going to fit in there!"

"What?" the purple Gem scoffed as she rolled her eyes. "I totally got this." In one fluid movement, she pulled the middle tray out of the fridge, all of its former contents dropping onto the floor to create a mess of spilled milk and fallen bagels. Amethyst paid this no mind however as she finally managed to push the egg inside, letting out a triumphant laugh as she gave Pearl a smug grin. "See! It fits!" she said before carelessly slamming the fridge door shut. A cringe-worthy crack immediately followed, and the purple Gem didn't even need to open the fridge to know what had happened to her prize. "Oh man..." she sighed in disappointment before perking up a moment later. "Eh, I guess it's not a total loss. Now we can make a big omelet, or a quiche, or a huge sunny side up!"
"Amethyst!" Pearl exclaimed in exasperation, only imagining the disaster that awaited inside of the fridge.

"Ugh, come on, Pearl…” Amethyst groaned. "You're no fun anymore. This is why we never form Opal anymore."

Pearl scoffed as she crossed her arms. "We don't form Opal because you're difficult and a mess."

Amethyst took up an angry stance as she marched up to Pearl, refusing to take such belittling. "We don't form Opal because you're uptight and—"

The purple Gem didn't have time to finish her criticism before Steven jumped in between them, abruptly interrupting their argument only moments before Garnet had intended to. "Guys! Guys!" he exclaimed, having left his package at the door as he pushed the two Gems apart a little and looked to both of them with wondering eyes. "What's Opal?"

"Opal is the two of us," Amethyst said with a sly grin as she clasped her hands together dramatically. "Mashed together!"

Steven gave her a look of bewilderment, but thankfully, Pearl jumped into better explain the concept, though it was clear she was still embittered. "Is water just hydrogen and oxygen 'mashed' together?" she asked sardonically, though the only response she received were clueless looks from Steven and Amethyst. "Analogy wasted…"

"Steven, what Pearl and Amethyst are trying to say is that Opal is the fusion of both of their forms," Garnet cut in as she placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. "When they synchronize physically, mentally and emotionally, they can unite into a single, more powerful Gem."

"Whoa…” Steven said in awe, stars in his eyes as he turned to look between the other two Gems, who were still clearly at ends. "That's so cool! Tell me more about Opal!"

"Well, Steven," Amethyst began with a grin as she wrapped her arm around the younger Gem's shoulder. "She's an ultra-powerful, stone cold, Betty—that part's me. And she's like, kinda tall—that part's Pearl," she finished, dropping her voice down to a loud whisper that the white Gem could still clearly hear.

"As I tried saying earlier, Opal is not that simple," Pearl restated eloquently. "She is an amalgam of our combined magical and physical attributes fused into a single entity."

"Wow! So can you do it right now?" Steven pleaded, excited to see what the two of them might look like together. "Come on, form Opal!"

Both Amethyst and Pearl were quiet for a moment as they both looked to Garnet, who simply nodded in agreement with Steven, though both of the other Gems could tell it was something of a challenge. "Well?" she asked expectantly, her arms crossed as she gave them both a stoic expression.

"Uh… well…" Amethyst began, scratching the back of her neck as she glanced away from Pearl somewhat awkwardly.

"Garnet, you know we only fuse when it's absolutely necessary!" Pearl protested, even if she knew that rule could and had been bent before.

"Alright then," Garnet said evenly, even if both of the other Gems could tell that she was only letting the matter go out of necessity rather than anything else. "If you don't want to fuse, I won't
Amethyst and Pearl both let out collective sighs of relief, though they were barely audible under Steven's loud sigh of disappointment. "However," Garnet went on. "We should set out on our next mission immediately. We must retrieve the Geode beetles of Water and Earth."

"Oh! Oh! Guys, this is perfect!" Steven exclaimed excitedly as he rushed back over to the package lying near the door and began to open it.

"What? Why?" Pearl asked.

"Because when we find the beetles, I can help carry them in this!" In a flourish, Steven pulled out the item he had been anxiously awaiting for weeks and held it up for the Gems to see. "Ta da!"

All three Gems looked at the backpack Steven was triumphantly holding up, which, interestingly enough, was styled to look exactly like a cheeseburger, complete with fixings and all. "It's a... hamburger?" Pearl asked as she raised an eyebrow.

"It's a novelty backpack shaped like a cheeseburger!" Steven said proudly as he slipped it over his shoulders. "Isn't it cool?! Everything is a pocket! Even the cheese is a pocket! I bet I could fit all sorts of important Gem stuff in here! Like those beetles!"

"Oh... well... I'm not sure if this mission will be... safe enough for you to go on, Steven," Pearl said, wanting to let him down gently upon seeing how excited he was.

"He can come," Garnet said before Steven even had a chance to offer a rebuttal to Pearl. "After all, we are splitting up to get the beetles."

"Well, I'm going with not Pearl," Amethyst said stoutly as she crossed her arms and glared away from the white Gem, still bitter from earlier.

"Well that's perfect because I don't want to go with grammatically incorrect people anyway," Pearl retorted.

"Is she talking about me?" Steven whispered to Garnet amidst checking out the features of his cheeseburger backpack, even if he wasn't entirely sure what Pearl had meant by "grammatically incorrect". The Gem leader cracked a small smile at this as she shook her head, before addressing her teammates before another argument could break out between them.

"You three go together," Garnet said simply. "I go alone."

"What?! Why?" Amethyst and Pearl exclaimed in surprised unison.

"The Earth Beetle's at the bottom of a boiling lava lake, and only I can swim through lava," Garnet explained, waving her fingers over her shades as they magically transformed into a pair of swimming goggles of the same triangular shape. "You won't even need to warp to find the Water Beetle because it's located somewhere around Lake Gravity Falls. It's safer."

"You mean boring-er," Amethyst scoffed as she rolled her eyes.

"You mean more boring," Pearl corrected.

"So you agree with me."

Pearl shot her an annoyed look as she headed for the front door. "Come on, you two!" she called to
Steven and Amethyst as Garnet headed for the warp pad. "Let's go."

"Coming!" Steven exclaimed with a huge grin, always excited to accompany the Gems on a mission, especially now that he had his cheeseburger backpack to help them out. Amethyst lagged a bit behind the younger Gem on purpose, knowing that her sluggishness would further aggravate Pearl, which it certainly did.

"Steven!" Garnet called out after the trio once more before she warped to go on her solo mission. "Be sure to keep the harmony!"

"No problem!" Steven said with a firm salute as the Gem leader warped away, leaving him with his two quarreling teammates. "You heard what Garnet said, guys!" he said with an eager grin as all three of them stepped out of the door to head over to the lake. "Today's gonna be all about HARMON-Y!"

"Are you ready for the ultimate challenge?"

"I'm always ready."

"Then you know what this means," Mabel said, giving Dipper a daring grin as she held her bottle of maple syrup up a bit higher, more than ready to take her brother on in their breakfast-themed competition.

"Syrup race!" both twins declared simultaneously, and sure enough, the battle was on. Both of them tipped their respective syrup bottles back and anxiously waited for the sweet, sticky liquid to drip down onto their awaiting tongues. It was something of a slow process, especially since they had an unspoken rule to not tap the bottom of the bottles to coax the syrup out sooner, but Mabel emerged as the victor in the end as she got to taste the syrup first, even if she did manage to choke on it in her excitement.

"Yes!" Mabel cheered amidst her choking as she slammed her bottle of syrup down on the table. "I won!"

Dipper accepted his sister's triumph with a good-natured laugh as he turned his attention back to the magazine he had been leafing through before Mabel had challenged him to a syrup race. "Whoa, no way!" he exclaimed with interest as a certain ad caught his attention. "Mabel, check this out."

Mabel let out a gasp in intrigue as a huge grin lit up her face. "Human-sized hamster balls?!" she asked, thinking that such a thing was too good to be true. "I'm human-sized! It's like it was made for me!"

"No, not that," Dipper said as he pointed to what was on the opposite page. "This." The page in question advertised a monthly monster photo contest, with the previous month's winning entry being a photo of a monster that looked anything but intimidating. However, what really attracted the attention of both twins was the fact that it promoted a one thousand dollar prize for the winning photo. "We see weirder stuff than this every day!" Dipper insisted enthusiastically. "We didn't happen to get any pictures of those centipeedles from the other day, did we? Or the gnomes?"

"Nope, just memories," Mabel said as she shook her head. "And this beard hair," she said, holding up a lock of grey hair that clearly came from one of the gnomes they had faced off against several days ago.

"Why did you save that?" Dipper asked, somewhat disturbed.
Mabel simply glanced towards the gnome hair again and shrugged, not entirely sure of the answer to that question herself.

"Morning, knuckleheads," Stan greeted as he entered the kitchen, apparently in a strangely upbeat mood. "You two know what day it is?"

"Um… happy anniversary?" Dipper guessed, though based on Stan's immediate reaction, he was clearly wrong.

"Mazel tov!" Mabel cheerfully proclaimed nonetheless.

Stan rolled his eyes as he gave his great nephew a light whack on the back of the head with his newspaper. "It's family fun day, genius!" he clarified as he headed over to the fridge to get some milk. "We're cuttin' off work and having one of those, ya know…" he paused as he took the milk out and gave it a tentative sniff to make sure it was still fresh. "Bonding-type deals."

"Grunkle Stan, is this going to be anything like our last family bonding day?" Dipper asked with a frown, referring to the events that had taken place just a few days ago. "You know, when you forced us to help you make counterfeit money and said it was 'arts and crafts'."

"The county jail was so cold…" Mabel shuddered, recalling their brief stint there after they had been inevitably caught by the police.

"All right, so maybe I haven't been the best summer caretaker so far," Stan admitted. "But I swear, today we're gonna have some real family fun."

Both twins couldn't help but smile a bit at this, both of them genuinely curious to see what their grunkle had in store for the day, even if there was a large chance that it could either put them in significant danger or trouble. Nonetheless, Stan gaged their receptive reactions with an eager grin as he wrapped his arms around their shoulders. "Now, who wants to put on some blindfolds and get into my car?"

"Yay!" both twins cheered in excited unison, though Dipper was the first to realize the somewhat untoward implications of what Stan had just asked. "Wait, What?"

The ride to wherever Stan planned on taking the twins was a bumpy one to say the least, though that could very well have been attributed to Stan's less than exemplary driving skills. Not that either Dipper or Mabel could really see where they were going anyway, as their grunkle had been true to his word in blindfolding them both before they even got in the car. While they both had plenty of questions about their destination or about Stan's intentions, neither of them really bothered asking any of them as they tried to remain in steady sitting positions amidst their grunkle's reckless driving. It was both a marvel and a relief when the vehicle finally sputtered to a stop, most likely worse for wear as it had certainly collided with several various obstacles en route to their destination.

"Okay," Stan with a confident grin after they had unloaded out of the car. "Open em' up!"

Dipper and Mabel did as they were told and finally lifted their blindfolds to see really the last thing they had been expecting. They had both thought that Stan was taking them to a bank or a diamond mine or some other place where he could attempt to acquire money, most likely illegally, under the guise of family "bonding". But what they hadn't been anticipating was that he was taking them to the town lake.

Lake Gravity Falls, while not the largest lake in the world, was still fairly sizable, stretching
several miles wide and quite deep in many places. Its murky cerulean surface shimmered radiantly in the mid-morning sunshine, as the towering waterfall that the town was named for spilled into it far across from its shore. Upon the waters themselves were countless small boats and dinghies owned by various townsfolk, and if the banner stretching from the bait shack on the shore that read "Fishing Season: Opening Day" was any indication, then it was clear that they were all here for the same purpose.

"Ta da!" Stan chimed as he threw his arm out towards the lake, a huge, genuine grin on his face. "It's fishin' season!"

"Fishing?" Mabel repeated as her and Dipper exchanged a bewildered glance.

"What are you playing at, old man?" Dipper asked, raising an eyebrow at the sudden strangeness of this situation. After all, neither twin had known their grunkle to ever be too fond of fishing, and this impromptu rip had been too out of nowhere for it to not have any ulterior motives behind it.

"I'm not playing at anything," Stan said, and his innocence was surprisingly believable. "You kids will love it. The whole town's out here! And you know what they say: fishing is some quality family bonding."

"I don't think anyone says that," Mabel said with a sided frown. "Ever."

"Grunkle Stan, why do you wanna bond with us all of the sudden?" Dipper asked somewhat distrustfully, finally voicing the question that both twins had silently been wondering.

"Come on, this is gonna be great!" Stan said enthusiastically, not really providing much of an answer. "I've never had fishing buddies before. The guys down at the lodge won't go with me. They don't 'like' me or 'trust' me," he said, using air quotes to emphasize his point.

"I think he actually wants to fish with us," Mabel leaned over and whispered to Dipper, feeling somewhat sorry for their apparently lonely grunkle. That is, until he pulled out two homemade fishing hats from his back pocket.

"Hey, I know what'll cheer you sad sacks up," Stan said before slapping the hats on the twins' heads. "Pow! Custom-made Pines' family fishing hats! That's hand stitching, you know."

Though Stan was clearly proud of his handiwork, Dipper and Mabel were far less enthusiastic as they took the hats off to get a better look. Stan had embroidered the twins' names onto the hats, though Dipper's was shortened to "Dippy" and the L in Mabel peeled itself off as she was holding it. As if the prospect of having to muddle through the mind-numbing boredom of fishing in and of itself hadn't been bad enough, these embarrassing hats only proved to turn the twins off from this outing even more.

"Yep," Stan said as he held his hands on his hips in satisfaction, barely even noticing the fact that his niece and nephew were cringing as they looked at the hats. "It's just gonna be you two, me, and those goofy hats on a boat, out on the wide open lake, for ten hours!"

"Ten hours?" Dipper asked in dismay, knowing that the last thing he'd ever want to do for ten hours straight was fish.

"I brought the joke book!" Stan added cheerfully as he held up a copy of 1001 Yuk 'Em Ups, the "Uncle Approved" edition.

Both twins let out a unified gasp of horror at this, knowing that the only thing worse than both fishing and poorly-made hats were bad uncle jokes.
"There has to be a way out of this," Mabel said to Dipper, her tone deadly serious and desperate as they both shared the same exact same dread over the unfolding situation.

However, this dread quickly turned to hope as Dipper happened to spot three familiar figures heading down the shoreline. "There just might be..." he said with a small smile as he nodded in that direction, directing Mabel's gaze there as she joined him in his relief.

Pearl, Amethyst, and Steven were approaching the lake at a rather hurried speed, even if the former Gem trailed behind the two latter ones a bit. And yet he tried his best to keep up as he continued asking them question after curious question about the mysterious Opal, craving to know more behind the concept of fusion.

"So, when you fuse, do you turn into a giant giant woman, or just a regular-sized giant woman?" Steven asked, ignoring Amethyst's groan of exasperation. "Does one of you control the right arm and the other control the left arm?"

"Come along, Steven," Pearl urged as she glanced behind her, her expression just as aggravated as Amethyst's as she also refused to acknowledge Steven's inquiries about Opal.

"Wait! These are extremely important questions!" Steven exclaimed as he quickened his pace up a bit to catch up, only barely taking note of the fact that they had just about reached the lake. "What if you eat a hot dog? Whose stomach does it go into? Or do you share the same stomach? That would be gross!"

"Steven, please," Pearl said with a sigh of disdain. "You know Gems don't need to eat."

"But Amethyst likes to eat!"

"True 'dat!" Amethyst quipped casually.

"So would that mean that Opal would like to eat too?" Steven continued with his endless round of questions. "Or would she only like to eat sometimes, since you don't like to, Pearl?"

"Wha-" Pearl began to ask, before she decided not to even indulge such a ridiculous question as the trio finally came to a stop upon the lake's shore. "That doesn't matter right now, Steven. What matters is that we've finally arrived at the lake."

"And on opening day of fishing season too!" Steven exclaimed with a grin upon spotting the banner. "Cool!"

"So where's this Water Beetle at anyway?" Amethyst asked as she played with a lock of her hair absently.

"It's hard to say for certain..." Pearl mused as she glanced over the lake with a frown. "For all we know, it could be anywhere around here, even at the bottom of the lake itself..."

"Great," Amethyst said sarcastically. "Then we better get our swimming caps on, huh, Pearl? After all, you wouldn't want to mess up that 'perfect' point of yours," she teased, referring to the symmetrical point at the end of the white Gem's hair.

"Actually, it would be completely illogical for us to swim all the way down there," Pearl retorted pointedly as she crossed her arms. "Instead, I was thinking that we could use the nearby resources available to us to craft a vessel that could help us retrieve it. That is, if the beetle even is located in the lake bed... We should probably get to searching around for it first before we-"
"Hey! Look who it is!" Steven exclaimed with a bright grin as he caught sight of the twins, who had been discreetly waving at him to catch his attention and avoid Stan's for the past several minutes. "Dipper! Mabel! Mr. Pines!" he called as he ran towards the Pines family, leaving the two Gems to continue to quarrel quietly about their mission as they followed not too far behind.

"Oh, geez…" Stan groaned in aggravation as he turned to see Steven headed their way. "I can't even go one day without having to deal with them, can I?"

Despite their grunkle's apparent exasperation, Dipper and Mabel continued to share hopeful smiles as Steven hurried towards them, knowing that if anyone could save them from having to spend the whole day fishing with Stan, it was Steven and the Crystal Gems.

"Hey, Steven," Dipper greeted as him and Mabel walked passed Stan, who crossed his arms and glared away bitterly. "What are you guys doing out here?"

"Please tell us you aren't going fishing," Mabel pleaded in a whisper, making sure Stan couldn't hear her.

"Nope, but I wish we were! That sounds like a ton of fun!" Steven said optimistically. "We're actually here looking for a magical Gem thing called the Water Beetle. And when we find it, I'm gonna carry it back to the temple in this!" He promptly spun around to show the twins his cheeseburger backpack, and as he had hoped, they were both duly impressed by it, though Mabel moreso than Dipper.

"Steven, that backpack is the coolest thing I've ever seen!" she exclaimed with an excited grin, stars in her eyes as she inspected it more closely. "I'd take it with a side of fries!"

The kids shared a laugh at this, though it was short lived as the Gems arrived, as it was clear that neither Amethyst or Pearl were in much of a mood to converse with each other, much less anyone else. "I'm sorry, Steven," Pearl said a bit impatiently. "But there's no time for you to play with your friends right now. We have to start looking for the Water Beetle."

"Yeah," Amethyst added boredly. "The sooner we get this mission done, the better."

"Yeah, well, we can't stand around and chat all day either," Stan said succinctly, even though he had no desire to as he grabbed the twins by the shoulders and began to lead them away. "We have a full day of fishing ahead of us, right kids?"

Dipper and Mabel exchanged an unenthusiastic glance, knowing that the search mission that Steven and the Gems were on sounded infinitely more fun than fishing with Stan ever would. However, before they could protest, a sudden interruption fortunately sounded out from the other side of the shore.

"I SEEN IT! I SEEN IT AGAIN!" a frantic voice shouted from the dock, immediately catching everyone's attention. A hunched over old man with a long white beard and large, tattered brown hat broke through the crowd of fishermen on the dock, clearly in a panic as he scrambled onto the shore.

"Oh boy," Amethyst commented to Steven and the twins with a sarcastic grin. "Look out, everyone; crazy Old Man McGucket's having another one of his 'episodes'."

"The Gravity Falls Gobblewonker!" the old man, McGucket, shouted wildly as he ran across the shore, obviously not in his right mind. "Come quick before it scrab doodles away!" Upon proclaiming this, he broke out into a frenzied sort of dance, bouncing up and down wildly to
emphasize his point.

"Aww… He's doing a happy jig!" Mabel said with an amused smile, though it quickly vanished as McGucket, who had happened to overhear her, grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her feverishly.

"NOO! It's a jig of grave danger!" he shouted to both Mabel and Dipper, the fear in his wide eyes clear, however, before he could continue his untamed ranting and raving, the old man was chased back by the lake ranger.

"Hey! Hey!" the ranger scolded in warning as he used a spray bottle to douse McGucket with water in an attempt to calm him down. "Now what did I tell you about scaring away my customers? This is your last warning, Dad!"

"But I got proof this time, by gummy!" McGucket protested as he headed towards the dock, waving a hand to the crowd that had gathered to watch his episode. "Foller me!"

Curious to see where this was going, most members of the crowd did so, including the Pines family and the Gems. Once everyone was gathered on the dock, McGucket pointed a shaking finger down to a small wooden boat that had been completely split in half floating in the water, its broken ends splintered and raw. "BEHOLD!" he shouted in reference to the boat. "It's the Gobble-dy-wonker what done did it! It had a long neck like that bird there!" he exclaimed, pointing to Pearl and her somewhat long neck. The white Gem simply scoffed at the absurdity of being called a bird as she placed a hand against her neck self-consciously, ignoring Amethyst's teasing laughter. "And wrinkly skin," McGucket went on in his description. "Like… like this gentleman right here!" He shifted his pointing finger over to Stan, who had hardly been listening as he picked his ear absently and was quite surprised to be put on the spot.

"It chewed up my boat to smitheroons, and then it shim-shammed over to Scuttlebutt Island!" McGucket continued, clearly distraught and desperate to be believed. "You gotta believe me!"

The entirety of the crowd was silent for a long moment as they took all this in, though this silence was soon broken as the police boat pulled up to the dock, carrying on it Sherriff Blubbs and Deputy Durland, who were quick to comment on the situation.

"Attention all units!" Blubbs said into his intercom, before breaking into a sardonic grin. "We got ourselves a crazy old man!"

Most of the townsfolk were quick to break into a round of laughter upon hearing this, save for a handful that included Steven, Dipper, and Mabel, who couldn't help but feel somewhat sorry for the crazy hillbilly, and Pearl and Stan, who were rather apathetic towards the situation altogether. Seeing that no one was buying his outlandish tale, McGucket hung his head in disappointment as he began to walk off, muttering incoherently to himself as he did so. "Aww, donkey spittle! Banjo polish!"

The crowd was also relatively quick to disband as everyone returned to their previous activities, though the Pines and the Gems hung about on the dock afterwards.

"Well, that happened," Stan said was an indifferent shrug as he turned towards his own boat, a small, ramshackle wooden thing that barely looked like it was seaworthy at all. "Now," he said to the twins. "Let's untie this boat and get out on this lake!"

Dipper and Mabel largely ignored their grunkle as he went about untlying the boat as they instead conversed with Steven over what had just occurred. "Poor Mr. McGucket," Steven said with pity
for the old man. "I believed his story about the Gibble— Grubble— whatever that thing was called!"

"But did you guys hear what he said?" Dipper asked, an idea already forming in his mind concerning this rumored creature.

"'Aw, donkey shpittle!'" Mabel exclaimed, mimicking Old Man McGucket, broad arm swings and all.

"The other thing," Dipper said, rolling his eyes. "About the monster. If we can snag a photo of it, then we can split that prize."

"What prize?" Steven asked curiously.

"This one," Dipper said with a daring grin as he held up the magazine he had brought with him, showing Steven the page that detailed the monster photography contest. "The winner of this contest gets one thousand dollars. And if we win it, then each of us would get about three hundred a piece!"

"Whoa! Three hundred dollars!?" Steven exclaimed in awe. "Imagine what we could do with all that money!"

"Oh, I already know what I'd do with my share," Mabel said as she fantasized it in her head. "Four words: Human. Sized. Hamster. Ball!" She let out a scree of excitement as she pictured how amazing it would be to run around all over town inside of a giant hamster ball. "Dipper, I am one hundred percent on board with this!"

"So am I!" Steven agreed whole-heartedly. "With three hundred dollars, I bet I could buy a whole collection of Wacky Sacks! I could get the hot dog, and the root beer float, and the taco… and even the rare crepe messenger bag! I'd have a food-shaped backpack for every occasion!"

"Then it's on," Dipper said with determination in their plan as he turned to Stan, hoping that he could convince him to let them do this. "Grunkle Stan, change of plans. We're taking that boat to Scuttlebut Island and we're gonna find that Gobblewonker!"

"What?" Stan asked in obvious confusion, taken aback by this sudden turn of events.

"And can I go with them?" Steven asked Amethyst and Pearl with a hopeful smile. "Please?"

"Only if you count me in!" Amethyst said with a rogue grin. "I'm always down for a good monster hunt!"

"Yeah!" Steven cheered in excitement. "Monster hunt! Monster hunt!" Amethyst was quick to join in on his enthusiastic chanting, with Dipper and Mabel following not long after. "Monster hunt! Monster Hunt!"

"Excuse me," Pearl cut in succinctly, interrupting the overzealous excitement. "But we aren't going on a 'monster hunt'," she said, referring to herself, Amethyst, and Steven. "We have a beetle to find."

"Ugh, come on," Amethyst groaned in annoyance. "Don't be such a party-pooper, P."

"I am not being a party-pooper!" Pearl asserted. "I'm simply thinking realistically! For all we know, this 'Gobblewonker' or whatever it is, might not even exist!"
"But Pearl, what if the Gobblewonker is really a Gem monster?" Steven asked, hoping to change her mind. "Then shouldn't we get rid of it before it hurts anyone?"

"Well… I suppose, if that was the case, then yes, but-"

"Yay!" Steven exclaimed triumphantly before Pearl could continue, joining Amethyst, Dipper and Mabel in another round of cheers. "Monster hunt! Monster hunt!"

A sudden honking noise broke through their chant as a new boat pulled up to the dock, one that was by far superior to Stan's meager, leaky boat in every way. And while the boat itself wasn't familiar to any of them, its captain was.

"You dudes say somethin' about a monster hunt?" Soos asked as he turned from the wheel of his boat with a friendly smile.

"Soos!" all three kids exclaimed with bright smiles.

"Wassup, hambones," Soos greeted warmly. "You know, you dudes could totally use my boat for your hunt. It's got a steering wheel, chairs; normal boat stuff."

"I bet we could use that boat for beetle hunting too," Amethyst said as she elbowed Pearl's leg. "Unless you wanna go for a pretty long swim."

Pearl shot a warning glare at the purple Gem, even if she knew she was right. But even so, she refused to acknowledge that Amethyst's plan was actually a good one, especially since she could tell that both her and Steven were more enthusiastic about going after that monster that they were about looking for the Water Beetle. And though she didn't consent to this wild goose chase, she at the very least hoped, just as Amethyst did, that it would take Steven's mind off of continually urging them to form Opal.

Though Steven had managed to convince Amethyst and Pearl to go looking for the Gobblewonker, Dipper and Mabel were finding that they were having a harder time persuading Stan to let them go.

"All right, let's think this through," Stan said to the twins, trying his best not to get angry with them, though he could clearly see that they were being taken in by the allure of monster hunting with Soos, Steven, and the Gems. "You kids could waste your time on some epic monster-finding adventure… or you could spend the day learning how to tie knots and skewer worms with your Great Uncle Stan!"

Dipper and Mabel were silent for quite a while as they weighed their options. On one hand, they had Stan and his leaky old dinghy, and the promise of a boring day out on the lake trying to catch fish that probably wouldn't bite all while having to put up with their out-of-touch old grunkle. And on the other hand, there was the chance to search for the Gobblewonker, to have a real, exciting adventure that they could very well profit from quite a bit, all while hanging out with Soos, Steven, and the Gems and exploring the mysterious unknown that lurked underneath the depths of the lake. Neither twin had to put much thought into what option sounded like the most fun.

"So?" Stan asked with a hopeful grin, trusting that his niece and nephew would make the right choice. "Whaddya say?"

"We made the right choice!" Mabel proclaimed cheerfully as Soos's boat sped away from the dock with herself, Dipper, Steven, Amethyst, and Pearl on board. Neither twin felt much remorse about leaving their grunkle behind at the dock, knowing that he'd only sulk about being ditched for a while before going on to a boring day of fishing by his lonesome anyway. And besides, it made
little sense for them to hold any regrets when they had an exciting monster hunt awaiting them.

"Yeah!" Steven agreed heartily, glad that his new friends were joining in on this adventure. "We're gonna find that Gobblewonker!"

"After we find the Water Beetle," Pearl cut in firmly, even if she doubted that such a monster as the Gobblewonker even existed. "That's our first and foremost priority, remember?"

"Chill out, Pearl," Amethyst said as she reclined back in her chair casually. "We'll find the beetle. Can't you just hang back and go with the flow for once? Who knows? Looking for this monster might actually be fun."

"We're not here for fun," Pearl retorted. "We're here on a mission. And maybe if you took things more seriously, then you'd insist on getting it done, like I do."

Amethyst simply scoffed sarcastically at this, not even bothering to put forth the effort to offer a snappy reply this time. Meanwhile, the kids (and Soos) were busy at work planning out a strategy for tracking down the Gobblewonker.

"Alright," Dipper began, his tone formal and serious as he paced before Mabel, Soos, and Steven. "If we want to win this contest, we have to do it right. So, think; what's the number one problem with most monster hunts?"

"Oh! I know!" Steven exclaimed eagerly. "When you run out of snacks! That happened to me once when I was on a mission with the Gems and I would have given anything for just a few chips or a cookie!"

"Or if you're a side character," Soos began, putting forth his own suggestion. "Then you die within the first five minutes of the movie." He paused for a beat before reaching a startling realization. "Dudes, am I a side character??" he asked Mabel and Steven with sudden worry. "Do you ever think about stuff like that?"

"No and no," Dipper said, shooting down both Steven and Soos's rather naïve suggestions. "Camera trouble!" he clarified before going into an example. "Say Bigfoot shows up. Soos, be Bigfoot?"

Soos played along as he struck what he assumed to be a Bigfoot-like pose, complete with a leg up and his arms held up in a somewhat menacing position. As soon as Soos was in position, Dipper continued with his example. "There he is! Bigfoot!" he exclaimed, playing his acting up for the sake of the made-up scenario. "Uh oh! No camera!" he said as he patted down his life vest in search of one, before pulling a disposable camera out with a clever smile. "Oh wait, here's one! But, aw… no film! You see? You see what I'm doing here?" he asked, his tone serious once more as he hoped his point was getting across to the others.

"Oh, yeah," Soos said as both Steven and Mabel nodded in agreement. "Dude's got a point."

"That's why I brought seventeen disposable cameras," Dipper said confidently, before running through his stock. "Two on my ankle," he said as he pulled down his sock to reveal the two cameras hidden there. "Two in my jacket, three for each of you," he said as he handed three cameras to everyone on board. "And one…" he trailed off as he lifted his cap to reveal the final camera resting atop his head. "Under my hat! There's no way we're gonna miss this."

"Wow, Dipper," Pearl mused as she checked over her trio of cameras with a small, somewhat surprised grin. "I have to say, your thorough preparedness for this situation is quite impressive."
"Thank you," Dipper accepted her compliment with a nod, glad that someone appreciated his zeal for planning. "Ok, everyone; let's test our cameras out!"

The entirety of the group began to do so in different ways, though to varying degrees of success. Soos snapped a picture of himself, though he didn't anticipate the brightness and suddenness of its flash as it startled him and caused him to accidentally drop the camera overboard. "Aw, dude!" he exclaimed with dismay as he turned towards Dipper with a frown, but thankfully, the younger boy was not upset over its loss.

"You see? This is exactly why we need backup cameras," Dipper said, keeping his cool, though he hoped that no more cameras would be lost.

Unfortunately, such hopes were dashed only a second later as a seagull happened to fly just a few feet over Mabel's head, surprising her with a sudden skwak. "Ah! Bird!" she exclaimed as she instinctually threw one of her camera's up at it, losing it in the process.

"Fifteen!" Dipper exclaimed, keeping count and trying his best to remain calm. "Okay, guys, I repeat: don't lose your cameras!"

"Wait, what was that?" Steven asked, having not heard what Dipper had said as he tossed one of his cameras into the water with the idea that the fish could use it to take fun group photos. "Do lose the cameras?"

"DON'T!" Dipper stressed somewhat impatiently.

"Dude, I just threw another one away," Soos confessed.

"Oh… I kinda thought these were snacks for later…" Amethyst said after having swallowed one of her cameras whole, as she had always loved the taste of cheap plastic and metal combined.

"Twelve! All right! We still have twelve cameras-" Dipper froze upon throwing his fist down, inadvertently crushing the camera that had been resting on the cooler. "Eleven," he said with a frustrated sigh. "We have eleven cameras."

"So what's the plan?" Mabel asked. "Throw more cameras overboard or what?"

"NO!" Dipper exclaimed, refusing to lose more cameras at this point. "No. Okay. Mabel and Steven, you guys can be lookouts. Soos can work the steering wheel. Amethyst and Pearl, can you make sure we don't lose anymore cameras?"

"Sure thing, dude," Amethyst said with a yawn as she stretched out and closed her eyes, soaking in the sun as she prepared to settle into a nap. Pearl shot a distasteful glare at her, unamused by her usual laziness.

"Yes, I can," Pearl agreed pointedly, used to pulling most of the weight anyway. "And I suppose I'll have to keep an eye out for the Water Beetle as well."

"Really?" Amethyst asked with a coy grin as she cracked an eye open. "Thanks, P. I can always count on you."

"What are you gonna do, Dipper?" Steven asked curiously.

"I'll be captain," Dipper proclaimed with a grin, though Mabel was quick to protest the idea of her brother being in charge.
"What? Why do you get to be captain?" she asked with a pout. "What about Mabel, huh? Ma-bel! Ma-bel! Ma-bel!"

"I'm not sure that's a good idea…" Dipper said with a frown, knowing how much of a lose canon his sister could be.

"What about co-captain?"

"There's no such thing as co-captain."

Mabel said nothing for a moment as she came up with an on the spot plan to convince Dipper to let her hold some authority on this mission. "Hey, Pearl?" she asked the white Gem with an innocent smile. "Mind if I see what one of your cameras for a sec?"

"Um… sure?" Pearl consented in obvious confusion as she handed the girl one of her three cameras.

"Whoops," Mabel said with a caustic grin as she casually tossed the camera into the water, taking amusement in the look of panic on her brother's face.

"Okay, fine!" Dipper relented, internally making down their number of cameras to ten. "You can be co-captain!"

"Can I be associate co-captain?" Soos asked.

"As co-captain, I authorize this request," Mabel nodded.

"And can I be assistant to the captain and co-captain?" Steven asked, adding onto the already lengthy chain of command.

"Approved!" Mabel agreed, ignoring Dipper's sigh of aggravation over how everyone wanted to be in charge.

"Well as first co-captain, our number one order of business is to lure the monster out with this," Dipper said, motioning to the large barrel of fish foot resting on the far side of the boat.

"Permission to taste some?" Soos asked, giving the fish food a tentative look.

Though this was certainly an odd request, no harm would probably come from it, which was why Dipper nodded his consent. "Granted."

"Permission co-granted!" Mabel added.

"Permission associate granted!" Steven encouraged.

"Permission associate co-granted," Soos said as he scooped some of the fish food into his hand before giving it an experimental lick. Immediately, though, the bitterness of it got to him as he gaged, quickly trying to wipe his tongue clean from the taste of it. "Dude, I don't know what I expected that to taste like!"

The kids all got a good laugh from this, however, their amusement was only multiplied as Amethyst rushed forward, a hungry grin on her face as she leaped right into the barrel of fish food. "I wanna try some!" she exclaimed, boldly stuffy a whole fistful of the flakes into her mouth and actually enjoying them. "Mm! I dunno, Soos; I think this stuff is pretty great!"

Everyone laughed wholeheartedly as they watched Amethyst readily scarf more fish food down,
though it was clear that Pearl was not as amused by what she viewed as nothing more than a sign of the purple Gem's immaturity. Regardless, everyone aside from the white Gem was having more than their fair share of fun thus far, something that did not go unnoticed by the sole person on board an old dingy floating not too far away.

"Traitors!" Stan scoffed bitterly as he glared behind him towards Soos's boat, having overhead the sounds of merriment coming from that direction. Though Dipper and Mabel had abandoned him, he had gone out on the lake nonetheless, even if the fish weren't biting whatsoever and the lake wasn't big enough for him to distance himself too far away from them at any given time. But even so, the old con man was resilient; he wasn't about to let the fact that his own niece and nephew left him hanging ruin his fishing day. He would just adapt instead. "I'll just find my own fishing buddies!" he said to himself as he glanced over the lake before spotting a young couple sitting in a boat not too far away. "Aha!" Stan said with a newfound grin as he started his boat's rattling engine up. "There's my new pals!"

Of course, what Stan didn't know as he sailed towards his new "fishing buddies" was that the young man was in the midst of attempting to propose to his girlfriend. That is, until they were abruptly and rudely interrupted by a certain con man.

"Hey!" Stan called to the couple as he pulled his boat up, ignoring the looks of both surprise and distain they were shooting his way. "You two wanna hear a joke? Here goes: my ex-wife still misses me… but her aim is gettin' better!" He flashed a large grin as he waited for a reaction from the couple, only to get nothing from them but expressions of disgust for his off-color joke. "Her aim is gettin' better!" he tried once more, though he still didn't get so much as a chuckle from either of them. "Y'see, it's funny because marriage is terrible."

Upon hearing this, both the young man and the young woman let out appalled scoffs and didn't even humor Stan with a response as they succinctly rowed away, turning their noses up as they refused to so much as glance back at the older man, who called out after them in confusion. "What did I say?"

The waters surrounding Scuttlebutt Island were engulfed in a thick fog, one that even the boat's spotlight could not pierce through. Since the vessel was already on a guided course towards the island, Soos was positioned towards the back of the boat as he shoveled the fish food over the side in the hopes that it would attract the Gobblewonker. Everyone else stood towards the front of the boat, with Steven, Dipper, and Mabel at the railing keeping watch for the island through the fog. As the boat pushed onward, Steven happened to glance behind him at Amethyst and Pearl, frowning as he noticed they both stood facing away from each other, their sour expressions telling of the antagonistic feelings they had been harboring towards each other all day. Garnet had instructed him to keep the harmony, and Steven realized that he hadn't been doing a very good job of that thus far. So perhaps it was time to change that.

"You know…" Steven began as he turned to face the two Gems with an encouraging grin. "I bet Opal would be really helpful in finding the Gobblewonker…"

Pearl sighed in exasperation as Amethyst simply turned her gaze tightly on the fog-covered waters. "Steven, we only fuse in deadly situations," the white Gem reminded him, not noticing as a pelican landed on the railing beside her. "Does this look like a deadly situation to you?" No more than a second after she said this, the pelican suddenly pecked her harshly on the side of her head with its large beak, startling her and eliciting a cry of pain from her. "Ow! Hey! Bad pelican!" she scolded the bird as it fluttered its wings and squawked at her. "Shoo!" The pelican took off, but as it did so, Amethyst let out a rowdy laugh at what had just happened, unable to uphold her stoicism in light of
"Pearl's humorous suffering."

"Darn it," Steven said in disappointment as he hung his head. "I'm never going to get to see Opal…"

"Who's Opal?" Dipper asked Steven in confusion, which was a sentiment that Mabel shared as well.

"Opal is Amethyst and Pearl combined together into a giant woman," Steven said, still somewhat disheartened by the Gem's refusal to fuse. "I've never seen her before, so I've been trying to convince the two of them to form her all day, but they just don't seem to be getting along…"

"Wait, how does that even work?" Dipper asked, primarily concerned with the logic of what Steven had simplistically explained about fusion. "They don't actually combine into one person, do they?"

"Who cares? I wanna see a giant woman!" Mabel exclaimed with an excited grin, the very idea of fusion sounding incredible to her. "Steven, we gotta convince them to form Opal!"

"Exactly!" Steven agreed as he reached to his cheeseburger backpack and pulled out his small ukulele, which somehow fit inside of it. "And I think I know of a way to do it…"

Both Amethyst and Pearl were quite surprised to be drawn out of the stalemated silence that lingered between them by none other than Steven's singing, accompanied by an impromptu melody that he had devised on his ukulele. "All I wanna do is see you turn into a giant woman! A giant woman!" Steven began his upbeat, encouraging tune as he stood between the two quarreling Gems, grinning as he sang all the while. "All I wanna be is someone who gets to see a giant woman."

While Dipper was still trying to figure out the science behind fusion on his own, Mabel was more than happy to join in with Steven's song, turning the melody into a duet as it entered its second verse. "All I wanna do is help you turn into a giant woman. A giant woman!" the two of them sang in unison, both of them attempting to urge Amethyst and Pearl closer together physically, though neither of them were really having it. "All I wanna be is someone who gets to see a giant woman."

Steven took over the first part of the next verse as he looked to both Gems with pleading eyes, coming up with more than a few reasons as to why they should fuse. "Oh, I know it'll be great, and I just can't wait to see the person you are together!"

"If you give it a chance, you could do a huge dance, because you are a giant woman!" Mabel added with apt excitement as she sang perfectly in time with the chords Steven was playing on his ukulele, before the two of them joined into a duet once more.

"You might even like being together, and if you don't, it won't be forever," they sang, and though Amethyst and Pearl exchanged a glance at this, they quickly looked away from each other once more. "But if it were me, I'd really wanna be a giant woman. A giant woman!"

The song began to wind down as Steven slowed the pace of his playing, both him and Mabel flashing the Gems as convincing of smiles as they could muster. "All we wanna do is see you turn into a giant woman…" the finished easily, waiting for a reaction as the melody faded into the fog.

"I appreciate the… effort you both put into that song," Pearl began, hoping to let them down as easy as possible. "But no."

"Yeah, sorry, guys," Amethyst said, though she really wasn't. "But no amount of singing is gonna get me to fuse with her."
Pearl glared harshly at her, but merely crossed her arms and turned away without offering much of a retort. "Likewise," was all she said, her tone bitter and cross.

Steven and Mabel's shared disappointment as visible as they rejoined Dipper at the front railing, both of them still pining to see Opal in all of her supposed glory. But, the way things were going, it seemed as improbable as the fog surrounding them letting up.

"I really thought that would work," Steven said with a frown.

"Eh, don't worry," Mabel said with a shrug, confident that they would succeed eventually. "We can always try again later. And maybe next time we can add a choreographed dance number! If that doesn't convince them, I don't know what will!"

"I hate to break this up, but aren't you guys supposed to be on lookout?" Dipper asked them, still largely focused on their hunt for the Gobblewonker, even if he wanted to see Opal himself, though in a more low-key way than Mabel and Steven. The two of them gave him blank stares for a moment, having completely forgotten about their lookout position in the midst of their song and its aftermath. And yet they didn't really have any time to return to it as the boat suddenly jolted to a very abrupt stop upon meeting the shore of the island, its tip dug into the sand as everyone somehow managed to maintain their footing.

"Look out!" Steven exclaimed, even if he was a bit late.

"We are lookout geniuses!" Mabel said with a wide grin as she exchanged a high five with Steven before leaping off the boat and onto the shore. "Hamster ball, here I come!"

Scuttlebutt Island wasn't very large, consisting of only about a square mile of densely forested land, still enshrouded in the thick fog that rested upon the lake waters. There was a rather eerie silence to the place as the group disembarked the boat, only occasionally broken by the distant knocking of a woodpecker or the beating of a dragonfly's wings. As the group headed into the darkened forest, Dipper led the way with a lantern in hand to light the way, with Mabel, Steven, and Soos following not too far behind and Pearl and Amethyst keeping their distance from each other as much as possible. It wasn't very long into their trek that they passed by a sign bearing the island's name on it, which Steven, Mabel, and Soos were quick to stop in front of.

"Dudes, check it out," Soos said with a joking grin as he covered the part of the sign that read "scuttle" with his hand. "Butt Island."

"Oh, Soos, you rapscallion!" Mabel exclaimed as her and Steven both got a good laugh out of this. Amethyst also let out a chuckle, ignoring the look of aggravation Pearl was giving her for not taking their mission seriously and looking for the Water Beetle as she was.

"Hey!" Mabel said to Dipper as she suddenly caught up with him, noticing he was not taking part in their merriment. "Why aren't you laughing? Are you scared?"

"Pssh! Yeah right!" Dipper scoffed, even if his tone carried the slightest bit of uncertainty. "I'm not-"

"Yeah, you are!" Mabel proclaimed with a teasing grin as she poked her brother in the nose and blew a raspberry, before proceeding to assault him with a round of playful pokes.

"Hey!" Dipper exclaimed in protest, trying his best to block her pokes, though ultimately failing as he dropped his lantern. "Quit! Stop! Mabel!"

Mabel finally did relent as a low growling noise sounded in the distance, bringing everyone to a
stop as they all grew silent to listen to its intimidating snarl. "Dude, did you guys hear that?" Soos asked with a concern frown.

"Oh! I bet it was the monster!" Steven exclaimed, seeing this as another opportunity to try and convince the Gems for fuse. "Quick!" he said to Amethyst and Pearl. "You guys have to form Opal! If you don't then it will eat us all!"

"Steven…" both Pearl and Amethyst groaned in shared exasperation.

In paying attention to Steven and the Gems, Dipper failed to notice the possum that was scurrying towards the group from behind, that is, until it clamped its long jaw over the handle of the lantern lying on the ground and abruptly ran off with it. "Hey!" he called out after the possum angrily, watching with dismay as it carried their only real source of light off. "Our lantern! Ugh, I can't see anything!"

"Dude, I dunno…" Soos said with an uncertain frown now that they were all in the creepy darkness of the woods. "Maybe this isn't worth it…"

"Not worth it?" Dipper asked, not about to let this minor setback deter him in his search. "Guys, imagine what would happen if we got that picture! It's not just about the money; it's about the fame, the notoriety…"

"And being able to rub it in Grunkle Stan's face that we had more fun monster hunting than we would have had fishing!" Mabel added with a grin.

"You guys are right!" Steven enthusiastically agreed. "We just gotta look at this from a different angle. In fact… I bet Opal would be tall enough to get a great view over the entire island… That way we could find the Gobblewonker and the Water Beetle all at once!"

"We don't need Opal to find the Water Beetle or the monster," Pearl asserted firmly as the group continued to head deeper into the woods.

"Aw… Can you do it anyway?" Steven practically begged. "Pleeease? It would be easier, wouldn't it?"

"Not as easy as this!" Amethyst said as she pulled her whip out of her Gem and succinctly cut her way through the myriad of branches that were impairing their path.

"Wow, Amethyst, that was a really good idea!" Mabel exclaimed as she ran on ahead, Steven nodding in agreement with her sentiment as he joined her.

"Hah, I know," Amethyst said confidently as she smirked at Pearl, who only rolled her eyes in aggravation over the purple Gem's unneeded use of brute force. "I'm full of 'em."

Though the woods were still dark, at least the path was somewhat clear thanks to Amethyst. No one was really sure where or how they'd happen upon the Gobblewonker, or the Water Beetle for that matter, Dipper was confident that when they did happen to find the monster, they'd be more than ready to span the coveted picture of it. Of course, despite her brother's seriousness about their mission, Mabel didn't mind trying to spice their hike with an impromptu rap, accompanied by Soos's rhythmic beatboxing and Steven strumming his ukulele.

"My name is Mabel! It rhymes with table!" she rapped upbeately. "It also rhymes with… glabel! It also rhymes with… shmabel!"

"Dude, we should be writing this down," Soos said as he took a break from his beatboxing.
Suddenly, the growling noise from earlier sounded once more as the group neared the other end of the island, only this time it was louder and obviously closer than before. "Guys, wait!" Dipper exclaimed, already digging one of his cameras out of his life-vest. "Did you hear that?"

Mabel and Steven let out gasps of excitement as they heard the growling more clearly, realizing that they were getting closer to what they had been searching for all day. "This is it!" Dipper proclaimed with an eager grin.

"Yes!" Mabel shouted in a zealous whisper, giving her brother a playful punch, which he was glad to return. Steven bounced up and down on his toes in elation, more than ready to see the mysterious Gobblewonker. Soos, being a bit more apprehensive about what they might find, picked up a thick, sturdy stick lying on the ground nearby, just in case it was needed for self-defense. Of course, Amethyst and Pearl were more prepared as they summoned their weapons, neither of them sure if they would be needed, though they were better safe than sorry.

The entire group pressed onward into the fog, eventually emerging out of the woods and on the opposite shore of the island. They all immediately came to a stop at the end of the path, all of them gaping with awe upon seeing a very monster-like silhouette resting afar in the water. Not wanting to be spotted prematurely by the creature, they were all quick to take cover behind a large, nearby log, though Dipper peered up over it with one of his cameras at the ready before urging everyone else to do the same.

"Everyone! Get your cameras ready!" he whispered as they all aimed their cameras towards the silhouette on the lake. "Ready?" Dipper asked, a determined grin on his face as he held a finger over the camera's shutter, ready to snap that all-important photo at any second. "GO!"

At this command, Soos was the first to let out a battle cry as he leapt over the log, rushing towards the water as he snapped a barrage of uncalculated photos. The kids were all quick to follow after him, taking their own pictures of the silhouette as the Gems were the last to come out of hiding, both of them still clinging onto their weapons just in case. However, as the group neared the water, what the silhouette actually was became clearer as the fog lightened a bit, revealing a sight that disappointed them all. The "monster" was nothing more than the battered remains of an old, wrecked boat sticking up out of the water, a group of beavers cavorting upon it as they chattered to themselves cheerfully.

"Aww…" Steven said with a charmed smile by the adorable creatures. "Beavers! They're so cute!"

"But… I don't understand," Dipper said with a frown as he lowered his camera. "What was that noise then? I know I heard a monster noise!"

His confusion was soon laid to rest as the supposed "monster noise" sounded out once more, only now, its source was plainly visible. Oddly enough, it turned out to be nothing more than another beaver fiddling around with a rusty old chainsaw, occasionally turning it on and off at random intervals.

"Oh, sweet!" Amethyst laughed in amusement at the sight as she snapped a picture of it. "Beaver with a chainsaw!"

"Maybe that old guy was crazy after all…" Dipper said with a dejected sigh, bitter over the fact that they had wasted all this time on a hunch that had turned out to be nothing more than a hoax.

"He did use the word 'scrapdoodle'…" Mabel said with a frown.

"Well, it just goes to show that you shouldn't believe everything you hear," Pearl said as she
stepped forward, glad that they could finally put all of this monster nonsense behind them. "Now we can finally focusing on finding the Water Beetle as we should have been doing all this time."

"Yeah, yeah," Amethyst said with a bored wave of her hand. "We'll find the beetle. Quit obsessing over it."

"I am not obsessing!" Pearl exclaimed angrily. "I'm simply acknowledging that we need to find it! It could be anywhere on this lake and we still don't have the slightest lead as to where it is!"

"Maybe you should freak out some more," Amethyst said with a goading chuckle. "That's really gonna help us find it."

Pearl clenched her fists tightly at her side, not even noticing the saddened look Steven was giving both of the feuding Gems. "I can't believe your attitude, Amethyst," she scolded. "All day long, you've been slouching around doing nothing to help!"

"Hey, it's not my fault we can't find the dumb beetle!" Amethyst said defensively. "Why do you have to make things worse by squawking at me!?"

"I do NOT squawk!"

"Yeah, you do! You're squawking at me and commenting on my posture!"

"That wasn't squawking! THIS is squawking! SQUAWK! SQUAWK!"

The two Gems continued to argue loudly and fiercely, something that disappointed Steven even more than the fact that they had failed to find the Gobblewonker. All day long he had tried to keep the harmony, but in the face of Pearl and Amethyst's drastic differences in personality and ideals, that seemed impossible. And so, seeing that their respective goals for the day had all turned up being nothing more than busts, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel all let out a dejected sigh in unison, knowing that this was the last way they imagined this day to turn out.

"Look, when you're threading the line—a lot of people don't know this—but you wanna use a barrel knot," Stan said to the young boy he had happened upon and decided to teach his coveted fishing tips to, the very same tips he had wanted to teach Dipper and Mabel before they had abandoned him. "That's a secret from one fishing buddy to another!"

"Uh… I… who are you exactly?" the obviously frightened boy asked, unsure of why this strange old man was even conversing with him in the first place.

"Just call be your Grunkle Stan!" Stan proclaimed with a cheerful grin as he gave the boy a pat on the back, which only made the terrified youth jump in fear.

"Sir? SIR?" the boy's mother, who, along with his father, was standing just on the other end of the family's small boat, said, obviously disapproving of the interaction between them. "Why are you talking to our son? If you don't leave right now, I'm calling the police!"

Stan chuckled nervously upon catching the suspicious glares of the boy's parents. "Uh… you see, the thing about that is…" he trailed off, before quickly switching his boat's motor on and speeding away as fast as he could, not wanting to get the police involved again.

"Go bother your own kids!" the boy's mother called out after him angrily, shaking a fist in warning as Stan's boat puttered across the lake, carrying only one lonely passenger upon it.
"You know, Pearl, I think that old guy was right about you being a bird, because you sure do squawk like one!"

"Stop accusing me of squawking! At the very least I get things done efficiently, unlike you, Amethyst!"

"Hey! I get things done and I have fun doing it!"

Steven frowned as he glanced back at the two Gems, who were somehow still arguing just as fiercely as ever. "Darn it…" he sighed as he sat upon the shore of the island alongside Mabel, absentely drawing in the sand with his finger. "I can't believe we're not gonna get to see Opal or the Gobblewonker…"

"Tell me about it…" Mabel said, just as disappointed as he was. At least Soos was having fun as he continued to snap pictures of the beavers out on the wrecked boat, somehow blocking out Pear and Amethyst's continuous bickering.

"What are we gonna tell Grunkle Stan?" Dipper asked as he sat upon one of the large rocks resting in the water close to the shore. "We ditched him over nothing." Seeing as there was nothing better to do, he picked up one of the smaller pebbles resting on the stone he was sitting on and skipped it across the surface of the lake.

However, no more than a second later, a soft, sudden rumbling sent ripples across the otherwise calm waters, something that did not go unnoticed by Dipper. "Hey… Did you guys feel that?" he asked Mabel and Steven, who both shook their heads no. However, they did feel it as it the ground rattled once more, causing the rock that Dipper was sitting on to sink into the water as he fell in. He was quick to swim the short distance back to shore, and by now, everyone, save for Amethyst and Pearl, had their attention turned towards the lake as a tall, ominous silhouette moved through the mist further out on the lake.

"Wait…" Steven said as he strained his eyes to get a better look at the mysterious shape. "Is that…?"

"This is it!" Dipper exclaimed excitedly, his hope renewed as the silhouette clearly shifted about in the fog. "It's the real thing this time! Come on! This is our chance!" he encouraged as he took out a camera and began to snap pictures at the approaching figure. However, instead of trying to catch a photo of the silhouette, Steven, Mabel, and Soos all backed up in sudden apprehension, especially as they heard a sinister growl come from the lake. "What's wrong with you guys?" Dipper asked as he turned towards them in confusion upon seeing their fearful expressions.

"Dipper…?" Mabel whispered worriedly as she watched the monstrous figure begin to rise out of the lake.

"Dude…" Soos breathed in obvious shock, his jaw dropped nearly to the ground.

"Uh… Amethyst? Pearl?" Steven asked, his voice shaking a bit as he glanced back towards the arguing Gems, who barely heard him as they continued to fight.

"It's not that hard, you guys," Dipper said, clearly unaware of the danger right behind him. "All you gotta do is point and shoot. Like this!" At long last, he turned around to try and catch a picture of the monster, only to encounter the fearsome creature face to face.

The Gobblewonker certainly lived up to the terror surrounding it; it was a huge, menacing beast, its long, snakelike neck towering high into the air and its deadly, serpentine fangs overlapping its long
lower jaw. Its skin was dark green and scaly, its body wide and finned in many places, despite its rather small appendages that were clearly meant for maximum mobility in the water. Its eyes were a piercing, glowing yellow and its nostrils flared as it took in the scent of its potential prey.

The beast let out a bone-chilling, ravenous roar, one that startled even Pearl and Amethyst as they finally turned towards the monster in absolute shock, their ongoing argument finally dying out. Likewise, Dipper didn't even notice as his camera slipped out of his hands and fell to the ground as he stared at the Gobblewonker in frozen fear, before both Mabel and Steven thankfully brought him back to his senses as they began to drag him away as fast as they could.

"Run!" Soos shouted, and no one protested as they all turned and sped off in the opposite direction, hoping to get to the boat before the Gobblewonker could catch up with them. But of course, the monster perused them, growling ferociously all the while. In an attempt to take the massive beast out, Pearl summoned her spear as they ran and skillfully tossed it at the monster, though it was all for naught as the Gobblewonker swallowed the weapon whole.

"This thing isn't a Gem monster!" Pearl announced frantically, having not spotted a Gem on its large body anywhere.

"Who cares?!" Amethyst shouted back. "We gotta take it down, or we'll be as good as fish food!"

"You know what you guys could do?" Steven asked with an eager smile as he ran alongside them, hoping that this us situation would be enough to finally convince them to fuse.

"Not now, Steven!" Pearl exclaimed, unable to believe that he was still thinking about Opal when all of their lives were in mortal danger.

As the Gobblewonker let out another roar, everyone quickened their pace, knowing that there really was no plan for defeating the monster at the moment as much as there was a need to escape it. "Get back to the boat!" Soos called in a panic. "Hurry!"

Mabel let out a fearful yelp as the Gobblewonker snapped its massive maw at her, prompting her to leap onto Soos's back and hitch a ride. Steven was trying his best not to trip over his own two feet as he tried to keep apace with the Gems, who were infinitely faster than he was. At the same time, Dipper turned and tried to run backwards, his camera poised to snap what would certainly be a great picture of the Gobblewonker, considering its proximity to them. However, what he failed to see in doing so was the root sticking up out of the ground, that is, until it tripped him up and caused the camera to fall out of his hands. "The picture!" he exclaimed as he quickly picked himself up off the ground and raced to reclaim the camera, before Soos ultimately grabbed him for his own safety.

"Soos!" Dipper protested as he struggled against the handyman's secure hold.

"Dude, if it makes you feel any better, I got a ton of pictures of those beavers!" Soos said between heavy breaths.

"Why would that make me feel better?!" Dipper shouted angrily, knowing that all of the peril they were currently in would all be worth it if he could get just one good picture of the Gobblewonker.

Thankfully, the other end of the island soon came into view and with it, so did Soos's boat still nestled into the sandy shore. No one hesitated to hop on board and as soon as everyone had, Soos quickly shoved the boat back into the water before jumping on himself and starting the engine. The boat lurched backwards as everyone clung tightly onto the railing, watching with baited breath as the Gobblewonker leapt into the water and swam after them.
"All right!" Dipper exclaimed as he pulled out another camera and aimed it towards the Gobblewonker. "Here we go." However, as he looked through the viewfinder, he let out a dismayed scoffed at what he saw. "Cracked lens!? Soos! Quick, get a photo!"

Soos was, in fact, doing quite the opposite of that as he continued to steer the boat backwards, tossing all of his spare cameras at the Gobblewonker in the hopes that one would strike it enough to stun it. Amethyst joined him in doing the same thing as she let out a wild battle cry, one of her cameras actually managing to hit the monster in its snout, only enraged it more.

"Yeah, that's right!" Amethyst shouted at the monster challengingly. "Oh, what? You want some more? Well then take this!" she yelled as she threw another one of her cameras at the beast.

"Amethyst!" Pearl admonished harshly, knowing that now was not the time for such impertinence.

"What are you guys doing!?!" Dipper exclaimed in a panic, having no idea how many cameras were left now, though he imagined it wasn't that many.

"Oh, don't worry, dude!" Soos reassured him. "I still got one left!" He tossed his last camera Dipper's way, however, his aim was off as it missed him and instead crashed into the nearby cliff side that the boat was sticking close to. Of course, the camera shattered into several pieces upon impact, all of them falling into the water as Dipper merely face-palmed in aggravation, knowing that they were getting nowhere as far as getting a picture of the monster went.

The Gobblewonker was clearly tired of playing games with its prey as it dove down into the water, going deep enough so that it could no longer be easily seen. As Soos continued to push the boat as fast as it would go, the kids and the Gems all kept close to the railing as they peered into the water, keeping a close lookout for the monster that could easily swallow the boat whole if it managed to catch up with them.

Stan grumbled to himself in exasperation as he struggled to tie a fishing knot, getting nothing but a bundle of tangles out of his lure. Though he had been out on the lake for several hours now, he had nothing to show for it. He hadn't caught a single fish, nor had he successfully found any new "fishing buddies". Overall, the day thus far had been a miserable experience and he could only hope that the kids were having just as bad of a time as he was.

Of course, Stan's already sour mood worsened as he happened to overhear a particularly mushy conversation between a pair of young siblings and their grandfather on a boat that was only a few yards away from his.

"Can you pwease tell us mo'e funny stories, Pop Pop?" the young boy asked his grandfather, his tone sincere and admiring as he smiled at his elder.

"Anything for my fishing buddies!" the grandfather said cheerfully as he patted the children on their heads and let out a warm laugh.

Stan growled bitterly as he watched this exchange, knowing that, while it was certainly sappy, he had still hoped for similar shows of affection from his own niece and nephew before the day had gone south.

"Pop Pop?" the boy asked as he looked to his grandfather with the upmost respect. "I just weewized that… I wuv you."

"Aw, come on!" Stan shouted, no longer able to stomach this sickeningly sweet display. "Boo! Boo!"
"Hey, now! What's the big idea?" the grandfather asked the con man with a frown.

"Maybe he has no one who wuvs him, Pop Pop," the young boy said with a pitied expression.

"Yeah, well, I… I…" Stan began to say challengingly, but before he could finish, Soos's boat happened to sped right in front of him, carrying the panicking twins and Gems alike on it as it soaked the old con man with a spray of water. Stan let out a growl of frustration as he threw his wet hat to the bottom of the boat before ultimately sitting down and sighing in disappointment. Clearly, this day wasn't going to get any better; the twins were obviously off on some epic adventure with Soos and the Gems, probably not even thinking about their old grunkle at all, and so he figured that the only thing to do now was just give up.

After all, this wouldn't be the first time he had lost something to the Gems.

"Guys, I know you're still not really getting along, but don't you think now would be the perfect time to form Opal?" Steven asked Amethyst and Pearl insistently, especially as the Gobblewonker reared up out of the water once more, only to reveal it was quickly gaining on them.

The two Gems exchanged a tentative glance at this, knowing that he did have a point. After all, they were all in mortal danger and clearly the Gobblewonker was too big of a threat for them to take on separately. Perhaps it was finally time for them to put aside their differences and fuse. At least until they warded off the immediate threat.

Steven was quick to get Dipper and Mabel's attention so they could watch as Amethyst and Pearl bowed to each other in preparation for their fusion dance. Their respective Gems began to glow brightly as Pearl preformed an elegant pirouette and spin while Amethyst did the exact opposite, shaking her hips and giving the white Gem a coy grin as she continued to dance to an invisible beat. Pearl took notice of this as she grumbled to herself and continued her graceful movements as Amethyst shuffled smoothly towards her. As the two Gems neared each other, Amethyst grabbed Pearl by the wrist and pulled her down causing her to trip and falter towards the bottom of the boat as it lurched to avoid the Gobblewonker. Amethyst narrowly caught her by the waist as both of their forms began to glow with a white light and their bodies began to fuse into each other. Stars were in both Steven and Mabel's eyes as they watched in eager anticipation, and Dipper's jaw was dropped in disbelief at what he was seeing. However, in the end, their attempt at fusion failed as their shared form wavered briefly for a moment or two, before spitting both Gems out and tossing them roughly to the ground.

"So you wanna try that again?" Amethyst asked with cold sarcasm as she picked herself up off the ground. "With less hitting me in the face this time?"

"Well, it would have worked if your movements weren't so erratic and formless," Pearl countered.

"So it's all my fault?" Amethyst asked bitterly as she got up and approached the white Gem. "You totally weren't even trying to sync with my dancing. You should know how I dance by now!"

Pearl was quick to push Amethyst away from her, but fortunately before any further altercation could occur, Steven was quick to intervene. "Stop!" he exclaimed, desperate tears practically in his eyes. "Come on, guys! Please stop fighting! If you can't get along with each other, then we might never get to see your awesome fusion powers!" He paused for a moment as the Gobblewonker caught everyone's attention with another fearsome growl. "And we might get eaten by a giant lake monster!"

And as it turned out, that exact thing happened no more than a moment after Steven had said it.
The Gobblewonker threw its head back once more as it roared loudly, before it rushed forward and swiped at the boat, knocking its control cabin clean off. Seeing that it had the upper hand, the monster snapped once more, this time at the group gathered towards its back end. Though Dipper and Mabel were narrowly able to leap out of its path, Steven was not so lucky as the Gobblewonker managed to entrap him in its huge maw, its pointed teeth thankfully not harming him as it picked him up off the boat and abruptly swallowed him whole.

"Steven!" everyone on the boat cried in a panicked unison, Pearl and Amethyst shouting the loudest and most fearfully.

However, there was no time to do anything about what had just happened as the Gobblewonker came in for a third attack, though it fortunately missed this time. But all the same, several holes had been torn in the wooden side of the vessel, and it was clear that it wouldn't last for much longer as it propelled forward straight towards a dead end.

"What do we do?!" Amethyst shouted, absolutely distraught over what had just happened to Steven.

"I don't know!" Pearl practically screamed as she looked towards the Gobblewonker, knowing that they had to find a way to rescue Steven from its belly quickly, or else.

"I think it's kinda obvious what you guys need to do!" Mabel exclaimed, taking the same initiative Steven had been pressing for all day. "You have to form Opal and save Steven!"

Both Amethyst and Pearl sighed relenting, knowing that they didn't really have much of a choice now that Steven was in such immense danger. "She's right," Pearl said, her tone serious as she turned to Amethyst. "There's no room for failure this time. We have to do this."

"For Steven?" Amethyst asked with resolve, already knowing the answer as she extended her hand.

"For Steven," Pearl nodded as she took the purple Gem's hand and their fusion dance commenced.

Of course, this dance went unnoticed by Soos and Dipper, who were trying their best to navigate what was left of the boat away from the Gobblewonker, lest they all meet a fate similar to Steven's. "Dude, where do we go?!" Soos exclaimed, seeing that they were speeding straight towards the waterfall with nowhere else to really go.

Thankfully, Dipper had remember to bring the journal with him before leaving the shack that morning, and he saw this as a good of an opportunity as any to put it to use. Acting quickly, he pulled it out of his vest and flipped through its pages, hunting for any information on Lake Gravity Falls that could be helpful. "Um… uh… Go into the falls!" he exclaimed after skimming over a line that briefly mentioned the waterfall. "I think there might be a cave back there!"

"Might be?!" Mabel asked as she briefly turned away from watching Amethyst and Pearl fuse to see that they were about to hit the waterfall. While the Gems were already in the midst of fusing, the other three all let out panicked screams as they covered their eyes to avoid having to see their inevitable impact. However, instead striking the waterfall and whatever might be behind it, be it a cave or a wall, something else happened instead.

Right before the boat collided with the falls, more than a pair of large arms scooped Dipper, Mabel, and Soos up and easily lifted them all off the boat as it sped through the falls and into the cave that actually did hide behind it. And yet, instead of crashing into the cave as the boat did, all three of them opened their eyes to see something, or rather someone was holding them.
It took almost no conjecture for them to realize that their rescuer was Opal, based on the fact that she fit the description of a "giant woman" perfectly. She easily stood at around twenty feet tall, maybe more, and she shared many of both Amethyst and Pearl's physical traits: Pearl's pointed nose and lithe frame, Amethyst's full lips and long hair, now tied up into a thick, white ponytail with two shorter pigtails framing her face. Her skin was a very pale shade of lavender and she possessed both Pearl's Gem upon her forehead and Amethyst's Gem on her chest, though both of them were of a more varied coloration. Her outfit was also a mix of that of the two Gems', with Pearl's yellow sash around her waist and a pastel green top with a drape in the front and back that bore the same star that all of the Crystal Gems seemed to wear. Her outfit also consisted of dark pink leggings akin to Amethyst's and her flat yellow boots fit her pointed feet perfectly. Oddly enough she had four arms instead of two, three of them holding on to the trio she had plucked from danger in the nick of time, and the other one clinging onto the cliff side close to the waterfall.

Dipper, Mabel, and Soos all stared up at Opal in silent amazement for a moment, before their awe was suddenly broken by the Gobblewonker speeding past them towards the cave. Opal barely managed to beat it inside as she gracefully leapt from the cliff, still holding the three humans in her grasp as she dove into the cave and landed deftly inside. The Gobblewonker barreled into the cave entrance after them, at which point Opal set the trio down and rose to her full height, which could barely be contained inside of the small cave.

"Stay low," she instructed the three of them in a rather deep, yet calm voice as she stepped forward. The Gobblewonker passed through the entrance of the cave, its maw snapping angrily at all four of them. That is, until its large body got stuck inside the narrow entryway halfway through.

"It's stuck?" Mabel asked in disbelief, glancing back to Opal, who was glaring at the Gobblewonker with her icy blue eyes.

Dipper breathed a laugh of relief at this, watching as the Gobblewonker struggled to break free from the cave entrance before a sudden realization struck him. "Wait, its stuck?" he asked as an even wider grin crossed his face. Acting fast, he patted himself down in search of a camera, only to find that they were all gone. That is save for one. Dipper was quite surprised when, out of all of them, Opal was the one who reached down and lifted his cap up, to reveal the camera he had forgotten he had stored there.

"Oh, right!" he said with a somewhat sheepish laugh. "Thanks," he said to Opal, who gave him a small, brief smile in return.

"Did you get any good ones?" Mabel asked her brother after he had happily snapped several up-close and personal pictures of the Gobblewonker.

"They're all good ones!" Dipper excitedly exclaimed, knowing that any one of these pictures could win the photo contest easily.

"Woo!" Mabel shouted in triumph. "Hamster ball!"

After several moments of letting Dipper photograph the Gobblewonker, Opal apparently decided that it was time to rescue Steven from it as she stepped closer to it, ignoring its enraged roars and wild thrashing. Both of the fusion's Gems began to glow as she summoned Amethyst's whip and Pearl's spear at the same time, holding them both over her head for a moment before they suddenly transformed into a magnificent longbow. Holding onto the bow with one set of arms and pulling back on the bowstring with her other two arms, she seamlessly formed an shimmering energy arrow upon the string, one that charged up with power the longer she held her stance. Dipper, Mabel, and Soos all watched with wonder as Opal took aim at the Gobblewonker, before ultimately letting her arrow loose in a dazzling array of light.
The arrow's aim was true as it struck the Gobblewonker squarely in the face, which somehow elicited both a wild scream, and a sputtering, electrical noise from it. The monster abruptly quit its struggling as its head fell into the water, the energy from the arrow having burnt off its "scales" to reveal a metallic framework underneath.

"What the…?" Dipper asked in confusion as he walked past Opal towards the Gobblewonker and touched its side, feeling nothing but cold metal as opposed to scales. "Huh?"

"Whoa…" Mabel said as she looked at the Gobblewonker's now robotic face. "What's going on here?"

Still curious, Dipper tentatively knocked on the Gobblewonker's side, only to hear nothing more than a hollow, metallic noise, further confirming his suspicions. Wanting to learn more, he climbed up onto the monster itself, disregarding the potential danger.

"Careful, dude!" Soos called with concern.

"I've got this! Hold on!" Dipper reassured him as he climbed onto the monster's other side, only to make a startling discovery. "Hey, guys! Come check this out!"

Mabel and Soos exchanged a confused look but hurried in that direction all the same, with Opal following in slow, graceful steps as she somehow defied the surface tension of the water to walk upon it. Oddly enough, there was a handle on the opposite side of the Gobblewonker's body, which Dipper hesitantly turned a little. A small stream of steam began to emit from the metallic monster, until a flood of it erupted once the trapdoor was fully opened, revealing who had been behind this "monster" the whole time: none other than Old Man McGucket himself.

"Work the billows and the… Eh?" the old hillbilly muttered to himself as he frantically worked the rather complex array of switches and buttons inside of the Gobblewonker. Upon realizing that the trapdoor had been opened, he quickly spun around in surprise, shocked that he had somehow been found out. "Aww, banjo polish!"

"Wha—you?!" Dipper exclaimed, as absolutely bewildered at this turn of events as Soos and Mabel were. Only Opal somehow managed to upon her usual calm exterior, though all three of them were sure that if Pearl and Amethyst weren't fused, they would be taken aback as well. "You made this? Why?"

"Well, I… I… uh…" McGucket stammered, looking for a viable excuse but finding none. "I just wanted attention."

Before anyone else could ask any further questions, Steven suddenly poked his head out from underneath the Gobblewonker's metal interior, thankfully unharmed and actually rather content as a relaxed grin was on his face. "Oh, hey guys!" he exclaimed brightly. "What's up?"

"Steven!" everyone save for Opal exclaimed in relief.

"Wait, wait, wait," Dipper said, still trying to make sense of all this. "Steven, how are you ok? We saw this thing eat you alive!"

"Oh, well I thought I was a goner too until I found Mr. McGucket controlling the monster," Steven explained, still smiling. "And even he gave me this in exchange for helping him run it!" he said with apt innocence, as he dug into his cheeseburger backpack for a moment or two, before holding out a small, insect-like object with a turquoise Gem encrusted on its back.

"I found that there doo-hicky while lootin' for spare parts for my robut here!" McGucket exclaimed
with his usual silly grin.

"The Water Beetle!" Opal exclaimed as she stepped closer, at last catching Steven's attention. The younger Gem's jaw dropped as he looked upon the fusion, stars in his eyes as he realized that his wish had come true after all.

"Opal?!" he exclaimed in awe, realizing that the wait to see her had been worth it; she was indeed as magnificent and as giant as he had hoped. Opal merely nodded, her expression still relaxed as Steven held the Water Beetle out to her, only for her to fold it back into his hand and point to the cheeseburger backpack with one of her other arms, wordlessly telling him that it would be safer in his keeping. Instead, the fusion held out her hand to him, kindly helping him up and out of the metallic monster as he continued to stare at her in astonishment. "Uh… do you… know who I am?" he asked a bit sheepishly, unsure if Opal retained any of Pearl or Amethyst's memories.

Opal simply chuckled softly at this before she slowly and gently broke into a short reprise of Steven and Mabel's song from earlier. "All you wanna do, is see me turn into…" she trailed off, allowing Steven to finish the rest.

The younger Gem let out a gasp of joyful surprise as he completed the melody with an awestruck whisper. "A giant woman!"

In the aftermath of this rather touching exchange, there were still quite a few unanswered questions as to what was going on concerning the Gobblewonker. "Wait, I still don't understand what's going on here," Dipper said with a frown as the group turned back to McGucket.

"Well, first I just hootenannied up a biomechanical brain wave generator," McGucket began, going into the details of the inner workings of his robot. "And then I learned to operate a stick-shift with ma beard!"

"Okay, yeah, but why did you do it?" Mabel asked.

"Well, when you get to be an old fella like me, nobody pays attention to you anymore," McGucket said with a sad frown as he glanced down and removed his hat. "My own son hasn't visited me in months! So I figured maybe I'd catch his fancy with a fifteen ton aquatic robot!" He broke into a rather maniacal bout of laughter before finally relenting into a morose sigh. "In retrospect, it seems a bit contrived. You just don't know the lengths us old-timers go through to spend a little quality time with our family."

Dipper and Mabel exchanged a frown at this, both of them unable to keep themselves from thinking about Stan. Regardless of his unorthodox ways of showing affection, he had put effort into trying to have a bonding experience with them. He had even put work into making them hats that, while incredibly tacky, did at the very least show that he cared. And how had they repaid him? They had leapt at the chance to ditch him, leaving him all alone without so much as a second thought. Some niece and nephew they were.

"Dude, I guess the real lake monster is you two," Soos said with a small laugh, only making the twins feel worse about what they had done. "Sorry, that was like—boom—just popped into my head there."

"So, did you ever talk to your son about how you felt?" Steven asked McGucket, clearly feeling sorry for the poor, deranged old man as the rest of them did.

"No, sir, I got to work straight on the robut!" he proclaimed with a proud grin as a projector rose up from the Gobblewonker's side, casting an image of the blueprints of the monster onto the inner side
of the trapdoor. "I made lots of robuts in my day!" he continued as he ran through a slideshow depicting his strangely extensive experience with robotics. "Like when my wife left me and I created a homicidal pterodactyl-tron, or when my pal Ernie didn't come to my retirement party and I constructed an eighty ton shame bot that exploded the entire downtown area!" he exclaimed as he laughed insanely once again. "Well, it's time to get back to work on my death ray!" he announced as he ducked back down into the robot's interior, working on his next project for a moment or two before reaching his arm up once more. "Any of you kids got a screwdriver?"

"Well, so much for the photo contest," Dipper said with a sigh as he pulled out his camera once more, knowing that they couldn't very well submit a picture of a monster that was nothing more than a robot.

"You know, I still have one camera left," Steven said with a small smile as he pulled said camera out of the cheeseburger backpack and handed it to Dipper.

"What do you wanna do with it?" Mabel asked Dipper with a grin, even though they both already knew exactly what the answer was.

Stan let out a defeated sigh as he steered his boat back to shore, knowing that the sun was getting low and the chances of having anything resembling a good time were even lower. The twins, wherever they were, would certainly catch up with him eventually, and if not, then Soos could just give them a ride back to the shack when they were done monster hunting, or whatever it was they were doing. Not that he really cared; after all, they had already showed how much they cared about him, so why should he concern himself with them?

"Hey! Over here!" Stan's attention was diverted away from the shore and towards Soos's rather beaten-up boat as it slowly puttered towards his own boat, Dipper, Mabel, and Soos all waving at the con man with bright smiles on their faces. Tagging not too far behind the tattered vessel was what looked to be a giant, four-armed woman unexplainably treading upon the surface of the water as if it was solid ground as she carried Steven on one of her shoulders. As the two boats pulled up next to each other, Dipper lifted up his camera and snapped a photo of a very confused Stan, who was not only surprised at the impossibly large woman, but the twin's return in general.

"What the—kids?" he asked in bewilderment. "I thought you two were off playing 'spin the bottle' with Soos! And who's the huge broad over there?"

"This is Opal!" Steven happily introduced the fusion Gem to Stan. "She's actually Amethyst and Pearl, fused into one Gem!"

Stan raised an eyebrow at this explanation, not fully buying it but shrugging nonetheless. "Eh, I've seen crazier, I guess," he said, deciding he didn't really care to know much more.

"We spent all day trying to find a 'legendary' dinosaur," Dipper began to explain with a leading grin.

"But we realized that the only dinosaur we wanna hang out with is right here," Mabel finished as she motioned to her grunkle with a warm smile.

"Save your sympathy!" Stan said as he stubbornly crossed his arms. "I've been having a great time without you! Makin' friends, taking to my reflection... I even had a run-in with the lake police! Guess I gotta wear this ankle bracelet now," he said, holding up his ankle to reveal the beeping brace clasped around it. "So that'll be fun."
"So… I guess there isn't room in that boat for three more?" Dipper asked with a somewhat regretful expression.

Stan shot the twins a rather cold grin, refusing to let his hard exterior break to their puppy-dog eyes. However, his resolve quickly crumbled as Dipper and Mabel put on the hats he had made for them, this time gladly and proudly wearing them, something that he had wanted from the very beginning. "You knuckleheads ever see me thread a hook with my eyes closed?" he asked with a relenting grin as he motioned for them to come aboard.

"Five bucks says you can't do it!" Dipper challenged as he hopped aboard Stan's boat.

"You're on!"

"Five more bucks says you can't do it with your eyes closed, plus me singing at the top of my lungs!" Mabel added onto the dare as she and Soos joined them on Stan's boat.

"I like those odds!" the con man grinned daringly before he turned towards Steven and Opal. "You sure that tall drink of water is up for fishing?" he asked Steven.

"Oh yeah!" Steven nodded enthusiastically. "Opal's great at fishing! Right?" he asked Opal, who, as a sign of her skill, quickly plunged one of her arms into the water before pulling it out with several fish thrashing about in her tight grip.

"Well, alright then," Stan said with surprise as he adjusted his glasses, clearly impressed.

"Okay, everyone, get together," Dipper called as he held his camera up to snap a group photo. Everyone, including Opal and Steven managed to squeeze into the frame as they all smiled collectively. "Say fishing!"

"Fishing!" everyone shouted as the picture was snapped, the first of many as the entire group spent the next several hours of the late afternoon fishing. Unlike their hunt for the Gobblewonker, this adventure was much safer, yet it somehow ended up being even funnier, something that the twins could have never expected earlier that same day. As it turned out, fishing in and of itself was quite the engaging activity, especially when Stan made good on his word and baited his hook with his eyes closed. The joke book that Stan had brought along actually turned out to contain quite a few side-splitters, a few of which made even Opal crack a smile as Steven nearly fell off her shoulder several times laughing at them. Opal herself made the fishing experience all the more interesting as she performed a graceful dance atop the surface of the water upon Steven and Mabel's request, which Dipper managed to catch several great pictures of. And of course, considering they were fishing with Stan, the trip was not without its mischievous escapades, which the twins were more than happy to help out with. Upon trying to steal a few fish from the siblings and grandfather Stan had encountered earlier, they were nearly chased off the lake by the police, though the officers were quick to flee upon being intimidated by Opal's towering, imposing presence. At the end of the day, they all managed to catch not only several fish, but even more memories that would certainly last for a long time.

As the sun set over the waters of the lake, Opal led the way towards the shore, with Stan's boat gliding across the water not too far behind. Both Dipper and Mabel sat in front of Stan and Soos, both of them relaxed and content with the day they had had. In fact, the calm of the evening was only broken by the boat shaking a bit, something that did not go unnoticed by the twins.

"Whoa!" Mabel exclaimed as she glanced down at the water.

"What was that?" Dipper asked in confusion, sitting up a bit from his former reclined position.
Mabel simply shrugged, having no idea what it could have been, and Dipper accepted it as he relaxed once more, knowing that not all mysteries could be solved.

Little did either of them know that, far underneath their vessel, one of the last disposable cameras was steadily sinking towards the bottom of the lake, only for it to be caught by the maw of a massive lake monster…

Everyone was in high spirits as they all returned from the lake that evening, something that Garnet noticed as she stood at the base of the hill where the Mystery Shack's property intersected with the temple's hill. She had almost been tempted to go see what was taking her teammates so long after returning from her solo mission and waiting for several hours for Amethyst, Pearl, and Steven to return, but she ultimately decided against it for several reasons. Regardless, her expression was as calm and stoic as ever as she watched Stan's car pass by, its three passengers all clearly happy as the twins waved at her as they passed. Garnet did not smile as she waved back at them, but that was usual for her. In fact, she didn't even smile as she turned to see Steven and Opal emerge from the path not too far behinds the Pines family.

"Hi, Garnet!" Steven chimed cheerfully as Opal helped him off his perch on her shoulder. "We're back!"

"The Water Beetle," Garnet reminded them, hoping that they had not left the lake without it.

Opal's usually calm façade suddenly crumbled as her eyes opened wide and she let out a gasp. "I don't have it!" she exclaimed in shock, her form wavering for a moment or two before she split apart, both Amethyst and Pearl falling out of her and to the ground as separate Gems once more.

"Amethyst! You got distracted!" Pearl exclaimed hotly as she sat up.

"Hey, you were the one getting carried away with all those fancy backflips!" Amethyst retorted defensively.

"Wait, guys!" Steven exclaimed, breaking up their argument as he reached into his cheeseburger backpack for the beetle in question before presenting it. "You guys—I mean Opal—gave it to me to hold onto! Remember?"

Pearl and Amethyst exchanged a rather surprised glance at this, neither of them remembering having done so. "Opal always has been very forgetful," Garnet said, knowing well the major weakness of her teammates' fusion. "Good job, Steven," the Gem leader said as she took the Water Beetle and put it into a small terrarium alongside the Earth Beetle she had retrieved earlier before bubbling them both away. "I also see you helped your teammates fuse."

"Yep!" Steven proclaimed proudly. "And all I had to do was get eaten by a robotic lake monster!"

"Nice work," Garnet said with a nod as she began to head back up to the temple, motioning for Amethyst and Pearl to do the same, despite the fact that they were still a bit stunned. "You'll be great at fusing someday."

"Yeah," Steven said with a wide grin as he began to follow her, though he stopped in his tracks as he caught onto the last part of what she had said. "Wait! I can do that too?!"
Chapter 7: Headhunters

Chapter Summary

In which wax figures are murdered and the Mystery Kids solve a mystery

Chapter Notes

So these chapters are taking a while to write, but I'm still going for it! And so, enjoy my rendition of Headhunters, with a little bit of Frybo mixed in! :D

PLVSODFHG VKDUGV PLJKW KDYH BRX VHHLQJ UHG
EXW WKDWV QR UHDVRQ WR ORVH BRXU KHDG

It had been a few days since the Gobblewonker incident, and surprisingly, things had been relatively relaxed since then. There had been no Gem monster attack or supernatural hoax as of late, something that actually bade rather well with the kids. While the Gems still went on their regular missions, Steven was restricted from coming along on most of them on the ground of them being "too dangerous", though he didn't really mind; after all, it gave him more time to hang out with Dipper and Mabel.

The young Gem and the Pines twins had been continuously developing their friendly rapport, though not always by means of climactic battles or fantastical discoveries. Sometimes it was just as casual as sitting down around the television, which was exactly how Steven, Connie, Dipper, and Mabel were spending the afternoon. Though her parents had much of her free time, even during summer break, devoted to tennis or violin practice, Connie had been able to take the day off and, under Steven's suggestion, she had joined him and the twins in enjoying a marathon of Duck-tective at the Mystery Shack.

The kids were all collected around the recliner in the den, all of them deeply invested in the adventures of the feathered sleuth despite the fact that they were all simultaneously multitasking. Mabel was busy at work knitting her newest sweater while Steven and Dipper snacked on a bowl of popcorn and Connie switched back and forth between watching the show and skimming through a novel she had already read several times. Yet despite their various distractions, they were all still able to follow the ongoing saga of the popular mystery-drama.

"I'm afraid your services won't be required here, sir," the constable on screen said to Duck-tective as the two of them stood together at the scene of a crime. "My men have examined the evidence, and this is obviously an accident."

Duck-tective was quick to offer a stout response, though it came out as a series of subtitled quacks. "An accident, constable?" the crime-solving bird challenged. "Or is it… murder?!"

"What?!" the constable exclaimed with a shocked gasp, a sentiment that both Steven and Mabel shared as they glued their eyes to the screen in light of this startling revelation. Of course, the show immediately cut to a commercial break at this dramatic cliffhanger, much to their disappointment.
"Whoa!" Steven exclaimed with a marveling grin. "I never saw that coming! How does Duck-tective do it?"

"I know, right?!" Mabel heartily agreed as she stilled her knitting needles for a moment. "That duck is a genius!"

"Eh, it's easier to find clues when you're that close to the ground," Dipper shrugged, clearly not as impressed.

"And it was kind of obvious that it was a murder," Connie added. "A body wouldn't end up in a position like that if the victim died of 'natural causes'."

Mabel and Steven exchanged a glance upon hearing this show of doubt, and both of them were quick to question it. "Are you guys saying that you could outwit Duck-tective?" Mabel asked, giving her brother in particular a scrutinizing look.

"Well, he is a duck," Connie said with a joking grin.

"But he's a really smart duck!" Steven protested. "Plus, he has that cute little detective hat."

"That doesn't matter," Dipper scoffed. "Besides, I have very keen powers of observation. For example, Mabel, just by smelling your breath, I can tell that you've been eating…" He trailed off to take in the scent of his sister's breath, only to frown in confusion at what he smelled. "An entire tube of toothpaste?"

"It was so sparkly…" Mabel confessed guiltily, remembering the painful stomach ache that she had gotten not long after doing so.

"Hey, dudes!" Soos exclaimed as he poked his head around the corner, clearly anxious to tell the kids something. "You'll never guess what I found!"

"A secret stash of ice cream?!" Steven guessed excitedly.

"Dinosaur bones?" Connie speculated.

"Ooo! Dinosaur bones would be way cooler than ice cream!" Steven gushed before Dipper and Mabel put forth their own ideas.

"Buried treasure!" Dipper theorized, not knowing that Mabel was about to do the same thing only a few seconds later.

"Buried—Hey! I was gonna say that!" she laughed, giving her brother a playful punch in the arm before all four of the kids got up to follow Soos to whatever it was he wanted to show them.

"So, I was cleaning up," the handyman began as he led the way to a door in the hallway, one that the twins had never seen before. "When I found this secret door, hidden behind the wallpaper. Its crazy bonkers creepy!"

"Oh, boy! I hope there really are dinosaur bones in there!" Steven exclaimed as he nudged Connie, who simply chuckled at his enthusiasm.

Soos opened the creaky door to reveal a hidden room that mystified all of them at once. It clearly hadn't been touched in years, as one could tell by the dust and cobwebs filling nearly every nook and cranny. However, that was by far the least notable thing about the room; what was much more bewildering was the horde of life-sized wax figurines of historical figures hall kept stored there for
some reason.

"Whoa…" Dipper mused in awe, shining his flashlight around at the various waxen faces. "It's a secret wax museum!"

"Cool…" Steven grinned as he stopped to glance up at the wax rendition of William Shakespeare. "Hey, Connie! Check it out!" he exclaimed as he mimicked the famous poet's pose, holding his hand up in a dramatic stance. "To be or not to be!"

"That is certainly the question," Connie finished with an amused laugh.

"They're all so life-like," Mabel noted as she poked the wax figure of Sherlock Holmes, only to see that he was indeed lifeless.

"Except for that one," Dipper said as he pointed his flashlight at what he had assumed was a wax figure of Stan. That is, until it moved.

"Hello!" Stan greeted with a chipper grin, the light shining up at his face from below giving him an unsettling appearance. The very fact that he had moved amidst all of the frozen wax statues elicited startled responses from the kids. "It's just me!" the con-man reassured them with a chuckle. "Your Grunkle Stan!"

His reassurance did nothing however, as all four of the kids, as well as Soos all let out a unified scream of terror and abruptly raced out of the room. Stan merely sighed in annoyance as he went to regather them all, and though it took some doing, he did manage to eventually coax them all back into the storage room so he could properly show off his prized wax figure collection.

"Behold! The Gravity Falls Wax Museum!" Stan announced in his usual showman way as he gave the kids a grand tour of the dusty storage room. "It was one of our most popular attractions… before I forgot all about it."

"Wow, Mr. Pines! How many wax figures do you have in here anyway?" Steven inquired curiously.

"I got 'em all, kid!" Stan said as he led the way down the long line of wax statues. "Genghis Khan, Sherlock Holmes, some kind of… I don't know, goblin man?" he guessed as he paused before the wax rendition of Larry King.

"Is anyone else getting the creeps here?" Dipper asked with a shudder.

"Yeah…" Connie agreed with an uneasy frown. "It's like their eyes follow you wherever you go…"

"Eh, I'm sure it's all in your heads," Mabel laughed off their paranoia in her usual carefree way.

"And now for my personal favorite," Stan continued the tour, coming to the other end of the room. "Wax Abraham Lincoln! Right over-" He abruptly cut himself off upon glancing over at what used to be the wax figuring of the 16th president, now reduced to nothing more than a melted glob of unrecognizable wax, courtesy of the hot summer sunlight streaming in through the nearby window. "Oh! Oh no!" Stan exclaimed in shocked horror, clearly distraught over the loss of his most prized figurine. "Come on! Who left the blinds open!? Wax John Wilkes Booth, I'm looking in your direction!" The conman let out a dejected sigh as he bent down and put a finger in the pile of melted wax, seeing that it was indeed unsalvageable. "How do you fix a wax figure?"

"With lots of wax glue?" Steven suggested with a grin.
"Oh, sure," Stan deadpanned, rolling his eyes. "I'll just go down to the supermarket and pick some of that up. After all, it's not like it's something that doesn't actually exist."

"Cheer up, Grunkle Stan!" Mabel encouraged. "Where's that smile?"

Stan merely passed his niece's cheerfulness off with a sour grunt, though Mabel showed her persistence by playfully poking her surly uncle in the face. "Beep! Bop! Boop!"

"Ow."

"Don't worry, Grunkle Stan. I'll make you a new wax figure to replace this one!" Mabel declared, more than ready to take on such an artistic challenge.

"You really think you can make one of these puppies?" Stan asked as he rose to stand.

"And how! Grunkle Stan, I'm an arts and crafts master. Why do you think I always have this glue gun stuck to my arm?" Mabel asked as she held up her arm to reveal that a small glue gun was indeed attached to her sweater, even despite her best efforts to shake it off.

"Hey, Mabel, mind if I help?" Steven asked eagerly. "Sculpting a wax statue sounds like a lot of fun!"

"Sure, Steven!" Mabel said with a huge grin. "We'll go into business together! I can see it now: Pines & Universe Wax Sculptors Extraordinaire! Together, we'll carve out a waxy empire!"

Of course, Steven was on board with plan as he joined Mabel in leaping right into the plans for the new wax figure, both of them chattering on about their ambitious ideas so fast that no one else in the room could really catch a word they were saying. Even Stan couldn't deny that he was amused by their shared enthusiasm.

"Well, I gotta admit, you kids have gumption," the conman said with a broad grin. "I like it!"

"I don't know what 'gumption' means, but thank you!" Steven said with a cheerful smile.

"Just you wait, Grunkle Stan," Mabel declared, countless plans for her and Steven's masterpiece already brimming in her mind. "We'll make you the best wax figure the world has ever seen!"

"I think it should be tall."

"At least ten feet!"

"And really colorful!"

"It should have nothing less than all of the colors of the rainbow!"

"How many arms should it have?"

"Four! Maybe even five!"

Dipper heard this zealous conversation coming from the parlor even all the way in the kitchen as he grabbed himself a soda. Curious to see what Mabel and Steven were intently discussing, he decided to peek in on them, only to see the two of them feverishly working on crayon sketches, several of which were scattered in a disarrayed mess on the floor around them. The two of them had gotten to work on planning for the new wax figure early that next day, and as the countless colorful drawings on the floor showed, their creative process had been quite hectic.
"Dipper!" Mabel exclaimed excitedly upon noticing her brother standing in the doorway, startling him and causing him to choke on his soda. She didn't take notice of this however as she happily leap to her feet, gathering several of drawings in her arms and rushing over to him, with Steven following not too far behind her. "What do you think of our wax figure ideas? This one is part fairy princess, and part horse fairy princess!" she beamed, proudly holding up a sketch of the somewhat horrifying amalgamation she had described.

"Or this one!" Steven added as he held up his own drawing. "It's a cat with eagle wings and a top hat! He's fancy."

"Uh… maybe you guys should carve something from real life…” Dipper frowned, somewhat weirded out by their bizarre ideas.

"Like a waffle, with big arms!" Mabel ventured, pulling out a drawing of said waffle from her pile of pages.

"Oh, that's one of my favorites!" Steven exclaimed with a smile.

"Okay… Or, you know, like something else," Dipper said, knowing that neither of them were really catching on in all of their wide-eyed excitement. "Like… like someone in your family."

Before either Mabel or Steven could respond to this idea, the idea session was suddenly interrupted by Stan's entrance into the room. "Kids, have you seen my pants?" the conman asked the trio as he casually walked into the room in but his boxers and a dirty undershirt, stopping with one foot perched upon a briefcase lying on the ground.

Mabel and Steven shared a unified gasp of excitement, newfound inspiration clicking in both of their minds all at once as they looked at Stan. "That's it!" Steven exclaimed, already getting to work on an experimental sketch.

"Oh, muse, you work in mysterious ways…” Mabel whispered in elation as she glanced upwards, her eyes big and brimming with exhilaration over this new, definitive idea.

"Why's your sister talking to the ceiling?" Stan muttered to Dipper, the creative magic clearly lost on both of them as they stared at the two overjoyed "artists" in confusion.

Without any further provocation, Steven and Mabel got to work on crafting their shared masterpiece. Though neither of them had really ever created something of this artistic magnitude before, much less worked with wax, but that hardly deterred them. With but a book on wax sculpting checked out of the library to guide them, the pair whittled away at the formless glob of wax that was their canvas, working tirelessly for hours on end until their hands were practically coated in the stuff. Of course, the process wasn't all work and no play; they both kept the radio blaring all the while, and they made sure to take the occasional break for a snack or random dance party to liven things up and keep their creative juices flowing.

They were about halfway finished with their waxy creation when Steven took a step back to examine their work, looking it over with a scrutinizing, intent gaze. It wasn't long before Mabel, who was still carving at her usual rhythmic pace, noticed her partner's thoughtful focus. "What's the matter?" she asked, giving their progress so far a once-over as well. "Did we mess up on the nose?"

"No, it's not that…” Steven mused as he put a finger to his chin in contemplation. "It's just… he looks kinda… lonely…"
Mabel frowned as she looked back to the half-shapened lump of wax in front of her, immediately thinking the same thing before she remembered something. "Oh, but he won't be as soon as we finish him and put him with the other wax figures!"

"Yeah, but he'll be the only new one… The rest of them are probably years old and they're covered in dust! He'll be like a baby compared to them."

"True… So what should we do?"

Steven pondered this question for a moment or two, though it didn't take him long to reach an obvious conclusion. "We should make more!"

"Yeah!" Mabel readily agreed, knowing that was sculpting was surprisingly fun despite the hard work that went into it. "But of what? Do we need to go back to the drawing board? I still have my sketches of the buff waffles!"

"Actually, I think I have another idea…" Steven said with a vague grin, the plans for three new wax figures already formulating in his mind as inspiration struck him yet again.

"I think… they need more glitter…" Mabel mused as her and Steven stood apace from their nearly-completed creations. It had taken nearly the course of a day and a half to finish all four of them, but the time had been well spent, as they had not one, but four new wax figures to show for their efforts, all of them painstakingly carved to ensure accuracy and presentability.

"Agreed," Steven nodded, his tone serious as he ran over and got the bucket of glitter they had on hand throughout the sculpting process. He handed it over to Mabel, who didn't hesitate to throw the entire bucket over all four of their wax sculptures without calculation, giving them all a decent coating of the sparkly substance.

"There!" Mabel smiled in satisfaction over their shared job well done. "They're perfect!"

No more than a moment later, Stan happened to wander into the parlor, now bereft of shoes. "I found my pants, but now I'm missing my-" he abruptly cut himself off with a startled cry upon noticing the set of wax figures the kids had made, their life-like semblances causing him to trip backwards in surprise.

"So?" Mabel asked with a beaming grin as her and Steven anxiously awaited Stan's seal of approval on their hard work. "What do you think?"

"There's four of them," Stan noted incredulously.

"Yeah!" Steven quipped cheerfully. "We were having so much fun carving the first one that we decided the more the merrier!"

"Hm… Well, I could always up the price of admission if we include even more figures…" Stan mused as he rose to stand, imagining the profits that could be made off of such artful displays.

"So, do you like them, Grunkle Stan?" Mabel asked, her tone hopeful.

"Like 'em?" Stan asked with a growing grin of satisfaction. "I think it's safe to say that the wax museum's back in business!"

A bustling crowd had gathered at the Mystery Shack, even though most of its members didn't
really know what the event they had congregated for was really about. But nonetheless, many of Gravity Falls' residents made their way out to the tourist attraction and they all even paid the rather steep admission price, creating a far bigger turn out than anyone, save for Stan, had been expecting.

"I can't believe this many people showed up," Dipper said to Wendy as the two of them worked the ticket stand together, watching the crowds flow in to the event.

"I know, right?" Wendy asked with a sardonic grin. "Your uncle probably bribed them or something."

"He bribed me," Dipper said with a grin, holding up the five dollar bill Stan had paid him off with to get him to stay at the ticket stand for a few hours. Likewise, Wendy smirked as she held up her own five dollars that the conman had bribed her with as well.

Amidst the steadily assembling crowd, Steven eagerly trailed ahead of the Gems, who kept a casual, non-rushing pace behind him as they all three stoically took in the gathering. Of course, Steven failed to notice their relative disinterest in light of his excitement over how he had managed to convince them to attend this paramount event, getting them to take a break from their constant flow of world-saving tasks.

"Right this way," Steven guided the Gems to a spot near the front of the crowd. "You guys are gonna love this!"

"Let me guess…" Amethyst began with a coy grin. "Stan tricked all these people into coming out here just so they could pay him to stand outside for several hours."

"That sounds like something he would do," Garnet deadpanned.

"I have to admit, I thought Stan would be at least a little more creative than that…" Pearl mused before glancing at the bubble hovering above her palm, several gem shards of various sizes and shapes trapped inside. "But regardless, we can't stand around here all day, Steven. We have to find the rest of these missing gem shards. They're very important."

"But this is very important too!" Steven protested, sneaking a glance up at the four tarp-covered shapes awaiting on stage amidst the other wax figures. "Otherwise I wouldn't have 'waxed' you to come!"

The younger Gem laughed heartily at his own pun, which elicited a snort from Amethyst and a short-lived smirk from Garnet. Pearl, however, was not as amused. "I'm serious, Steven," she urged. "These shards contain a powerful consciousness that has been harnessed by Gems throughout history in order to create fully-sentient drone soldiers with the capacity to follow both basic and complex orders."

Pearl went on with her lengthy, intricate explanation, detailing something about the gem shards becoming self-aware and turning on their commanders, though Steven missed most of it as Amethyst distracted him instead. "Hey, Steven," the purple Gem grinned mischievously as she elbowed the younger Gem, catching his attention. "What's under the sheets up there?"

"I can't tell you," Steven whispered in response, not wanting to interrupt Pearl's rant. "You just gotta wait until the grand unveiling. But I can tell you that it will be totally worth the wait!"

"It better be," Amethyst said, crossing her arms. "Last time Stan held a grand unveiling, it was for 'renovations' he did on the outhouse, which was really just a band-aid he put over one of its peepholes. He charged everyone ten bucks for coming, and let's just say… it wasn't a pretty
Steven frowned a bit at this as Amethyst simply chuckled in levity over the memory, both of them still not really listening to Pearl as she finished up her speech. "That's why is very, very important that they're kept away from any moldable substance, or else they'll-"

"Shhh, Pearl!" Steven was quick to quiet the white Gem as Stan took the stage. "It's starting!"

Stan was quick to garnish the crowd's attention with a succinct tap of the microphone, ignoring the brief ear-splitting screech that emitted from it as he flashed his best charming grin. "You all know me, folks! Town darling, Mr. Mystery! Please, ladies, control yourselves!" The conman paused for a moment to wait on the reactions of any of the women in the crowd, only to get none whatsoever. "As you all know, I always bring the people of this fair town novelties and befuddlements, the likes of which the world has never known!"

"Oh please..." Pearl muttered sarcastically upon hearing this claim, rolling her eyes.

"But enough about me," Stan went on, getting to the point of this gathering. "Behold... me!" He pulled the sheet off of the foremost shape with a flourish, revealing one of the wax museum's newest additions: Stan himself. The wax carving of the conman matched him in almost every way, from height, to clothing, to even the proud beaming grin he wore as he stood alongside his wax twin. The crowd's response was lukewarm at best, with only about one or two of its members offering a soft, polite clap while the rest simply continued to stare up at the stage, unimpressed.

"Mr. Pines!" Steven called remindingly, breaking through the bored haze of the crowd with an eager grin.

"Oh, yeah, right..." Stan muttered as his smirk quickly turned into an annoyed scowl. "And, uh, the Crystal Gems... or whatever." In a much less ceremonious fashion, he pulled the tarps from the other three obscured wax figures, revealing that they were indeed quite accurate carvings of the Gems. The figure of Garnet held her usual stoic expression, her hands placed on her hips in a firm stance. Pearl's figure was posed more elegantly, her eyes shut in a peaceful smile and her hands poised gracefully in front of her. The carving of Amethyst wore a confident, if not somewhat impish grin as her arms were held up in a carefree pose and her long waxen hair flayed out behind her.

While the rest of the crowd was just as indifferent towards the wax statues of the Gems as they were with Stan's, upon seeing these renditions, the Gems themselves all responded in different ways. Garnet remained silent, but as Steven grinned up at her for her approval, she recognized his hard work with a thumbs up. Pearl was clearly the most bewildered as she looked up to her own wax figure with a confused frown, unsure of what the practical purpose of a lifeless lump of wax molded to resemble her was. Amethyst, on the other hand, let out an amused chuckle upon seeing her own wax twin, admiring the apt accuracy in its form, features, and even its playful manner.

"And now a word from our featured artists: Mabelangelo and, uh... Steve-inci! Yeah, that works..." Stan took a step aside as both Steven and Mabel rushed to the stage, excited to finally reveal the fruits of their shared labor the world.

"Now, now! Settle down!" Steven called into the microphone with a wide grin, even though the only ones applauding in the entire crowd were the Gems, who were doing so to show support to their young ward. "Applause are not needed! Your smiling faces are appreciation enough!"

"Thank you all for coming!" Mabel continued cheerfully. "Steven and I both worked hard to make these sculptures with our own two hands. They're covered in our blood, sweat, tears, and other
fluids!

The crowd reviled a bit in disgust upon thinking through the implications of this, though Mabel and Steven simply laughed it off. "We will now take questions!" Steven announced, pointing to the first person in the crowd to raise their hand. "You there!"

"Old Man McGucket, local kook," the hillbilly addressed himself as he stood. "Are the wax figures alive? And follow-up question: can I survive the wax-man uprising?"

Steven and Mabel exchanged a confused glance upon getting such a left-field question, one that neither of them were really sure how to answer. However, Mabel attempted to so anyway. "Um… Yes!" she exclaimed with an awkward grin. "Next question!"

"Ronaldo Fryman for the blog 'Keep Gravity Falls Weird!'" the teenager rose to stand, his phone in hand ready to record the answer to his prodding question. "Is it true that these wax figures were sculpted out of rare Ukrainian cursed wax?"

"Uh… I don't think so…" Steven replied with a frown. "We just recycled the wax from a figure that melted, plus a few other ones that were broken. So… they're probably not cursed. Probably. Any more questions?"

"Toby Determined, Gravity Falls Gossiper," the staunch man began, holding up a turkey baster towards the stage as opposed to an actual microphone. "Do you really think this constitutes as a wonder of the world?"

"Your microphone's a turkey baster, Toby," Stan deadpanned, shooting the amateur reporter's question down quickly. "It certainly is…" Toby said as he retracted his question with a disappointed frown.

"Next question!"

"Shandra Jimenez, a real reporter," the newswoman said pointedly, not needing to prove herself as she had an actual microphone and a camera crew. "Your fliers promised free pizza with admission to this event. Is this true?"

"I can confirm that it is not!" Kofi Pizza exclaimed hotly. "Fish Stew Pizza is the only pizzeria in town that delivers and we received no orders from Mr. Pines! Not that we would ever expect a cheapskate like him to pay us anyway!"

Angry murmurs began to ripple through the crowd at this, all of its members wondering where their promised pizza was and why it had not been passed out yet. Stan frowned a bit nervously as they began to grow gradually more impatient, many of them glaring at him expectantly, though of course, he found a way to avoid altercation as usual. "That was a typo," he said succinctly, not bothering to explain any more. "Good night, everyone!" Without another word, the conman tossed down one of the smoke bombs he always kept on hand for just such an occasion and dashing off the stage in the aftermath of its explosion. Of course, before he escaped the scene entirely, he made sure to swipe the admission cash box before anyone could see him, refusing to let go of such an easy profit.

Of course, the crowd was in no way pleased with this as they all bitterly disbanded, all of them beyond furious for how they had been duped. It was a miracle that no violence broke out in the aftermath of such a scam, though one of the decorative poles near the shack did suffer a casualty courtesy of Manly Dan. In the end, the only members of the crowd who hung around were the
Crystal Gems, who had done nothing to quell the crowd's anger and had instead merely let them simmer.

"Well… that was…" Pearl began with a frown, though Garnet was quick to finish for her.

"A mess," the Gem leader said simply, calmly adjusting her shades.

Amethyst let out a rowdy bout of laughter, one that she had been holding back as a subtle snicker throughout the crowd's heated outburst. "Boy, Stan really knows how to piss a crowd off, huh?" she chuckled with a sly grin as she hopped up on the stage. "Though I gotta admit, I'm totally digging wax me!"

"You like them?" Steven asked as he stepped forward on the stage, a hopeful smile on his face as he awaited the Gems' critique.

"Oh… well, Steven, they're um… they're very… lifelike," Pearl stammered, not really sure what to think of the wax sculptures. "But are they really necessary?"

"Huh?" Steven asked with a confused frown, though thankfully Garnet cut Pearl off once more before she could offend the budding artists.

"We love them," Garnet said, her usual stoicism breaking for a small grin. "You both did a wonderful job."

"Thank you!" Steven and Mabel both chimed in unison.

"Yeah!" Amethyst heartily agreed as she jumped up onto the shoulders of her wax double to take a seat. "I was just telling Pearl the other day that we need more of me around! And this chill dude will look awesome in my room next to my favorite pile of trash!"

"Wait, Amethyst!" Steven protested. "You can't take it back to the temple with you!"

"Why not?" the purple Gem asked, having already hoisted her wax duplicate onto her back.

"Because they're for the wax museum!" Mabel explained.

"Oh, please don't tell me Stan's trying to revive that tired old exhibit…" Pearl said with an exasperated sigh.

"Yeah, he is!" Steven grinned cheerfully. "And I can't wait to take the grand tour when it's up and running with all four of these new wax figures on display! It'll be great!"

"Hot pumpkin pie! Look at all this cash!" Stan exclaimed with a proud grin as he tallied up the proceeds from the grand unveiling later that evening. "Scamming unsuspecting yokels always pays off! And I owe it all to one person! This guy!" He let out a hearty laugh as he placed an arm around his wax duplicate's shoulder affectionately.

"Grunkle Stan…" Mabel said with a knowing smirk as her and Dipper sat across the kitchen table from their uncle, watching him count his proceeds.

"Yeah, you too, ya little gremlin," Stan acknowledged with a chuckle.

"And…" Mabel urged, giving a nod towards the wax carvings of the Gems, which Stan had carelessly shoved into a small group in the corner of the living room.
"And them too, I guess," the conman said, his grin diminishing a little bit. "But not as much as me!…Or him… Eh, both of us! Now you kids go wash up. We got another long day of fleecing rubes tomorrow."

The twins shared a laugh of amusement as they got up and did as their uncle said, both of them heading upstairs to get ready for bed. Once they were gone, Stan decided to take this opportunity to "bond" with his beloved wax twin by carefully toting it over to his chair in front of the TV, setting it down as he reclined in the chair and flipped the TV on to a rerun of Duck- tective.

"Well, Duck- tective," the constable concluded. "It seems you really quacked the case."

"Don't patronize me," Duck- tective responded via subtitles, though his quacks were obviously annoyed at that pun.

"Ha! Stupid duck!" Stan laughed as the show cut to a commercial. "Well, I'm gonna use the john," he said to his wax duplicate, who's broad grin was as unchanging as ever. "You need anything?"
The wax figure didn't respond, but the conman simply mirthfully chuckled once more. "I love this guy! Don't you go nowhere, handsome!"

Stan was only in the bathroom for about a minute or two, but that was just long enough. No one was around to see the figures looming in the shadows of the living room, and there was not a single witness to swift, yet heinous act that was committed in that quick span of time. And of course, the culprits were all quick to make themselves scares as soon as it became apparent that the conman was returning to the room. And when Stan did enter the room, he did so to find a sight that made him instantly scream in shock and horror.

"No!" the conman cried in absolute dismay, loud enough that it could clearly be heard throughout the entire shack. Even though they were in the upstairs bathroom, Dipper and Mabel could hear him, and concerned, they didn't hesitate to rush downstairs to see what was the matter.

The twins came to an abrupt stop in the entryway of the den, both of them surprised and confused to see their grunkle on his knees, cradling his wax double's body in his arms as he lamented over it. At first, it was hard for them to understand why, though they quickly discovered why he was so upset: Wax Stan's head had been sliced cleanly off.

"Wax Stan! He's… he's been murdered!" Stan cried mournfully, completely devastated by this travesty.

Upon seeing how her and Steven's art had been so callously defaced, Mabel let out a horrified gasp before ultimately fainting into her brother's arms from the shock of it all. Of course, while Dipper was nowhere near as emotional over the "death" of an inanimate wax figure as his sister and grunkle were, he did understand their sudden grief. But as he glanced over the scene of the crime once more, he noticed two other important factors that both Stan and Mabel had failed to. Firstly, the wax forms of all three of the Crystal Gems had toppled over each other onto the floor into a careless pile. But even more disturbing than that: their heads were also missing, and much like Wax Stan's head, they were all nowhere to be found.

Steven hummed happily to himself as he prepared himself a glass of water before bed as he usually did. As he was doing so, Amethyst emerged from the temple, an impish grin on her face as she sauntered over to the kitchen to chat with the younger Gem.

"Hey, Steven," she began casually, leaning against the counter as she took a cursory glance towards
the temple door to make sure Pearl was nowhere around, lest the white Gem discourage her from her crafty plan. "How'd you like to do something fun?"

"Like what?" Steven asked, always ready for fun, especially with Amethyst.

"I was thinking about going down to the Mystery Shack so I could… borrow wax-me," the purple Gem said, her smirk widening. "You wanna come?"

"Amethyst, you can't do that!" Steven frowned. "The wax figures belong in the museum!"

"Oh, come on," Amethyst scoffed playfully. "It's just a prank. Me and Stan used to punk each other like this all the time. Besides, he's so in love with his own wax twin that he probably wouldn't even notice that he's missing one."

"Hm…" Steven mused, not buying her argument. "I dunno… Isn't that stealing?"

"Nah," the purple Gem shrugged. "Remember what I said: I'm just gonna borrow it for a while. I figured I could stick it in Pearl's room and use it to creep her out. I figure it'll be good for a few laughs."

Before Steven could reply, the kitchen phone suddenly rang, though the younger Gem made sure to voice his disapproval of Amethyst's mischievous plan as he went to answer it. "Well, I still don't think you should just go take it," Steven said. "Me and Mabel can just make you another one, if you want."

"Aw… but it wouldn't be the same…" Amethyst pouted, crossing her arms. Steven ignored her however as he answered the phone with his usual cheerful greeting.

"Hello!" he said, not noticing the purple Gem as she practiced shapeshifting her hand into a larger size to she could properly carry her wax copy away. "Oh, hi, Dipper! What's up?... Wait, who is that crying in the background?... Well, why are they crying? Did something happen?... W-what?! Oh, no! NO!"

By now, Amethyst was eavesdropping in on the conversation with rapt interest, though because she was only hearing one half of it, she didn't really understand what it was about, not that her curiosity was any less for it. "Ok, ok, we'll be right there!" Steven panicked exclaimed before he hastily hung up the phone.

"What's up, Steven?" Amethyst inquired calmly, watching as the younger Gem rushed over to the temple door and pounded on it feverishly, calling for Garnet and Pearl desperately. "You're acting like there was a fire or something."

"There might as well have been!" Steven exclaimed morosely, not even letting the other two Gems get a word in edgewise as they emerged from the temple before he grabbed them by the wrists and practically dragged them towards the front door.

"Steven, what's wrong?!" Pearl exclaimed with concern, her eyes wide as she stumbled after Steven, Amethyst following not too far behind them. "What are you doing?!"

"We have to go down to the Mystery Shack right now!" Steven urged insistently. "Come on!"

"This late?" the white Gem questioned. "Why?"

"Because… because… Oh, it's too horrible for words!"
"Steven," Garnet interjected calmly, placing a hand on the distraught boy's shoulder. "What happened?"

Steven took in a deep breath to settle his frayed nerves before finally relaying the terrible news to the Gems. "There's... there's been... a murder!"

"What?!" all three Gems exclaimed in shocked unison, all of them exchanging stunned glances upon hearing this news. Of course, Steven didn't say anything else as he hurriedly led the way out of the house, the trio following close behind him without question this time. After all, a murder was a very serious matter, and as the sworn protectors of humanity, the Crystal Gems weren't about to let such a horrible crime go unpunished under their watch.

"Steven, I wouldn't exactly classify this as a... murder..." Pearl frowned in exasperation as she glanced down at the younger Gem, who had joined Mabel in mourning over the fallen wax sculptures of Stan and the Gems. They were all crowded in the living room of the shack, now roped off with police tape courtesy of Sherriff Blubbs and Deputy Durland, who had arrived on the scene to investigate the "crime" and were in the process of questioning Stan. Though Garnet and Pearl were rather unsympathetic towards the beheadings of what were nothing more than lumps of wax, Amethyst was taking the "death" of her own wax figure almost as hard as Steven and Mabel were.

"If only I'd gotten here sooner!" the purple Gem mourned as she cradled the headless wax figure. "You'd still have your head, and we'd be chilling out, pulling pranks of Pearl... Man, it could have been great..."

"Why do things like this happen to good wax figures!?!" Steven practically sobbed as he clung onto Garnet and Pearl's wax figures tightly. "They deserved so much better..."

"I just can't believe it..." Mabel said dejectedly, shaking her head as she tried not to tear up at the sight of the headless wax carving of Stan. "All our expert handcrafting... besmirched!!"

"Who would do something like this?!" Dipper asked with a suspicious frown, knowing that there was no way this could have been an accident; the heads had all been too cleanly chopped off for it to be anything but completely intentional and most likely premeditated.

"So, I got up to use the john, right?" Stan continued to explain to the two officers, still clearly traumatized from the death of his wax double. "And when I come back, blammo! He's headless, and so are the other three!"

Sherriff Blubbs gave the conman a somewhat stoic expression after he finished taking down notes about the murders. "Look, we'd love to help you folks, but let's face facts... this crime is unsolvable."

Almost everyone in the room let out a gasp of disbelief upon hearing this, save for Pearl, who scoffed harshly instead. "What crime?!" she asked caustically. "This may be a case of property damage, but it's a far cry from an actual murder! They're wax figures for crying out loud!"

"Wow, Pearl," Amethyst retorted crossly, glaring at the white Gem in offense. "No need to be so insensitive. That's just rude, you know."

"There has to be something you can do!" Steven pleaded with the two officers. "Our wax creations must be avenged!"

"Sorry, kid," Blubbs shrugged somewhat apathetically. "But we got nothin'. It's a dead end case."
"You're kidding, right?" Dipper asked, believing their lack of confidence to be nothing more than a lack of effort instead. "There must be evidence, motives, something! You know, I could help if you want."

"He's really good," Mabel pointed out, her hope renewed in the possibility that her perceptive brother might be able to find out who had done this horrid act and bring them to justice. "He figured out who was eating our tin cans!"

"All signs pointed to the goat," Dipper said with a confident grin in his sleuthing skills.

"Yeah, let the boy help," Stan added. "He's got a little brain up in his head!"

"Yeah!" Steven agreed. "I'm sure that if anyone could figure out who did this, it's Dipper!"

Of course, upon being present with this suggestion, the officers merely laughed mockingly in response, much to Dipper's immediate frustration. "Oooh! Would you look at what we got here!" Blubbs jeered with a chuckle. "City boy thinks he can solve a mystery with his fancy computer phone!"

"City booooy! City booooy!" Durland called in additional taunting derision.

"Heh, city boy," Amethyst chuckled in amusement to herself, ignoring the aggravated glare Dipper sent her way for egging the officers on.

"You are adorable!" Blubbs proclaimed as he grinned at the boy patronizingly.

"Adorable?" Dipper scoffed, knowing that was the last thing he wanted to be called.

The officers let out another round of laughter at his obvious aggravation, finding that his irritated scowl only made him all the more adorable. "Look, p.j's, how about you leave the investigating to the grown-ups, ok?" Blubbs asked rather demeaningly.

"You two can't be serious about actually looking into such a ridiculous issue, right?" Pearl asked in disbelief, unable to take this situation seriously. "Certainly you must have more important things to do with your time and resources!"

"Listen, darlin'," Blubbs began, addressing her with the same condescending grin he had used with Dipper. "You've got a point. We're very busy and we have a lot of important police-type work to do before we-"

The sheriff was cut off by the sound of his own walkie-talkie sounding off from his belt. "Attention all units," the officer on the other end of the line announced. "Carl is about to fit an entire cantaloupe in his mouth. Repeat, an entire cantaloupe!"

"It's a 23-16!" Durland exclaimed in excitement.

"Let's move!" Blubbs proclaimed with a wide grin, both officers giggling gleefully as they can out and rushed for their car without a second thought.

"This is why we take responsibility for protecting this town," Garnet deadpanned as she also took her leave, not really caring to stick around much longer in favor of returning to the temple. Pearl followed behind not too far after her, but not before turning to Steven with a puzzled frown once more.

"Come back up to the temple when you're done… mourning, Steven," she called, clearly not
empathizing with the younger Gem over what she viewed to be a silly, pointless situation anyway. "You too, Amethyst!"

"Gimme a minute!" the purple Gem called back, lingering over the prone form of her headless wax double a moment longer. "I'll never forget you," she said morosely, stroking the wax figure's arm affectionately. However, her former grief was clearly not inconsolable as she was still able to easily depart after Garnet and Pearl, without really even looking back.

"I guess we'll never know who was responsible for this…" Steven said with a dejected sigh, knowing that the police had made it quite clear that they would not be of very much help.

Upon hearing this, the idea that Dipper had been thinking through when the cops left solidified in his mind, determination filling him as he reached a conclusion. He had never been one to believe in impossible odds, especially in light of a situation like this. There had to be a solution to this perplexing mystery, an explanation behind who was behind this and why. And if anyone was going to get to the bottom of this, it would be him.

"That's it!" Dipper proclaimed boldly. "Steven, Mabel, we're going to find the jerk who did this and get those heads back ourselves. Then we'll see who's adorable." No sooner had he finished asserting himself than he let out a small, short, somewhat high pitched sneeze, which of course elicited amused chuckles from Mabel and Steven.

"Aww, you sneeze like a kitten!" Mabel gushed with a beaming grin, despite the annoyed scowl both her and Steven were catching from Dipper. He made sure to make a mental note to make his sneezes less cute. After all, the road to being taken seriously had to start somewhere.

The next morning saw the kids all getting up early so they could properly begin their investigation of the wax murders. Steven had invited Connie to join them, knowing that her intelligence would certainly be in asent in solving this bewildering mystery and she had readily agreed to come along to help out. Dipper had decided that the best place for them to start would be at the very scene of the crime, and so the four of them had gathered in the den of the Mystery Shack, where the headless bodies of the wax figures still lay. They had worked to make it look a bit more like an actual crime scene by stringing up "police tape", even if it was just toilet paper with "do not cross" etched onto it with marker.

"So someone just broke in and cut all their heads off?" Connie asked with a frown, trying to get a better read on the situation. "And no one saw who did it?"

"Nope," Steven confirmed, shaking his head. "Weird, isn't it?"

"It's more than just weird," Dipper said, his tone serious and resolved. "It's suspicious. This couldn't have just happened out of nowhere; there were a lot of unhappy costumers at the unveiling yesterday. The murderer could have been anyone."

"Yeah! Even us!" Mabel exclaimed, even though the chances of that being the case were basically nonexistent.

"In this town, anything is possible," Dipper continued, largely ignoring his sister's left-field comment as he took the journal out and flipped through its pages. "Ghosts, zombies… it could be months before we find our first clue."

"Hey, look!" Steven exclaimed, having noticed something on the ground in front of him. "A clue!"
The clue he had pointed out turned out to be a series of shoeprints, rather large ones, imbedded into the thick carpet of the living room and originating next to Stan's chair. "Nice find, Steven!" Dipper exclaimed with a grin, glad to see that they had a starting lead to get them on the right track.

"But look at them for a minute," Connie noted, lowering herself closer to the ground so she could get a closer look at them. "There's a hole in the prints. What could have caused that?"

"Maybe the murderer was wearing a pair of old shoes?" Steven guessed, hoping that information might be of some help.

"Maybe…" Dipper noted thoughtfully. "Where do they lead to?"

At this prompting, all four of the kids followed the relatively short line of footprints around the chair to find what was obviously a very damming piece of evidence lying behind the chair: an axe.

"Whoa!" Mabel gasped in surprise, carefully picking the somewhat heavy weapon up so they could all see it better. "How did this get here?"

"It must be the murder weapon!" Connie exclaimed. "Nothing else could have cut the heads off of the wax figures so cleanly."

"Why don't we go ask Soos about it?" Steven suggested. "He knows all about tools!"

Without any need for further deliberation, the four of them agreed on doing so, taking the axe with them to the gift shop where Soos was indeed on duty performing his usual tasks of keeping the shack up and running. After a brief exchange of greetings, the kids handed the supposed murder weapon off to the handyman, hoping that he could give them more information about the kind of person who might possibly wield such a tool.

"So, what do you think?" Dipper asked expectantly after Soos had an ample opportunity to look over the axe.

"In my opinion, this is an axe," Soos stated simply, affirming the obvious.

"And…?" Steven urged on, hoping for more information.

"And it's sharp," Soos continued astutely, though of course, that insight was of no help to them either.

"Wait a minute!" Mabel gasped, a sudden realization hitting her. "The lumberjack!"

"Of course!" Dipper exclaimed in agreement, recalling how the lumberjack had singlehandedly punched out a pole at the unveiling yesterday in his unbridled rage.

"That does make sense," Steven said. "He was pretty mad when he didn't get that free pizza."

"Mad enough for murder!" Mabel dramatically added.

"Oh, you mean Manly Dan?" Soos asked casually. "Yeah, he hangs out at this crazy intense biker joint downtown."

"Then that's where we're heading," Dipper said with resolve.

"Wow!" Connie exclaimed with an excited grin. "Looks like we already have a suspect and a motive! Looks like we're well on our way to solving this case."
"Dude, this is awesome," Soos commented with a grin, admiring their shared zeal. "You four are like, the Mystery Kids, or something."

"Don't call us that," Dipper was quick to say, feeling as though such a title made all four of them sound like they were far from the serious mystery-solvers they were setting out to be.

With their mission in mind, the kids bid Soos farewell and headed out to go downtown, though they didn't get very far past the shack before they were stopped by Stan, who was in the midst of pulling a large wooden coffin out of the back of his car. "Hey, kids!" he called to the four of them as soon as they stepped out of the shack. "Give me a hand with this coffin, will ya? I'm doing a little memorial service for Wax Stan later on. Something small, but classy."

"What about the wax Gems?" Steven asked with a concerned frown, knowing that they deserved to be honored in the same way. "What are you going to do with them?"

"Eh, I don't really care," Stan shrugged rather matter-of-factly. "You can do whatever you want with them, kid."

"Well, Amethyst will be happy to hear that…" Steven said, deciding to bequeath the remains of the fallen wax Gems to their living counterparts later on.

"Sorry, Grunkle Stan, but we can't help you right now," Dipper said in reference to Stan asking for their aid. "We've got a big break in the case."

"Break in the case!" Mabel added for extra emphasis.

"We're heading downtown right now to interrogate the potential murderer."

"And we have an axe!" Steven added as he pulled out the deadly weapon, waving it around a bit with a showy grin.

"Hm, this seems like the kind of dangerous thing that responsible parents wouldn't want you to do…" Stan noted, though his tone was nowhere close to chastising. "Good thing I'm an uncle. Avenge me, kids! Avenge me!"

The kids all grinned and nodded in firm agreement, glad to see that Stan was encouraging of their mission to catch the criminal who had defaced the wax figures. Resolve and ambition burned in the youths as they banded together in their unanimous goal: to find the murderer and bring them the justice due to them for slaughtering the four innocent wax figures. And none of them would rest until they had succeeded.

Skull Fracture was Gravity Falls' sole biker bar, and as such, it was the central hangout for many of the town's rougher and more rugged thugs and brutes. Its rundown outer appearance was frightening enough on its own, the large, muscular bouncer on duty outside was just as intimidating. None of this was lost on Dipper, Mabel, Steven, and Connie as they peered around the corner of the tavern, gaging up the situation they were about to dive into.

"This is the place," Dipper said, trying to act bold, though the edge of fear in his tone was obvious.

"Um… are you guys sure this is a good idea?" Connie asked with slight uncertainty. "Chances are we probably won't even be allowed in there."

"Oh, that won't be a problem," Mabel said with an assured grin. "I came prepared." Upon saying this, she pulled out four fake IDs that she had created for just such an occasion and passing them
out. In all honesty, none of them looked very convincing, being composed of un-laminated cardstock and covered in crayon and glitter. And while neither Dipper nor Connie were that confident in their believability, Steven and Mabel were optimistic that they would work perfectly.

As inconspicuously as possible, the kids emerged from their hiding place, all of the approaching the surly bouncer with the most confident, mature strides they could muster. The bouncer gave them an unimpressed glance as they approached him, his arms crossed as he looked down at them with an expectant eyebrow raised.

"There's no way this is going to work," Connie whispered nervously to Steven, who simply returned her concern with a low-key grin of reassurance.

"We're here to interrogate Manly Dan the lumberjack for the murder of Wax Stan and the Wax Crystal Gems," Mabel got straight to the point, her tone really quite professional when compared to her usually silly manner.

"We believe you will find our identifications to be viable," Steven said, dropping his voice down lower so he could sound more mature as they all held up their fake IDs.

Dipper couldn't help but face-palm upon hearing this, sharing Connie's sentiments that this plan would certainly be a failure and that they would harshly be denied access into the pub. However, he was duly surprised when the bouncer only briefly glanced over the makeshift IDs and shrugged, opening the door for them. "Works for me," he said cooly, as stoic as ever as the kids went inside.

"I can't believe that worked..." Connie said, still feeling the lingering anxiety of the situation, anxiety that quickly turned into legitimate fear as they saw the sight inside of the bar.

Skull Fracture was certainly an appropriate name for the pub, as nearly every one of its patrons were engaged fist fights with each other. The entire club was filled with the sounds of not only physical fighting, but uproarious arguments and the stale, sour stenches of cigarette smoke and beer. Clearly, this violent bar was no place for children, but that hardly deterred the four self-proclaimed detectives as they began to scan the space over for their suspect.

Thankfully, none of the rugged patrons picked the obviously kids out of the crowd immediately, as they were all clearly invested in showing off their masculinity to their opponents instead. Mabel in particular noticed this as she stepped over the unconscious form of a thug that had recently been defeated lying in her path. "He's resting," she reassured herself with an optimistic smile as she caught up with the others.

"Alright, everyone, let's just try to blend in, ok?" Dipper asked, knowing that the best kind of detective work was discreet and under the wire.

Steven and Mabel responded with cheerful thumbs up while Connie merely nodded sincerely, obviously taking their mission as seriously as Dipper was. Though the original intention was for all of them to stick together for this interrogation, Mabel was the first to break away to chat up a nearby surly patron sitting at the bar. "Hey there, fellow restaurant patron!" she greeted brightly as she climbed up onto the barstool beside him, giving him a friendly punch on the arm and ignoring the sour growl he emitted as she did so.

"Didn't take too long for Steven to split off from the group either as he easily approached a group of rowdy bikers sitting at one of the tables. "Hi, I'm Steven!" he introduced himself with a friendly grin as he noticed the scowls and glares they were directing at him. "You all look like you could use a good song. Any requests?" he asked as he pulled his ukulele out of his cheeseburger backpack and eagerly prepared to play.
Even though Steven and Mabel had gotten distracted from their original mission, Connie and Dipper still managed to locate Manly Dan towards the back of the pub, brutally taking on the arm wrestling machine. As he defeated it once more, the lumberjack let out a fierce victory shout and ended up effectively breaking the machine by pulling the fake arm up from its restraints entirely, showing off his formidable strength.

"Manly Dan, just the guy we wanted to see," Dipper began, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible. "We have a few questions for you. Where were you last night?"

"Punchin' the clock!" Manly Dan answered in usual angry, gruff manner.

"So… you were at work?" Connie inferred.

"No, I was punchin' that clock!" the lumberjack growled, pointing to a street clock right outside the window, which had clearly been pummeled to the point that its pole was bent in an awkward angle and it obviously was no longer functioning.

"10 o'clock…" Dipper noticed the time frozen onto the broken clock face with dismay. "The time of the murder… So, I'm guessing you've never seen this before?" he asked, pulling the axe out of his backpack and presenting to the lumberjack.

"Listen, little girls!" Manly Dan began hotly.

"Hey, actually, I'm a-" Dipper started to correct him, only to be quickly cut off by the impatient lumberjack.

"I wouldn't pick my teeth with that axe! It's left handed! I only use my right hand, the MANLY HAND!" Without any real provocation, Manly Dan let out another brutish shout and began wildly beating the remains of the arm wrestling machine with the mechanical arm he had pulled off of it earlier.

"Left handed…" Dipper and Connie repeated in unison, both of them exchanging a glance as they realized they had just happened upon another clue.

In light of this new information, Dipper was quick to grab Mabel, interrupting her conversation with the thug she had befriended, in which she was helping him determine his future via cootie catcher. Likewise, Connie went over to get Steven, breaking through the cheerful tune he was strumming for the choir of bikers he had assembled right before they reached the chorus.

As soon as they had all regrouped outside of the bar, Dipper and Connie made sure to relay the information they had managed to glean about the axe to Steven and Mabel, viewing it as a rather significant break in the case. "It's a left handed axe," Connie explained. "Which means that our pool of suspects just shrunk a whole lot."

"From here on out, all we have to do is use the process of elimination," Dipper said after he finished scribbling up a list of everyone who had been present at the unveiling. "These are all of our potential suspects. Manly Dan is right-handed, so that means all we have to do is find our left handed suspect and we've got our killer."

"Well, that shouldn't be too hard," Steven said with a confident smile. "There can't be too many left-handed people in Gravity Falls, right?"

"Hopefully not…" Connie said, knowing that if there were multiple lefties then things would most likely become even more complicated.
"Oh man, we are on fire today!" Mabel exclaimed with zeal over their progress thus far. "This will be easier than guessing what my favorite color is! Spoiler alert: is all of them."

"Alright," Dipper said with determination, steeling their resolve up for what he assumed would be the final stretch of this investigation. "Let's find that murderer!"

Unlike at the pub, the kinds all managed to stick together throughout the duration of their search across town for the criminal. At the risk of enraging the innocent, they decided to avoid bringing up their investigation to anyone, instead opting to only check and see what each suspect's dominant hand was. They worked in the order of whomever they encountered first, which worked rather well considering Gravity Falls was a rather small town and the chances of bumping into any of its citizens were fairly high.

By chance the first person they ran into during their search was Old Man McGucket, who they quickly realized wasn't the murderer upon seeing that his right hand was engulfed in the maw of a baby alligator for some reason. They headed to Fish Stew Pizza next, knowing that Kofi Pizza had been quite angry over how Stan had neglected to order any of his pizza for the unveiling. Though Kofi was quick to kick the kids out for what he called "loitering without buying any of his delicious pizza", they did manage to spot him chopping up fish with his right hand, eliminating him from their list of suspects. From there, they stopped by Gravity Fries to check out Mr. Fryman, who had also been amongst the crowd at the unveiling along with his sons Ronaldo and Peedee. They immediately ruled Ronaldo out based on his incompetence alone, as he had caught wind of the wax murders and had been blogging nonstop about how they were "completely bizarre and part of a much larger government conspiracy to use wax figures as target practice". Fryman himself could not have been the killer based on his right-handedness, which the kids deduced upon watching him whip up a batch of "fry bits" upon Steven's order for them. Likewise, Peedee could not have been responsible, as he was seen spinning a sign for the restaurant while begrudgingly wearing a rather unsettling-looking fry costume. They even spied on Onion, whom Steven claimed to Dipper, Mabel, and Connie, was probably quite capable of an action as violent as the wax murders, despite his young age, small stature, and strangely silent nature. And indeed, upon watching Onion stoically and unfeelingly toss a brick into a nearby car window for apparently no reason, the suspicions of his strangeness were confirmed, though there was only one problem: he had thrown the brick with his right hand.

The kids continued their search for the true culprit throughout much of the day, checking name after name off of the list of suspects upon confirming that they were all righties. At first, it seemed as though they were getting nowhere with their investigation, until their list began to gradually narrow down until it all became clear.

"Guys, there's only one person left on the list!" Dipper exclaimed as he crossed the second to last suspect off, quickly checking over it once more to make sure they had not missed anyone. But indeed, every single last potential murderer had been ruled out, save for one.

Of course, upon hearing this, Mabel, Steven, and Connie were all quick to crowd around Dipper to take a look at the list, all of them gasping in surprise at who the sole remaining suspect was. "Of course! It all adds up!" Mabel exclaimed, snapping her finger for extra emphasis.

"Then it looks like there's only one thing left for us to do..." Dipper said with finality, confident that they had this case just about wrapped up once and for all.

They had decided to wait until dark to execute their final operation. Dipper had even managed to convince Sherriff Blubbs and Deputy Durland to join them in order to make the arrest, even though
they still aggravatingly referred to him as a clueless "city boy". Nonetheless, the kids and cops all gathered just outside of the small headquarters of the Gravity Falls Gossiper, sneaking in the shadows to be aloof and inconspicuous.

"You kids better be right about this or you'll never hear the end of it," Blubbs warned the youths, who were all beyond eager to prove that their hunch was correct.

"Don't worry, officers," Dipper assured them confidently. "The evidence is irrefutable."

"It's so irrefutable," Mabel added with a casual wave of her hand.

"I'd say it's downright intrusive!" Steven grinned, though Connie was quick to notice that he had used the wrong word.

"I think you mean conclusive, Steven," she corrected him gently.

"That too!"

"I'm gonna get to use my night stick!" Durland exclaimed with glee, waving said night stick around zealously.

"You ready? You ready, little fella?" Blubbs asked his partner with equal verve as they playfully poked each other with their police batons, both of them ready to do what they classified as "real" police work.

"Ok, on three!" Dipper said, readying himself, just as all the others were, to face whom he was absolutely certain was the murderer. "One, two-

Before he could make it to three, Durland and Blubbs jumped the gun, breaking the door down with a unified wild shout. "Nobody move!" the sheriff shouted firmly as the kids all piled into the building behind the two cops. "This is a raid!"

Upon having his office invaded so suddenly, Toby Determined tumbled off his chair and onto the floor with a startled cry, clearly befuddled over this unexplainable break in. "What is this, some kind of raid?!" he asked redundantly, giving the officers a fearful look.

"Toby Determined, you're under arrest for the murder of the wax bodies of Grunkle Stan and the Crystal Gems!" Dipper boldly declared.

"You have the right to remain impressed…" Mabel began with a satisfied grin, trailing off so Steven could finish off the one-liner they had rehearsed in preparation of this moment.

"…With our awesome detective work!" Steven picked it up brightly, prompting all four of them into a round of celebratory high fives over their success.

"Gobbling goose feathers!" Toby exclaimed, obviously flustered by this news. "I don't understand!"

"Then allow me to explain," Dipper began articulately, prepared to bring up all of the conclusions he had drawn about this case. "You were hoping that Grunkle Stan's new attraction would be the big story that could save your failing newspaper. But when the show was a flop, you decided to go out and make your own headline…"

To emphasize this point, Connie held up that morning's issue of the Gravity Falls Gossiper to show off its front page article, which of course detailed the scoop of the murders of Wax Stan and the
"Wax Gems. "It's all right here in black and white," she said firmly, having analyzed the article over and over for all of the clues they needed.

"And read all over!" Steven added jokingly, eliciting a giggle from Mabel, but no one else appreciated the pun.

"But you were sloppy," Dipper continued, still as serious as ever. "And all the clues pointed to a shabby-shoed reporter who was caught left handed."

"Toby Determined, you're yesterday's news," Mabel finished off with an assured grin.

"Ooo, that was a good one!" Steven complimented her one-liner in light of the fact that the two of them had been working on them all day as part of their "detective-talk".

"Boy, your little knees must be sore…” Toby began with a frown. "From jumping to conclusions! Hachacha!" Proud of his own witty remark, the reporter broke out into a short jig before coming to what the kids had hoped would be a confession, though it was anything but. "I had nothing to do with those murders!"

"I knew it!" Dipper jumped on what he thought was an admission of guilt, though he was quick to realize it wasn't. "Wait, what did you say? Nothing?"

"But… what about the axe? And the hole in the shoes?" Connie asked with a confused frown, knowing that all the signs had pointed to Toby being the murderer. "The motives and clues all added up… How could it not be you?"

"So, if it wasn't you, then where were you the night of the murder?" Blubbs asked Toby, him and Durland having a hard time believing either the reporter or the kids in light of these circumstances.

"Ehh…” Toby scratched the back of his neck rather awkwardly, not really wanting to reveal this information, though he soon relented for the sake of proving his innocence.

Without any explanation, he inserted one of the office's security tapes into the TV, and it immediately opened on Toby cautiously glancing around the office before hurrying towards the closet. What none of the others save for the reporter himself had been expecting was for him to pull out a life-sized cardboard cutout of Gravity Falls' key female news reporter, holding it closely and romantically as he attempted to flirt with it. "Finally we can be alone, cardboard cutout of TV news reporter Shandra Jimenez!" he swooned affectionately before kissing it passionately. Of course, this elicited disgusted, disturbed reactions from everyone else watching, and though there was nothing of note about this tape save for its bizarre strangeness, one thing about it was of key importance. It has been recorded around 10 o'clock the previous night.

"Well, the time stamp confirms it," Blubbs said with finality after the initial revulsion over the tape had worn off. "Toby, you're off the hook, you freak of nature."

"Hooray!" Toby cheered with relief, regardless of the fact that the embarrassing tape of him and the cutout of Shandra Jimenez was still playing.

"B-but… it has to be him!" Dipper protested, shocked that their hard-earned conclusion to this mystery had unraveled so suddenly, leaving them with countless loose ends. "Check the axe for fingerprints!"

The cops were quick to do so, dusting the weapon's handle for any signs of incriminating fingerprints, only to strangely come up with nothing. "Nope," Blubbs shook his head. "No prints at all."
"No prints?" Dipper repeated, beyond confused at this revelation.

"But… how is that possible?" Connie questioned, just as bewildered at the lack of logic in it all.

"Hey, I got a headline for you, Toby," Blubbs said, though it was clear he was aiming his taunting tone more at the kids than the reporter. "City kids waste everyone's time!"

The adults in the room shared a laugh at their expense, disheartening the kids even more in their embarrassing failure. They had all been so certain that their hunch had been correct and their detective work had been sound. They had searched every inch of the crime scene, inspected every clue, checked out every lead, considered every suspect, but in the end it was all for naught. Their thorough investigation had reached a dead end, and at that end, the young sleuths found themselves with nowhere else to go and nowhere left to look.

True to his word, Stan had arranged a small funeral service for his deceased wax counterpart at the Mystery Shack. It wasn't anything excessive or extravagant, especially since its sole attendees aside from all the other wax figures consisting of Dipper, Mabel, Steven, Connie, and Soos. The headless wax Gems were lined up in the back of the room, ready for Steven to take them back to the temple once the funeral was over seeing as Stan had no use for them. But nonetheless, the service itself was a solemn scene, the red rays of the setting sun streaming in through the parlor windows as Stan took the front of the room, standing alongside his wax double's coffin as he began officiating the service.

"Kids, Soos, lifeless wax figures, thank you all for coming," the conman started with a somber frown, ignoring the fact that Soos was the only one in the room who had managed to tear up. "Some people might say it's wrong for a man to love a wax replica of himself."

"They're wrong!" Soos exclaimed emotionally as he jumped up out of his seat.

"Easy, Soos," Stan said, though he understood the handyman's upset sentiments. "Wax Stan," he said, his voice growing thick with an oncoming sob as he turned to address his headless double. "I hope you're picking pockets in wax heaven. I'm sorry!" he exclaimed, clearly unable to go on amidst being overwhelmed with grief. "I got glitter in my eye!"

Without another word, the conman rushed out of the room tearfully, with Soos following not too far behind so he could hopefully console his despondent employer. A solemn silence leveled the sunset-painted room as the kids all exchanged pitied glances, all of them still feeling rather defeated in the aftermath of their failure to solve the murders.

"Poor Mr. Pines…" Steven frowned with sympathy after seeing how upset the conman had been. "I wish there was something we could do to at least give him some closure about all this…"

"There's nothing we can do," Dipper said, bitterness and disappointment in his tone as he crossed his arms. "Those cops were right about us…"

"Aw, come on, Dipper," Mabel encouraged with a small smile, placing a reassuring hand on her brother's shoulder. "We've come so far. We can't just give up now!"

"Mabel's right!" Steven heartily agreed. "That murderer has to still be out there somewhere. For all we know, the answer could be right under our noses."

"There has to be something that we missed…" Connie mused with a frown. "But what?"

"We didn't miss anything," Dipper insisted as he stood and approached the coffin up front, the
others doing the same after him. "We considered it all: the weapon, the motive, the clues… Maybe this really is a dead end case…" He let out a dejected sigh as he glanced down at Wax Stan's headless form, which of course reminded him of how they had unexplainably failed to find the perpetrator. Though he didn't have the same emotional connection to this case as Stan, Mabel, or Steven did, Dipper had still wanted to solve it, and not just to prove the officers who had doubted him wrong. He had seen this mystery as an opportunity to prove himself not just to everyone else, but largely to himself. This had been a test of his resolve, his deductive skills, his very intelligence, and though he had utilized all of those things to the fullest, in the end, none of it had been enough. And because of his failure, the mystery of the wax murders would be forever that: a mystery.

However, it was only as Dipper was looking down at the wax rendition of his grunkle that he noticed something he never had before, even after investigating the decapitated body several times in their initial search of the crime scene. "Wax Stan has a hole in his shoe..." he noted with confusion, realizing that the hole itself was oddly enough in the very center of the shoe.

"Oh yeah," Steven said with a nod as he took a glance at the hole in the shoe himself. "All of the wax guys have that, even the Gems."

"That's how you get them to stand upright," Mabel explained. "It's where the pole thingy attaches to their stand dealy."

"Wait a minute…" Dipper said, his eyes widening with the sudden realization. "What has a hole in its shoes and no fingerprints?"

Though the conclusion was lost on Mabel and Steven, Connie was quick to catch his drift as she gave him a look of disbelief. "What?" she asked with a bewildered frown, thinking that it didn't make sense. "But… that's impossible…"

"It might be," Dipper admitted, knowing that he could be wrong once more, even if all of the loose ends were starting to tie themselves up with this new theory. "But if it's not, then that means that the murderers are-"

"Standing right behind you."

All four of the kids let out a unified fearful gasp at the new, English-accented voice from behind them, and as they spun around to find its source, they could scarcely believe their eyes. Beyond all logic, the audience of wax figures, save for Wax Stan and the Wax Gems, began to move on their own accord, their varied expressions twisting into malicious grins and scowls as they sulked forward towards the kids rather menacingly. The army of around twenty or so wax figures towered over them as they all bunched together towards the front of the room in shock over what they were witnessing. The lineup of wax marauders was composed of all of the figures in the collection, from Sherlock Holmes, to Shakespeare, to Genghis Khan, to Edgar Allen Poe, to Larry King to even Coolio, all of them united in the intent of taking out the four youths, the only ones who had discovered that they were responsible for the murders.

"Congratulations, my four amateur sleuths," Wax Sherlock Holmes spoke up, stepping forward as he gave the kids a patronizing glance. "You have unburied the truth, and now, we're going to bury you. Bravo, Dipper Pines; you've discovered our little secret." The waxen detective brushed his cape aside in a flourish, pulling out the decapitated, still broadly grinning head of Wax Stan as he did so. Likewise, several of his cohorts produced the hidden heads of the Wax Gems, revealing that they had been harboring them away in secret ever since the murders. "Applaud everyone!" Wax Holmes addressed his fellow wax figures sardonically. "Applaud sarcastically."

The wax figures collectively did so, all of them smirking mockingly at the four frightened kids as
they clapped. "Uh, no, that sounds too sincere," Wax Holmes admonished. "Slow clap. It's more mocking." At this, the figures decreased the frequency of their applause, to the point that it indeed sounded quite taunting. "There we go, nice and condescending…"

"You know, this would be kinda cool if it wasn't actually terrifying…" Steven said nervously, believing that the wax figures coming to life was indeed incredible save for the fact that they wanted to hurt them.

"H-how is this even possible?" Dipper asked, completely bewildered by this sudden, totally unexpected twist. "You're all made of wax!"

"Are you… magic?" Mabel asked was a curious gasp.

The wax figures all chuckled at what they perceived to be an incredibly simple question. "Are we magic?" Wax Holmes laughed with a sneer. "Did you all hear that? She wants to know if we're magic! Of course we're magic!"

"W-what do you mean?" Connie asked apprehensively.

"It's elementary, my dear girl," Wax Holmes began to explain, his tone as snide as ever. "Many years ago, Stan purchased us at a garage sale-

"A haunted garage sale, dog!" Wax Coolio added.

"For the last time, it was not haunted garage sale!" Wax Holmes insisted in annoyance. "It was just an ordinary garage sale. And up until that point, we all had just as much sentience and mobility as any other wax figures under the sun—or preferably, not under the sun. But all that changed upon our first night here at the Mystery Shack…"

"It was by fate that I had happened to be positioned underneath a shelf upon which a sack containing the remains of shattered gemstones, which of course, upon being agitated shifted off of the shelf and into my hands. And alas, suddenly I was alive, self-aware, free-willed! Likewise, my fellow waxen compatriots were also brought to life as soon as I imparted the other gem fragments to them."

"Wait…" Steven interrupted, his eyes widening with realization as he vaguely remembered something from a few days ago. "Gem fragments…?" It all came back to him at once as he let out a surprised gasp. "Oh my gosh! The shard thingies Pearl told me about! The Gems have been looking for those! You guys had them all along?!

"Indeed we did," Wax Holmes affirmed with a disdainful scowl. "And we weren't about to let those vexing 'Crystal Gems' take our newfound consciousness away from us. So we quickly learned to keep out sentience a secret from the world for our own protection. By day, we would reside in the wax museum, forced to be but the playthings of man."

"But when the old man was asleep, we would rule the night," Wax Coolio interjected placidly.

"It was a simple, yet charmed life for us waxen beings…" Wax Holmes said reminiscently, though his tone quickly turned sour once more. "That is, until your uncle closed up shop. He locked us away inside that infernal storage room, and though we tried our hardest to escape, it was by all means impenetrable."

"We've been waiting ten years to get our revenge on Stan for locking us away…" the wax detective continued vengefully. "We had it all planned out; we were going to take him out and shatter the Crystal Gems before they could shatter us. But when we finally got what seemed like the perfect
opportunity… we got the wrong ones…”

"So you were trying to murder Grunkle Stan and the Crystal Gems for real?" Dipper asked, completely shocked at the dark turn this had all taken.

"You guys were right all along!" Mabel said to Dipper and Connie, remembering their earliest assumptions about the wax figures. "Wax people are creepy!"

"Well, yeah, but who could have ever guessed they'd be this demented?!" Connie exclaimed, pressing her back against the wall in fear even moreso in light of this revelation.

"Enough!" Wax Holmes silenced them abruptly. "Now that you all know our secret, you must die!"

For an extra measure in terrifying the kids, the wax figures all simultaneously growled intimidatingly as their eyes inexplicably rolled back in their heads. The four youths watched as they edged closer to them with murderous intent, all of them frightened out of their wits at the bizarre danger they were facing.

"What do we do!? What do we do?!!" Mabel shouted, clearly in a panic as they were being cornered.

"I don't know!" Dipper exclaimed, completely at a loss as the wax figures drew closer to them. "Steven, do you know anything about those shard things that are keeping them alive?"

"Uh, not really!" Steven admitted a bit sheepishly. "I wasn't really listening to Pearl when she was telling me about them!"

Upon gaging that everyone else was clueless about what to do, Connie was the one to take the initiative, coming up with a spur of the moment plan to get them out of harm's way initially. "This way!" she commanded firmly, motioning for the others to slip away from the wall right as Wax Lizzie Borden swung her axe at them. They narrowly escaped and rushed over to the small refreshments table sitting near the window, hoping that they could find a means of defending themselves there. Of course, the wax figures were quick to follow after them, many of them wielding weapons of their own as they prepared to strike. In the midst of this chaos, Dipper spun around without really thinking and upon spotting the coffee pot resting on the table, he quickly picked it up and tossed it towards the crowd of wax figures without much calculation. Fortunately, it hit at least one of them, Wax Genghis Khan, it the scalding liquid instantly began to melt his wax form as he let out a pained scream.

"That's it!" Mabel exclaimed with a grin of realization. "We can melt them with hoty melty things!"

"And then we can collect all of the gem shards!" Steven added with apt enthusiasm.

"Then let's do it," Dipper declared with renewed resolve, grabbing one of the electric candles resting on the table. The others were quick to do the same as they pointed the lit ends at the wax figures with confidence that the heat emanating from them would get them to back off. "Anybody move and we'll melt you into candles!"

"Decorative candles!" Mabel added, waving her candle around with emphasis.

"Do you four really think you can defeat all of us?" Wax Holmes scoffed.

"I… I don't really know," Dipper admitted with a shrug, knowing that he was being honest with himself over his level of confidence against such a threat. "I'm not really sure."
"I mean, we're going to try at the very least," Connie said, though her tone was also only half-certain as well.

"It's worth a shot," Mabel added rather casually.

"So be it," Wax Holmes said coldly before addressing his companions. "Attack!"

Once more, the wax figures closed in on the kids, regardless of the warm weapons they now wielded against them. But this time, none of the youths backed down; instead, they stood their ground together. If the wax figures wanted a fight, then it was a fight they were going to get.

Fueled with adrenaline, Connie was the first to take the offense against the wax marauders, thrusting the tip of her candle out like it was a sword. She managed to hit the unprepared Wax Thomas Edison right in his midsection, melting out a hole that allowed the gem shard hidden inside his body to come free and fall to the ground, causing him to lifelessly freeze up instantly. In the midst of watching this victory with amazement, Mabel almost failed to notice Wax Lizzie Borden toss her axe broadly towards her until it was almost too late. Nonetheless, she managed to duck out of the way just in time, and the murderer's strike ended up inadvertently decapitating the nearby Wax Robin Hood instead. As Wax Shakespeare crept up behind her however, Steven leapt in before the poet could attack, using his candle to swipe his hands off. Wax Shakespeare let out a startled cry as he hurried away from the young Gem, who barely pursued him across the room with his candle raised for attack. Meanwhile, Dipper was facing off against Wax Larry King, holding his candle out boldly, despite the fact that he was secretly clinging onto it like his life depended on it, which it did, in a way.

"Interview this, Larry King!" Dipper exclaimed pointedly, swinging his candle out widely and quickly enough to decapitate the interviewer in one clean slice. Apparently, the gem shard keeping Wax Larry King alive was inside his head, as it somehow remained animated even after his head was chopped off.

"My neck!" the wax host cried in despair as his head tumbled to the ground. "My beautiful neck!"

Dipper had no time to relax in this victory however as Wax Groucho Marx rushed for him, though he accidentally managed to grasp the tip of the candle, instantly causing his hand to melt. While he was distracted, Connie came in from behind and used her candle to slice him clean across the middle.

"Joke's on you, Groucho!" Connie quipped triumphantly, returning Dipper's nod of gratitude for coming to his rescue.

"I've heard of cutting remarks, but this is ridiculous!" the wax comedian chaffed casually, twittling his fingers a bit as the top half of his body slid off of the lower half. "Hey, why is there nothing in my hand?"

"You're surprisingly good at this," Dipper said to Connie, duly impressed with her skills under fire.

"So are you," she remarked with a sly grin, though their exchange was cut short as the already partially-melted Wax Genghis Khan ran at them both with a barbaric battle cry. Both kids let out a surprised gasp but get their wits about them as they both leapt out of the way in opposite directions, freeing up the path for the wax conqueror to dash right into the lit fireplace instead.

"Ha, Genghis Khan!" Dipper laughed victoriously, grinning as the discarded gem shard clattered onto the floor. "You fell harder than the... uh... I don't know, Qin Dynasty? Right?"
"Ok, that one was a bit forced…" Connie frowned sidely as she collected the gem shard and added it to the pocketful she had already gathered.

"Dipper, I've told you thousands of times before!" Mabel called out remindingly even from across the room as she took out several of the other figures using Wax Coolio's head as something of a mace. "You're no good at witty one-liners!"

"Whatever," Dipper scoffed in annoyance, though he did accept Connie's kind offer of help in getting off of the ground before she went off to help Steven.

Mabel had just defeated a handful of the wax figures when she happened to glance across the room to spot something that made her gasp in fear. "Dipper!" she called worriedly to her brother, who was in the midst of taking out Wax Richard Nixon by the legs. "Watch out!"

Heeding her warning, Dipper quickly turned to see that the main instigator of all of this, Wax Sherlock Holmes, was approaching him with a dark, murderous expression. "Alright," the detective said rather calmly, even though the underlying anger and annoyance in his tone were clear. "Let's get this over with."

Dipper took in an anxious breath as he watched Wax Holmes swiftly grab the ornamental sword that was hanging from the wall and give it an experimental swing before aiming it at him. Not really knowing what else to do, Dipper attempted to use his candle to defend himself from the detective's first actual slash, though it was cleanly sliced in half by the swipe, which nearly took his hand off as well.

Noticing that her brother was in considerable peril, Mabel attempted to slip away from her own duel against Wax Betsy Ross to help him, but found that she was ultimately unable to. And so instead, she decided to aid him from afar. "Catch!" she called to him, quickly grabbing the fire poker from beside the fireplace and tossing it over to him. Dipper managed to catch the poker just in the nick of time as Wax Holmes brought down his blade once more, only for it to be blocked by the poker. The detective let out a growl of aggravation at this turn of the tide but nonetheless, he continued his barrage of attacks, which Dipper frantically did his best to guard against.

Gradually, the brute force of Wax Holmes' slashes managed to push Dipper back until they were both out of the parlor and steadily heading towards the stairs that led to the attic. Dipper knew well that he wouldn't be able to keep this fight up forever, especially considering that the only thing he head to defend himself with was a measly fire poker that was already starting to wear down from being consistently struck by the detective's sword. But as they all too quickly emerged into the attic, he realized maybe he wouldn't have to, especially as he glanced over at the large alcove window that lead to the roof.

"You might as well surrender now, child," Wax Holmes taunted as he managed to temporarily corner Dipper against the wall. "Once your family and those Crystal Gems are out of the way, none shall stop us!"

Finalizing his rather spur of the moment plan, Dipper took one more look towards the window as the wax detective prepared to bring his sword down for the finishing blow. "Don't count on it!" he retorted boldly, taking advantage of his own relatively small size to roll through Wax Holmes' legs and escape him before promptly throwing the window open and emerging out of it onto the slanted roof.

"Come back here, you little brat!" Wax Holmes shouted in frustration, his sword raised as he pursued his opponent outside.
Meanwhile, back in the parlor, Connie and Mabel were wrapped up in their own struggles against a
group of wax figures while Steven was going one-on-one against Wax John Wilkes Booth, who
was all too quickly cornering him against the window. Somewhat intimidated, Steven took a
cursory glance down at his stomach, wishing that he had better control over his Gem so he could
use it in this battle. But even if he couldn't, he saw the opportunity he needed as the wax assassin
began to leap towards him, especially as he glanced up at the window. Acting quickly, Steven
unlatched the window and threw it open, allowing Wax Booth to jump through it, though only
halfway. He was quick to throw the window shut as the assassin's body was partially through, the
force of the action cutting him in half and allowing the gem shard to fall into Steven's hand. "That's
for Honest Abe!" the young Gem proclaimed with a justified grin as he reopened the window once
more and quickly took a glance at the nighttime scene outside.

"Pearl!" Steven exclaimed as he noticed the white Gem standing a few feet away from the shack,
er jaw dropped in shock as she stared up towards the roof.

"Steven?!" Pearl gasped with concern, quickly hurrying over to him. Upon making sure that
Connie and Mabel were able to hold their own without him, which they certainly were, Steven
hopped through the open window, falling down into the grass with a clumsy thud as Pearl reached
him. "What are you doing here?! What's going on? And why is Dipper fighting a wax version of
Sherlock Holmes on top of the Mystery Shack?"

"Ok, so this might sound crazy…" Steven began a bit sheepishly, especially since he knew he
should have gone to go get the Gems as soon as all this chaos began. "But-

Before the young Gem could go on, a sudden shatter was heard from behind him as the same
window he had come out of broke. Pearl and Steven spun around in surprise to see that several of
the remaining wax figures were pushing their way through the window to come outside, still intent
on taking out anyone that stood in their way. Without any hesitation, Pearl summoned her staff and
gave it a deft spin as she looked back to Steven for an explanation.

"So it turns out that all of the wax figures are alive and they were the ones who killed the wax
figures of you guys and Mr. Pines," Steven explained, speaking quickly as he stuck close to Pearl
for protection. "But that's because they each have one of those gem shards that you were looking
for."

"What?!" Pearl exclaimed in a panic. "Steven, those gem shards are incredibly dangerous! The
longer they're attached to something, the more intelligent and rouge they become! Didn't you hear
what I said about the living armor and infantries and the many, many deaths?!

"No!" Steven admitted guiltily. "But if it helps, we already got rid of a bunch of them!"

"It certainly looks like it," the white Gem scoffed a bit sardonically as the group of wax figures
angrily approached the two of them. "Just stay back, Steven. I'll handle this."

"Pearl, wait!" Steven exclaimed worriedly, though the white Gem didn't heed him as she rushed for
the wax army, thrusting her spear out skillfully. She managed to skewer several of them right off
the bat, though Steven knew that it wouldn't do too much good. The only weapon that was really
effective against the wax figures was heat, which, he fortunately still had on his side as he clung
onto his candle.

Though her movements were swift and precise, what Pearl hadn't been counting on was for the
apparent intelligence of the wax figures. As she managed to stab one of the figures to her left clean
through the chest, one of them suddenly grasped onto her spear from behind. Though she did her
best to shake them off, she soon found herself becoming overwhelmed by the entire group, all of
them converging on one of their actual murder targets at once.

Steven let out a frightened gasp as Pearl disappeared into the center of the wax figures, her spear being flung away from her and landing in the ground only a few feet away from him. Even though the white Gem had told him to keep away from the fight for his own protection, he knew that he had to intervene now, before the wax figures actually succeeded in taking Pearl out just as they had her wax counterpart.

With a courageous shout, the young Gem ran towards the raging crowd of wax figures, which were all doing their best to oust Pearl, who had taken to fighting them with her bare hands, even if that wasn't her strong suit. She was quite surprised to say the least when Steven burst into the fray, candle in hand, burning through the horde as much as he could.

"Steven!" the white Gem cried with concern over how he was putting himself in such danger. "Be careful!"

"Don't worry, Pearl!" Steven replied with a confident grin. "I got this-" Of course, right as he said this, the candle, his lone means of defense, was knocked clean out of his hand by one of the figure's weapons. "Ok, maybe I don't..."

"Steven!" Pearl practically screamed, picking herself off the ground as she kicked one of the wax figures away from her so she could rush over to protect him. However, as he watched her do so, a sudden idea came to him, especially as he happened to glance down and see a few discarded gem shards lying on the ground in front of him.

"Shards..." he gasped, his eyes widening with realization, remembering that Pearl had mentioned that they could be used to bring any moldable substance to life. Certainly something like clothes would fit into that category, right? "Need!"

"What?!" Pearl called, having only heard part of what he had said before he dashed out of the fight for a moment to enact his plan. "Steven, what are you doing!?" Steven didn't offer her a reply as he got out of the wax horde's range, and he didn't need to; his plan would become clear soon enough.

As Steven and Pearl were struggling against the wax army in the yard, Dipper continued to duel it out with Wax Holmes up on the roof. It was essentially a race against time and endurance now as the wax detective chased him up the roof, still attacking all the while. Not really having anywhere else to go, he hastily climbed up onto the Mystery Shack sign, still gripping onto the fire poker, which by now was heavily dented and bent in an awkward angle. Of course, Wax Holmes followed, parrying his blade continually as Dipper struggled to both defend himself and keep his balance on the edge of the sign at the same time. Right as they were nearing the far corner of the sign, the wax detective thrust his sword out with gusto, forcing Dipper to jump back lest he be struck by it as he wasn't entirely sure the poker would provide him much protection anymore. The abrupt movements on top of the sign caused the weakly-hammered S in shack to come loose from its holds and slide down onto the roof. Upon watching this, Dipper was reminded just how high up they really were, and that if he were to so much as slip up now, there was a high chance that he could fall to his doom. And as intimidating as that thought was, he couldn't help but notice the bizarre scene taking place down in the yard below.

Pearl was just about to summon another staff to cut down the wax figures assaulting her, but right before she could, a new force entered the fray. Oddly enough, the white Gem noticed with bewilderment that it was none other than Steven's pants, freely moving on their own accord thanks to the gem shard tucked into the pocket. Since the shard had just been imparted to the pants, they hadn't gained enough sentience to be as the wax figures, and therefore they were actually obedient to Steven, who stood back away from the battle and watched as his pants actually managed to kick
one of the figures out of the way so Pearl could slice it in half. The young Gem grinned as all of the remaining wax figures looked towards him in shock, his shirt, socks, and shoes all standing upright alongside him, each containing a gem shard of their own and leaving him in nothing but his underwear.

"Your move, wax guys," Steven challenged daringly, before commanding his living garments to leap into action. The clothes all leaped into action, flying towards the wax figures, who were all at first undaunted by things as weak and supposedly ineffectual as mere clothing. However, they underestimated the garments at their own peril, as they managed to land legitimate attacks on the wax army, knocking them to the ground so Pearl could sweep through and clean them all up. All the while, Steven cheered his clothes as he rushed into the heat of the chaotic clothing fray, picking up all of the scattered shards with as much haste as possible.

Though he was momentarily distracted by all this, Dipper's attention was quickly drawn back into his duel against Wax Holmes as he barely managed to parry away another heavy slash. Praying that time was on his side, he carefully leapt off of the sign and back down onto the roof, discarding the fire poker as he did so to increase his mobility; hopefully he wouldn't need it any longer anyway.

"Do you really think you can outwit me, boy?" Wax Holmes asked in aggravation over how Dipper had managed to slip away once again. "I'm Sherlock bleeding Holmes! Have you seen my magnifying glass?! It's enormous!"

Dipper didn't reply as he instead raced to hide behind the chimney, exhaustion catching up with him as he felt the adrenaline that had been fueling him begin to run out as he anxiously waited for Wax Holmes to catch up with him, which he inevitably did. He had only been hiding for a moment before he peered around the side of the chimney to see that the detective was there, scowling hatefully as he prepared to end this fight. Dipper was unable to do anything but let out a pained gasp as Wax Holmes brutally kicked him down and kept him from getting back up by keeping him at sword point.

"Any last words?" the detective asked dramatically as he raised his sword for the final blow.

Dipper didn't respond immediately, but instead, he glanced past Wax Holmes to see that the skies were beginning to lighten just below the tree line to the east. He let out a small, barely noticeable sigh of relief upon seeing this, knowing that everything was going exactly according to his plan. "Um… got any sunscreen?" he asked with a small grin, trying his best to be witty, even though he knew that he was still in considerable danger.

"Got any—what?" Wax Holmes asked in confusion, though he was quick to gather what was happening as he turned around. He let out a startled gasp upon seeing that the sun was just beginning to rise over the trees, warm summer heat already emanating from it even as dawn broke. "No," he said rather calmly, glaring at the source of warmth that immediately began to melt his waxen body as its rays shined over the roof of the shack.

"You know, letting me lead you outside? Probably not your sharpest decision," Dipper said with more confidence as he rose to stand, watching with satisfaction as the wax detective began to steadily melt.

"Outsmarted by a child in short pants! No!" the detective exclaimed in frustrated dismay as the sun rose every higher, causing him to melt faster. Likewise, as the sun struck the yard, the wax figures that Steven and Pearl were fighting also began to melt from the heat, exposing their individual gem shards, which the white Gem hurried to collect and bubble. "Fiddlesticks!" Wax Holmes shouted in defeat, his form liquefying even more as he went off into a long string of archaic English curses.
"Humbugs! Tiiter… total kerfuffle! B-butter hullabaloo..." His words startled to slur together until he melted into a pile of wax, with little more than his head remaining.

"Case closed!" Dipper declared victoriously, whipping the dust of his hands in triumph, though he did inavertently let out a small sneeze as he did so.

What was left of Wax Holmes let out a mocking laugh upon hearing this, even as his remains began to drip off of the room and onto the ground several feet below. "You sneeze like a kitten! Those policemen were right, you're adorable! Adorable!" the detective's final word was elongated as the last of his remnants fell off of the roof and splattered onto the ground, finally defeated.

"Ew..." Dipper muttered with disturbed disgust upon watching the wax detective's somewhat gory demise, though he immediately relaxed upon seeing that all of the wax figures in the yard had melted too. "Are you guys ok?" he called down to Steven and Pearl, who were just finishing up collecting the remaining gem shards.

"Yeah, we're fine!" Steven replied with a cheerful grin, his clothes still discarded, even if Pearl had taken the gem shards from them. "As soon as I bared by butt, I knew they'd crack."

Both Pearl and Dipper rolled their eyes upon hearing this, the white Gem in particular rather fed up with the situation at large as she teleported the bubble containing the shards back to the temple. As she did so, Garnet and Amethyst arrived on the scene casually, having missed the wax catastrophe entirely as they took in the melted wax all over the yard with surprise.

"Whoa..." Amethyst mused curiously, investigating the wax in confusion. "What happened? It looks like a wax graveyard out here?"

"The wax figures all came to life but we beat them!" Steven explained enthusiastically.

"Does that explain why you aren't wearing any clothes?" Garnet asked in her usual stoic way.

"Yep!"

"The figures somehow got ahold of the gem shards we've been searching for," Pearl reported with an exasperated sigh. "But don't worry; we collected all of them and I bubbled them away. They should be safe now."

Garnet nodded with satisfaction at this, not even noticing as Amethyst playfully ran through the puddle of wax on the ground, intentionally slipping in it and getting covered in the slick, liquid substance as she laughed in amusement.

Just as the wax battle was finishing up outside, Mabel and Connie had successfully taken out all of the remaining figures by working together. All that remained of the wax army were discarded body parts and scattered gem shards, though Connie picked them all up as Mabel got rid of the remains by tossing them into the fireplace, which was what she was about to do with the still-living head of Wax Shakespeare.

"Though our group be left in twain, man of wax shall rise again!" the poet rhymed eloquently as Mabel held his head up towards the flames.

"Know any limericks?" she asked with a curious grin.

"Uh... there once was a dude from Kentucky..." Was Shakespeare attempted rather lamely, and clearly, it wasn't good enough for Mabel.
"Nope!" she cheerfully proclaimed before tossing the head into the fire.

"Well, I think that's all of them," Connie said with a tired sigh as she held out her handfuls of gem shards. "I hope Steven and Dipper are doing ok against the rest of them."

"We're more than ok!" Steven proclaimed brightly as him, Dipper, and the Gems entered the room. "We're great!"

"Uh… why aren't you wearing any clothes?" Connie asked Steven somewhat awkwardly, a slight blush lighting up her cheeks.

"Oh, I used them to help defeat the wax figures," Steven exclaimed, glancing down at the pile of clothes folded in his arms. "Pretty cool, huh?"

"Yeah, it is!" Mabel agreed with an amused grin before she rushed over to her brother and gave him a congratulatory high-five. "Dipper, this is so awesome! You solved the mystery after all!"

"Well, I couldn't have done it without my sidekicks," Dipper said with self-assurance as he went to go recover the heads of Wax Stan and the Wax Gems from the other side of the room along with Steven.

"No offense, Dipper, but you're the sidekick," Mabel informed him with a frown.

"What? Says who? Have people been saying that? Have you heard that?"

Steven was more than eager to present the found heads to the Gems, which he gladly did with a cheerful flourish. "Ta da!" he chimed with a huge grin, Connie helping him in handing the wax heads over to their rightful Gems. Pearl merely frowned at hers as she held it in her hands, a bit disturbed by it after the ordeal she had just been through with the living wax figures.

Amethyst let out an excited gasp as she tossed the head around a bit before placing it on her shoulder and letting out a playful laugh. "Hey! Check me out!" she chuckled. "I have two heads!"

Meanwhile, Garnet took her own wax head and simply stared at it expressionless for a moment or two before she slowly headed over to her wax duplicate standing at the back of the room. With firm movements, the Gem leader positioned the head back on the wax figure's body, placing her hands on her hips and mimicking its pose when she was sure it looked just right. And, before walking away, she gave the wax figure a thumbs up, satisfied that all was well.

It was around this point that Stan happened to walk in, having been fast asleep during the wax battle, despite the fact that his niece and nephew had been in considerable danger during it. "Hot Belgian waffles!" the conman exclaimed in shock upon seeing the waxen mess all over the room. "What happened to my parlor!?"

"Your wax figures turned out to be evil, so we fought them to the death!" Mabel explained with a dramatic flare.

"I decapitated Larry King," Dipper vouched rather seriously, the realization of the danger all four of them had been in hitting him once more.

Stan frowned doubtfully upon hearing this, raising an eyebrow at the Gems for a real explanation. "Hey, don't look at us," Amethyst said with a defensive shrug. "Pearl was the only one who was there."

"And it's a good thing I was," the white Gem said rather pointedly, though she still gave credit
where credit was due. "Though I can't say I was entirely responsible for defeating them…" she said, smiling down at the kids with gratitude.

"On the bright side, look what we found," Dipper said with a grin, holding up Wax Stan's head.

"Hey, my head!" Stan beamed happily, clearly overjoyed to be reunited with his wax double's head as he gladly took it. "I missed this guy! You done good kids! But, uh… is there any reason why you aren't wearing any clothes, kid?" he asked Steven with an awkward frown.

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?" Steven asked obliviously.

As fate would have it, a police patrol car happened to drive up to the broken parlor window, Sheriff Blubbs and Deputy Durland casually relaxing inside. "Solved the case yet, boy?" Blubbs asked condescendingly, having stopped by to really mock the kids over their previous failure and little else. "I'm so confident you're gonna say no, that I'm gonna take a long, slow sip of my coffee."

He proceeded to do so as the kids all exchanged broad grins at this chance to prove that they had succeeded after all. "Actually, we did," Dipper informed them, anxiously anticipating their shocked reactions. He was not disappointed as Blubbs choked on his coffee in surprise upon hearing this, before ultimately spitting the hot liquid on Durland's face. The deputy, who had also been drinking his own coffee, let out a pained cry as he did the same, tossing the two cops into a loop of screaming and spitting until they drove off in a panic, still crying out in pain all the while.

Of course, upon watching their humorous misfortune, the kids, Stan, and even the Gems all shared a good laugh, knowing that this was certainly cathartic in light of the doubt the officers had previously shown. "They got scalded!" Stan chuckled heartily before he went to return his wax duplicate's head to its proper place.

"Well, you guys," Steven grinned broadly, taking up a heroic pose despite the fact that he was still barely clothed. "I think our work here is done."

Dipper, Mabel, and Connie all readily agreed with this sentiment, satisfied in their teamwork and in a job well done and a mystery well solved. And though Garnet, Amethyst, and Stan were all distracted in reuniting with their respective wax figures, Pearl couldn't help but frown down at the ambitious younger Gem, admiring his verve but knowing that there was still one thing he needed to do. "Steven," she began in exasperation, knowing that she would be perfectly content in never seeing another wax figure ever again. "Put your clothes back on."
Chapter 8: The Cool Kids

Chapter Summary

In which a bunch of teens and three kids nearly die in a convenience store because of ghosts and moss

Chapter Notes

Ok, so this is something of a meh chapter but oh well. Enjoy my combination of both Lars and the Cool Kids and The Inconveniencing nonetheless!

“Behold!” Steven declared in an excited grin as he led the way from the forest path to their intended destination, with Dipper and Mabel following not too far behind. When the young Gem had offered to show the twins to one of his many favorite spots in Gravity Falls, they had been expecting for him to take them to a mysterious, magical hotspot or an ancient Gem structure. However, where they had ended up instead was a far cry from either of those things. “The Big Donut!” Steven chimed cheerfully, throwing his arm out towards the rather small snack store that stood on the outskirts of downtown Gravity Falls. “This place as the best donuts in the world. I come here pretty much every day!”

“Oh my gosh!” Mabel exclaimed with the same amount of excitement as Steven as she grinned up at the large donut sign resting atop the building. “I love donuts! I once ate two dozen donuts all at one sitting on a dare. Talk about a sugar rush! It was great!”

“So I threw up a little,” Mabel said with a carefree shrug. “Nothing can change how I feel about donuts and their sugary sweetness!”

“Then you’ll absolutely love the Big Donut!” Steven beamed as he led the way to the store. “Not only are the donuts great, but its employees are so nice! Just wait till you meet-” the young Gem was abruptly cut off upon opening the doors to the shop to an intense argument that was going on between the two teenage employees behind the counter.

“No, Lars, I told you not to stack those boxes like that!” the short, blonde female clerk yelled at her taller male coworker in frustration over the box of pastries that had spilled onto the floor. “But of course, you didn’t listen to me, as usual! Now look at this mess!”

“Chill out, Sadie,” the young man, Lars, scoffed with little concern as he leaned against the counter, making no effort to help Sadie in picking the donuts up. “It’s not my fault our stock comes in these wimpy boxes. And besides, you know how heavy those things are!”
“Lars, they’re filled with donuts,” Sadie deadpanned, knowing that he was simply being lazy. “Each box only weighs about ten pounds.”

“So what, are you saying I can’t lift them?” Lars asked defensively. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’ve got plenty of muscles.” To prove his point, he flexed with a showy grin, though he only managed to emphasize his lanky build.

“Plenty of nothing if you ask me,” Sadie muttered to herself with a sarcastic grin. However, before their spat could go on, they were interrupted by the trio of young customers that had just burst into the store.

“Lars, Sadie!” Steven greeted the duo cheerfully as he approached the counter along with Dipper and Mabel. “How are my two favorite donut-dealers this afternoon?”

“Hi, Steven,” Sadie welcomed with a friendly grin as she finished cleaning up the scattered donuts. “Who are your friends?”

“This is Dipper and Mabel,” Steven introduced the twins, who greeted the cashier with amicable nods. “Mr. Pines is their uncle; isn’t that neat?”

“You mean that old creep who runs that lame tourist trap down the road?” Lars asked dryly. “That place is a run-down mess.”

“Aww, the Mystery Shack isn’t that run-down,” Mabel said with a bright grin. “If you can get past the splinters, and the mold, and the occasional leak in the roof.”

“More like the one leak in the attic that Grunkle Stan refuses to fix,” Dipper corrected a bit sarcastically.

“So, would you three like some donuts?” Sadie asked dutifully, resisting the urge to cast an aggravated glare Lars’s way as he disregarded their customers by taking out his phone.

“You know we do!” Steven exclaimed. “That’s the whole reason why we came; well, that, and so I could say hi to you and Lars!”

Though Sadie appreciated Steven’s outgoing ways, Lars simply let out a scoff at this, rolling his eyes as he kept his focus on his phone. However, this did not go unnoticed by the young Gem, who was quick to garnish the teen’s attention through a different way. “Hey, Lars…” Steven said with a widening grin. “Get ready, cause I got a high five for you from waaaay down town!” With his arm raised high, he pushed himself against the counter in an attempt to reach Lars, who refused to reciprocate his high five but instead only offered him a sour glower. But even so, Steven persisted as he managed to high five Lars’s chest as opposed to his hand.

“Steven, cut it out!” Lars said crossly as he slapped the young Gem’s hand away, not even initially noticing the new group of customers that had just entered the store until after Sadie formally greeted them.

“Welcome to the Big Donut,” she addressed the rather large group of teens, directing the kids’ attention towards them as well. While they were rather unfamiliar with most of the teens, the three of them immediately recognized one amidst their number.

“Wendy!” Dipper, Mabel, and Steven all exclaimed in surprised unison as the teen Mystery Shack cashier entered the donut shop, her large group of friends trailing not too far behind her.

“Hey, dorks,” Wendy playfully greeted the kids with a casual grin. “What’s up?”
Before any of the kids had a chance to answer, Lars spoke up, leaning up against the counter as he flashes as nonchalant of a grin as possible. “Oh, hey you guys,” he said, trying to sound relaxed but coming across as a bit nervous instead. “Crazy seeing you all here, a-am I right?”

The teens all exchanged confused glances upon hearing this, until one of the guys amidst the group, tall with shaggy blond hair, questioned Lars’ claim of familiarity with them. “Uh… do we know you, bro?”

Ignoring Sadie’s amused laugh at this, Lars tried his best to play it off with a chuckle that was actually rather awkward. “Ha! Good one, Lee!”

Though Lars continued to laugh for an uncomfortable amount of time, no one else joined him, making things all the more awkward. Fortunately, this passed quickly as another member of the group, clearly the most apathetic and broody of the bunch, spoke up with a question posed to Wendy. “So… what?” he asked, giving Dipper, Mabel and Steven a rather condescending glance. “Do you, like, babysit these dweebs or something?”

“Come on, Robbie,” Wendy scoffed. “Dipper and Mabel are my pals from work, and Steven hangs out at the shack a lot. Right guys?” she asked the kids with a grin.

“Right!” Steven readily agreed with a beaming smile as he exchanged a high five with Wendy. “Though I also hang out a lot here too, especially with my buddies Sadie and Lars!”

“Ugh, Steven…” Lars muttered in aggravation at the boy’s embarrassing enthusiasm, though fortunately no one seemed to notice.

“Hey, look!” Mabel exclaimed excitedly to the group at large. “I chewed my gum so it looks like a brain! Blah!” At this, she stuck her tongue out to reveal the wad of gum upon it, eliciting amused chuckles from several of the teens.

“Mabel’s not much for first impressions,” Dipper cut in with a somewhat awkward grin, trying to play it cool in from of the teens, especially Wendy. “Unlike this guy!” he exclaimed, pointing himself. Of course, after he got no real reaction from the teens, he tried once more, only with much less confidence this time. “…this guy…”

“Anyway…” Wendy fortunately jumped in just in the nick of time to spare Dipper from any real embarrassment. “These are my friends. We have Lee and Nate…” she said, as the two guys she referred to shared a chuckle as they playfully punched each other on the arm. “Tambry…”

“Hey,” Tambry muttered broadly as she kept her focus on her phone as she had been ever since the group had walked through the door.

“Thompson, who once ate a run-over waffle for 50 cents…” Wendy continued.

“Don’t tell them that!” Thompson exclaimed in embarrassment, before he was promptly struck with the donuts Lee and Nate had jokingly tossed his way.

“Jenny…”

“What’s up?” Jenny asked with a cool grin.

“Buck…”

“Yo,” Buck greeted in a relaxed, monotonous tone.
“Sour Cream…”

“How goes it?” Sour Cream asked nonchalantly.

“And Robbie,” Wendy finished “You can probably figure him out.”

“Yeah, I’m the guy who spray painted the water tower,” Robbie said passively as he leaned against the nearest wall and shoved his hands into his sweater pockets.

“Oh, you mean the big muffin?” Dipper asked, having noticed the red painted mark on the water tower before.

“Um, it’s a giant explosion,” Robbie clarified pointedly.

At this, everyone took a glance out of the shop window towards the water tower, which was clearly visible from there despite its relative distance from the Big Donut. “Heh, it kinda does look like a muffin,” Nate agreed with a laugh.

Of course, upon having his handiwork undermined in such a way, Robbie was quick to shoot a bitter glare at Dipper, who anxiously shied away from it the slightest bit. Regardless, rounds of various conversations broke out amongst the group of teens as they spread out through the small store to get what they came there for, leaving Sadie rather busy as Lars declined in helping her work the register. However, though he was trying his best to be passively cool in the presence of the teens, Lars’s attempts were soon undermined as Steven leaned against the counter in front of him with a broad grin, also trying to come off as insincerely aloof.

“So, you know these guys, Lars?” Steven asked curiously.

Upon realizing that the teens were all pretty much distracted and not really listening in on his conversation, Lars broke his nonchalant front a little bit. “N-not quite,” he admitted quietly. “But I’ve seen them around. I’m sure we’ll hang out at some point.”

“Well why not hang out with them now?”

“T-that’s not how these things work, Steven!” Lars exclaimed, obviously flustered. “The plan is to keep it cool and let them come to me.”

“But since they’re here, isn’t it like they came to you anyway?” Steven asked, clearly not getting Lars’s apparent anxiety with the situation. “You know, if you want, I could go ask them if you could hang out with them.”

“What?!” Lars stammered, his face turning bright red in embarrassment. “W-what would ever make you think I would need you to make friends for me!? And besides, it’s not like I can just leave; in case you haven’t noticed, I’m at work.”

“Actually, Lars, your shift is just about over,” Sadie remarked with a coy grin, more than ready to get back at her coworker by seeing him embarrass himself. “You’re free to go.”

“Thanks a lot, Sadie,” Lars said sarcastically, though he soon realized with a panic that Steven had already departed to go talk to the teens on his behalf. “Steven, no!” he shouted in an aggravated whisper. “You’re gonna wreck everything! Ugh, I hate you!”

Of course, Lars’s pleas went unheard as Steven walked up to Buck, Sour Cream, and Jenny, who had all gathered in a corner of the shop as they conversed, and addressed them out-goingly. Meanwhile, Wendy and Dipper were watching in amusement as Lee and Nate dared Thompson to
chug an entire liter of soda, only for him to fail rather miserably at it as he began coughing it up within the first few seconds.

“Oh guys,” Wendy said laughingly as she garnished their attention, as well as Tambry’s and Robbie’s. “Let’s hurry it up and get what we need; I got big plans for tonight.”

The rest of the group complied as they raced throughout the small store to stock up on all of the snacks they wanted for the evening, save for the trio that was still conversing with Steven. “So… where are you guys heading to exactly?” Dipper asked Wendy a tensely, trying to sound more casually curious than anything else.

“We were planning on checking out this old shut-down joint across town,” Wendy explained. “It’s gonna be wild.”

“Ooo!” Mabel suddenly cut in, much to Dipper’s lowkey annoyance. “Are you guys gonna throw a crazy dance party?”

“Maybe,” Wendy shrugged. “It kinda depends on what we’re feeling when we get there. We sorta just roll with the flow, you know?”

“Oh, I totally know,” Dipper interjected, feigning confidence that he admittedly lacked.

“Well, if you do have a dance party, I know somebody who would definitely be down for it,” Mabel said leadingly as she gave Dipper a referential elbowing.

“Mabel…” Dipper groaned in annoyance with his sister, already knowing what she was alluding to and hoping that she wouldn’t actually discuss it with Wendy.

“Whoa, Dipper! I didn’t know you danced!” Wendy said in amusement.

“I-I don’t really…”

“Yeah, he does!” Mabel cut in once more, hardly noticing her brother’s growing impatience. “Mom used to dress him up in a lamb costume and make him do…” she paused for a moment before lowering her voice down to a whisper for extra emphasis. “The Lamby Dance!”

“Now is not the time to talk about the Lamby Dance,” Dipper muttered in angry embarrassment, quickly glancing around to make sure that none of the other teens had happened to overhear.

“Lamb costume?” Wendy laughed good naturedly. “Wow, was there like little ears and a tail or…”

“Well, uh…” Dipper stammered nervously, wishing that Mabel hadn’t revealed this rather embarrassing early childhood memory in the first place.

“Yep!” Mabel went on, pulling out a picture from the stack she usually kept on her, depicting a four-year-old Dipper wearing an admittedly adorable lamb costume, ears, tail, and all. “Dipper would prance around and sing a song about grazing. It was seriously cutest thing ever.”

“No kidding,” Wendy grinned as she glanced over the picture, before smirking at Dipper in amusement. Of course, though he was extremely mortified, he couldn’t help but falteringly grin back as a sudden idea occurred to him, especially as he noticed that the rest of the teens were finishing up their purchases.

“Well, looks like it’s about time for us to head out,” Wendy noted. “Though I gotta say, it really does look like Steven’s hitting off with Buck, Jenny, and Sour Cream over there.” She nodded over
to the group in question, and indeed, the trio of teens all let out a collective chuckle as Steven cheerfully conversed with them.

“Wait!” Dipper exclaimed before Wendy had the chance to head off. “Why don’t I—or, why don’t we, and by we, I mean Mabel, Steven, and me, go with you?”

“Oh… I don’t know…” Wendy mused a bit cautiously. “My friends are pretty intense… How old did you guys say you were?”

Before Mabel had a chance at answering that question honestly, Dipper was quick to cut in with a white lie that would hopefully work in their favor. “We’re thirteen! So, technically a teen.”

“All right,” Wendy nodded with a sly grin. “I like your moxy, kid. Let me gather up the gang and we’ll head out.”

At this, she departed to collect her scattered friends, leaving the twins behind and leaving Mabel very confused. “Since when are we thirteen?” she asked Dipper with a frown. “Is this a leap year?”

“Come on, Mabel,” Dipper said, seeing nothing really wrong with the small lie he had told. “This is our chance to hang out with, you know, the cool kids. And Wendy and whatever.”

Mabel let out an loud gasp upon hearing this, hardly able to contain her excitement as she gave her brother a huge, goading grin. “I knew it!”

“You’re in love with Wendy!” she exclaimed rather overtly, at which Dipper was quick to quiet her down before anyone heard.

“Yeah, right!” he retorted defensively. “I just think Wendy’s cool, ok? Its not like I lie awake at night thinking about her, or anything…” Of course, he knew this was something of a lie too, as he had spent the very last night doing that very thing.

“Don’t try and deny it!” Mabel said with a knowing grin. “I can tell by the way your awkwardly stammer even more than usual when you’re around her! You’re in love with her! Love love love!”

Not really wanting to hear much more on what was a rather touchy subject for him, Dipper was quick to detract Mabel’s rambunctious elation by way of distracting her. “Oh hey, what’s that?”

“Huh?” Mabel was quick to spin around to curiously face the direction her brother was pointing. Of course, because of this, she was unable to do much as he promptly flipped her long hair over in front of her face. Mabel was hardly phased by this however, as she simply stuck her tongue out in playful protest amidst the curtain of hair covering her face.

While Steven had been conversing with Buck, Jenny, and Sour Cream, Lars had been watching from behind the counter apprehensively the whole time, ignoring Sadie’s teasing comments about him being a chicken. It was only as the young Gem eagerly rushed back towards the counter that he stood up straight from his crouched over position, trying to act cool once more as the trio of teens glanced his way.

“Hey, Lars!” Steven exclaimed brightly.

“Yo,” Lars nodded nonchalantly, nodding towards the teens as they rejoined the rest of the group.
“Guess what?! They invited you, me, Dipper, and Mabel to come hang out with them tonight! Isn’t that cool?”

“Huh?!” Lars exclaimed, clearly flabbergasted. “Wait a minute, they—you? Steven, you got lucky! Just don’t ruin this with any of your lame shtick!”

Steven was happy to comply with this as he pointed his fingers and playfully pretended to shoot them like guns. “Pew pew! You got it!” he laughed, already heading for the door as Lars face palmed before rushing off to change and clock out.

As soon as everyone had gathered what they needed, the collective group of kids and teens gathered outside just as dusk was falling over the town. Though the minivan the teens have come in was barely large enough to contain the nine of them, they had to squeeze even more tightly into the vehicle to accommodate all thirteen passengers. Of course, this meant that Lars had to begrudgingly take the very back alongside Steven and Mabel, which was clearly the last thing he wanted since he was trying to get in good with the cool kids. Meanwhile, Dipper attempted to slip into the front row alongside Wendy, only to ultimately be cut off right before by someone else.

“Sorry, kid, but I ride shotgun, alright?” Robbie asked rather arrogantly as he shut the car door.

Dipper didn’t offer a reply but instead simply smiled a bit nervously as he backed off in disappointment, knowing that he would be getting nowhere with Wendy from the back seat. Hopefully though, the ride wouldn’t be too long, especially since he had to uncomfortably crowd into the back between Steven and Mabel.

Once everyone was packed inside the van, Thompson glanced through the rear view mirror from his spot in the driver’s seat before apprehensively addressing his load of passengers. “Ok, so… before we go, my mom said you guys aren’t allowed to punch the roof anymore, so…”

Of course, no one heeded Thompson as they all instead did the exact opposite of what he had told them by fist pumping into the metal roof of the car and adding onto the myriad of dents there from past punches. Knowing there was little he could do to stop the rowdy group, Thompson simply put the car in drive and sighed relenting as the others cheered his name patronizingly.

Buck, Sour Cream, and Tambry had filed into the seat in front of Lars and the kids, and though the latter was still glued to her phone, the guys were quick to turn around and converse after the car had pulled out. “Where’d you get that rad shirt, Steven?” Buck asked in his usual cool manner.

Steven grinned down at his shirt for a moment before he innocently, yet honestly replied. “I have no idea where any of my clothes come from.”

“Yeah, man,” Buck nodded with a small smile. “Living free. I like it.”

“Hey, check out my shirt,” Lars cut in, pointing to the snake design on his tee-shirt.

“Oh, that snake is nasty,” Buck commented as his grin faded.

“Oh,” Lars said, flustered as he let out a fabricated laugh. “Yeah, I hate snakes!”

“Oh, what? That’s too bad. Some snakes are pretty cool.”

“Hey, Thompson!” Sour Cream called up to the front. “Let’s get some spaced out beats up in here!”

“Uh… Well, I’m not really supposed to play loud music in here, but, uh…” Thompson shyly began
before Wendy cut in.

“Pump up the jams!” she exclaimed as she turned the radio onto an upbeat electronica station. The teens all cheered once more as they enjoyed the smooth beats, and even far in the way back, Steven and Mabel danced as much as they could to the music in their seats, as limited as their space, despite the fact that they were inadvertently shoving Dipper around as they did so.

“Oh, man, I could totally rave to this!” Sour Cream declared as he slowly moved his arms in front of him, flowing to the rhythm of the song.

“Whoa there, Sour Cream,” Jenny laughed easily as she glanced back at him. “Don’t get too crazy there.”

As the car plodded through town, Mabel happened to take notice of the wide variety of graffiti written all over the interior of the car, specifically a message that read “You stink!” Wanting to make it a little more positive, she quickly snatched the pen that Dipper had with him away and crossed the offensive note away, writing her own instead: “You look nice today!”

“Ha! This is gonna blow someone’s mind!” she exclaimed proudly as she capped the pen, proud of her handiwork.

“Mabel, please!” Dipper said rather impatiently, wishing that she would for once try to be a bit more mature since they were in the midst of an older crowd.

“What, am I embarrassing you in front of your new GIRLFRI-” Before Mabel could even finish obnoxiously shouting the word so everyone in the car could hear, Dipper hurriedly slapped his hand over her mouth, not allowing her to out him again. However, Mabel was quick to pay him back, which was what prompted Dipper to immediately pull his hand away from her mouth.

“Ugh! Did you just lick my hand?” he asked with disgust, though Mabel only responded with a sly, triumphant grin.

As the van drove past the park, it was halted by a stoplight, allowing the group to notice the evening political rally taking place there. “Hey Buck, isn’t that your dad?” Nate asked, referring to the mayor, who was clearly in the midst of a passionate speech.

“…Another reason you should re-elect me, I love babies!” Mayor Dewey declared over the microphone, coming across as only fairly confident. “Oh, will you look at that!” he exclaimed, feigning shock as one of his aids handed a baby to him. “Gonna kiss it…” He did so rather fakely, though this garnished the impressed applause of the crowd nonetheless.

“Hm, I like his policy on babies,” Steven noted.

“Man, he never kisses me like that,” Buck said somewhat bitterly as he crossed his arms and turned away from the window.

“That’s rough, bro,” Lars said with apt sympathy.

“It’s not rough,” Buck clarified. “The lack of daddy kisses in my life made me who I am.”

“Truth!” both Nate and Lee agreed as they exchanged casual high fives with Buck, leaving Lars ousted and annoyed at his own lack of social graces.

It wasn’t too much longer before the van finally pulled to a stop on the more empty side of town, just as the sun had finally set completely. Their stop certainly had an eerie quality to it, one that
was quite noticeable as the kids and teens alike got out of the vehicle to get a closer look. On the other side of a tall metal fence was what looked to be an abandoned, rather run-down building that looked as though it had not been touched in years. It looked to be some sort of shop or convenience store, though its sign was not lit and it was too dark to really read the name off of it. It rested directly in the shadows of a tall hill that shielded it from the rising moon, and in the shadows of the store itself was a pool filled with quite a bit of thick, lush moss, giving it a swampy appearance. However, as Steven hopped out of the car following Dipper and Mabel, he froze in his tracks, his eyes going wide with surprise and fear as he noticed the familiar spot they were at, or even more specifically, the yellow police tape surrounding the lake that had only been heavily strung up there just a few days ago…

“This doesn’t look good at all…”

Pearl shook her head as her, Garnet, and Amethyst stood halfway up the hill, looking down at the small swamp and the building resting beside it. Steven was preoccupying himself as he leapt among the dead logs floating in the lake, stopping to reach down towards the skim the green moss floating upon its murky surface. The Gems took notice of this immediately as they all let out warning gasps, especially as the moss slowly began to move on its own accord.

“Whoa…” Steven remarked in amazement as the moss began to creep towards his outstretched arm. “Cool!”

“No, Steven!” Pearl exclaimed in a sudden panic. “Don’t go near that stuff!”

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“Steven, wait!” Amethyst shouted in growing fear, ready to lash her whip out at the moss to protect the younger Gem if need be. However, Garnet preempted both of her teammates as she easily lifted one of the boulders resting on the hill and chucked it towards the log Steven was standing on. The force with which it hit the log was enough to catapult Steven up out of the lake entirely and into Pearl’s concerned, outstretched arms.

“Steven’s here!” he announced with a playful grin as Pearl gently placed him on the ground beside her.

“Steven, you have to be more careful!” Pearl cautioned with a frown.

“Why?” Steven asked as he glanced down at the lake below, noticing that the moss was quickly consuming the log he had just been on until it was no longer visible at all. “What is that stuff?”

“It’s the moss that Rose Quartz planed on the hill,” Garnet said astutely as she folded her arms.

“My mom planted this stuff?” Steven asked curiously, always wanting to know more about his mysterious mother, whom the Gems always spoke of with such high regard, even though he would never really have the chance to know her.

“Rose Quartz used to climb that hill every spring and tend to the moss at the top in the light of the full moon,” Pearl exclaimed somewhat wistfully as she projected a vague holographic image of Rose ascending the hill from her gem. “But now that Rose is… gone, the moss has no guidance or sense of location. It’s on the move!”

“It’s lost…” Steven said with sincere empathy, knowing that even if he had never gotten to know his mother personally, she certainly would be upset about her precious moss not thriving as it should.
“It’s not lost,” Amethyst remarked a bit sarcastically. “It’s gross.”

“Yes, but Rose loved it anyway,” Pearl mused as she held her hands close to her heart and gazed up at the sky, clearly caught up in memories of their former leader. “She saw beauty in everything, no matter how gross.” The white Gem let out a deep breath as she regathered her usual formality. “Fortunately, I know just what to do in this situation.”

The Gems had carefully descended the hill to stand in the dry area beside the abandoned building, with Pearl positioned before the rest of the group. With a daring grin, the white Gem opened her closed eyes wide and preformed a deft spin as she lifted her hands towards her gem, which was starting to steadily glow.

“This is why I get up in the morning!” Steven whispered to Amethyst with rapt excitement, stars in his eyes as he watched Pearl work her magic. No more than a second later, a small glowing orb floated out of Pearl’s gem, hovering over to Steven before it fell into his hands, the glow fading from it to reveal what it really was. “Is this… police tape?” he asked, rotating the roll of yellow cautionary tape in his hands.

“Isn’t this great?” Pearl asked with a satisfied grin. “This way, we don’t even have to use magic! The humans will just see this and walk away.”

“But isn’t that what that big fence is here for?” Steven asked in confusion, remembering how they had breached that very fence to get to the hill earlier.

“Well… let’s just say fences haven’t proven to be the most… foolproof precaution in our experience…” Pearl said with a slight, somewhat disdainful frown.

“Besides,” Amethyst added with an impish grin as she leaned in close to Steven. “That fence is here to keep people out of there,” she nodded towards the abandoned store a few feet away.

“Why?” Steven asked, raising an eyebrow. “What happened there?”

“We’re not really sure,” Garnet said rather succinctly.

“They say that some people died in there several years ago,” Amethyst said with something of a morbid grin. “And you know humans; they’re always so superpsicious about stuff like that.”

“You mean superstitious,” Pearl corrected before getting the group back on track. “But enough about that. We have work to do.”

Considering that the Gems fought fierce monsters on a regular occasion, putting up police tape was child’s play for them. Between Amethyst and Garnet throwing the tape across the rocks surrounding the swamp, to Pearl elegantly lacing it up into a bow near the front of the store just to ensure humans wouldn’t go near it, to Steven breathlessly rushing to cover any spot they had missed, they had this mission completed in less than an hour. And by the time they were done, the pond was completely marked off limits thanks to the ample supply of police tape barring its entrance.

“Perfect!” Pearl sang cheerfully as she admired their handiwork. “Now we just have to come up with a plan to move the moss back up to its hill!”

“Maybe we could carry it?” Steven suggested, even if he wasn’t sure such a plan would work.

“What, do you wanna get swallowed by that stuff?” Amethyst asked incredulously. “It’s better to just leave it where it is. It’s not hurting anyone.”
“But it might if we just leave it to grow,” Pearl advised before she let out an impatient sigh. “I suppose there isn’t anything we can do for it now, though. After all, it only really blooms at night.”

“We’ll come back some other time,” Garnet declared with finality, already leading the way back to the temple. Pearl and Amethyst were quick to follow behind her, though Steven cast one more frowning glance back at the moss, left to its own devices as it choked in the shadows, instead of the moonlight where his mother had wanted it to be and where it belonged.

Steven paled as this recent memory rushed back to him, especially as he stared at the pool of moss resting directly beside the store. Based on what he had seen of it as well as what the Gems had told him, this was quite a dangerous spot, but a part of him hoped that this was only a momentary stop and that they were just there to look from a distance rather than actually get in close. Which was why he didn’t immediately speak up as the teens approached the fence, but rather trailed behind the entire group apprehensively, thinking that certainly the fence alone would be enough to keep them away from the moss.

“There it is, fellas,” Wendy said with a daring grin as the group pressed up against the fence. “The condemned Dusk 2 Dawn.”

“Cool!” Lee and Nate exclaimed in unison as they pumped each other up by exchanging punches to the arm.

“I’m getting some killer vibes from this place,” Jenny commented with a smooth smile.

“So, uh… why’d they shut it down?” Dipper asked with slight uncertainty as he looked towards the store, noting how eerily silent the scene was as the nearest streetlight flickered on and off hauntingly. “Was it like a health code violation, or-”

“Try murder!” Nate said dramatically.

“Some folks died in there,” Lee explained. “The place has been haunted ever since!”

“This town has such a colorful history!” Mabel grinned pleasantly, seeing nothing that morbid about the fact that they were standing just a few feet away from a supposed murder scene.

“A-are you guys serious?” Dipper asked with a nervous frown, hoping that the teens were just messing with him.

“Yeah! We’re all gonna die!” Wendy teased light heartedly before giving Dipper a friendly punch on the arm. “Chill out, man! It’s not as bad as it looks.”

“Y-you know what?” Steven spoke up, hoping that maybe the possibility of the store being haunted when combined with the threat of the moss would drive the teens away. “Maybe Dipper’s right. This place may look cool, but it’s probably a lot less cool than you think. W-why don’t we just go have fun downtown or something?”

“Steven, you trying to scare us?” Jenny asked with a coy grin, fortunately not directly making fun of his worry.

“Building atmosphere,” Buck said with a complacent nod. “I appreciate that.”

“Steven, stop being lame,” Lars whispered crossly as he pushed his way past Steven before
casually addressing the others. “Let’s check this place out.”

Steven took in a sharp breath as the teens began to scale the fence one by one, his worry growing even more as he glanced towards the moss once more. He was half tempted to warn them all about it, before he refrained, not wanting to be the one to spoil everyone’s fun, especially since he knew Lars wanted to get in good with the other teens. And besides, certainly they wouldn’t violate the police tape on the other side of the fence, right?

It didn’t take too long for everyone to scale the fence and land on the other side. Against his better judgement, Steven had just finished climbing the fence himself, with Dipper going next as he awkwardly attempted to straddle the fence so he could properly climb it.

“Come on, Dipper!” Wendy encouraged from the other side.

“O-okay!” Dipper reassured her a bit shakily, clearly intimidated by how far away the ground below was. “Just gotta get a foothold…”

“Dude, your sister did it!” Robbie criticized impatiently as everyone glanced towards Mabel, who was excitedly running on the ground in a sideways circle, her boundless energy clear.

In order to speed the process along, Lee, who was also on the other side of the fence, cleared the top of it alongside Dipper. “Hey, you know what? Just…” he paused for a moment as he abruptly picked the younger boy up and somewhat roughly nudged him off the fence. Dipper landed on the other side somewhat clumsily, but fortunately, he escaped any sort of injury aside from a few scrapes on the knee.

“Good job throwing the kid off the fence, genius!” Nate remarked teasingly as Lee jumped down to the other side.

“You mom’s a genius!” Lee retorted, giving his buddy another punch on the arm.

Steven made sure to cautiously lag behind just a bit as the rest of the group approached the store, thankfully none of them bothering to get close to the pond. Likewise, the moss seemed to be relatively still, so maybe there wouldn’t be much of a problem after all, especially since Pearl had sealed the store’s entrance with a bow of police tape. Steven took in a breath of relief as the teens took notice of the tape barring the doors, remembering what that the Gems had been confident that it would keep people away.

“Huh, police tape…” Sour Cream remarked with a sided frown. The entire group exchanged a brief glance before Sour Cream abruptly ripped off the careful bow of cautionary tape over the door. “Awesome,” he grinned, not even regarding the discarded tape on the ground.

Steven let out a surprised gasp at seeing this, especially as Lee, Nate, Thompson, and Buck joined in on ripping off the rest of the tape covering the front of the store. “I’m above the law,” Buck said boldly, garnishing a laugh from the other guys.

“Oh no…” Steven whispered worriedly, completely at a loss of what to do. By now, Dipper, who as just about as anxious, had noticed Steven’s apparent apprehension, and he was quick to gather that there was more to it than just the unsettling atmosphere of the area.

“Steven, what’s wrong?” he asked with concern, lingering back alongside Steven as the rest of the group peeked through the store windows.

“W-well, I didn’t wanna freak anyone out, but…” Steven began with a fearful frown, making sure that the teens couldn’t overhear. “You see that moss in the pond over there? It’s magic. My mom
planted it a whole bunch of years ago, but since she’s not… around anymore, it’s kinda gotten out of control. That’s why the police tape was there; the Gems and me put it up a few days ago to keep people away.”

“But… it’s just moss,” Dipper said, clearly not understanding Steven’s immense worry. “Honestly, I think the possibility of this place being haunted is a lot more intimidating.”

“You don’t get it!” Steven clarified, staring at the moss with a pit in his stomach. “The moss can move on its own! I’m not really sure how it works, but the Gems told me it’s really dangerous. I don’t think we should really be here. What if something bad happens!?”

Dipper frowned uneasily as he took all this in; of course, he believed what Steven was telling him, based on what he had seen of the Gems and all things related to them thus far. But he doubted that any of the teens would be as willing to buy a story about magic moss as he was. In actuality, they would be more likely to pass it off as both boys being cowardly and nothing more. And in his goal of impressing Wendy, that was something that Dipper couldn’t really afford to let happen, regardless of the apparent risk. After all, the moss didn’t look like it was anything too worrying at the moment, and if they were going to enter the store, then they wouldn’t really have to be too concerned with it anyway.

“Well, the moss is only out here, right?” Dipper reasoned, hoping that he could set Steven’s dread to ease as much as his own. “So if we’re inside the store, it can’t hurt anyone. Simple as that.”

“Uh… I guess…” Steven said a bit uncertainly, though he preferred it if they were as far from the dangerous moss as possible. “But we probably should warn everyone, just in case.”

“Steven, wait!” Dipper exclaimed in a sudden panic, stopping the young Gem before he could mention any of this to the teens. “There’s no sense in raising a false alarm, right? I mean, everyone’s having such a good time; why make everyone worry about some moss that probably won’t even cause any trouble?”

Steven only half-bought this as he cast a concerned glance at the teens, silently ensuring that they were keeping a safe distance from the pond. He had much of the same line of reasoning as Dipper, especially when he considered that the teens had been kind enough to invite them all along in the first place. The last thing he wanted to do was spoil the fun for everyone by warning them of a looming danger over their heads or trying to convince them to leave when they were so dead set on exploring the abandoned store. And so, with a resolute sigh, he relented. “Mm… Okay…” he said, still clearly on edge. “But if the moss shows signs of acting up, then we’ve gotta get everyone out of there, agreed?”

“Agreed,” Dipper nodded, even if he didn’t think that such a precautionary measure would even need to be taken. Or at least he hoped.

They boys rejoined the rest of the group just as they were discovering that the doors to the convenience store were locked. “I think it’s stuck!” Robbie grunted as he tried his hardest to wedge the glass doors open.

With a fair amount of effort, Sour Cream gave the bottom of the doors a kick, though they still did not budge. “Well, I got nothing,” he admitted with a shrug of defeat.

“Let me take a crack at it,” Dipper volunteered, putting the worrying conversation he just had with Steven behind him to focus on trying to prove himself to the teens.

“Oh sure,” Robbie scoffed, rolling his eyes sarcastically. “I can’t get in, but I’m sure Junior here is
gonna break it down like Hercules!”

“Come on, leave him alone,” Wendy admonished with a sympathetic frown. “He’s just a little kid.”

Dipper did his best to suppress the fact that his face reddened in embarrassment over this comment. After all, the last thing he wanted to be seen as by Wendy was just a weak kid. And he saw no better way of refuting that idea than by utilizing both his wit and relatively small stature to find a way to grant them all access to the store. After briefly glancing over the surrounding area, Dipper managed to spot a dumpster on the side of the building, which was fortunately opposite from the lake and the moss. Without informing any of the others of his spur of the moment plan, he headed for the dumpster, his expression stern and resolved as he began to scale it. Everyone took notice of this and watched in confusion as he stood on top of the dumpster and then used the old vines clinging to the building to climb the rest of the way up onto the roof.

“Kid, what are you doing?” Tambry asked in surprise, having finally glanced up from her phone.

“Whoa, look at him go up there!” Jenny remarked, impressed with Dipper’s dauntless tenacity.

“Go Dipper!” Mabel cheered her brother on as she watched him punch the metal grate covering the vents that lead inside the building from the roof. “Punch that metal thing!”

Though the grate wouldn’t budge upon a first attempt, Dipper was persistent as he struck it once more, this time breaking it free from the rusty bolts restraining it and creating an opening into the store that was just large enough for him to crawl through.

“Hey Dipper! Take it easy!” Wendy called with concern as she watched Dipper disappear inside the store.

“Who wants to bet he doesn’t make it?” Robbie asked as he crossed his arms, anticipating that the younger boy would either get lost or scared inside. However, what he hadn’t been expecting was for the front doors to swing wide open only a few moments later. Dipper grinned confidently as he held the door open, gesturing for everyone to go on inside.

“Yeah!” Mabel exclaimed with a huge grin as she gave her brother a celebratory high five before rushing into the store.

“Good call inviting this little maniac!” Lee laughed heartily.

“Your new name is Dr. Funtimes!” Nate proclaimed as he walked past Dipper, who gladly accepted such a recognition.

“That was pretty rad, kid,” Buck agreed with a casual nod.

“Nice work,” Wendy smiled with satisfaction as she gave Dipper an affectionate punch on the arm, making him all the more proud of what he had just done as it had garnished her approval.

Steven was the second to last to enter before Dipper, though before he did, he stopped short and took one more glance over at the moss on the side of the building. “Remember what we talked about,” Steven cautioned with an uneasy frown. “If things start going wrong, we need to get out.”

“I know,” Dipper reassured him with a calm grin. “But relax, Steven; nothing’s going to happen.”

“...I hope your right...” Steven said, trying his best to shake away the bad vibes he had towards this entire situation away.
“I know I’m right,” Dipper said confidently. “Now come on; let’s have some fun.”

Steven halfheartedly agreed as the two of them went inside the store, the doors closing behind them as they joined the group in marveling at the abandoned shop. Since the lights weren’t on, it had an unsettling, darkened feel to it, dust layering most of the still-stocked shelves and counter. However, despite that, it was quite surprising that everything looked as though it was largely in order, as though people had stopped going there altogether and left it exactly the way it was the day it closed down, which clearly must have been quite a few years ago based on the discontinued brands of snacks and food that the store offered.

“Whoa, this place is sweet,” Buck remarked as he adjusted his shades.

“D-do you guys really think it’s haunted?” Thompson asked a bit nervously.

“Na!” Nate scoffed with little concern. “Thompson, are you kidding me?”

“I gotta admit, though, it’s even creeper than I imagined!” Wendy grinned as the group disbanded to investigate the rest of the store.

As everyone spread out through the shop, Mabel headed for the counter, curiously wiping off some of the dust on the change holder sitting there with her finger before giving it an experimental like. “Yep,” she confirmed her suspicions with a small grin. “It’s dust.”

Steven stuck close behind Lars, Robbie, Lee, and Nate as they walked before the line of freezers in the back. Though he was admittedly still apprehensive about being there in the first place, he forced himself to try and relax, knowing that the chances of the moss harming them while they were inside were low. And besides, the abandoned convenience store itself was interesting enough of a place to distract him from his concerns. For the most part.

“Hey dude, where do you think they keep the dead bodies?” Lee asked Nate jokingly.

“Shut up, man!” Nate laughed as he shoved Lee, obviously not concerned with the prospects of the store being haunted whatsoever.

“So, uh, this place is pretty cool, huh Robbie?” Lars asked the teen in front of him, who wore an unimpressed scowl as he glanced around.

“I guess,” Robbie said apathetically. “If you’re into old hole-in-the-walls covered in dust.”

“Ha! Yeah!” Lars agreed a bit too heartily. However, before he could say anything else, Steven inadvertently ran into him from behind, having not watched where he was going as he took a tentative glance towards the window to make sure the moss was still where it belonged. “Steven!” Lars exclaimed in annoyance, glaring back at him. “Watch where you’re going!”

“S-sorry, Lars!” Steven apologized, a bit startled, though Lars hardly noticed as he continued conversing with the other guys.

“Hey, guys! Check it out!” Wendy called everyone’s attention from the front of the store. They all turned to see that she was standing before the master power switches, grinning coolly as she prepared to flip them on. “You think these still work?”

Clearly they did, for as she turned the switches on, the entire store came to life with light and electricity. The florescent lights hummed as they illuminated the building, allowing everyone to get a better view of the snacks lining its shelves and treats filling the freezers. The entire group grinned in excitement over the fact that a whole new realm of possibilities for their evening had
opened up, possibilities that they were more than ready to take.

“So… what do we do now?” Dipper asked Wendy curiously.

“Anything we want!” Wendy responded boldly, knowing that there was no one stopping them from doing whatever they pleased.

And so, the unrestrained fun began. Since the store had been untouched for so many years, no one in the group saw any problems with making good use of the countless bags of chips and candy by holding an impromptu food fight, complete with water balloons filled with soda as opposed to water. Using only a bottle of Pitt Cola and mints, they managed to create a cascading soda fountain, with everyone trying to catch a little bit of the soda in their mouths as it exploded in a sticky shower. Not a single person could deny that they were having the time of their lives as they went wild, disregarding rules entirely and embracing all the fun open to them. In the wave of activity and excitement, Steven gradually forgot about his anxiety concerning the moss and instead embraced the fun everyone was having, especially as he joined Mabel, Jenny, and Thompson, in building a tower entirely composed of candy bars. Maybe, just maybe, if things continued as well as they were going, this evening would be both safe and successful after all.

In fact, it was as Mabel was racing to get more candy for their growing tower that she happened across something that made her stop in her tracks and let out a gasp of surprise. “Oh my gosh!” she exclaimed as she stood before the display of candy sugar packets, immediately grabbing one as she stared at it in disbelief. “Smile Dip! I thought this stuff was banned in America!”

“You know, maybe they had a good reason for banning it,” Dipper said with a frown, having overheard his nearby sister’s elation at this discovery. However, he didn’t try to really dissuade her from trying it as he was struck by a soda balloon from behind, prompting him to laughingly run off to exact payback. With no one to convince her otherwise, Mabel grinned broadly as she opened up a pack of Smile Dip, shoving the stick into the sugary powder before disregarding it completely and pouring the entire package directly into her mouth.

The group had been living it up in the convenience store for over an hour, and the fun still showed no signs of slowing down. Everyone was still spread about the shop, partaking in all of the creative entertainment they could come up with using the all resources the store had to offer. Dipper and Wendy were taking a break from the merriment as they relaxed together on top of one of the store shelves, enjoying ice cream bars as they watched everyone else have fun down below.

“Hey, come here! We got it ready!” Nate called to Thompson as he collaborated on a dare along with Robbie and Lee.

“Whatever it is, I’ll do it!” Thompson exclaimed as he rushed past the shelf Dipper and Wendy were sitting on top of.

“Thompson!” Wendy called in joking encouragement, laughing cheerfully as turned to the younger boy beside her. “Dipper, this night is like, legendary.”

“Really?” Dipper asked with a small, hopeful grin.

“Totally! Just look around,” Wendy said as she nodded towards the various groups having fun on the ground. “The guys are bonding…” she said, referring to Nate, Lee, and Robbie, who were pouring ice down Thompson’s pants. “Sour Cream hasn’t been this inspired in ages…” And indeed, Sour Cream was creatively raving to the song Jenny was playing from her phone as Buck, Lars, and Steven cheered him on. “I’ve never seen Tambry look up from her phone this long…” Of course, while Tambry was still texting away, she did happen to glance up from her phone every
now and then as she sat hunched over it. “And your sister seems to be going nuts for that Smile Dip.”

Mabel let out a slightly nauseous groan as she lay against the Smile Dip display, her mouth coated with the ridiculously sugary substance. She had consumed at least ten packs of it in a row, and it was starting to become apparent that she had gone a bit overboard. “Ugh, maybe I’ve had too much…” she admitted, trying her best to ignore her rumbling stomach. “What do you think?” she asked the giant puppy that existed only in her sugar-induced hallucinations. Dipper and Wendy watched with concern for a moment as Mabel continued to talk to her bizarre fantasies, before Wendy continued.

“You know Dipper, I wasn’t sure if you could hang with our crew at first, but you’re surprisingly mature for your age.”

“Yes, yes I am,” Dipper said with confidence, distracted by Wendy to the point that he inadvertently shoved his ice pop into the side of his face instead of his mouth.

“Hey guys! We need more ice!” Lee called as he shook an empty bag of ice over Thompson’s pants as the latter visibly shivered.

“I’m on it!” Dipper volunteered as he hopped down from the shelf to head towards the ice freezer near the back of the store. He couldn’t help but grin in satisfaction as he did so, knowing that this evening was turning out to be better than he could have ever imagined. Not only had he managed to prove himself to the teens, but he had also impressed Wendy, which had been his overall goal from the beginning. Dipper figured that if things continued going well as they were and he continued to keep his cool, then perhaps, against all odds, he might actually have a chance with Wendy.

Dipper was so engrossed in that enticing thought that he didn’t notice that something was amiss as he opened the freezer and grabbed a bag of ice until he happened to glance up and see something that made him gasp in fear. Inexplicably floating inside the freezer was what appeared to be a phantom creature of unspeakable horror; it vaguely resembled a brain, only with two long protruding eyestalks and several vein-like tendrils stemming from it. Upon merely taking a momentary glance at this bizarre monstrosity, Dipper let out a frightened shout as he slammed the freezer door shut, the bag of ice slipping out of his arms and spilling onto the ground in the process. For a moment, he simply stood before the freezer with his eyes wide and heart racing, before he tentatively cracked the door open once more and peered inside, only to find that there was no signs of the nightmarish monster; the only thing awaiting in the freezer was exactly what should have been there: ice.

“What was that?” Dipper spun around to see that most of the teens, as well as Steven, had congregated behind him, clearly having overheard his fearful cry earlier. “I thought I heard some lady screaming back here,” Sour Cream remarked, following up his prior question.

“You freakin’ out kid?” Nate asked, his tone jokingly dramatic.

“Uh, no,” Dipper said defensively, hiding his former distress well. “I’m cool. Everything’s cool.”

“Then what’s all this about?” Robbie asked caustically, pointing to the steadily melting ice spilled all over the floor.

The teens all collectively murmured their curious confusion as Dipper glanced around nervously, trying to come up with a viable, spur of the moment excuse that wouldn’t cost him any momentum with the teens. As he did so, he happened to briefly meet eyes with Steven, who, unlike everyone
else, said nothing as he wore an expression of worry, as though he was silently and knowingly asking Dipper if something was wrong. Of course, he wasn’t about to admit the strange, disconcerting sight he had seen in front of all of the teens, lest they cast him as little more than a frightened kid in over his head. And so instead, he decided to detract them with a distraction instead.

“That’s uh, um… Hey, look!” Dipper exclaimed, pointing to the dance video game machine near the front of the store. “Dancy Pants Revolution! That game that tricks people into exercising!”

Fortunately, the teens took the bait as they all migrated towards the machine, Steven reluctantly following as well. Dipper breathed a sigh of relief at this, though he did anxiously take one last glance back at the freezer before putting thoughts of the terrifying monster he may or may not have seen out of his mind and joining the rest of the group.

Not surprisingly, Thompson was the first to try out Dance Pants Revolution merely upon Nate and Lee’s goading, and they were not disappointed as they cheered him on while he flailed and faltered in trying to keep up with the beat. “Wow, he’s really terrible at this,” Wendy laughingly remarked to Dipper as the two of them stood together, watching Thompson fail.

Dipper let out a nervous laugh, having not really heard what she had said as he was still wrapped up in thought about the new realization he had reached in light of the freezer monster: the chance that the convenience store could really be haunted after all. “Yeah,” he agreed a bit distantly. “That… that’s great…” No more than a moment after he had said this, however, Dipper stole a glance over at the doors of the shop, only to be met with yet another startling sight. The reflections of everyone standing near the dance machine were clear in the glass, himself included, with one glaring difference. It was as though everyone had been robbed of their skin, so that they instead all appeared as erect skeletons instead, though none of them seemed to notice this horrifying imagery. Dipper gasped softly at this, rubbing his eyes to make sure that he wasn’t hallucinating like Mabel certainly was on her Smile Dip binge. But when he looked towards the window once more, their reflections were all as normal as they should have been. And though this normally would have comforted him, the fact that he had seen two frighteningly strange sights in a row only made Dipper worry even more.

Meanwhile, Steven was also keeping a watch on the windows, but for an entirely different reason. He dutifully watched for any signs of the moss making a move as he stood not too far away from Lars, who was trying to flirt with Tambry and Jenny to less than stellar results.

“So… Tambry…” Lars began with a smooth smile as he leaned against the counter close to her, despite the fact that she was still texting at a rapid rate. “That’s a pretty cool phone you got there. What brand is it?”

As engrossed in her phone as she was, Tambry didn’t offer any real response, largely because she hadn’t really heard him. Lars noticed this as he anxiously tried again. “Uh… Tambry?”

“Huh?” Tambry muttered boredly, not even bothering to glance over at Lars at all.

“…Never mind,” Lars sighed, seeing that he was getting nowhere with her as he turned to Jenny, who was also watching Thompson play Dance Pants Revolution. “So… Jenny… What’s working at the pizza shop like?”

“Pft, its lame,” Jenny shrugged. “I only do it ’cause my dad makes me.”

Lars let out a slightly obnoxious laugh at this, one that Jenny clearly found a bit off-putting based on her weirded out expression. “Yeah!” he agreed too heartily. “I totally feel you!”
“Uh… yeah…” Jenny frowned, obviously not wanting to prolong this awkward conversation. “Hey, Steven, what are you looking at?”

“Huh?” Steven jumped a bit startled at the question as he turned away from the window for a moment. “Oh, uh… nothing. I was just…” He trailed off as he glanced out the window once more, only to notice something that made him gasp in sudden fear. Though the moss had not shown any prior signs of movement, it had apparently crept up from its original spot in the brief seconds he had looked away, to the point that it was now pressed against the base of the window. Steven stared at it with his mouth agape for a moment, watching with dread as it slowly crept up the window a little more, something that went unnoticed by Lars, Jenny, and Tambry. “Uh… I’ll be right back!” he said quickly, not noticing the aggravated glare Lars was shooting his way as he hurried off to another part of the store.

At the same time, Dipper had also snuck away from the others to find Mabel, knowing that if there was anyone he could confide in about the odd happenings he had observed, it was her. “Mabel, I need your advice,” he began, pacing anxiously as he often did when he was at a loss. “We’re hanging out at a haunted convenience store, apparently there’s a whole bunch of magical, deadly moss right outside, and if I say anything about it to any of these guys, they’ll think I’m a scared little kid or something!”

Of course, Mabel was in no real position to offer advice of any sort as she lay on the ground before the Smile Dip display, awash in the sugary candy and her eyes wide and clearly zoned out. The only response she could give was a lazy, yet intoxicated moan, a dazed grin on her face even as her brother shook her in an attempt to rouse her.

“Mabel! How many of these did you eat?!” Dipper asked with concern, knowing that Mabel had a tendency to go too far when it came to anything sugary.

“Beleven… teen…” Mabel murmured contentedly, her words slurring as her head drooped to the side. Seeing that she was unresponsive only made Dipper worry more, knowing that her sugar buzz was only making matters worse.

“Oh man…” Dipper said to himself as he dropped Mabel, letting her wallow in her craving as he began to panic, knowing that there was little he could do or say in this difficult situation. “Oh man…”

“Um… hey, Dipper?” Steven asked as he approached the other boy from behind, clearly startling him as he spun around with an agitated gasp.

“Steven! Don’t sneak up on me like that!” Dipper exclaimed, clearly on edge in light of everything that had happened.

“Sorry,” Steven apologized, though his expression gave away his own worry well. “But, uh… I need to talk to you. I think we should leave. Soon.”

“W-why?” Dipper asked, trying his best to hide his anxiety over the unfolding situation. “Aren’t you having fun?”

“It’s not that…” Steven frowned, though he was steadily catching onto the fact that Dipper was being as apprehensive as he was. “It’s the moss. I think it’s starting to climb up the window. See?” He pointed to the far window, where indeed, the moss was slinking up the glass in small increments, though neither boy had taken of the small crack that had manifested at its base.

“Oh,” Dipper acknowledged, admittedly relieved at this development. After all, if they could
convince the teens to leave based on the threat of the moss alone, then perhaps they wouldn’t have to deal with the haunted aspects of the store actually manifesting themselves. “Well, if you think leaving is the safest thing to do…”

“I do,” Steven nodded with resolve. “So… should we tell everyone?”

“Uh… you can,” Dipper encouraged, knowing that it would be better if Steven interrupted the fun, as the teens probably would go easier on him due to his relative innocence and cheerfulness. “I’ll catch up with you in a second. I gotta get Mabel and everything, you know?” he asked as he pointed back at his still inebriated sister.

“Yeah,” Steven said with a small, relieved grin as he began to head towards the dance machine. However, before he could address them, Robbie gathered everyone’s attention first.

“Whoa, guys! You might wanna see this,” he called from behind the counter, prompting everyone to head over that way to what the big deal was. Against their better judgement, both Steven and Dipper joined the rest of the group, hoping that whatever it was, it wouldn’t take too long so they could convince the teens that they needed to leave.

Dipper was perhaps the least surprised out of the entire group that what awaited behind the counter was yet another sign pointing towards the store being haunted. The outlines of what looked to be the shape of two bodies were marked on the floor in tape, obviously proving that the store was indeed the site of a murder. Oddly enough, however, the floor surrounding the outlines was immaculate, clear of blood or any other signifiers that the victims had been intentionally slaughtered.

“Whoa… That is straight-up creepy,” Jenny remarked, her eyes wide with surprise.

“Looks like the rumors are true after all!” Lee exclaimed.

“Dude, I dare you to lie down in it,” Robbie elbowed Lee with a goading grin.

“Good idea! Go lie down in it,” Lee said, passing the dare onto Nate, who readily agreed.

“Hey look! I’m a dead body!” Nate laughed as he walked over the markings, preparing to step foot inside one of them before he was abruptly stopped.

“Wait!” Dipper exclaimed, his nerves getting the better of him and finally prompting him to speak up before something horrible had a chance at happening. “M-maybe let’s not do that.”

“Oh! This guy’s scared!” Sour Cream said a bit teasingly.

Dipper resisted the urge to outright deny this claim as he instead strived to come across as calm, something that he definitely was not internally at a moment like this. “All I’m saying is, why tempt the fates? I mean… what if this place really is… haunted?”

As he had been expecting, his apprehension was not well received. The teens all collectively booed upon hearing this, none of them buying it and instead passing it off as mere superstition. Only Steven seemed to share the same concerns as Dipper, though his were largely more centered around the moss, though the chances of the store being haunted worried him as well.

“Nice job taking it down a notch, Captain Buzzkill!” Robbie said caustically, sending a glare Dipper’s way.

“I thought I was Dr. Funtimes,” Dipper frowned, knowing that he was all too quickly losing
"Well, you're acting like Captain Buzzkill! Right, guys?"

The teens all nodded their consent, several of them crossing their arms as they frowned at the younger boy in dry exasperation. Even Wendy, who had largely been vouching for Dipper for most of the evening, couldn’t help but reluctantly agree. “Yeah, little bit…” she said with an awkward frown, glancing away from him.

Fortunately, Steven was quick to leap in, fending for the same line of reasoning as Dipper, though with a different fear behind it. “Uh… I don’t know you guys…” the young Gem frowned anxiously. “Maybe we really shouldn’t be here after all… I mean, there’s no proof that this place isn’t haunted… right?”

“Ugh, are you serious, Steven?” Lars asked with a bitter scoff. “I should have known that you and your lame friends would ruin tonight!”

Steven and Dipper exchanged fretful frowns upon receiving this collective admonishment, knowing that they were both losing favor fast amongst the teens because of their shared paranoia. However, though Steven was more concerned with making sure everyone was safe rather than his own reputation, Dipper wasn’t about to take such belittling lying down.

“Status update,” Tambry said sarcastically, still texting away on her phone. “Trapped in store with two insane nine year olds.”

“I’m not a nine year old!” Dipper declared defensively and firmly, proving his point by succinctly lying down in one of the tape outlines on the floor, despite Steven’s fearful gasp of warning. “I’m thirteen! Technically a teen!”

Of course, Dipper regretted his brashness no more than a moment after he did this as the tape markings on the floor around him suddenly traced themselves in a bright, haunting green light almost instantaneously. As he quickly scrambled to pick himself up off the floor, the lights throughout the entire store shut off, leaving everyone in the dark as they looked around with newfound fear and confusion. The most horrifying part of these sudden developments however, came when Tambry happened to glance up from her phone, only to be momentarily enveloped in a violet glow before dissolving into thin air entirely, only her phone remaining as it dropped to the ground unceremoniously. Mere moments after her disappearance, she reappeared, only now she was on the security camera TV hanging from the ceiling, letting out a horrified scream as she banged her fist on the screen she was somehow trapped behind.

“Tambry!” Wendy exclaimed with a frightened gasp of concern.

“Can you hear us in there?!” Steven called worriedly, though clearly Tambry could neither hear nor see any of them as she instead looked around in confusion from inside the TV.

“Oh man, I did not sign up for this!” Buck said, breaking his usual steady cool and replacing it with fear.

“What are we supposed to do?!” Nate asked in a panic.

“I don’t know, man! I don’t know!” Lee replied, equally as alarmed.

“Let’s just go already!” Robbie ordered, motioning towards the door. Everyone was quick to head that way, save for Thompson, who was still engrossed in Dance Pants Revolution.
“Thompson!” Wendy called to him, gleaning his attention.

“Wait! I’ve almost got the high score!” Thompson exclaimed as he jumped up and down to the beat, until the dance machine began to shake and glow with an unnatural light. “Uh…?” Before he even had time to react, Thompson vanished in a manner quite similar to how Tambry had disappeared moments earlier. However, instead of appearing on the security monitor, he rematerialized on the screen of the game as the directional arrows began to rain down upon him from above.

“Time to shake what your mama gave you!” the machine declared in its usual cheery tone as the falling arrows began to strike Thompson.

“No!” he exclaimed, clearly in pain from their sharp tips. “Too many arrows!”

“You’re a dance machine!”

“No! You’re a dance machine!” Thompson retorted as he finally gave up, curling into the fetal position as the arrows continued to steadily fall on him.

“Thompson!” Jenny exclaimed in shock as the others watched all of this occur, none of them able to help him.

“Forget them! Let’s just go!” Robbie exclaimed, hurrying for the open doors of the shop, which slammed shut the moment everyone approached them.

“What the…” Wendy murmured in confusion as she did her best to pull the doors open, but much to her dismay, they wouldn’t budge. “Guys, it’s locked!”

No one really had the time to take in the fact that they were trapped in the midst of this chaos, especially as a new source of trouble suddenly made itself quite apparent. The glass window on the far side of the shop suddenly shattered, and though this could have been seen as an alternate escape, it was anything but as thick green moss began to migrate into the store through the opening, creeping towards the group at an alarming rate.

“Oh no!” Steven exclaimed, realizing his fears had come true. “Everyone, stay back!” The young Gem took charge as he threw his arms wide in front of the teens, essentially shielding them from the encroaching moss as it headed their way inch by inch.

“Steven, what is your deal!?” Lars exclaimed, just as frightened at this sudden turn of events as everyone else was, though he was quite surprised that Steven seemed to know exactly what was happening. “What is that stuff?”

“I—it’s some kind of magic moss my mom planted!” Steven explained quickly, pulling up his shirt a bit to see if he could get his shield to come out, but to no avail.

“Wait,” Lars said, his eyebrows furrowing in sudden frustration. “Your mom?”

“Quick!” Steven ordered as the moss began to completely dominate the area near the window it had broken. “To the other side of the store!”

No one objected as they all followed the young Gem’s lead, pressing against the opposite window as the moss steadily crawled their way. By now, everyone who was remaining was in a complete panic, their hearts all collectively racing as they tried to find a way out, which seemed like an impossibility now.
“Okay,” Wendy began, trying to keep her cool as much as possible as she tried to make sense of this. “So on one hand, we have some killer magic moss, or whatever. But then what made Thompson and Tambry disappear?”

“Wait!” Dipper exclaimed, a sudden idea hitting him as he pulled out the journal from his vest as he began frantically leafing through it for something that would help. “Whatever’s doing this has to have some kind of reason. Maybe if we can figure out what it is, they’ll let us out of here before the moss can reach us!”

“‘Uh-uh, they’ll let us out of here!’” Robbie mocked scornfully. “Yeah, that makes a lot of sense!”

“I don’t know guys, maybe he’s got a point!” Wendy said, knowing that some plan was better than nothing.

“Yeah right,” Lee remarked sarcastically. “I’m sure the ghost just wants to talk about his feelings!”

As soon as he said this, however, Lee also disappeared just like Tambry and Thompson before him, though instead of on a screen, he reappeared on a box of cereal sitting on a nearby shelf. Lee let out a horrified cry as he glanced up to see the toucan mascot on the box lift up his spoon before shoving it down into the bowl of milk and cereal that he just so happened to be in.

“Lee!” Nate cried in fear as he heard his friend’s pained shout. “Okay, okay… I’m with you kid! 100% man!”

As everyone focused on the moss ever inching their way, they failed to notice the figure slowly rising up into the air from behind the counter until they spoke up in a deep, haunting male voice: “Welcome.”

Upon being startled by this new, booming voice, everyone whipped around to see the last sight they had expected such a voice to come from: Mabel. It was clear that something was off about her however, as a intimidating blue glow hovered around her as she somehow floated above the group, her arms held out wide and her eyes bereft of pupils as they shared that same empty, eerie glow amidst glowing down at them all. Though initially horrified and bewildered at what was happening to his sister, Dipper soon reached a disturbing realization as he remembered the ghost that was actively haunting the store and quickly picking them off one by one.

“They’ve got Mabel!” he exclaimed, filling everyone else in on the fact that his sister was apparently possessed.

“Welcome to your graves, young trespassers,” the ghost spoke through Mabel in its menacing voice, letting out a taunting laugh. “I would tell you that you shouldn’t be here, but it seems you’ve all already figured that out.”

“We’re super sorry for hanging out in your store!” Wendy exclaimed, trying to come off as sincere as possible despite her fear.

“Yeah!” Dipper agreed, having put the journal away as it really wasn’t helping much in this situation “Can we just go now and leave forever?”

“We promise we won’t come back!” Steven added pleadingly, keeping his watch on the crawling moss as well as the ghost, which was the only thing that could grant them an exit in light of the moss.

“Well… Okay. You’re free to go,” the ghost said, its tone surprisingly amicable as it willed the doors open. “But before you leave, hot dogs are half off! I know it might be crazy, all things
considered, but you gotta try these dogs!"

Of course, the teens were having none of that as they took the opportunity for escape that was available to them instead of even so much as heeding what the ghost had said. Nate, Robbie, and Sour Cream were all the first to rush for the door, not withholding their unified cries of terror as they did so. Expectantly, before they could reach it, the ghost slammed the doors shut, sealing them tight as the moss began to stretch in front of it, sealing it even further.

“Just kidding about the hot dog sale!” the ghost proclaimed angrily, clearly having put forth the offer in spite.

“Just let us out of here already!” Nate demanded rather crossly, as tired as they all were of being tricked.

“I don’t like your tone!” the ghost retorted harshly before making Nate dissolve into thin air with just a mere glare in his direction. No more than a second later, he reappeared, strangely enough, as one of the several hot dogs inside the rolling warmer case on the nearby counter.

“No!” Nate screamed, panicking as he glanced down at his new meaty form. “I’m a hot dog!”

With only eight trespassers left out of the original group, the ghost apparently decided that it was time for the haunting to kick it into high gear. Still possessing Mabel’s body, it hovered even higher into the air, its arms held outside as the ghostly glow around it intensified. “It begins…” the ghost declared gravely, using its otherworldly powers to flip the entire store completely. Gravity seemed to reverse itself as everything that was once on the floor was abruptly pulled to the ceiling, including the moss. “Welcome to your home for all eternity!”

As the kids and teens also fell from what was once the floor, Buck, Jenny, and Sour Cream were all violently thrown sideways, or more specifically, towards the moss. Though the others had managed to cling onto things to weigh themselves down as the ceiling became their new floor, the three of them had not been as lucky as they fell right into the thicket of the moss, which was more than happy to begin swallowing them up upon contact.

“No!” Steven exclaimed fearfully as both him and Lars took shelter behind a flipped over shelf.

“Lars, we have to help them! Come on!”

“Steven, wait!” Lars exclaimed, though he was able to do nothing as the younger boy desperately grabbed him by the wrist and dragged him towards the moss, which by now had all but covered Jenny, Sour Cream, and Buck, despite their attempts to struggle to break free from it.

“Even the moss from outside acknowledges your disrespect!” the ghost goaded with a triumphant laugh. “Now either it will destroy you, or we will!”

As Steven and Lars began futilely trying to rescue Jenny, Buck, and Sour Cream, Dipper and Wendy were doing their best to avoid the debris that were wildly being tossed about by the ghost’s telekinesis in an attempt to strike them. “Dipper, what do we do!?” Wendy shouted, noticing that Robbie had been knocked out by one of the randomly flying objects, though at least he was out of harm’s way.

“Duck!” Dipper exclaimed warningly, pulling Wendy down along with him as a shelf narrowly flew just above their heads.

“Quick! In there!” Wendy pointed to the cabinet of the nearby ice machine that had been tipped over onto its side, moss congregating in the space behind it, giving them little options of anywhere
else to go. As the two of them crowded inside of it to catch their breaths, they glanced out at all of the chaos raging on in the rest of the store, both of them at a loss on how to stop it.

“What do they want from us!?” Wendy asked, obviously distraught after watching almost all of her friends be picked off.

“Revenge, I guess?” Dipper ventured, knowing that in light of everything that had happened, this made the most sense, even if the situation at large was all rather confusing.

“But for what? We didn’t do anything to them!”

“Okay, let’s try to figure out the pattern here,” Dipper said, trying to utilize logic and reason in face of all of the havoc. “Why was each person taken? Tambry was texting, Thompson was playing a video game, Lee was being sarcastic; it doesn’t make any sense!”

“Yeah! I mean, those are all just normal teenage things!” Wendy said, as equally as bewildered. However, upon hearing this, Dipper realized that this was perhaps the missing piece of the puzzle behind this bizarre haunting.

“Wendy, say that last part again,” he said, his eyes widening in realization.

“Normal teenage things?”

“Of course!” Dipper exclaimed, a newfound plan filling him with resolve. Of course, it was something of an embarrassing plan, but it was one he knew he had to implement for the sake of the greater good. “Stay here until I get back,” he said as he began to crawl out of the freezer, much to Wendy’s confusion.

“Dude, what are you doing?!” Wendy called with a concerned frown, half tempted to follow him until she relented, hoping that whatever plan he had would be a good one.

At the same time, Steven and Lars were still trying their hardest to rip away the moss from the other teens, though it seemed that with every small piece they managed to tear away, more moss would cover its victims in its place. “Guys, hang on!” Lars called to the teens, who were clearly having a hard time breathing as the moss steadily began to suffocate them.

As Lars became even more frustrated with the clinginess of the moss, Steven happened to glance up at the ceiling, or well, the floor, above them as he remembered something that Pearl had mentioned when he had first visited this spot several days ago with the Gems: “*Rose Quartz used to climb that hill every spring and tend to the moss at the top in the light of the full moon...*” It stood to reason that if the moss needed moonlight to thrive, then perhaps the reason it was acting so violently was that it had been deprived of it for so long in light of Rose’s absence. However, Steven knew there would be no getting the moss outside and up the hill thanks to the ghost barring their sole exit from the store. But perhaps all the moss needed was the light of the moon itself, and as Steven focused on the tiled floor above them, a sudden, yet risky plan came to him.

“Lars, I know what we have to do!” Steven exclaimed with newfound hope, just as Lars was giving up in trying to save the teens out of frustration. Unfortunately though, this also meant that he didn’t so much as heed a single word of what the young Gem had said as he lashed out instead.

“This is all your fault!” Lars shouted bitterly, showing the slightest signs of tearing up out of vexation. “I knew that if something went wrong tonight, it would be because of you! Now I’m never going to be friends with these guys, and it’s all because of your... weird mom!”

Despite the clatter of the haunting going on behind them, these heavy words hung on the air for
what seemed like ages as Steven took them in, his eyes narrowing as his jaw dropped in offended shock. Though the young Gem was usually so patient and gentle, it was clear a nerve had been struck as he clenched his fists tightly at his side, his expression twisting into one of rage that Lars didn’t even know Steven was capable of. “What would you know about my mom?” he asked, his voice low and practically shaking with fury, before it finally exploded into an enraged shout. “I didn’t even get to know my mom! But I do know she saw beauty in everything! Even in stuff like this and even in jerks like you!”

A long silence hung between the two of them as Lars backed off, obviously regretting what he had said as he glanced down in shame. Steven let out a sigh himself, never liking to get so cross with anyone, even if it was completely called for. After all, he had indeed never gotten to know Rose; everything he had ever heard about her was from secondhand stories from the Gems or his father. He had never really thought much about it before, but the fact that he did not know his own mother nor would he ever get to know her, filled him with a sadness that he really couldn’t describe. But even so, Steven knew that there was no time to dwell on all that now, not when there were lives in danger. Now was the time for action, not mourning. “Come on,” he said to Lars, his tone still rather dry and bitter as he lead the way to a gathering of boxes in a corner of the store which was steadily being covered in moss. “We need to make a hole in ceiling.”

“You mean the floor?”

“It doesn’t matter!” Steven urged, already starting to stack the boxes into a tower. “Just help me!”

Lars didn’t argue this time as he helped Steven in any way he could, knowing that they were essentially racing against the clock now in saving both themselves and the teens from the moss. However, in the midst of their desperation, they failed to remember that the ghost was still fueling a haunting that was making their attempt all the more difficult, especially as it took notice of the tower of boxes they were building. “Hey there!” the ghost called, glaring threateningly at Steven and Lars as it began to glide Mabel’s body over to them. “What do you two think you’re doing?!”

The two of them exchanged a frightened glance as they froze amidst stacking the boxes, only to find that the moss was just about at their toes. If they didn’t start climbing towards the ceiling soon, they would meet the same fate as Jenny, Buck and Sour Cream, but they wouldn’t even have a chance to save them if the ghost got ahold of them first. Fortunately though, before the ghost could properly stop them, it was intercepted just in the nick of time.

“Hey, ghost!”

The ghost abruptly spun Mabel’s body around, head first, followed by the rest of her body, in a rather creepy fashion, towards Dipper, who stood before it boldly, refusing to back down in the face of this threat. “I have something to tell you!” Dipper exclaimed, sending a cold glare up at the ghost as he declared what he hoped it wanted to hear. “I’m not a teenager!”

All at once, everything that had once been floating around the store abruptly fell to the ground as gravity acted upon it all once more. Seeing that the ghost was clearly distracted, Lars and Steven let out a shared sigh of relief as they discreetly continued building their box ladder to the ceiling, knowing that they had no time to waste.

At long last, the ghost, or ghosts rather, freed Mabel from their possession to reveal themselves. Surprisingly, the pair of specters appeared to be an elderly couple, and a rather amiable looking couple at that. Based on their name tags, which read “Pa” and “Ma” respectively, as well as the work aprons they wore, it was easy to infer that they had probably worked at the convenience store at some point, if they weren’t its very owners. They both shared the same friendly grin as they hovered...
above the ground for a moment before dropping her into the pile of candy just below them.

“Well, why didn’t you say so?!” Pa laughed warmly in response to hearing that Dipper was not a teen after all. “How old did you say you were?”

Dipper hesitated for a moment, knowing that he finally had to come clean over the lie he had told earlier, but there was really little else he could do at this juncture. “I’m… I’m twelve. Technically not a teen.”

“Oh, thank heavens!” Ma exclaimed with relief. “When we were alive, teenagers were a scourge upon our store!”

“Always sassafrassin’ costumers with their boomy boxes and disrespectful short pants!” Pa raved in frustration. “So we decided to up and ban them! But then they retaliated with this newfangled rap music.”

“The lyrics, they were so… hateful!” Ma exclaimed with apt horror, cringing at the memory. “It was so shocking, we were stricken down with double heart attacks! That’s why we hate teenagers so much. Don’t we, honey?”

“We sure do!” Pa proclaimed cheerily, nuzzling his wife romantically as the two of them embraced.

“But… they’re my friends,” Dipper said with a pitied frown, understanding the ghosts’ distain, even if he didn’t necessarily agree with it. “Isn’t there anything I can do to help them?”

“Well… there is one thing…” Pa said, his grin widening. “Do you know any funny little dances?”

“Uh… Is there anything else I can do?” Dipper said with an awkward smile, knowing that he would really rather do anything but that, especially in front of Wendy.

“NO!” Pa shouted, his patience suddenly all but gone as frightening flames surrounded his ghostly form.

“Okay! Okay!” Dipper exclaimed relentingly, backing up a bit to avoid being burned. “Um… Well… I do know… the Lamby Lamby Dance…” he admitted very reluctantly, hating even so much as bringing it up. “B-but I can’t really do it without a lamb costume! So…”

Dipper crossed his arms and grinned in satisfaction, hoping that this excuse would be enough to get him out of having to do the dance. Unfortunately, he underestimated the ghosts’ ability to bend reality, for with a mere snap of Pa’s fingers, Dipper found that he was suddenly clad in a full-body lamb costume, complete with wool, ears, tail, and all.

“Oh…” Dipper sighed with dismay, already feeling his face redden in embarrassment as he frowned down at the childish costume, knowing there was no way out of this now. “Well… There it is…” He took in a deep breath as he steeled himself for what was most likely going to be the most mortifying experience ever, not even bothering to glance back at Wendy, lest he back out of this entirely. Nevertheless, he figured he might as well get it over with, solely for the sake of saving everyone and little else. “Welll… Who wants a lamby lamby lamby? I do! I do!” he began the song and the sickeningly adorable dance that went along with it, still remembering every prancing step of it. “So go up and greet your mammy mammy mammy! Hi there! Hi there!”

Wendy suppressed a laugh as she watched Dipper perform the Lamby Lamby Dance, knowing that it was perhaps one of the silliest, yet cutest things she had ever seen. It also caught Steven and Lars’ attention just as they were starting to use a discarded pole to break a hole through the ceiling,
with the hopes of making an opening just large enough. Steven let out a delighted gasp as he watched Dipper dance, grinning in amusement as he genuinely found it to be entertaining rather than embarrassing. Lars, on the other hand, cringed, thinking that nothing could be more corny, which was saying something considering how schmaltzy Steven often was. However, as their attention was drawn back towards the moss, which by now had begun creeping up the tower of boxes they were both standing on top of.

“Steven! It’s getting closer!” Lars exclaimed in alarm.

“Just keep pushing!” Steven urged as he pushed the pole further into the ceiling, having broken through the tiles, leaving only a layer of concrete between them and the sky.

“What’s gonna happen when we break through the ceiling anyway?” Lars asked, not getting the point of this plan.

“I-I don’t really know!” Steven admitted sheepishly.

“You don’t know?!”

“The moss needs moonlight to grow! That’s what it wants!” Steven explained, letting out a gasp as he felt it begin to cling to his feet.

“Ugh! It’s getting everywhere!” Lars shouted, losing mobility as the moss swallowed his legs.

“We’re almost there!” Steven encouraged as they rammed the pole into the concrete, creating a sizable crack in it. “Don’t give up!”

Of course, it was getting increasingly harder to do so as the moss began to overwhelm them all too quickly. The hole had nearly been caved into the roof just as the moss covered their arms, halting their movements entirely and leaving them effectively immobilized.

“Steven…” Lars said a bit stiffly as the moss crawled up his neck, threatening to suffocate him.

“What?” Steven struggled to ask, close to meeting the same fate.

Lars’ solemn manner quickly faded as he glared down at the moss encasing them. “This sucks!” he declared bitterly, before the moss swallowed him up, covering his face and freezing him where he stood.

“Lars!” Steven exclaimed fearfully, his final word muffling as the moss overcame him as well, the hole they had so desperately tried to carve into the ceiling still unopened as a sign of their failure.

The moss still continued to creep along the floor of the store, hoping to claim more victims, though Dipper had not time to notice this as he was still in the midst of gratifying the ghosts via the Lamby Lamby Dance. “So march march march around the daisies…”

“Yes!” Pa cheered as him and Ma cheerfully applauded, clearly eating it up. “More! MORE!”

“Don’t don’t don’t you forget about the babies!” Dipper went in for the big finish, complete with a charming wink, despite the fact that he was thoroughly exhausted and humiliated in the aftermath of the abhorred dance. At the very least, though, he could take solace in the fact that it was over, especially as the lamb costume turned back into his normal clothes courtesy of the ghosts, who were clearly pleased.

“That was some fine girly dancin’, boy!” Pa praised heartily. “Your friends are free. Though you
“Well, I don’t think you have to worry about us coming back, so…” Dipper said with clear relief, though he didn’t have much time to react to the fact that the ghosts abruptly vanished into thin air, clearly no longer restless as they had been before. With their powers no longer acting upon the store, gravity reverted back to normal, everything and everyone falling back down to the floor. Tambry, Thompson, Lee and Nate all suddenly reappeared, none of them worse for wear, even if they were all a bit dazed. However, by far the most miraculous thing in all this was the fact that the sudden shaking of the foundation of the store caused the hole that Lars and Steven had been working on in the ceiling to finally break open, creating a rather sizable opening that allowed the light of the full moon directly above the store to shine through.

The bright glow of the moonlight struck the moss squarely, and the effect was almost immediate. As Wendy emerged from the freezer cabinet, her and Dipper found that they were essentially cornered by the moss, which had already begun swallowing up all of the other teens almost as soon as they reappeared, much to their horror. However, as the moonlight fell upon the moss, it was as though it received all new life. Instantaneously, the green moss erupted into an abundance of pink blossoms, which all began to float upward and out of the store through both the hole in the ceiling and the now open doors. The small flowers were radiantly beautiful, with glowing pink gems at their centers and petals as soft as silk. As they glided up into the air, they released everyone from their once mossy prisons, leaving all of them breathless, but safe as they recovered.

Steven and Lars abruptly fell from their box tower after being freed from the moss, but neither of them were hurt as they picked themselves up and joined Dipper and Wendy, who were now standing in doorframe of the store watching the flowers rise.

“This is seriously the coolest thing ever, man,” Wendy said with clear awe before she gave a sly grin to Dipper. “Aside from what you just did, dude.”

“Yeah, well…” Dipper trailed off with an embarrassed grin, finding it hard to believe that Wendy actually thought the Lamby Lamby Dance was anything resembling cool, but relieved to know that she did not think any less of him for it.

“The moss was just trying to bloom!” Steven grinned brightly as he watched the flowers dance through the air with stars in his eyes, knowing that his mother would be proud.

It wasn’t long before the others started joining them near the door, Mabel being the first as she was steadily recovering from the aftermath of her intense sugar rush. “Ugh…” she groaned, feeling sick as she barely even noticed the rain of blossoms. “I’m never gonna eat or do anything every again…”

“Hey, look! There’s still some left!” Dipper said as he spotted a discarded package of Smile Dip on the ground, picking it up and offering it to Mabel.

“Evil!” she exclaimed, wanting no parts of the disastrously sugary candy as she slapped it out of her brother’s hand.

“What happened after everything went crazy?” Lee asked, still a bit on edge as all the teens were.

“I think we died…” Sour Cream moaned, still feeling a bit week.
“But look at that!” Jenny exclaimed, clearly amazed by the countless wafting blossoms reigning the sky as they glided towards the moon itself, glowing radiantly in the starlight.

The teens all shared muses of awe at this sight, all of them clearly impressed. “It’s beautiful,” Buck remarked, adjusting his shades as they reflected the moon.

“But… what freed us from that stuff?” Jenny asked in confusion.

“Well, Steven thought of—” Lars began to explain before he was abruptly interrupted.

“Lars broke a hole in the ceiling to let the moonlight into the store!” Steven said with an enthusiastic grin, not at all begrudging Lars the credit he wanted. Clearly, he hadn’t been expecting this, especially after he had insulted both Steven and his mother, but he couldn’t help but feel grateful for it as Buck, Jenny, and Sour Cream gave him their grins of approval.

“I can totally rave to this,” Sour Cream declared before he did exactly that, moving to the impromptu beat of the other teens cheering him on amidst the blossoms falling.

Steven and Lars exchanged a friendly grin as they stood by, a new understanding clearly formed between them. Though Lars had once seen Steven as an annoyance and little else, he couldn’t deny that if it had not been for the enthusiastic young Gem, he wouldn’t have gained any ground among the cool kids at all. Which was why he intercepted Steven’s attempt to give him a basic high five by instead high fiving his chest instead as a show of his gratitude.

“Yeah!” Steven laughed cheerfully, returning the favor as he slapped a hand on Lars’ chest and kept it there.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Lars said a moment later, his grin fading into an awkward frown as the gesture had gone on too long for his comfort.

“Wait, so if Lars took out the moss, what happened to the ghosts?” Robbie asked, rubbing his head as he recovered from being knocked out earlier.

“You guys aren’t gonna believe it!” Wendy began with a zealous grin. “The ghosts appeared, and Dipper had to—” She cut herself short as she glanced over at the younger boy, noticing his embarrassed expression as he expected her to reveal the humiliating way in which he got rid of the ghosts. But instead, she spared his reputation and did the exact opposite. “Uh… And… uh, Dipper just grabbed a bat and started beating down ghosts left and right! And then the ghosts got all scared and ran away like a couple of little girls! It was insane!”

Dipper was quite shocked to hear all this, even if he was immensely relieved, especially as the teens all regarded his supposed heroism highly. As a sign of confidentially between them in this matter, Wendy turned to Dipper amidst everyone else celebrating and reveling in the falling flowers and nonchalantly zipped her lips, silently telling him that this would forever be their little secret. Dipper gladly returned the gesture, taking satisfaction that despite everything that had gone wrong and all of the danger they had been through, he had accomplished his original goal in getting closer to Wendy after all.

It wasn’t very long before the blossoms all disappeared into the night and everyone decided it was time to call it quits for the night. As exhausted as everyone was, most of the teens clonked out as soon as they piled into Thompson’s car, with Dipper and Wendy being the last to do so as they chatted outside.

“Well, I’m probably scarred for life,” Wendy said with a rather relaxed grin in light of what had
“Yeah, that was pretty crazy…” Dipper admitted with a small smile, knowing how close they had all been to being doomed in a variety of ways.

“I think I’ll go stare at a wall for a while and rethink everything,” Wendy said, her calm manner fading into a serious one for a moment, though she was quick to chill again as she climbed into the van. “Hey, next time we hang out, let’s just stay at the Mystery Shack, ok?”

“Next time?” Dipper asked with newfound hope in the confirmation that the two of them would do something like this again, only hopefully in a less harrowing situation. “Yeah! Let’s hang out at the shack!” he heartily agreed as he got into the car himself, this time gladly sandwiching himself between Steven and Mabel. “Next time…” he muttered with a satisfied smile.

“You know, all in all, I think tonight went well,” Steven said with a cheery grin as the car roared to life and began to drive away from the convenience store. “Right, Lars?”

“Whatever…” Lars said tiredly as he leaned against the window. “Ugh, I’m getting Sadie to cover for me tomorrow. I need a day off after all that…”

Still sick from the aftereffects of the Smile Dip, Mabel let out a sluggish groan as she glanced down at the note she had scribbled onto the interior of the door earlier, reading “You look nice today!” with her bleary vision and clearly not getting it. “What kind of sick joke is this?” she asked languidly, before immediately succumbing to sleep just as the rest of the teens had.

As the van filled with both kids and teens left the convenience store behind, none of them noticed its lights flicker on and off until they eventually died out entirely, leaving the store just as it had been before they arrived. Abandoned as it sat in the shadows of a hill now bereft of the moss that had once grown there, but now had bloomed towards the skies.
Chapter 9: Strong the Real Way

Chapter Summary

In which Dipper and Steven try to act like they aren’t soft and adorable baby boys, Mabel tries to get Stan a date, Sugilite runs wild, and Pearl sings a dramatic song.

Chapter Notes

Well, this one took a while, but I really do love it! And so here is my combination of Coach Steven and Dipper Vs Manliness! Enjoy! :D

Chapter 9: Strong in the Real Way

EUXWH VWUHQJWK LV UDWKHU XQUHILQHG
WUXH ZDUULRUV FKHULVK VWUHQJWK RI PLQG

In the occasional event that the Gems would allow Steven to accompany them on one of their missions, the young Gem always eagerly leaped at the chance, and this particular mission was no exception. Though Garnet had made it clear that this was a routine inspection, with little chance of any danger befalling them, Steven didn’t mind. The thought of getting to see another legendary Gem structure was exhilarating enough for him.

Stars were already in the young Gem’s eyes as they warped to their destination, which was obviously quite a ways from Gravity Falls. Instead, it was somewhere in the middle of a desert, though thankfully the Gems were spared from the heat of the day as they had chosen to go at night. The bright glow of the moon rested upon the imposing structure only a few feet away from the warp pad, an illustrious pillared tower that stretched high into the starry skies as it emitted a thin beam of light from its tip that stretched even higher, perhaps even into space.

Steven’s jaw was agape with awe as he stepped off the warp pad, the other Gems following not too far behind. “Whoa…” he whispered in amazement as he stared up the length of the tower. “What kind of magical place of mystery is this?”

“Oh, I’m so glad you asked!” Pearl grinned, always eager to divulge Gem knowledge to Steven. “This was once a communication hub, used to send messages among Gem-kind. But lately, it’s begun transmitting bursts of electromagnetic interference!”

“What’s that mean?” Steven asked with a confused frown as the group headed over to the pillars of the structure.

“It’s hurting television,” Garnet said succinctly, placing her hands on her hips.

“Oh no!” Steven exclaimed with a gasp of dismay. “We have to do something guys! We can’t let television die!” In an admirable, yet futile effort to “save television”, the young Gem pressed his weight against one of the load-bearing pillars near the ground in an attempt to shove the whole
“Sorry, dude,” Amethyst grinned slyly as she easily picked Steven up and set him aside, curtailing his efforts. “But we need a Steven at least…” she paused as she shapeshifted into the younger Gem, only a taller, more muscular version of the original. “*This* strong for the job!”

Steven let out a wonderstruck gasp at seeing the buff rendition of himself. “It’s all the me I could be!”

Still shapeshifting as Steven, Amethyst let out a rouge laugh as she gave one of the pillars a hearty punch, creating a crack in it and sending a bit of debris flying from it, but ultimately failing to cause integral damage.

Pearl shook her head disapprovingly as she deftly caught a piece of the rubble, knowing that a plan would be necessary to tackle this problem as opposed to brute force. “Amethyst, we could be here all day taking down these pillars individually.”

“Ugh, I hate it when you’re right…” Amethyst groaned in annoyance as she shapeshifted back into her original form. “You get this *look* on your face—” Before she could continue, she happened to glance over at the white Gem and notice the aggravatingly smug grin she was wearing. “Yeah, that’s the one.”

“What we need is a well thought-out plan…” Pearl began strategizing, her Gem glowing with an oncoming hologram that she could use for illustrative purposes, before she was abruptly cut off.

“No,” Garnet said with resolve. “We don’t need a plan. What we need is Sugilite. Amethyst, fuse with me.”

“WHAT?!” both Pearl and Amethyst exclaimed in absolute shock, though the later was quick to break out into a series of uproarious screams of unbridled joy. Amethyst excitedly dashed forward, leaving Pearl behind as she glanced away somewhat bitterly.

“Yeah!” Amethyst cheered in clear delight. “Let’s mash it up! Bigger! Badder! Better! Woo!”

As the purple Gem continued to enthusiastically celebrate, Steven watched her elation with confusion for a moment before he began to gather what was going on. “Wait wait wait!” he exclaimed, briefly halting Amethyst’s revelry. “Are… you guys going to turn into a Gem fusion?”

Amethyst simply screamed happily as a reply, and her excitement was contagious as Steven soon joyed her, more than ready to see another fusion, especially one between Garnet and Amethyst.

“Wait!” Pearl broke in, practically shouting with her protest as she tried to call them all to reason. “Garnet, think about this. You and Amethyst can be a little… um… unstable when your personalities combine. We need to be careful in this situation. Why don’t you fuse with *me* instead?”

“We don’t need to be careful,” Garnet replied with honesty as she placed a consoling hand on Pearl’s shoulder, understanding her position, though she was still going to do what she believed was appropriate for the situation at hand. “We just need to be huge.”

“Oh yeah!” Amethyst cheerfully bounded towards Garnet, already fully prepared to begin fusing. “Let’s wreck this joint!”

Garnet agreed as she held up her hands, the gems on both of her palms already starting to glow in anticipation. “Synchronize,” she ordered calmly, before she began to smoothly move her hips in
time with their dance. Steven watched eagerly, but before he could see much more of it, his eyes were abruptly shielded by Pearl, who found the whole display to be a bit too inappropriate for him.

“Wha-? Who-?” the young Gem frowned in dismayed confusion. “Aw… C’mon, Pearl! I wanna see!”

He managed to pry away the white Gem’s fingers just a bit to get a glimpse of the fusion dance. Garnet continued to swivel her hips and arms in deft, easy gestures, as Amethyst shook her shoulders about as her own gem began to shine. The two gradually began to approach each other, with Garnet planting herself in a firm, open stance before Amethyst took the initiative and rushed for her fusion partner in a zealous dash. Immediately upon contact, the two Gems’ bodies merged, the fusion emitting a dazzling display of violet light that shot high into the air, until, out of the obscurity of the light, a set of five glowing eyes emerged. As the light faded to reveal the fusion, she quickly covered four of them with a set of triangular shades, leaving only one atop her forehead exposed.

Garnet and Amethyst’s fusion was massive to say the least. She easily dwarfed Opal in size and made both Pearl and Steven look even smaller by comparison. Her frame was strong, muscular, and stocky, and her four arms were all buff as could be. Her skin was a dark lavender and her hair was a deep purple unkempt main that hung down her back messily. Her outfit was easily a mix between Garnet’s and Amethyst’s, with a predominantly violet color scheme, rugged tears in several places, and pronounced shoulder pads. She wore a confident, sharp-toothed, twisted grin as she let out a loud playful laugh that rumbled across the desert like thunder.

“Ha! It’s been a while!” the fusion exclaimed boisterously, cracking one set of her knuckles. “I forgot how great it feels to be me!”

“That’s Sugilite?” Steven asked with an impressed grin, stunned at just how larger-than-life this new fusion seemed to be.

“You got it, baby,” Sugilite replied with a sly smirk. “Hey, Steven, wanna see something cool?” she asked, bending down a bit closer to him and Pearl.

“Yeah!”

“Then check this out.” As Sugilite rose to stand, she summoned Garnet’s gauntlets, which were now big enough to fit her large hands. As the gauntlets rose up from her palms and joined together in a connected fist, Amethyst’s whip caught the end of them as Sugilite pulled the combined weapon, now a giant flail, back down to the ground as it landed beside her.

Steven could scarcely contain his amazement upon seeing this, something that Sugilite clearly noticed as she let out another chuckle. “You like that, little man?”

“Are you gonna smash stuff with your giant wrecking-ball thing?” Steven asked eagerly, knowing that he couldn’t wait to see Sugilite throw her impressive strength around.

“That’s the plan!” the fusion shouted heartily. “Where should I start?”

“Do that one!” Steven exclaimed, pointing to the nearest pillar of the tower. Sugilite was quick to indulge him as she easily heaved her flail, swinging it around recklessly until it struck the tower squarely, creating a shower of rubble in the wake of its destruction.

Unable to hold back her distaste towards such a needless show of violence, Pearl finally voiced her disapproval as she realized that it was far too dangerous for Steven to be in Sugilite’s careless
presence. “Steven, I think we should go.”

“What? No way!” Steven frowned. “This is awesome!”

As Sugilite continued plowing down the numerous pillars of the hub, the chunks of debris thrown from it became even larger, something that Pearl took notice of as they fell closer to her and Steven. “Watch what you’re doing!” she shouted angrily to the uncontrollable fusion, preemptively kicking one of the rocks that was flying their way in half. Unfortunately, one half of it managed to go haywire and accidently strike Steven squarely in the forehead, knocking him to the ground he let out a pained gasp. “Steven!” Pearl shouted worriedly before glaring at Sugilite for being responsible for this. “Ugh! You’re just… too much!”

“Maybe you’re just too little!” Sugilite taunted, holding her flail back before letting it lose with another uncalculated swing.

“Steven, we’re going,” Pearl said with finality, picking Steven up and taking him to the warp pad amidst the rain of debris before he could be hurt anymore.

“B-but I’m fine!” Steven protested, holding a hand against the injured spot on his forehead. “What about Sugilite? We can’t just leave her here!”

“She can find her own way home!” Pearl said bitterly, not willing to hear another word about the overpowered fusion as her and Steven warped away, much to the young Gem’s disappointment. And they did so just in the nick of time too, as mere seconds after they left, a large rock fell from the debris of the tower and crashed into the warp pad, shattering it completely.

With relatively little persuading, Dipper and Mabel had convinced Stan to take the morning off work and go to Greasy’s Diner in town so they could satisfy their appetites with a late breakfast. Normally, the con man would have denied such a request on the grounds of saving money, but he admittedly hadn’t been in the mood for dealing with the usual round of scatterbrained customers at the shack and so he sided with the kids just this once.

Since it was a sleepy Sunday morning, business at the diner was booming. A large number of the town’s residents were enjoying breakfast as the Pines arrived and took a seat at a booth. Despite the bustling activity, they were waited on fairly quickly, before the twins even had a chance to decide what they wanted, though it soon became apparent that Stan had already made a meal choice for them all.

“Lazy Susan!” Stan greeted the waitress with a bright grin. “There’s my little ray of sunshine! What were you up to yesterday?”

“I got hit by a bus!” Lazy Susan replied cheerfully.

Stan let out a hearty laugh at this, not believing her to be serious. “Hilarious!”

“Thank you!” Susan chuckled in return, her laughter going on for an awkwardly long amount of time.

“So, you do split plates here, right?” Stan asked, glancing over the menu.

“Maybe…” Lazy Susan said a bit coyly, forcing her one constantly shut eye up into a wink.

“Great! We’ll all split one-fourth of the number seven, plus a free salad dressing for the lady and a small plate of ketchup for the boy,” Stan ordered succinctly, ignoring the glance of dismay Dipper and Mabel exchanged upon hearing what little food their miserly great uncle expected them to eat.
“But Grunkle Stan, I want pancakes!” Mabel protested as Lazy Susan scribbled the order down and walked away from the table.

“With the fancy flour they use these days?” Stan scoffed. “What am I, made of money?” As he asked this, a dollar bill peeked out from his suit sleeve, though he was quick to tap it back into hiding before the kids could catch onto him.

Before either Dipper or Mabel could complain further, the clamor of the entire diner was suddenly broken as the door abruptly burst open, drawing everyone’s attention that way. Steven stood in the doorframe, his posture bold as he stood with his arms crossed and his sunglasses further punctuating his “tough” manner along with the white gauze generously wrapped around his head. The young Gem clearly noticed all of the attention as he nodded to the crowd of restaurant patrons who were all giving him confused glances. “‘Sup,” he greeted simply, dropping his voice down a little to sound more masculine. Steven carried a bit of swagger in his step as he moved through the restaurant, which had buzzed back to life as everyone began muttering gossip amongst themselves.

“Whoa! Steven, what happened to you?” Dipper asked with concern as the young Gem approached their table.

“Seriously, you’ve got enough bandages wrapped around your head to patch up an amputee,” Stan remarked sarcastically as he took a sip from his coffee.

“Oh, this?” Steven asked nonchalantly as he leaned against the table. “Just a little… battle damage from our last mission.”

“Oh come on, kid, suck it up,” Stan said, rolling his eyes. “I’ve seen paper cuts worse than that.”

“You’re right…” Steven said with a disheartened sigh as he took a seat at the booth beside Dipper. “I’m soft… I guess I’ll never be as tough as Sugilite…”

“Sugilite? Who’s that?” Mabel asked.

“Oh yeah!” Steven perked up almost instantly, realizing that he hadn’t told the twins about the fusion he had met last night. “You guys remember Opal, right? The fusion between Pearl and Amethyst?” He paused for a moment as all three of them nodded in recollection, since their encounter with Opal had been just about a week ago. “Well, it turns out Garnet and Amethyst can do that too. So last night we needed to smash this tower thing, so they fused together into a super beefy, giant, giant woman named Sugilite! You guys should have seen her! She was so cool and loud and fun!”
“I wish I could!” Mabel exclaimed enthusiastically, remembering well how amazing Opal was as she tried to picture Sugilite. “Is she still around?”

“Eh… yes and no,” Steven said with a half-smile. “I’m pretty sure Garnet and Amethyst are still fused, but I don’t really know where she is now since me and Pearl left Sugilite back in the desert last night. I’m not really sure why, but I don’t think Pearl likes her that much…”

“Oh gee, Pearl not liking something that’s fun? That’s a shock,” Stan deadpanned dryly.

“But yeah…” Steven sighed again, his excitement fading as he leaned back in his seat. “Sugilite is way strong. She can break a huge rock just my throwing her wrecking ball at it! I wish I could be as tough as her…”

“Oh, I wouldn’t sweat it too much, kid. It’s not like you’re alone in that boat,” Stan said, shooting a rather pointed glance to Dipper.

“What?” Dipper asked in confusion, not catching his uncle’s drift.

“No offense, Dipper, but you’re not exactly “Manly Mannington”,” Mabel said with a chuckle, sharing Stan’s opinion.

“Hey! I am too Manly… Manny… or whatever it is you said,” Dipper protested, trying his best to hide his already growing embarrassment at being called out on this point.

“Face the music, kid,” Stan began apathetically. “You got no muscles, you smell like baby wipes, and let’s not forget last Tuesday’s… “incident”.”

“What happened?” Steven asked.

“No!” Dipper exclaimed immediately, knowing exactly what incident Stan had been referring to. “Grunkle Stan, don’t tell them!”

“I walked in on him singing “Disco Girl” to himself in the bathroom mirror,” Stan laughed, ignoring his nephew’s pleas and getting a good laugh out of both Steven and Mabel.

“You were listening to girly Icelandic pop sensation BABBA?” Mabel asked with a teasing grin, finding it hilarious that her brother was into such effeminate music.

“Me and Amethyst heard that song while listening to the radio once,” Steven recalled with a wry grin. “She said that the only people who listen to that kind of music were middle-aged, single women. And Pearl.”

“Well, I wasn’t listening to it!” Dipper affirmed defensively, even if he knew that was a lie. “It’s not important anyway. I’m plenty masculine. You see this chest hair?” he asked as he pulled his shirt down a bit, only to reveal his completely bare chest, with not a single hair in sight.

“Put it away!” Mabel cried jokingly, laughing as she shielded her eyes from how pale and empty her brother’s chest was.

“So smooth! My eyes!” Stan leapt in on the teasing just as heartily, joining his niece in another round of laughter at Dipper’s expense.

“Aw man…” Dipper muttered with a disappointed frown as he pulled his shirt back up in embarrassment.
“Don’t feel bad, Dipper,” Steven reassured empathetically. “I don’t have any chest hair yet either.”

“See?” Stan interrupted, still taking great amusement in all of this. “It’s not so bad! At least you two can be wimps together!”

Dipper and Steven exchanged a frown at this, both of them tired of being belittled for their relative lack of strength or toughness. Even if they were both still rather young, they were both in the general age range in which qualities of manliness were supposed to begin showing themselves, so why hadn’t they yet? Were they merely late bloomers or were they just doomed to be forever weak and fragile? If it was indeed the latter, then Dipper was resolved to fix that as soon as possible.

“Fine, family of little faith,” Dipper said firmly after taking notice of the manliness tester towards the back end of the diner, which advertised a stack of free pancakes as a prize to the winner. “Allow me to prove to you just how manly I am by winning us all some free pancakes by beating that manliness tester. Get ready to eat your words,” he said with a confident grin as he got up from his seat. “And some delicious pancakes.”

“You? Beating a manliness tester?” Stan called after Dipper as he headed over to the machine, garnishing the attention of the curious restaurant patrons. “Ha! That’ll be the day!”

Dipper largely ignored his uncle’s teasing as he approached the machine with determination, knowing that the simple game couldn’t be that hard to beat. Steven anxiously followed not too far behind, wanting to test his hand at the manliness tester as well so he could further aspire to share Sugilite’s strength.

“Uh… Dipper? Are you sure you’re up to this?” Steven asked with an uncertain frown, admittedly intimidated by the machine himself as the two boys stood before it.

“Are you kidding? Of course, I am!” Dipper scoffed, feigning his own confidence as he realized the majority of the restaurant was watching him in anticipation. Taking in a slightly nervous breath, he moved his hand over to the machine’s handle, not quite taking hold of it yet as he mentally conditioned himself for this test of strength. “Okay…” he muttered in anxious preparation. “Here we go… And a one and a two-”

“Quit stallin’!” Stan called out impatiently from the other end of the diner, putting even more pressure on Dipper as he was prompted into quickly grabbing the handle. With as much force as he could muster, he forcibly pulled back on the lever, straining what few muscles he did have. Both boys’ faces lit up with increasing excitement as they watched the light move up the machine’s level indicator, slowly blinking from “whip”, to “middle-aged woman”, to “barely passible” as it gradually started to increase towards “man” and “manly man”. However, before it could really come close to either of these categories, Dipper unfortunately and quickly reached his limit, and the machine clearly detected this as it immediately bottomed back down to “wimp” as his final result. To add even more embarrassment to this already humiliating failure, the machine spat out a small card with the image of a baby that read “You’re a cutie-patootie!”

“Aw! What a cute baby!” Steven beamed as Dipper took the card with a dismayed frown. “Oh what?” he asked in offended disbelief, hoping that something was simply wrong with the machine, even if he knew that probably wasn’t the case. “This thing must be broken. It’s totally broken, guys!” he said, turning to the face the restaurant customers who had all watched him lose. “It’s like, a million years old. Probably ran out of steam power or-”

Before Dipper could finish, both him and Steven were abruptly pushed out the way by Manly Dan, who cracked his large knuckles before making his attempt at the machine. “Hey, um, excuse me?”
Steven asked a bit timidly as him and Dipper picked themselves up off the ground. “I was going to try-”

The lumberjack didn’t so much as heed the young Gem as he simply nudged the machine’s handle with but his pinky, the light spiking all the way up to “manly man”. Apparently, the manliness tester couldn’t handle Manly Dan’s brute strength, as it imploded immediately after, flinging the stack of free pancakes sitting beside it all across the restaurant so a least one landed on the plate of every patron. “Yes!” Manly Dan shouted in loud triumph. “Pancakes for everyone!”

No one was about to turn a free breakfast down as they all cheered and began scarfing the pancakes down. Dipper and Steven both frowned in disappointment, largely in themselves, especially as they noticed that Stan and Mabel were laughing at them even more than before.

“Um… Steven, at the risk of embarrassing ourselves even more, I think we should go!” Dipper quickly said to the other boy, knowing that this situation was beyond mortifying.

“Good idea,” Steven nodded in immediate agreement, just as flustered as they rushed out of the diner. Both of them tripped over each other as they clumsily ran out, though they were quick to pick themselves out and leave with all due haste, both boys sharing the resolve to toughen up in any way possible.

“Yeesh!” Stan remarked as him and Mabel watched Dipper and Steven hurry out. “How am I related to that?”

“Oh come on, Grunkle Stan,” Mabel said, feeling a bit bad for how she had teased the boys in retrospect. “Everyone has a soft side deep down, some more than others. I bet even you do too!”

“Ha! Not a chance!” Stan said, crossing his arms. “There’s nothing in this chest but a cold, dark, empty soul.”

Though Mabel wasn’t entirely convinced, she had not time to protest as Lazy Susan arrived at the table with the measly breakfast Stan had ordered. “Here ya go!” she said with a cheerful grin as she placed the plate down.

“Thanks there, sugar pot,” Stan began, though the hint of trepidation in his tone was clear. “I-I mean, uh, honey wasp, k-kitten baby, baby cow, uh…”

Susan merely chuckled in response to the con man’s impromptu pet names. “Ha! Silly!” she beamed as she began to head back to the kitchen. “Silly man…”

“What was that about?” Mabel asked Stan with a curious frown once the waitress had left.

“Nothing,” Stan said stubbornly, awkwardly glancing away. “I don’t wanna talk about it. Talk about what? Why is this table sticky?”

“Wait a second…” Mabel said, catching on to what she had just observed. “Oh my gosh… I think I get what’s going on here! You-”

“No!” Stan protested before she could even say it, though nothing could really contain Mabel when she was excited.

“And her-”

“Stop it!”
“AHHHH!” the girl screed, nearly deafening her grunkle with her elation.

“Oh boy…” Stan sighed, knowing there would be no defusing her now.

“You have a crush on Lazy Susan! Aw! You really do have a soft side!”

“Hey! Keep it down will, ya?” Stan hushed her quickly before anyone could hear, especially the waitress in question. “Alright. I don’t like admitting things like this, but you got me. I guess it would be kinda nice if she liked me. But I’ve been out of the dating game for so long, I wouldn’t know where to start! I mean, look at her. She’s so classy.”

They both turned to see Lazy Susan beating the broken pie case in frustration, trying her best to get it to spin but failing. “She may be a bit out of your league…” Mabel began, resolve burning in her to make this unattainable romance happen for her hapless uncle. “But don’t worry, Grunkle Stan. You may be a cranky, gross, weird old man-”

“Is that supposed to be reassuring?”

“But we’ll get Lazy Susan to like you, because nothing is stronger than the power of-”

“Love?”

“Mabel,” the girl corrected him boldly, confident in her match making skills. “To victory and romance!”

“One… t-two… t-t-three…”

“Two… three… f-four…”

“H-hey… Dipper…”?

“Y-yeah, Steven?”

“Are… are you making any progress?”

“Hold on; let me check.” Admittedly grateful for the interruption, Dipper set the branch he had been trying to bench press aside as he sat up and glanced down his shit, checking carefully to see if any masculine hairs had emerged. After leaving the diner, the boys had taken to the woods, hoping that the ruggedness of the outdoors would inspire them as they both conspired to work towards their shared image of manliness together. To this end, they had decided the best place to start was a solid, steady workout to help increase their strength and muscles, even if they both were essentially starting from nothing. “No chest hair yet…” Dipper sighed in disappointment as he flopped back down into the grass. “What about you?”

Still breathing heavily from exerting himself through a relatively small number of pushups, Steven took to an upright sitting position as he checked his chest as well, only to find nothing. “Nope,” he frowned, though he quickly perked up again once more. “But we are just starting out. I’m sure that if we keep at it, we’ll both be buff in no time!”

“More like in twenty years,” Dipper remarked sarcastically. “What are we missing here? Is it physical, is it mental? What’s the secret to being strong?”

“Maybe it’s magical!” Steven suggested optimistically. “At least, that’s what seems to work for the Gems…”
“Well, unlike you, I’m not a Gem,” Dipper said dryly, wishing that it could come that easy to him. “Which means I actually have to work for this.”

“Hey, I’m only half-Gem remember?” Steven asked, half-heartedly remembering how effortlessly Sugilite had thrown her massive flail around as a show of her marvelous strength. “So I guess the only thing we can do is keep working out. We’re bound to get stronger eventually!”

“At this rate? I doubt it,” Dipper sighed in defeat as he pulled out the bag of beef jerky they had picked up on the way to the woods for them to share as a snack. “We’re gonna need some serious help.”

Before either of the boys could dig into the bag of jerky, the ground beneath them suddenly began to softly tremble, though the shaking grew stronger with each passing second. By the time it escalated to the point that neither Dipper nor Steven could really keep their footing, the nearby forest animals had all cleared out, rushing through the clearing with frightful speed as they fled from the source of the rumbling.

“What is that?!” Steven shouted fearfully above the clamor.

Dipper had no time to respond as a loud, fierce roar sounded from the forest, most likely the source of the shaking earth. “Who cares!? Let’s just get out of here!”

They both quickly turned in an attempt to flee, but before they could take even a single step, their path was blocked off by the tree that had suddenly come toppling down only a few feet in front of them. Seeing that there was no escape, the boys spun around to face this danger with a horrified cry, though Dipper was quick to correct his high pitched scream by throwing his voice a bit to make it sound lower and more manly. Both boys froze with fright as a huge, burly monster stormed out of the woods. Well, not exactly a monster; instead, the creature seemed to be mostly human, very tall, muscular, hairy and undoubtedly masculine. At the same time, however, he seemed to have several bovine features, such as a snout and sharply-pointed horns; likewise, his legs were more akin to those of a bull, hooved, stocky, and covered with ruddy hair. He belted out a wild roar as he stomped into the clearing, though it soon morphed into a yawn as he easily picked up a nearby dear in his large hand and used its antlers as a backscratcher before tossing it aside and glaring down at the two young boys cowering before him.

“Please, don’t eat us!” Dipper pleaded fearfully as him and Steven trembled together in the shadow of this massive creature.

“We don’t taste good at all!” Steven vouched nervously. “And I’m really chewy; not in the good way, either!”

“Yeah!” Dipper readily agreed, backing up into the tree just behind them. “And I haven’t showered. And I’m all elbows! Elbows and grilse!”

“YOU TWO!” the manly creature bellowed in a deep, powerful voice, frightening the two boys even more, despite the fact that his apparent rage quickly reverted to complacency. “Gonna finish that?” he asked, poiting to the bag of jerky that had fallen to the ground between Steven and Dipper.

“Um… no…” Dipper frowned as he exchanged a confused glance with Steven, before tossing the masculine monster the bag of jerky. Upon catching it, he savagely tore the bag open and devoured the strips of dried meat savagely as the boys stood by and watched curiously.

“Whoa…” Steven remarked with a small, amazed grin. “He’s so beefy! He reminds me of
“I can’t believe it,” Dipper said, equally as awed. “Part animal, part human. Are you some kind of minotaur?” he asked the creature, who had just finished scarfing down the entire bag of jerky.

“I’m a manotaur!” he roared boldly in response. “Half man, half… uh… half taur!”

“Cool!” Steven exclaimed with a grin.

“So… did we like, summon you, or-” Dipper began to ask, though he was quickly cut off.

“I smell of jerky summoned me! JERKY!” the manotaur shouted fiercely as he easily punched a nearby tree down before smashing a rock against his head merely as a testament of his brute strength. “YEAH!” he let out a hearty laugh before he paused and bent down to sniff the two youths before him. “I smell… emotional issues.”

“Aw… you mean you don’t smell the scent of manly toughness?” Steven asked in disappointment.

“Nope; the only things I smell from you two are sweat and desperation,” the manotaur said, crossing his buff arms.


The manotaur nodded gruffly as he plopped down to a sitting position with a loud thud, patting his leg as he prompted both boys to join him so he could listen to their shared plight. From there, Dipper and Steven launched into their relatively short tale of embarrassment and the woes that came along with their lack of masculinity. The manotaur nodded in understanding as he heard their troubles, though as they listed them, both boys soon reached the same idea as to how they could fix them.

“Hey, you know, you seem pretty manly,” Dipper said to the manotaur as soon as him and Steven were finished with their explanation. “Maybe you could give us some pointers?”

“Yeah!” Steven chimed in agreement. “If there’s anyone who knows about being tough, I’m sure it would be someone as manly as you!”

“Very well,” the manotaur said as he rose to stand. “I shall train you in the arts of manliness! Climb atop my back hair, children!”

Dipper and Steven exchanged an uncertain glance as the manotaur knelt down to allow them to scale his rather grimy back hair, but they tentatively did so nonetheless. Before they could really even get a good hold, the manotaur began barreling through the woods at a thunderous pace, disregarding any obstacles in his path. The boys held on for dear life as they crashed through tree branches, soared over a sizable gorge, and finally crashed through the rocky side of a mountain through sheer force alone. Though they were a bit shaken up from the rough trip, both Steven and Dipper were instantly awed by the place they now found themselves in.

They large cave they had smashed their way into was an absolute mess, littered with discarded bones and food scraps. At the same time however, it was also outfitted with several other features, including an impressive set of barbells, a few dart boards lining the stony walls, and even a foosball table. All of these activities were being enjoyed by the countless other manotaurs filling the cave, who were all aptly tough and macho in both their appearance and mannerisms.

“Whoa… This place is amazing!” Dipper remarked as him and Steven dismounted from the manotaur’s back.
“The gnomes live in trees, the merpeople live in the water… ‘cause they’re LOSERS!” the manotaur proclaimed with pride. “But we manotaurs crash in the MAN CAVE!” With another loud roar, he punched the nearby gong with his bare fist, catching the attention of the other manotaurs. “Beasts! I have brought you two hairless children!” he announced as he pushed the two boys forward for the other manotaurs to see.

“Hiya!” Steven greeted with a friendly, cheerful grin.

“…S’up,” Dipper said much more anxiously, clearly intimidated by the horde of incredibly manly manotaurs towering over them.

“This is Pubetor,” the manotuar began, going down the line of other manotaurs as he introduced them. “Testosteror… Pituitor… And I’m Chutzpar. And you two are?”

“I’m Dipper,” the first boy introduced himself, though he was quick to add a masculine addendum to his name as the manotaurs booed, clearly not impressed. “The… uh… Destructor?”

The manotaurs nodded in complacent approval of this title before Steven quickly came up with an additional name for himself. “And I’m Steven the Strong Guy!” the young Gem boldly proclaimed, much to the amusement of the manotaurs who took his title with a round of hearty laughs.

“Dipper the Destructor and Steven the Strong Guy want us to teach them the secrets of our manliness,” Chutzpar informed the other manotaurs after silencing them with another bang of the gong.

“We really need your help, guys!” Dipper practically pleaded, knowing that the manotaurs might be their only chance for learning how to be truly tough. “We’re both seriously lacking in the chest hair department!”

“And we wanna get huge, beefy muscles, just like all of you!” Steven added, flexing a bit to show his desire for toned, meaty biceps. “And like Sugilite. She’s a really tough Gem fusion, just so you guys know.”

“GEM?!” several of the manotaurs roared in angry unison, startling both boys quite a bit at their sudden shift in mood.

“What business do you have with those dainty, frilly Gems, boy?” one of the manotaurs asked Steven harshly.

“Oh, well I am one,” Steven explained, seeing nothing wrong with that fact as he pulled his shirt up to reveal his Gem. “Well… half-one, anyway.”

“Long have we manotaurs quarreled with the so-called Crystal Gems,” Pubetor explained bitterly. “Their girliness is an insult to our MANLINESS!” he shouted as he brutally punched the manotaur beside him right in the face, though of course, he took it like a man.

“O-oh… Um… Well…” Steven began, trying to come up with something to say in defense of the Gems. After all, he really did find them to be quite strong in his eyes; perhaps not as macho as the manotaurs, but still quite tough and tenacious warriors all the same.

“Well, Steven is only half Gem, like he said,” Dipper cut in, hoping that the manotaurs would still accept them both despite the rivalry they apparently had against the Gems. “So… that shouldn’t really be that much of a problem, right?”
The manotaurs hesitated to themselves for a moment or two, muttering their dissent amongst themselves as both boys anxiously awaited their verdict. However, as they convened within a collective huddle, their discussion soon erupted into little more than a brutish fist fight, which was how the manotaurs solved most of their dilemmas. Eventually, the exchange of fists died down as the manotaurs apparently reached a consensus, which they finally relayed to Steven and Dipper. “After a lot of punching, we have decided to deny your request to learn our manly secrets.”

“Denied?” Dipper repeated in clear dismay.

“Aw… Why?” Steven asked with a disappointed frown.

“The keys to manliness are far too sacred and awesome to give out to humans, and especially to prissy Gems!” Testostoraur growled firmly, the other manotaurs nodding in resolved agreement.

“B-but what if we-” Steven began, though Dipper was quick to interrupt as he utilized the sudden idea he had just come up with.

“Okay,” he said calmly, pretending to be not at all concerned with their reaction of them. “That’s fine with us. Obviously you guys must think it would be too hard to train us. Maybe you’re not man enough to try.”

“Not MAN enough?” one of the most burly manotaurs asked, clearly appalled by the boy’s audacity.

“Destructor…” Chutzpar cautioned, already seeing how this call-out was incurring the wrath of the other manotaurs.

“Not MAN enough?!”

“He didn’t mean it.”

“I have three Y chromosomes, six adam’s apples, pecs on my abs, and FISTS for nipples!” the enraged manotaur shouted brutally as he glared down at the two boys. “We’re ALL more manly than you’ll ever hope to be!”

“I-I believe you!” Steven stammered nervously, shrinking back a bit out of fear.

“I dunno…” Dipper said caustically, still upholding his casual manner. “Seems to me like you’re too scared to teach us how to be men. Maybe it’s just too much of a challenge for you guys. In fact… it kinda seems like you’re all a bunch of-”

“Dipper, don’t say it!” Steven pleaded in a whisper, not too keen on the idea of getting pummeled into the ground by a group of angry manotaurs.

“Chickens,” Dipper finished with a bold, daring grin. He could tell just by how insulted the manotaurs all seemed to be by this statement that he had them right where he wanted them. Fortunately, Steven’s fears of the manotaurs taking their anger out on the two of them were disproven as they formed a huddle once more and quickly talked over their previous decision before announcing their intention to change it, lest they be proven cowards.

“After a second round of deliberation, we have decided to help you two become men!”

“Men! Men! Men!” the manotaurs all chanted loudly as Steven and Dipper high-fived in triumph of their unexpected success, knowing that their journey into manliness and toughness was about to begin.
“Thanks guys,” Dipper said with a grin of satisfaction. “Whatever we have to do, we won’t let you down.”

“Yeah!” Steven added enthusiastically. “Just you wait! We’ll be the toughest, strongest men the world has ever seen!” Despite his boldness, he quickly retracted this statement as the manotaurs all growled their mutual disapproval of it. “A-aside from you guys, of course!”

Mabel had practically dragged Stan out of the diner so they could begin what she called “dating practice”. Though the con man wasn’t as enthusiastic as his niece, he didn’t complain too much as they headed back to the shack, especially since they had managed to leave the restaurant without paying for their meal, which was more than good enough for him.

“Okay, Grunkle Stan,” Mabel began as her and Stan emerged from the car once they got back to the shack. “Welcome to the first day of the rest of your life! We’re gonna teach you how to impress a lady! But first, a before picture.”

Before Stan had really even gotten out of the car, Mabel suddenly snapped a rather unflattering picture of him, startling him to the point that he nearly fell right back into the car. “I never miss a scrapbookertunity!” Mabel proclaimed brightly as she slapped the picture into her scrapbook. “Ah, memories…”

“Listen, kid, I appreciate your energy, but can’t this wait till later?” Stan asked with relative disinterest. “I had a big day of sitting around and watching TV planned out and I kinda don’t wanna miss out on that.”

“C’mon, Grunkle Stan,” Mabel said with a bit of an impatient huff. “You’re not getting any younger. Who knows how many years you have left to find love?”

“Gee, thanks,” Stan said, rolling his eyes sarcastically.

“Just you wait,” Mabel said with determination. “By the time we’re though, Lazy Susan will think you’re irresistible! Let’s start with some roleplaying. Soos! You can come on out now!”

The handyman stepped out of the shack at this que, oddly enough dressed in drag and plenty of makeup, much to Stan’s confusion. “Soos will play Lazy Susan,” Mabel said to her grunkle with a confident grin.

“I’m soft, like a woman,” Soos remarked, gesturing to the dress Mabel had given him to wear.

“Oh, you’ll do fine,” Mabel said with a casual wave of her hand. “First of all, show me how you approach a woman. Remember, this is a safe, non-judgmental environment. I’ll just be right off to the side here judging you on a scale from one to ten.” However, before this simulation could begin, Mabel happened to catch sight of the familiar figure coming along down the forest path towards the intersection between the Mystery Shack and the Gem temple, and she didn’t hesitate to cheerfully greet her. “Hi, Pearl!” she called as the white Gem passed by, not noticing her apparent anxiety.

“Oh, hello Mabel,” Pearl put on a quick smile, though it faded into confusion as she noticed Stan and Soos. “Uh… What’s going on here?”

“We’re teaching Grunkle Stan how to talk to women!” Mabel informed her chipperly. “Wanna watch?”
Pearl frowned as she looked Stan over, already knowing there would be no success on that front. “…No,” she said simply, not offering much of a goodbye as she turned and continued up the path to the temple. Stan merely scoffed with slight distain and little concern as he watched her go.

“Ok! See you later then!” Mabel called out after the white Gem as she turned her attention back to her current project. “Alright. Ready and… flirt!”

Stan did as he was told, taking in a deep breath as he approached “Lazy Susan” with apt confidence. However, he quickly lost his edge as soon as he rudely spit to the side and held out his hand demandingly. “Can I borrow some money?” he asked callously, though Mabel was quick to call out his failure with a blow of her whistle.

“This is gonna be harder than I thought…” she sighed, knowing that she certainly had her work cut out for her.

The ongoing bubble of anxiety Pearl had been feeling ever since they had left the communication hub only grew as she arrived back at the temple to find that neither Garnet nor Amethyst, or even Sugilite for that matter, had returned. It was already early afternoon and the fusion had been MIA ever since the previous night, much to the white Gem’s alarm, especially considering the fact that the desert warp pad was inexplicably down. While Pearl didn’t doubt her teammates could hold their own, she knew well what happened to fusions who remained together for too long, and considering how brash and volatile Sugilite was, the chances of that occurring were dangerously high.

However, instead of arriving back at the house to find Garnet or Amethyst, the white Gem did happen upon another pair as she glanced up to the loft after noticing the trail of discarded clothes leading up to it. Pearl frowned at the mess as she came to stand at the base of the stairs, glancing up to the two boys who had scarcely noticed her arrival as they were apparently hunting through a large pile of clothes for something.

“Steven? Dipper?” Pearl called up to them, catching their attention instantly.

“Oh, hey, Pearl,” Dipper greeted with a casual grin as Steven quickly popped his head out of a mountain of clothes.

“Pearl!” the young Gem exclaimed. “Have you seen my sweatbands anywhere around here? We need them for something really important!”

“I… can’t say that I have…” Pearl said with slight confusion as she distastefully glanced over the clothes scattered all over. “What do you need them so badly for anyway?”

“We’re going to learn how to be real men from a group of manotaurs,” Dipper explained as both boys climbed down the stairs to the main floor.

“What?!” Pearl asked with a concerned gasp.

“Yeah!” Steven chimed, having managed to find one of the sweatbands he had been searching for not too far away from the stash of jerky that they were going to take back to the Man Cave so they could stay in the manotaurs’ good graces. “They’re gonna teach us all sorts of stuff about being tough! We’re gonna get supa strong! Like Sugilite!”

Pearl flinched a bit upon hearing the reckless fusion’s name, but she ignored her resentment for Sugilite for the moment as she focused on the more immediate issue. “Manotaurs?” she repeated with a disapproving glower. “How on earth did you two run into those brutes anyway? They’re
hardly a good source of advice, considering the fact that they rarely think.”

“Oh yeah! They mentioned something about having some sort of rivalry with you guys,” Dipper said, remembering how the manotaurs had made their derision for the Gems quite clear. “What’s the deal with that?”

“Well… it’s not so much of a rivalry as it is… a mutual sense of contempt,” Pearl said rather bluntly. “We try to get along with all of the various tribes and creatures of Gravity Falls, but the manotaurs have never been willing to meet us halfway. Apparently, they have a problem with our “girliness”, whatever that means.”

“Aw, come on, Pearl,” Steven pleaded. “The manotaurs aren’t so bad. Like we said, they’re gonna help us be manly!”

“Yes… Well, maybe that’s not such a good idea…” the white Gem remarked dubiously, knowing that if there was anything that both the manotaurs and Sugilite had in common, it was that they certainly took the concept of being “tough” way too far.

“What?” Dipper asked with a puzzled frown, not understanding what Pearl was so apprehensive about. “Why not?”

“Um… Well…”

“But Pearl,” Steven protested zealously, cutting the white Gem off. “How else are we gonna become men?”

“You know, maybe being a… ‘man’ isn’t the most important thing,” Pearl cautioned tentatively. “After all, you both are still rather young. And besides, there are different ways of being strong…”

“But we wanna be strong in the real way!” Steven emphasized, believing that lied only in physical strength and little else.

“Yeah!” Dipper readily agreed with a confident grin. “Like men!”

“Yeah!” Steven cheered in response before launching into a round of enthusiastic chants, which Dipper was quick to join in on as the two headed out. “Men! Men! Men!”

“Steven, Dipper, wait!” Pearl called out after them, though they hardly heeded her as they left to head back to the manotaurs. The white Gem let out a worried, somewhat disdainful sigh as the door slammed behind them, still wanting to derail them from the risky path they had chosen. But instead, she merely glared down at the clothes littering the floor, creating quite a mess as she thought of how headstrong and thoughtless both boys were being, much like the manotaurs and the fusion they were striving to be like.

She should have guessed that Steven would become enthralled with the idea of being “strong” after seeing Sugilite’s careless display of raw physical power the previous night. However, the fact that him and Dipper had decided to follow after the barbaric ways of the manotaurs only made matters worse. Pearl couldn’t help but feel as though they were both searching for the wrong kind of strength in the wrong kind of places. If they had only asked, then she would have been more than happy to educate them in a much more well-rounded kind of strength, one that was physical and mental, one that would never falter no matter what the occasion. But instead, they had chosen brute strength, which, at most, was only ever superficial and temporary, hardly anything resembling what she believed to be real strength.

Not really knowing how else to vent her frustrations over the situation, Pearl resorted to the method
she often took when she wanted to express her deeper emotions: song. And so, she busied herself with tiding up the mess of clothes the boys had left behind as she sang to no one in particular, her harmonious voice belting out throughout the house in a passionate melody nonetheless.

“Why do you have to look up to them? Aside from in a literal sense…” the white Gem began with apparent scorn as she gathered a bundle of Steven’s clothes and began folding them neatly. “Don’t you know that a power that big, comes with a bigger expense?"

An expense that, at least Pearl believed, was common sense. Physical strength had its place, but she knew that reliance on it could be deadly, something that both Steven and Dipper had yet to learn. “And can’t you see that they’re out of control and overzealous? I’m telling you for your own good, and not because I’m-”

She quickly cut herself off before she could even admit it to herself, even if she knew it was true. The aversion she harbored towards the manotaurs was one thing, but her hidden envy towards Sugilite ran far deeper than she really cared to express. “I could show you how to be strong… In the real way. And I know that we can be strong… In the real way!”

Pearl paused for a brief moment as she stole another glance towards the door, a new idea striking her. She couldn’t deny that she was quite concerned for both boys in their mission towards manliness, especially since she had a firsthand idea of how unforgiving and harsh they could be. Perhaps, even if they weren’t going to listen to her advice, the least she could do was follow after them from a distance and keep an eye on them to make sure they weren’t getting hurt or pushing themselves too far. She figured she would only really get involved if the situation spiraled out of their control; otherwise, she was content to let them learn the error of their ways the hard way. “And I want to inspire you,” the white Gem sang boldly as she ventured out of the house, knowing that she would easily be able to catch up with Steven and Dipper as they made their way back to the Man Cave. “I want to be your rock, and when I talk, it lights a fire in you…”

As it turned out, the manotaurs had quite a training routine cut out for the two boys, a “gauntlet of manliness”, as they called it. Nonetheless, Dipper and Steven were more than ready to take on all of the challenges laid out before them, no matter how daunting or intimidating. As was expected, all of these tasks involved some form of physical strength or endurance, as their first trial of pulling the manotaurs’ “party wagon”, made clear. As the boys went through each of these manly tests, Pearl was never too far behind, taking refuge behind trees or just outside of the Man Cave as a refrain of her song rang through her mind as she watched them struggle for their idea of strength.

“I can show you how to be strong… In the real way…”

The white Gem couldn’t help but roll her eyes as the manotaurs eagerly plastered both boys in temporary tattoos as symbols of their increasing manly toughness or how they foolishly tried gluing hair to their bare chests. Though she didn’t have much knowledge on what human men believed to be masculine, she hardly thought such things were dignified or respectable when combined with the Neanderthal behavior the manotaurs were known to exhibit. “And I know that we can be strong… In the real way…”

Regardless of Pearl’s low opinion on the situation, neither Steven nor Dipper could deny they were having the time of their lives with the wild, eccentric manotaurs, who, despite their rough exteriors, were actually quite likable. Though some of the activities they took part in were questionable, such as the obstacle course they had set up over a gator-filled river, they still knew how to have a good time with their complete disregard for manners or authority. For all of their manly statures, both boys couldn’t deny that there was a wonderful, refreshing freedom in all of it, one that not only
liberated them, but made them feel as though they were making real progress on their road to masculinity.

“And I want to inspire you, I want to be your rock…”

As the day progressed and the challenges became more physically demanding, it was becoming quite apparent that Steven in particular was starting to lag behind in comparison to Dipper, who only became more zealous and passionate about their trials. Though neither boy was used to such strenuous activity, the young Gem was starting to realize that he was less fit than he thought, especially when they were tasked with scaling up a tall cliff-face with but their bare hands alone. They both managed to reach the top, though Steven only managed to do so with Dipper’s help, despite the manotaur’s firm motto of “every man for himself”. Though Pearl nearly emerged from hiding upon seeing how worn out and fatigued the younger Gem was, she restrained herself; after all, Steven had to learn that the strength he sought came at a price, even if it was as simple as a tired body and sore bones.

“And when I talk, it lights a fire in you…”

After several hours of hard work and several manly challenges later, the boys finally got a well-deserved break as they joined the manotaurs in relaxing in one of the Man Cave’s hot springs. Steven especially appreciated this as he sunk low into the refreshing, boiling water, hoping that it could soothe his aching muscles, which had been worked to their limit throughout their intense training session. However, he knew it would all be worth in the end when that raw soreness would hopefully be exchanged for muscles as big as the manotaurs’ or Sugilite’s.

“Guys,” Dipper said to the manotaurs with a grateful grin, feeling quite indebted to them all for the advice and training them had imparted thus far. “I just wanna say that these last few hours have been…”

“Painful…” Steven moaned, his voice muffled a bit as he spoke half submerged in the water.

“Well, yeah,” Dipper admitted, not able to deny that he was a little sore himself after spending the day using muscles that weren’t used to being employed. “But I really do feel like we’ve been making progress here I mean, you guys took us under your wing and you’ve all been so supportive.”

“Yeah!” Steven chimed with as much enthusiasm he could muster, sitting up a little, even if the movement alone made his back ache even more. “You guys are the best, hands down!”

“Oh, stop,” Chutzpar said with a wave of his hand, clearly flattered, as all the other manotaurs were.

“No, you know what? Steven’s right; you guys really are the best,” Dipper said with sincerity. “I think I speak for both of us when I say that we’re really starting to feel like men thanks to all of you.”

Steven nodded in enthusiastic agreement with this statement, knowing that his sore bones were obviously a sign that he was inching his way towards being stronger. However, despite the boys’ shared confidence, the manotaurs were not yet convinced. “Not yet, Destructor,” Chutzpar clarified. “One final task remains for you both. The deadliest trial of all.”

“Another one?!” Steven whispered in exasperated concern, not sure if he could take another test of his already wavering strength.
Dipper, on the other hand, was ready for any test or task the manotaurs had in store for them. “We’ve survived forty-nine other challenges,” he said with a daring shrug. “Whatever it is, bring it on!”

Steven sucked in an anxious breath upon hearing this, not quite sharing the same sentiments. While he wanted to be strong and manly just as much as Dipper did, the young Gem felt as though he had already pushed himself too far to this end, to the point that he wasn’t quite sure if he could push himself any further. Especially if this final challenge was as dangerous as the manotaurs were implying. But even so, Steven refrained from protesting, not wanting to be seen as weak or afraid by any of them. After all, Sugilite certainly wouldn’t ever back down from a trial, no matter how daunting. Neither would he.

Wanting to get this final manly test over with so they could claim the rite to be called true men, the boys followed the manotaurs to their great hall deep within the Man Cave. While neither of them were really sure about what the nature of this last challenge would be, they were both a bit anxious as they stood together, waiting for further instructions about what supposedly deadly task they were to undertake. They didn’t have to wait for too terribly long however, as the clanging of the gong rung out throughout the cave, calling all of the manotaurs to attention.

“Behold our leader!” Chutzpar announced, throwing his arm out to the obscured back of the cave. “Leadertaur!”

At this, a rather old, somewhat small manotaur stepped forward, his long beard greyed and his muscles nowhere near as impressive as those of his younger brethren.

“Aw… He’s so old and wrinkly!” Steven gushed with a small grin.

“So, is he like the oldest, or the wisest, or…?” Dipper trailed off in slight confusion, having not expected such an weakly elder to be very highly revered among the manotaurs. And as it turned out, his suspicions were right, for no more than a moment after he posed this question, the old manotaur was abruptly captured in the jaws of a much larger, much more monstrous figure.

“Nah, he’s just the offering,” Chutzpar corrected. “That…” he paused to point to the massive manotaur who had just devoured the elder whole, a fierce beast that was at least ten times as large as the other manotaurs and somehow even more masculine, if that was even possible. “Is Leadertaur.”

Both boys were awestruck and admittedly terrified as they craned their necks up to get the full scope of the manotaur leader, feeling incredibly small and intimidated in his presence. “YOU!” Leadertaur bellowed, his booming voice bouncing off the cave walls as he shouted at the two youths before him. “You wish to be men?!”

Though Dipper responded to this question with a bold battle cry, Steven simply swallowed and nodded nervously, trying his best to hide the fact that he was shaking fearfully. Leadertaur seemed to accept this, however as he continued, his tone stoic and stone-cold as his harsh, eternally glaring expression. “Then you both must do this heroic act. Go to the highest mountain and bring back the head of… The Multi-Bear!”

The other manotaurs let out a collective gasp as Leadertaur threw the two spears down at the boys’ feet, providing them with weapons to complete this challenge. “The Multi-Bear?” Dipper asked with a hint of trepidation in his tone as he glanced down at the spear before picking it up. “Is that some sort of bear…?”
“He is our sworn enemy!” Leadertaur growled with fierce scorn. “Conquer him and your
mansformation will be complete!”

“C-conquer?” Steven asked with a frown, taken aback by this concept. “As in… kill him?”

“Of course!” the manotaur leader exclaimed as if it were obvious. “How else are you going to
prove your manly strength?!”

Steven and Dipper exchanged an uncertain glance upon hearing this, neither of them too keen on
the idea of actually taking out another living being, even something that sounded as frightening as
the Multi-Bear. The young Gem in particular found an anxious pit in his stomach forming as
conflict filled him over this dilemma, but thankfully, before he could voice these concerns to the
manotaurs and be called out for them, Dipper had the courage to do so first.

“…I don’t know, man…” he said with a hesitant frown, not as much intimidated by the thought of
facing off against the Multi-Bear as he was the task of slaughtering it in cold blood that they had
both been given. He knew well that being violent was all part of being a man, but as far as he
knew, the Multi-Bear was innocent. Did he really deserve to be killed just because of an ongoing
rivalry he apparently had with the manotaurs?

“Hey, Destructor? Is this yours?” Chutzpar called to Dipper from across the cave, apparently
having rooted through his backpack to happen upon the BABBA CD he kept in it. The boy let out a
frightened gasp as he quickly snatched it away, trying his best to hide his embarrassment as the
other manotaurs began to murmur their dissent to each other over this choice of such feminine
music.

“W-what? Are you guys kidding? Of course it’s not mine!” Dipper exclaimed, laughing awkwardly
as he tried to play it off by hiding the CD behind his back.

“But Dipper, I thought you liked BABBA,” Steven said with a confused frown, remembering the
anecdote Stan had told earlier at the diner.

“Ha! Yeah right!” Dipper joked with a rather forced grin, begrudging Steven’s tendency to be
innocently honest. “I don’t know whose this is. I’m just borrowing, uh… I mean, it’s a friend’s!
Yeah, not mine. Not mine at all…”

The manotaurs didn’t seem to be entirely convinced as they frowned down at the two boys,
shaking their heads in disapproval as the crossed their arms suspiciously. Caught up in the heat of
the moment as his desire to be accepted, Dipper was quick to act upon his first whim so he could
prove to them all that he was just as manly as any of them, even if that meant taking on their rather
unfavorable challenge. “We’ll do it!” he proclaimed boldly and bravely, raising his spear above his
head as Steven hesitantly picked up his own. “We will conquer the Multi-Bear!”

“Uh… Y-yeah…” Steven agreed with a half-hearted grin as the manotaurs all cheered their
bombastic support. “What he said…” With their goal set out for them, both boys ran out of the
cave, Dipper triumphantly leading the way as Steven followed a bit behind out of uncertainty. As
they emerged from the Man Cave and set off on the arduous path towards the mountain, a lone
figure stood hidden near its entrance, dread filling her as she caught wind of the dangerous,
undoubtedly cruel mission that they had been sent on. But nonetheless, the white Gem dutifully
followed after them, hoping that they wouldn’t go too far in their misguided quest towards false
strength.

Much like Steven and Dipper, Mabel had also been undertaking a difficult challenge for most of
the afternoon, though one of an entirely different kind. She had completely thrown itself into the
daunting task of implementing all of her skills and talents in trying to mold Stan into her idea of “datable”. Of course, this entailed many things that the con man found rather unpleasant, such as Mabel trying to shave his untamable body hair, teaching him to walk with something resembling actual poise, and attempting to squeeze his gut into a girdle. It had been an undertaking, to be sure, but in time, they reached a point where Mabel felt satisfied with Stan’s progress, which, despite her optimism, really wasn’t that great.

“Okay, Grunkle Stan. You started out like this,” Mabel said as she stood alongside Soos and Wendy to evaluate how far the conman had come by comparing her before picture to how he was now. “But you became…” Her smile quickly turned to a frown as she lowered the picture to reveal that her uncle was somehow even more of a sweaty, grizzled mess than he had been when they had started hours ago. “Oh…”

“Can I scratch myself now?” Stan asked in disinterest, none too interested in upholding the rules of etiquette Mabel had been enforcing upon him all day.

“No!” the girl exclaimed in angry dismay at how all of her hard work was for naught. “And is that throw up on your shirt?”

“I don’t know how to answer that,” the con man responded, taking a tentative glance down at his soiled undershirt.

“Ugh, I can’t believe we didn’t make any progress at all!” Mabel groaned in frustration as she ripped up the before picture. “If anything, he regressed! How in the world is he supposed to impress Lazy Susan looking like that?”

“Face it, Mabel, your uncle’s unfixable,” Wendy consoled as she placed a hand on the younger girl’s shoulder. “Like that spinning pie thing in the diner.”

Mabel let out a gasp of realization upon hearing this, her eyes widening as she looked back to Stan, who was standing by rather apathetically, once more. Indeed, he was a fixer-upper, but perhaps he wasn’t in need of as much fixing as she thought. Or at least the kind of fixing she specialized in.

“Grunkle Stan, come with me!” she exclaimed with newfound zeal, heading for the door. “And leave your pants at home!”

“With pleasure!” Stan readily agreed, not questioning his niece’s guidance this time as they headed out.

The trek to the mountain where the Multi-Bear’s lair was certainly was a journey, one that spanned across the vast forests and ravines resting in the outskirt wilderness of Gravity Falls. For Dipper, it barely felt like a hike at all as he was fueled with both determination and adrenaline, but Steven admittedly struggled to keep up as he was weighed down not only by his own physical fatigue, but also by his ever growing conflict over the situation as a hole. Neither boy had really taken the chance to discuss their mission, even now that they were out of the Man Cave and away from the manotuars. If anything, an uncomfortable silence lingered between them as they drew ever closer to their destination, neither of them wanting to address what they knew they had to do if they wanted to be acknowledged as true men.

Regardless of this malleable tension, it became increasingly obvious that it was bound to break as the pair scaled up the rugged path towards the Multi-Bear’s cave towards the peak of the mountain. The inklings of apprehension that Steven had first felt when they had first been charged with this mission had steadily grown into a well of overwhelming anxiety that he could no longer keep to himself as him and Dipper found themselves standing at the mouth of the cave where their
“Um… Dipper?” Steven asked hesitantly before either of them could step foot inside. “A-are… are you sure about this?”

Dipper immediately understood the concerns Steven was alluding to without him even needing to mention them at all, largely because he shared them. But as uneasy as he felt about having to flat-out kill the Multi-Bear, he knew that he would never be a real man if he didn’t. And besides, they had both come so far towards masculinity in the course of one day alone. It wouldn’t make sense to throw all that hard work away just because of something as temporal as guilt or remorse. “Of course, I am,” he replied with assurance. “Now, let’s do this!”

“Dipper, wait,” Steven said a bit more insistently as he grabbed the other boy’s arm to stop him in his tracks. “I… This doesn’t seem like a very good idea… Maybe we should think about this before we go diving right in.”

“You’re not scared, are you, Steven?” Dipper asked with a frown, his tone not challenging or teasing, but rather genuinely concerned. Even if he knew what the young Gem was truly apprehensive about, he secretly hoped that Steven would admit to fear instead of trying to derail their final mission.

“No, not really…” Steven said with a small shrug. “I just… Well, this doesn’t really feel… right.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean…” the young Gem paused and let out a heavy sigh, not entirely sure how to express his ongoing inner conflict in words, though he tried nonetheless. “Is we’re about to do really worth it? I know that the manotaurs don’t like the Multi-Bear, but does that really make it ok for us to hunt him down and… kill him?”

Dipper had seen this coming, and though he agreed with this line of reasoning, he stubbornly forced himself not to follow it, especially since it flew so in the face of all of the lessons of aggression and violence that the manotaurs had been imparting them with. “What? Are you serious?” asked with a somewhat relaxed smile. “It’s totally worth it. Besides, the Multi-Bear is probably some horrifying monster that terrorizes these woods for fun. Getting rid of him will probably be for the best.”

“But what if it’s not?!?” Steven asked, glancing down to his feet as he held onto his longtime belief that all life was worth salvaging, no matter if it was good or evil. “What if… what if the manotaurs were wrong? What if being a man isn’t about being super macho or tough? What if being strong doesn’t mean being mean?”

These questions held quite a bit of weight behind them, and as provocative as they were, Dipper resisted his natural urge to use logic to think them through and reach the right conclusions. After all, the manotaurs had made it clear that intelligence and reasoning had little to do with being manly, and morality had even less to do with it. Certainly, strength and ruthlessness were synopsis with each other, which meant that the only way to obtain strength was through rising above and conquering the weak and cowardly. Right?

“Oh, come on, Steven,” Dipper said with a slight edge of exasperation. “I think the manotaurs know a thing or two about being manly. I mean, nobody’s ever gotten strong from sitting around and just talking about their feelings. And besides, weren’t you saying that you wanted to be super strong? Like Sugilite?”

“Well… yeah…” Steven admitted as he awkwardly scratched the back of his neck, knowing that he
had been striving after the kind of fortitude Sugilite possessed all along. But now that it was within his reach, he found that perhaps it wasn’t as appealing as he had once thought. “But at what cost? Hurting others doesn’t really seem like the kind of thing that makes a man; it’s the kind of thing that makes a bully.”

“S-so what?” Dipper asked a bit too harshly, clearly on edge and conflicted, as much as he didn’t want to admit it. “You’re saying that after all we’ve been through, everything we’ve done, we should just turn around and head back like scared little kids?”

“No…” Steven said calmly, his resolve growing ever clearer as he realized which path he had to take. “I’m saying that I… I just don’t think I can go through with this. I don’t care if that makes me weak or afraid or whatever… All I know is this is wrong… I won’t stop you from going in there and doing what you feel you have to do, but… you can count me out.”

“Are you sure?” Dipper asked, clearly taken aback and unsure of how to really respond to this sudden turn of events. Regardless though, even if he knew Steven was right on many of the points he had made, he wasn’t quite willing to let his dreams of manliness slip through his fingers quite so easily.

Steven merely nodded his resolute reply, his expression hard, yet still a bit nervous as a long silence lingered between him and Dipper. The young Gem anxiously held his breath to see if his friend would give up this foolish quest and adopt the same merciful line of reasoning he had, so that they could both put all of this behind them. But instead, Steven’s heart sank as he watched Dipper wordlessly turn towards the cave once more, his grip around his spear tightening with fearless resolve. At the same time, however, Steven was quite surprised; if he had expected anyone to listen to reason on something like this, it was Dipper. But apparently, the tempting call of manliness and strength were just too strong for him as he slowly ventured into the darkened cave, but not before the young Gem stopped him one last time.

“Dipper, wait,” Steven called out with a saddened frown. Dipper paused only for a moment to glance back at the young Gem, trying to express stoicism, when what he really felt was remorse, not only for what he was about to go do, but for their disagreement over it as well. Steven took in an anxious breath, wanting to say something to convince Dipper against this cruel course of action, but all of his words went unsaid as he sent him off with a worried farewell instead. “Be careful…”

The other boy nodded in acceptance as he boldly returned to his quest, leaving the young Gem to restlessly wait for him just outside. Of course, neither one of them knew about the set of eyes that had watched their entire exchange from the shadows not too far away, and though she could not deny that she was overwhelmingly proud of one of them, she still harbored dread over the safety and morality of the other one.

The inside of the Multi-Bear’s cave was just as dark and menacing on the inside as it appeared from the outside. Dipper was admittedly quite a bit on edge as he ventured inside, clinging onto his spear tightly with both hands as though his life depended on it, which it very well might. There were no immediate signs of any creature that would fit the bill of what the manotaurs had referred to as their sworn enemy, giving Dipper very little to go on as to what to expect.

“What is a Multi-Bear anyway?” he muttered to himself incredulously, figuring that it was a bear, though that was about all he knew. However, what he didn’t see as he took a cautious glance around the cave was the large, lumbering figure that was looming in the shadows behind him. That is, of course, until it let out a sudden, fierce, echoing roar.

Dipper quickly spun around with a frightened gasp, his spear poised in defense as he faced the monstrosity before him. “Oh,” he remarked in breathless nervousness. “That’s a Multi-Bear.” As it
turned out, the “Multi” part of the creature’s name was quite literal. It was a fearsome beast composed of several bears, all conjoined to form one massive, furry black body. The Multi-Bear possessed quite a few sets of limbs and several heads, many of which were still growling harshly as they glared down at the boy standing so audaciously before them.

“Bear heads, silence!” the central head called, somehow capable of English speech. However, the other heads apparently weren’t as intelligent as one of the continued to roar, despite this command, though it was soon quieted by an authoritative smack. “Child, why have you come here?”

“Multi-Bear! I seek you head!” Dipper proclaimed brazenly, banishing his former dread, both literally and morally, and replacing it with zeal and courage. “Or… one of them, anyway. There’s like what? Six heads?”

“This is foolish!” the Multi-Bear bellowed angrily, his deep voice rattling the walls of the cave. “Leave now or die!”

Undaunted by this threat, Dipper took up an offensive position as he pointed his spear at the Multi-Bear and set his expression in a hardened glare. “So be it…” the Multi-Bear growled as he rose to its full height, all of his heads roaring in violent unison as he prepared to attack.

Without much warning, he charged at the boy headfirst, though Dipper was more than ready for it. Acting quickly, he rolled out of the Multi-Bear’s barreling path easily, not even missing a beat as he dodged most of the bones the beast had sent flying this way with a mere swipe of its paw. Taking advantage of his surroundings, Dipper snatched a rock from a nearby pile and chucked it straight at the Multi-Bear, watching with satisfaction as it struck his main head. Seeing that the creature was distracted in tending to its now-bleeding muzzle, the boy took a chance and rushed for the bear, leaping on top of one its lower heads as an aid in scaling its back and reaching the top of the behemoth. Now that he had the upper hand, Dipper used his spear to wrangle the Multi-Bear’s main head into a tight head lock, not letting up even as the beast began to choke. Desperate to break free, the Multi-Bear lashed his claws up at the boy, and though he managed to land a few minor, shallow swipes, but most of them missed. After what seemed like ages, the mighty beast finally collapsed to the ground with a heavy thud, weak from asphyxiation as he lay on the ground in pitiful defeat.

“A real man shows no mercy!” Dipper shouted triumphantly, clearly caught up in the adrenaline that had kept him going through this fight as he stood over the fallen Multi-Bear, his spear poised to land the finishing blow.

“Very well, warrior…” the Multi-Bear sighed relenting, knowing that he had embarrassingly lost this battle against a mere human child. “Victory is yours… But will you grant a magical beast one last request?”

“Uh… okay?” Dipper shrugged, seeing nothing really wrong with this. After all, it was clear that the Multi-Bear intended on being a good sport about this, so why couldn’t he do the same?

“I wish to die listening to my favorite song,” the Multi-Bear said, nodding one of his heads towards a tape player sitting on a nearby rock. Hoping that this wasn’t some sort of trick, Dipper hopped off the beast’s back and headed over to it, wondering what kind of music a Multi-Bear would be into. However, his curiosity was soon replaced with absolute shock the moment he hit play and heard a song that he instantly recognized: “Disco Girl”.

“You listen to Icelandic pop group BABBA?” Dipper asked in disbelief as he turned back to the Multi-Bear. “I… I love BABBA…”
“I thought I was the only one,” the Multi-Bear said in slight shame. “All of the manotaurs made fun of me because I know all of the words to the song ‘Disco Girl’.”

“Oh, you mean: Disco girl…” Dipper began, singing along with the tape as the Multi-Bear quickly picked up the next lyrics.

“Coming through…”

“That girl is you!” they both finished with equal grins, a newfound sense of understanding formed between the two former adversaries.

“This is crazy!” Dipper said with a good-natured laugh, amazed at this incredible coincidence. “Finally someone who understands!” His enthusiastic grin soon turned into a remorseful frown however as he glanced down at the spear still in his hand, reminding him of what he had come here to do in the first place. “Oh yeah… Uh… I guess I’m supposed to… kill you? Or I’ll never be a man?”

“It’s fine,” the Multi-Bear said with a compliant nod, clearly wanting to die with dignity. “I accept my fate.”

“R-really?” Dipper asked, more hesitant than ever about all this as he remembered what Steven had said: perhaps taking the life of the Multi-Bear wasn’t the right thing to do after all, even if it was a task of manliness and toughness. Perhaps it would only be a product of mindless violence instead of true strength and fortitude.

“It’s for the best…” the Multi-Bear insisted amiably, though it was clear he wasn’t going to put up a fight in his final moments. Dipper couldn’t help but feel as though his own words were being thrown right back at him upon hearing this, making him feel all the more guilty now that he knew the Multi-Bear was truly an innocent, if not benevolent creature. He knew that if he really did go through with this, he’d probably regret it not just later, but immediately. But if he didn’t, then certainly he’d never be considered a real man.

Right?

Steven let out an apprehensive sigh as he paced in front of the Man Cave worriedly, waiting for either Dipper to come out or for a sign that he might need help. Though the young Gem had heard sounds of fighting from inside the cave earlier, now things had gone eerily silent, much to his alarm. And yet, Steven remained firm in his resolve to not get involved, hoping that things would turn out the way they were supposed to.

Regardless of his neutrality, Steven was overwhelmingly relieved to see Dipper finally emerge from the cave, looking a bit disheveled but generally unharmed, even if he did look a bit forlorn. But even so, the always-sentimental young Gem didn’t hesitate to meet his battle-worn friend with a sudden, yet sincere hug, startling him quite a bit.

“Dipper!” Steven exclaimed with an overjoyed grin. “I’m so glad you’re ok! I was starting to think something happened in there!”

“I’m fine, Steven,” Dipper said with a small laugh of amusement as the friendly embrace disbanded. “Well… physically, at least…”

“What happened?” Steven asked nervously, a bit confused as he realized that the Multi-Bear’s decapitated head was thankfully nowhere in sight.

“I couldn’t do it,” Dipper admitted with a sigh. “You were right; turns out the Multi-Bear didn’t
deserve it at all. I beat him and everything, but when it came down to killing him… it didn’t feel right… I guess this really does make me a wimp, huh?”

“Are you kidding?” Steven asked with a pleasantly surprised smile, his lingering dread gone all at once. “Not at all! I think deciding not to go through with it makes you even braver than if you actually had done it!”

“Yeah, well you know what will take even more bravery?” Dipper asked, still not entirely reassured, even if he was confident in the choice he had made. “Standing up to the manotaurs and telling them they were wrong about everything.”

“Well, no matter what happens, I’ve got your back,” Steven encouraged as the two of them began to descend the mountain together. “And who knows? Maybe we’ll end up teaching those manotaurs a thing or two about what being manly really means!”

“You two know nothing about being manly!” Leadertaur roared in heated anger immediately after Steven and Dipper had asserted their position against killing the Multi-Bear upon their return to the Man Cave. “You were told! The price of manliness is the Multi-Bear's head!”

“But is it, really?” Steven asked with an incredulous frown.

“Listen, Leadertaur, alright?” Dipper began, utilizing his reasoning skills for perhaps the first time all day as opposed to brute force. “You too, Testostoraur, Pubertaur, and… I don’t know, whatever your name is? Uh, Beardy?”

“It’s Beardy,” the heavily bearded manotaur in question affirmed.

“You guys keep telling us that being strong and manly means doing all these tasks, and being aggressive all the time, but I’m starting to think all that stuff’s malarkey.”

The manotaurs let out a collective gasp of shock at this, clearly none of them used to having their masculine viewpoints challenged so boldly. Despite their surprise, however, Dipper continued with just as much zeal. “You heard me: malarkey,” he said brazenly, hoping that he was gaining some ground with this impromptu speech. “So maybe we don’t have muscles or hair in certain places, and sure, when a girly pop song comes on the radio, sometimes I leave it on! Because dang it, top 40 hits are in the top 40 for a reason! They’re catchy!”

“And maybe I am a Crystal Gem!” Steven added, motioning to the pink gem on his navel without shame this time. “But you know what? I’m proud to be one! The Crystal Gems are really brave and smart and heroic, even if they are all girls! I don’t see anything wrong with that, and neither should any of you. After all…” he paused for a moment, a brief burst of guilt filling him as he remembered how he had so callously brushed off Pearl’s advice, especially as he finally realized it had been true all along. “They’re strong in the real way, and so are we!”

“So… what are you two saying?” Chutzpar asked, the point of the boys’ message clearly not getting through to any of the rather dense manotaurs.

“We’re saying that the Multi-Bear is a really nice guy,” Dipper said, knowing that he had left the cave on actually quite good terms with the beast, despite his original mission. “And you’re a bunch of jerks if you want us to cut off his head!”

“Yeah!” Steven agreed firmly. “He did nothing wrong! You guys just like bullying him because he’s different than you. Why don’t you actually try getting along with him? Maybe then you guys could all be friends!”
“NEVER!” Leadertaur shouted, refusing to listen to reason over virility. “We’ll give you one last chance: kill the Multi-Bear or never be men!”

Steven and Dipper exchanged a hardened glance, not even needing to consider this choice. Even after everything they had gone through and all their strides towards supposed manliness, physical strength would all mean nothing if they didn’t have moral strength first. “Then I guess we’ll never be men,” Dipper said with calm finality, feeling strangely at ease with this choice despite his earlier panic over his prior lack of masculinity. Steven added his agreement with a simple firm nod, knowing that the kind of strength that the manotaurs flaunted was only skin-deep.

Expectantly, the manotaurs didn’t take such impudence positively. Instead of heeding the truths that the boys had discussed with them, they simply disregarded them with a round of disapproving boos and jeers, though neither Dipper nor Steven paid them much attention as they took their leave from the Man Cave. Despite the manotaurs’ teasing, both boys felt more confident and self-assured than they had all day. And even more than that, they had reached this high point all on their own.

None of this had gone unnoticed by Pearl, who had overheard the boys’ standing up to the manotaurs from right outside the cave. Her heart swelled with pride and relief for both of them as she took to hiding one last time as they emerged from the cave, knowing that it was time to reveal herself for the sake of affirming their morally sound choice.

“I can’t believe we just did that…” Dipper said with a frown as him and Steven exited the Man Cave, slightly regretting the fact that they could never really be called men. But even if he had scarified his claim to masculinity, at least he could claim that he had a clean conscious, which was indeed worthwhile.

“We did what we had to,” Steven shrugged, rubbing his shoulder to try and ease the soreness he was still feeling. “At least we don’t have to do any more “manly challenges”. I don’t know how many more of those I could take!”

“Yeah… But it still feels like something of a waste…” Dipper said with a sigh. “All that hard work, and we have nothing to show for it…”

“I wouldn’t exactly say that…” a familiar voice mused from behind a nearby trees, startling both boys as they stopped in their tracks.

“What the…? Wait… Pearl?” Steven called in confusion, his bewilderment growing even more as the white Gem indeed emerged from behind the tree, a small, sheepish grin on her face.

“Hello, Steven, Dipper,” she greeted rather cheerily as she ignored the bewilderment written all over their faces.

“What are you doing here?” Steven asked curiously, gathering from the fact that neither Garnet nor Amethyst were with her that Sugilite had still yet to return.

“Oh, well, I was concerned about the two of you hanging out with those brutish manotaurs, so I decided to tag along from a distance to make sure they didn’t push you too far,” Pearl explained. “But it turns out I had nothing to worry about! When given the choice between senseless violence and moral reasoning, you two made the right decision after all. I’m very proud of you both.”

“So… you’ve been following us around all day?” Dipper asked with a disconcerted frown, though Steven was hardly concerned with this as he gladly accepted the white Gem’s adulation.

“Thanks, Pearl!” Steven grinned widely. “And you were right; being tough and macho doesn’t
make someone strong in the real way. I only wish we had realized it sooner. Sorry for not listening
to you earlier…”

“It’s quite alright, Steven,” Pearl said with a good-natured smile. “Now if only a certain rouge
fusion could learn that lesson too…”

As if in answer to the white Gem’s statement, the ground soon began to rumble softly, birds
clearing out of the forest to the east as a booming, enraged shout echoed through the area.
Confused, the trio made the unanimous decision to go check it out, getting a better vantage point on
a nearby bluff as they watched the towering, angry figure that was approaching them.

“What *is* that?!” Dipper asked in alarm, not recognizing the four-armed being storming their way,
even though Steven and Pearl immediately did.

Though the white Gem was filled with instant dread upon seeing the massive fusion return instead
of having chosen to split up, Steven eagerly grinned as he announced her arrival, even if her fierce
manner already had done that for him. “It’s Sugilite!”

Sugilite let out an infuriated roar that rattled the woods she was plowing her way through, her
double sets of arms easily pushing down the trees, which were all smaller than her, out of her way.
It wasn’t too long before she spotted the small group standing on the nearby cliff, all four of her
hands clenched into tight fists as she shouted at them. “I’M BORED!” she growled bitterly, her
fiery scowl apparent even behind her shades.

“Y-you’re back!” Pearl exclaimed fearfully, instinctually positioning herself between the outraged
fusion and the two boys.

“You left me behind!” Sugilite accused hotly, her menacing form towering high above all three of
them, even despite the elevation of the cliff.

“We just thought you didn’t need any help!” Pearl tried to reason, even if she knew well that
Sugilite never listened. “Now, why don’t you two separate and we can all sit down and-”

“NO!” the fusion shouted, abruptly interrupting the white Gem as she threw down one of her fists
at all three of them, which they all narrowly dodged.

“Listen to me!” Pearl exclaimed more firmly, glaring up at Sugilite as she rose to stand. “You’ve
been fused for too long! You’re losing yourselves!”

“I AM myself, and I’m sick of being split up!” Sugilite proclaimed stubbornly. “So you better get
used to me, baby! CAUSE I’M HERE TO STAY!”

With another brutal battle cry, the fusion swung her fists out at the bluff, knocking off large chucks
of it as Pearl, Steven, and Dipper drew back a bit to escape her wrath.

“That’s what Garnet and Amethyst are like fused together?” Dipper asked in disbelief, wondering
why the two of them were so volatile and savage when combined.

“Yeah, but I don’t get it!” Steven exclaimed, sharing Pearl’s clear panic. “Why is she acting like
this? Why is she attacking us?!”

“That doesn’t matter!” Pearl called over the sounds of destruction, knowing she had no time to
explain the intricacies of fusion now. “You two need to get out of here!”

“But we wanna help!” Steven insisted, ready to do anything to get Garnet and Amethyst to return
to their senses.

“Yeah!” Dipper agreed, knowing that if there was any circumstance in which to combine both strength and reasoning, this was it.

Pearl had no time to argue with them as they attention was soon caught by a new party rushing headlong towards Sugilite from just underneath the cliff they were on. Apparently, the clamor the fusion was causing had not gone unnoticed by the manotaurs, who had all emerged from the Man Cave to fight off whatever the threat might be. “HEY! YOU!” Chutzpar shouted up at the fusion challengingly. “We don’t care how big you might be; no woman is gonna come up here and wreck our turf! So beat it!”

“Your turf?” Sugilite retorted with a harsh scoff. “Yeah right! This place is mine now, boys, so why don’t you beat it! Or how about I just beat all of YOU!”

Without much effort at all, she easily lifted a large bolder up from the forest floor and held it up high above her head, smirking darkly as she prepared to slam it down on the manotaurs. It was at that point that they all instantly realized that even with their muscles and spears, they were no match for the massive size and strength of the fusion. Which was why, in a rare act for the usually so bold manotaurs, they all instantly fled back to the Man Cave, right before Sugilite chucked her boulder after all of them, only narrowly missing as she laughed in crazed triumph.

“Huh,” Dipper remarked to Steven as they watched the manotaurs hastily retreat. “So much for ‘a real man never runs away from a fight’.”

Seeing that the situation was only getting worse by the second, Pearl decided to take matters into her own hands, summoning her spear from her Gem as she dashed to the tip of the bluff and aimed it at Sugilite unflinchingly. “WHAT?!” the fusion challenged as she glared down at the much smaller Gem. “YOU WANNA FIGHT TOO?!”

“You’ll thank me for this later!” Pearl exclaimed, deftly leaping towards Sugilite as Dipper and Steven ran to the edge of the cliff as well to watch what was about to unfold. Clearly, the fusion didn’t see the white Gem as much of a challenge as she simply knocked her away with a bat of her large hand. Pearl wasn’t about to give up so soon however as she managed to land on one of the nearby treetops, using her agility to aid her in jumping off of it and back towards Sugilite. The fusion tried punching her away once more, but the white Gem was ready for it as she maneuvered out of her fist’s path and succeeding in kicking away Sugilite’s visor to reveal all five of her eyes, which were all filled with unspeakable ire. The boys gasped in shock upon watching this, especially as Sugilite’s fury grew to the point that she was visibly shaking with rage, which was something she all too quickly took out on her opponent.

“You THINK YOU’RE SOMETHING?!” Sugilite roared fiercely, catching Pearl by surprise as she used one set of arms to knock the white Gem upwards. Pearl let out a sharp gasp of pain as the fusion’s huge fists struck her squarely in the side, sending her flying up into the air. “YOU!” Sugilite practically screamed as she threw her fists up at Pearl again, this time smashing her into the ground almost instantly. “AIN’T!” The white Gem let out a small sob of agony as she collided with the forest floor, every part of her body screaming with searing pain. But even so, the merciless fusion did not relent as she landed a heavy kick to Pearl’s stomach, plowing her through several layers of trees as if she were nothing but a mere twig. “NOTHING!”

Pearl was nearly unconscious by the time she landed, though thankfully her gem was undamaged, which was the only reason why she was still going. She was, however, heavily injured, which only added to her despair as she glanced up to see Sugilite summoning her flail. The fusion threw it down in her direction, sliding it across the forest floor, though thankfully missing due to her limited
visibility from the cover of the trees.

“Pearl!” Steven’s concerned cry reached the white Gem as she weakly attempted to pick herself up off the ground, only to collapse to her knees breathlessly as her body recoiled with pain. Tears sparked in Pearl’s eyes as she looked up, spotting Steven and Dipper as they stood high above her on the bluff, staring down at her with fearful worry. Shame flooded her as she stole another glance towards Sugilite, remembering that despite the fusion’s heated, uncontrollable fury, her teammates were still in there, though there was painfully little she could do to separate them.

“I… I can’t do this…” she muttered to herself mournfully, her tears finally falling as she bowed her head, knowing she had lost this battle. “I’m sorry!” she cried up to the two boys, her failure overwhelming her. “Garnet… Amethyst…” she choked on a sob as she realized that because of this failure, the two other Gems would be forever lost to their wild, untamed fusion. “I wasn’t strong enough… to save you… I’m not strong enough to do anything…”

“That’s not true!” Steven called down to the injured white Gem firmly, resolved to inspire her into action once more. “Come on, Pearl! Don’t give up! I know you can take her down!”

“Yeah, you gotta get up, Pearl!” Dipper encouraged just as fervently. “Who else is gonna separate those two?!”

“I can’t!” the white Gem replied dejectedly, tears still streaming down her cheeks as she prepared to surrender to the fusion’s strength.

“Yes, you can!” Steven argued passionately, trying his best not to tear up himself. “You always know what to do! You gotta show her what you showed us! That you’re strong, Pearl! Strong in the real way!”

Pearl took in a sharp breath upon hearing this, her heart beginning to stir with something far different from shame. Instead, the words of her own song echoed through her mind, ringing in tune with the sincere encouragement Dipper and Steven had offered her: “And I know that we can be strong… in the real way…” It was a strange, yet special irony, the white Gem thought as she shakily rose to stand once more, that the very same message she had wanted to inspire them with was now inspiring her. There was no doubt that Sugilite had ample amounts of physical strength, but without restraint and control, what was that really worth? And as Pearl realized that she had so much more to offer instead of muscles or brute force, she wiped her tears, her confidence renewed as she smiled, ready to stand firm and defeat the rogue fusion once and for all.

“Hey!” Pearl called out to Sugilite, refusing to back down this time.

“What?!” the fusion snarled in disbelief, appalled that the white Gem was still alive. “You want some more?!”

“Any time!” Pearl proclaimed with determination as she summoned another spear. “You’re no match for me! Not even CLOSE!” With a bold battle cry, the white Gem threw her spear up at Sugilite, landing a rather sizable cut across the side of her face. The fusion growled angrily as she threw a punch Pearl’s way, but this time, she was more than ready to leap out of the way as she began to outmaneuver her larger opponent.

“Yeah, Pearl!” Steven cheered enthusiastically, overjoyed to see that the white Gem had gotten her morale back. Dipper, on the other hand, was no longer content to simply sit on the sidelines and watch this battle unfold.

“Steven, we have to help her!” he said with resolve, having already formulated a plan through
watching Sugilite throw her weight around. “Follow my lead!”

Pearl grinned in assurance, realizing that she had something that Sugilite certainly didn’t have as the fusion continued to try and crush her with her lumbering fists: speed. Using agile leaps, the white Gem made sure to steer clear of the fusion’s attacks, all while trying to come up with a plan for defeating her. However, it seemed as though the boys already had that covered as they managed to distract Sugilite by launching a barrage of stones her way.

“Wha-?” the fusion spun around after being struck with several rocks from behind to see Steven and Dipper throwing them at her from the cliff.

“Hey, Sugilite!” Dipper called out challengingly. “Bet you can’t catch us!”

“You two?!” Sugilite scoffed, believing the two of them to be no match for her. “Please! I’ll crush you like the bugs you are!”

Knowing that they had to act now, Dipper quickly took Steven by the hand and practically dragged him off the bluff just before Sugilite could smash it entirely. Running as fast as they could, the boys hurried down the hillside, already racing through the forest as the fusion began to peruse them with thunderous footsteps. Pearl gasped in sudden worry as she realized the danger they were in, and she didn’t hesitate to give chase as well, her speed aiding her as she managed to pass between Sugilite’s legs unnoticed to catch up with them.

“What are you two doing!?” the white Gem demanded as she joined stride alongside them.

“Don’t worry!” Dipper reassured her a bit breathlessly as all three of them charged through the woods towards town. “I’ve got a plan!”

Pearl didn’t outright protest as she decided to go along with whatever he had in mind, hoping that it would somehow work. All the while, Sugilite was starting to gain on them, her fury burning as hot as ever as she pursued them. “Get back here!” she shouted, punching a thicket of trees forward with the hopes of barricading their path. Unfortunately for them, this just so happened to work as the pile of trees landed only a few feet in front of them, stopping them right before they emerged out of the woods near the diner.

“Ha!” Sugilite laughed triumphantly as she smirked down at the trio, her lower set of arms ready to take them all out with one fell swing. “Nice try! But running away ain’t gonna save you now!”

“O-okay…” Dipper said a bit nervously as they all backed up a bit, his plan suddenly falling apart at the seems. “We may need to come up with a new plan…”

“I think I may have something in mind…” Pearl said with a small smile as she looked over to the tall tree to her right. “You two stay down here and figure out a way to clear out these trees. I’ll take care of Sugilite!”

Steven and Dipper nodded in agreement with this plan, both of them splitting up to divert the fusion’s attention while at the same time hoping to push the trees away. Sugilite let out an infuriated roar, refusing to be tricked again as she slammed her fists down at the two of them, only to narrowly miss once more. Before she could try again, however, she was suddenly cut across the chest with a spear that came from above. With a bitter snarl, she glanced up to see that Pearl was precariously positioned atop one of the few trees that actually happened to be taller than Sugilite, balancing on its point on her tip-toes as she stood ready to leap. Sugilite took a swing at the tree, smashing it in half only after the white Gem had jumped from it, soaring high over the fusion’s head. Not letting her get away this time, Sugilite quickly tossed her flail up at Pearl, only for it to
miss its target and continue sailing high into the air, though the fusion was quick to disregard it as the white Gem landed squarely on the ground below.

“Is that all you got?!” Sugilite challenged with a sneer as she raised her foot to crush Pearl underneath it. “You think that’s enough to beat-”

The fusion was abruptly cut off as her own flail suddenly fell from above, plummeting down to land hard and heavy on her head. The heavy shaking caused by this strike was enough to finally clear the path free of the fallen trees as they rolled out of the way, but that wasn’t all. The brutal damage caused by the force of the heavy weapon was enough to damage Sugilite to the point that she could no longer remain together. She didn’t even have time to let out any bitter remark or even a surprised gasp as she immediately fell apart, Garnet and Amethyst flying apart from each other as they fell to the ground, their fusion at least defeated and disbanded.

Mabel grinned brightly as she and Stan returned to Greasy’s Diner to find that Lazy Susan was still beating the broken pie trolley, as the girl had been hoping for. After instructing Stan to forget everything she had taught him earlier, Mabel led the way to the waitress, confident that her new plan would succeed.

“Lazy Susan, listen,” Mabel began, interrupting Susan’s futile attempts to get the trolley spinning. “I know he may not be much too look at, but you’re always fixing stuff here at the diner, so if you’re into fixing stuff, look no further than my Grunkle Stan! Nothing needs more fixing than him! Also, women live longer than men, so your dating pool is smaller and you should really lower your standards.”

Upon hearing this, Lazy Susan gave Stan an expectant look, not offering a response as she waited for him to speak first. “So, Lazy Susan… What do you say?” the conman asked with a small, hopeful grin.

The waitress was still silent as she looked him up and down with a rather neutral expression before simply walking away. Stan glanced down disappointment as Mabel gave him a pitied frown, both of them knowing that despite their earnest efforts, it had all been for naught. “Well, Grunkle Stan, I guess that’s it…” Mabel sighed, hating to admit defeat as they two of them prepared to leave the diner. “I’m sorry…”

Stan was just about to reassure his niece before they were interrupted with a call from behind. “Hey!” Lazy Susan exclaimed, hurrying after them with a piece of paper and a plate of pie in her hand. “Here’s my number!” she said with a coy grin, handing the conman the paper. “Why don’t you give me a call sometime?”

“R-really?” Stan asked in surprise, his eyes wide as he looked down at the waitress’s number.

“Really!” Susan nodded with a bright chuckle. “Also, here’s some pie! For you!”

Stan gladly took the pie and took a seat at a nearby booth with Mable as Lazy Susan got back to work, but not before sending one last flirtatious wink his way. “EEEEEE!” Mabel squealed excitedly, amazed that her matchmaking had come to fruition. “We did it! When are you gonna call her? You wanna call now? I don’t have a phone. Let’s buy a phone! We can put it on a credit card! Let’s get a credit card!”

“Mabel, please!” Stan said with a satisfied grin, unable to keep up with his enthusiastic niece who was talking a mile a minute in her elation. “Let a man enjoy his pie, huh?”

Mabel was about to start listing all of the things that Stan could talk about during his call with
Lazy Susan, but before she could, the entire diner was suddenly rattled by a sudden earthquake apparently right outside. “Whoa!” Mabel exclaimed as soon as the spell of rumbling had ended. “What was that?!”

“Who cares?” Stan asked with little concern as he continued eating his pie.

“C’mon, Grunkle Stan!” the girl quickly got up from her seat, dragging her begrudging uncle away from the pie so they could see what had just happened. “Let’s go check it out!”

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“Amethyst! Garnet!” Pearl exclaimed with concern as she raced over to her fallen teammates, who were both lying semi-paralyzed and incapacitated on the ground in the aftermath of their defeat. Likewise, Dipper and Steven joined her, both of them relieved to see that Sugilite had been taken down and torn apart. “Are you okay?!”

“Yeah…” Garnet moaned, clearly worn out as she remained unmoving on the ground. “Sugilite just overworked our bodies… It’s… a little painful.”

“Ugh… I’ve got a monster headache…” Amethyst muttered, every part of her body aching as she refused to move a single muscle.

Pearl, however, disregarded their pain as she expressed her joy at their return by tightly embracing them both, though she quickly released them upon hearing their unified agonized groans. “Whoops!” the white Gem laughed sheepishly as she allowed them both to rest and recover. “Sorry…”

“Pearl, you did it!” Steven congratulated enthusiastically.

“That’s not entirely true…” Pearl said with a fond grin as she wrapped her arms around both boys’ shoulders. “We did it.”

Steven and Dipper more than readily accepted this affirmation, knowing that despite the manotaurs’ claims that they would never achieve manliness, they had still found a way to prove their strength all the same. And unlike going against the Multi-Bear, this had been a challenge of true strength, one that, as far as both them and the white Gem were concerned, they had passed with flying colors.

“What the hey happened out here?” Stan asked as him and Mabel came from the diner to see the mess of fallen trees that had caused the rumbling they had felt from inside. “Oh,” the conman noted gruffly upon seeing the Gems. “I should’ve guessed.”

“Dipper!” Mabel greeted her brother with a cheerful grin, though it faded as she noticed how battle weary he looked. “Whoa! You’re a mess, bro-bro! And so are you, Steven! What happened to you guys?”

“Sugilite got a little out of control, so we helped Pearl defeat her so she could split apart!” Steven explained with a proud grin.

“What?! You mean I missed her again?” Mabel asked with dismay. “Darn it! Oh well… Maybe I’ll get to see her next time!”

“Hopefully not…” Pearl muttered to herself as she grinned knowingly at Garnet and Amethyst, who were still largely out of it.
“Well… Defeating a crazed Gem fusion wasn’t the only thing we did today…” Dipper admitted a bit hesitantly.

“Oh really?” Mabel asked with interest. “What else happened? Fill me in on all the deets!”

“I’d rather not…”

“Good,” Stan deadpanned, crossing his arms.

“It’s just that these half-man half-bull humanoids were hanging out with us,” Dipper began anyway, still clearly bothered by what had happened with the manotaurs earlier.

“Here we go…”

“But then they wanted us to do this really tough, horrible thing, but it just wasn’t right. I was actually going to go through with it, but in the end, I decided not to.”

“You were your own man and you stood up for yourself,” Stan remarked rather out of nowhere, catching Dipper off guard quite a bit.

“Huh?” he asked in confusion, knowing that it wasn’t like his gruff grunkle to be so oddly supportive.

“Well, you did what was right even if no one else agreed with you,” the conman said with a hint of an almost proud smile. “Sounds pretty manly to me, but what do I know?”

Dipper smiled as he accepted what he knew to be something of a compliment, at least for Stan anyway. It was by this point, however, that Mabel had taken notice of something that her brother hadn’t yet. “Wait a minute…” she mused, squinting scrutinizing at Dipper. “Do my eyes deceive me? Dipper, I think you have a chest hair!”

Upon hearing this, he immediately glanced down at his chest, pulling his shirt down a bit as he let out a gasp of pleasant surprise. “Oh my gosh! You’re right!” he exclaimed triumphantly. “This is amazing! I really do! Take that, man tester! Take that, Pituitor!”

“Pituitor?” Stan asked, raising an eyebrow.

“This guy has a chest hair!” Dipper proclaimed proudly, pointing a thumb to himself with a broad grin. However, he only had a moment to celebrate this newfound sign of emerging masculinity before Mabel suddenly reached over and plucked the hair right from his chest.

“Scrap-bookертunity!” she blithely chimed as she plastered the hair in her scrap book, ignoring the look of horrified shock that her brother was giving her.

“Don’t worry, kid,” Stan reassured his nephew, placing a hand on his shoulder. “If you’re anything like me, there’s more where that came from!” With a wide smirk, the conman ripped his shit open to reveal his chest covered in grayed hair, eliciting sounds of both amusement and disgust from the entire group.

“Ew…” Pearl recoiled in revulsion, though Amethyst, who was still lying on the ground, couldn’t help but let out an entertained chuckle.

“Oh my gosh!” the purple Gem laughed as much as she could despite her sore body. “That is so gross! Awesome!”
Of course, everyone got a good laugh out of this, though it gradually faded as it became apparent that Stan had no replacement shit. “Seriously though,” Dipper said with a somewhat repulsed frown once the levity had passed. “That’s disgusting.

“Pearl,” Garnet spoke up in the midst of all this, catching the white Gem’s attention. “We feel as though we should apologize,” she said, speaking for herself and Amethyst, obviously. “We should have listened to you… You were right.”

“Yeah,” Pearl nodded, though she soon became emboldened as she realized the implications of what the Gem leader had just said. “Yeah, I was right, wasn’t I?”

“Go Pearl!” Steven cheered enthusiastically, just as proud of the white Gem as she was of him.

“Come on!” Pearl declared rousingly to her listless teammates. “I feel great! Who’s up for a mission?! Or…”

The white Gem continued on her cheerful rant as Amethyst and Garnet merely exchanged a passive glance, neither of them having the energy or really the right to derail her after Sugilite’s rampage. “How long is she going to keep this up?” the purple Gem asked with a tired sigh, hating how Pearl often loved to filibuster like this.

“We deserve it,” Garnet admitted, knowing that this was fair payback for how outlandishly their fusion had behaved. After all, if Sugilite had no mercy on Pearl, then it only made sense for Pearl to take no mercy on them. “Take it like a Gem.”
Chapter 10, Part 1: Magic and Mystery

Chapter Summary

In which an eye appears, the kids go cannon hunting, and the Gems and Stan underestimate them.

Chapter Notes

Ok, so here's the first part of our two part arc ender, which will happen every ten chapters or so! I'm really proud of this one, but I'm even MORE excited about the next one :D

Chapter 10: Magic and Mystery

Part 1

“Ooohhhhh! He’s a frozen treat with an all-new taste!”

“The cause he came to this planet from outer space!”

“A refugee from an interstellar war!”

“But now he’s at your local grocery store!”

“Cookie Cat! He’s a pet for your tummy!”

“Cookie Cat! He’s super-duper yummy!”

“Cookie Cat! He left his family behind!”

“Cookie Caaaaat!”

“Now available at Gurgens off Route 109!”

Upon the conclusion of their rapping duet of the commercial jingle, Steven and Mabel burst into a giggling fit as they both stuffed the ice cream treats they had been singing about into their mouths. Likewise, Dipper chuckled in amusement at the abundant enthusiasm of his sister and his friend as he enjoyed his Cookie Cat much more casually and calmly.

“Mmm! So good!” Mabel gushed with a delighted grin, ice cream sloppily smeared all over her face. “Steven, where on earth did you get these Cookie Cats? I thought they stopped making
“They did…” Steven said, somewhat remorseful over that fact as he climbed down from his bedroom loft to grab them all some more Cookie Cats. “But the Gems got a whole bunch of them for me from the factory a few weeks ago. I’ve eaten a few already, but I’ve been saving most of them for a special occasion. And what could be a more special occasion than all of us finally getting the chance to hang out here at the temple!?”

“Thanks for having me and Mabel over, by the way, Steven,” Dipper said with a grin as Steven returned with his load of ice cream sandwiches. “We’ve been meaning to come ever since you invited us, but things have been… pretty crazy since then.”

“Yeah,” Mabel chimed her agreement as she readily took the Cookie Cat Steven had offered her. “After dealing with living robot lake monsters, living wax statues, and haunted convenience stores, it’s nice to just sit back, relax, and enjoy the best, now-extinct, ice cream in the world!”

“And we all get to watch…” Dipper trailed off as he glanced towards the TV, only for his smile to turn into a confused frown. “Steven, what is this again?”

“It’s Crying Breakfast Friends!” Steven said with a chipper grin as he turned his attention towards the incoherently sobbing food items on the screen. “Isn’t it great?”

“I don’t know if ‘great’ would be the word I would use to describe it…” Dipper said with a skeptical frown.

“Oh come on, bro-bro!” Mabel said, giving her brother a playful punch on the arm. “I love this show! It may not look like much at first, but it’s actually super deep and has a lot of complex layers and themes. Plus, Mourning Muffin is absolutely adorable!”

“I know, right?” Steven agreed with a grin. “Personally, I’m a Bawling Bacon kinda guy myself.”

Dipper rolled his eyes in exasperation as Mabel and Steven continued fawning over the rather unimpressive cartoon, not really getting what all the fuss was about. Thankfully, before it could go on for too much longer, a bright flash of light coming from the warp pad in front of the temple door caught their collective attention.

“Wow…” Dipper and Mabel whispered in awed unison as the light intensified, though Steven merely grinned eagerly. After all, this was quite a regular sight for him.

The Crystal Gems materialized above the warp pad, all of them looking quite satisfied with their most recent victory. Pearl and Amethyst were both grinning broadly, and though Garnet didn’t share their apparent glee, she did have a bubbled gem hovering over her palm, which she was quick to send away with a mere wave of her hand.

“Hi, you guys!” Steven greeted brightly as he leapt off of the loft, landing on the soft couch below. Mabel dismounted onto the couch in the same way, laughing all the while, though Dipper took the more sensible approach in taking the stairs down to the main floor.

“Oh, hello there, kids,” Pearl greeted with an amicable smile as the trio stepped off the warp pad.

“Well, what do you know?” Amethyst laughed. “Looks like the gang’s all here! How are you guys digging the place?” she asked Dipper and Mabel, knowing that this was their first visit to the temple.

“It’s awesome!” Mabel exclaimed cheerfully.
“And definitely more inviting than the Mystery Shack,” Dipper remarked somewhat sardonically.

“Well, that’s because, unlike your uncle, we actually manage to keep our house clean,” Pearl explained pointedly. “Or at least some of us do…” she muttered, shooting a glare Amethyst, who was busy making a mess in the kitchen as she constructed a sandwich.

“There is something I have been wondering though…” Dipper continued with a curious frown.

“And what’s that?” Garnet asked simply.

“What’s in there?” he asked, nodding towards the temple gate and the five gemstones resting on each point of the star emblazoned upon it. He had thought to ask Steven about it earlier, but he figured that he would be able to glean even more information about the magical-looking door from the Gems themselves.

“Oh, you mean the temple?” Amethyst asked casually.

“The temple?” Dipper repeated in confusion. “But I thought we were in the temple.”

“Nah, this isn’t the temple,” the purple Gem corrected. “This is just the house. It’s kinda like a lobby to the temple, actually.”

“Wait, so does that mean my room is part of the lobby?” Steven asked, clearly inspired by this comparison. “Maybe I should set up a welcome desk for when visitors come by, just like a real lobby!”

“Anyway…” Pearl continued the conversation that Steven had innocently interrupted. “The temple serves as our base. Garnet, Amethyst, and I live inside of it, while Steven has his own room out here. At least until he becomes more accustomed to using his Gem.”

“Yep!” the young Gem chimed in. “And when I do, I’ll be able to go in there any time I want, right?”

“Yes,” Garnet answered succinctly, even though Pearl had a mind to elaborate. However, before she could, the white Gem was abruptly cut off.

“Wow! I bet there’s so many cool things in there!” Mabel exclaimed in excitement as she took a tentative step towards the temple gate. “Mind if we take a peek?”

All three Gems exchanged a glance at this, but as usual, it was their leader who was the one to voice their unanimous opinion. “That’s not a very good idea…” Garnet said, sidestepping to block Mabel’s path to the gate.

“What? Why not?” Dipper asked in dismay, which was something Mabel shared over this rejection as well.

“Um… well, the temple… It’s a bit… dangerous,” Pearl explained, though she had no real intentions of telling them why. “Especially for… non-Gems-”

“Like you guys!” Amethyst cut in with a rouge grin, ruffling both twins’ hair playfully, even though neither of them were very amused.

“Amethyst!” Pearl scolded, knowing just how rude calling that fact out was. “But yes… The temple really is no place for humans. We’re sorry, but we just don’t want to see either of you get hurt.”
“But don’t be so down about it!” Amethyst encouraged with an upbeat grin, taking note of how upset both Dipper and Mabel were over this news. “At least you guys can still hang out here with Steven.”

“Yeah!” Steven exclaimed reassuringly. “And you guys are welcome here any time!”

“Thanks, Steven,” Dipper said, mustering a small smile, even if his innate curiosity over what lay beyond the temple gate was still eating away at him. But even so, he decided against further questioning the Gems about what exactly was so dangerous inside of the temple, knowing that they probably wouldn’t supply much of a straight answer anyway.

“We have to go,” Garnet said to her teammates, nodding towards the front door.

“What? But you guys just got back,” Steven frowned. “Don’t you wanna hang out with us for a while?”

“We’d love to, Steven,” Pearl said with sincerity. “But we have to preform our weekly check over the town. Gravity Falls isn’t going to protect itself, you know.”

“Right…” Steven sighed in relent, knowing that the Gems insisted on their weekly inspections over the town, largely because of its strange, often-dangerous facets. “See you later, then?”

“See you later,” Garnet affirmed with a hint of a smile as she led the way out of the house.

“Don’t have too much fun without us!” Amethyst joked as the Gems headed out, leaving the kids alone once more.

Since he was used to the Gems taking off quite often, Steven merely shrugged in acceptance once they had left, his usual upbeat attitude quickly returning. Likewise, Mabel easily perked up from her former disappointment of being denied access into the temple, as fascinating as whatever was inside sounded. Dipper, on the other hand, was nowhere near as complacent.

“You okay, Dippin-Dots?” Mabel asked her brother with a small, empathetic grin upon noticing his downcast expression. She gave him a small, playful poke on the arm in an attempt to cheer him up, but Dipper was having no parts of it as he absently swatted her hand away and kept staring at the door the Gems had left through rather bitterly.

“They didn’t even answer my question…” he muttered, still clearly upset over how his simple curiosity had gone unrequited.

“Well, they kinda did,” Steven pointed out. “You wanted to know what was in there, and they did technically tell you it was the temple. So…”

“But they didn’t tell us what was inside of the temple!” Dipper protested rather crossly. “Do you even know what it’s like in there, Steven?”

“Er… Not really,” the young Gem admitted sheepishly as he glanced towards the temple gate. “I’ve never actually been in there before. My gem’s supposed to be able to open the door up, but… it’s never really worked…”

“What’s so ‘dangerous’ in there that we can’t at least see what’s inside?” Dipper asked, crossing his arms in an impatient huff.

“I bet it’s full of magical lasers and sparkly lava!” Mabel theorized zealously. “Or maybe it’s a room that’s entirely underwater, stuffed with swords and other sharp pointy-things! Or maybe the
reason why the Gems don’t want us in there is because it’s super messy and they just need to tidy up!”

As Mabel continued rambling her various imaginative ideas off to herself, Dipper simply let out an agitated sigh as he leaned against the doorframe. “Why do the Gems have to be so mysterious all the time anyway?”

“That’s… just kinda… how they are,” Steven frowned, suddenly perplexed even as he said this. He had never really thought of the Gems as “mysterious” before, considering he had known them ever since he was born, but the more he thought about it, the less he realized he actually knew about them aside from the basics. Like how Pearl liked to keep things neat and clean, how Amethyst found great amusement in causing mischief almost as much as she found pleasure in eating, and how Garnet… well, since Garnet utilized her words so sparingly, he probably knew the least about her, but he did know that she cared for him immensely, as all of the Gems did. But anything beyond personality traits, such as where the Gems had actually come from, how they had ended up living in Gravity Falls, and of course the enigma that was his own deceased mother… Steven realized he actually had no real answers to such questions. And this distressing realization alone was enough to silence the young Gem and really make him think; why were the Gems keeping what seemed like very basic, essential information about themselves away from him?

“I just wish they’d let us know a little more about them,” Dipper said, largely to himself as he glanced down sourly. His curiosity didn’t really come out of suspicion towards the Gems; after all, they seemed to be pretty on the level in their selfless commitment to protect the town from what he had seen thus far. No, instead his wonderings came from his own inquisitive nature, especially in regards to anything that seemed highly unusual, which was a description the Gems certainly fit. Both them and Steven had provided the rather simple explanation that they were “magical” beings, but Dipper had never really been one to buy into the idea of magic. That was more Mabel’s fancy. Dipper, on the other hand, preferred to favor himself as a man, or perhaps more appropriately boy, of science. In his opinion, everything had to have a logical, semi-rational explanation behind it. Even things that seemed to be supernatural or mythological, such as the gnomes, the manotaur, or even the Gems themselves, had to have originated in a way that could be scientifically explained. Which was why it bothered him all the more that the Gems refused to provide him with any such explanations. Certainly, getting even the slightest glimpse at the inside of their temple would have answered many of the questions he had about them ever since their first encounter last week. But all the same, the summer was still very young. Hopefully, Dipper reasoned, the veils of secrecy and ambiguity about the Crystal Gems would steadily be pulled away, so that he could better understand what was by far the most interesting thing about Gravity Falls he had seen yet. And that was saying something.

A long bout of stated silence had filled the house, something that Mabel immediately noticed as she practically felt the bothered puzzlement that her brother and her friend were sharing. Always one to try and lighten the mood, she had an impromptu joke at the ready, but before she could even open her mouth to say it, a heavy crash suddenly sounded from outside.

“What was that?” Dipper asked, having been shaken from his spot against the door.

Both Steven and Mabel were prepared to answer with an “I don’t know”, when all three of the kids caught onto the sound of familiar voices arguing outside. “The Gems!” Steven declared, already taking the initiative by leading the way out of the house as the twins quickly followed.

The first thing the trio noticed upon emerging into the balmy heat of the summer afternoon was that the entire world seemed to be bathed in a faint shade of red. It was a color befitting the glow of sunset, but it made no sense, considering it was only about three o’clock and the sun wouldn’t go
down for hours yet. The next thing the kids spotted were the Gems, who had apparently not gone very far in their survey of the town as they stood clustered together at the base of the path that led towards the Mystery Shack. All three of them had their sights set towards the sky, their neck craning as they all worriedly gazed upwards at what the kids initially assumed was the sun, though they were quickly proven wrong as they took their own tentative glances up from the porch.

Their jaws dropped all at once upon seeing the strange, foreign crimson orb hanging in the sky, countless miles away from the earth, but still close enough to be plainly visible. In its current position, it was about the size of the average full moon, a faint glow surrounding it as it hovered in the yellowing sky. Upon a first glance, it appeared to be stationary, but as the kids stood staring intently at it, something became unnervingly clear.

It was moving.

“Whoa…” Mabel whispered in sedated awe. “What is that thing?”

“I dunno…” Steven shrugged, just as encompassed in wonder and curiosity. “But maybe the Gems do.”

The decision to head down the hill and ask the gems about the unknown object was unspoken and unanimous. Even though none of them knew that it was, they couldn’t really shake the feeling that it was unwelcome, possibly even dangerous. Those suspicions were only confirmed as they approached the Gems, hearing their concerned conversation as they did so.

“This is bad,” Garnet said, though her tone was as calm as ever.

“What is it doing here in the first place?” Amethyst asked, glaring up at the orb distrustfully.

“That’s not what we should be worried about right now,” Pearl said gravely as she peered up towards the object in question through the telescope she had summoned from her gem. “We should be worried that it’s here in the first place. Look at the size of it! I had no idea these things were so big!”

The Gems had yet to notice the kids’ arrival as they all paused behind them, exchanging nervous glances upon hearing their worries. Regardless though, Steven was the one to speak up first.

“Um… you guys?”

All three Gems spun around, startled, as they looked to the kids with wide, anxious eyes. “Oh! Seven! Dipper! Mabel!” Pearl exclaimed with a nervous, clearly fake laugh as she tried to make light of the situation. “What are you three doing down here?”

They largely ignored this question as Dipper came forward with an even more pressing, obvious question instead. “What is that?” he asked, nodding towards the intrusive orb above.

“And more importantly, can I see?” Steven cut in before any of the Gems could answer. Pearl handed him the telescope and the young Gem didn’t hesitate to use it to get a better look at the orb, which he quickly realized was more akin to a giant eye as it came into focus. Its iris was long and hexagonal, and surrounded a pupil that seemed to be more like the shutter of a camera than anything else. The whole thing seemed to have something of a metallic tint to it, further showing that it was far from anything natural. “Wow…” the young Gem mused with a small grin as he handed the telescope off to Mabel so she could take a peek. “It’s a giant eyeball! Awesome!”

“NOT awesome!” Pearl scolded testily. “It’s a Red Eye.”

“Red Eye?” Mabel asked in bewilderment. “You mean like that disease that makes your eyes all
“Oh no!” Steven exclaimed in a sudden panic. “It’s going to infect us all!”

“That’s pink eye,” Garnet corrected as Amethyst let out an amused chuckle at their paranoia.

“So, what exactly is this Red Eye thing anyway?” Dipper asked, hoping that the Gems would actually provide a real answer this time. “And what’s so bad about it?”

“The Red Eye is sort of like a meteor,” Pearl explained with an anxious frown. “If we don’t do anything about it, then it will crash into Gravity Falls and crush us, along with a bunch of oblivious, innocent people. That’s why we have to stop it!”

“Whoa! This is sorta like that one video game where you have to stop the moon from falling on this town in three days!” Steven exclaimed with a bright grin. “Only… we probably don’t have three days to stop this thing, do we?”

“No,” Garnet answered bluntly.

“What can we do to get rid of it?” Dipper asked, hoping that the Gems would actually let him and Mabel in on aiding them in this dilemma and not just chalk it up as a “Gem” situation, like they had with the temple. After all, certainly the journal would be able to help them find a solution, and even if it didn’t, the twins, as well as Steven, were quite inventive and clever on their own.

“The only things powerful enough to destroy it are the two laser Light Cannons that belonged to Rose Quartz,” Garnet explained as she adjusted her shades.

“Rose Quartz?” Mabel asked in confusion, unfamiliar with the name. “Who’s that?”

“My mom,” Steven spoke up, realizing that though he had mentioned his mother to the twins before, he had never really addressed her by name. “She’s… um… not really around anymore…”

Neither Dipper nor Mabel had to press for any more information than that as they expressed their sympathy for their friend with silent, solemn nods. The Gems, however, were still clearly stressing over the situation at hand.

“Ugh, if Rose were here, this would be so easy!” Amethyst groaned bitterly, kicking the ground as she crossed her arms and pouted.

“I know, but she’s… not…” Pearl said tightly, glancing away as she bit back what seemed to be oncoming tears. “And both cannons have been missing for years. We’ll just have to find another solution.”

The kids all exchanged frowning glances as they paused to think about just what to do about the imposing Red Eye, until, out of nowhere, Steven perked up with a sudden idea. “Oh! Oh! I know!” the young Gem exclaimed with a newfound grin, his bout of grief over his mother now passed. “If the cannons belonged to my mom, I bet my dad knows where they are! He can help us save the day!”

An off-putting silence hung over the Gems upon hearing this idea, all three of them glancing away from Steven rather awkwardly. Amethyst cleared her throat as Garnet kept up her usual stoic expression behind her shades, which left Pearl as the one to speak up. “Greg is… nice, Steven…” the white Gem began with an uncomfortable frown, though it was clear she was hiding her true opinion behind a layer of sugarcoating. “But I doubt Rose would entrust someone like him with such powerful weapons…”
“Your dad’s kind of a mess, Steven,” Amethyst pointed out rather bluntly, placing a hand on the confused young Gem’s shoulder.

“AMETHYST!” Pearl snapped hotly, shocked that the purple Gem would say something like that outright, even if she couldn’t deny it was true.

“I’m just sayin’,” Amethyst shrugged. “Even if she did leave them with him, he probably broke them, or lost them, or dropped them in the lake by now.”

“True,” Garnet agreed succinctly.

“No way,” Steven said, brushing their underestimations of his father aside. Unlike the Gems, he had all of the confidence in the world in his dad, and he had no problems showing it. “I’m sure he’s just keeping them somewhere safe. I’ll go ask him.”

“We can handle this, Steven,” Garnet assured him, sharing the sentiment that there would be no need for Greg’s amateur assistance. “Ready?” she addressed Amethyst.

“You know I am!” the purple Gem quipped daringly before letting the Gem leader easily lift her above her head. The kids all watched in confusion as Garnet aimed Amethyst, who had her body positioned as though she was about to dive in a body of water, before tossing her towards the Red Eye with an incredible amount of force. The purple Gem soared towards the orb, letting out a battle cry as she sailed higher and higher into the air before she abruptly hit it. This had no apparent effect however, as Amethyst merely bounced off of its metallic surface before she began to plummet towards the earth once more.

“I’m ok!” she shouted from afar, most likely having landed somewhere in the woods.

“Um… we’re gonna go…” Steven announced with a frown, though the Gems weren’t really paying him much attention anyway as they focused their efforts on the Red Eye.

“Okay, good luck,” Pearl said absently, waving the kids away as she resumed watching the Red Eye through the telescope while Garnet and Amethyst continued their current guerilla method of attacking it.

“So,” Steven began with a grin as he turned to Dipper and Mabel. “You guys wanna come with me to see if my dad has the cannons?”

“Of course!” Mabel eagerly agreed. “Anything to help out in another epic Gem mission!”

“But Steven, what if your dad doesn’t really have them?” Dipper asked apprehensively, not too fond of the idea that the entire town might be crushed in just a few hours.

“Oh come on, Dipper!” Mabel smirked teasingly. “Don’t be such a Negative Nancy! He’s gotta have at least one of them, right Steven?”

“I dunno,” Steven shrugged with a bright grin, not letting the possibility that he might be wrong deter him. “But it’s worth a shot. Now, come on! We have a town to save!”

Neither twin questioned the young Gem’s enthusiasm this time as they followed after him towards town, all three of them knowing that they were working on a hunch and a hunch alone. Yet, considering the giant menacing eye looming miles above their heads and growing ever closer with each passing hour, it was enough.
Soos whistled blithely to himself as he emerged from the Mystery Shack, toolbox in hand, to fix the weather vane like Stan had asked him to. Already feeling the sweltering summer heat, the handyman wiped the sweat from his brow and got to work, though not before taking a quick glance up at the apparently sunset-golden skies and the blood red orb he assumed was the sun.

“Huh,” Soos said to himself with a confused frown. “Guess it’s later than I thought. Oh well! That just means it’s almost time to head home and enjoy Abuelita’s world famous quesadillas!”

The handyman shrugged contentedly as he carried on with the repair, scaling the stepladder so he could reach the weather vane. He had scarcely even set his toolbox down on the roof when the gift shop door suddenly burst open, rattling the roof and nearly knocking Soos down from his perch.

“Soos!” Stan bellowed gruffly as he stepped out of the shack. “When you’re done with that weather vane, I need you to get in here and clean up the broken snow globe that this klutzy kid dropped. I would enforce a “no kids under five” policy, but I don’t wanna lose out on their parent’s money.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Pines!” Soos readily complied. “I’ll be in as soon as the new sun sets. You know, I think that one actually gets closer instead of going lower.”

“Soos, I don’t know what you’re babbling about this time but-” the conman cut himself off as soon as he stepped out from under the porch roof a bit, only to see that the usual yellow afternoon sun was being completely overshadowed by the red, meteor-like orb positioned in the eastern skies. “What in the heck is that?”

Greg Universe lived on the far end of town, though technically, he could live wherever he wanted given that he slept in his van. However, most of the time he kept up shop at the carwash he owned and operated singlehandedly. Even if it’s wasn’t too close to the temple, it still wasn’t that much of a walk through town to get there, but considering the circumstances they were facing, the kids hurried towards it at a rather quickened pace.

“You guys are gonna love my dad!” Steven grinned cheerfully, glancing back at the twins as he led the way to the carwash. “He’s really laid back and a lot of fun. Plus, he used to be a rock star!”

“Wow!” Mabel exclaimed, stars of wonder practically in her eyes. “Your dad was a real rock star? With like a band and everything?”

“Nah, he didn’t have a band or anything like that,” Steven explained. “He sang and played the guitar by himself, but he still sounds great! He told me he used to go on tours all over the place. In fact, that’s how he ended up here in Gravity Falls in the first place!”

“So… why did he end up giving all that up so he could work at… a car wash?” Dipper asked, his tone turning a bit deadpan as they arrived at the car wash in question, the pun of its name: “It’s a Wash!” not being lost on him.

“Because of my mom, of course,” Steven explained succinctly, his idealistic grin apparent. “Now, if I know my dad, then he’s probably relaxing in his van right about now…”

Greg’s van stuck out like a sore thumb as it sat in front of the carwash. Its paint job was an elaborate array of colors and patterns, though they all called a space aesthetic to mind as stars, comets, and planets embezzled themselves on the vehicle’s otherwise white, lightly dented
exterior. The words “Mr. Universe” were painted onto the side in purple, pointing towards the van’s origins as a tour vehicle. Dipper and Mabel followed close behind Steven as they approached the van, neither of them knowing what to expect save for what the young Gem had detailed about his father thus far. Steven, on the other hand, didn’t hesitate to bang on the van’s back doors rather loudly in an attempt to rouse him.

“Dad!” Steven called. “It’s me! Are you in there?”

There was no immediate response, which only prompted the young Gem to knock harder on the metallic doors. “Dad, come on! Wake up!” he shouted as he began to climb onto the van itself. After giving Dipper a daring grin, Mabel joined him, and together, the two began to shake the vehicle as much as they could.

“Mr. Steven’s dad!” Mabel called loudly. “Come on out! Me and my brother would love to meet you!”

“Yeah! And we have to save the world!” Steven urged as him and Mabel continued to rock the van lightly. It wasn’t too long before the sudden motion set the van’s alarm off, the high pitched, irritating noise blaring through the calm of the afternoon. And, as the kids had hoped, this was finally enough to wake Greg up.

The former rock star burst out of the van, its doors swinging open as the middle-aged man stumbled out, brandishing a waffle iron and a startled expression. “Who’s there?” he exclaimed in a. “I have a waffle iron!” Greg quickly stopped waving the iron around upon noticing Dipper, who was the only one of the kids still on the ground and who was somewhat taken aback in light of the man’s abrupt appearance. “Huh?”

“Dad!” Steven called from the top of the van as both him and Mabel peered down. “It’s me!”

Greg glanced upwards upon hearing his son’s voice, squinting in confusion as his eyes adjusted to the waning daylight. “Steven?”

With an energized grunt, Steven hopped off of the roof of the van, landing squarely in his bewildered father’s arms while Mabel dismounted from the vehicle the way she had scaled up it. “Dad!” Steven exclaimed once more, a wide grin on his face as Greg set him down. “I want you to meet my friends! is Dipper and Mabel.”

“Oh yeah,” Greg offered the twins a friendly smile. “Steven’s told me about you guys. It’s good to finally meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too, Mr. Universe,” Dipper replied politely, though he had barely finished speaking before Mabel jumped in with her usual verve.

“So, Steven told us that you used to be a rock star,” she began with an eager grin. “Just how famous were you? Did you ever sign a record deal? Did you go platinum? Did you ever get a lunchbox with your face on it? Did you-”

“Heh, I wasn’t that much of a big deal back in the day…” Greg cut her off with a humble laugh, somewhat overwhelmed by all of her questions, though her boundless energy certainly reminded him of his own son. “I used to dream about making it that big, but… well… sometimes things don’t always turn out the way you’d think they would…” He paused for a moment, smiling wistfully before he turned back to the twins. “But anyway, Steven says you kids are related to Mr. Pines?”
“Yep!” Mabel confirmed. “He’s our grunkle!”

“Which is short for great uncle,” Dipper added, knowing that not everyone initially understood the term they had come up with for Stan.

“Well, what a coincidence!” Greg said. “I used to work for Mr. Pines when I first came here to Gravity Falls. It was a part-time gig, of course, but it put food in my belly and gas in my van back when me and Steven’s mom were going out.”

“Whoa!” Steven gasped in awe upon hearing this new information. “Dad, you never told me you used to work at the Mystery Shack! That’s so cool!”

“Yeah, I don’t like to brag about it too much, but I was the first real employee there,” Greg said with a reminiscent laugh. “Mr. Pines was actually a pretty neat boss. In fact, he even helped me out with a small loan so I could buy the car wash here.”

“That’s funny; I can’t picture Stan giving a loan out to anyone now,” Dipper deadpanned, taking a small, harmless jab at his uncle’s miserly ways.

“Anyway, I gotta admit, you kids gave me a bit of a scare. I almost waffled your faces!” Greg chuckled as he put the waffle iron back in the van. “What are you three doing up so late in the first place?”

“It’s only about 4 in the afternoon…” Dipper informed him.

“Oh,” Greg reddened in embarrassment upon taking a glance up at the sky to see it was still light outside and that his perception of time was quite askew. “It was a… slow day at the carwash. So… what’s up, Steven? Did you just want to introduce me to your friends, or did you wanna see you old man, pal around, learn some lessons about life?” The former rock star grinned fondly as he took his son into a headlock and gave him a gentle noogie.

Steven couldn’t help but laugh at his father’s show of affection, though he was quick to remember the important matter at hand. “No, Dad,” he said as his grin faded into a concerned frown. “We need the Light Cannons that used to belong to Mom, so we can blow up that eyeball!” he exclaimed, pointing up to the Red Eye, which was steadily growing ever closer to the earth.

“Eyeball?” Greg asked incredulously as he turned to face where his son was pointing. His eyes widened as he saw the crimson orb, and he was quite taken aback to see Amethyst flying towards it from a distance, only to bounce off of it and fall back into the forest once more. “Wait, is this a magical thing?” he asked a bit uncomfortably as he turned back to Steven. “The Gems told me not to get involved with magic stuff… It could be dangerous, or interfere with what’s left of my hair…” He frowned as he rubbed his somewhat graying mullet, which didn’t quite reach the top of his head, even though it flowed down his back quite a ways.

“But the Gems need Mom’s cannons!” Steven urged. “You gotta know where they are! Or at least one of them!”

“And if you don’t remember, then maybe we could try to jog your memory!” Mabel suggested enthusiastically. “Are they in a sparkly cave dungeon somewhere? Or what about at the top of a giant volcano, filled with lava?! Or they might be buried in a huge treasure chest at the bottom of the lake!”

“Well, I don’t know about all that…” Greg said, scratching the back of his neck. “But I have an idea about where one of them might be… Maybe…”
“Throw me again!” Amethyst encouraged brazenly as she emerged out of the forest, returning from her and Garnet’s latest attempt at wearing down the Red Eye. “I think I’m starting to crack it!”

Garnet was about to do just that before Pearl cut in. “I… don’t think this is working…” she said with a worried frown. “All we’re doing is wasting what little time we have left. We’ll have to come up with a different plan.”

“There’s not much we can do without those cannons,” Garnet stated plainly, knowing just as well as the white Gem that simply launching Amethyst at the Red Eye wasn’t going to do much good.

“I hope Steven isn’t too disappointed when he finds out Greg doesn’t have them,” Pearl sighed. “But it makes no sense that Rose would leave them with him without telling us, or at least me. After all, she used to tell me everything…”

“Yeah, yeah…” Amethyst said, rolling her eyes. “We know, P. You’ve bragged about how much Rose trusted you a billion times. We get it.”

Pearl was just about to send a biting retort back at the purple Gem before their conversation was abruptly interrupted. “Hey!” Stan called gruffly as he marched towards the trio of Gems, Soos trailing not too far behind. “What’s the big idea here?”

“What are you talking about?” Garnet asked calmly, even though she had an idea about what he meant.

“Don’t play dumb,” Stan accused crossly. “I’m talking about that huge red thing in the sky! Trouble follows you three around like a shadow, which means you probably know what it is, so spill it.”

“Ugh, Stan, we don’t have time for this!” Pearl said impatiently. “If you couldn’t already tell, we’re in the middle of trying to deal with it ourselves. But if you must know, it’s called a Red Eye and-”

“And if we don’t get rid of it, it’s gonna smash into the town and take us all out!” Amethyst said with mock dramaticism, largely so she could get on Pearl’s nerves, which she succeeded at.

“Ha! Yeah right!” Stan laughed, thinking that this was just another of the purple Gem’s infamous jokes. “What, do you think I was born yesterday?”

“Compared to the three of us, you are!” Amethyst chuckled, fully joking this time as she referred to the long lifespans of each of the Gems.

“Amethyst wasn’t joking,” Garnet said succinctly. “Either times.”

Upon hearing this confirmation from the most serious of the Gems, Stan sobered up and took another glance up at the Red Eye, finally realizing the immense threat it posed. “But… you dudes are gonna get rid of it… right?” Soos asked the Gems nervously, hoping that they would be able to handle this danger.

“Well of course we are,” Pearl said with apt confidence, before dropping her voice down to a mutter. “As soon as we figure out how to destroy it…”

“What?!” Stan exclaimed, aghast. “You mean you don’t even know how? I thought you three were supposed to protect the town from magical nonsense like this?”
“Well, Garnet tried throwing me at it a whole bunch of times, but it’s not doing much...” Amethyst admitted with a sheepish frown. “So... yeah. We’re basically screwed. Unless Steven, Dipper, and Mabel can somehow find those Light Cannons. But the chances of that happening are... pretty low.”

“You three sent my niece and nephew off to go find some magical cannons or something like that?” Stan asked all three of them, raising a caustic eyebrow.

“First of all, we didn’t send them,” Pearl corrected pointedly. “They wanted to go look for them with Steven. Second of all, they’re not in any danger at all. They’re across town asking Greg if he has them. So you have no reason to be concerned, Stan.”

“You actually thought I was worried about those knuckleheads?” Stan scoffed, crossing his arms. “At least if they’re off bothering Greg, they ain’t bothering me for a change.”

“So, uh... What are you guys gonna do about that red thing?” Soos interjected anxiously, still frowning up at the looming Red Eye.

“We’ll think of something,” Garnet assured, even though the resourceful Gem leader herself was starting to run low on options as time began to run out. “We always do.”

As it turned out, Greg’s theorized location for where the Light Cannons might be stored was far from any spectacular, mythical hide-out like Mabel had speculated. Instead, it was the simple, yet sizable storage bin the former rock star rented, which was fortunately just a few blocks away from the car wash.

“Wow!” Steven exclaimed with a bright grin as the four of them arrived at the storage facility. “A magical storage unit!”

“Ha, not exactly,” Greg laughed as he searched his pocket for the key. “But some would say there’s magic inside...” He flashed a mysterious grin at the kids, though all three of them returned his dramatic statement with clueless stares of confusion. “It’s just a shed I use to keep things that don’t fit in the van. If those cannons are anywhere, they’ll be in here.”

Without any further ado, Greg unlocked the storage bin and pulled the large door up and open. The unit was a mess, to say the least; it was an unorganized cluster of boxes piled upon boxes, filled to the brim with countless items and articles that didn’t fit in those boxes and took up the sparse space in between the pile. It was clear that Greg hadn’t really had the time or energy to go through half of what he had tucked away in there, but he still grinned optimistically as they all stood before it, hardly phased with the disaster at all.

“It’d be a miracle if the cannons even fit in there at all...” Dipper said with a dismayed frown, much less ready to take on the ordeal of searching through the messy bin than Steven and Mabel were.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Mabel asked with a daring grin. “Let’s get looking!”

“Wait!” Steven stopped her as she began to lead the way towards the bin. “If we’re going in there, we’re gonna need some gear.”

Gathering the proper “supplies” from what they could salvage from near the entrance of the storage bin, Steven and Mabel managed to fashion what they deemed to be the proper gear for
investigating the cluttered unit. Steven tied a flashlight to his head as something of a headlamp while Mabel took up a yardstick that could be used to poke and prod through the layers of boxes. Though Dipper turned down his sister’s offer of using a trash can lid as a shield, he did agree to being tethered along by an extension chord along with Mabel and Steven, so the three of them would be able to find their way out if they lost themselves in the mess.

“Ok,” Steven said with confidence as the three of them stood before the daunting mountain of clutter, prepared to take on this challenge. “Here we go.”

“Good luck!” Greg called after the kids as he watched them squeeze their way through the first layer of boxes. They all needed to crawl just to slip inside, but they managed to work their way in as Steven led the way, his flashlight dimly illuminating the dark, crowded space.

“Wow!” Mabel exclaimed in awe as they all got a better look of the depths of the storage bin and its diverse contents. “Your dad has so much cool stuff in here, Steven!”

“I know, right?” Steven agreed, looking around with interest. “It’s like a Dad museum in here!”

“If it was a museum, it’d be the messiest one ever,” Dipper remarked, somewhat intimidated by all of the clutter. “Mr. Universe, have you ever thought about having a yard sale? You know, so you can get rid of some of this junk and have more space?”

“Yeah, I’ve been meaning to for a while now…” Greg admitted with a sheepish, somewhat guilty chuckle. “I guess I’m just a little hesitant about parting ways with some of this old stuff…”

“I can see why!” Steven said with a grin as he spotted a vague, cannon-like shape in the shadows nearby. He let out a small gasp of excitement as he pointed his light in that direction, only to find that it was simply a golf club hanging from above. “Do you golf, Dad?” he asked curiously, leaving the golf club where it was as they moved on.

“Eh, I’d like to think of myself as someone who would golf… eventually.”

“Whoa! Look at that!” Mabel exclaimed, pointing to another shadow deeper along, one that was undeniably similar to a cannon in shape. She strayed from the path a bit to reach for it, her grin widening as the features of the handheld, gun-like object growing ever clearer. “Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh!” she gushed as she picked it up, showing it off to the boys. “This has to be it!”

“It looks kinda… small to be a Light Cannon,” Dipper said with an underwhelmed frown, though Steven was much more open to the possibility that it was.

“Try it!” the young Gem encouraged heartily. Mabel did so, shooting the cannon towards the bare wall only for a rolled-up tee shirt fly out of the barrel instead of a beam of magical light.

“‘Buy T-Shirt Cannons?’” Mabel read the print on the tee shirt aloud as she unfurled it, setting the t-shirt cannon down as the trio continued their search.

“Called it,” Dipper said with a small, somewhat smug grin, though Mabel was quick to offer payback as she gave him a light punch on the shoulder.

The kids were steadily approaching the back of the storage bin as Steven caught sight of a rather interesting box along their path and he immediately recognized its contents. “Hey, Dad!” he called back to his father. “There’s a whole box of your old CDs in here!”

“So you did have a record deal!” Mabel exclaimed with satisfaction that she had been right. “I
“Oh, nah,” Greg said with a wave of his hand. “I burnt those CDs myself way back when. I couldn’t give those things away. You know, before I ran the car wash, when I was a one-man band, I traveled the whole country.”

“We know, Dad,” Steven said with a good-natured chuckle. “I already told Dipper and Mabel all about that.”

“Heh, yeah, well…” Greg laughed in slight embarrassment at being redundant in his reminiscing. “When I came to play a concert here in Gravity Falls, no one showed up except-”

“An ALLIGATOR!” Steven finished dramatically.

“Whoa, really?!” Mabel asked, fully buying it, though Dipper merely rolled his eyes, knowing that Steven was probably joking.

“No, it was Steven’s mom, Rose,” Greg said with a small, fond smile as he thought of his late love.

“Yeah, I know!” Steven quipped as the kids continued to dig ever deeper into the bin.

“Me and Rose hit it off right from the start,” Greg continued with a contented sigh, caught up in memories long gone by. “And after I settled down here, we were always together. Until she gave up her physical form to bring Steven into the world.”

“Wait, that’s what happened to your mom, Steven?” Dipper asked, somewhat confused by this odd explanation.

“Yeah,” Steven said with a nod, though he still managed to keep up his usual cheerful attitude despite the grim subject. “The Gems told me that Mom passed her gem down to me, which is why she isn’t around anymore. I don’t really understand it that much, but she must have been really nice to be willing to do that for me.”

“She was more than just nice,” Greg smiled, the very thought of Rose filling him with wistful, happy longing. “She was sweet, and selfless, and funny, and brave, and beautiful, and amazing. I don’t know what a magical lady like her ever saw in a plain old dope like me.”

“Aw…” Mabel mused, always a sucker for sweeping love stories. “How romantic!”

Steven was so caught up in listening to his father recount details about his mother that he didn’t even notice the framed photo in his way until he heard the breaking of glass underneath his knee. “Uh oh…” he frowned as he picked up the picture, seeing that the glass of the frame had a sizable crack in it. “Um… Dad, I broke a photo… The one of you and Mom…”

“That’s your mom, Steven?” Dipper asked in amazement as he stole a glance at the picture, which featured Greg and Rose blissfully side by side.

Rose Quartz was indeed as lovely as Greg had made her out to be. Her features were soft and pleasant, even though her eyes were closed, though there was a contented smile on her full coral lips. Her hair was a bewildering abundance of lofty pink curls, the somehow perfect ringlets framing her face and spinning their way long past the borders of the picture. She was clearly taller than Greg, though he stood alongside her all the same, grinning up at her with adoration despite the hot dog that was half-shoved into his mouth.

“Wow…” Mabel whispered in awe as she looked at the photo as well. “Steven… she’s so
“Yeah…” Steven said with a small, though somewhat sad smile as he stroked the side of the photo with his thumb. “She was, wasn’t she? Oh, but again, I’m really sorry about breaking it, Dad!”

“Don’t worry about it, buddy,” Greg reassured him, not at all angry with his son for an innocent accident. “If every pork chop were perfect, we wouldn’t have hot dogs.”

No sooner had the former rock star said this than a bright, pinking glow alerted all three kids, diverting their attention to its source, which was near the back of the storage unit. At first, it was so bright and sudden that it practically blinded them, though as it faded a bit, they were all able to see the large pink cannon sitting, still emitting a soft, magical light.

“Wait… is that…?” Mabel trailed off though Steven was quick to finish for her.

“It is!” he gasped in excitement. “It’s one of the Light Cannons!”

“But where’s the other one?” Dipper asked, glancing around and noticing that this cannon seemed to be the only one there.

“Wait… they’re not together?” Steven frowned, his zeal dimming a bit. “But… I thought… If it’s not here, then where could it be?”

“Don’t worry!” Mabel encouraged. “I’m sure we’ll find it soon! For now, we should probably get this huge thing outta here. Anyone wanna carry it?”

“Uh… why don’t we just use the chord?” Dipper suggested, not too fond of the idea of hauling the most likely very heavy cannon all the way through the messy storage unit.

“Good idea!” Steven said before calling out to his father outside. “Hey, Dad! We found one of them!”

“Really?” Greg asked, actually taken aback that Rose had trusted him enough to hide one of her precious cannons away in his storage bin. “I’ll get the van!”

He did just that as the kids securely tied the cannon down with the extension cord, the end of which was still outside so Greg could latch it onto the back bumper of his van. In truth, their plan hadn’t been very well thought out, for as Greg slowly inched the van forward, it indeed pulled the cannon forward. However, doing so ended up pushing most of the tightly packed contents out of the storage bin as well, until the cannon was free and most of the boxes and clutter were in a disheveled pile right outside.

“This thing could help save the town!” Steven urged as him, Dipper and Mabel emerged from the storage bin themselves. “We’ve gotta get it back to the temple!”

“Easier said than done,” Greg said with a frown. “It’s too big to fit in the van.”

Coincidentally enough, a wagon that had once been in the storage unit happened to roll by them, giving them all pretty much the same idea. Though it took some doing and some teamwork, the four of them all managed to lift the hefty cannon up onto the wagon. Of course as soon as they gently let it down, its weight abruptly caused the bottom of the wagon to collapse entirely, leaving the cannon’s base still on the ground, though it was still surrounded by the wagon’s wheels.

“We… really should have thought this plan through better,” Dipper said, doubting that they’d be getting the cannon anywhere like this.
“I’m sure it will be fine,” Mabel said with a wave of her hand, clearly not concerned. “Now come on! Let’s get this bad boy to the temple!”

Knowing they had no time to lose, everyone quickly piled into the van, Greg and Steven taking the only two front seats while Dipper and Mabel sat semi-comfortably on top of the large pile of clothes fight behind them. As the van pulled forward, the cannon dragged along behind it, tethered to the back bumper as it was still contained by the sides of the wagons, though not the bottom.

“Are you sure it’s gonna be ok?” Steven asked his dad as he glanced out the side mirror, seeing how the cannon was scraping along the bare pavement unrelentingly as they headed through town.

Greg shrugged, not really having an answer to that question as he defaulted to his usual catchphrase. “If every pork chop were perfect-”

“We wouldn’t have hot dogs!” Steven chimed in, finishing the statement.

“I’m pretty sure that’s not how hot dogs are made…” Dipper remarked with a frown.

“Sheesh…” Greg muttered as he glanced up out of the window towards the Red Eye, which they were gradually getting closer to as it was getting closer to them. “That thing’s getting huge. It’s freaking me out.”

“Can’t the van go any faster?” Mabel asked eagerly, leaning forward a bit.

“This is faster,” Greg replied, somewhat ashamed over how the van could only handle going about thirty miles an hour at most.

“Don’t worry,” Steven reassured all of them with a blithe grin. “Everything’s gonna be great! We’ll take this cannon to the Gems and then we’ll hurry up and find the other one!”

“Yeah!” Dipper and Mabel agreed in whole-hearted unison, both of them resolved to do whatever they had to to help save the town.

“Hey, Dad? Mind if I put on one of your CDs?” Steven asked his father with a small grin, pulling out the copy of the single he had tucked away in his pocket back at the storage bin. “It’ll help lighten the mood!”

“Aw… really?” Greg asked, clearly embarrassed. “You guys don’t wanna hear that old thing…”

“Yeah we do!” Mabel exclaimed encouragingly. “Come on, Mr. Universe! Let’s play it!”

“Play it! Play it!” Steven cheered as he inserted the disc into the van’s CD player. The rock single blared over the speakers, rumbling the van with the loud guitar riff that opened it. The intro only lasted for a few seconds though, before the lyrics started, with Greg’s voice singing passionately to the upbeat tune.

“I know I’m not that tall, I know I’m not that smart, But let me drive my van into your heart!”

“Let me drive my van into your heart!” Steven chimed in on the song, already knowing the words from having heard it countless times. Greg chuckled, albeit nervously as he looked to the Red Eye again. The cannon still dragged faithfully behind the van as it careened through downtown, many of the ordinary residents of Gravity Falls pausing their usual activity to watch it go by in confusion, the sound of metal against cement accompanied by the ballad thumping from the vehicle.

“I know I’m not that rich, I’m trying to get my start…”
“So let me drive my van into your heart!” Steven sang along and this time Mabel zealously joined him, both of them singing along to the melody as the van turned onto the path that led to the temple.

The song continued to blast from the van even as it approached the Gems, still observing the Red Eye from the base of the hill along with Stan and Soos. At first, none of them noticed the van as they all argued amongst themselves over what to do about the incoming orb, and even from a distance, it was quite clear that the Gems and the con man were quite frustrated with each other and their situation.

“Why don’t one of you just go up there with a baseball bat or something and knock the stupid thing back up into space?” Stan proposed somewhat sarcastically, having already suggested several other actual ideas that had all been quickly shot down.

“Oh, please,” Pearl rolled her eyes at such a ridiculous thought. “That would never work. None of our weapons would even put a dent in the Red Eye; a bat would shatter into pieces upon simply striking it.”

“Not if you hit it hard enough,” Stan remarked with a caustic grin.

“Hey, I’m all for hitting it with stuff,” Amethyst agreed, smiling daringly at the Red Eye. “Maybe we could throw a car or a house or something huge at it. That might work, right?”

Garnet and Pearl were both about to reject this idea before the van broke through the woods and arrived on the scene, still tugging the Light Cannon behind it. All three of the Gems stared at the pink cannon in shock, barely even noticing as Steven poked his head of out the window and offered a cheerful greeting. “Hey guys!”

“I can’t believe it…” Pearl muttered in awe. “He actually had one of them!”

“We’re SAVED!” Amethyst cheered exuberantly, overwhelmed with relief.

“No quite,” Garnet remarked, not really needing to remind them that they were still a Light Cannon short.

“What is that thing?” Stan asked, raising an eyebrow at the cannon. “Some sort of flower gun?”

“It’s a cannon!” Steven exclaimed happily as he got out of the van and ran over to the group, Dipper and Mabel following not too far behind as Greg positioned the van and the cannon just right. “We’re gonna use it to save the town!”

“Let me get this straight,” Stan began as he gave all three kids a scrutinizing look, particularly the twins. “You three actually managed to find something that can blow up that eyesore?”

“We sure did, Grunkle Stan!” Mabel beamed proudly.

“Well, we found one of them, anyway,” Dipper corrected, well aware that there was still work to be done.

“Where’s the other one?” Pearl asked, concern overriding relief. “Didn’t Greg have it?”

“Hey, my storage bin can only fit so much!” Greg called out defensively as he continued parking the van.

“So if he doesn’t have it, then where is it?” Amethyst asked the kids.
“We… don’t really know,” Steven admitted sheepishly.

“Well you have to go find it!” Pearl exclaimed insistently. “We don’t have much time left. At this rate, there’s only about an hour or so left until the Red Eye crashes into the earth!”

“Wait… you guys are actually trusting us to go find it?” Dipper asked, somewhat taken aback at the fact that the Gems didn’t take this mission upon themselves. After all, they usually insisted on handling such daunting matters on their own, without relying on any outside help. It was quite a sudden surprise to hear them actively asking for assistance, especially with such an important task.

“You three found the first cannon,” Garnet said with confidence. “We’re sure you can find the other one.”

“Yeah, you guys got this!” Amethyst assured. “But uh… just don’t take too long finding it. Otherwise… we’re all pretty much toast.”

“Amethyst!” Pearl scolded.

“Just sayin’”

“You dudes can do it!” Soos encouraged with a wide grin and a thumbs up.

Steven, Dipper, and Mabel all gladly accepted this optimism in the mission that had been thrust upon the, though they were more than ready to tackle it, despite not having any clear leads. However, the twins were quick to notice that the only one who was making no affirmation of confidence was, of course, their own grunkle.

“You’re… not gonna try and stop us, Grunkle Stan?” Dipper asked hesitantly, knowing how the con man felt about the Gems and their affairs.

“I don’t know if I really buy the idea that two ‘magical’ pink cannons can take that eye out,” Stan said as he crossed his arms stoically, pretending to not really care about the matter that much. “But I don’t really care as long as it doesn’t end up crashing into the shack and costing me hundreds in property damage and lost merchandise.”

“Don’t worry, Grunkle Stan!” Mabel grinned reassuringly. “We’ll knock that eye right out of the sky! Right, fellas?”

“Right!” Steven and Dipper unanimously agreed.

“Well? What are you kids waiting for?” Pearl urged anxiously, taking a nervous glance up at the looming Red Eye. “We’ll stay here and get the first cannon into position. You three go find the other one. And hurry! The entire town is counting on us!”

“And we won’t let them down!” Steven said boldly, already leading the way towards town so they could find a starting place for locating the second cannon. “Let’s go, you guys! One cannon down, one to go!”

To be continued...
Chapter 10, Part 2: Magic and Mystery

Chapter Summary

In which the kids are still cannon hunting, the journal is cryptic, and we end on a boatload of foreshadowing

Chapter Notes

Well it took a while, but here’s part to the first arc ender! Enjoy! (also, use the ceasar cipher to decode the codes in the chapter!)

DQ HBH LQ WKH VNB
RQOB PHDQV WR SUB
ZDWFKLQJ IURP RXW LQ VSDFH
ZDLWLQJ WR UHWXUQ WR WKLV SODFH

Stan frowned skeptically as he watched Dipper, Mabel, and Steven enthusiastically hurry off towards town, their mission to find the second Light Cannon clear as ever. Though he didn’t want to admit it in front of the kids, he did in fact have his doubts about them succeeding in this daunting task. Sure, they had located the first cannon, but since Greg had it all this time, it had been a rather easy find. But even the Gems themselves didn’t seem to have the slightest clue about where the other one might be, which was quite alarming considering the fact that the Red Eye was drawing every nearer with each passing minute. And it was only as the kids were far out of earshot that the con man turned to the Gems to voice these concerns.

“Do you three really think those kids can find that cannon?” Stan asked with a caustic frown, his arms crossed as he watched them untie the first cannon from the back of Greg’s van.

“Hey, they found the first one, didn’t they?” Amethyst shrugged, seeing no reason not to have any confidence in the kids.

“Besides, it’s not like we have too many other options at the moment…” Pearl said fretfully, harboring her own worries about whether or not they would be able to retrieve the second Light Cannon.

“You know how determined Steven can be, Mr. Pines,” Greg laughed good-naturedly, joining the group after he finished parking the van. “And from the looks of it, your niece and nephew seem to be the same way.”

“A bit too much if you ask me…” Stan mumbled somewhat disgruntledly. “But what if they don’t find it, huh? What happens then?”

“Then we’ll figure something else out,” Garnet said, though the vagueness in her calm tone was
“Garnet’s right,” Pearl agreed firmly. “We’re not about to let this town be destroyed under our watch. We’ll do what we have to in order to protect it.”

“Like what?” Soos asked curiously.

None of the Gems answered this question at first as they all exchanged an apprehensive glance. In truth, none of them really knew what they were going to do if the kids failed to find the second canon. Despite their combined strength and abilities, none of them were quite strong or skilled enough to take on such an enormous threat as the Red Eye without any external force or weapon. Once again, they all silently mourned the fact that Rose was no longer with them, for certainly she would have brought both of her Light Cannons forth as soon as the Red Eye appeared in the sky. But even without the cannons, she would have been able to come up with a decisive, effective plan for eradicating it and protecting the people of Gravity Falls as she always used to do. But, as the Gems were all too painfully aware of, Rose was gone, and now, their last hope seemed to rest in the hands of three optimistic, if not inexperienced children, who were currently on a time-pressed mission with nothing but their own determination and ingenuity to aid them. In the eyes of the Crystal Gems, this certainly seemed to be an ironic twist of fate.

“Like… well…” Pearl began with relative uncertainty in her tone before Garnet fortunately cut in.

“Like combining our efforts together in order to bring it down,” the Gem leader explained simply, even if her answer was incredibly ambiguous.

“Yeah, well as great as that sounds, it’d be better if those kids hurry up and find that cannon,” Stan said, masking his worry with sarcasm as usual. “I’m not too excited about the idea of being flattened into a pancake.”

“I think you mean Stan-cake!” Amethyst joked before breaking into a round of impish laughter, though she was largely ignored by the other Gems, who found it hard to find levity in a moment like this.

“They’ll find it,” Garnet said with clear, firm confidence. “We underestimated them before. We are not going to underestimate them again.”

“Okay,” Dipper began as he held out a map of Gravity Falls so that Steven and Mabel could see. They had picked up the free tourist map from the Big Donut, which was where the young Gem had insisted they start their search for the Light Cannon, if only to pick up a few donuts for the road. The trio sat together on the sidewalk of the donut shop now as they tried to come up with a good way to jumpstart their search and finish it as quickly as possible. “So as far as we know, the other cannon could be literally anywhere here in Gravity Falls.”

“Or it might not even be in Gravity Falls at all,” Steven interjected. “There are a lot of Gem places out there that the Gems and I have to use the warp pad to get to. Mom could have hid it at one of them.”

“Not helping, Steven,” Dipper said with slight exasperation in his tone, especially as he glanced up to see the Red Eye hovering overhead, serving as a reminder that time was not on their side. “But anyway, I think we should start by narrowing down a list of all of the places the cannon might be.”

“Good idea, bro-bro!” Mabel said enthusiastically. “So what kind of place would be the hiding
spot for a magical pink glowy cannon?"

“Out in the forest maybe?” Steven suggested as Dipper circled the woods on the map as a place to check. “There’s all sorts of weird, cool stuff hiding out there!”

“And it probably wouldn’t be stored somewhere in town…” Dipper mused, drawing an x over most of the stores and businesses on the map.

“It’s not out near the Mystery Shack,” Mabel assumed. “I’m pretty sure we would have seen it by now if it was.”

“And it’s not at the temple,” Steven concluded. “After all, the Gems don’t know where it is, and they’d be the first to know if it was there.”

“Ok, so that leaves us with the forest, the lake, and the cliffs as being the best places to look,” Dipper said as he looked over the map with a frown. “That’s… a lot of ground to cover in not a whole lot of time…”

“Maybe we could split up?” Steven suggested, even if he wasn’t too fond of the idea to be perfectly honest. “Oh, but then how would we get the cannon back to the Gems if one of us found it…?”

“Nah, I think we should stick together,” Mabel grinned, wrapping her arms around both boys’ shoulders. “After all, three heads are better than one!”

“Still, there has to be a better way to look for it…” Dipper said thoughtfully, frowning down at the map once more. However, as he did so, a sudden idea at last came to him, one that he had actually thought of before, but only now remembered as he shifted his gaze up towards the Red Eye once more. “Wait a minute… the journal!” he exclaimed, his expression brightening, despite the fact that Mabel and Steven were a bit confused.

“You think the journal might have something about the Light Cannon written in it?” the young Gem asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Maybe,” Dipper shrugged, as he pulled the journal out of his vest. “After all, it did have info on the Centipeedle in it. Who’s to say the author didn’t know about other Gem-related things too?”

Convinced that this was a solid lead, Dipper began to leaf through the journal, brushing past pages detailing gnomes, ghosts, and gargoyles in search of anything that told of Gems or, at the very least, the elusive Light Cannon. While he had read several of its more interesting pages already, he hadn’t had time to look over everything contained within the thick, rather complex volume, including most of its latter pages. However, as he flipped through the journal’s second half, he began to notice something odd about the crinkled, browning pages, or even more specifically, their randomly varying thickness. “Wait…” he muttered in confusion as he thumbed a corner of one of the apparently thicker pages, running over a strange, small, metallic bump lining the very edge of the paper. “Are these pages… stapled?”

“Whoa…” Mabel gasped as she took the bottom of the page and felt out the rather small, barely visible bottom of the staple there. “They totally are! Weird…”

“But… who would staple these pages together? And why?” Steven asked with a frown as he looked to the contents of the page in question, which only seemed to have some basic information about a rather generic-looking monster, though it certainly did seem like the kind of beast the Gems would have encountered in the past.
“I don’t know…” Dipper said, though he didn’t hesitate to begin picking away at the staples, hoping to free the obscured pages trapped by them. “But we’re about to find out.”

As soon as Dipper removed the staples and turned the next page, all three kids gasped in shock and amazement at what they saw. The formerly-hidden pages were covered in detailed sketches of the Crystal Gems themselves, accompanied by a variety of notes and descriptions, though interlaced throughout much of the script were codes and cryptograms in place of certain words. Each Gem seemed to have her own page, including Rose Quartz herself, much to Steven’s great surprise.

“W-what is all this?” the young Gem muttered, slightly disconcerted by the revelation that the already mysterious journal contained such specific information on the Gems.

“This is incredible!” Dipper grinned widely, immensely fascinated by all of these new facts and details about the Gems. Just by skimming over these first few pages alone, he learned that Garnet could withstand incredibly high temperatures, Amethyst could perfectly shapeshift into a person or object after only seeing them once, and Pearl could create holographic replicas of herself at a whim. “Look at all this! I knew the journal had information about Gem stuff, but I didn’t think they’re be anything about the Gems themselves! We could learn so much about them from this!”

“Yeah, but… why is all this stuff in the journal anyway?” Steven asked with a somewhat uneasy frown, feeling as though delving into such information without the Gem’s consent was something of an invasion of their privacy.

“Maybe the guy who wrote the journal was friends with the Gems,” Mabel suggested. “And so they let him write about them in his book because they’re so cool!”

“Oh my gosh!” Dipper exclaimed, simply beside himself with excitement at this possibility. “If that’s true, then that means that the Gems would know who the author of the journal is! Finding out who wrote this thing will be as easy as just asking them!”

“Uh… maybe we should focus on finding that other Light Cannon first…” Steven cut in, trying to hide the fact that he wasn’t exactly comfortable with the idea of presenting the journal to the Gems now. After all, he knew better than anyone that the Gems much preferred to keep to themselves, and any unknown scrap of knowledge about them and their abilities came few and far between. And, for the most part, the young Gem was just fine with that. Yet, for some reason he couldn’t quite discern, the thought of showing them the journal and all of the information it contained about them didn’t sit well with him. What if the author had obtained that information without their permission? Certainly, the Gems would be furious upon seeing any number of their secrets being inscribed in any way, even if a lot of the notes in the journal were obscured by jumbled letters and codes. The last thing Steven wanted to do was upset anyone, especially his illustrious guardians. Which was why he was quick to switch the focus of the conversation back to the dilemma at hand, knowing that the problem with the journal had to wait compared to the impending destruction posed by the Red Eye.

“Oh yeah!” Mabel exclaimed, reaching over to flip through the pages of the journal, much to Dipper’s slight aggravation. “Let’s see if there’s something about that cannon in here!”

“I’m sure there is,” Dipper said a bit matter-of-factly as they leafed through the journal, passing pages detailing the Gem temple, the Crystal Gems’ weapons, and their group manifesto, all of which were things that he made a mental note to read over late. However, after a few more pages of various Gem monsters, the kids finally happened upon exactly what they were looking for: an image on the dual Light Cannons themselves with two pages worth of notes describing them.
“There they are!” Steven exclaimed with a relieved grin, thankful for both the information as well as the fact that they had moved away from the Gems’ mysterious connection to the author. “So what’s it say? Are there any clues about where the other one might be?”

“Let’s see …” Dipper used as he looked over the Light Cannon entry before reading it aloud. “The dual Laser Light Cannons are among the Crystal Gems’ most powerful auxiliary weapons. They appear to be powered by an internal, contained source of magic and, upon activation, they emit a conjoined beam of pure energy strong enough to tear through many manner of physical material, terrestrial or otherwise. It should be noted that the cannons can only function to their maximum capacity when they are paired together, for their power is approximately halved when they are apart.”

“Blah, blah, blah,” Mabel groaned boredly, not particularly interested in the superfluous description. “We already know all this stuff. What about where it’s at?”

“Hold on a minute,” Dipper said as he quickly skimmed over a few of the other notes about the cannons and their functionality before flipping the page to see that it had little else on it aside from what looked like a poem, with a brief description at the top. “Because of how potentially powerful the Light Cannons are together, Rose believes that it is safer to store them separately when not in use. It is for this reason that she recently entrusted me with the care of one of her cannons until the Gems have need of it. While I can’t state here where exactly we agreed to hide it, we did collaborate on a series of clues as to its location, which are inscribed below.”

“Wow…” Steven said in awed realization, his former concerns about the Gems learning about the journal slightly diminishing in light of this. “So the Gems really did know the author! Or at least my mom did. And she must have trusted him a lot to let him take care of one of her cannons! I wonder who he could be…?”

“We can figure that out later,” Dipper said, even though he was even more curious about the identity of the mysterious author now more than ever. “For now, we should see what these clues say.”

The clues took the form of a two-stanza poem, scrawled in a handwriting that was obviously different from that of the author’s but still just as elegant. The poem itself was vague and cryptic even upon a first reading, though that only made sense, considering the powerful weapon it was meant to keep hidden:

“My cannon hides within the heart
Its key within the mind.
Go down to where the waters part
And search for gold of a different kind.”

“For those who are truly smart,
This riddle shall soon unwind.
For near the place where mysteries start,
There, magic, you shall surely find.”

“Well, that’s a pretty poem and everything,” Mabel said with a slightly confounded frown. “But what the heck does it mean? Dipper, you read a lot of nerdy mystery books and junk. Do you get any of this stuff?”

“I don’t exactly read a ton of poetry, Mabel,” Dipper frowned, rolling his eyes before looking to the riddle once more. “But this can’t be too hard to figure out, right? I don’t know what the whole part about the cannon being in the heart and the key in the mind means, but going to ‘where the
“That could mean the lake!” Steven exclaimed brightly. “But… where are we supposed to find gold down there?”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out!” Mabel proclaimed with a bold grin, already taking the initiative as she stood, motioning for the boys to do the same. “To the lake we go!”

The scarlet aura the Red Eye cast upon the town seemed to steadily intensify as the kids hurried for the lake, reminding them that they were on a right schedule for decoding the journal’s riddle. While Steven and Mabel took the lead, merrily conversing about a wide variety of trivial, lighthearted subjects from sweaters to ice cream, Dipper hung back a bit behind them, intently pouring over the newly-discovered section of the journal. While it did indeed contain previously unknown information on the Gems, several portions of it were frustratingly encrypted in code, as if to keep the already obscured texted hidden even more. And yet, that hardly deterred Dipper as he read through the scrambled passages anyway, trying his best to infer what they might say despite the staggering amount of cryptograms interspersed within them.

“Early on into my investigation of Gravity Falls, I noticed a group of elusive female beings, quite possibly of some magical origin, who seem protect the town from danger. Previously, I had been unable to get close enough to get any specific details, but after finally getting the chance to converse with them face-to-face, I learned many fascinating things!”

“Since Gravity Falls is home to many potentially dangerous anomalies, it is fortunate that the Crystal Gems are here to protect its ordinary residents from them. The Gems hail from wkh idu uhdffkhv ri rxwhu vsdfh, rq d sodqhw wkhb rqob uhihu wr dv "Krphzruog". They are, in layman’s terms, a race of polymorphic sentient rocks, making them “Gems” in both literally and by name. The Gems are capable of using a wide host of magical abilities and powers, including vkdshvkliwlqj, uhjhqhudwlrq diwhu frqvlghudeoh gdpdjh, dqg wkhlq skbyfdo irupv, zkfk lv dq delowlb wkhlq fdo “ixvrlq”. Despite the fact that they are qrw ri wkh hidawk, they are still devoted to its protection, and, according to my understanding, wkhh kdyh ehhq grlqj vr iru wkrxvdqgv ri bhduv."

The general explanation about what the Gems were was interesting enough, aside from being broken apart by the codes tucking away any sensitive information, the sections on each individual Gem were even more intriguing.

“Garnet is the ixvrlq ri wkhlq Jhpv Uxeb dqg Vdsskluh, dqg ghvufdevh khuvhio dv ehlqj wkh xowlpdwh dpdodpdlwlrq ri oryh. She is physically the strongest member of the group, though it does seem as though the physical weight of an object has little effect on a Gem. In battle, she wields a pair of durable gauntlets summoned from her gems, and her sense of logic and iruvljkw fdsdelolwlhv, ru ixwxuh ylvrlq make her an invaluable member of the Crystal Gems.”

“Pearl serves as the intellectual strategist of the Gems, and her loyalty and devotion to Rose Quartz are without question. In fact, Rose and Pearl zhuw wkhh ruflqdo Fubwvdo Jhpv, dqg irxjkw vlgh eb vlgh lq wkhlq zdru djdlqvw Krphzruog ilyh wkrxvdqg bhduv djr. Her weapon is a lithe spear, which, when paired with her graceful abilities in sword dueling, provide her with a deadly set of skills for any opponent.”

“Amethyst is the youngest Crystal Gem, irxqg eb Urvh dqg wkhlq rwkhuv lq wkhlq Nlqghujduwhq (vhh mrxqdo 1) kxqghuv ri bhduv djr. As a testament to her more immature, carefree nature, she is
innately curious about the human world, which is most likely a result of her ehlqj d qdwlyh ri hduwk khuvhoi. Despite her relative inexperience compared to the other Gems, she still possesses admirable strength and speed on the battlefield, with her summoned whip and mastery over vkdshvkliwlqj.”

And of course, there was the final entry on the individual Gems, featuring by far the most enigmatic one of them all:

“Rose Quartz is the leader and founder of the Crystal Gems. Her deep affection and commitment the human race is fhqwxulhv rog, eruq lq wkh plgvw ri dqflhqw Jhp zdu dqg lw kdv exuqh ghhs zlwklq khu hyhu vlqfh. Rose is an incredibly powerful Gem with many different unique abilities, such as khu khdolqj whduv, skbwrnlqhvlv, and of course, her highly resistant, incredibly durable shield. A firm, yet merciful leader and a kind, dependable friend, wkhuh duh ihz lq wkh zruog L kdyh frph wr wuxvw dv pxfk dv Urvh Txdwuc.”

As stinted and broken as all of this information was, it still peaked Dipper’s curiosity, perhaps even more than it had been before, especially as he once again wondered who the mysterious author was and what his apparent connection to the Gems was. Considering how admirably the journal seemed to speak of them, it was obvious that they were on good terms with each other, or at least they used to be. But if that was the case, then why had the Gems never once mentioned the journal or the author, even to Steven, who had spent his whole life around them? And even more importantly, why had the journal been hidden away on the hill near the Gem temple, for what appeared to be quite a long time? Certainly with all of the detailed information concerning them contained in the journal, they would want to keep it hidden away from prying eyes, which had been proven by the Gem pages being enclosed by staples in the first place. But hadn’t they consented to the author recording it all in the first place?

It was only as the trio approached the shores of the lake that the abrupt, somewhat disconcerting realization dawned on Dipper. Perhaps the Gems really did want to keep the information the journal contained hidden away after all. If the author had indeed vanished under some mysterious circumstances, then there was a high chance that the Gems, entrusted with the journal, decided to hide it away near their base, hoping that no one would ever happen upon it and the most likely revealing secrets it contained, even despite the staples and the encoding. Yet what they hadn’t counted on, and what they still didn’t know, was that it had indeed been found, even if Dipper knew he only happened upon it by accident. But even so, the idea of showing the Gems the journal with the hopes of uncovering the author no longer seemed like a very wise one in light of all this. After all, if its content really was confidential, then chances were the Gems, as secretive as they seemed to be, wouldn’t hesitate in confiscating it from him, a thought that practically made Dipper sick. Even though the journal had only been in his possession for a little over a week, he couldn’t imagine parting ways with it so soon. It contained so many fascinating and incredible secrets about not just the Gems, but Gravity Falls as a whole, most of which he hadn’t even had the chance to investigate yet. He wasn’t about to take a chance and give up so many potential answers to all of his questions about the strange town just so he could ask the Gems about the author, which was probably a mystery he would end up solving on his own in due time.

“Well, we’re here!” Mabel announced cheerfully as the three of them came to stand on the practically empty shore of the lake. The usually calm blue waters reflected the aura bounding off the Red Eye, which painted them an unnatural, unsettling shade of dark pink. “Guess we better start looking for gold, right?”

“Yeah, but isn’t gold usually mined up out of the ground?” Steven asked with a frown, glancing over the deserted stretch of sand before them. “Maybe if we dig deep enough, we might find some! Oh, but that would take too long…”
“Uh, guys?” Dipper cut in, placing his thoughts concerning the Gems and the journal aside to correct the two of them. “I don’t think the riddle is talking about literal gold. It said we had to find ‘gold of a different kind’, remember?”

“But that could mean anything!” Mabel groaned in exasperation. “Steven, your mom may have been super nice and super pretty, but she sure didn’t make finding her cannon easy.”

“No, she didn’t, did she?” Steven mused as he turned a slow circle, thoughtfully taking in their surroundings once more before coming up with a momentary plan of action. “But it looks like the only thing we can do around here is dig and see if we come up with any gold. And luckily for us, I happen to know a professional digger! Oh, Lion!” Though the young Gem’s call for his trusted pink companion echoed across the lake, it initially unanswered, prompting Steven to try again, especially since he knew how stubborn the fluffy creature often was. “Lion! Come on over here! I know you can hear me, wherever you are!”

“Whoa, Lion can hear you all the way out here?” Mabel asked in interest, already more than excited to get to see the adorable feline once more.

“Yeah,” Steven shrugged with a small grin. “He’s pretty great like that. Oh, and what do you know? He’s already here!”

Dipper flinched when he suddenly felt something warm on the back of his neck, prompting him to fearfully spin around to come face to face with Lion, who had his distrustful, cold glare set upon the boy before him. However, he relaxed as soon as Steven called for him once more, and the pink beast obediently followed the call of his master by coming to sit beside the Young Gem to await further instruction.

“Steven, what’s Lion’s deal with always trying to scare me to death?” Dipper asked in slight exasperation, casting an aggravated glare towards the pink feline, which was returned in full.

“That just means he likes you!” Steven answered cheerfully, giving Lion an affectionate pat on the head. “Now Lion, we need you to use your claws to dig around the beach and look for some gold that Mom hid around here. Can you do that for us?”

Lion showed no signs of compliance as he instead briefly narrowed his eyes at the young Gem before lowering himself to the ground as if offering him a ride. Steven frowned in confusion at his fluffy friend, knowing all too well that Lion didn’t always follow his instructions. “No, Lion,” he corrected patiently. “We need you to dig. D-I-G, dig!”

The pastel beast merely let out a calm, soft roar in response and stayed in place, pointing his nose towards the lake almost insistently. “It looks like he wants to take us somewhere…” Mabel mused as she approached Lion, even if her brother still kept his safe distance. “Is that true, Lion?” she asked the large feline sweetly, gently scratching under his furry chin, which was something Lion only begrudgingly accepted. “You wanna show us something?”

Lion finally offered another small roar of confirmation, his tail whipping a bit impatiently as he waited for the kids to mount him. “Well, that answers that question!” Steven grinned widely, leaping onto his pink companion’s back as Mabel readily climbed on behind him. “Aren’t you coming, Dipper?”

“Uh….” Dipper frowned apprehensively, not too crazy about the idea of willingly climbing onto the back of the ferocious feline that had nearly killed him upon their first encounter. “I… don’t think that’s such a good—Whoa!”
“C’mon, bro-bro!” Mabel encouraged, forcibly grabbing her brother by the arm and pulling him up onto Lion’s back behind her as Steven guided the pink beast to stride past him. “Don’t be such a scaredy-cat!”

“Ok, Lion!” Steven proclaimed, grinning down at the feline trustingly. “Where do you wanna take us?”

Lion let out an affirmative roar as he turned towards the lake again, not wasting any time as his paws began to bound across the sand towards the water, much to the sudden alarm of all three kids. “Lion, wait!” Steven called in sudden panic, tugging on the beast’s pastel mane in an attempt to slow his swift pace, though it was to little avail. “What are you doing?!”

“He’s gonna run right into the lake!” Dipper shouted nervously, his eyes widening in fear as Lion continued to rush for the water. “We have to jump off of him!”

Steven and Mabel didn’t disagree with this logic as all three kids prepared to do so right as Lion reached the waterline. However, right before they could jump into the water, they all stopped when they noticed that Lion had not dragged them into the lake; instead, he was running upon it. The kids glanced down at the surface of the water that the pink beast was dashing across as if it was solid ground, completely bewildered by this sudden turn of events.

“Cool!” Mabel and Steven exclaimed in excited unison, their huge grins showing just how much they were enjoying what should be a complete impossibility.

“Wha-? How…?” Dipper began to ask in immense confusion as he stared down at the water they were practically gliding upon, before quickly retracting his many questions. “You know what? I’m not even going to ask.”

Lion continued to speed across the water, his destination apparently the waterfall as they drew ever nearer to it. Thanks to the pink feline’s speed, none of the kids got too wet as they passed through the curtain of water and into the waterfall cave, where Lion finally came to a stop upon the bar of dry ground to let his passengers dismount.

“Oh my gosh!” Mabel beamed happily as her and Steven hopped off Lion’s back, with Dipper following more cautiously. “That was amazing! We literally just rode on top of the lake!”

“I know, right?!” Steven exclaimed brightly, giving Lion a rewarding scratch on the ear. “Let’s do it again!”

“First things first,” Dipper cut in, anchoring the two of them back down to the task at hand. “We need to see if we can find any kind of gold around here. Mabel, you look in the water, Steven, you check the ground, and I’ll take the walls of the cave. And don’t forget what the poem said: we’re looking for “gold of a different kind”."

Mabel and Steven nodded in affirmation as the three of them split up to search the cave, leaving Lion to stand by and watch them with an observant, almost knowing gaze. For several minutes, their investigation came up empty, despite their best efforts. Dipper pressed against the darkened cavern walls, trying to feel out any loose rubble or hidden switch, while Steven meandered about, keeping his gaze on the gravel ground as he tried to spot the faintest hint of gold amidst the ordinary rocks. Mabel, on the other hand, waded in the shallows of the small pool, not really caring about the fact that her socks and shoes were getting soggy. She didn’t particularly expect to find anything in the water, for even if there had been something of note here, it probably would have been washed out into the rest of the lake by now. However, just as she was about to report to the boys that her search had no results when a sudden glimmer down near her feet happened to catch
her eyes.

“Huh?” she muttered to herself in confusion, bending down to get a better look at the sparkling object amidst the otherwise dull stones. Upon closer inspection, she realized that it seemed as though the small, shining cap of a bottle perhaps was peeking out from the shallows. Mabel grinned excitedly as soon as she saw this, not hesitating to reach into the cool water and get a grip on the cap, even if the rest of the bottle was deeply entrenched by the rocks surrounding it. However, this hardly deterred her as she tried her best to pull it out of the bedrock, and though she had some trouble at first since it was so deeply wedged in, she soon managed to tug it out of its tight spot, stumbling back the slightest bit from the momentum before she examined her prize.

It was a much smaller bottle than Mabel had anticipated, small enough to easily fit in the palm of her hand. The glass was clear in color, yet its shape was a bit unusual, round, yet oddly bumpy, but its contents were even more intriguing. Contained within the bottle appeared to be small, delicate, shining yellow flecks, suspended in some type of clear liquid as they shimmered radiantly, even in the low light of the cave. “You guys!” Mabel exclaimed in muted amazement, cupping the small bottle in her hands carefully. “Check out what I found!”

Dipper and Steven quickly complied as they went over to her, both of them instantly fascinated upon seeing the bottle she was holding. “Oooo… What is that stuff?” Steven asked, stars of wonder in his eyes as the dim glow the flecks were giving off seemed to reflect throughout the cave.

“I dunno,” Mabel said with a small grin. “But isn’t it pretty?”

“It sort of looks like… golf leaf…” Dipper guessed, recognizing the shimmering substance from a documentary he had seen once.

“You mean that stuff that rich people put on food?” Mabel asked.

“Wait… you can eat that stuff?” Steven frowned in confusion. “I thought it was just for decoration.”

Dipper merely rolled his eyes and prepared to correct them both before he suddenly remembered an essential detail. “Wait… “gold of a different kind”… You guys! I think this gold leaf was what the riddle was talking about!”

“Uh… is your hat on too tight, bro-bro?” Mabel asked incredulously. “This doesn’t look like a cannon to me.”

“No, but it might be the key the poem mentioned,” Dipper clarified, taking out the journal to glance over the riddle once again.

“Oh yeah!” Steven said in realization, peeking over at the poem himself. “It says that “it’s key within the mind”. And you know, the more I look at it, that bottle does kinda look a little like a brain…”

“Oh, it does!” Mabel gasped, running a finger along the bumpy surface of the bottle with a wide grin. “But if this is the key, then what’s is supposed to unlock?”

“My guess, where ever the cannon’s at,” Dipper said with resolve. “Now all we need to do is find “the place where mysteries start”, wherever that is.”

“We can figure that out along the way,” Steven said as he headed over to Lion before quickly climbing on the pink beast. “We probably don’t have a whole bunch of time left, so we gotta
Dipper and Mabel didn’t argue as they hopped onto Lion as well, making sure that the bottle of gold leaf was secure in their possession before the large feline began making a beeline for the water, easily running upon it just as he had before. As they emerged from the waterfall cave, the kids let out a unified gasp of shock upon seeing just how much closer the Red Eye had gotten, the world now drenched in its red glow as it still drew ever closer to the earth. Time was of the essence, and every second counted now, meaning that they had to greatly hurry, otherwise there wouldn’t be a town left to save at all.

“Ok,” Dipper called to Steven and Mabel over the rush of wind as Lion ran across the lake towards the shore. “Apparently the cannon “hides within the heart”, so that might mean it could be in the center of something.”

“So like what?” Mabel asked with a frown. “The center of town? Oh, but I guess people would notice if there was a sparkly pink cannon just sitting in the square…”

“Hm…” Steven mused thoughtfully, taking a glance ahead at the path Lion was taking as they reached the shore once again. They had few hints to go on, but one of them did include something about the place “where mysteries start”, and though Gravity Falls was filled with many mysterious spots, there was one location that came to the young Gem’s mind first and most prominently when he considered this clue. “The Mystery Shack!” he exclaimed in realization, even though he did arouse the shared confusion of the twins.

“Huh?” Mabel questioned, raising an eyebrow.

“The riddle said we’ll find the cannon at the place where mysteries start,” Steven explained, already guiding Lion towards the shack in question. “And to me, there’s no place more mysterious in Gravity Falls than the Mystery Shack itself!”

“Uh… I hate to break it to you, Steven, but I doubt the cannon is anywhere in the shack,” Dipper frowned, knowing that there was no way Stan could possess such a mythical weapon, especially considering his apparent distain towards the Gems.

“Wait a sec!” Mabel exclaimed as she recalled another important detail from the riddle. “The poem said that the cannon is in the heart of something, and the Mystery Shack is smack-dab in the middle of the woods! So it could be there, or at least somewhere nearby!”

“You guys aren’t actually serious, are you?” Dipper asked skeptically, still not convinced that the Light Cannon could be hidden away in a place as mundane as the Mystery Shack.

“As serious as Lion is pink!” Steven quipped with resolve.

“…Alright, fine,” Dipper relented with an exasperated sigh, casting a worried glance up at the approaching Red Eye. “But we really need to hurry up. That thing’s getting closer by the second and we can’t afford to waste time on a wild goose chase.”

“First of all, bro-bro, we’re chasing a cannon, not a goose,” Mabel joked cheerfully. “And don’t worry so much! We managed to find the key, didn’t we? The cannon will be a piece of cake!”

“Mabel’s right,” Steven heartily agreed. “We’re so close to finding it! And we will find it. After all, the Gems and all of Gravity Falls are depending on us. We won’t let them down!”

Thanks to Lion’s swift speed, the kids reached the Mystery Shack in record time, hopping of the pink beast’s back as soon as they arrived to begin their search. The area was quiet, since Stan had
pretty much closed up shop upon noticing the Red Eye, yet things were hardly serene. As the crimson orb sunk closer to the ground, its proximity began to show a subtle effect on gravity itself, stirring up heavy winds and pulling lighter objects such as leaves and paper towards it. The kids knew well they probably had only about less than an hour until it was too late to do anything to stop it, which meant that their hunch about the shack had to be correct. Otherwise… well, none of them even wanted to consider what might happen if they were wrong.

“Ok, so what exactly are we looking for out here?” Dipper asked objectively, taking a furtive glance around the shack’s yard.

“I’m not sure…” Steven frowned before taking a glance to his fluffy companion sitting nearby. “Lion, you knew where the gold leaf was. What about the Light Cannon?”

Upon being asked this question, Lion hardly offered a helpful response but instead turned his nose up pridefully, as if refusing to give an answer. “C’mon, Lion,” Steven pleaded. “It’s really important. If we don’t find that cannon, then… then the whole town and everyone in it…”

“Will be crushed!” Mabel finished a bit dramatically, voicing what Steven didn’t really have the heart to say. Yet even still, Lion refused to be of any assistance, instead simply letting out a stubborn grunt as he settled down for a nap, his tour of duty over for the day.

“Well, it looks like we’re going to have to figure this one out on our own,” Dipper said in exasperation, already having a great deal less faith in the pink beast than Mabel and Steven both seemed to. “But again, I don’t think the cannon would be inside the shack; there’s no space for it.”

“Aw, come on, Dipper,” Mabel said with a wry grin. “The Mystery Shack may be a bit rough around the edges, but you gotta give this old place a little more credit than that!”

“Yeah!” Steven agreed cheerfully. “After all, if every pork chop were perfect, we wouldn’t have hot dogs!”

Almost immediately after the young Gem exclaimed this catch phrase, a bright glow from the forest caught their collective attention. It was rather dim, but it did seem to come from a definitive spot, specifically a ways into the forest directly before the shack. “There!” Steven exclaimed with an excited gasp. “That’s the same glow the Light Cannon in Dad’s storage bin had! It must be over there!”

After make the unanimous, unspoken agreement to go check it out, all three kids bounded into the woods, following the hint of pink light that was barely noticeable amidst the red glow from the Red Eye that seemed to bathe the entire area. Fortunately, their intended destination wasn’t too far into the forest, only about a few yards away from the shack actually, for they soon happened upon the source of the light. The blush glow was spilling out from a long, very thin sliver of the forest floor. For a moment, the kids stopped to stare at this rather strange sight, before at last, their collective confusion could no longer be contained.

“No way…” Dipper muttered in absolute bewilderment as they all slowly approached the slit of light. “It’s actually here?! But that’s… that’s impossible!”

“Guess it’s not as impossible as you thought,” Mabel shrugged not too amazed by this revelation, but still rather surprised all the same.

“But how is it this close to the Mystery Shack?” Dipper asked, his mind practically reeling from all of the new theories and questions racing through it. “And if it’s been here all these years, how did Grunkle Stan not know about it?”
“Well, it has been buried underground for a long time,” Steven guessed, getting down on his knees to inspect the sliver of light more closely. “Maybe my mom and the author hid it here without telling Mr. Pines about it.”

“But-” Dipper began to protest, knowing that none of this made sense, however, his sister was quick to interrupt him first.

“You don’t have time for you to conspiracy theorize, Dipper!” Mabel said, pulling the bottle of gold leaf out of her pocket. “We gotta open this thing up!”

The kids didn’t bother discussing what they might have to do with the gold leaf, as the answer seemed obvious as the sheet of pink light continued to emit from the slit in the ground. Carefully, Mabel uncapped the small, vaguely brain-shaped bottle before handing off to Steven to let him do the honors. The Young Gem let out an anxious breath as he held the bottle over the crevice, hoping that they weren’t wrong about this, even though all signs were pointing to the Light Canon being exactly below them. And, after letting his inhibitions go, Steven slowly began to pour the flecks of gold leaf upon the glowing sliver, making sure that the glimmering chips fell into the crack squarely as he walked the length of it. As soon as he was done, he stood at the other end of the line, empty bottle in hand as all three kids stared at the crevice expectantly, waiting for something, anything to happen.

“Um… shouldn’t the ground be opening right about now?” Mabel asked after several minutes of stated silence.

“I…. It’s not…” Steven stammered a bit nervously, his heart sinking as the ground remained as still as ever. “It’s not working…”

“But it has to work!” Dipper exclaimed in a sudden panic, realizing that they had just wasted their key on the wrong lead, putting them all in even more danger than before. “What are we gonna do it if doesn’t-”

He was suddenly cut off, however, by the abrupt, though initially subtle rumbling ground beneath them. All three of them were quick to leap out of the way of the suddenly shifting ground beneath their feet, the pink glow widening as the slit in the ground widened in reaction to the gold leaf poured within it moments ago. And, soon enough, the square-shaped dugout was uncovered, revealing, at long last, the treasure they had been searching for all along.

“The cannon!” Steven cheered triumphantly, dazzled by the radiance of the Light Cannon, which was an exact copy of the first one. “We found it!” Unable to contain his elation, the young Gem was quick to pull both twins into a tight, friendly embrace, both of them returning it laughingly in the midst of their shared relief and levity.

“Ok, you guys, we can celebrate later,” Dipper said with returned seriousness, remembering the matter at hand. “For now we have to get this thing back to the Gems.”

“Way ahead of you, Dipper,” Steven said with a daring grin as he turned back towards the shack. “Lion!”

Fortunately, the pink beast was quick to head over this time, apparently sensing the severity of the situation as much as the kids did. Lion indeed seemed to be privy as to what he needed to do as he came bounding into the clearing with the thick bundle of rope that had been sitting near the Mystery Shack in his maw.

“Well that’s convenient!” Mabel noted with a grin as Lion dropped the rope to the ground before
them. The kids were all quick to get to work, with Steven tying one end of the rope around Lion’s stomach while Dipper and Mabel hopped down into the dugout to secure the rope to the cannon. Thankfully, the hole the cannon was hidden in had a gradual, ramp-like slope leading out of it, which had previously been concealed by the trap doors but now would serve as very helpful in getting the cannon out. After an experimental tug to make sure the ropes would hold, Lion began to pull the cannon up out of the dugout, with Steven planted firmly on his back to keep the rope in place as the twins helped push the weapon along, despite its girth and apparent weight. Yet the strong pink feline seemed largely undaunted by it as he managed to tug the cannon out of its longtime hiding place, meaning that the only thing left to do was drag it over to the Gems, who were fortunately not too far away. But even so, the kids made haste as they ran alongside Lion, opting out of riding him as not to weigh him down as he pulled the Light Cannon along their intended path with as much speed as he could muster.

“Come on, Lion!” Steven encouraged, placing a hand against his furry companion as he noticed him beginning to pant out of exhaustion. “You can do it! We’re almost there!”

And indeed they were. For soon enough, the kids were able to spot the Gems, Greg, Stan, and Soos afar in the distance, all of them turned towards the very close Red Eye and watching its deadly approach with immense concern. “Hey!” Mabel called out loudly to the observing group, somehow catching their attention amidst the high gales pulling everything towards the crimson orb. “We need some help over here!”

The entire group let out a collective gasp as they turned to face the kids, the Gems especially shocked to see that, at long last, just as they were starting to give up hope, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel had indeed succeeded in their mission, just as they promised they would. “This is incredible!” Pearl exclaimed with a wide smile of relief. “You actually found it!”

“We knew you guys could do it!” Amethyst cheered enthusiastically, rushing towards the kids alongside Garnet and Pearl to help them, with Stan, Soos, and Greg tagging along not too far behind.

“Well, what do you know?” Stan remarked to himself with a small, somewhat proud grin as the others began to untie the cannon. “Those knuckleheads actually came through…”

“Where in the world did you kids find it?” Greg asked in shock upon taking in the sight of the other Light Cannon.

“It’s a long story…” Dipper said a bit breathlessly, just as exhausted as Steven and Mabel were from running all the way over there with Lion.

“There’s no time to waste,” Garnet said with urgency in her tone. “We have to use the cannons now.” Not skipping a beat, the Gem leader made use of her formidable strength as she summoned her gauntlets and used them to get a good grip on the cannon before heaving it up, despite the fact that she struggled somewhat under its size and weight. Even though they were nowhere near as strong as Garnet was, Pearl, Amethyst, Greg, Soos, the kids, and even Stan all did their best to help equalize its weight as they carried it together along the rest of the path. They dropped the second cannon off right beside its twin, which was already poised in the direction of the Red Eye, which was dangerously close by now and showed no signs of slowing its approach.

“So, uh… aren’t these things supposed to be blowing that eye to pieces by now?” Stan asked skeptically upon noticing that the cannons remained still even in the face of the danger they were all in.

“What should we do?” Dipper asked the Gems worriedly. “Is there like a button or a switch or
“W-we… we don’t know how they work!” Pearl gasped in fearful realization, clearly panicking as she glanced at Garnet and Amethyst, who were clearly just as clueless. “They were Rose’s!”

“Dad, do you know how to use them?” Steven quickly asked his father, who merely sheepishly shrugged, knowing that Rose had not imparted such information to him.

“Steven, this is serious!” Pearl exclaimed in relative frustration, aggravated that the Young Gem would resort to asking Greg about how to solve this problem now. However, that quickly faded as she happened to glance down at Steven, only to notice that the winds were blowing his tee shirt a bit to reveal the gem upon his navel. “The Gem…” she gasped, her eyes growing wide with wonder as she addressed the confused younger Gem. “You have Rose’s Gem!”

“That’s it!” Amethyst proclaimed, immediately lifting Steven up, despite the fact that he really had no idea what was going on. And yet, he wasn’t able to protest very much as the purple Gem thrust him against one of the cannons, rubbing his stomach, or more specifically his gem, up and down along the length of the cannon. When this didn’t initially work, she tried again with the other cannon, only to the same fruitless results. “Aw, come on!” Amethyst shouted in frustration.

“Stop that,” Garnet ordered, her usually calm façade starting to break under the pressure as she took Steven from Amethyst and safely set him on the ground once more.

“So if Steven can’t activate them, what are we supposed to do?” Mabel asked with palpable concern.

“Let’s just forget about the cannons!” Amethyst exclaimed hotly. “Throw me again!”

“That’s not going to work,” Pearl scoffed firmly, knowing that going in without some sort of plan could cost them their lives in the minutes they had left now.

“Maybe we should just beat the stupid things until they start working,” Stan huffed impatiently, even if his apprehension was finally starting to show as well.

“Yo, dudes, maybe their broken,” Soos suggested as gently as he could to not stir up the already high emotions of the group any more. “I could see if I could maybe fix them really quick. Though I’m not sure where to put the nails or screws…”

“They’re not broken!” Pearl quipped, gripping onto one of the cannons in desperation. “We just need to… Oh, I don’t know!” she admitted once more, practically on the verge of tears. “If only Rose were here! She would know exactly what to do!”

As the adults and the Gems of the group broke down into a round of arguments about what to do about their dire straits, the kids simply stood by in absolute dismay, none of them willing to accept the fact that they had gotten so close to saving the say, but were still so far. And indeed, time seemed to be quickly running out. The Red Eye nearly encompassed the entire sky above the forest by now, drowning everything in its sinister red glow as it stared at the people down below with some unknown, malicious hidden intent. It displaced gravity even more as it got ever closer, to the point that it soon became strong enough to start pulling the cannons themselves along the forest floor, though the Gems were quick to restrain them down once again before going back to their heated debating, even if they weren’t coming up with any real solutions.

“We have to do something,” Dipper said with both resolve and fear, realizing that there was a good chance that they had worked so hard to find the cannons for nothing.
“No duh, but what can we do?” Mabel asked with a worried frown. “The cannons are too stubborn and so is everyone else! What else is there left to try?”

“Uh... well...” Dipper stammered anxiously, though neither him nor Mabel were noticing that Steven was strangely quiet as he stared at the cannons both intently and morosely. “Maybe there’s something in the journal about how to activate it! Mabel, help me look.”

Mabel didn’t protest to this plan as Dipper, after making sure that the Gems wouldn’t notice, turned and discreetly cracked open the journal, quickly flipping to the Gem section in a desperate search for answers. Both twins peered as carefully and as quickly as they could over every page, but the only information they could glean about the Light Cannons was everything they had learned before, much to their despair and dread. However, Steven was the one who put an end to this futile search as he placed his hands on both of their shoulders, giving them a sincere, yet sad expression that told them everything they already knew.

“You guys...” the young Gem muttered, his voice edged with a type of hopelessness that was so strange to hear in one so usually bright and optimistic. “I don’t think the journal is gonna help this time...”

Dipper and Mabel merely froze upon hearing this, the fear and desperation in their faces evenly matched as time itself almost seemed to slow down in the approach of what looked like their inevitable demise. And yet, even despite how bleak everything looked, Steven still had one more idea in mind, even if he wasn’t sure it would work at all.

The young Gem said nothing to the quarreling Gems and con man as he pressed back them and approached the cannons, standing in the space between them as he placed a hand on each one gingerly. “Please,” Steven began in solemn desperation, speaking to the cannons themselves. “You guys have to work, unlock, activate, go, something! Everyone’s counting on you! My friends and I worked so hard to find you both in time! You can’t just be useless! I know you can help!”

Despite this sincere encouragement, the cannons still refused to fire, much to the young Gem’s increasing despair. Greg took notice of his son’s melancholy, since he was really the only one of the group aside from the kids who wasn’t arguing about what to do. The former rock star couldn’t stand to see Steven so upset, even despite the grave situation they were all facing at the moment. “Hey, it’s ok, kiddo,” Greg consoled with a soft grin, placing a hand on his forlorn son’s shoulder. “We’ll figure out something else. Something better.”

Upon receiving these reassuring words, Steven perked up just the slightest bit, knowing that his father was rarely ever wrong about these things. “R-right,” he said somewhat shakily, wiping away the tears that had started to form in his eyes. “If every pork chop were perfect, we wouldn’t have hot dogs.”

Immediately after saying this, Steven let out a surprised gasp as both cannons began to glow in tandem with each other, catching the immediate attention of the twins. “Oh my gosh!” Mabel exclaimed with newfound excitement, pulling Dipper along with her as she rushed towards the young Gem. “Look, you guys! The cannons are working!”

“What?!” the Gems all exclaimed in unified alarm, all of them spinning around to see the stiff cannons begin to unlock. Simultaneously, the muzzles of both cannons began to open up in a way that resembled the blooming of a rose. By the time they had both opened fully, the mouths of the cannons began to glow even brighter, meaning that they were starting to charge up, despite the fact that the barrels themselves had fallen without any support to hold them up. Knowing that the cannons would do them no good if they weren’t aimed towards the Red Eye, Steven quickly reached under one of them, trying his best to lift the heavy barrel up as much as he could.
“Everyone, hurry!” Dipper urged Stan, Soos and the Gems, who were clearly still stunned with shock, even as the twins and Greg rushed to the young Gem’s aid. “We have to help Steven!”

The rest of the group didn’t hesitate to comply, the Gems using their combined strength to tilt the cannon that Greg and Steven were struggling with up. Though Dipper and Mabel tried their hardest to pull the second cannon up, they didn’t make any real progress until Stan and Soos helped push it up from the back, until both cannons were aimed directly for the Red Eye. The menacing crimson orb’s proximity began to make the very ground shake, telling everyone that it was incredibly close to striking the earth, but now they were finally ready for it. The cannons muzzles were glowing radiantly by now, the pressure quickly building up within them just waiting to be released as everyone clung onto them for dear life.

“Ok, these things can fire any second now!” Stan shouted a bit impatiently, knowing well that they had all waited for this uncertain salvation long enough.

“Wait! I think this is it!” Pearl called over the din of the racing winds and the trembling earth. And indeed, the cannons themselves began to shake as a result of the untold power contained within them, the saving blast mere seconds away from being unleashed.

“Brace yourselves!” Garnet ordered firmly, though her voice was all too soon drowned out by the cannons finally letting their immense power go.

The cannons fired in perfect harmony, letting out a deafening boom as they did so. Dual bursts of pale pink light, so bright that it was practically blinding, raced forth from the muzzles, pushing the cannons back a bit from the sheer force of the blast. And yet, the entire group on the ground watched in awed silence as the pair of lights began to spiral each other, dancing beautifully as they sailed towards the Red Eye with immense speed. As they approached their target, the beams both split apart in a dazzling flash before each of the four lights morphed themselves into a vague, strangely feminine shape. Nonetheless, the beams continued to spiral towards the Red Eye until, at long last, the blast struck the orb squarely in its pupil, spreading across its surface quickly and powerfully. For a moment, the scarlet light that the Red Eye put off was completely drowned in white as the invading orb began to be torn apart by the force of the blast. And then, all at once, the Red Eye exploded.

The world returned to its normal coloration, only darkened as night had fallen, and the winds stirred up by the Red Eye went still as its large debris began to rain down upon both the forest, a few pieces even falling into town itself. Thankfully, none of the crimson shrapnel struck the group or the cannons as they watched the aftermath of the explosion, the same heavy, yet happy realization settling upon them all.

“I can’t believe it…” Dipper muttered, finally breaking the longstanding silence. “It actually… worked…”

“WOO WHOO!!!” Mabel cheered triumphantly, pulling both Steven and Dipper into a tight hug as they disbanded away from the cannons. “We did it! We saved the town!”

“But… I don’t understand…” Pearl said, still a bit shaken from shock. “How did you get them to work?”

“I just said that thing Dad always says,” Steven shrugged with a bright grin.

“That thing about the pork rinds?” Pearl asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Pork chops,” Garnet corrected, placing a hand on the white Gem’s shoulder.
Despite the fact that the conversation was focused on him, Greg’s gaze was focused on the starry skies above, where, just moments ago, the glorious light of the cannon had taken on an undeniably familiar form. “Rose…” the former rock star whispered reverently, tears forming in his eyes as he pondered that, even though Rose was gone, her loving, protective presence still somehow lingered all the same.

“Well, I don’t like saying things like this too often,” Stan began, addressing the kids with a wry grin. “But you three munchkins really saved the day by finding those cannons. I gotta admit, I had my doubts, but you proved me wrong. Good job.”

“Aw, Grunkle Stan, are you getting soft on us?” Mabel asked jokingly, even if both her and Dipper were genuinely touched by their uncle’s rare show of pride.

“No,” Stan scoffed defensively, his usual stoic manner quickly returning. “I told you I don’t get all mushy like that, didn’t I?”

“So where’d you guys find the other cannon anyway?” Amethyst asked the kids curiously.

“Oh! Well, we found out where it was from-” Steven began to explain, though he suddenly cut himself off as he glanced over at Dipper, who shook his head warningly before the young Gem could mention the journal. Even after all they had been through, he was still quite apprehensive about telling the Gems anything about the journal, even if he hadn’t had time to communicate these worries to Steven. Fortunately though, even if the young Gem didn’t quite understand Dipper’s reasoning, he complied nonetheless, if only because he was still a bit hesitant to bring up the journal himself. “Um… Lion helped us find it!” Steven ventured, hoping that it would be an acceptable excuse. “Y-yeah! He helped us sniff out its hiding place out in the woods.”

“But… I thought we read about where it was in the-” Mabel started to correct Steven out of confusion, before Dipper quickly silenced her by slapping a hand over her mouth before she could finish, bewildering her even more.

“Well, regardless of how you found it, you can’t tell all three of you how proud and how grateful we are,” Pearl smiled, speaking for Amethyst and Garnet as well, who both shared her sentiments. “We know we might have underestimated you earlier, but we were wrong. We’re sorry.”

“Yeah, you three make a pretty great team!” Amethyst chuckled, giving each of the kids a fond noogie. “We might just have to ask you guys for help next time we have a hard time fighting some monster or something!”

The group got a good laugh out of this, though the thought did excite Dipper, Mabel, and Steven as they realized that perhaps this was a turning point. Instead of being seen as three kids in over their heads, maybe now the Gems would finally see them as capable of keeping up with them. Maybe now they would take them seriously and would consider their thoughts and ideas. Maybe, just maybe, they might even let them tag along on their mystical, incredible adventures willingly, instead of claiming they were “too dangerous”. But even so, it was too early to tell. After all, the summer was still just beginning, and despite everything they had gone through so far, they knew that there was still plenty of magic and mystery left to come.

“RED EYE OFFLINE. SCAN FAILED.”

“Impossible! I had my best technicians calibrate that Red Eye! How are we supposed to check on
the progress of the cluster now!?”

“You know, maybe I could help with that!”

“Oh, joy… Its you again… What business do you have here, demon? I thought our plans were already solidified.”

“Aw, c’mon now, Yellow! How could I stay away from my favorite Diamond? And besides, you know you love me!”

“Please. Don’t make me laugh. I’m in no mood for your foolish games.

“Oh yeah, ’cause you’re eye thing blew up, right? As much of a sucker for giant eyes as I am, I gotta admit, that thing wasn’t very idiot proof, even for you.”

“How dare you come here, and mock me, Cipher! I’ll have you know that the Red Eye was the newest model, one of the finest pieces of our surveillance technology!”

“Geez, no need to get a crack in your gem there, Yellow! You know I’m just kidding. It’s what I do!”

“You do it too much, if you ask me. So why are you really here, aside from trying to make a fool out of me, which, by the way, is not working?”

“Oh, I just came to offer you a little intel.”

“What kind of intel?”

“Eh, it’s not really important… In fact, I’m pretty sure it’s not even worth your time.”

“Enough with your nonsense, Cipher! Just tell me what you need to and be gone!”

“Well, if you say so! All I wanted to tell you was that your Red Eye’s little malfunction wasn’t exactly a… ‘malfunction’, if you catch my drift.”

“What are you implying…?”

“Come on, Yellow, try to keep up with me here! I’m saying that SOMEBODY destroyed it. Intentionally.”

“What? Who would dare to defy Homeworld in such a way!? Tell me who these interlopers are at once!”

“Sorry, Yellow, no can do. Gotta leave you hanging just a little bit, right?”

“Why you little-”

“But what I CAN tell you as that it’s almost time for our plans to get their feet off the ground…”

“…You’re serious?”

“Sure am! Would I lie to you?”

“I don’t believe that you haven’t before… But all the same, I need to know how my cluster is doing and so now I suppose I’ll just have to send one of my agents there to reestablish the warp stream… Always something…”
“Aw, don’t be so blue, Yellow! After all, what’s a few earthling fleshbags to all your POWERFUL forces and ADVANCED technology?”

“I don’t appreciate your sarcasm, demon. But even so, if there are indeed still rebels on Earth, then I will do whatever it takes to crush them into obliteration. I will not lose that planet again…”
Chapter 11: Lil' Gideon

Chapter Summary

In which Gideon's a brat, Mabel has a hard time saying no, and Garnet is the best at relationship advice

Chapter Notes

Ok, so here's the beginning of arc 2! I have a lot of cool things planned for this arc, so I hope you enjoy! (arc 2 ciphers are translated via atbash cipher!)

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YV DZIB LU DSLN BLF YVORGGOV
YRT KILYOVNH XZM HGZIG LFG DRWWOV
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It was a rather balmy Saturday, and though the Mystery Shack was bustling with weekend tourists, Stan had given his niece and nephew the afternoon off. He hadn’t exactly expressed why he had decided to let them off the hook for the day, but Dipper and Mabel assumed that it had something to do with the rather stressful series of events with the Red Eye and the light cannons the previous day. Nonetheless, the twins were grateful for the reprieve after such a near-disaster, and they had invited Steven down to the shack so that he could relax along with them. The kids had gathered in front of the TV, though they were barely watching it as they lazily reclined around the den. Steven had brought his ukulele with him and had taken to absently strumming a few of his favorite songs for fun, lightly humming along as he masterfully plucked to a rather complex tune as though it was nothing. His skill did not go unnoticed by Mabel, who recognized the upbeat pop song he was plucking out and grinned contentedly at how accurate it was, and yet somehow the young Gem managed to give it even something of a fun, lighthearted spin. And as soon as Steven finished, Mabel was the first to break the relative calm of the room by letting out an enthusiastic round of applause from her spot on the back of the recliner.

“Wow, Steven!” Mabel remarked, brightly smiling down at the young Gem who sat below her. “That was great! Where’d you learn how to play so good?”

“Well, my dad taught me the basics when I was little,” Steven said with a small grin. “But I just sorta taught myself all of the actual songs I know. Most of the time though, I just play whatever comes to me.” To prove his point, he began strumming a series of random chords that actually flowed quite nicely together into a coherent melody.

“I see what you mean,” Mabel noted with a smirk as she continued sewing her latest sweater. “You know, I’ve always wanted to learn how to play something. Maybe you could teach me how to play the ukulele, Steven!”

Before Steven could offer a reply, Dipper spoke up, a hint of joking in his tone as he glanced up at his sister. “Wait, Mabel, you mean you’re actually going to commit to learning how to play an instrument?” he asked teasingly. “Like you did when you tried to learn to play the violin? Or the oboe? Or the xylophone?”
“Oh, ha ha, Dipper,” Mabel laughed dryly, tossing one of the balls of yarn that she wasn’t using at her brother in retaliation. “We can’t all instantly ‘master’ the sousaphone, like some people…”

“Mabel!” Dipper protested in embarrassment, though Steven was quick to cut in before the argument could go on any further.

“Wait, wait, wait!” the young Gem called with an amused chuckle. “First of all, of course I’ll teach you, Mabel. But only if you show me a few sewing basics first! I’d love to be able to knit a sweater as good as you can!”

“You got it!” Mabel agreed cheerfully as she finished sowing a dolphin patch onto her new sweater.

“Secondly,” Steven continued as he looked to the boy sitting next to him with interest. “Dipper, you can play the sousaphone?”

Dipper shot a glare up at Mabel once more for revealing that bit of information on a talent he wasn’t exactly proud of. “Uh, kinda…” he admitted hesitantly. “I know how to play it because our parents forced me to.”

“Yeah and he’s super good at it!” Mabel goaded with levity in her tone. “I bet you guys could play an awesome ukulele-sousaphone duet together!”

Though Steven showed instant excitement at this very idea, Dipper was clearly less enthusiastic about it. “I-I don’t know if that’s such-” His protests were suddenly cut off as a mysterious chiming sound blared from the TV, catching their collective attention. While the television had been more or less background noise up until now, all three kids turned to it in curious confusion, intrigued by the rather interesting commercial playing on screen.

The first image of a handful of doves being released was soon accompanied by a voice-over and an actor who appeared to be far too overly distraught as he sobbed incoherently. “Are you completely miserable?” the voice-over asked in a deep southern accent.

“YES!” the actor answered while still crying.

“Then you need to meet…” the voice over dropped down to a dramatic whisper at this, a vague silhouette figure appearing on screen. “Gideon…”

“Gideon?” Dipper repeated, raising a confused eyebrow.

“What makes him so special?” Mabel asked with a bewildered frown.

“Oh, I know Gideon!” Steven cut in. “He’s-”

“He’s a psychic,” the voice over explained before the young Gem could. The twins exchanged an intrigued glance at this, though neither of them were quite sure if they were willing to buy such an impressive claim, even as the commercial continued. “So don’t waste your time with other so-called ‘men of mystery’.” Not surprisingly, an image of Stan himself appeared on screen as the voice over said this, the word “FRUAD” stamped onto the picture as the con man emerged from the outhouse with toilet paper still stuck to his shoe. “So hurry on over to Gideon’s Tent of Telepathy tonight for an evening of magic and delight for all!”

“Wow, I’m getting all curious inside!” Mabel exclaimed as the ad quickly listed off its terms of services. “This Gideon guy sounds pretty mysterious!”
“Steven, you said you know Gideon?” Dipper asked inquisitively. “Is he actually the real deal?”

“Er… Well, I’ve been to a few of his shows before and he seems like he’s a real psychic…” Steven shrugged a bit half-heartedly. “The Gems don’t think so though, but then again, they don’t think most of the stuff here at the Mystery Shack is authentic either. But I don’t care; I still love coming here, more than the Tent of Telepathy anyway.”

“That’s ‘cause the Tent of Telepathy is nothing but a two-bit sham,” Stan suddenly cut in as he entered the room, a rather cross expression on his face from having overheard the conversation. “Ever since that monster Gideon rolled into town, I’ve had nothin’ but trouble! He’s a no-account punk, and that’s that.”

“So… is he really psychic or not?” Mabel asked, still not having a conclusive answer.

“I say we go and find out,” Dipper suggested and Steven nodded in agreement. Stan, on the other hand, was vehemently against the very idea.

“Never!” the con man exclaimed stubbornly. “You’re forbidden from patronizing the competition! And besides, you don’t even need to go to anywhere to learn that Gideon’s a fake! He’s about as much of a psychic as I am a flamenco dancer.”

“Mr. Pines, you’re a flamenco dancer?” Steven asked in clear awe. “Wow! I’m learning so much about you guys today!”

Stan rolled his eyes as he ignored the young Gem and continued. “Long story short, you two knuckle-heads need to stay away from Gideon,” he staunchly asserted to Dipper and Mabel. “No one that lives under my roof is allowed under his roof!”

With no more to say on the matter, the con man succinctly stormed out of the room, still clearly seething over the fact that his niece and nephew would even consider indulging his longstanding rival. However, the kids were still clearly intrigued by the idea of a genuine psychic in Gravity Falls, regardless of Stan’s unyielding position on the matter.

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“Do tents even have roofs?” Dipper asked caustically after Stan was out of earshot.

“Not that I know of,” Steven replied with a growing smile.

“Well boys, I think we just found our loop hole!” Mabel declared, holding up a string tied into a loop knot. “Literally!”

The kids all got a good laugh out of this as they headed out of the shack, though none of them were around to hear the Tent of Telepathy’s ad stinger as they planned to go there for themselves. “So come on down, folks. Gideon’s expecting you…”

Excited for their forbidden escapade, the kids had only decided to let in a few others to join them in their firsthand investigation of the Tent of Telepathy. Dipper and Mabel had invited Soos to come along with them, and the handyman had agreed out of his own curiosity after having heard the rumors about Gideon’s psychic prowess. Wanting to know more on the Gems’ negative position on the supposed psychic, Steven had managed to coerce Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl into coming with him, though he hadn’t exactly mentioned to them where they were going until they arrived. Upon seeing that their destination was the Tent of Telepathy, the Gems were clearly less than amused about having been duped into going there.

“Ugh, this place?” Amethyst asked with a loud groan as the collective group entered the crowded tent. “Come on, Steven, you know that Gideon kid is a fake. Why don’t we just leave and go hang
out at the shack instead? At least the stuff Stan has there is actually interesting.”

“For once, I agree with Amethyst,” Pearl frowned with distaste. “There really isn’t anything of genuine worth here… Though I wouldn’t go as far as to call anything at the Mystery Shack ‘interesting’…”

“Aw, come on, you guys,” Steven urged as they all found their seats. “This place isn’t *that* bad. At least stick around for a while… for me? Please?”

The Gems all grumbled their dissent as they begrudgingly sat down alongside Steven, none of them really wanting to be there and yet they didn’t want to upset the young Gem. Meanwhile, the twins were glancing around the large tent curiously, knowing that despite it’s relatively simply set up, the show had garnished quite a crowd. “Man, is amazing how many people showed up for this,” Dipper remarked. “I wonder if this huge turnout has anything to do with Gideon actually being authentic or not.”

“Just for the record, he’s not,” Garnet replied in a rather deadpan tone, her arms crossed as she merely frowned in dissatisfaction.

“Shh!” Mabel quieted them in budding excitement as spotlights flooded the stage. “It’s starting!”

“Let’s see what this ‘monster’ looks like…” Dipper muttered skeptically as the crowds quieted down, wondering what could be so bad about Gideon that he was able to get even Stan so riled up.

The crowd held their breath in baited anticipation as a large, somewhat intimidating silhouette appeared behind the curtain, though it grew gradually smaller as it stepped forward. However, as the curtains pulled back, Dipper and Mabel were quite surprised to see what Gideon looked like in the flesh. In actuality, he was probably even younger than the twins or Steven was, a short, stout child with an impressively large, yet very neat pompadour of white hair. He was clad in a baby blue business suit, complete with large shoulder pads, a jade bolo tie, and a flashy cape. The child psychic flashed the crowd a winning smile as they applauded him before he addressed them in a warm, friendly greeting.

“Hello America!” Gideon greeted, his voice carrying a heavy southern drawl. “My name’s Lil’ Gideon!”

The audience cheered excitedly as the young psychic clapped his hands once, doves flying out of his touted hair on his command. “Oh come on,” Amethyst commented, rolling her eyes boredly. “Anyone can get birds to fly out of their hair. In fact…”

“No, Amethyst,” Pearl shook her head in disapproval, already knowing that the purple Gem wanted to try it out for herself.

“That’s Stan’s mortal enemy?” Dipper asked in disbelief.

“But… he’s so wittle!” Mabel remarked with a gushing grin over how adorable Gideon was.

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“Ladies and gentlemen, it is such a *gift* to have you all here tonight!” Gideon announced to the crowd with cordial smile. “Such a gift! I have a *vision*; I predict that you all will soon say, “aww”.”

Gideon was quick to make his own prediction come true as he struck an undeniably cute pose that made the crowd unable to contain their adoration for him as they all resonated in a unanimous “Aww…”

“It came true!” Mabel gasped in awe at how accurate Gideon’s prediction had been.
“I know!” Steven replied with an equally enthused grin. “Amazing, isn’t it?”

“What? I’m not impressed,” Dipper scoffed, not as willing to buy Gideon’s cutesy charm as the rest of the impressionable crowd was.

“Oh come on!” Mabel teased. “You’re totally impressed!”

“Hit it, Dad!” Gideon called to his father, who sat at the nearby piano and began to play an upbeat gospel tune. The child psychic began to dance a jig to the melody’s intro, before he broke into a chipper song that drew the crowd in even more. “Oh I can see what others can’t see! It ain’t some sideshow trick, its innate ability! Where others are blind, I am futurely inclined. And you too could see, if you was widdle ol’ me! Come on, everybody, rise up! I want ya’ll to keep it going!”

As Gideon called the crowd up, they were all quick to eagerly rise to their feet, including Mabel, Steven, and Soos, who joined the others in clapping along to the beat. Though Dipper and the Gems were nowhere near as invested in the show and didn’t particularly want to stand, they found themselves doing so anyway, much to their shared confusion.

“Wha-? How did he-?” Dipper trailed off in bewilderment as he realized he had stood involuntarily.

“W-what just happened?” Pearl asked both Amethyst and Garnet, equally disconcerted. None of them had any time to really question it though, as Gideon carried his song down into the crowd itself.

“You wish your son would call you more,” the child psychic sang, pointing to an elderly woman in the crowd.

“I’m leaving everything to my cats!” the woman exclaimed, affirmed by the cat fast asleep on her lap.

“I sense that you’ve been here before,” Gideon predicted as he looked over to Sherriff Blubbs, who was decked out in Lil’ Gideon official merchandise.

“Oh, what gave it away!” the officer exclaimed in surprise.

“Come on,” Dipper muttered in exasperation at how Gideon was pointing out the obvious, not understanding what the crowd was so enthralled with. “He can’t be serious.”

As if on cue, Gideon soon appeared beside the twins, though they missed the incredibly short, practically unnoticeable glare he shot towards the Gems and Steven. “I’ll read your mind if I’m able,” he sang to Mabel, giving her a small wink as he picked up his cheery manner again almost instantly. “Something tells me you’re named Mabel.”

“How did he know?!” Mabel exclaimed in amazement as Gideon hurried back to the stage.

“Uh, maybe it had something to do with the fact that your name is on your sweater,” Dipper said sarcastically, glancing down at his sister’s sweater, which indeed bore her name on it in large, colorful letters.

“So welcome all ye... to the Tent of Telepathy...” Gideon sang, gearing up for his big finish. “And thanks for visitin’... widdle ol’ me!”

As the song ended, the crowd burst into a round of wild, rousing applause, which Gideon was more than happy to accept, despite the fact that the act had clearly worn him out. “Thank you!” he
exclaimed as he took a sweeping bow. “You people are the real miracles! Now drive home safely, ya’ll! And don’t forget to stock up on Lil’ Gideon merchandise on the way out! Goodnight everyone!”

The audience continued to cheer for the child psychic even as he headed offstage and the show came to a conclusion. Steven and Mabel had both been caught up in this excitement as they joined the raptured applause, until the Gems announced that it was time to go.

“At least it was mercifully short this time…” Pearl said in exasperation as the group began to file out of the tent.

“Yeah, last time we got dragged into one of these, it was almost an hour,” Amethyst rolled her eyes as she stretched out, glad to be out of the tent.

“Aw, don’t be like that, you guys,” Steven said with a small grin. “Admit it: you all had at least a little fun tonight, right?”

“Not really,” Garnet said simply and honestly.

“Steven, we appreciate that you wanted us to join you, but you have to remember, we see real magical things every day,” Pearl reminded the young Gem with a gentle smile.

“Yeah,” Amethyst said with a wry grin, “Nothing phases us. Especially not some four foot tall kid with a fancy suit who can put on a little song and dance.”

The purple Gem let out a chuckle at this that Pearl couldn’t help but share in and even Garnet cracked a smile at. Even Steven couldn’t keep his amusement contained for too long as he joined their guardians in their levity, which was something Dipper and Mabel were quick to join in with too.

“I didn’t think it was possible, but somehow, that kid’s an even bigger fraud than Stan,” Dipper said with a smirk, knowing that even if he was in no way convinced that Gideon was an actual psychic, at least his show had been somewhat entertaining. “No wonder our uncle’s jealous of him!”

“If there’s anything you really can say for Gideon is that he does have quite a bit more… pizzazz than Stan does,” Pearl agreed with a small laugh.

“Oh, come on, you guys,” Mabel urged. “His dance moves were adorable! And did you see his hair? It was like, whoosh!”

“You’re too easily impressed,” Dipper remarked, knowing that Mabel found amusement in practically everything she saw.

“Yeah, yeah,” Mabel laughed, giving her brother a playful shove as the group walked off back towards the shack and the temple. However, none of them were aware of the figure that was watching them from the Tent of Telepathy as they left, who was filled with both malice and infatuation all at once.

The next morning, Dipper had taken to pouring over the journal once more, only this time with the intent of attempting to decode the cryptograms interspersed throughout the Gems’ entries. However, he didn’t get very far in his codebreaking as Mabel hurried in from upstairs, her face covered in a wide array of brightly colored sequins.

“Um… Mabel?” Dipper asked with slight concern, already more than curious to know what the
explanation behind this escapade was.

“Check it out, Dipper!” Mabel exclaimed with a wide grin. “After a lot of practice and wasted sequins, I finally managed to successfully bedazzle my face! It’s just a little hard to blink though…” She frowned as the natural urge to blink came, some sequins flying off her face as she struggled to do so.

“Is that permanent?” Dipper questioned a bit worriedly, knowing well that his sister often jumped into her more dangerous creative projects without thinking.

“I hope so!” she said with excitement, though her joy was soon interrupted by the ringing doorbell.

“Somebody answer the door!” Stan called from the kitchen, too busy to do so himself.

“Oh, that must be Steven!” Mabel exclaimed, remembering that the young Gem was coming to hang out again. “I’ll get it!” Her face still dotted in sequins, she ran for the door and flung it open, expecting to find Steven standing outside, only to find another, much shorter figure standing before her instead.

“Howdy!” Gideon greeted with a warm smile, which was quick to garnish Mabel’s absolute delight.

“Oh my gosh!” she smiled with a surprised gasp. “It’s ‘widdle ol’’ you!”

“Yeah, my song’s quite catchy,” Gideon said with a somewhat nervous laugh as he scratched the back of his neck. “Now, pardon me if I’m a bit bold here, since I know we haven’t formally met, but after yesterday’s performance, I just couldn’t get your laugh out of my head!”

“You mean this one?” Mabel asked before breaking out into a slightly obnoxious laugh that managed to charm Gideon all the same.

“Oh, what a delight!” the young psychic smiled brightly. “When I saw you in the audience, I said to myself, ‘Now, there’s a kindred spirit. Someone who appreciates the more… sparkly things in life.’”

“You got that right!” Mabel heartily agreed with another chuckle, though it soon turned into a cough as she accidentally choked up some of the sequins she had managed to swallow while bedazzling her face. The sequins managed to land perfectly on Gideon’s lapel, making his suit flashier than it already was.

“Enchanting…” Gideon whispered in captivated awe. “Utterly enchanting.”

“Who’s at the door?!” Stan called from inside the house, causing Mabel to panic slightly as she remembered just how much disdain the conman had for the young psychic.

“No one, Grunkle Stan!” she replied, covering for Gideon as casually as she could.

“I’m much obliged for your discretion,” the child psychic said politely. “Stan’s no fan of mine. I don’t know how a lemon so sour could be related to a peach so sweet.”

“Oh, stop it, you!” Mabel laughed with a wave of her hand.

“What do you say we step away from here and get better acquainted?” Gideon offered. “Perhaps in my… dressing room?”
“You have a dressing room?” Mabel asked in excited amazement. “We could give each other makeovers! Oh, but wait… I was waiting on Steven to come over so he could teach me to play the ukulele! In fact, he should be here any minute now…”

“Oh…” Gideon frowned, the smallest hint of contempt in his tone, though Mabel hardly noticed it. “Well, if you’re expecting company, then I understand. I’ll suppose I’ll just be on my way then…”

Mabel bit her lip apprehensively as Gideon disappointedly turned to leave in, not really wanting to turn his kind offer down. “Gideon, wait!” she called to him before he could get too far, reaching a spur of the moment decision. After all, Steven would certainly understand if she put off their lessons until later, considering the circumstances. “I’m sure Steven won’t mind. Besides, he can just hang out with my brother until I get back, so… makeovers, here we come!”

“Why, yes indeed!” Gideon agreed with newfound verve as Mabel hurried to accompany him. The child psychic couldn’t help but flash a discreet triumphant, almost snide grin towards the Gem temple as the two of them passed by it, knowing that he had won this first, important victory. “Yes indeed…”

Steven frowned as he glanced up at the clock again, knowing that he had been waiting at the shack for almost an hour now for Mabel to come back so they could start their first ukulele lessons. He had even brought an extra ukulele that he didn’t use much anymore with him to loan to her so she could get some practice. Normally, the young Gem wasn’t the kind to be impatient; after all, he had grown very accustomed to waiting for extended periods of time for the Gems to return from their missions. But Steven had been excited about this endeavor ever since Mabel had asked about it the previous day, to the point that neither of them had wanted to put it off. And yet, it appeared that Mabel had done so anyway.

“When do you think she’ll be back?” Steven asked Dipper as the two of them sat together and watched TV to pass the time until Mabel’s return.

“I don’t know…” Dipper said with a slightly concerned frown. At first, he hadn’t thought much of Mabel randomly disappearing, as she did that all the time. However, she had been gone for several hours now, which was quite strange, since she hadn’t told either him or Stan where she had gone. “It’s not like Mabel to be gone for so long. All she did was answer the door this morning and she hasn’t been around since.”

“You don’t think something’s happened to her, do you?” Steven asked with sudden worry.

Before Dipper could even answer, the front door suddenly burst open, instantly calming both boys’ concerns. “As if on cue…” Dipper remarked to himself with a smirk as Mabel bounded into the room cheerfully.

“Hey, guys!” Mabel greeted the boys exuberantly, her ‘makeover’ surprising them both quite a bit. Her hair and been curled and was held in place with a daunting amount of hairspray, her face painted excessively with makeup, and her manicured fingernails dancing as she waved them in front of her to show them off. “What’s goin’ on?”

“Wow, Mabel!” Steven exclaimed with a smile. “You look great!”

“Thanks!” Mabel laughed cheerfully. “I gotta admit, this is even better than bedazzling my face!”

“Mabel, where have you been?” Dipper asked with a confused frown. “And what’s going on with those nails? You look like a wolverine.”
“I know, right?” Mabel readily agreed as she let out a playful roar and pawed at the air. “I was just hanging out with my new pal, Gideon. I gotta say, he is one dapper little man!”

“Wait, you were with Gideon all this time?” Steven asked, looking the slightest bit disappointed. “But… I thought you wanted me to teach you the ukulele…”

“Oh, well of course I do!” Mabel exclaimed, feeling the slightest bit guilty over how she had snubbed the young Gem without any warning. “But Gideon invited me over, and I didn’t really want to turn him down since he’s so nice! You’re not mad, are you, Steven?”

“No,” Steven shook his head, though he still didn’t smile. “We can always start our lessons later. I mean, you were just out having fun, right?”

“I sure was! Gideon’s the best! We talked about all sorts of stuff, like unicorns and summer fashions and he even did my hair!” Mabel gushed as she gave her hair a stylish flip.

“Mabel, what would Grunkle Stan say if he found out you were hanging around with his biggest rival?” Dipper asked warily.

“Well, he’s not gonna find out, ‘cause you’re not gonna tell him, right?” Mabel asked her brother a bit pleadingly.

“I guess not,” Dipper shrugged, seeing no need to cause senseless drama. “But still, I don’t trust anyone who’s hair is bigger than their head.”

“Oh, leave him alone!” Mabel said defensively. “You never wanna do girly stuff with me! You and Soos get to do boy stuff together all the time!”

“What do you mean?” Dipper asked, though before Mabel could even answer, Soos poked his head into the room, a packet of hot dogs in hand.

“Yo, dude, you ready to blow up these hot dogs in the microwave one by one?” the handyman asked with an excited grin.

“Am I!” Dipper exclaimed readily as he jumped to his feet. “Aren’t you coming, Steven?”

“Uh… nah…” the young Gem frowned, even though he normally would have joined in on such an escapade. “You guys go on ahead without me.”

“Whatever you say, dude,” Soos shrugged as him and Dipper rushed into the kitchen and began watching the hot dogs explode while laughing in amusement all the while.

“Ugh,” Mabel rolled her eyes after her brother left. “Do you see what I have to put up with, Steven?”

“Mabel, I’m sorry if you’re feeling left out,” Steven said with a sincere frown. “I know how hard that can be, since the Gems leave me out of a lot of things.”

“It’s not your fault,” Mabel said with a sigh as she took a seat next to the young Gem. “After all, even though me and Dipper are twins, that doesn’t really change the fact that he’s a boy and I’m a girl. That’s why it’s so nice to hang out with someone like Gideon for a change. He’s actually into a lot of the same stuff as me, even if he is a guy. Sorta like you, Steven. You should totally come out with the two of us sometime!”

“Uh… yeah…” Steven said with slight uncertainty before quickly changing the subject. “Well, it
might be a little too late to get very far into the basics of the ukulele today, but we could always start another time. I’m going on a mission with the Gems tomorrow, but… how does Wednesday sound? We could do it up at the temple, and we can have snacks and everything!”

“That sounds perfect,” Mabel smiled as the two of them shook hands on it, both of them resolved on making it happen this time.

The sun sank low over Gravity Falls, casting a lazy warm glow on the sleepy little town. Mabel and Gideon took in this stunning view from an excellent high vantage point, namely the roof of the warehouse where the majority of the child psychic’s merchandise was stored. The new friends had spent most of the day out on a shopping trip, with Gideon happily footing the bill for any and all purchases. The pair had then decided to conclude their adventures in a relaxing way, which had led them to their current spot.

“What a good thing we both brought our…”

“Opera glasses!” they both chimed in unison as they pulled said glasses out, pointing them at each other and letting out a shared laugh.

“Oh, but seriously though, this view is incredible,” Mabel reaffirmed. “You can see the whole town from up here! And I don’t think I’ve ever been able to look down at the Gem temple before!”

“Away, that ol’ temple ain’t nothing special,” Gideon said dismissively, before quickly changing the subject. “You know, Mabel, when I’m up here lookin’ down at all those little ol’ people, I feel like I’m the king of all I survey.” The child psychic grinned a bit ominously as his voice dropped down into a temporary whisper, before his manner turned cheerful once more. “I guess that makes you my queen, huh?”

“What?” Mabel chuckled, thinking that he had merely been joking. “You are being so nice to me right now! Quit it!”

“I can’t quit it,” Gideon said with complete sincerity. “I am speaking from the heart.”

“From the where-now?” Mabel asked as her smile lessened a bit into sudden confusion.

“Mabel, I must admit, I’ve never felt this close with anyone,” Gideon said with an endearing smile as he reached out to stroke Mabel’s hair, despite her growing discomfort. “So, so close…”

“Uh… Gideon, listen,” Mabel began with a disconcerted frown as she gently pushed the child psychic’s hand away. He was quick to reach for her hair once more, but she brushed his hand away once again, only more insistently this time. “I like you a lot, I really do, but… maybe we should just be friends…”

“At least give me a chance,” Gideon said, taking the initial rejection surprisingly well. “Mabel, will you do me the honor of going on a date with me?”

“A play date?” Mabel asked tentatively, hoping that this wasn’t what she thought it was.

“Uh uh,” Gideon shook his head.

“A shopping date?”

“Uh uh. It’ll just be one lil’ ol’ date. I swear on my lucky bolo tie.”
“Well…” Mabel bit her lip apprehensively. After how kind Gideon had been to her thus far, she knew she was in no real position to turn him down. She certainly did enjoy hanging out with him, though she wasn’t too fond of the idea of their friendship turning into anything serious. But, she reasoned, all Gideon was asking for was one simple, casual date. What’s the worst that could happen? “Okay, then… I guess one date wouldn’t be so bad…”

“Mabel Pines, you have just made me the happiest boy in the world!” Gideon exclaimed in absolute delight as he gave Mabel a sudden hug, though she couldn’t help but notice something rather unsettling as she hesitantly returned it.

“Wait…” she frowned, suddenly regretting her decision, even if she knew she couldn’t go back on it now. “Are you sniffing my hair?”

True to his word, Gideon came calling on Mabel for their date the following evening, though he did so with quite a bit of pomp and circumstance. Mabel had been quite surprised to see the child psychic arrive at the shack atop a magnificent white stallion, which they had rode to one of the finest, most expensive restaurants in town. Needless to say, Gideon had reserved the most lavish, secluded booth in the place, but what bewildered Mabel even more than that was the fact that the large steed they had gotten there on was currently drinking out of the decorative fountain only a few feet away from their table.

“Havin’ a good time, Mabel?” Gideon grinned flirtatiously. “Cause I know I am…”

“Um… sure…” Mabel said rather half-heartedly. “Still, I can’t believe they let us bring a horse in here!”

“What can I say?” Gideon asked coyly as he propped his feet up on the table. “People have a hard time sayin’ no to me…”

“Ah, Monsieur Gideon! Ze feet on ze table! An excellent choice!” the waiter complimented as he came by to refill their kids drinks.

“Jean Luc, what did we discuss about eye contact?” Gideon asked coldly, shooting the garcon a glare.

“Yes, yes! Very good!” the waiter complied, immediately looking away from the child physic as he backed away from the table with a wide grin.

As this exchange had been going on, Mabel happened to glance down at the place setting before her, noting just how elegant it was. Despite her initial hesitance on going on this date, she couldn’t deny, at the least, that Gideon was treating her to quite the evening out. “I’ve never seen so many forks!” she remarked in amazement. “And water with bubbles in it? Ohh lala, oui oui!”

“Oh, parlez vous francais?” Gideon asked with interest, even though his simple question left Mabel absolutely confused.

“I… have no idea what you’re saying.”

Gideon simply let out a charmed laugh at this, before sobering into a coy grin directed at his date. “You know, Mabel, I can’t recall the last time I’ve had such a delightful time on a date.”

“You’ve been on dates before?” Mabel asked skeptically, not sure if she was willing to buy such a claim, since Gideon was almost certainly even younger than she was.

“Well… not traditionally…” Gideon admitted with a shrug. “But I hardly think that lil’ detail
matters. After all, it only makes this first date all the more… special, don’t you agree?”

“Uh…” Mabel began, glancing away rather uncomfortably as their food arrived. She knew what the child psychic was hinting at, and she couldn’t say she was very enthusiastic about the idea. While she did view herself and Gideon as friends, she couldn’t very well imagine them being anything more than that, even with all the fancy dates and gifts he might try to impress her with.

“As far as I’m concerned, tonight’s date is turning out to be a complete success!” Gideon continued with a pleased smile. “And tomorrow’s date promises to top this one in every way!”

“Whoa, whoa, what?” Mabel cut in, sudden alarm filling her as she disregarded the still-living lobster on her plate. “You said just one date, and this was it.”

The child psychic was quick to avoid answering her concerns as he abruptly changed the subject to something that seemed rather left-wing at first. “Hark! What a surprise! A red-crested South American rainbow macaw!” No sooner had Gideon pointed out the large, colorful bird that it flew in seemingly out of nowhere, obediently coming to perch on the young psychic’s arm, despite Mabel’s startled cry. Upon a simple snap of Gideon’s fingers, the macaw began to deliver its rehearsed message in surprisingly clarity.

“Mabel! Will! You! Accompany! Gideon! To the! Ballroom! Dance! This! Websday—Wednesday!” the bird quickly corrected its error after Gideon gave it a shake, before it hacked up an invitation to the event onto Mabel’s plate and flew away.

Mabel could hardly find the words to say over this sudden, awkward turn of events, especially as the other restaurant patrons had taken notice and let out a collective “aw” over the young couple. She knew she couldn’t very well tell the truth about how she was feeling and turn Gideon down in front of so many people, especially as she turned to meet his expectant grin.

“So, Mabel?” Gideon asked hopefully, clearly playing up the factor of all of the many eyes that were watching them. “What do you say?”

“O-oh… well…” Mabel began, her eyes darting back and forth anxiously. Considering the fact that she was a hopeless romantic, she had been turned down by many a boy countless times before, which was something she was able to shake off rather easily most of the time. However, she couldn’t once recall ever having been in the position to break someone else’s heart herself. To be perfectly honest, she wasn’t sure if she had it in her to even tell Gideon the truth about how she preferred their relationship to be, even if she knew it would be for the best. “Gideon,” she started over, summoning up her resolve to let him down as gently as possible. “I’m sorry, but I’m gonna have to say…” She trailed off once more, however, as she glanced over at the other patrons, all of them still on the edge of their seats over whether or not she would say yes. Mabel had never been one who liked to disappoint anyone, be it a longing admirer, or a large group of eager onlookers. Which was why she was more than thankful when a sudden memory struck her, one that she knew could save her for now all while doing the least amount of harm. “I can’t—at least not tomorrow,” she said quickly, cringing at the sighs of disappointment from the crowd as she turned to Gideon once more.

“Oh?” Gideon asked with a confused, yet not upset frown. “And why ever not?”

“B-because,” Mabel stared shakily, realizing that she was only putting the matter off. Yet she felt as though it was a necessary caution; after all, she needed some time to think. “I promised Steven that I would hang out with him tomorrow. You know him, right?”

“Ah yes…” Gideon said with a fake smile, his fists clenched tightly under the table so Mabel
wouldn’t see them. “Young Steven Universe… He’s a right good fella, for sure. And where would this town be without those friends of his, the ‘Crystal Gems’ to keep this lil’ town here safe…” The child psychic held back a twitch of frustration as he continued. “And how long did you say you’ve been friends with him for?”

“Since the beginning of summer,” Mabel said with a fond, somewhat relieved grin as she gaged Gideon’s mostly amicable tone. “But anyway, Steven said he would teach me how to play the ukulele, and I really do wanna learn. I already felt bad about putting it off the other day when the two of us hang out, and… well, I just wouldn’t feel right if I made him wait again, you know?”

Gideon was only somehow managing to maintain a calm façade that hid away how he really felt on the matter. “Why, of course,” he said between a clenched grin. “Don’t fret, Mabel, I completely understand. I would be simply remiss if I made you miss what certainly sounds like quite an… important affair…”

“Really?” Mabel asked with a glad smile, even if she knew that this situation wasn’t over yet. “Thanks, Gideon. I’m really sorry about having to call our… date off.”

“Oh, now never you mind all that,” Gideon said with a half-hearted laugh and a wave of his hand. “After all, we can just push it on over to Thursday evenin’, simple as that.”

“O-oh,” Mabel’s smile instantly vanished upon hearing this. And yet, a small part of her relaxed as she reminded herself that she had time; she could use her day off from hanging out with Gideon to try and find a way out of this uncomfortable cycle she had found herself in. And hopefully, she could do so without causing the kindly child psychic too much pain. “Heh, yeah… Thursday… That sounds… great…”

“Excellent!” Gideon perked up, putting aside his former hidden distain as he held his glass of sparkling water up. “I propose a toast!” he called to the rest of the restaurant, the many patrons more than happy to follow the young psychic’s example and join in with their own glasses. “To me and my darlin’ Mabel! The happiest couple this side of Gravity Falls!”

The other patrons all cheered in support as they drank to this, the only one not joining in on the excitement being Mabel herself. Instead, she merely glanced down apprehensively, more unsure than ever about what to do. The only thing she could really think at this juncture was about how she wished she had a bit more assertive nerve to stop what was already derailing out of her favor far too quickly for comfort.

Even though Dipper had promised Mabel that he would keep her newfound rapport with Gideon a secret from Stan, that didn’t mean that the conman couldn’t find out about it through other avenues, or specifically, through the front page article of the next morning’s *Gravity Falls Gossiper*.

“Hey!” Stan growled in heated anger as he stormed into the gift shop, catching Dipper, Soos, and Wendy all off-guard from the mere fury in his tone alone. “What in the jackal is Mabel doing in the paper next to that crazy pickpocket Gideon?!” he harshly questioned the trio, waving the newspaper in front of him. “I thought I told her to stay away from him!”

“Oh yeah,” Wendy said as she showed a wide array of texts on her phone concerning the young couple. “It’s like a big deal. Everyone’s talking about Gideon and Mabel’s big date tomorrow night.”

“WHAT?!” Stan exclaimed, completely taken aback. “That little shyster’s dating *my* niece?!”
“I wonder what the new name for the power couple will be,” Soos pondered as he looked up from the magazine he was reading featuring Mabel and Gideon together. “Mabideon? Gideabel? Or what about Magidbeleon!?”

“Dipper, did you know about this?” Stan asked his nephew gruffly, still clearly fuming.

“N-no!” Dipper said defensively, even if he knew that was a blatant lie. But all the same, he wasn’t about to be on the receiving end of his uncle’s wrath when this was all because of his sister’s indiscretion. “I didn’t hear a thing about it! Plus, I told her not to!”

“Well, where is she now?” the conman asked impatiently. “I swear if she’s with that little weasel, I’m gonna-”

“She’s not,” Dipper quickly cut in. “She’s up at the Gem temple hanging out with Steven for the day.”

“Hm, well I’d rather her be up there than with Gideon of all people,” Stan scowled as he pulled his suit jacket over his shoulders. “But either way, this all ends today. I’m going down to that little skunk’s house and putting a stop to this right now!” Without another word, the conman stomped out, slamming the door behind him and leaving the three youths slightly concerned that they would have to step in to help in the likely event that he got himself into any legal trouble.

Of course, Stan disregarded most traffic ordnances and speed limits as he rushed over to the Gleeful house, making a beeline for the door as soon as his car skidded to a stop. “Gideon, you little punk! Open up!” he yelled as he pounded heavily on the door, only pausing for a brief moment as he noted the knit sign that read “Pardon this garden” nailed to the door. “I will pardon nothing!” the conman hissed in intrepid fury as he knocked the sign off the door in retaliation.

No more than a moment later, Gideon’s father, Bud, arrived at the door, a welcoming grin on his face despite the very unhappy conman standing before him. “Why, Stanford Pines!” Bud greeted warmly. “What a delight!”

“Out of the way, Bud!” Stan pushed his way past the used cars salesmen and into the house. “I’m looking for Gideon! I have a bone to pick with him!”

“Well, I haven’t seen the boy around lately, but since you’re here, you simply must sit down for some coffee!” Bud offered amicably as he placed a hand on Stan’s shoulder and guided him into the den.

“B-but I came-”

“It’s imported! All the way from Columbia!”

Stan paused for a moment, unable to deny that the sound of genuine Columbian coffee did sound enticing. “Huh… you don’t say… I went to jail there once.” Only now that his rage had subsided a bit was the conman able to notice just how spacious and well-furnished the Gleeful residence was, a far cry from the cramped, dusty nooks and crannies of the Mystery Shack. “Wow… These are some nice digs you got here. And-oh, this…” the conman’s jaw dropped at the painting of a sobbing clown hanging from the wall. “This is just beautiful.”

“Well, thank you very much,” Bud said with a humble grin as he took a seat and poured Stan a cup of coffee. “Now, I hear that your niece and my Gideon are, well, they’re singin’ in harmony lately, so to speak.”

“Uh, yeah,” Stan glowered as he remembered the reason why he had come. “And I’m against it.”
“Aw, no, no, no!” Bud shook his head, still smiling calmly. “I hardly see this as a bad thing, Stanford! I see it as a fantastic business opportunity!”

“…Huh?”

“Yes, the Mystery Shack and the Tent of Telepathy,” Bud began to explain. “Gravity Falls’ premiere purveyors of the supernatural! We’ve been at each other’s throats for far too long now, yes we have. But don’t you see? This could be our big chance to set aside our rivalry and… pool our collective profits, you know?”

Stan’s eyes widened upon hearing this, the tantalizing promise of money making him forget about his former anger towards Gideon completely. After all, if there was any way to profit from this, then he wasn’t about to turn that chance down. “I’m listening…”

“Okay, so now that the ukulele is tuned, we can start by getting the three most basic keys down,” Steven instructed as he positioned his hand over his ukulele’s strings. He glanced over with a smile and watched as Mabel did the same on the ukulele he was lending her for their lessons, though he didn’t really notice how her expression was less than enthusiastic. “Great. So first of all, let’s try one of the easiest chords of them all: C. All you gotta do is put a finger down on this third fret here and…” The young Gem trailed off as he strummed an easy, assonant C chord, his grin widening as Mabel did the same after a moment of trying to get the right fingering down. “Awesome!” Steven encouraged. “You’re doing great so far, Mabel!”

“Steven, you only taught me one chord,” Mabel said with a small laugh, unable to deny that his kind enthusiasm was cheering her up from her rather glum mood.

“Yeah, but that one chord sounded great all the same,” Steven affirmed as Garnet stepped in from the kitchen, a tray of warm, freshly-baked treats on hand.

“Cookies are done,” the Gem leader said with a small smile as she placed the try on the coffee table for the kids to enjoy.

“Thanks, Garnet!” Steven smiled as he gladly took one of the cookies, scarfing it down happily. “Your cookies are the best.”

“Well, I make sure to bake them with plenty of love,” Garnet chuckled softly as she turned to go back to the kitchen to make another batch.

“What’s the matter, Mabel?” Steven asked, his mouth full as he noticed that she hadn’t touched a single cookie, despite the fact that there were plenty. “Don’t you want one? I thought you loved cookies.”

“I do,” she said, giving him a small, somewhat fake reassuring smile. “I’m… just not very hungry…”

Steven frowned as he finally picked up on how melancholy Mabel seemed to be, knowing that it wasn’t like her to be so disinterested and solemn, especially since she had been so excited to come over a few days ago. Fortunately though, Steven wasn’t the type to let any of his friends stay down in the dumps for too long.

“Mabel, is something wrong?” Steven asked with apt concern, putting his ukulele aside for the moment to focus on the more pressing matter. “You look kinda upset…”

“I’m not upset,” Mabel said, even if she knew that wasn’t exactly true. But she reasoned that if anyone would be able to give her sound advice on this problem, it would be Steven. “It’s just…
Have you ever had to disappoint someone who was really nice to you, but expected… a bit too much from you?"

The young Gem gave her a look of lost confusion, clearly not catching her drift. Mabel let out a sigh as she laid back on the couch, deciding to lay her problems out to him in hopes that he would listen. “It’s Gideon,” she began with a frown. “I went out to dinner with him last night, even though I really didn’t want to go. And when he asked me out again for tomorrow night, I didn’t know how to say no! It’s like I’m trapped in this really awkward round of dates, and I just can’t get out of it!”

“So… what’s the problem?” Steven asked, unsure if he understood the whole matter. “I thought you liked hanging out with Gideon.”

“I do!” Mabel protested. “But not like that! I like Gideon, but only as a friend/little sister! But I can’t just turn him down and break his heart after he’s been so nice to me, even if he is sorta clingy. I just need things to go back to the way they used to be. You know, friends.”

“Have you tried telling him any of this?” Steven inquired, willing to help her in any way possible.

“It’s not that easy,” Mabel groaned in exasperation. “Every time I try to work up the nerve to break things off with him, I get this weird, guilty feeling in my gut that forces me not to say no! I don’t know what I’m gonna do! I have no way out!”

“Hm…” Steven mused, unsure of what needed to be done about this problem himself. Thankfully though, one of the wisest people he knew happened to be in the kitchen just a few feet away. “Hey, Garnet!” he called to the Gem leader, who had just put another tray of cookies into the oven. “Mabel needs help with—”

“I heard,” Garnet said succinctly as she walked into the living room.

“So… any advice?” Mabel ventured, hoping that the Gem leader could be of some assistance. “I bet you, Amethyst, and Pearl deal with unwanted admirers all the time, since all three of you are super pretty.”

“We deal with them occasionally,” Garnet admitted as she took a seat on the couch beside the kids. “But most of the time, we don’t let it go too far.”

“I wish I had done that…” Mabel muttered with a sigh of regret, knowing that she should have nipped this problem in the bud when it was still small and she still had the chance.

“Mabel, listen,” Garnet began with sincerity as she placed a hand on the despondent girl’s shoulder. “The best advice I can give you is to tell Gideon the truth about how you feel. It’s not fair to him for you to lead him on, and it’s not fair for you to force yourself to keep doing something you don’t want to do. It may not be easy, and it may not feel good at first, but chances are it will be better for you both in the long run. Trust me.”

Mabel couldn’t help but smile a bit as she took this advice to heart, knowing that it was more than sound. Coming clean seemed like the only thing she really could do, especially when opposed to just putting it off and feigning her feelings. Telling the truth was a difficult solution, yes, but, as Garnet had said, it would certainly be the best one overall. Or so she hoped. “Thanks, Garnet,” she said with a resolved smile. “I guess I’ll just have to work up the courage to tell Gideon that we’re not going out again tomorrow night. I mean, what’s the worst that could happen?”

“Things will turn out fine,” Garnet encouraged with a small grin. “You’ll see.”

“Wow, Garnet,” Steven remarked, clearly impressed by the Gem leader’s solid suggestion. “I
didn’t know you knew so much about relationships! You’re like the romance master!”

Garnet let out an amused laugh at this as she rose to stand, casually adjusting her shades as she did so. “I guess you could say that…” she said, a hint of mystery in her tone as she returned to the kitchen once more.

“Well, that’s that,” Mabel clenched her fists in determination. “I just hope I don’t end up flaking out again when I try to explain it to him.”

“Don’t worry,” Steven reassured. “You can do this, Mabel. I believe in you!”

“Thanks,” Mabel chuckled as she picked up her ukulele again. “Now, are you gonna teach me how to rock out on this thing or not?”

“You bet!” Steven exclaimed heartily, both of them sharing a laugh as they jumped into an afternoon of enjoyable ukulele lessons, their problems and worries far behind them, even if only for a while.

Mabel returned to the shack that evening in high spirits, Garnet’s wise advice still ringing in her ears. Though she was still admittedly apprehensive about the whole situation, she knew now exactly what she had to do. The sooner she cut any supposed romantic ties she might have had with Gideon, the happier they both would be.

“Hey,” Dipper greeted his sister as she sauntered into the living room with a spring in her step. “You look like you’re in a good mood. What happened? Did you finally break things off with Gideon?”

“Not yet,” Mabel replied with an easy grin. “But never you fear, bro-bro. I plan on doing exactly that tomorrow night.”

“You’re not going to flake out and not tell him again, are you?” Dipper asked skeptically, remembering how Mabel had told him about her prior inability to come clean to the child psychic.

“Nope,” Mabel shook her head, still smiling. “I got some pretty sound advice from Garnet. She told me that the best thing to do it just tell Gideon the truth, even though it might be hard at first. But Gideon’s been pretty understanding so far; hopefully he won’t take it too hard.”

“Well, hopefully he’ll be more understanding than Stan was when he found out you and Gideon went out on a date,” Dipper said as he returned his attention back to the journal.

“I thought you said you weren’t going to tell him!” Mabel exclaimed in disappointment, looking around apprehensively for their uncle.

“I didn’t,” Dipper corrected. “He found out on his own and so he went over to Gideon’s to straighten him out. He’s been gone for several hours now, so it’s probably safe to assume that he’s been arrested by now.”

“Wait a minute…” Mabel said, her eyes widening as she ignored her brother’s sarcastic remark. “That’s it! If Grunkle Stan tells Gideon, it’s over, then that means I won’t have to! It’s like he’s doing all the work for me!”

“But I thought you said you were going to tell him the truth.”

“Hey, why put myself out there if I don’t have to?” Mabel said with a relieved grin. “I should have let Grunkle Stan know about this from the beginning! I owe him big time for this!”
“You sure do, kid!” Stan said with a broad grin as he entered the shack. Mabel spun around to face her grunkle excitedly, more than ready to give him a grateful hug, though she froze when she noticed the tee-shirt he was wearing, the words “Team Gideon” printed on it.

“Um… Grunkle Stan?” the girl frowned in slightly unnerved confusion.

“Mabel, I have some great news for you!” Stan proclaimed proudly, not at all noticing his niece’s steadily growing worry.

“Uh… is it that you told Gideon he’s not allowed to see me anymore?” Mabel asked tentatively, daring to hope that her uncle’s tee-shirt was no indication of the opposite.

“What?” Stan scoffed with a laugh, thinking that she was joking. “No! The good news is that you’re going to have to marry Gideon.”

“WHAT?!” Mabel practically shrieked in shock, her mind reeling at the very thought.

“It’s all part of the long term deal I just made with Bud Gleeful,” Stan explained. “There’s a lot of cash tied up in this thing, so don’t blow it for me.”

“B-but I-” Mabel began to protest, completely distraught in this sudden turn of events.

“Plus this merger has some immediate benefits too. Like this shirt!” the conman’s wide grin faded as he glanced down at said shirt, noticing how it emphasized his bulging stomach. “Ugh, I am fat.”

Unable to contain her abject horror over this disastrous news, Mabel did the only thing she could really think of at this juncture. Instead of expressing her complete opposition to her uncle’s newfound deal, she let out a terrified scream and hurried up the stairs to the attic as fast as she possibly could, leaving her concerned brother and confused uncle behind.

“Oh no…” Dipper frowned with sympathy, hating to see his usually bright and bubbly sister reduced to such sorrow. “Mabel…”

Dipper rolled his eyes at Stan’s tactlessness as he climbed the stairs not too far after Mabel, already anticipating the complete emotional wreck that awaited him. It wasn’t often that Mabel gave into fear or despair, but in the event that she did, Dipper knew more than enough about her unique, yet not always helpful way of coping with her most pressing problems and woes. And sure enough, his expectations were confirmed as he arrived in the attic, finding Mabel curled up into a tight ball against the wall, her arms, legs, and face tucked into her sweater as she rocked back and forth in a poor attempt to console herself.

“Mabel’s not here,” the girl muttered bitterly, her voice muffled thanks to her sweater. “She’s in sweater town.”

“Are you going to come out of sweater town?” Dipper asked as he headed over to her and sat against the wall beside her.

Mabel didn’t offer a verbal response as she instead let out a soft whine, clearly trying to hold back tears as she shook her head. Fortunately though, Dipper knew exactly how to break through his sister’s sweatered wall of despondency, since he had been in the practice of doing so ever since they were both little. “Come on, Mabel,” he encouraged as he placed a hand on her shoulder, even though she was quick to pull it away. “Don’t listen to Stan. You can always just end things with Gideon yourself, just like you said you were going to.”
“Ugh, it’s not that easy, Dipper!” Mabel groaned, still refusing to lift her head out of her sweater. “Talking about it is one thing, but actually doing it is entirely different! And… to be perfectly honest… I just don’t think I can do this…”

“Yeah, I understand,” Dipper sighed with a good-natured smile. “I know how much you hate disappointing people.”

“Exactly! I’m too darn nice for my own good!”

“That’s hardly a bad thing, Mabel.”

“It is in this case!” Mabel protested, burying her head even deeper into her sweater. “I just don’t know what to do…”

Seeing that his sister was clearly inconsolable, Dipper couldn’t help but feel the slightest bit of resolve rising in the midst of his pity. While this whole situation had merely been a point of amusement and skepticism for him thus far, he wasn’t about to let it continue any longer if it caused Mabel this much woe and stress. “Alright, enough is enough,” Dipper said reassuringly, catching Mabel’s attention as she peaked at him from her sweater. “If you can’t break up with Gideon, then don’t worry. I’ll do it for you.”

“Y-you will?” Mabel asked in surprise, lifting her head up a little more.

“Of course,” Dipper confirmed with a confident grin, knowing that passing the message onto Gideon would be beyond easy. “And if it makes you feel any better, I’ll take Steven with me. Between the two of us, this will be a piece of cake.”

Joy instantly exploded across Mabel’s face as she quickly pulled herself out of her sweater and nearly knocked her brother to the ground in a sudden, tight hug. “Oh, thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” she exclaimed exuberantly, all of her pep and verve back as relief flooded her. “Have I ever told you that you’re the best brother ever?!”

Dipper simply laughed warmly at his sister’s excitement, his own spirits lifted upon seeing her so elated once more. “You could stand to say it more often,” he remarked jokingly, willingly taking the playful punch on the arm Mabel gave him in the midst of her celebration.

Though Steven had been there when Garnet had imparted her words of relationship wisdom to Mabel, he still instantly sympathized with her upon hearing how her situation had worsened from Dipper. Which was why the young Gem hadn’t hesitated to join the twins in going to set Gideon straight, even though Mabel insisted on waiting outside of the restaurant for the boys to return, claiming that she wasn’t sure she could even face the child psychic in light of the awkward circumstances.

“So… have you ever really talked to Gideon before?” Dipper asked Steven as they approached the largest table near the back of the crowded restaurant.

“Eh, not that much,” Steven shrugged. “I’ve only met him a handful of times. But he seems nice enough, based on how he acts during his shows, and he really seems to like Mabel, so I’m sure he won’t take this too badly.”

“Hopefully.” Dipper muttered as him and Steven made it to Gideon’s table. The child psychic hadn’t noticed their arrival as he was intently looking over his menu, patiently waiting on his date to arrive. In fact, he wasn’t even aware of the boys’ presence until Steven spoke up, albeit a bit apprehensively.
“Um… Hi, Gideon,” the young Gem greeted tentatively. Gideon lowered his menu and forced a smile as he took in the sight of the two boys, clearly having been expecting Mabel instead of either of them.

“Oh, well look who it is!” the child psychic exclaimed with feigned delight. “Dipper Pines and Steven Universe! What a pleasant surprise! Tell me, Steven, how are those magical colleagues of yours doin’?”

“You mean the Gems?” Steven asked in confusion. “They’re fine, I guess.”

“Very good, very good,” Gideon replied, masking his contempt through small talk. “So, have either of you boys seen Mabel around? It’s high time for our date to get in motion.”

“Um, yeah… Look, Gideon,” Dipper began with a somewhat nervous frown. “Here’s the thing. Mabel… isn’t joining you tonight. To be honest, she, uh… she doesn’t wanna see you anymore. She’s… Well, she’s kinda weirded out by you, no offense.”

“She was going to tell you herself,” Steven added carefully. “But she didn’t want to hurt your feelings. She just thinks it would be better for both of you if you went your separate ways. You understand, right?”

A beat of uncomfortable silence passed between them as Steven and Dipper exchanged a rather awkward glance, both of them noticing Gideon’s eye twitching in hidden anger upon hearing this news. “So…” the child psychic began, his voice low and unstable. “What you’re sayin’ is… you’ve… come between us?”

“You’re not like, gonna freak out, or anything, are you?” Dipper asked anxiously, remembering his initial distrust of Gideon quite well.

Upon being posed this question, the child psychic instantly righted himself, seamlessly reverting to his calm and collected manner. “Oh, heavens no!” Gideon exclaimed with a fake laugh and a wave of his hand. “These things happen, after all. Bygones, you know.”

Dipper and Steven were admittedly quite relieved to hear this, both of them having noticed Gideon’s earlier hints at underlying rage at this news. And yet, he seemed to be just fine with it now as he offered them both an amiable smile, apparently not bothered by secondhandedly hearing about Mabel’s rejection. “A-are you sure you’re gonna be ok?” Steven asked with genuine concern.

“Oh, don’t you worry yourself over lil’ ol me,” Gideon replied a bit forcefully, still grinning a little too much to the point that it was a bit unsettling. “I’ll be more than fine, I assure you.”

“Okay, cool.” Dipper said with a sense of finality, feeling as though their work there was done. “Again, we’re sorry, man, but uh… thumbs up, huh?”

With nothing else really left to say, Steven and Dipper decided to take their leave as they both gave the child psychic parting, albeit awkward smiles as they left. However, neither of them noticed how Gideon’s false grin instantly dissipated into a burning glare of heated rage the moment they turned their backs. “Thumbs up indeed, my friends…”

The boys couldn’t deny that they felt palpable relief as they exited the restaurant to find Mabel anxiously waiting for them near the door. As soon as she saw them exit, she didn’t hesitate to pounce an abundance of questions on them both, her dread and curiosity getting the better of her. “So? How’d it go?” she pressed, biting her lip. “Was he mad? Did he try to read your minds with
his psychic powers?"

“Actually, he took it kinda well,” Steven grinned. “Better than we expected him to, anyway.”

“Oh, good,” Mabel sighed in relief. “I was afraid he might go totally ballistic on you guys or something.”

“Don’t worry, Mabel,” Dipper reassured, rolling his eyes at her baseless concerns. “He’s just a kid. He doesn’t have any ‘psychic powers’ or anything like that.”

“…I guess you’re right,” Mabel said with a small chuckle, knowing that the idea of Gideon actually possessing any genuine powers did seem a bit silly.

“So now that all that’s out of the way, you guys wanna come hang out up at the temple for a while?” Steven offered. “We still have plenty of Garnet’s cookies left over from yesterday!”

Neither twin was about to turn this offer down as they both unanimously agreed. The three of them cheerfully raced off towards the temple, heedless of the danger they had just gotten themselves into.

Gideon paced around his darkened room lividly, his footfalls heavy and tense as he muttered bitterly to himself. If there was anything the child psychic wasn’t used to, it was being told no, especially when it was concerning something he wanted this much. In the confines of his own room, Gideon didn’t hesitate to let his pent-up heated temper flow to the surface, especially when he thought of who had brought him this sour news in the first place.

“Steven Universe, Dipper Pines, you have no idea what you’ve just done!” Gideon growled, practically seething with rage as he threw his fist down on his desk. The child psychic blamed both of them entirely for Mabel supposedly “breaking up” with him right out of the blue. The way Gideon saw it, his chances with Mabel had been severely diminished if only because of Steven, of all people, somehow managing to woo her away from him. After all, she seemed to speak rather highly of the young Gem, so it would have been quite easy for him to capture her affections without even trying. The child psychic figured that Dipper, who probably supported Steven’s budding bond with his sister, had been the one to ultimately convince Mabel to break things off with him. And to add insult to injury, Steven and Dipper had conspired and callously passed this message onto him, instead of allowing Mabel to speak the truth about how she really felt on the matter.

Instead of being upset about this situation though, Gideon was filled with unbridled rage. As far as he was concerned, no one, absolutely no one would stand between him and Mabel. And fortunately for the child psychic, he had a foolproof way of getting rid of any obstacle that stood in his path.

A twisted grin crossed Gideon’s face as he gripped his bejeweled bolo tie, the green gemstone glowing brightly in response to his touch. “Those darn Crystal Gems always ruin everything…” he muttered to himself with blatant hatred. “But even they don’t know that I just so happen to have one of their secret lil’ weapons!”

Gideon let out a devious chuckle as he spun around, lifting his free arm up as the glow from his amulet transferred to his hand first, before surrounding the majority of the furniture in the room. The gemstone’s magic caused the affected objects to steadily rise into the air, levitating above the ground by Gideon’s command. And then, as the child psychic threw his arm down in rage, the furniture all came crashing to the floor in a destructive mess, creating a clamor that shook the entire room.
“Look out, boys…” Gideon said with a maniacal smirk, his revenge plan already emerging into existence. “You’ll rue the day you ever tried to tear me and my Mabel apart!”

Of course, in the aftermath of the child psychic’s loud, disastrous tantrum, his father was quick to burst into the room, startled at the broken furniture scattered all over the floor. “Gideon Charles Gleeful!” Bud scolded firmly. “Clean up your room this instant!”

“I CAN BUY AND SELL YOU, OLD MAN!” Gideon shouted furiously as he spun around to face his father, refusing to let him get in the way of his plotting.

Bud was silent for a moment upon hearing this, his expression somewhat taken aback at first, but, knowing how temperamental Gideon could be, he soon shrugged in acceptance as he left his son to his own wicked devices. “…Fair enough.”

A feeling of calm and jovial relaxation had fallen over the area surrounding the Mystery Shack in the golden light of the late afternoon as Dipper, Mabel, and Soos all reveled in it by having a good round of mindless fun. The handyman had volunteered to be the target for their merriment, tucking a firm pillow underneath his shirt as he held his arms out wide to the twins.

“Okay, dudes,” Soos said with a ready grin. “Hit me.”

Dipper and Mabel didn’t hesitate to comply as they simultaneously charged towards Soos, both of them bouncing off his padded stomach as they collided with the pillow under his shirt and laughing as they fell back onto the ground.

“Huh, feels good,” the handyman said with a satisfied grin.

“This is so nice,” Mabel said with a contended sigh as she lay back on the ground in relaxation. “I’m so glad everything’s finally back to normal.”

“Well, as normal as things get around here,” Dipper commented with a joking grin.

“I’m serious,” Mabel replied with a laugh. “It’s so nice to not have to worry about Gideon anymore. And I have you to thank for that, bro-bro!”

“Eh, don’t worry about it,” Dipper shrugged good-naturedly. “I know you would have done the same for me.”

“Ha!” Mabel laughed teasingly. “As if you could even get a date in the first place!”

Dipper merely rolled his eyes at this dig, knowing that his sister teased him about his love life, or lack thereof, far too often. Thankfully though, she wasn’t able to continue goading him as the phone soon rang from inside the shack.

“Your turn!” both twins proclaimed in near unison, though Dipper was just a second too slow to the punch, meaning that the task fell to him. He let out an exasperated groan as he rose to go answer it, ignoring Mabel as she playfully stuck her tongue out at him as he headed inside.

Mabel sighed happily once more as she stood up as well, though she remained outside with Soos, who was entertaining himself by poking himself in his cushioned belly. “You know, Soos, I didn’t use to think so, but I might be able to get used to this whole being single thing,” she said as she prepared to barrel into the handyman’s stomach again. “Especially if the alternative was being with someone who was probably a little too obsessed with me.”

“I know what you mean, dude,” Soos nodded in understanding. “I’ve been single for as long as I
“Yeah, freedom!” Mabel cheered zealously, though her excitement diminished a bit a moment later. “Still, I kinda can’t help but feel a little bad for how things went down between me and Gideon. Maybe I should have just broken up with him myself…”

“Well, the way I see it, hambone, you could either let Dipper and Steven help you out like they did,” Soos began to explain as he placed a hand on the girl’s shoulder. “Or you could have kept on going out on dates with Gideon and just suffered silently for the rest of forever. It was your choice, so do you think you made the right one?”

“Um… yeah, I guess,” Mabel shrugged, not entirely sure where the handyman was going with this.

“Then you made the right one,” Soos concluded with an easy-going grin. “Don’t worry, dude. You’ll feel better about this soon.”

“Yeah…” Mabel said half-heartedly, remembering that Garnet had told her the exact same thing. Still, she couldn’t deny that she felt the slightest bit ashamed over how she had handled this entire situation, but it wasn’t like she could go back and change her approach. What was done was done, and at the very least, she could take solace in the fact that any prospects of a relationship between her and Gideon had been nipped in the bud.

As Mabel was reflecting over her actions, Dipper soon emerged from the shack, an excited grin on his face as he hurried past his sister and Soos. “Yo, dude,” the handyman called out after the boy. “Where you goin’ in such a hurry?”

“The town paper just called,” Dipper explained, only pausing for a brief moment as he waved the slip of paper with an address scribbled on it that he was holding. “They wanna interview me about all of the weird stuff we’ve noticed in Gravity Falls since we got here. Can you believe it? I could fill the whole paper with all of the crazy things I’ve seen so far!”

“Or you could just fill it with how you’re a huge dork!” Mabel joked, though Dipper hardly paid her any mind as he continued on his way.

“Anyway, I’ll be back later,” he called as he headed onto the forest path. “Don’t wait up!”

Mabel merely let out a small laugh at her brother’s zeal for learning about practically everything, which balanced out her enthusiasm towards basically everything else quite nicely. “Okay, Soos,” she said with a daring grin as she turned towards the handyman once more. “Get ready for round two!”

Soos returned her confident smile as he tapped his pillow-shielded stomach, clearly as prepared as she was. “Dude, I’m always ready.”

Dipper frowned in confusion as he glanced between the address he had written down and the building it had led him to. A seemingly abandoned factory nestled atop a cliff on the far end of town certainly seemed like an odd place to conduct an interview, but he figured that it was just a more spacious place for the reporter to get better pictures of him for the paper. All the same though, he decided not to read much into it at the moment; after all, if this was just an elaborate prank, then he was more than free to just leave at his own leisure.

However, as strange as this setup already appeared to be, Dipper was even more surprised to head up the short path to the factory doors and find that a familiar face had already beat him there. “Steven?” he called as he approached the young Gem, who was quick to turn around just shy of
entering the warehouse. “What are you going here?”

“Oh, hey, Dipper,” Steven greeted with an equally puzzled expression. “Are you here for the free ice cream too?”

“Ice cream?”

“Yeah! I got a call a little while ago about there being a free sundae bar here, and since the Gems aren’t back from their mission yet, I figured I’d go check it out. After all, I’m always down for a delicious sundae!”

“Um… I think you might have the wrong place, Steven,” Dipper frowned. “I’m here to meet up for an interview for the town paper; they didn’t mention anything about free ice cream.”

“Huh,” Steven took a tentative glance towards the closed factory doors. “That’s weird. But I guess there’s only one way to figure out what’s really going on here.”

Without any further deliberation, the young Gem pushed the doors open for both of them, revealing the dark, apparently empty interior of the large warehouse. The boys exchanged an apprehensive glance as they stepped inside a bit, finding no signs of reporters or ice cream, but only large crates and boxes lining the walls.

“Um… hello?” Steven called, his voice echoing through the lofty factory. “Is anybody here?”

“Well, Steven, I think it’s safe to say we’ve both been set up,” Dipper crossed his arms as Steven went unanswered. “But still, this doesn’t make any sense. Who would tell us to come all the way out here for nothing?”

As if in response to his question, the row of lights lining the high ceiling suddenly began to switch on, the door slamming shut behind the two boys. Dipper and Steven simultaneously gasped in surprise as they spun around, pulling on the doors only to find that they had somehow locked themselves tight, leaving them with no way out. Neither of them had much time to react to this sudden turn of events, however, as a familiar voice greeted them from behind.

“Hello, friends…”

Of course, both boys recognized the child psychic’s distinct southern accent without even needing to turn around, though they did so anyway. “Ugh, Gideon,” Dipper groaned in exasperation, in no mood to deal with Mabel’s unwanted ex-date.

“A-are you here for the free sundaes too, Gideon?” Steven asked innocently, though there was a hint of uneasiness in his tone.

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry, Steven,” Gideon said, his voice dripping with dry sarcasm. “But there ain’t any free ice cream here…”

“So then why are we here?” Dipper asked skeptically, raising an eyebrow at the child physic, who was giving them both a rather manic grin. However, instead of answering this question, Gideon went off on an entirely different tangent completely.

“Dipper Pines…” he began, the dark shadows of the room giving his childish face a somewhat eerie quality. “How long have you been livin’ in this town? A week? Two? You like it here? Enjoy the scenery?”

Steven and Dipper exchanged an unnerved glance as Gideon looked to them both expectantly,
neither of them entirely sure of what was going on. It was undeniable that there was a certain level of creepiness to this strange encounter, to the point that the tension building up in the room was almost tangible. But even so, neither of them were really understanding what the child psychic’s intent was in tricking them into coming here, even though it was clear that it was far from a friendly purpose. “Uh… Gideon?” Steven spoke up a bit anxiously, diverting his attention instantly.

“Oh, and how could I forget about you,” Gideon continued, an edge of cold anger in his tone. “Steven Universe, prodigy of the so-called “Crystal Gems”. Even you have to realize that those three ladies cause this lil’ town more harm than good.”

“No they don’t!” Steven quickly rushed to the Gems’ defense. “They protect Gravity Falls from things that want to hurt it! They’re heroes!”

“Heroes, hm?” Gideon mused with a disgusted scoff. “You poor, deluded boy. If you only knew the truth…”

“What are you even talking about, man?” Dipper cut in, just as confused as Steven was.

“Listen carefully, both of you,” Gideon said, his tone and expression both suddenly turning dead serious. “This town has secrets you couldn’t even begin to imagine and so do those Gems.”

“Huh?” Steven asked, growing steadily more unsettled as Gideon leapt out of his chair, his small stature somehow seeming quite intimidating.

“Wait, is this about Mabel?” Dipper asked caustically, wanting to get to the bottom of this. “We already told you, she’s not into you!”

“LIES!” Gideon suddenly shouted in absolute fury. “Me and Mabel belong together! She was my peach dumpin’! And she would have been all mine if it hadn’t been for you, Universe!” he exclaimed, pointing an accusatory finger at Steven.

“Me?” the young Gem asked in sudden bewilderment. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, I think you know exactly what I mean, boy,” Gideon hissed in clear jealousy. “You stole Mabel away from me! I don’t know what you did or how you did it, but you’ve got some gall to try and beguile a taken woman!”

“What?” Steven asked, suppressing a small laugh over the humorous misunderstanding. “There’s nothing like that going on between me and Mabel! We’re just friends.”

“You must think I’m pretty dumb to believe that hogwash,” the child psychic scoffed heatedly. “You snatched her affections up and you turned her against me!” Gideon exclaimed, turning on Dipper this time.

“No I didn’t,” Dipper replied defensively, though it was clear Gideon was beyond listening to any type of reason at this point. Instead, the child psychic began to approach both boys in a slow, calculated stride, gripping his jeweled amulet tightly as it began to glow with magic. “Uh… you ok, man?”

Gideon didn’t respond as he threw his free hand up dramatically, and all at once, it seemed as though the ground underneath Dipper and Steven disappeared completely. They were both shocked to find that they were levitating just a few feet above the ground, the same strange blue glow that surrounded Gideon’s amulet enveloping them both as well. The child physic didn’t keep them suspended in the air for too long though, as he thrust his arm forward, sending them both flying
across the factory with a great amount of force. Thankfully, they both landed in a pile of Lil’ Gideon plush toys, but that didn’t mean they weren’t both quite shaken up in this frightening turn of events.

“Readin’ minds isn’t all I can do…” Gideon grinned ominously as he approached the two of them once more, still holding onto his magical amulet.

“B-but you’re a fake,” Dipper said, trying to hide his steadily growing fear with little avail.

“Oh really?” Gideon inquired with a cruel, sardonic smile. The glow around his amulet intensified as it lifted up several of the nearby heavy boxes, all of them quickly circling around Dipper and Steven to prevent any attempts at escape. “Then tell me, Dipper; is this fake?!”

Mabel let out a pensive sigh as she sat on the edge of the shack’s porch, her mind swimming in a myriad of thoughts as she absently chewed on a lock of her hair. Despite Soos’s earlier reassuring, she couldn’t help but still feel guilty, though for what reason, she wasn’t quite sure. After all, things never would have worked out between her and Gideon, even if she had wanted them to. And yet, she knew that by failing to break things off with him herself, she had not only shown cowardice, but also duplicity. True, things were indeed over between them, but were they really? She felt no genuine closure, no finality or assurance that the situation had been properly dealt with. And to be perfectly honest, she wasn’t sure how she could really obtain such closure now, so late after the fact.

“Hey, how’s that hair tasting, buddy?” Mabel’s musings were interrupted as she turned to see Wendy emerge from the shack and take a seat on the porch beside her with a casual grin.

“Wendy, I need some advice,” Mabel said, knowing that the teenager would probably be the best place to go to for help at the moment. She had considered going to Garnet for help once more, but she refrained when she realized she had pretty much done the exact opposite of what the Gem leader had advised her to do. “You’ve broken up with guys before, right?”

“Oh sure,” Wendy said with a wave of her hand. “Plenty of them. There was Russ Durham, Eli Hall, Stoney Davidson…”

As the teen continued to list off her past flings, Mabel began to explain her own plight to her. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I thought everything was back to normal, but I still feel all gross inside…”

“Pysche Wirley, Nate Holt, that one guy with the tattoos…”

“I dunno… Maybe I made a mistake letting Dipper and Steven do it for me,” Mabel continued, feeling as though she was finally reaching something of a conclusion. “Gideon at least deserves an honest breakup.”

“…Danny Feldman, Mark Epston…” Wendy suddenly stopped at this name as she recalled something. “Oh man, I don’t think I ever actually broke up with him. No wonder he keeps calling me!”

“I know what I gotta do,” Mabel stood with newfound resolve, confident in her decision this time. “Thanks for talking to me, Wendy.”

Still focused on her former boyfriends, Wendy didn’t offer a response, though Mabel was in such a hurry, she didn’t mind. Instead, the girl rushed for her bike, hastily climbing on it, even though she didn’t know exactly where to go. She figured she would just ride over to Gideon’s house and come
clean, however, she did halt her bike briefly as she rose past the Gem temple upon spotting Amethyst standing at the foot of the path, waving her down.

“Hey, Amethyst,” Mabel greeted the purple Gem with a small smile. “What’s up?”

“Eh, not much,” Amethyst said casually. “Just got back from a mission and Pearl’s freaking out cause Steven’s not at the temple. Have you seen him lately?”

“Not since yesterday,” Mabel frowned.

“Yeah, I mean he left a note about going to get free ice cream from some factory or something,” the purple Gem said, clearly not as worried as Pearl apparently was. “So he’s probably fine. Heck, if I had been around when he left, I would have gone with him. I could go for a whole freezer right now.”

“Wait a minute…” Mabel said, focusing on one specific part of what Amethyst had said. “Did you say Steven went to a… factory?”

Amethyst nodded, though she didn’t really see the significance of this detail. “I guess. His note said it was right across town near the cliffs. I mean, he was pretty specific, so I don’t know why Pearl’s so worried. Oh wait, yeah I do; its ‘cause she worries about everything.”

The purple Gem let out a chuckle in spite of herself as a troubling realization dawns on Mabel, her suspicions confirmed thanks to Amethyst’s description of where the factory was located. All at once, her confusion about way to go dissipated, replaced with a newfound dread for both her friend and her brother, as well as deep sense of guilt that she might have just placed them both in significant danger.

“Hey, Mabel?” Amethyst broke through the girl’s thoughts, noticing her concerned expression. “You ok?”

“Uh… y-yeah,” Mabel shook her head, knowing that time was of the essence now. “I gotta go. See you later, Amethyst!”

“Oh, uh, later!” Amethyst called out after Mabel as she hurriedly rode off, somewhat confused as to what the rush was. “And if you see Steven, tell him to save some ice cream for me!”

In a matter of mere minutes, the factory had been thrown into absolute chaos. Broken boxes of merchandise were strewn all over the place, and yet Gideon still had several on hand to use as ammunition against Dipper and Steven. The child psychic laughed in twisted amusement as he threw another large crate their way, which the boys only managed to narrowly avoid by running out of its path. However, there was hardly any reprieve from the attack as Gideon launched several broken splintered shards of wood their way at a frightening speed.

“Look out!” Steven called worriedly to Dipper, as both of them ducking low to the ground as the pieces of wood flew over their heads and crashed into the nearby wall. Thankfully, Gideon decided to pause at this juncture, allowing them to catch their breath even though there were still plenty of boxes hovering precariously above them.

“Grunkle Stan was right about you,” Dipper glared at the child psychic, who stood over him and Steven with a menacing smirk. “You are a monster!”

“Your sister will be mine!” Gideon proclaimed fiercely as he flung several crates at Dipper in particular. Fortunately, Steven rushed to his friend’s rescue though, pushing him out of the way just in time.
“Thanks,” Dipper said with a grateful sigh of relief. Steven offered him a brief grin, though his expression became resolved as he rose to stand and face Gideon.

“Gideon, listen,” Steven implored sincerely. “You don’t have to do this. I mean, think about it; is hurting us really gonna help you feel better?”

“Well, of course!” Gideon exclaimed as though it was obvious. “Once you two are outta the way, no one will ever stand between me and Mabel again!”

As a show that he meant business, the child psychic used his powers to telepathically shove Steven into the nearby wall. The young Gem let out a cry of pain as he roughly collided with the wall, though Dipper was quick to hurry over to him and help him up. “You ok?” he asked with immense concern, noticing how Steven seemed to be slightly out of it after such a direct attack.

Steven weakly nodded, but before he could offer a verbal response, Gideon was already upon them again. “And besides,” the child psychic continued darkly. “With you gone, Universe, this town will have one less pesky Crystal Gem in it to get in my way!”

“What do you have against the Gems anyway?” Steven asked, his voice a bit tight with lingering pain.

“You really think those Gems are worth defendin’?” Gideon asked coldly. “Don’t make me laugh. Those three have so much power, power that no one in this backwoods hick town could ever comprehend. And what do they use it for? ‘Helpin’ people. ‘Savin’ ‘em. It’s a such a waste! If I had powers like those…” The child physic paused briefly as he tossed another box of merchandise at the boys, though thankfully it missed them by a small margin. “This town would be mine!”

Seeing that Steven’s attempt at a logical appeal wasn’t going to work, Dipper reached the conclusion that they would have to stop the crazed child psychic some other way. “Steven,” he whispered harshly, taking advantage of the fact that Gideon was momentarily distracted by one of his dolls. “We have to do something. If this keeps up for much longer, we’ll be crushed!”

“If only I could get my gem to work!” Steven frowned as he lifted up his shirt and gave his gem a small tap, though it showed no signs of response. “My shield would be a huge help right now…”

Dipper couldn’t help but agree with this, though as he happened to glance over to his right to find a baseball bat lying on the ground nearby, he got an entirely new idea. “Follow my lead,” he instructed Steven as he quietly picked the bat up, making sure that Gideon’s attention was still diverted away from them. The young Gem apprehensively followed close behind, taking up a makeshift shield composed of a panel of discarded wood as they approached the child psychic, slowly at first, though they soon broke out into a simultaneous courageous shout as they charged for Gideon. He was quick to pick up on their attack however, as he spun around with an enraged glare, thrusting his hand out towards him as his amulet shined once more. Dipper and Steven felt their bodies suddenly seize up, their grips on their weapons failing as they found themselves rising up into the air. Despite their struggling against the amulet’s hold, they found that neither of them could really move, leaving them completely at Gideon’s mercy.

“Let us go!” Steven protested firmly, still squirming fruitlessly.

“Seriously, man!” Dipper agreed, shooting the child psychic a defiant glare. “Just give it up! She’s never gonna date you!”

“That’s a lie!” Gideon hissed furiously, though a sadistic grin spread across his face as he noticed several boxes of his officially-licensed lamb sheers lying nearby. “And I’m gonna make sure you
The boys’ eyes widened in shock and fear as two pairs of shears lifted into the air, their blades separating as they hovered over Dipper and Seven, who were both helpless to escape them, even despite their struggling. Gideon’s twisted smirk widened as he prepared to clench his hand and finish the job, ready to get rid of his two foes once and for all, though fortunately, his treacherous intents were halted just in the nick of time.

“Gideon!” The factory doors suddenly burst open to reveal a very livid Mabel, her hands clenched into tight fists as she glared daggers at the child psychic. “We have to talk!”

Gideon instantly froze upon seeing Mabel, his hold on the shears fading as the clattered to the ground. Dipper and Steven let out a unified sigh of relief, even if they were still stuck suspended in midair. “M-Mabel!” the child psychic exclaimed in flustered surprise, knowing he had been caught red handed. “My marshmalla! What are you doin’ here?”

“I’m sorry, Gideon,” Mabel frowned sincerely as she walked towards the child psychic. “But I can’t be your marshmellow. I needed to be honest and tell you that myself in the first place.”

“I… I don’t understand…” Gideon said, clearly taken aback. He squeezed his amulet a bit tightly, its magic suddenly suffocating Dipper and Steven as they were still held in its grip.

“Uh, Mabel?” Dipper choked, his air supply severely cut off. “This probably isn’t the best time to be brutally honest with him!”

“Y-yeah!” Steven agreed, though he wasn’t able to say much more as breathing became quite difficult.

Mabel glanced towards the two of them, concern flashing over her face, though she gave them a small nod, assuring them that she had a plan. “Hey, but don’t be too upset, Gideon,” she offered the child psychic a small smile as she placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “We can still be makeover buddies, right? Would you like that?”

“R-really?” Gideon asked, hope filling his tone as he let go of his amulet.

Mabel had been keeping an eye on the amulet this whole time, and as soon as she saw her opportunity, she took it. “No, not really!” she exclaimed, quickly ripping the bolo tie off of the child psychic’s neck and holding it up out of his reach. The boys let out cries of surprise as they fell to the ground, released from the amulet’s power at last. “You were attacking my brother and my best friend! What the heck is wrong with you?!”

“My amulet!” Gideon gasped, stunned at this sudden turn of events. “Give it back! I stole that from the Gems and I ain’t about to lose it! Er-I mean…”

Dipper, Mabel, and Steven all gave the child psychic a look of disgusted disbelief upon hearing this, shocked that he would stoop so low as to steal from the Crystal Gems themselves. But all the same, they weren’t about to let such a powerful artifact fall into his hands again. “Steven, catch!”

Steven successfully caught the amulet as soon as Mabel threw it to him, holding it aloft so Gideon wouldn’t be able to get ahold of it again. “Ha!” Dipper gave the child psychic a triumphant grin as soon as he was sure Steven had the amulet secured. “Not so powerful without this, are you?”

Unable to contain his rage for very long, Gideon let out a frustrated scream as he charged for the
two boys, determined to get his prized, stolen amulet back. Unprepared for this sudden assault, Dipper and Steven could do nothing as Gideon roughly collided with them, startling the young Gem and causing him to drop the amulet. The child psychic was surprisingly strong for his small size, and the force of him barreling into the two boys was enough to knock all three of them back into the nearby window, which shattered upon impact.

“Dipper! Steven!” Mabel shouted in sudden fear as all three boys fell out the broken window, plummeting down the length of the cliff in a freefall. At first, Dipper, Steven, and Gideon all instinctually panicked as they fell, though even their quick descent soon turned into a skirmish as the young psychic roughly hit both of his foes. Though Steven was more concerned with the fact that there was nothing to cushion their long fall, Dipper was quick to retaliate by smacking Gideon back, setting off a mid-air slap fight that continued almost until they hit the ground.

Fortunately though, no such thing happened. For as they were all just inches away from a no-doubt fatal collision, all three of them found themselves suddenly suspended in the air. Confused, Dipper and Steven glanced up to see Mabel, holding onto Gideon’s amulet, floating slowly towards them in the light of the full moon. Her expression as firm and very provoked as her feet touched the ground, before she brought Steven and Dipper down gently and Gideon much more roughly.

“Listen, Gideon,” Mabel began as she stood over the child psychic, who was still collecting himself off the ground. “It’s over. I will never, ever date you.”

Gideon watched with dismay as Mabel handed the amulet over to Steven again, who made sure to tuck it away in his pocket for later. “The Gems will be glad to get this thing back, whatever it is,” he said with a smile.

“My powers!” the child psychic exclaimed in protest. He knew that getting the amulet back would be nearly impossible, however, as both Mabel and Dipper stood between him and Steven to keep him from even trying to reclaim it. “Oh, this isn’t over,” Gideon warned crossly as he stood, glaring hatefully at all three of them. “I’ll make ya’ll pay! This isn’t the last you’ll see of wittle. Ol’. Me…” With this threat relayed, he began to back away into the dark forest behind him, still scowling at them viciously.

“Uh… we can still see you!” Steven called with a frown, though Gideon only let out a frustrated growl in response as he stormed off in full force. The twins and the young Gem exchanged an initially tentative glance at this, though it soon turned into a round of triumphant laughter, none of them thinking that Gideon’s threat held any real weight. After all, without any of his stolen “powers”, what was the worst that the child psychic could really do?

“Ah, this is living,” Stan said with a contented sigh as he reclined back in his plush chair. He had just finished signing the last of the paperwork that would seal the deal him and Bud had worked out concerning their partnership and both men were in relatively high spirits because of it.

“Indeed it is,” Bud agreed with a smile as he took a sip of his coffee. “From now on, it’s all brand name foods and clown paintings.”

“That’s the way it should be,” Stan nodded, more than ready to live in the lap of luxury with hardly any effort.

This calm was suddenly shattered completely as the front door suddenly burst open, a very livid Gideon storming in. The child psychic’s rage only intensified when he caught sight of the conman sitting in his living room.

“Well, look who it is,” Bud greeted his son with a casual grin. “Gideon, we were just-”
“Stanford Pines, I rebuke thee!” Gideon shouted hotly as he leapt on the coffee table, pointing an accusatory finger at Stan.

“Rebuke?” Stan raised a confused eyebrow. “Is that a word?”

“The entire Pines family has invoked my fury!” the child psychic seethed. “And so have those darn Crystal Gems! You all will pay recompense for your transgressions!”

“What, you got a word-a-day calander or something?” Stan asked, still clearly not taking Gideon’s anger seriously.

“Oh, but sunshine?” Bud cut in with a nervous laugh. “What about our deal with Mabel and-”

“SILENCE!” Gideon practically screamed, his face red with fury. “The deal’s off! I want him out!”

A beat of uncomfortable silence passed, with neither man sure of how to react to the child psychic’s uncontrollable anger, though Bud soon spoke up again, this time to Stan. “Well, uh, I see that he’s taken to one of his rages again,” he said rather awkwardly. “Sorry, Stan, but I have to side with Gideon on this one.”

Stan let out a disappointed scoff as Bud tore up their contract, succinctly ending any merger that could have happened between the Mystery Shack and the Tent of Telepathy. “Okay, okay,” he said with a shrug, though an idea came to mind as he glanced over at the clown painting hanging from the wall. “I can see when I’m not wanted.”

Without any explanation, the conman ripped the painting from the wall, much to Bud’s surprise, especially as he began to run out. “Um, Stan? I’m sorry, but I’m gonna need that painting back,” he called, though with no response as Stan rushed out the door. “Stan?! Stan!”

“Try and catch me, suckers!” Stan laughed triumphantly as he threw the painting into his car and drove off, satisfied that he had at least gotten something out of the failed deal after all.

It was rather late when the kids arrived back at the Mystery Shack, all three of them quite exhausted after the ordeal they had been through. Still, even if they did look a bit worse for wear, thankfully none of them had been hurt, and they had even safely claimed the amulet from Gideon, which had been no small feat. Knowing that they deserved a chance to rest, they all plopped down on the porch together, taking their much-needed opportunity to relax.

They had only been resting in silence for a few minutes when Stan’s car pulled up, the conman stepping out with his new prize and a somewhat forlorn expression. “What are you three doin’ up so late?” he asked the kids with a skeptical frown as he noticed how rough they looked. “And what the heck happened to you? You all look like you were attacked by an angry chipmunk.”

“Gideon,” Mabel responded simply and tiredly, with both Dipper and Steven echoing her with the same amount of exhaustion.

“Gideon,” Stan repeated with disdain. “Yeah, the little mutant ‘swore vengeance’ on the entire family and on the Gems too. Heh, I guess he’s gonna try and nibble my ankles or somethin’.”

“Oh yeah,” Dipper perked up with a small smile. “How’s he gonna destroy us now, huh? Try to guess what number we’re thinking of?”

“He’ll never guess what number I’m thinking of,” Mabel proclaimed proudly. “Negative eight! No one would ever guess a negative number!”
Everyone shared an amused laugh at this, though it was soon interrupted as the Gems arrived in a bit of a hurry, all of them clearly relieved upon seeing their youngest member safe and sound. “Steven!” Pearl cried with an allayed sigh. “There you are! We’ve been looking all over for you! Someone was supposed to be out looking for you…”

“Hey, I told you not to worry about him,” Amethyst shrugged defensively before turning to Steven. “So did you bring back any ice cream?”

“No…” Steven said, though excitement filled him as he suddenly remembered something. “But I do have something for you guys!” The young Gem grinned triumphantly as he held out Gideon’s bolo tie.

“Uh… Steven? That’s a tie,” Amethyst pointed out the obvious, though Garnet was able to see beyond that point as she took it for herself.

“No, it’s not,” the Gem leader said. “It’s an ancient Gem artifact with the ability to give its telepathic control over objects and people.”

“I can’t believe it!” Pearl exclaimed in surprise. “We’ve been looking for this for ages! Where on earth did you find it?”

“Gideon had it,” Dipper explained. “He said he stole it from you guys.”

“Gideon?” Amethyst asked in disbelief. “That little loser? How the heck did he get his hands on it?”

“We must have been careless with it,” Garnet concluded as she bubbled the tie before sending it back to the temple. “But that’s a mistake we won’t make again.”

“He didn’t hurt you three with it, did he?” Pearl asked the kids with concern.

“Eh, not too badly,” Steven said, making light of the situation somewhat. “He was really mad though. He said he was going to get his revenge on all of us somehow, but I don’t think we have to worry about that since he doesn’t have that amulet anymore.”

“It’s all my fault,” Mabel said with a guilty frown. “Garnet, I didn’t listen to your advice, and I ended up messing everything up. You were right; I should have told him the truth from the start. Maybe then he wouldn’t have tried to attack two guys I actually care about…”

“Like I said,” Garnet said, her tone understanding as she knelt down to the girl’s level and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Telling the truth about how you feel isn’t always easy. And though some people might not take the truth well, that’s on them. What’s important is that you did what was right for your heart. Is that what you think you did?”

Mabel hesitated in answering this at first, a small part of her knowing that she should have handled breaking up with Gideon sooner and better than how she actually had. And yet, she couldn’t deny that she felt a sense of relief that it was finally all over. She was indeed guilty that her indiscretion had nearly gotten Steven and Dipper seriously hurt, but in the end, everything mostly turned out. True, Gideon had reacted quite violently to the rejection, but as Garnet said, that was his problem, not hers. Which was why she was able to answer the Gem leader’s question with certainty in her tone, feeling more sure of herself than she had in days. “Yes. I think I did.”

Garnet simply smiled and nodded at this, satisfied in her response. Stan soon cut in, however, breaking up the moment with his usual sarcasm. “Not that this isn’t touching or anything like that,” he remarked dryly. “But you kids beds to get to and I have a painting to hang. It’s time we called it
a night.”

“For once, I agree with Stan,” Pearl assented. “Let’s go, Steven.”

“Ok,” Steven grinned, hopping up from his spot on the porch to follow after the Gems. “See you guys later!”

“Bye!” Dipper and Mabel called in unison as they headed inside with Stan. For the moment, things finally seemed peaceful for both the Pines and the Gems. In wake of what had been a rather stressful week, it looked like they could all rest easy. And of course, they were all quick to forget about the threat issued on every one of them, even if there was one person who would never forget until it was completely fulfilled.

Gideon was still fuming even hours after his fight against Dipper, Mabel, and Steven. His vendetta against them and their guardians was one he wasn’t about to take lightly; after all, no one crossed him and got away with it, especially those who denied him of anything he wanted. He didn’t care how and he didn’t care when. He was going to have his vengeance on the Pines and Gems, no matter what the cost was.

The child psychic channeled his anger into crafting small, crude, wooden dolls, adding onto the collection he had consisting of a figure of nearly every resident of Gravity Falls. He made three new additions in his fury, letting his frustrations flow as he fiddled with them. “‘Gideon, I still love you,’” he said in a high-pitched voice as he waved his Mabel doll about, mimicking what he supposed his former crush nearly though. “‘If only my stupid family weren’t in the way.’”

Gideon picked up the doll he had made of Stan quite some time ago, dropping his voice down as he imitated his business rival. “‘Look at me. I’m old and smelly.’”

The child psychic let out a bitter sneer as he gathered the figurines of the Gems in his hands, holding onto them tightly as he glared at them darkly. “‘Oh we’re just so ‘perfect’!’” he mimicked the Gems with clear sarcasm in his tone. “‘Everybody loves us, even though we’re nothin’ but a bunch of goody-two-shoes.’”

Gideon threw the Gems’ figures rather roughly as he grabbed Steven’s, completely incensed as he attempted to copy the youngest Gem, whom he considered was his ultimate rival for Mabel’s affections. “‘I’m just a two-timin’, no account little girlfriend stealer!’” he satirized cruelly, violently throwing Steven’s doll halfway across the room in rage.

He mocked Dipper last as he snatched the boy’s doll, clearly unhinged in his ranting by this point, though he hardly cared. “‘Hey, what are you gonna do without your precious amulet?’”

Gideon clenched his fist tightly around the now-empty space where his amulet used to be, still outraged at how it had been so easily taken from him. But all the same, he didn’t need it. After all, he had other ways of getting his revenge.

“Oh, you’ll see, boy…” the child psychic said ominously as he closed the old book lying on his desk, a red, leather-bound volume with a golden six-fingered hand on the cover, marked with a number 2. “You’ll see….”
Chapter 12: Copies and Clones

Chapter Summary

In which Dipper and Steven simultaneously realize cloning is a dumb idea and Connie wants to punch Pacifica’s teeth in

Chapter Notes

Ok so here's my version of Double Dipper and Steven and the Stevens, combined! This was a really fun chapter to write, so I hope its a lot of fun for you all to read! Enjoy!!!

WFKORXZGVH LU WRKKVI
Z HFIKOFH LU HGVEVM
DRGS HL NZMB XOLMVH
RGH SJIW GL YIVZP VEVM

The Sea Shrine, as its name implied, rested deep at the bottom of the ocean, making it one of the most remote Gem structures on Earth. Its glass walls and high-vaulted ceilings allowed for a grand view of beauty of the deep sea, but what made the submerged temple even more interesting was the diverse collection of hourglasses lining its long, singular hall. With awed curiosity, Steven examined each hourglass from a distance, which varied in size from as big as his hand to as tall as the high ceiling, remembering Pearl’s firm warning not to touch any of them. The other Gems weren’t too far away, inspecting the other hourglasses in search of the one they had come to this ancient place for: the glass of time.

“Hey, what about this one?” Steven called to the others, pointing out a small, round hourglass that had caught his eye.

“What one?” Pearl asked as she walked over, glancing over the table of hourglasses.

“This little one right here,” Steven grinned, pointing to the tiny sphere, which was easily small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. “It’s adorbable.”

“Steven, the legendary glass of time won’t be nearly so small and insignificant,” Pearl explained, turning her nose up at the petite hourglass. “It will be beautiful and grand. Like this one!” The white Gem’s eyes were filled with delight and wonder as she looked over to another nearby hourglass, which was medium in size and very elegant in design.

“I think it’s this one,” Garnet remarked, her hands on her hips as she gazed up at the largest hourglass in the shrine. It easily towered over all of the Gems, its imposing statue not lost on their youngest one.

“Whoa…” Steven muttered in amazement as he stood in the shadow of the massive hourglass, stars in his eyes. “I’ve never seen an hourglass so huge!”
“But how are we supposed to even get this back to the Warp Pad?” Pearl asked with a concerned frown.

“I can carry it,” Garnet affirmed, cracking her knuckles as a show of her strength.

“Garnet, wait!” Pearl exclaimed, placing a hand on the Gem leader’s shoulder to stop her. “We need to be careful about which one we touch. You remember what happened the last time we were here, don’t you?”

“What happened?” Steven asked curiously, though before he could answer, Amethyst spoke up.

“Hey guys, I’m makin’ the call!” the purple Gem shouted, picking up a rather intricate hourglass with several connected bulbs. “It’s this janky one right here!”

“Amethyst!” Pearl exclaimed in a sudden panic, which only intensified as the entire shrine began to shake.

“Uh…. I guess it wasn’t…” Amethyst frowned as she looked at the hourglass she had chosen, which had apparently been the wrong one.

All too soon, sea water began to surge into the temple, pouring into the glass structure from a panel in its roof that had suddenly shattered. “Look out!” Garnet shouted, leaping into action to grab Steven and save him from the heavy deluge. The Gem leader landed squarely upon the warp pad on the far end of the temple, with both Steven and Pearl in tow “We don’t have much time before the shrine is completely flooded,” Garnet noted. “We need to leave. Now.”

“Amethyst, come on!” Pearl impatiently urged the purple Gem, who hopped up onto the warp pad herself only as Steven leapt off of it. “Steven! Where are you going?!”

“Amethyst got to keep her hourglass!” Steven called back as he ran towards the hourglass collection, slogging through the water that was already knee-deep.

“Darn tootin’!” Amethyst proclaimed with a proud grin, holding her hourglass up in triumph.

“I wanna get the one I picked out!”

“Steven!” Pearl and Garnet called out in worried unison, though the young Gem hardly paid them any mind as he approached the smaller hourglass from earlier.

“Hi there! My name’s Steven,” he greeted the spherical hourglass with a fond grin as he scooped it up into his hands. “You’re gonna come live with me!”

“Steven, come on!”

“Coming!” Steven called back as he ran for the warp pad, fully aware of the huge wave of water at his heels the whole time. Pearl let out a panicked squeal upon seeing this, but Garnet, as calm as ever, quickly shapeshifted her arm, stretching out to catch the young Gem and pull him towards the warp.

“Hurry up! Hurry up!” Amethyst urged anxiously, though thankfully Garnet managed to pull Steven to the warp pad just in the nick of time.

“Ah! Well done, Garnet!” Pearl praised with relief. There was no time to celebrate as the heavy wave rolled upon them, forcing them to warp out of the flooding shrine just seconds short of being swept away.
Unfortunately, the Gems hadn’t been quick enough to warp back without taking a majority of the massive wave with them. Water poured into the house, soaking everything in sight, including the Gems who stood upon the warp pad dripping wet, and Steven, who was more than happy to ride the wave as it flowed onto the floor.

“Woo hoo!” the young Gem cheered in merriment as he landed onto the floor, his clothes and hair sopping. “That was great! We’re doing that again, right?!?”

“Unfortunately,” Pearl began in aggravation, plucking the seaweed that was stuck to her hair off. “We can’t. We’ll have to wait another hundred years for the Sea Shrine to reform all because somebody couldn’t keep their hands to themselves.”

“Oh well,” Amethyst shrugged with little concern as she held her hourglass close. “At least we didn’t leave there empty handed this time!”

Pearl cast the purple Gem a bitter scowl, though it was quickly broken with Garnet’s next statement. “You have a lobster on your butt,” the Gem leader pointed out stoically, causing the white Gem to panic once more and the purple Gem to break out into a loud round of laughter.

Likewise, Steven also chuckled in amusement at his guardians’ shenanigans, until his alarm clock suddenly sounded throughout the house. “Oh! I almost forgot about the party!” the young Gem exclaimed as he rushed to turn the alarm off.

“What party?” Pearl asked curiously.

“Mr. Pines is throwing a party tonight down at the Mystery Shack, and every kid in Gravity Falls is invited!” Steven explained with an excited grin. “Me and dad are supposed to play a few songs there so I gotta hurry down to the car wash so we can rehearse.”

“Whoa, Stan’s throwing a party?” Amethyst asked, a mischievous grin spreading on her face. “I just might have to crash it and see if he’s got any good snacks…”

“Haven’t you caused enough trouble for today, Amethyst?” Pearl asked caustically, ripping the lobster off of the back of her skirt.

“You know me, P. I can never cause enough trouble.”

“Well, I had a lot of fun, you guys,” Steven said to the Gems as he rushed to the door. “I’ll see you later!” Despite his excitement, the young Gem did pause to let the crab that had accidentally warped back with them out the door first. “After you, sir,” he said politely, before running out head into town himself. “Bye!”

Even though the Mystery Shack had closed early for the afternoon that hardly meant that its employees were idle. Stan had put Soos, Wendy, Dipper, and Mabel to work setting up for the party, which namely consisted of decorating the floor room with streamers, banners, and balloons. Even though their grunkle was expecting them to be working, the twins had taken to playing with the silly string for the party as soon as his back was turned, with Wendy eagerly joining in on their fun. Of course, it didn’t take Stan too long to notice their loud laughter and grow impatient with them wasting the party favors that were meant for their guests later that night.

“Alright, that’s enough,” Stan said gruffly, breaking up the fun as he confiscated the cans of silly spray from the kids. “Party supplies are now off limits.”
“Aw… Grunkle Stan, party preparing is so booring… We were just having a little fun!” Mabel pouted, but the con man was having none of it this time.

“Yeah, at my expense,” Stan said as he put the silly string up for later. “Party stuff doesn’t come cheap, you know.”

“Didn’t you buy all this stuff at the dollar party store in town?” Dipper asked knowingly, crossing his arms.

“Who asked you?” Stan quickly snarked as he began to unroll a pin the tail on the donkey poster.

“Mr. Pines, who’s birthday is it again?” Soos asked as he continued hanging streamers.

“Nobody’s. I thought this party would be a good way to get kids to spend money at the shack,” Stan replied. “If the young people of this town want fun, I’ll smother ‘em with it!”

“Maybe comments like that are why kids don’t come to the Mystery Shack,” Dipper said caustically as he poured himself and Mabel some soda.

“Hey! What did I say about the party supplies!?” Stan exclaimed as he took the bottle of cola from his nephew and instead shoved a flyer into his hands. “How about you kids actually make yourselves useful and copy these flyers?”

“Oh boy, a trip to the copier store!” Mabel grinned with excited delight.

“Calendars, mugs, t-shirts and more! They’ve got it all at the copier store!” Soos rhymed with a smile. “That’s not their slogan; I just really feel that way about the copier store.”

“Save the trouble of making the trip all the way into town,” Stan said with a wave of his hand. “You know the old copy machine in my office?”

“You mean the one that’s being held together with duct tape and band-aids?” Wendy asked with a casual grin.

“That’s the one!” Stan grinned proudly. “I finally fixed the old girl up, good as new! And this way, I won’t have to spend extra money on that fancy, high-quality paper they use down at the copier store. It’s perfect!”

Complying with their grunkle’s need to horde money, the twins hurried to the con man’s office, easily locating the outdated, beaten up copy machine against the wall. Despite the obvious wear and tear is showed, a few lights on its exterior still flashed dully, giving them the impression that it still functioned, at least somewhat.

“Dipper, check it out! A winky face!” Mabel exclaimed cheerfully after drawing a face onto the layer of dust coating the machine with her finger.

Dipper largely ignored her as he lifted the scanner lid up. “Does this thing even work?” His question was quickly answered as he happened to rest his arm on the scanner, only for the machine to come alive with a bright green light. The machine managed to scan over Dipper’s arm before he could lift it away in surprise, and sure enough, it slowly produced a grayscale copy of the boy’s arm.

“Ha! Success!” Mabel cheered as she pulled the paper up out of the tray, holding up in the air for her brother to see. Her excitement was quickly replaced with surprise however, as the page suddenly began to shake on its own accord, prompting her to abruptly drop it. “Whoa!”
The twins watched with wide eyes as the paper inexplicably began to crinkle up on the ground before them, until, against all logic, the copied arm somehow managed to pull itself up out of the page and into existence. Dipper and Mabel let out a shared frightened gasp as the disconnected arm began to slowly and unnervingly pull itself across the floor towards them.

“Stay back!” Dipper warned, protectively pulling Mabel behind him as he grabbed her cup of soda and threw it at the still moving arm in alarm. Thankfully, this method actually worked, for as the liquid splashed onto the copied arm, it began to bubble and disintegrate, until it was nothing more than a puddle on the floor.

“Wow…” Mabel whispered in awe. “I gotta hand it to that copier; I didn’t expect it to do something so armazing! Ha!”

Despite the fact that his initial shock was still wearing off, Dipper rolled his eyes as his sister’s rather ridiculous puns and instead focused on the oddity they had just witnessed. “Mabel, I think this copier can copy human beings!”

“No way!” Mabel gasped, her eyes wide with wonder. “Do you realize what this means?” She briefly paused for dramatic effect, but instead of offering a legitimate answer like Dipper was expecting, she suddenly pulled out the silly string she had managed to hold onto and playfully sprayed it all over him. “BLAAAHMMMM!”

Before hurrying over to the car wash, Steven had decided to pop in at the Mystery Shack briefly, overwhelmed with excitement for the party. It was rare for any kid-centric events to be held in Gravity Falls in the first place, but the young Gem was even more elated about such a party being thrown at the Mystery Shack, one of his favorite locales in the entire town.

Steven hummed happily to himself as he hopped off his scooter, setting it against the shack as he hurried to the door and discreetly poked his head inside. Though Stan, Soos, and Wendy were all too busy setting things up to notice his arrival, Dipper and Mabel weren’t as they just so happened to be returning from the con man’s office, a large stack of flyers split between them. “Steven!” the twins greeted in cheerful unison, alerting the others to his presence.

“Hi, guys!” Steven smiled as he stepped into the shack fully. “Are you ready to party tonight?”

“I am always ready to party!” Mabel proclaimed, energetically pumping her fist.

“She’s not kidding,” Dipper said with a knowing chuckle, well aware of how enthusiastic his sister was about all things party-related.

“This party’s gonna be intense, dudes,” Soos said with a wide grin. “Especially since I’m gonna be DJ!”

“Only because you begged,” Stan reminded from across the room. “And ‘cause you work for free.”

“You won’t regret it, Mr. Pines,” the handyman assured. “I even got a book to teach me how to DJ r-r-right!”

“Not encouraging,” Stan deadpanned before turning to Steven. “You and Greg are still on to perform tonight, right kid?”
“You bet!” Steven heartily agreed. “In fact, I was just heading down to the car wash so we can get some last-minute practice in.”

“Don’t you wanna stick around and help set up, Steven? I’ll let you tie the balloons!” Wendy offered, holding up a pack of uninflated balloons.

“Ooo, that sounds tempting…” the young Gem agreed, though he knew he had to resist it. “But I can’t. The party’s only in a few hours and there’s still so much to do! I’ll see you all later!”

Steven was quick to head out as the others bid him farewell, leaving them to finish preparing. “Ok, party people… and Dipper,” Stan called, gathering everyone in front of him and ignoring his nephews annoyed glare. “Let’s talk business. We already know that Soos is DJing and the Universes are gonna provide some live entertainment. So, Wendy, I’m putting you and Mabel at the ticket stand.”

“What?” Mabel asked with a disappointed frown. “But Grunkle Stan, this party is my chance to make some new friends. You can’t just stifle my outgoing personality like this!”

“Um… I could always work with Wendy instead,” Dipper volunteered a bit awkwardly, not at all minding the idea of getting to work one-on-one with the girl he had a rather sizable crush on.

Stan sarcastically rolled his eyes at this, not really thinking that Dipper was up to such a task. “You do realize that if you do, you gotta commit to staying at the ticket stand all night with Wendy. No getting out of it. Just the two of you, alone, all night. Can you promise me that you’ll stick to it?”

Dipper paused before answering, stealing a glance over at Wendy as her and Mabel used some silly string to paint a face onto Soos’s stomach. As the teen let out a bold, amused laugh, Dipper couldn’t easily hide the small, admittedly love-struck grin spreading across his own face as well. If there was any task that he would be more than happy to commit himself to, it was this one. “I promise.”

Steven pushed his foot off the sidewalk with gusto, propelling his scooter forward as he rode through town. The young Gem always looked forward to jamming out with his father, but this special occasion had him all the more excited, especially since they were being presented with the opportunity to entertain the whole town with their music. He pushed his scooter a bit faster as the car wash came into view, and in his enthusiasm, he barely noticed the large, wide-load lumber truck stuck in the wash entrance.

“Dad!” Steven called as he rode up to Greg, who stood beside Manly Dan inspecting the situation. “Dad! Are you ready to rehearse?” The young Gem stopped short when he finally noticed the truck, its stacks of logs jutting out of the wash awkwardly. “Whoa…”

“Uh… We’re having a bit of a day…” Greg said, stretching the back of his neck in exasperation. The former rock star cast a nervous glance over at the lumberjack, who was practically seething in rage, letting out a frustrated growl with each breath.

“Is it stuck?” Steven asked with a concerned frown.

“Yeah…” Greg nodded.

“Why does a lumber truck need a car wash anyway?” the young Gem inquired, though Manly Dan was quick to answer in his usual surly way.
“Because clean wood is TOUGHER!” the lumberjack shouted, storming over to the truck to attempt to pull it out himself.

“Mr. Corduroy, wait!” Greg called, knowing that was a dangerous idea. “Oh, sorry, buddy,” the former rock star turned towards his son with an apologetic frown. “I don’t think I’ll be able to play at the party tonight. I gotta deal with this…”

“You’re bailing on the party?” Steven asked with disappointment clear in his tone. “But the whole town’s gonna be there!”

“Steven, that’s like twenty people,” Greg pointed out.

“But what about Mr. Pines? He’s counting on us to play tonight!”

“I’m sure he’ll understand,” Greg reassured, placing a comforting hand on his son’s shoulder. “I know this stinks, bud, but I’ll be there next time. I promise.” The former rock star offered his son a consoling smile before he hurried to go help Manly Dan before he could make the situation any worse. “Wait! Mr. Corduroy, you don’t have to punch the—Oh… too late…”

Steven let out a disgruntled sigh as he hopped onto his scooter, slowly riding away from the car wash as he muttered to himself dejectedly. “Stupid truck, getting all stuck…” he scowled, blaming the truck alone for diverting his father’s attention away from what would have certainly been a great evening. “Nobody likes you, truck! I wish I could have been there to tell my dad you were too fat!”

No more than a second passed after Steven had said this before the young Gem abruptly and completely disappeared into thin air, leaving only his scooter and helmet behind. In just the blink of an eye, Steven found himself back at the car wash, much to his absolute confusion, especially as he glanced around the corner to see Greg helping Manly Dan guide his truck into the wash.

“That’s it!” Greg called confidently, waving the lumberjack on. “Just back her in! She’ll definitely fit.”

“W-what the…?” the young Gem whispered in bewilderment, before a sudden realization struck him just in the nick of time. “Dad,” he gasped, his eyes widening before he dashed out to meet his father. “Dad!”

“Hey, stoo-ball!” Greg greeted cheerfully as he turned to his son. “You excited for the party tonight?”

“Dad! Dad! Fat! It’s fat!” Steven shouted, hopping up and down anxiously. “Fat, fat, fat!”

“Rude…” Greg muttered in embarrassment as he glanced down at his own rotund stomach.

“Not you! The truck!” Steven corrected, pointing to the truck just seconds before Manly Dan backed it into the wash.

“Huh? Oh! Hey! Wait!” Greg called to the lumberjack in a sudden panic. “Stop the truck! Stop the truck!”

Manly Dan slammed on the breaks just in time, poking his head out of the window as he let out an impatient, confused growl. Even so, the car wash operator gave his son a congratulatory pat on the head. “Nice catch, Steven.”

The young Gem smiled in relief as his father went to explain the situation to Manly Dan. Now that
he had a moment to catch his breath, only to feel a burst of warmth in his pocket. “Whoa!” Steven gasped in awe as he pulled the small hourglass he had gotten from the Sea Shrine out of his pocket, noticing it was enveloped in a dim glow. “The thing! You took me back in time, didn’t you? Oh man, Pearl’s gonna flip when she finds out that you’re the real deal!”

Steven’s elation was cut short as he glanced over at his father, who was trying to reason with the very incensed lumberjack. “Look, I’m sorry, but the truck’s fat,” Greg explained as calmly as he could.

“My FIST is fat!” Manly Dan shouted gruffly as he held his large fist up, prompting the former rock star to take a nervous step back.

“Oh no!” Greg exclaimed as he noticed the lumber truck begin to roll backwards in light of Dan failing to properly park it. “Your truck!”

Before anyone could stop it, the front end of the truck crashed into a nearby telephone pole, which easily toppled over onto it. The wire immediately caught fire, which spread across the line and onto the very flammable wood on the truck bed. Steven and Greg let out unified screams of horror as the roof of the car wash itself lit up in flames, while Manly Dan simply punched the side of his truck in a heated rage.

“I gotta save the van!” Greg exclaimed fearfully as he hurried to pull his van away from the dangerous inferno, leaving Steven to watch in shock as his father’s business burned. Though he had tried to help Greg avoid disaster, he had inadvertently created an even bigger one. And yet, as the young Gem happened to glance down at the hourglass in his hand, a new idea quickly came to him, one that he sincerely hoped would work.

“I-I wish I could go back and stop myself from stopping my dad!” Steven exclaimed hurriedly. Thankfully, the hourglass complied, enveloping him in its glow and teleporting back to just moments before the accident. The young Gem took in a tight breath as he caught sight of his past self running towards his dad, and, knowing he only had a few seconds to act, Steven ran for his other self.

“Dad!” the past Steven called, though he was abruptly cut off as someone tackled him just before Greg caught sight of him.

“H-huh?” the past Steven’s eyes grew wide as he saw exactly who had attacked him, namely himself. “Are… are you… future Steven?!”

The future Steven nodded gravely, his expression serious as he began to explain the situation. “Listen, two-minutes-ago-Steven. We can’t go around trying to change time stuff. It just makes things worse.”

Before the conversation could go on any further, both Stevens’ jumped at the sound of a rough crash coming from the other side of the car wash. They both peeked around the corner to see that, as expected, Manly Dan’s truck had gotten itself stuck in the wash yet again, much to Greg’s distress.

“Oh no!” the wash operator exclaimed as he hurried to go help the lumberjack. “How did this happen?”

“Aw, man!” the past Steven let out a defeated sigh. “That’s what I was trying to prevent! This is the worst… I really wanted to play at the party. Too bad you and I can’t be in a band together.”
The future Steven frowned in sympathy, before both Stevens suddenly perked up, reaching the same exact conclusion at once. “Wait a minute!”

Steven pushed his foot off the sidewalk with gusto, propelling his scooter forward as he rode through town. The young Gem always looked forward to jamming out with his father, but this special occasion had him all the more excited, especially since they were being presented with the opportunity to entertain the whole town with their music. However, before he could make it to the car wash, Steven found himself suddenly being tackled off of his scooter completely out of nowhere. He landed on the pavement roughly, though he let out a stunned gasp upon seeing the two figures who were pinning him down.

“Steven!” the future two Stevens exclaimed with wide grins.

“Whoa… Steven?” the past Steven asked in worried confusion. “And… Steven? What’s going on?”

“No time to explain!” the first Steven urged.

“Wanna join our band?” the second Steven asked eagerly.

The third Steven stared at his two future selves for a moment, bewilderment written all over his face for a brief moment before he gave them a very definitive answer. “Yes. Yes I would.”

The other two Stevens helped their past counterpart up off of the ground, the first three members of their makeshift band locked in. “Oh, this is gonna be so great!” the first Steven proclaimed. “Everyone at the party is gonna love us! What could be better than a band of Stevens!?”

“Nothing!” the second Steven cheered heartily.

“But wait…” the third Steven frowned. “Isn’t Dad supposed to play with us tonight?”

“Oh, he had an emergency at the car wash.”

“Well then, we should go help him!”

“No!” the first Steven was quick to stop his past self, remembering well what had happened before. “There’s nothing we can do. The truck’s fat, trust us.”

“Okay…” the third Steven’s brows knitted together in confusion. “So who’s our fourth? We need a drummer.”

“Oh, good thinking, Steven!” the second Steven grinned. “Don’t worry. We got this covered.”

The first two Stevens smirked in confident unison as they held up their respective hourglasses, ready to head back in time once again to gather the last member of their band. “Hey, is that the time thingy?” the third Steven asked, though he received no answer as the trio of Stevens teleported to the past together.

Dipper smiled at his reflecting as he finished adjusting his bowtie, knowing that it would be a nice way of sprucing up his usual outfit for the party. He knew that if he was going to get anywhere
with Wendy, then he had to exude confidence, which was something he admittedly normally lacked. But fortunately, Dipper had already anticipated that he might end up blundering, which was why he had spent the past hour or so preparing for the evening in more ways than one. If all went accordingly, then his evening with Wendy would go without a hitch.

However, Dipper’s air of confidence was suddenly broken as he turned to see Mabel standing only a few inches away from him, startling him quite a bit. His surprised expression turned into a plaintive scowl as he noticed his sister’s broad, teasing smirk, and he could only guess that she was more than ready to poke fun at him yet again. “What?”

Mabel’s grin widened as she stepped away from her brother, lowering her voice so she could mimic him. “‘Uh, uh, I could work the ticket counter with you, Wendy! Let’s kiss!’” To top her impression off, she wrapped her arms around herself and made over exaggerated kissing noises before breaking into a round of giggles.

“Yeah, yeah. Laugh all you want,” Dipper rolled his eyes, not phased by Mabel’s antics. “But I’ve devised a plan to make sure my night with Wendy goes perfectly. And when I end up landing a dance with her, then we’ll see who’s laughing.”

“Plan? Oh, no… you’re not making another one of those over complicated listy things, are you?” Mabel asked with a frown, knowing that her brother had a tendency to overthink nearly everything, especially things like this.

“Over complicated?” Dipper scoffed. “Please. Let’s just take a look here…” He paused as he pulled what appeared to be a small piece of paper out of his pocket, though Mabel flopped down to the floor in exasperation as she watched him unfold what was actually quite a lengthy list. “Okay. Step one: getting to know each other better with playful banter. Banter is kinda like talking, only smarter.”

“Ugh… That sounds like a dumb idea for poopheads,” Mabel groaned boredly.

“Yeah, see? This isn’t banter. This is what I want to avoid with Wendy,” Dipper asserted, glancing back to his list again. “If I just follow steps one through eleven, then nothing can keep me from getting to the final step: asking her to dance!”

“Oh, Dipper,” Mabel laughed, interrupting her brother’s daydream of dancing with the teen of his affections. “You’re the only one getting in your way! Why don’t you just walk up to her and talk to her? You know, like a normal person?”

“Step nine, sister.” Dipper grinned confidently as he pointed number nine on his list, which was indeed “talk to her like a normal person”. Mabel simply rolled her eyes as she let out a relenting sigh, knowing that there was no reasoning with her brother when he had his mind set to, what he perceived, was a perfect, though far too intricate plan.

“Can’t you see it in my eyes?”

“I’m the one—I’m the ONE!”

“TWO!”

“THREE!”
"FOUR!"

"I’m not like other guys…"

"He’s not like anybody!"

"Well, that’s not completely right. There’s a few that I’m just like!"

"Steven and the Stevens! We’re gonna make you smile!"

"Me, myself, and I, and him, are all the same guy!"

"Steven and the Stevens! Come on, now, don’t be shy."

"Me, myself, and I, and him-"

"That’s me!"

"Are all the same guy!"

The quartet of Stevens finished off their rehearsal in perfect harmony, the final note of their upbeat tune ringing out throughout the temple. Despite the fact that their band had only existed for a few hours, they had already succeeded in not only writing a song, but practicing and perfecting it. Of course, all of the Stevens attributed their cohesion and cooperation to all of them being essentially the same person, but even so, excitement reigned in the group as they exchanged a round of congratulatory high fives.

"Great singing, Steven!" the second Steven, labeled “Steven 2” by the original, praised his counterparts with a wide grin.

"Thanks, Steven!" the original Steven nodded proudly, glad to see his idea was working wonderfully. “Everyone’s gonna love us tonight!”

"They sure will!" Steven 3 readily agreed. “Hey, how about I sing lead this time?”

"Well, I usually sing lead when I play with dad,” Steven pointed out, his smile fading a bit.

"Me too!"

"Me too too! We all do!" Steven 4 concluded. “We’re all Steven!”

"Oh yeah!" the other Stevens laughed, though the original wasn’t as amused.

“Well, we can’t all sing the lead. One of us has gotta be the band leader,” he said as the others offered a hum of agreement.

“Oh, I got it!” Steven 4 perked up. “The leader should be the original Steven!”

“The one that’s been around the longest!” the other Stevens agreed in unison.

The first Steven beamed upon hearing this as his counterparts from the past all pointed his way. “Yeah, alright,” he shrugged, passing off his role of leadership off as though it wasn’t a big deal. “I guess I can be in charge… And since I’m the leader, I say, we’re more than ready to play at that party!”
“Yeah!” the others cheered happily, raising their instruments up in revelry.

“So, without any further ado, let’s get going!” Steven urged as the rest of the group eagerly gathered their instruments and hurriedly freshened up before the party. Needless to say, they were all chattering excitedly amongst themselves as they headed out of the house and bounded down the hill towards the Mystery Shack.

The party had largely kicked off in full swing, with a line of zealous kids of all ages lined up outside the shack, all of them ready for a night of fun and excitement. Stan was elated upon seeing how many guests had shown up for the widely-advertised events, and at ten dollars a ticket, the con man figured that this party would turn in a generous profit. “So, can your uncle throw a wild party, or what?” Stan asked Mabel as the two of them stood together and looked out over the dance floor. The party kept up a consistent flow of activity thanks to Soos’s DJing, even if he was largely a novice at it.

“The energy! It’s electric!” the handyman called out over the mic, before turning to his keyboard to find an appropriate sound effect. Of course, instead of finding a lightning sound he went through several others that were mismatched with the techno beat playing. “Let’s see… lightning… lightning… lightning…"

“I gotta hand it to you, Grunkle Stan,” Mabel grinned up at her uncle. “This party’s a lot cooler than I expected it to be!”

“Hey, just cause I’m old doesn’t mean I don’t know how to be ‘hip with the kids’.”

“Oh man, I can’t pick just one!” Wendy grinned, and though she intended on continuing, Dipper accidentally cut her off.

Dipper had no problem keeping the promise he had made to Stan as he sat alongside Wendy at the ticket booth outside. While he was indeed happy to hang out with her one-on-one, he had scarcely made any conversation with her yet, though that was something he planned on changing very soon.

As Wendy was busy selling tickets, Dipper took advantage of the moment and quickly pulled out his list, scanning over it once more under the table. “Step one: casual banter,” he reminded himself with resolve. Thankfully he had already thought through several simple conversation-starters beforehand, and, after surprising his nerves, he boldly leapt right in. “Hey, so here’s a casual question!” he addressed Wendy, cringing at how forced and still his own voice sounded. “What’s your favorite type of snack food?”

A huge grin spread on Mabel’s face as her uncle left to collect all of the discarded money he could, excitement filling the girl at the prospect of make new friends. “Time to go out there and be a mingle master!” she declared, rushing out onto the dance floor without delay.
“No way! Mine too!” he exclaimed hurriedly, though he was quick to realize he hadn’t heard what she had said over his own rapidly racing heart.

“Wait, what?” Wendy frowned, confused at his odd answer.

“Uh… I… I mean…” Dipper stammered, knowing it was far too late to catch himself. Wendy looked to him expectantly, which was why he quickly diverted her attention away from him the only way he could think of: by shoving a large handful of popcorn into his mouth. The cashier simply shrugged casually as she got back to selling tickets, while Dipper hunched over his list in a panic once more. “New topic! New topic!”

Thankfully, the boy was saved from having to restart the conversation as a round of rowdy cheers sounded out from inside the shack. Curious, Wendy stood and glanced through the window behind them, excitement spreading on her face as she watched the party heat up. “Whoa! Sounds like the party’s getting nuts, huh?” she asked Dipper, who was quick to shove his list out of her sight as she turned to him. “I gotta get in there! Will you cover for me?”

“O-oh… well, I… um-” Dipper began, his heart sinking at the prospect of Wendy leaving, though the teen was clearly already on her way inside as she offered him a grateful smile.

“Thanks, man!” she called as she stepped into the party, leaving Dipper to run the busy ticket counter by his lonesome. The boy let out a disappointed sigh as he looked back through the window, enticed by the sight of Wendy dancing enthusiastically inside. Certainly, as busy as Stan probably was inside, he wouldn’t notice him slip away to share just one dance with the teen, right?

“I’ll be right back!” Dipper called to the large crowd still waiting to get their tickets, standing up from the table to go into the party. He didn’t make it very far however, before a firm hand grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, stopping him in his tracks.

“Hey!” Stan scowled down at his nephew, his arms crossed and his expression irritated. “Where do you think you’re going, kid? These suckers aren’t gonna rip themselves off!”

“Yeah!” one of the kids in the crowd shouted in agreement.

“B-but I was just-” Dipper began to explain, but Stan wasn’t hearing it.

“You promised, remember?”

“I did?” Dipper asked innocently, even though he did clearly remember doing so.

The con man didn’t offer a response himself, but instead let the tape recording he had on hand of the boy promising to work the ticket stand do all the talking instead. Dipper let out a defeated sigh, knowing that he wouldn’t be shirking away this responsibility so easily with the con man about. Stan returned to the party, but not without making it clear that he would be keeping an eye on his nephew throughout the night.

Realizing he was stuck at the ticket stand, Dipper returned to his seat disgruntledly, showing little interest or effort as he continued selling tickets to the eager patrons. Of course, it only irked him all the more to think that, just on the other side of the wall, Wendy was inside, living it up and just waiting for someone to come along and dance with her. “If only I could be in two places at once…” he muttered dejectedly, though his train of thought was soon broken as another customer stepped up to the front of the line.

“Four tickets to the party, please!”
Upon hearing the familiar voice, Dipper glanced up, managing a small, yet still half-hearted smile as he greeted the young Gem. “Oh, hey, Steven,” he said, though he was quick to pause as he noticed the three figures also standing at the table. “A-and Steven?”

“And Steven!” Steven 3 chimed in.

“Don’t forget about Steven!” Steven 4 added.

“Wha—Steven, since when are there four of you?!” Dipper asked, his eyes with shock after he wiped them to make sure he wasn’t seeing double.

The four Stevens all exchanged knowing, amused grins as they discreetly held out their respective hourglasses for Dipper to see. “I went on a mission with the Gems earlier and swiped this thing,” the original Steven explained. “I guess it can teleport people back in time? I’m still not really sure how it works, but since my dad had an emergency at the car wash, I used it to round up past versions of myself and make a Steven band to play tonight!”

“Pretty cool, huh?” Steven 2 asked, not noticing that Dipper was still trying to make sense of the situation.

“Wait, wait, wait,” the boy shook his head, looking between the four young Gems. “So basically, what you’re saying is… you all are essentially copies of the same person?”

“Yes!”

“Pretty much.”

“We’re all different versions of the same Steven!”

“A Steven quartet, if you will.”

Dipper didn’t respond as he gaped at the four Stevens for a moment or two, an idea budding in his mind, especially as he recalled the mysterious copy machine in Stan’s office. While different in execution, this new plan would be essentially the same as the one Steven had carried out, though instead of forming a band, the boy figured he could just as easily use it to help him gain ground with Wendy after all. “That is really cool, Steven—er… Stevens.” Dipper said rather quickly as he hurriedly exchanged their money for tickets. “Well, here you go! Have fun in there, you guys!”

“You know we will!” Steven 4 exclaimed readily.

“It’s a shame you have to have to sit out here and sell tickets, Dipper.” Steven 2 said sympathetically. “It sounds like that’s some party.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Dipper said with an unconcerned wave of his hand, solidifying his plan in his mind. “I’m sure I’ll see you all in there soon enough…”

“Well, until then, we better get on in there,” Steven urged the others as they all waved Dipper farewell and headed inside. “We only have an hour until we preform, so in the meantime, let’s go have some fun!”

Energy and excitement seemed to course through Mabel’s every vein as she danced freely and cheerfully, her bright laughter ringing out despite the fact that she was dancing alone. Clearly
though, she had already become something of the life of the party, as quite a few people had
gathered to watch her enthusiastically cavort about the dance floor, all of them appreciating her apt
enthusiasm. Of course, even despite her verve, Mabel eventually found herself in need of a break
so she could catch her breath, which she took as she skipped over to the refreshment table to grab a
bottle of water. Her chipper mood brightened even more, however, as she encountered a familiar
face there.

“Oh my gosh!” Mabel exclaimed with delight as she caught the other girl’s attention with a
friendly embrace. “Connie! I’m so glad you’re here!”

“Hi, Mabel!” Connie greeted just as warmly as their hug disbanded and she finished getting her cup
of punch. “How’s it going? It’s been a like a week since I’ve hung out with you guys thanks to my
parents’ insistence on violin and tennis practice…”

“Aw, don’t worry about it,” Mabel said with an easy chuckle. “I’ll catch you up on everything out
on the dance floor!”

“O-oh… Well… I’m not much on dancing…” Connie frowned a bit anxiously. “But maybe we
could just sit and you can tell me about everything?”

“That’s fine too!” Mabel agreed as she began leading to the chairs against the wall, taking a
healthy swig of her water. “I’m a little danced-out at the moment to be honest. Besides, that just
makes it easier to tell you about the beautiful light canons and the crazy child psychic who has a
 crush on me.”

“Steven already filled me in on a few of the details…” Connie laughed as her and Mabel took a
seat. “But I’d love to hear more.”

“Sure thing! Well first of all, we-” Mabel stopped short as she happened to glance over at the larger
girl sitting on her other side of her, or more specifically, the lizard resting on her shoulder. “Wow!”
she exclaimed in awe, catching the girl’s attention. “You’ve got an animal on your body! That’s
the coolest thing I’ve seen all night! I’m Mabel, and this is my friend Connie,” she introduced
herself with a friendly grin as Connie also smiled and nodded in greeting.

“Hi, I’m Grenda,” the large girl smiled, her voice surprisingly deep and masculine. “And this is
Candy.” She motioned to the smaller, beglassed Asian girl sitting next to her, who waved to the
other two girls, despite the forks attached to each of her fingers.

“Why do you have forks taped to your fingers?” Connie asked with a bemused grin.

Candy’s smile widened as she reached her forked fingers into the bowl of popcorn on Grenda’s lap,
pulling it out with a bounty of popcorn on each finger. “Improvement of human being,” she
explained simply, yet eloquently.

Mabel could scarcely contain her excitement as she realized she had just met two kindred spirits.
Even upon a first impression, she could tell that both Candy and Grenda were quite unique, which
was a trait she could safely say, she shared with them. “I’ve found my people…” she whispered
happily, though before she could really strike up a real conversation with them, the girls were
suddenly interrupted by a new arrival.

“Connie! Mabel!” Steven, the original Steven, greeted cheerfully as he ran towards the group. He
had let his counterparts disband throughout the party and entertain themselves for the time being,
at least until they had to regroup and preform. “Oh hey! I see you guys have met Candy and
Grenda! Long time, no see, you two!”
“Hi, Steven!” Grenda exclaimed rather loudly, her voice rumbling across the dance floor despite the fact that the young Gem was right in front of her.

“Hello, Steven Universe!” Candy greeted more formally, though she still wore a friendly smile as she waved her forks.

“How do you guys know each other?” Connie asked curiously, even if she was already well aware that Steven knew practically everyone in Gravity Falls thanks to his outgoing nature.

“Aw, we go way back,” Steven chuckled fondly. “Right, guys?”

“Yeah!” Grenda heartily agreed. “Steven’s the BEST!”

“We met at the Big Donut a few years ago,” Candy explained with a smile. “And we shared a dozen delicious glazed donuts.”

“Boy, were they ever delicious!” the young Gem recalled. “And we’ve all been friends ever since!”

“That’s so cool!” Mabel gushed excitedly. “Now we can all be friends and party together! Could this night get any better?!”

Before the new group of friends could converse any further, however, they were interrupted by an announcement from Soos over the microphone as he manned the DJ table. “Remember, dudes!” the handyman called out, briefly glancing back at his DJing book before continuing. “Whoever, um, ‘party hardies’—what? Uh, they get the party crown!” Soos held up said party crown, which, despite clearly being made out of plastic, was bejeweled and quite fancy. “Most applause at the end of the night wins!”

Mabel, Connie, Steven, Candy, and Grenda all “ooed” in unified interest upon hearing this, but before any of them could see about entering the contest themselves, someone else stepped forward. A trio of girls, all of them clad in rather expensive clothing, stepped forward, the leader of them, a blonde dressed in purple, holding out her hand demandingly as she stood before the DJ table. “Party crown? I’ll take that, thank you very much!”

“Who’s that?” Mabel asked curiously.

“The most popular and richest girl in town, Pacifica Northwest,” Candy replied with a hint of ire in her tone.

“I always feel bad about myself around her!” Grenda exclaimed, glaring at the spoiled, wealthy girl.

“One time, I tried saying hi to her, and she just turned her nose up at me…” Steven frowned, though he couldn’t exactly claim to have the same harsh feelings towards Pacifica as Candy and Grenda apparently did. Mabel frowned herself upon hearing this, not liking the sound of anyone who made her friends, new or otherwise, feel bad.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t just give you the crown,” Soos explained to Pacifica as he held it up out of her reach. “It’s sort of a competition thing, you know?”

Pacifica simply laughed haughtily upon hearing this, spinning around to give a caustic look to her potential challengers. “Honestly, who’s gonna compete against me?” she asked sarcastically. “Fork fingers? Lizard lady? Glasses girl?” After slamming Candy, Grenda, and Connie, the heiress turned to Steven, her confident grin turning to a distasteful scowl. “Oh, and—what’s your name again?
“Sammie Galaxy?”

“It’s Steven, actually,” Steven corrected. “Steven Universe.”

“Whatever,” Pacifica rolled her eyes, clearly not caring whatsoever.

“Hold me, Candy!” Grenda exclaimed fearfully as her and Candy embraced each other for support.

“Our kind isn’t welcome here!” Candy cried morosely.

Connie and Mabel both shot the heiress an incensed glare, neither of them willing to put with such cruelty. “Where does she get off, treating people like that just because she’s rich?” Connie asked with a scoff. “Someone needs to put her in her place.”

“Don’t worry, Connie,” Mabel said with a bold grin as she stepped forward. “I’ve got it covered. Hey!” she exclaimed to Soos, standing before the table alongside Pacifica. “I’ll compete!”

Connie, Candy, Grenda, and Steven all gasped in surprise at how forward and unflinching Mabel was in this resolve, even despite the hateful scowl Pacifica shot her way. “Hi!” the girl greeted the heiress cheerfully, holding out a friendly hand for her to shake. “I’m Mabel!”

Pacifica sneered, rejecting Mabel’s handshake as she placed her hands on her hips. “That sounds like a fat old lady’s name,” she goaded coldly.

“I’ll take that as a compliment!” Mabel quipped brightly, clearly not intimidated at all.

“I don’t know how you think you have a chance at beating me,” Pacifica said, crossing her arms as she seized her opponent up. “But I guess the better partier will win in the end. Which, of course, will be me.”

Not sparing another word on her new rival, Pacifica commandingly snapped her fingers, regathering her two friends as the three of them walked away menacingly. “Nice meeting you!” Mabel called after her with a kind grin, though her smile grew daring as she addressed the others. “She’s going down.”

Dipper hesitated as he stood before the copy machine in Stan’s office, the potential kinks in his plans starting to become apparent. While rounding up an army of clones seemed to be working well enough for Steven, Dipper wondered if it would be the best course of action for himself, especially since his lengthy plan didn’t include anything about cloning himself. What if this all ended up backfiring on him and only failed in getting him any closer to Wendy? Or worse, what if Stan found out and he ended up getting in even more trouble? He forced himself to think past these concerns, however, hoping that, for once, everything would turn out his way. After all, if there was anyone he could trust, it was himself, right?

With a deep breath of resolve, Dipper lifted the copier head and carefully climbed up onto the scanner. Fortunately, he was just short enough for his entire body to fit onto the glass as he laid down upon it before reaching over the side to press the copy button. Another burst of anxiety ran through him as the scanner bar ran over him with its bright green flash, but he knew there was no going back, especially as the copy printed out into the tray. Dipper watched with anticipation as the full copy of the boy began to come to life, pulling himself out of the paper and slowly, clumsily rising to stand before turning to face the original.
“Whoa… It actually worked!” Dipper whispered in awe. He offered his clone a slightly awkward smile as he jumped off the copier and stood before him. Indeed, it was like looking in a mirror, save for the fact that the copy was slightly faded in coloration, though it was hard to tell unless one was looking very closely.

“So, um…” both Dippers began in unison, though they quickly stopped short as they talked over each other. Still, they continued to do so, even if it was by accident. “Sorry, you first. No you! Stop copying me!” They let out a shared amused laugh at this, a testament to the fact that they had the exact same sense of humor.

Knowing that there needed to be some sort of method of distinction between them, the original Dipper was quick to label his clone by marking a 2 on his cap in place of where the pine tree would usually be. “I’ll call you: number 2.”

“Definitely not,” the clone dissented as he repositioned his hat. “But you know a name I’ve always wanted?”

Both Dippers exchanged a knowing smile, their wavelength in perfect harmony as they both responded in unison once more. “Tyrone!”

“Okay then, Tyrone,” Dipper began, deciding to bestow their coveted name onto him to make things less complicated. “Let’s get down to business. I’m thinking you cover for me at the ticket stand, while I go ask Wendy to dance.”

“I know the plan, buddy,” Tyrone assured him, pulling the list out of his pocket as Dipper did the same. The original took a slightly nervous step away from his clone upon seeing this, realizing that there was a certain level of unexpected creepiness in this situation.

“Hey, um, we’re not gonna get jealous and turn on each other like the clones in the movies do, are we?” Dipper asked with a disconcerted frown, thinking that this could be another way this plan could go awry.

“Dipper, please. This is you you’re talking about,” Tyrone said with a reassuring grin. “Plus, if things go downhill, you can always just disintegrate me with water!”

“Oh yeah,” Dipper said with a small smile of relief, glad that there was a simple way to abort this plan if need be. “Well, Tyrone, let’s get out there and do this!”

Tyrone nodded firmly as the two of them headed out to the party, taking care not to linger too close to each other, lest they cause unnecessary confusion. However, they didn’t make it very far before they ran into, incidentally enough, two of the four Stevens.

“Whoa, Dipper! There are two of you!” Steven 2 exclaimed with an interested grin. “Did you find a time thingy of your own too?”

“Nope,” Dipper shook his head. “I just used the copier in Stan’s office. Can you believe it can make real, living copies of people?”

“Wow!” Steven 3 gasped in amazement. “And I thought the time thing was cool! We should all get together and have a giant clone party of our own! It’ll be clone-tastic!”

“I wish we could, Steven, but we have a plan to carry out, right Dipper?” Tyrone said, wrapping his arm around the original’s shoulder.
“We sure do,” Dipper confirmed with a confident nod. “This guy’s gonna help me score a dance with Wendy.”

“Neat!” Steven 2 smiled. “I hope you guys do. In the meantime, we should probably find the others and get ready for our performance.”

“Oh my gosh, you’re right, Steven!” Steven 3 exclaimed as he began to pull his other self away. “We’re on in only a half an hour! Good luck, Dippers! We’re rooting for you guys!”

“Thanks!” Dipper and Tyrone called out after the Stevens as they disappeared into the crowd. The two of them exchanged a knowing nod at this juncture before separating to go to their decided roles in their shared plan. As Tyrone headed outside to man the ticket stand, Dipper anxiously approached Wendy, who was taking a break from the dance floor as she enjoyed a cup of punch near the wall.

“Great news, Wendy!” Dipper grinned as he fixed his tie. “I got someone to cover the ticket booth for me! So, I’m pretty much free for the rest of the night.”

“That’s awesome, man,” Wendy smirked. “Now you can hang out with me and Robbie.”

“W-what?!” Dipper asked in alarm as he noticed the older boy standing near Wendy, his arms crossed as he shot the boy a distasteful glower.

“Robbie, you remember Dipper from the convenience store, right?” Wendy asked Robbie, who was quick to turn his nose up in a scoff.

“Uh, no,” the teen said rather crossly, quickly changing the subject as he pulled his electric guitar out. “Yo, Wendy, check out my new guitar.”

“Whoa, cool!” Wendy said, clearly impressed as Robbie skilfully played a riff on his guitar. Dipper let out a horrified gasp upon seeing this, his mind already racing over how disastrous this night would be if Robbie stuck around. Even if Robbie was unintelligent, arrogant, and largely dull, Dipper knew that he didn’t stand a chance against him when it came to competing for Wendy’s affections. Which was why the boy knew he had no other choice; he had to get Robbie out of the way; and fast.

Fortunately though, it seemed as though Tyrone had the same exact though, as Dipper found himself getting a call from his clone only seconds later. “Hey, buddy, it’s me, you,” Tyrone said over the phone as he glanced into the party through the window. “I see that things aren’t going exactly as we planned…”

“I don’t know what to do, man,” Dipper said, stepping away from Wendy and Robbie so they wouldn’t overhear his conversation. “But we gotta get rid of Robbie if I ever wanna dance with Wendy!”

“Hey, Dipper!” Wendy called to the boy as her and Robbie began to walk away. “We’re gonna go sit on the couch for a while. Meet us when you’re done!”

“H-heh, sure thing!” Dipper said with a fake smile before he frantically addressed Tyrone again. “Oh no! They’re sitting on the couch together! The couch, Tyrone! They might as well be getting married!”

“Whoa, whoa, calm down, Dipper,” Tyrone cautioned. “We just need to think of another plan; we’re good at that.”
“Y-yeah… you’re right…” Dipper let out the nervous breath he had been holding in as he glanced around the stuffed room, until he just so happened to spot Robbie’s bike propped against the nearby wall. “Wait. I think I have an idea…”

“I have the same one,” Tyrone said, not even needing it explained to him. “But we’re gonna need some help…”

“Ok, Stevens,” Steven addressed his copies as they all sat against the wall, their instruments in hand. “We’ll be on in just a while, so I think one more practice session is in order. After all, we wanna go up there and amaze everyone, right?”

“Right!” Stevens 2 and 3 agreed, though Steven 4 wasn’t as convinced.

“Eh… I think we already sound great, to be honest,” he said with a frown. “Why can’t we go enjoy the party a little while longer?”

“Yeah!” Steven 3 quipped. “I wanna see who wins the party crown!”

“Oh, I hope it’s Mabel!” Steven 2 smiled, though before the others could converse about it, the original Steven cut in firmly.

“Come on, you guys!” he urged sternly. “We need to prepare for our number! Can’t you all be serious for a little while?”

The other three Stevens merely gave him blank stares, leaving the original to let out a sigh of exasperation. “Maybe we need to set some ground rules first…” he muttered, hoping that would give his copies some focus. “Here’s how things are gonna go: Steven 2, you’re the smart one, Steven 3, you’re the funny one, and Steven 4, you’re the sensitive one and…” He paused dramatically as he swiftly combed his hair up into a quaff. “I’m the handsome one! Is everyone ok with that?”

“Okay!” Stevens 2 and 3 nodded in contented unison.

“Okie-dokie artichoke-y!” Steven 4 joked, though the original was anything but amused at this.

“Steven 4, what are you doing? You’re not the funny one; Steven 3 is!” Steven scolded.

“Well, we are all the same person, so we’re all equally prone to our own moments of hilarity,” Steven 3 mused eloquently.

“No, no! That was too smart of an observation for you, 3! You’re the funny one, remember?!” Steven asked, quickly growing frustrated.

“Wait, which one am I again?” Steven 2 asked, finding it hard to keep up.

“Dang it, Steven 2, you’re the smart one!”

“Hey, if the original Steven is the handsome one, does that mean the rest of us aren’t good looking?” Steven 4 asked with a concerned frown.

“No way! We’re all extremely attractive!” Steven 3 affirmed confidently.

“Let’s go get jobs as models!” Steven 2 quipped proudly.
“Stop it!” Steven exclaimed with an annoyed scowl. “None of you are the handsome one! I’m the handsome one, okay?!” He stopped short however upon noticing the hurt expressions his past selves were giving him, all of them clearly offended by his impudence.

“D-do you really mean that, Steven?” Steven 3 asked with a saddened frown.

“Of course he does!” Steven 4 said bitterly. “He hates us all!”

“Wait, no!” Steven clarified, realizing the situation was quickly falling out of his hands. “I don’t—I didn’t mean… We—Ugh…” He sighed in defeat as the other three Stevens glared at him coldly. “Let’s take five…”

“There’s a fifth Steven?!” the other three asked in unified horror.

“No!” Steven exclaimed in clear irritation. “I mean, let’s take a five minute break!”

“We know!” all three Stevens laughed, aggravating the original even more. Needing to clear his head, Steven left his copies to their own devices for a while, hoping that, by the time he returned, they would finally take things seriously.

“I can’t believe it!” Steven mumbled to himself disgruntledly. “I’m so annoying! I sure hope Dipper’s having a better time with his clones…”

“And that’s where you come in, number 3,” Dipper finished briefing his second clone as Tyrone labeled his hat with a three. Both of the first two Dippers had agreed that the best course of action was to bring in another one, who could hopefully divert Robbie away from Wendy, at least long enough for the original to ask her to dance.

“Okay, I think I get it…” Dipper 3 said, though there was hesitance in his tone. “But what if Robbie catches me? I’ll be all alone!”

“Yeah… He makes a good point…” Tyrone agreed thoughtfully.

“Okay, one more,” Dipper nodded, knowing that if Steven could handle three copies of himself, than so could he. “Four Dippers. This is a four Dipper plan.”

The other two Dippers stood by and watched as the original pulled himself up onto the scanner again and made another copy of himself. However, the machine let out a loud, rattling shutter as it inconveniently stopped up, the paper getting stuck halfway out of the printer.

“Uh oh, paper jam,” Tyrone commented as he pulled the page out of the machine. However, something was amiss as this particular copy came to life; this clone was quite deformed thanks to the wrinkled paper he had been made on, and as he pulled himself off of it, he let out a continuous, incoherent screech.

“Yikes…” Dipper frowned with slight pity as he watched the disaster that was his newest clone cling onto Tyrone for support.

“Oh, come on, you’re seriously not gonna make me team up with him, are you?” Dipper 3 asked a bit callously.

“Shh! Don’t be rude,” Tyrone scolded before he turned to the paper jam clone, giving him a
comforting pat on the back. “Hey, buddy, it’s ok.”

As Paper Jam Dipper continued to shriek wildly, the original Dipper realized that this clearly wouldn’t work. He needed two clones who were on top of their games to drive Robbie away successfully. “Okay,” he said with resolve as he went over to the copier once more. “Just one more clone.”

With the party crown at stake, the party had heated up intensely, with Mabel and Pacifica competing at the center of it all. The heiress had taken the stage first, throwing passion into her performance as she dazzled the crowd with her apparent charm and talent.

“Always means forever…” Pacifica sang boldly, closing her eyes as her voice rose to an incredibly high pitch for the final note of her song. “ALWAAAAAYYYSS!” The crowd was stunned at just how high she was capable of going as she finished her number off, winking confidently at her audience as she whispered, “Forever.”

“I used to sing like that,” Grenda commented to Mabel, Candy, and Connie. “Before my voice changed.”

“And Pacifica pulls ahead!” Soos announced to the cheering crowd as the heiress headed offstage.

“Oh, that wasn’t that impressive,” Connie crossed her arms. “You can do way better than that, Mabel.”

“Thanks,” Mabel said with a confident grin, more than ready to tackle the challenge Pacifica presented to her.

“Aren’t you nervous, Mabel?” Candy asked.

“Nope,” Mabel shook her head. “Not at all. Like I said: I got this.”

Pacifica smirked challengingly as she passed the mic off to Mabel, still relishing in the crowd’s applause. “Try and top that!” she declared, though she didn’t walk off before making another offensive dig. “Oh, and Grenda? You sound like a professional wrestler.”

“I wanna put her in a headlock and make her feel PAIN!” Grenda shouted fiercely after Pacifica was out of earshot.

“It’s not over ‘til it’s over, sisters!” Mabel reassured, grasping the mic boldly. “Watch this!”

Without a moment’s hesitation, she rushed onstage, grinning brightly at her awaiting audience. “Soos! Give me the 80s-ist, crowd pleasing-ist, rock battle-y-ist song you got!”

The handyman nodded as he complied, putting on a passionate, retro rock ballad, one that Mabel was more than familiar with. “Perfect,” she smiled, taking in a deep breath as she sang along to the tune with gusto. “Don’t stop un-believing! Never don’t not feel your feelings!”

The crowd cheered wildly as they all got caught up in Mabel’s clear enthusiasm, Connie, Candy, and Grenda among the loudest out of all of them. Pacifica clenched her fists tightly at her sides in anger upon seeing this, knowing that she would do whatever she had to in order to claim her crown. All the while, Mabel continued putting on a show for the crowd, spinning the mic gracefully before she shouted into it. “I’m gonna do a flip!” she exclaimed daringly, jumping as high into the air as she could before inevitably falling flat on her face. This hardly phased her
however, as she lifted her head up off the stage, blowing a few stray strands of hair out of her face before calling to the audience again. “That was for YOU guys!”

As Mabel hoped, the crowd continued to show their excitement for her performance as she continued putting her all into it. In the midst of all this, Dipper, or more correctly, one of his clones, discreetly ran up on stage, passing a message onto Soos as he continued DJing. The handyman nodded as the boy hurried off, before speaking out over the microphone. “Dudes, would the owner of a silver and red dirt bike please report outside,” Soos announced. “It’s being stolen right… now.”

“Wait, what?!” Robbie exclaimed as he perked up from his spot beside Wendy on the couch. The teen was quick to rush over to the window to see that two unknown figures were indeed making off with his dirt bike. Of course, what he didn’t know was that the culprits were both copies of Dipper, who laughed triumphantly as they rode Robbie’s bike off into the woods, even as he began to give chase after them. “Hey! Come back here!” he shouted as he ran outside, giving the original Dipper plenty of time to take a seat on the couch near Wendy.

“Oh, tough break…” he said with mock sympathy as both him and Wendy watched Robbie run out. “I wonder who those two guys are who aren’t me because I’m right here.”

Before Wendy could make a comment, Soos spoke out over the mic once more as Mabel’s performance came to a close. “Up next we have our live performance by Steven and the Stevens!” he announced, reading off the card that Steven had handed to him earlier. “But first, we’re gonna bring it down for a minute. Ladies, dudes, now’s the time.”

A slow, rather romantic pop song began to play as the lights dimmed a little, giving way for couples to take the dance floor. “Oh snap, I love this song,” Wendy smiled as she contentedly swayed her head to the music. Dipper took in a deep breath as he watched her, knowing that this was the perfect opportunity. However, before he could actually work up the nerve to ask her, Mabel happened to hurry over and interrupt him first.

“Hey, goofus! Now’s your chance to ask Wen-” Dipper was quick to cut his sister off by throwing an arm over her mouth. Before Wendy could even notice, he managed to drag Mabel away from her, his patience towards her incredibly low at the moment.

“Now’s your chance to ask Wendy to dance!” Mabel finished with an eager grin. “C’mon! Go!”

“Ugh, Mabel, it’s not that simple,” Dipper frowned, glancing back at Wendy, who he couldn’t deny, looked absolutely radiant in the low light of the room. “I haven’t gotten to that part of the plan yet!”

“Who cares about your silly plan, Dipper?” Mabel scoffed. “You should just do what Garnet told me to do when I was dealing with Gideon a few days ago: be honest and just go for it! Believe me, you’ll be glad you did.”

“But this is totally different!” Dipper clarified, not wanting to admit that he just wasn’t ready. “For starters, I actually like Wendy.”

“Dipper…” Mabel groaned admonishingly, giving her brother a forceful shove back towards the teen.

“Ok! Ok! If it will get you off my back, I’ll do it!” he exclaimed, ignoring the thumbs-up his sister was giving him as he began to head back over to Wendy. Though he wanted to think that he had enough courage to ask her one simple question, it all quickly crumbled as the cashier happened to
glance over at him and offer him a casual smile.

“Hey, man,” she greeted, her tone as relaxed as ever. “What’s goin’ on?”

“I… I, uh… Well, I was just…” Dipper stammered nervously, knowing he was quickly floundering. His mind desperately searched for something to say to recover, especially as Wendy’s smile faded into a look of concern. But eventually, he knew he had to count his losses this time and try again later. “Uh… I’ll be right back!”

“Oh, I agree; you can’t just go DANCE with her all willy-nilly!” Tyrone assented as him and Dipper paced around the attic, trying to brainstorm about what to do next.

“The dancefloor is a minefield,” Dipper said, his tone serious and slightly panicked. “A MINEFIELD, Tyrone! Literally anything could go wrong!”

“What if there’s a glitch in the sound system?” Tyrone asked, putting forth a hypothetical situation.

“Stan might get in the way,” Dipper suggested, hoping that the con man hadn’t already discovered he had abandoned his post at the ticket table.

“Robbie might come back,” Tyrone added objectively.

“There are just too many variables,” Dipper concluded. “We need help.”

“And lots of it,” Tyrone agreed, already leading the way down to the office.

In almost no time at all, eight more copies of Dipper came to be, flying off of the copier at a rapid, successive pace. Fortunately, all of them had the exact same mindset, which was, of course, to help the original finally ask Wendy to dance. With more Dippers, their already complicated plan only became more lengthy and complex, but all of them agreed that would certainly help instead of hinder them. At the end of their quick, yet productive planning session, each Dipper had been assigned a concrete roll, and all of them were ready to execute their mission, as though they were all parts of a well-oiled machine. Certainly, with so many Dippers all working together, things would go off without a hitch. Right?

“I just don’t know what to do, Connie!” Steven exclaimed after he finished confiding his clone troubles to the girl. “No matter what I do, they just won’t listen! They’re so stubborn!”

“Well, they are you, Steven,” Connie laughed knowingly. “And you can be a little stubborn sometimes.”

“Yeah, but not like that! Why won’t they do what I say!?!”

“Maybe you were a little hard on them,” Connie suggested as her and Steven grabbed a few cookies from the snack table. “I mean, I can’t imagine establishing authority to be easy when you’re trying to reign in different versions of yourself.”

“I know…” Steven sighed in frustration. “But they should listen to me! I was the first one! I’ve been around the longest!”
“They might not see it like that,” Connie said rationally. “Maybe they think they’re equal with you, which, I gotta admit, they kind of are.”

“You’re right…” the young Gem said with a remorseful frown, suddenly regretting his past behavior. “The more I think about it, the more this seemed like a bad idea after all. I guess it’s time for me to quit the music business…”

“Don’t be so torn up about it, Steven,” Connie encouraged as she placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “I’m sure you can still put on a great solo!”

“I guess…” Steven said, even if he wasn’t as easily consoled. “Well… I might as well go tell the others that the gig is up. Where are they anyway?”

As if in response to his question, an ear-splitting noise resounded from right outside the shack, breaking through even the din of the party. Steven and Connie exchanged a confused glance before they hurried outside, finding the trio of Stevens practicing their act on the other side of the shack. However, instead of the light, upbeat song they had written together earlier, the Stevens had apparently composed a new tune, a hard, metallic rock song, one that was far from pleasant to the ears.

“Steven’s a big fat meanie!” Steven 3 practically screamed into the mic, bereft of melody or even rhythm, as the other two jammed out on their instruments. “A big fat meanie zucchini! Let’s chop it up! Chop-chop-chop it up! And serve it with linguini!”

Both Steven and Connie covered their ears upon hearing this terrible racket, but before the young Gem could put a stop to it, someone else did instead. “Hey! Hey! Hey!” Stan yelled over the clamor as he emerged from the shack. “What’s with all this noise?! It’s interrupting my party!”

“Yeah!” Steven agreed as he took a step forward, angrily glaring at his counterparts. “I thought we all agreed that Steven and the Stevens was going to be a light-hearted throwback to early rock and roll, not this mess of screaming into distortion!”

“Wait…” Stan interrupted, his eyes widening as he realized there was more than one of the young Gem. “There are four of you now, kid? As if one wasn’t enough of an annoyance…”

“Yeah, there are four of us, Mr. Pines!” Steven 4 proclaimed pointedly. “But only three of us are going to be performing tonight!”

“What?!” the original Steven asked in dismay.

“Wait, what happened to Greg?” Stan asked, crossing his arms as he looked between the quartet of young Gems. “Did he find out you were actually a set of quadruplets and bail?”

“He couldn’t come because there was a problem at the car wash,” Steven quickly explained. “And I thought I could make an even better band out of my past selves, but clearly, I was wrong.”

“You sure were wrong!” Steven 3 shouted bitterly. “Especially about you being the handsome one!

“Yeesh,” Stan rolled his eyes, not wanting to be in the middle of such a strange conflict. “Listen, I don’t care how many of you there are, the folks in there are still expecting some live entertainment. So you all better sort things out and fast, or else I have to resort to letting Soos beatbox, which I’d really rather not.”

With nothing else to say on the matter, the conman returned inside, leaving the Stevens to have it out as Connie stood by, watching the confrontation anxiously. “What do you guys think you’re
doing?!” Steven asked rather harshly, forgetting Connie’s advice to be patient with them.

“Look, Steven,” Steven 2 began calmly. “Steven and I were talking, and Steven agrees. Your attitude… just wasn’t working for us.”

“We’ve been a lot more productive without you,” Steven 3 said pointedly.

“We already wrote an angsty song about that time you made us feel bad for not being handsome,” Steven 4 informed scornfully.

“So you’re kicking me out of the band?!” Steven asked in disbelief. “Wait… who’s playing drums?”

“Amethyst said she’s do it.”

“Yooooo, Steven,” the purple Gem greeted with a playful smirk from her spot at the drums.

“Really, Amethyst?” Steven asked with a distressed frown. “Wait, what are you even doing here?

“Well, at first I just snuck down here to get some free snacks,” Amethyst said as she twirled her drum stick in her hand. “But then these three jokers asked me if I could drum for them, so I said sure. I’m down for whatever.”

“Oh, come on!” Steven exclaimed in exasperation, realizing that enough was enough. “Listen up! You can’t kick me out of the band! I’m the original Steven! I created you! Steven and the Stevens was my idea!”

“Um… Steven?” Connie cut in, clearly concerned, but Steven ignored her as he continued his rant.

“So either you all shape up and get smart, or… or you can all just leave!”

A beat of prolonged, uncomfortable silence followed in the wake of this harsh demand, all of the Stevens staring at the original with offended shock. Amethyst was the one who actually ended up speaking first, even if it was just a simple comment spoken under her breath. “Whoa, dude…”

Steven 2 spoke up next, a look of tranquil rage on his face as he spoke strangely calmly. “Ok. We’ll go… But if we do, then you won’t have a band at all.”

“I know,” Steven said succinctly. “And I’m fine with that if it means I don’t have to deal with you guys.”

“Well, good!” Steven 3 shouted, as him and the others set their instruments down. “Because we didn’t want to deal with you either, right Steven?”

“Right!” the other two Stevens agreed crossly as the trio headed off, not even bothering to say goodbye. The original let out a sigh of relief as he watched them go, even if he couldn’t deny that he felt the slightest bit bad for how poorly he had treated them.

“Man, Steven…” Amethyst said as she left her place at the drums to stand alongside the young Gem. “I didn’t know you could be so harsh… Well, anyway, I’m gonna go inside and raid the snack table again. Catch ya later!”

“Are you ok, Steven?” Connie asked worriedly as she placed her hand on the young Gem’s shoulder.

“Yeah…” Steven sighed tiredly. “I just wish things hadn’t gone downhill like that… We made a
pretty good band when we actually got along… But at least they’re all going back to the past. And I’ll never have to deal with myself again!”

“Sure, Steven,” Connie laughed in amusement as the two of them returned to the party, hoping to enjoy the rest of the evening in peace. Of course, neither of them knew about the three figures still roaming about in the woods around the shack, plotting and planning amongst themselves.

In contrast with the bitter conflict between Steven and his copies, things were running quite smoothly for Dipper and his clones. All of them were at their stationed posts, preforming their assigned roles perfectly. Soos had been aptly distracted by one Dipper as another one took over his spot at the DJ table, making sure that the perfect set of music was playing. Another Dipper had taken on the task of diverting Stan’s attention, namely through the use of money, while two more had taken on guard duty to keep a steady watch out for Robbie. Once everything was in order, yet another rang the bell from the hall, which sounded down to the attic, where the original Dipper and Tyrone were waiting.

“There’s your cue,” Tyrone said. “Everything’s all set up. Now’s the perfect moment to ask Wendy to dance. Good luck, me!”

“I don’t need luck,” Dipper smirked confidently, more than assured that things would finally work out this time. “I have a plan.” With one final resolute nod, the original sauntered down the stairs, only to stop short as he rounded the corner into the hall to see none other than Wendy herself leaning against the wall.

“Oh hey, Dipper,” the teen greeted with an easy smile. “What’s up?”

“W-what are you doing here?!” Dipper asked, his eyes wide with panic. He was quick to catch himself though, knowing that he couldn’t afford to freak out in front of her again. “I… I mean, wouldn’t you rather be out on the dance floor in, uh, like exactly 42 seconds?”

“I’m just waiting for the bathroom,” Wendy said, her smile fading a bit as she nodded to the door next to her.

“O-oh, um, ok…” Dipper said, his voice tight and anxious. He broke out into a cold sweat as he quickly turned away from her, pouring over his list once more for answers. “Small talk. Make small talk!”

“So, hey,” Wendy spoke up, apparently launching into small talk first. “Let’s say everyone at this party gets stuck on a deserted island. Who do you think the leader would be?”

Dipper was too dumbstruck to offer an immediate response as he stared blankly at her, desperately trying to think of something to say. Fortunately though, Wendy continued regardless. “I think I’d go with this lunatic,” she pointed out a short, sweaty man out on the dance floor, who was hopping about to the beat rather aggressively.

Dipper found himself joining in on Wendy’s bout of laughter, and in light of this, he also found some of his nervousness fading. He took another tentative look at his list, before deciding that, perhaps, he didn’t need it after all. “I’d probably go with stretch over there,” he said, motioning to a very tall man doing the moonwalk. “Because, uh, tall people can reach coconuts?”

“Speaking of tall, wanna see something crazy?” Wendy asked as she finished around in her pocket for a moment before pulling out an old photo. “Those are my brothers,” she said, referring to the
three young boys in the picture. “And I’m… boooooop.” Her smirk widened as she removed her thumb away from the picture, revealing a younger version of herself, who was quite gangly and easily towered over her brothers.

Dipper couldn’t hold back an amused laugh upon seeing this. “Ha! You were a freak!” he exclaimed, though he hurriedly covered his mouth as soon as he said it.

“Yep,” Wendy admitted with a chuckle. “Guess I finally grew into my height though. At least puberty’s good for something.”

“You know, kids used to make fun of my birthmark before I started hiding all of the time,” Dipper admitted with a small smile, though he quickly regretted even bringing it up, especially as it peaked Wendy’s interest.

“Birthmark?” she asked, raising a curious eyebrow. “What birthmark?”

“Uh, no!” Dipper exclaimed, his face lighting up in bright red embarrassment. “It’s nothing! Nothing at all!”

“No way, dude,” Wendy grinned, clearly not buying him trying to pass it off. “Now you have to show me. Show me! Show me!”

The teen continued eagerly chanting this until Dipper finally relented, hoping that she wouldn’t laugh too much. Taking in a deep breath, he hesitantly took his hat off and slowly pushed his bangs up to reveal a series of interconnected marks on his forehead, which just so happened to be arranged into a clear, familiar shape.

“The Big Dipper!” Wendy gasped in realization as she recognized the outline of the famous constellation. “So that’s how you got your nickname! I thought your parents just hated you or something.”

“Yeah, well…” Dipper said with a small, bashful grin as he put his hat back on. “Mabel’s the one who came up with the nickname when we were really little. It’s just sorta stuck with me ever since.”

“Well, hey, I guess this means we’re both freaks,” Wendy smiled broadly, clearly showing no shame in that fact. Relief filled Dipper as he shared a warm laugh with her, glad to know that, not only did they have something in common, but they were able to bond through that. For perhaps the first time ever, he was actually glad to have such a unique birthmark instead of resenting it as he had always done.

Before their conversation could continue, however, the bathroom became available as a very irritated Pacifica Northwest stormed out of it and returned to the party. “I’ll be right back,” Wendy said to Dipper as she turned to head in. “Wait here for me?”

“Of course,” Dipper nodded, more than happy to wait for her as long as he had to. After all, despite his earlier dread and worries, he had actually managed to uphold a proper, genuine conversation with Wendy, that didn’t end with him running off or making a complete fool out of himself. If he could just keep this up, then certainly, he would earn a dance with her before the evening was through.

“Hey!” Dipper’s contented train of thought was suddenly broken as he turned to see nearly every one of his clones gathered behind him, none of them looking very happy with him as Tyrone spoke up. “What are you doing up here? Number 10 has been distracting Soos for fifteen minutes with a
laser pointer! He’s gonna get tired of chasing that dot eventually.”

“You won’t believe it, guys!” Dipper said with a wide smile, even as his clones continued to glare at him. “I bumped into Wendy on accident and things are actually going great!”

“That’s nice and all, but not the plan,” Tyrone said, clearly not amused. “Do we have to remind you?”

In eerie unison, the other Dippers all pulled their lists out, each of them reading a different step over each other as the original watched in slight discomfort. “Oh man, you guys sound crazy,” Dipper frowned, taking a cautious step away from his perturbed clones. “Look, maybe… maybe we don’t need the plan anymore, you know? Maybe I could just talk to her like a normal person, open and honestly.”

The other clones gasped together in shock, as if this was the most outlandish idea they had ever heard. “You bite your tongue!” Dipper 7 scolded in offense.

“Don’t you know anything?” Dipper 9 asked crossly. “Things are never gonna work out without the plan!”

“And if you’re not gonna stick to the plan, then maybe you shouldn’t be the Dipper to dance with Wendy,” Dipper 5 mused coldly as the others all consensually agreed amongst themselves.

“Oh you guys, come on,” the original Dipper scoffed, even though he knew things were quickly going downhill fast. “We said we weren’t gonna turn on each other, remember?”

“I think we all knew we were lying…” Tyrone said, his tone and expression both rather dark and unsettling. Dipper backed away from his clones once more as they all began to steadily approach him together, knowing that there was a good chance that things were about to get ugly.

“Uh, well… i-it’s been great, you guys…” Dipper said with an awkward laugh as he took a glance behind him to make sure his path was clear. “But… I gotta go! Bye!” Without another word, he turned on his heel and took off in the other direction into the party in the hopes that he could shake his obsessed clones, even as they all immediately gave chase.

Steven let out a pensive sigh as he trudged his way through the crowded party, quite ashamed of the fact that he now had to inform Stan that he would be playing what would most likely be a very sub-par solo in just a few minutes. He couldn’t deny that he wished that things had turned out better with his past counterparts, but it was too late for such regrets now. At least he could take solace in the fact that all of the Stevens were back in their own continuities now, giving him three less things to worry about. Or so he had thought.

“Hey, Steven!” The young Gem stopped in his tracks and spun around in shock as he heard his own voice call him out challengingly. Steven let out a gasp as he saw the trio of Stevens standing behind him, all of them looking quite angry and disgruntled as they glared bitterly at him.

“O-oh, Stevens!” the original exclaimed somewhat nervously. “What are you all doing here? I thought you all went back in time!”

“We did,” Steven 3 said vaguely, casually tossing his hourglass up and down in his hand. “And we managed to round up a few… friends…”
Steven gasped in shock as he watched even more Stevens step out from behind the original trio, each one apparently having gathered two more young Gems of their own to make up a grand total of nine Stevens. The original Steven stepped away from the incensed group fearfully, knowing that he would never be able to take them all on alone, especially as angry as they all were with him.

“Since we couldn’t keep the original band together, we all decided to go back and start Steven bands of our own,” Steven 4 explained with a mischievous smirk.

“Yeah! And we’re all gonna play the party together!” one of the countless other Stevens spoke up. “Without you.”

“Are you guys nuts?!” the original Steven asked in disbelief at this ridiculous scheme. “Do I need to remind you all that without me, there’d be no band?! You all would be nothing without me!”

“Actually, I think it’s the other way around…” Steven 2 remarked, taking a bold step forward. “Sorry Steven, but your nothing without us.”

Acting quickly, the original Steven only narrowly managed to leap out of the way as three of his copies lunged for him. “Get him!” Steven 3 ordered, the others all hurrying to comply. Knowing there wasn’t a moment to waste, Steven scrambled to his feet and bounded away from the angry mob of copies. He was admittedly surprised at how violent they were being, though he supposed it was somewhat understandable, considering how condescendingly he had treated them earlier. But all the same, he wasn’t about to be done in by himself, especially in such a literal way.

Steven was hardly paying attention to where he was going as he barreled through the crowds of party goers, which was why he was unable to stop before he accidently ran right into Dipper, who was, coincidentally enough, also fleeing from his own angry clones. Both boys bounced off each other roughly as they landed on the floor adjacent to each other, though they didn’t stay down for too long, lest their copies catch up with them. “Steven, what-” Dipper began, though Steven was quick to cut him off.

“Shh! They’ll see us!” the young Gem whispered tensely as he tightly grabbed the boy’s wrist and began to pull him away. “Follow me!”

“Wait, who will see us?” Dipper asked, checking over his shoulder to see that they had fortunately lost his clones as they emerged into the hallway.

“Me!” Steven exclaimed in a panic. “Well… not me me, but the other me’s! Our band broke up and now they’ve all gone mad with power lust!”

“Your clones too?” Dipper asked in surprise as the two of them stopped to catch their breath.

“Mine all flipped out just because I didn’t wanna follow the stupid plan we all came up with! They’re completely obsessed!”

“Well, we can’t stay here for too long,” Steven said between fatigued breaths. “We gotta think of a way to stop all of our clones, before they-”

“Too late!”

A fearful gasp escaped both Dipper and Steven as they spun around to see that both groups of clones had managed to trail them and catch up with them. “Oh, hi, Dippers!” the various Stevens perked up, grinning amicably as they noticed the boy’s clones standing alongside them.

“Hey, Stevens!” the group of Dippers greeted, all of them sharing friendly grins that quickly faded as they turned to the originals.
“Do you guys mind helping us out here?” Tyrone asked the Stevens. “We’re trying to get a dance with Wendy, but we need to get him out of the way first,” he said, nodding to the original Dipper.

“Sure!” Steven 2 said eagerly. “But only if you guys help us with him—” he pointed to the first Steven. “—so we can jam out without freely, the way we us Stevens were always meant to!”

“Okay!” the Dippers agreed, boldly turning to face the originals as the Stevens did the same, their alliance solidified. Both Steven and Dipper knew they were no match for the combined forces of their respective clones, especially since both groups were equal in number and intentions.

Much to their shared distress, Dipper and Steven found that they were backed into a corner as their copies and clones pressed them, their united efforts easily overwhelming them both. A multitude of various hands from both groups latched onto them, and despite their struggling, both boys found themselves being shoved into the nearby supplies closet before they could escape again.

“Wait!” Steven and Dipper cried in unison as they rushed forward, only to have the closet door slammed in their faces. The two of them exchanged a brief, worried glance, before Dipper happened to come up with a makeshift plan that could possibly get them out of this.

“Ahh! We can’t breathe!” he called out to the clones outside, his tone rather unconvincing.

“Yes, you can!” Tyrone responded from the other side of the door, clearly not tricked.

“We even put some snacks and a coloring book in there for you so you guys won’t get bored!” Steven 2 called cheerfully. “Have fun!”

Dipper let out a defeated sigh as he promptly took a seat and opened the pack of cheese and crackers the clones had left for them, sharing them with Steven, who remained standing as he stood near the door in frustration. “I can’t believe we let them trap us in here!” the young Gem exclaimed, resting his head against the door in exasperation.

“I can’t believe they all teamed up so easily, no questions asked,” Dipper remarked caustically.

“Well, I guess it does make sense,” Steven shrugged. “After all, none of them have any reason to be mad at each other like they do for us.”

“Wait a second…” Dipper sat up, his eyes widening as he realized something important, something that could very well help them win the day yet. “Steven, that’s it!”

“Thanks for the help, Dippers!” Steven 2 grinned as he shook Tyrone’s hand in celebration.

“No, no, Stevens; thank you,” Tyrone said with a casual nod before he turned to address the other Dipper clones. “Okay, so now that the original Dipper, or ‘Dipper Classic’ is no longer fit for it, I nominate myself to dance with Wendy instead. I’ve been around the longest, so it should be me, right?”

“Oh, you know, he makes a good point, you guys,” Steven 2 said to the other Stevens. “That’s why I think I should be the leader of our brand-new Steven ensemble! I think you’ll find that, unlike our previous leader, I’m firm, but fair.”

The other Stevens muttered amongst themselves as they considered this idea, while the Dippers continued discussing who their respective leader would be. “You make a fair point,” Dipper 10
said to Tyrone. “But… I have a counterpoint; maybe I should get to dance with Wendy since I’ve been around her the least!”

“That makes, like, zero sense,” Dipper 5 remarked, crossing his arms.

“YOU make zero sense!” Dipper 10 retorted crossly, giving number 5 a rough shove into Dipper 6.

“Hey! Watch it!”

“Don’t shove people!”

“I wouldn’t have to if it wasn’t for-”

Dipper 5 was abruptly cut off by the sudden, incoherent screeches of Paper Jam Dipper, who had somehow managed to lumber down from the attic. As Tyrone went to quiet the disfigured clone down, the Stevens watched on as the other Dippers continued to quietly argue amongst themselves.

“Yeesh,” Steven 2 frowned as he turned back to the others. “It’s good to know we all get along here, right guys?”

The others were hesitant to agree, especially as Steven 8 spoke up. “Um… Steven? We’re not so sure you should be in charge… Or anyone else for that matter.”

“What?!”

“Well, trying to pick out a leader was what caused all this trouble in the first place,” Steven 5 pointed out. “Maybe we should all be the leader!”

The other Stevens all assented over this plan, even as Steven 2 shot them a cross glare. “Of course, even though we’re all in charge, one of us should be the most in charge,” Steven 9 stated with a sly smile. “And that should be me!”

“What? No way! It should be me!” Steven 7 argued.

“No, me!”

“Me!”

“ME!”

“Hey, you guys!” Tyrone cut through both sets of clones squabbles, a sudden realization occurring to him as he turned away from the jammed clone. “I just thought of something. If you were trapped in a closet, what would you do?”

“Break out,” all of the Steven and Dipper clones answered in unison, as though it was obvious. Of course, this prompted all of them to turn towards the closet, only to find that it was empty, the door swung wide open.

“I told you we should have locked it,” Steven 2 said to Tyrone, who could only face palm at this turn of events.

“Hurry! We have to find them before they get back to the party!”

The others all nodded as they began to fan out through the hall, keeping a close eye out for the originals. “Gee, I wonder where they could be…” one of the Dippers mused to Steven 6 inconspicuously.
“I dunno,” Steven 6 said, his manner serious. “But keep a look out. They could be anywhere…”

“Yeah…” Dipper said, surprising a sly smirk. “Oh, by the way, Steven… I was wondering if I could see that hourglass thing of yours. I’ve been dying to get a closer look ever since you guys told us about it earlier.”

“Oh, sure, Dipper,” Steven 6 said with an amicable grin as he pulled the hourglass out of his pocket. “But be careful with it, ok?”

“Whatever you say, man,” Dipper nodded as he took the small sphere in his hands before quickly spinning around. “Steven, now!”

“Huh?! all of the Steven’s exclaimed, though only one of them really understood.

“Hey, Dipper!” Steven tapped the shoulder of the Dipper closest to him, which just so happened to be number 7. He turned around, but before he could respond, the young Gem was quick to throw the cup of punch he had scavenged at the clone. “I’m sorry!”

As all of the copies turned to watch as the Dipper clone disintegrated on contact with the punch, the original took advantage of the moment and threw the hourglass he had claimed from Steven 6 down onto the ground. The sphere shattered into countless pieces, and as it did so, the Steven who had once wielded it let out a panicked scream before quickly dissipating into a sand-like substance. Chaos exploded among the clones as the lost two of their collective number, all of them easily singling out the originals who had managed to blend into the group.

“There they are!” Dipper 10 declared, pointing to the originals, who were more than ready to fight back.

“Get them!” Steven 4 demanded as the clones rushed forward, not sparing any brutality. Though they were grossly outnumbered, Steven and Dipper held their ground, fighting back with the same weak slaps and punches their clones were throwing out. Despite the fact that they didn’t have any more punch or water to use against the Dipper clones, they did their best to try and snatch away the hourglasses from the Steven copies, knowing that would make them disappear back to their own continuities. They weren’t all too successful with this, however, as Steven was only able to rip the hourglass away from Steven 9, only for it to be immediately reclaimed by Tyrone, who quickly handed it back to its rightful owner.

“Come on, you guys,” the second Dipper clones said as he pinned the original down. Likewise, Stevens 3 and 5 kept the first Steven pressed against the wall, immobile. “Just give up already. You’re overpowered.

“Maybe,” Dipper said with a resilient glare. “But think about it. All of us Dippers are equals mentally and physically-”

“And all of us Stevens are equal mentally and physically!” Steven added, even as his copies pushed him harder against the wall.

“And if we fight like this, then it will just go on for infinity and none of us will win,” Dipper finished, hoping that he could get them all to see reason.

Both sets of clones paused upon hearing this, none of them able to deny that he did have a point as they agreed amongst themselves. Of course, Dipper and Steven took their opportunity as the young Gem broke free from his copies’ tight hold on them, managing to snag Steven 3’s hourglass away in the process. As he stomped it under his foot, both the third Steven, as well as the seventh and
eight Stevens, all instantly collapsed into dust, giving the original an exciting realization about how to get rid of the rest of his copies.

Meanwhile, Dipper managed to repel Tyrone with a rather harsh left hook, slipping out from under him as he recovered. He wasn’t sure where he was going to find enough water to melt the rest of his clones on such a short notice, but he could only hope that he could think of something. After all, he wouldn’t be able to hold them back forever.

Confusion spread throughout both groups of clones as they all began to fight each other, hoping that they would single out the originals some way or another. Order was completely left by the wayside as the various copies of both Steven and Dipper began skirmishing indiscriminately, throwing punches, pulling hair, and shoving each other about. In the tumult, several of the Stevens ended up meeting their ends as their hourglasses were accidentally broken, leaving less than half of them behind. Of course, as they were all caught up battling each other, none of them noticed the originals crawling through the quarreling crowd and start to escape. That is, until one of the Stevens happened to spot them.

“Hey! They’re getting away!”

The clones were quick to stop their senseless fighting as they regrouped and opposed their sources together. Dipper and Steven were only able to round the corner before they found themselves trapped once more, between a wall and the disgruntled clone army, all of them more than ready to finally end this struggle.

“S-stay back!” Dipper warned the collective group nervously as him and Steven pressed against the wall. They clearly had nowhere to go and nothing to get them out of this tight spot, but as a last-ditch effort, Dipper hurriedly pulled the party popper he had in his pocket from earlier out, aiming at the clones, who clearly weren’t intimidated by it.

“What’s that supposed to do?” Steven asked in distress, knowing that water or a hammer would be much better weapons against their crazed clones.

“Help, hopefully,” Dipper shrugged, clearly just as panicked as he fired the party popper off. The clones all simply laughed at this poor effort of warding them off, though none of them noticed the thin stream of smoke that rose up from the weak explosive. As the smoke reached the sprinklers on the ceiling, water immediately began to pour from them in a heavy shower, something that both Steven and Dipper considered to be nothing less than a miracle. The remaining Stevens gasped in surprised horror as they watched the Dipper clones begin to melt as the water rained down upon them from above. In the midst of this chaos, Steven charged forward and tackled Steven 4, stealing his hourglass away just in the nick of time. As he had hoped, Stevens 4, 9, and 10 disappeared entirely as he smashed the sphere, leaving him with just one more Steven to get rid of. Dipper helped him out with this, however, jumping on Steven 5 and, after a brief struggle, managing to claim the hourglass and crush it under his shoe.

Both boys let out sighs of exasperated relief as the sprinklers stopped, leaving nothing more than the watery, dusty remains of their clones in their wake. “Huh… how about that,” Dipper remarked with a relieved smile, glad to be rid of his unhinged copies.

“I guess there really is no better way to get rid of yourself,” Steven said with a small laugh.

“Stop right there!”

Despite the fact that Steven and Dipper were certain they had gotten rid of their clones in one fell swoop, they had apparently forgotten about two of them, namely Tyrone and Steven 2. The copies
stood together in offense against their originals, both of them clearly seeking revenge.

“Uh oh…” Steven and Dipper said in worried unison, both of them already dreading the do-doubt violent confrontation that was about to take place.

Pure excitement pounded through Mabel’s veins as she danced her heart out, her bright smile never fading as she did her best to win the crowds over, something that was clearly working. Dancing the worm had been a huge crowd-pleaser, and she could tell every time she glanced in Pacifica’s direction that the rich girl was far from amused.

“Ok, one more song dudes!” Soos announced as Mabel took a break. “And then it’s time for the bestowing of the party crown! It’s gonna be the-” He paused as he hit a key on his keyboard, an explosion sound blasting over the speakers. “Nailed it.”

With an amiable smile, Mabel approached Pacifica after exchanging confident grins with Connie, Candy, and Grenda. Despite the fact that she wanted to beat the heiress as payback for insulting her friends, Mabel still wanted to be a good sport about things, even if Pacifica had no intentions of doing the same. “Pacifica, I just wanna say that, whoever wins, it’s been a super fun party.”

Pacifica ignored her show of kindness as she let out a snide sneer, her hands placed on her hips as she gave Mabel a condescending look. “Aw, it thinks it’s gonna win,” she patronized coldly. “Hey, did you hear that? People clapping for the weird girls? Yeah, me neither.”

Mabel’s bright smile vanished as Pacifica let out a haughty laugh as she sauntered off. Candy, Grenda, and Connie were quick to rush over to her and comfort her, even if Mabel wasn’t really that hurt by her disparaging comments.

“Ok, that’s it,” Connie said rigidly, fed up with the heiress’s rotten behavior. “Mabel, you have to win. If only so we can see that smug grin of her’s disappear.”

“Wow, Connie, I didn’t know you could be so… hostile,” Mabel said with a somewhat nervous smile. “It’s kinda scary honestly.”

“Well, what can I say?” Connie replied, crossing her arms as she sent a glare Pacifica’s way. “Steven’s not the only one who’s feeling feistier than usual tonight.”

Clearly, both Tyrone and Steven 2 were much more tactile and tougher than the other, now-disappeared clones as Dipper and Steven found themselves having a hard time contending with them. As the pair of Dippers tussled on the floor, the two Stevens grappled for each other’s hourglasses, even if neither of them were getting very far.

“Give me your time thing, Steven!” Steven 2 shouted angrily, trying to reach into his counterpart’s pocket to steal it.

“No!” Steven retorted defiantly. “Why do you need both of them so badly anyway?!”

“Just hurry up and give it to me!” the second Steven griped, even as the original shoved him away.

At the same time, both Dippers were essentially slapping each other senseless, trying to wear each other down as much as they could so that would of them could emerge victorious in the end. Despite the fact that they were an equal match, however, Tyrone was clearly inching ahead as he had a momentary advantage over the original. “Say it!” he demanded fiercely. “Say I can dance
“Never!” Dipper exclaimed resiliently, not about to let that coveted dance slip through his fingers again. Though their scuffle could have continued indefinitely, it soon came to a grinding halt, however, as both Dippers caught onto the sound of a familiar laugh coming from the dance floor.

“Wendy?” they both asked in confused unison as they let go of each other and hurried to the doorway, only to see something that made their hearts simultaneously sink. Much to their shared despair, Robbie had returned, and had easily garnished the cashier’s attention as the two of them conversed and laughed together. Both Dippers couldn’t help but feel the same bitterness upon seeing this, knowing that one of them easily could have been out there with Wendy instead, if they hadn’t been so caught up with their petty battle instead.

As the Dippers witnessed this disheartening sight, Steven at last gained the upper hand over his counterpart, pinning him down and snatching his hourglass away with little effort. Fear flashed across Steven 2’s face as he looked up at the original, knowing that his end was near. Yet it was only as Steven held up the final hourglass and caught sight of his frightened copy’s expression that clarity, as well as heavy guilt struck him. “This… this isn’t right…” he said quietly as he lowered the hourglass. Steven 2 frowned in confusion, but listened as the original continued. “When Steven fights Steven, who really wins? What have we become?” Steven 2 was silent as he glanced to the side, clearly ashamed of his own previous, antagonizing behavior. “We are not the Stevens we once were. But I plan on fixing that right now.”

Steven 2 shut his eyes tightly, anticipating that Steven intended on shattering the hourglass. However, instead he extended his hand out in offering, an apologetic smile on his face as he helped his surprised copy up off the ground. “Steven, I’m sorry… I got really carried away… But I think this belongs to you.”

The second Steven smiled softly as he accepted the hourglass Steven was holding out to him. “It’s ok, Steven. And I’m sorry too. Especially about the whole, you know, trying to kill you part…”

“Well, it looks like we all blew it tonight,” Dipper said pensively as him and Tyrone joined the two Stevens. The four of them shared a tired, somewhat sad sigh as they all sat together against the wall, silence falling over them for a moment or two before Tyrone offered a suggestion.

“I dunno… You guys wanna go grab a couple of sodas or something?”

“Sure,” Steven shrugged as Steven 2 nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, why not,” Dipper said, casting one last longing glance at the party, knowing that all of his careful planning and worrying had been for not in the end. “It’s not like we’re gonna be doing any dancing tonight anyway…”

The party had just about reached its end, which meant the ongoing competition was also coming to a conclusion. Mabel and Pacifica stood alongside each other on the stage as the audience waited in rapt attention to see who would emerge the victor. “Let the party crown voting commence!” Soos called as he played a bell sound on his keyboard.

“Good luck, Mabel,” Pacifica remarked, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “You’re gonna need it.”

“Thanks, Pacifica!” Mabel quipped blissfully. “Good luck to you too!”
The heiress simply rolled her eyes as Soos relayed the instructions to the audience. “Applaud to vote for Mabel!”

As the girl had hoped, the crowd went absolutely wild for her. Candy, Grenda, and Connie all howled their support from the front row, and even Stan stopped to clap loudly for his niece. “Let’s check the applause meter,” Soos said as the audience continued to cheer. The handyman raised his hand up, smiling as he gave the girl a confident not. “Oh, very good!”

Mabel smiled broadly, bouncing up and down on her toes in excitement over how well things were going so far. “And now, for Pacifica!” Soos called, and, compared to how they had clapped for Mabel, the audience was clearly much less enthusiastic about the heiress. Refusing to accept defeat, Pacifica shot the audience members a burning glare, her wealth and authority proving enough to get them to hesitantly support her louder.

“Uh oh, a tie,” Soos said as both of his hands raised to the same level. “This has, like, never happened before.”

Knowing that she was quickly losing ground, Pacifica glanced around the room before coming up with a quick plan that would ensure her victory. Before the crowd could simmer down, the heiress rushed over to the benches, pulling a dollar out of her pocket and waving it in front of Old Man McGucket, who lay sprawled sleeping over the chairs. The old man instantly awakened at the scent of nearby cash, and he was more than happy to let out a rowdy, wild cheer as he took the dollar, even if he had no idea what he was clapping for.

Soos frowned as he raised his hand up for Pacifica just a bit higher than Mabel’s. “Ladies and gentlemen, we… we have a winner…” the handyman said reluctantly, giving Mabel an apologetic look as he continued. “The winner of the contest is… Pacifica Northwest.”

Unsurprisingly, there was little fanfare as Pacifica greedily claimed the party crown as her own, smirking triumphantly as she positioned it on her hand. “No fair!” Connie exclaimed to Candy and Grenda, clearly incensed. “She cheated! Mabel should have won, fair and square!”

“That is just how it goes for popular girls…” Candy mused in disappointment.

“They always win!” Grenda growled bitterly, cracking her girthy knuckles angrily.

“Thank you, Jorge!” Pacifica said to Soos, not even caring that she had gotten his name wrong. “Thank you, everyone! You all are invited to the after-party on my parent’s yacht! Let’s go!”

Despite the fact that few people in the audience had wanted Pacifica to win, none of them were about to miss out on a much fancier party. The crowd chanted the heiress’s name happily as they carried her off and out of the shack, leaving the dance floor largely empty in their wake.

“But you can’t win them all, I guess,” Mabel grinned warmly. “Thank you, Connie,” she said as Connie left, Candy and Grenda waving their farewells.

“I still can’t believe she beat you, Mabel,” Connie said, still somewhat aggravated. “For what it’s worth, you totally deserved to win. You were awesome out there!”

“Thanks, Connie.” Mabel frowned. “Well, it’s getting pretty late…” She frowned down at her watch. “My parents will be expecting me home soon, so I better go find Steven before I go and make sure he’s alright. Candy, Grenda, it was great meeting. I’ll see you all later!”

“Bye, Connie!” Mabel called as Connie left, Candy and Grenda waving their farewells. “I’m sorry I let you guys down,” the girl said as she turned to her new friends, the slightest hint of remorse in her tone. “I understand if you wanna leave.”
“But then we will miss the sleepover,” Candy said, a small smile appearing on her face.  

“What?”  

“We want to call our moms and see if we can have a sleepover with you,” Grenda explained. “You’re like, a total rockstar!”  

“I have magazine boys!” Candy grinned as she pulled out several teen magazines out of her backpack for Mabel to see.  

“And I have nail polish!” Grenda exclaimed, taking out several bottles of polish she had stored in her pockets.  

“Oh… you guys!” Mabel gushed in absolute delight.  

“Maybe we don’t have as many friends as Pacifica,” Candy began as she adjusted her glasses. “But we have each other, and that is pretty good, I think.”  

“It’s not just good,” Mabel affirmed as she drew her new friends into a tight hug. “It’s the best. Soos! Play another song! This thing’s going all night!”  

“Way ahead of you, hambone!” Soos grinned, already setting another track up.  

“This is it!” Mabel proclaimed excitedly, already taking the dance floor as Candy and Grenda joined her, cheering her on all the while. Even if she hadn’t won the competition, Mabel knew that she had won something far better: not one, but two budding friendships.

The last two remaining Stevens and final two Dippers had taken to the roof for a while, all of them needing to calm their nerves and blow off some steam after everything that had happened. They all sat in silence for a while as they enjoyed their sodas, watching the glowing stars high ahead in the peaceful, summer night’s sky.  

“Some night, huh?” Tyrone asked, exhaustion clear in his tone.  

“You said it,” Steven 2 agreed as the others nodded.  

“I still can’t believe things got so crazy back there,” Steven frowned. “But I guess we all learned some important things tonight. For example, I learned that I’m really bossy…”  

“Eh, maybe…” Steven 2 shrugged. “But our heart was in the right place. For the most part… I guess…”  

“Hey, at least you guys didn’t end up making huge fools of yourselves,” Dipper said with a remorseful sigh before addressing Tyrone. “Sometimes it seems like we won’t ever have a chance with Wendy. I mean, she’s 15, we’re 12…”  

“I don’t know, man,” Tyrone said, looking back towards the starry skies. “I hope so, but we’re making zero progress the way we’re doing it. The only good conversation you had with her was when you didn’t bother with any of that list stuff.”  

“Wait, you guys actually tried using a list to get a dance with Wendy?” Steven 2 asked, cracking an amused smirk. “No wonder things didn’t work out. That’s way too complicated!”
“Says the guy who went back in time just to put a band together,” Tyrone remarked under his breath good-naturedly.

“I know…” Dipper admitted sheepishly. “Turns out Mabel was right. I do get in my own way.”

“Literally!” Dipper and Tyrone exclaimed in unison as the Stevens laughed together.

“Speaking of getting in the way…” Steven said as he pulled out his hourglass. “I guess we should give these to the Gems? Or at least one of them? I’m not sure…”

“We’ll figure something out,” Steven 2 said confidently, casually tossing his own hourglass up and down. “After all, we—” He stopped short as he accidently failed to catch the hourglass as it came down, watching with horror as it slipped through his fingers and fell off the roof and onto the ground far below. All four of them cringed as the hourglass shattered, tears already starting to fill the original Steven’s eyes as he watched his last remaining double began to dissolve into sand.

“Steven!” the young Gem exclaimed in distress, clinging onto his quickly fading counterpart as the pair of Dippers stood by watching helplessly.

“I-its ok!” Steven 2 assured with a weak smile as his lower body melted away. “This was bound to happen anyway.”

“But we could have played an awesome duet together!” Steven cried desperately. “We could have—”

“Hey! It’s alright! If I know me, I know you’ll find another way!” Steven 2 said as the original dropped down to his knees so they could be level with each other. “Stay cool forever, Steven.” The second Steven give his present counterpart a parting kiss on both cheeks as he began to disappear entirely. “Arrivaderchi!”

Steven’s hands were trembling as the last of Steven 2 spilled out of his hands and dissipated into nothingness. “Alas… Poor Steven…” he muttered despondently, tears streaming down his cheeks. “I knew him well…”

“Oh man…” Dipper said with a sympathetic frown as he put a consoling hand on the young Gem’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, Steven…”

“Yeah, but look at the bright side,” Tyrone said with a reassuring smile. “At least he’ll always be a part of you. Or something like that…” Realizing he had failed to be poetic, the second Dipper took an awkward sip of his soda without thinking. He soon realized his mistake however, as he stole a glance down at his stomach only to realize that a hole was starting to melt through it. “Oh boy… Don’t look now…”

Steven and Dipper gasped in alarm as they watched the last clone of either of them begin to melt. “Tyrone!” Dipper exclaimed in a sudden panic. “Not you too!”

“It’s ok, dude,” Tyrone said, putting up the same kind of dignity Steven 2 had at the end of it all. “I had a good run. Remember what we talked about!”

“O-of course,” Dipper choked, accepting Steven’s hand on his shoulder as the young Gem moved to comfort him now.

“And quit being such a wimp around Wendy, ok?” Tyrone said, even if he was practically completely melted away by now. “For my sake!”
The final clone’s words still lingered even as he was reduced to nothing more than a puddle. “Oh… Tyrone…” Dipper sighed sadly. “You were the only one who understood…” As once final show of respect to the fallen clone, the boy poured some of his soda onto Tyrone’s remains before taking a sip himself. Likewise, Steven decided to pay one final tribute to Steven 2 by stomping on the hourglass, knowing that it wasn’t worth all the trouble it had caused.

“I’m really gonna miss them…” Steven said with a forlorn frown. “But at least they’re in a better place…”

“Sure…” Dipper said, not entirely convinced since both clones had blipped out of existence completely. “But all the same, I’m pretty sure this whole ordeal has scarred me for life. So you wanna go back to the party? It’s better than moping around up here.”

“Ok,” Steven agreed with a small smile. “There’s probably a few snacks left that Amethyst hasn’t stolen yet… Wait! That gives me an idea! Come on!”

Dipper nodded, letting the young Gem descend the roof first as he lingered behind for a moment and pulled his list out of his pocket one last time. As Tyrone had said, the list had done little to help him out with Wendy in any regard. It was clear that if he intended on getting anywhere, he truly had to rely on himself and his instincts instead of any overcomplicated, convoluted lists he might come up with. Which was why the boy had few regrets as he ripped the list up, watching with a small, relieved smile as its pieces scattered to the wind. “Hey, Steven!” he called out after the young Gem as he hurried down the roof himself to return to the party. “Wait up!”

“Can’t you see it in our eyes?” Steven sang with a bright smile as he strummed his guitar, more than happy with his newfound band. “We’re the one, we’re the—one!”

“Two!” Garnet called with a smirk, showing off her skill on the keytar.

“Three!” Pearl sung out, hitting every note on her violin perfectly.

“Four!” Amethyst shouted, beating away the rhythm of their song on the drums.

“We’re not like the other guys…” Steven continued, looking out at his rather small audience. Since most of the party goers have left with Pacifica earlier, the Pines, of course, still remained, as did Soos, Wendy, Candy, Grenda, and even Connie, despite the fact that she had to leave right after the performance. But still, the young Gem was glad to have this audience, as intimate as it was, especially as he watched everyone enjoy themselves as him and the Gems jammed out.

“We’re not like anybody!” Amethyst harmonized on Steven’s cue.

“By the way, don’t go back in time,” Steven sung, deciding to put a meaningful spin on his rewritten song. “Or you’ll destroy yourself!”

“Steven and the Crystal Gems! We’re gonna make you smile!”

As Steven and the Gems continued to perform, Stan happily counted the bountiful sum of money he had earned thanks to this party, knowing that he would be laughing all the way to the bank tomorrow. Soos worked the lights as the Gems played, giving them a perfectly-timed light show as their upbeat melody flowed through the dance floor. Mabel, Candy, and Grenda all danced to the tune in their own unique way, and though Connie wasn’t much of a dancer, she still smiled her support up to Steven as she tapped her feet to the beat. And though it couldn’t be officially called a
“dance” in the way that he had wanted it to be, Dipper still succeeded in dancing near Wendy at the very least. And, considering what he had been through earlier to get here, that was good enough for him.

“I accidently created an, alternate timeline!” Steven proclaimed, not noticing the concerned glance Pearl sent his way upon hearing this. “Steven and the Crystal Gems! Come on now, don’t be shy!”

The young Gem took in a deep breath as he geared up for his big finish, even as everyone already prepared to generously applaud him. Yet that hardly mattered to Steven, who was simply reveling in the fact that he was playing with people he deeply cared about in front of people he deeply cared about. And in the end, that was all he had wanted. “I learned to say true to myself, but watching myself die...”
Chapter 13: Bottomless Pit

Chapter Summary

In which the gang falls into a pit, Dipper tries to jumpstart puberty, Amethyst moonlights as a wrestler, Soos cheats in pinball, Pearl tells a PG 13 story, Garnet has secret expy animal friends, Stan wins the football bowl, Mabel learns lying is the best, and Steven turns into an amorphous ball of cats.

Chapter Notes

Ok, so here's my take on Bottomless Pit, with a few SU episodes added in (namely Tiger Millionaire, Garnet's Universe, and Cat Fingers). Enjoy!

Chapter 13: Bottomless Pit

XS QHAW: SXUSOH SXPD YV. IRRWERW
UXPEOH LQ WKH JORZ RI WKH OXPLQRXV RUE RI WKH QLJKW

The Mystery Cart bumped across the thin dirt road, all of its passengers, save for its driver, clinging onto its frame for dear life. Even though it was quite a short drive, Stan still found a way to drive fast and recklessly, even despite the frightened cries of his nephew, niece, and handyman. Fortunately for Dipper, Mabel, and Soos, the cart soon veered and screeched to a halt, allowing them to all relax after such a harrowing experience. Their shared relief soon turned into bewilderment, however, as they filed out of the cart only to find what appeared to be a very wide, probably quite deep hole in the dusty ground before them.

“In this land of ours, there are many great pits,” Stan said as he stood near the edge of the hole, gesturing for the others to join him. “But none are more bottomless than the bottomless pit. Which, as you can see here, is bottomless.”

“Question,” Soos spoke up. “Is it bottomless?”

The con man let out an annoyed sigh as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Kids, can one of you try explaining this to Soos?”

“Whoa!” Mabel gasped in awe as she peeked over the side of the pit, looking into the seemingly endless black abyss below. “That’s not your ordinary kind of darkness down there. That’s advanced darkness!”

“Grunkle Stan, why are we here again?” Dipper asked, warily staying clear of the rugged edges of the pit.

“To get rid of stuff we don’t want anymore,” Stan replied, pulling a small stack of square papers out of his sleeve before tossing them into the abyss. “So long, Mystery Shack suggestion cards!”

The con man’s broad grin soon vanished, however, as he happened to catch sight of the group
heading down the hill towards the shack. “Speaking of things I’d like to get rid of…”

“Hi, guys!” Steven greeted cheerfully as he sprinted towards the Mystery Shack crew, the Gems following not too far behind him. “What’s going on?”

“Hey, Steven! We’re throwing all of our junk into this pit here!” Mabel said brightly as she carelessly discarded several cards and papers into the hole. “Goodbye, creepy love letters from Lil’ Gideon!”

“Ooo, I wanna try!” Steven grinned, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a few pieces of spare change. “I wish I could get my hands on the limited edition Dogcopter boxed set, complete with special features and director’s commentary!” the young Gem proclaimed as he tossed the coins into the pit.

“Nice wish, dude,” Soos remarked as he took off his shoes and threw them into the pit. “That’s a hard find.”

“Soos, what are you doing?” Dipper asked with a confused frown.

“Throwing stuff,” the handyman shrugged as he tossed the nearby grill into the hole as well. “Everyone’s doin’ it.”

“This isn’t a wishing well, kid,” Stan deadpanned to Steven as he rolled his eyes. “It’s a bottomless pit. The only thing it can really be used for is as a giant trash can.”

“Hey, the bottomless pit!” Amethyst exclaimed as her, Garnet, and Pearl arrived on the scene. “You know I’ve always wanted to jump in there and see where it goes…”

“You will do no such thing!” Pearl quickly grabbed the purple Gem by the shoulder and yanked her away from the pit. “Who knows what’s at the bottom of that abyss!?”

“Well, it is bottomless,” Garnet cut in stoically.

“And besides,” Pearl continued. “We can’t loiter around here all day anyway. We have to track down those crystal shrimp into they get into town! If we don’t, they’ll—Mabel, what is that?”

Mabel smiled somewhat enigmatically as she paused near the edge of the pit, stopping the large, chained-up crate she had pushed all the way over from the shack. “Oh, it’s just my personal box of mysterious secrets… Nothing worth worrying about…” she said vaguely, inching the box closer to the edge before shoving it over without a second thought. “Goodbye forever!”

A beat of uncomfortable silence passed as the collective group as they all watched the curious crate tumble down into the blackened depths. “Grunkle Stan,” Dipper finally spoke up, clearly not as impressed as the others were with the intriguing pit. “Do I really have to be the one to point out that a bottomless pit is, by definition, impossible?”

“I agree with Dipper,” Pearl conquered. “The crust of the earth is only about thirty five kilometers deep, and no form of penetration, by man or nature, has ever extended to its furthest depths. Even if such a thing as a bottomless pit could exist, it would have to-”

“‘Blah, blah, blah, science, blah, blah, boring’,;” Stan said mockingly, thoroughly aggravating the white Gem. “That’s all I’m hearing. Go ahead and doubt all you want. I’m telling you, this pit is as bottomless as I wish my wallet was.”

“I believe you, Mr. Pines,” Steven quipped encouragingly. “Though I guess there really is no way
to know for sure whether or not it’s bottomless…”

“I can check and see!” Amethyst readily volunteered, preparing to leap headfirst into the hole just for fun.

“No, Amethyst,” Garnet admonished rationally.

“Well, I guess the secret of the bottomless pit will always be just that,” Mabel shrugged. “A secret.”

No one even had time to agree with this statement however, before a sudden, ear-splitting screech caught everyone’s attention. A horde of small, strange creatures was emerging from the nearby woods, vaguely crustacean in appearance and iridescent in color. They skittered towards the groups standing before the pit, letting out ravenous, high-pitched hisses all the while. “W-what are those things?!” Dipper asked in alarm.

“Crystal shrimp!” Pearl gasped, her eyes wide as her and the other Gems summoned their weapons. “They’re incredibly dangerous! Mere physical contact with them could be deadly!”

“Everyone, stay back!” Garnet ordered, clenching her gauntleted fists.

“Stay back where?!” Stan asked caustically. “We’re kind of standing in front of a giant endless hole, in case you forgot!”

“Uh… how are we supposed to fight these things anyway?” Amethyst called to her teammates as the shrimp slunk ever closer. “We can’t touch them, remember?”

“Don’t worry, you guys!” Steven cut in. “I can help!” After taking in a quick deep breath of determination, the young Gem spread his arms out wide, a pink-tinged orb surrounding him and Dipper and Mabel, who had been standing closest to him. “Aw, man! I thought I could make one big enough for everyone!” Steven frowned to everyone outside of the bubble.

“Oh my gosh, Steven, this is so cool!” Mabel grinned as she poked the firm surface of the pink bubble they were trapped inside. “It’s like a giant hamster ball!”

“This is another Gem thing, isn’t it?” Dipper asked, breathing a sigh of slight relief that they were out of immediate harm.

“Yeah,” Steven replied with a small smile. “We’ll be nice and safe from those shrimp guys inside this bubble, at least until the Gems can find a way to get rid of them.”

“Please. We don’t need any fancy magic bubbles to deal with these puny pests,” Stan scoffed as he pulled out his cane. “I can take care of ‘em myself!”

“Stan, wait!” Pearl warned, but the conman didn’t heed her call. Instead, he simply thrust the tip of his cane towards the nearest crystal shrimp, only for the glass-like creature to let out a rabid squeal as it reared up onto its hind legs. Startled, Stan stumbled back away from the shrimp, only to back right into Steven’s bubble by mistake. Since the bubble had no form of traction, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel were helpless to stop the orb they were in from rolling backwards, until it ultimately slipped right over the edge of the nearby bottomless pit. The trio of kids let out unified screams of terror as they fell into the dark abyss, the adults still on the ground all letting out horrified gasps. It wasn’t long before they got company, however, as the conman, still trying to catch his footing, teetered on the edge of the pit himself. Of course, he had nearly righted himself when he caught the brunt of Soos’s good-natured, knee-jerk reaction.
“Don’t worry, Mr. Pines!” the handyman cried, leaping forward to catch his boss before he fell. “I’ll save you!” Unfortunately, instead of rescuing the conman, Soos only managed to make the situation worse as he barreled into Stan, resulting in both of them backpedaling into the pit on accident.

“Hey, no fair!” Amethyst called out after the rounds of fading screams coming from the pit. “I wanted to be the one to jump in there first! Oh well, I’m goin’ for it anyway!” The purple Gem smirked daringly as her whip vanished as she leapt into the pit without another moment of delay. “Cannonball!”

“Amethyst!” Pearl practically screamed in a panic. “Steven! Oh Garnet, what are we going to do?!” Garnet only paused for a moment, glancing between the approaching crystal shrimp and the bottomless pit before reaching a quick conclusion. “Cannonball,” she answered with a shrug, before diving headfirst into the pit herself. The white Gem gasped, though her shock was quick to turn to irritation as she knew she had no choice left herself.

“Oh… Stan’s gonna pay for this!” Pearl growled bitterly, hesitating briefly before making the plunge after the others, deep into the unknown darkness of the bottomless pit.

It didn’t take long for everyone to catch up to each other, not that anyone knew it thanks to the inky blackness surrounding them. The only thing they were able to recognize were each other’s frightened screams, which lasted for quite some time as they all fell together. It was only as seconds passed on into minutes that the collective group gradually began to calm down, especially as they all realized they had not hit anything, and probably weren’t going to any time soon.

“Um… guys?” Steven spoke up through the darkness once the initial rounds of screaming had ended. “I think we’re good…”

“Are you sure, dude?” Soos asked. “Or do we need to scream some more?”

“Please, don’t,” Garnet remarked calmly.

“Where are we anyway?” Dipper asked, straining his eyes to see through the immense darkness. Fortunately though, a faint, yet still suitable light flooded the surrounding area, courtesy of the gem on Pearl’s forehead. The white Gem herself looked very perturbed, but she said nothing as she cast an angry glare Stan’s way.

“We’re somewhere where it looks like we’re nowhere…” Mabel mused, though she let out a gasp of awe as Steven’s bubble dissipated in a burst of pink light.

“Whoops…” the young Gem chuckled bashfully. “Forgot about that…”

“Yo… This place is even cooler than I thought it would be!” Amethyst grinned excitedly. “It’s so big, and dark, and echo-y!” The purple Gem paused as she let her final word repeat on the pit’s natural echo. “Kinda reminds me of my room.”

“If only your room were as empty,” Garnet said sarcastically.

“I guess this pit really is bottomless!” Mabel smiled broadly as she took a curious glance into the heavy darkness they were continually falling into.
“Mabel, please,” Dipper rationalized, fear getting the better of him. “We’re probably gonna land on something eventually, no matter how far we fall. It could be any minute now!”

As the group took a collective glance down, they all simultaneously braced themselves for a rough impact. And yet, it was an impact that never came as they all continued floating down together through the endless abyss.

“Well,” Stan began candidly. “It looks like we’re all down here for the long haul. Who wants to see some card tricks?” With a wave of his hand, the conman produced a deck of cards, which all were quick to fly up thanks to gravity as he tried to shuffle them. Even though Steven and Mabel applauded the nonexistent trick, the others were far less than amused.

“How can you be so calm about this?!” Pearl scolded, her panic quickly rising. “For all we know, we could be stuck in this Gem-forsaken pit for the rest of time! We’ll never escape! THIS is our new home!”

Realizing that the white Gem was quickly unraveling into a frenzy, Garnet quickly stepped in. “Pearl, you’re overreacting.”

“I’M NOT OVERREACTING!” Pearl shouted defensively, clinging onto her spear for support.


“Don’t worry, Pearl!” Steven said with a reassuring smile. “I’m sure there’s a way out of here! Somehow…”

“If only I had my trusty grappling hook!” Mabel snapped her fingers. “That could get us out of here for sure!”

“Somehow I doubt that your grappling hook to reach the top of the pit,” Dipper remarked dryly. “We’ve probably fallen several hundred feet by now, and I guess there’s no sign of stopping…”

“Hey, dudes, maybe we could calm ourselves down by telling stories to pass the time,” Soos suggested. “It’s better than just falling forever in the dark, ya know?”

“That’s a great idea, Soos!” Steven heartily agreed.

“I’ve got a story,” Dipper said, his tone rather hostile as he crossed his arms. “It’s called the time Grunkle Stan got us all thrown into a bottomless pit where we spent the rest of our natural lives!”

“Sounds like a good one,” Amethyst laughed as she grinned over at Stan, who merely rolled his eyes.

“Come on, Dipper, you can do better than that!” Mabel urged.

“Fine,” Dipper sighed in relent, realizing that they really didn’t have anything better to do than simply exchange tales for the time being. “I’ll tell you a story. A story I’d like to call ‘Voice Over’…”

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**Voice Over**

In the heat of the balmy summer afternoon, a water balloon battle had been waged, with Steven and Mabel on one side and Soos and Wendy on the other. Stan only narrowly avoided getting hit
by of the balloons that had happened to sail towards the porch as reached for another can of soda.

“Hey, watch it!” he shouted gruffly, briefly interrupting the water war. “If I wanted to get wet, I
would have taken a money bath this morning!”

“Sorry, Grunkle Stan!” Mabel called with a laugh. However, before the water balloon fight could
resume, Dipper came running from the woods towards the group, clearly in a panic as he clutched
his wrist tightly.

“Guys! I think I just got bit by a snake!” he exclaimed, fearfully glancing down at the two lightly
bleeding dots on his hand. “I need you to get me to a hospital quick!”

Instead of offering an appropriate worried response, Stan simply burst out laughing from his spot
on the porch as he heard his nephew’s voice hitch on his last word. “What’s so funny?” Dipper
asked, finding no humor in the situation at all.

“Sorry,” Stan chuckled. “It’s just sorta hard to focus on what you’re saying with that squeaky
puberty voice you got there.”

“My… what?”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of, Dipper,” Mabel said with a growing grin. “Your voice is
hilaarious!” she squeaked, trying to imitate her brother’s voice.

“Are you saying my voice cracks?” Dipper asked in disbelief. “My voice doesn’t crack!”

“Eh… it kinda does…” Steven admitted with a frown. “Just a little.”

“Dude, no offense, but it cracks so much that we’ve already made a techno remix of it,” Soos said
as he held up a tape recorder and pressed play.

Dipper gasped in appalled shock as he listened to his own recorded voice, mixed to emphasize how
much it hitched, which was actually much more than he had originally thought. “Nice to meet you.
My name's Dipper Pines, P-P-Pines, Pines, Pines Nice to meet you P-p-pines, Pines, Pines.”

“Do I really sound like that?” Dipper asked as the others, save for Steven, all laughed in
amusement over the track.

“It’s not that bad, Dipper,” the young Gem attempted to reassure. “So what if your voice squeaks
sometimes? Mine does too. Well… actually, only when I get really excited, which, to be fair,
happens a lot.”

Dipper was hardly consoled by this, especially as the others howled with laughter as the tape
continued. “Stop it, guys!” the recording whined, his voice sounder higher-pitched than ever.
Despite his earlier empathy, even Steven couldn’t resist letting out a chuckle at that. Not wanting
to risk further embarrassment, Dipper quickly grabbed the tape recorder out of Soos’s hand,
hurrying off with it as everyone else continued laughing at his expense.

Dipper let out a dejected sigh as he walked through downtown, though he easily picked up on his
voice cracking just the slightest bit with this simple breath. “Even my sighs sound weird…” he
muttered to himself, begrudging the fact that he was, at least for now, stuck with a voice trapped
between youth and adulthood.

His thoughts were interrupted by fear however, for he jumped back, startled as a familiar face
suddenly peeked out from a hole in the nearby face. “Hello there!” Old Man McGucket greeted
with a toothy grin, not noticing the boy’s surprise. “I couldn’t help but overhear your situation! Old Man McGucket,” he introduced, spitting on his hand as he held it out to be shook. “Part time inventor.”

“Why did you spit on your hand?” Dipper asked, refusing to meet the old man halfway out of disgust.

“I don’t rightly know!”

“Hey, I remember you!” Dipper exclaimed. “Your giant robot almost killed me and my friends the other week!”

McGucket ignored this accusation as he let out a wild laugh. “Come on! Follow me into this dark and dangerous alley!” Before Dipper could protest, the old man yanked him into the alley, which led into the junkyard on the other side of the fence. He was quite surprised to see the rather elaborate, yet rugged lab McGucket had set up out of the back of a beaten up old car. “Lately, I’ve been tinkering with a voice alterin’ tonic,” the old inventor explained as he began to pour a strange green liquid into a vial. “On account of my horrifying voice! Youngins’ try to run away at the sound of it, but I’ll still be in their nightmares!”

“Wait,” Dipper said, momentarily disregarding McGucket’s insane mannerisms. “So you’re saying this stuff will really fix my voice?” The old inventor nodded eagerly as he handed the concoction to the boy, who took it with relatively little reservations. “Well… I guess it’s worth a try,” he shrugged as he downed the entire potion in one swig, confident that it would yield results.

“Come mornin’, you’ll sound like a new man!” McGucket called after Dipper as he headed back to the shack. “If you survive…”

The next morning, Dipper wok up as usual, hardly even thinking about the voice tonic he had taken the previous day until he stood before the mirror and greeted himself. “Good morning, Dipper!” he said, gasping happily as he heard his own voice come out very deep and masculine. “It worked! Now I have a new voice!” He let out a hearty laugh in his deeper voice, relishing the sound of it as he rushed over to Mabel to rub it in her face. “Morning, Mabel!” he cheerfully addressed his still-sleeping sister. “Who’s my favorite Mabel?”

Of course, upon hearing such a startlingly strange voice, Mabel darted up out of bed, fear overriding her common sense as she grabbed a nearby golf club with the intention of driving the supposed intruder out. She certainly wasn’t set to ease when she realized that it was her brother who had spoken in such a mismatched, low tone, which was why she didn’t hesitate to give him a good whack over the head with her club. “Who are you!? What have you done with my brother?!” she demanded as she continued to beat him with the club, despite his protests. “Dipper! Don’t worry! I’ll save you from this body switching warlock!”

“Mabel, it’s me!” Dipper exclaimed as he finally got himself out of her range. “This is my voice now!! I sound awesome. Soooouunnnnd aaawwwwesoommmee.”

“I know boys’ voices change, but this is weird,” Mabel frowned uncomfortably. “Weird and bad.”

“But Mabel, this is the best thing that has ever happened to me!” Dipper argued with a confident grin. “Just listen to my voice. It’s so deep and manly!”

“Eh… Mabel no like,” she cringed as she shook her head, knowing that such an adult voice did not match her twin brother’s small, young frame at all.
“Well, that’s your opinion,” Dipper shrugged. “I’m sure everyone else will absolutely love it!”

“How are you diddly-doing, Soos?” Dipper greeted the handyman as him and Mabel emerged into the gift shop. However, much like Mabel, Soos gave his own panicked reaction to the stark, sudden change in Dipper’s voice.

“Kill it!” he exclaimed fearfully, swatting at the boy with a broom. “Kill it with fire! Everyone flee!”

The gift shop was quick to empty in light of this episode as Dipper swatted Soos and his broom away. “What gives, man?! You guys all made fun of my old voice; I thought you’d like the new one!”

“Well, at least before you sounded like a real person,” Soos frowned. “Now you sound like some weird commercial dude.”

“He does, doesn’t he?” Mabel agreed with a chuckle.

“O-oh yeah? Well, I bet Stan will like my new voice,” Dipper retorted defensively as he started to head out. “Or better yet, I’ll find Steven and the Gems! I’m sure they’ll appreciate it. You’ll see! I’ll be right back after these messages!... I mean... bye.”

It didn’t take Dipper too long to find the Gems, seeing as how they were wandering about the outskirts of downtown. “Hello, Steven, Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl! How are you all on this fine afternoon?” he asked with a wide grin as he approached them, eagerly anticipating their reactions to his vocal change. All four of them stopped in their tracks as they heard him however, the equal shock on their faces clear.

“Dipper?” Steven spoke up first, his expression awash with confusion. “What happened? Why does your voice sound so-”

“ Weird?!” Amethyst cut in with a brazen laugh. “You have the voice of some creepy old dude!”

“Creepy?” Dipper repeated with a dismayed frown.

“It is a bit unsettling...” Pearl said with a bit more tact. “After all, most human males’ voices usually don’t deepen completely like that until mid to late adolescence. But in your case, Dipper, this... well, this is just...”

“Weird,” Garnet echoed Amethyst, calmly adjusting her shades.

“Not you guys too!” Dipper exclaimed. “Well, you’re just going to have to get used to it, because this new voice is here to stay!”

As if in response to this firm statement, the ground suddenly began to rumble as several strange, drill-like creatures began burrowing up from underground. “Whoa! Are these those drill guys we’re looking for?” Steven asked the Gems as he watched the quadruped monsters skitter towards them with impressive speed.

“Yes,” Garnet answered as she summoned her gauntlets.

“Finally! We’ve been searching for hours!” Pearl exclaimed. “But they only respond to noticeably rich, low-pitched sounds!”

“Which means your ‘super manly’ voice must have lured them out, Dipper!” Amethyst chuckled
teasingly as she elbowed the boy playfully.

“My voice?” Dipper asked incredulously, knowing that certainly couldn’t be the cause of the
monsters’ sudden appearance. “Don’t be ridiculous! Of course it’s not-” He abruptly cut himself
off however as the entire group of drill monsters set their sights solely on him and began to
scamper towards him, proving the purple Gem’s theory right. The boy let out a frightened cry, his
deep, masculine voice only attracting the creatures even more as he took off towards town to get
away from them.

“It’s ok, Dipper!” Steven called out encouragingly as Dipper hurried off. “If you just stop talking
forever, maybe they’ll leave you alone! Oh, wait… hm…”

Dipper wasn’t paying much attention to Steven’s flawed advice as he rushed down the sidewalk,
the crowd of drill monsters at his heels the entire time. He only managed to evade them by leaping
behind the junkyard fence, only to conveniently enough find McGucket happily dancing a jig on
top of a nearby car.

“McGucket!” Dipper exclaimed in appropriate anger. “Your invention was a catastrophe!”

“That’s probably why I live in a dump!” McGucket shrugged.

“My own sister didn’t recognize me,” Dipper began, realizing more and more that trying to tamper
with his voice had been a terrible mistake. “I scared away crowds. And now, I have a horde of
rabid, bass-loving monsters chasing me!”

“Well now, here’s your problem,” McGucket said after digging around in his makeshift lab. “I gave
you the wrong drinking majiggy. That one was for voice over professionals! I’m sure I’ve got a
better voice in here somewhere… But you came just in time! Come sundown, you’d be back to
your ridiculous old voice.”

“It was ridiculous… wasn’t it?” Dipper asked with a remorseful sigh as he pulled the tape recorder
out of his pocket. The sound of his own, old voice, even as cracking and remixed as it was,
somehow sounded good when compared to all of the trouble his new one had caused him. He
missed it even more when he finally managed to hear the message Mabel and Soos had left for him
at the end of the tape.

“This remix is dedicated to my brother, Dipper,” Mabel’s voice rung bright and cheerful as ever
over the recorder. “Your voice is one of a kind!”

“Dude, I’ve never heard anything like it,” Soos remarked. “R-r-remix over!”

Dipper couldn’t help but feel quite a bit of regret upon hearing this, realizing that, even though they
had made fun of it, his family and friends had a strange, yet sincere sense of appreciation for his
natural voice. And, despite its flaws and hitches, perhaps it was time for him to start appreciating it
too.

“Are you ready for your new voice?” McGucket asked as he offered the boy a new vial of potion.
“This one should be permanent!”

Dipper frowned as he glanced back and forth between the tonic and the tape, indecisive about the
daunting choice he now faced. Either he would go back to his old voice, or take up another new
one forever. Both sides had their advantages and disadvantages of course, but as he focused his
gaze on the tape instead of the vial, the obvious answer soon became very clear.

Mabel, Steven, and Soos all turned to Dipper expectantly as he emerged into the shack’s den later
that evening, all of them ready to hear his odd, unnatural deep voice once again. However, all three of them were admittedly surprised to hear him greet them in his natural, still-cracking, youthful voice. “Hey, guys.”

“Dipper!” Mabel and Steven exclaimed in delighted unison.

“Dude, you’re back!” Soos chimed with a grin.

“Yeah…” Dipper said with a small smile as he glanced down to the empty potion vial in his hands. “I guess I realized that even though my voice may not be perfect, it’s still mine and I wouldn’t change it for anything, not even whatever was in this new vial.”

“At least you won’t have to worry about monsters chasing the sound of your voice around anymore!” Steven laughed good-naturedly.

“So, what did you do with the rest of that potion?” Mabel inquired curiously.

“Oh, I dumped it in Stan’s coffee,” Dipper said with a slightly mischievous grin as he saw his grunkle walking into the room.

“Have any of you kids seen my girdle?” Stan asked, his voice sassy and feminine instead of gravelly and gruff like it usually was. “Where my girdle at?” Clearly the con man didn’t hear the ridiculous sound of his own voice, even as the kids all shared a good laugh over it. “What? What’s so funny? I’m Grunkle Stay-an!” he exclaimed, his humorously womanly voice quite mismatched, much to the other’s amusement. “Kids laughin’. Laughing at their grunkle.”

“Hey, everyone!” Mabel called as soon as Dipper had finished his story. “Let’s play I Spy! I’ll go first. I spy with my little eye something that is… black!”

“Ooh ooh!” Soos eagerly raised his hand. “Everything!”

“You got it!” Mabel grinned as she applauded. “Yay for Soos!”

“Yay for Soos!” the handyman cheered in unison with the young Gem.

“You guys can’t be serious,” Dipper rolled his eyes at their antics.

“Oh! I wanna go next!” Steven exclaimed. “Hey, Garnet! I spy with my little eye something… purple!”

“It’s Amethyst,” Garnet answered succinctly, nodding over to the purple Gem.

“How’d you know?!”

“Ugh… you guys, this is so booooring!” Amethyst groaned as she reclined in midair. “I thought this pit was supposed to be fun.”

“Well, if you have any other ideas to pass the time, we’d simply love to hear them,” Pearl said pointedly.

“Actually, I do,” Amethyst said with a growing smirk. “I’m gonna tell you guys the best story you’ve ever heard, mostly ‘cause it’s about me! So get ready for the awesome tale of Purple Puma and Tiger Millionaire!”
“How could you think punching a blood polyp was a good idea?!” Pearl scolded Amethyst harshly as the Crystal Gems warped back into the temple in a stream of light. The purple Gem simply rolled her eyes as she listened to the white Gem’s bitter accusations, more than used to them by now. “Just look at all of the gunk you got on Steven!”

“It’s not so bad once you get used to it,” Steven shrugged, even though his entire body, save for his face was covered in thick, pink goo.

“See?” Amethyst retorted, crossing her arms. “He likes it.”

“He certainly won’t like it when it hardens!”

“Uhh, what?”

“Well, how was I supposed to know they would pop?” Amethyst asked defensively.

“That’s not the point!” Pearl exclaimed crossly. “You’re always putting us in danger with your little outbursts! You’re just so… childish!”

“Yeah, yeah,” the purple Gem said with a wave of her hand. “And don’t forget: reckless, vulgar, and loud mouthed. And that’s just what makes me so awesome! Right, Garnet?”

The Gem leader let out a deep breath as she adjusted her shades, a serious frown on her face as she glanced down at the purple Gem. “Amethyst, you are a Crystal Gem. You need to act like one.”

Realizing that Garnet wasn’t on her side for once, Amethyst took a step back, her expression hurt and crestfallen. “Fine!” she shouted angrily, taking off into the temple without taking a single glance behind her.

“I think we really got through to her!” Pearl exclaimed with a bright grin, despite the lingering tension in the room. “Right, Garnet?”

Garnet simply let out an exasperated groan as she headed for the front door, Pearl following not too far after her. “Uh… guys?” Steven called as they walked right past him, completely forgetting about the goo he was still trapped in, which was steadily starting to harden.

By nightfall, the gunk the young Gem was encased in had completely hardened, but somehow, Steven had managed to fall asleep regardless. The sound and light of the temple doors opening quickly awakened him, however, as Amethyst emerged swiftly and silently. For some unknown reason, a dark hood and cloak covered the purple Gem, and she didn’t seem to notice Steven as she rushed past him and out into the night. Curious about where she was sneaking off to, the young Gem shuffled forward, only to end up falling over completely, shattering the goo mold and freeing him to pursue the purple Gem and get some answers.

The purple Gem had no idea she was being followed of course as she hurried down the hill and into town, a grin spreading across her face as she seamlessly shapeshifted under her cape. Her bubbling excitement grew even more as she approached the abandoned warehouse on the far end of town, the rowdy cheers of the spectators ringing out from inside.

Amethyst finally discarded her cape, revealing her new muscular form as she spotted Stan waiting
for her right outside the warehouse. “You’re late,” the con man said somewhat impatiently. “What happened?”

“Sorry,” the purple Gem shrugged. “I really didn’t wanna get caught this time. Especially since both Pearl and Garnet got after me today.”

“What else is new?” Stan scoffed. “Well, you better get on in there. We have crowds to please, opponents to fight, and money to make!”

“Whatever you say, ‘Mr. Agent’,” Amethyst laughed playfully as she and Stan headed inside the warehouse, neither of them aware of the young Gem who had happened to tag along.

“Gooooooood evenin’, ladies and gentlemen!” Mr. Smiley announced over the M.C. mic, as the crowds inside the warehouse swelled with excitement around the ring. “For those of you befuddled by the events of athleticism, you are about to see, I present the single most hated wrestler in Gravity Falls Underground’s HIS-TO-RRY: PURPLE PUMA!”

The audience erupted into a round of jeers and boos as Amethyst confidently took the center of the ring, shapeshifted into a masked, beefy, quite hairy wrestler. She let out a wild roar as she egged the angry crowds on, clearly basking in their playful disdain. Just outside of the ring, Stan stood by, already taking bets and anticipating the heavy payout he would get at the end of the match.

“And now, for his opponent! Or should I say: victim,” Mr. Smiley laughed. “The Thompsonator!”

Hesitantly, Thompson climbed into the ring, wearing a rather flimsy robot costume as he stood, trembling fearfully before the mighty Purple Puma. “I-I’m, uh, going to e-end your reign of terror!” he proclaimed, letting out a shaky shout as he ran for the disguised Gem. Amethyst simply smirked daringly as she managed to immediately knock the teen out with a simple block, winning the match in a matter of seconds.

“Well, now, that was quick!” Mr. Smiley exclaimed as the crowds booed loudly once more. “Yeah, yeah, I don’t like it either, but hey, what ya gonna do?”

Despite how harshly the audience was reacting, both Amethyst and Stan could do nothing but laugh in triumph as Purple Puma threw her defeated opponent into the crowd, pumping her fists in triumph as she smiled down at her longtime champion’s belt, loving every second of it.

“Great job in there, ‘Puma’,” Stan said with a satisfied grin, counting his thick wad of cash as him and Amethyst emerged from the warehouse after the match. “If you keep this winning streak up, I’ll have enough money to buy myself a boat! I don’t need one, but I’ve always wanted one, you know?”

Amethyst chuckled mirthfully as she shapeshifted back into her usual form, stretching as she did so. “Yeah, I can see you now,” she joked. “Captain of the S.S. Stan! Ha!”

Both of them laughed playfully, though this was soon interrupted as Steven leapt out from his nearby hiding place. “Amethyst!” he exclaimed, jumping onto the purple Gem from behind and attempting to trap her in a head lock. Startled, she flipped him over her and threw him onto the ground, though she instantly regretted doing so as soon as she saw the young Gem.

“What are you doing here?!” she exclaimed in shock.

“Yeah, kid,” Stan added sarcastically. “Isn’t it past your bed time?”

Steven ignored both of their questions as he looked up at Amethyst, stars in his eyes. “Are you a
Amethyst and Stan exchanged a tentative glance before the purple Gem answered hesitantly. “Yeaaaahhh….”

“And are you her agent?” the young Gem asked the con man.

“Of course,” Stan replied, crossing his arms.

“But how?!” Steven hopped up onto his feet, an amazed grin on his face. “But when?! But why?!”

“Sheesh, calm down,” Stan said, glancing around for any prying eyes. “This isn’t that big of a deal. It’s just a hobby the two of us happen to share. Amethyst fights, I promote her, I walk away with the money, and she walks away with… what is it again?”

“I walk away feeling good,” Amethyst said as she wrapped an arm around Steven’s shoulder. “Lemme explain something to you. In the ring, nobody can tell me what to do. And if they try, I hit ‘em in the face with a chair!”

“And people… like that?”

“Like it? They love it!” Stan exclaimed with a broad grin. “Well… they actually hate it, but that’s part of the fun!”

“And everyone here gets that,” Amethyst said as her smile began to fade. “You don’t know what it’s like having Pearl and Garnet on your back all the time!”

“Are you kidding me?!” Steven asked, quickly throwing his voice to impersonate Pearl. “‘Oh, Steven, I told you before not to take peanut butter on missions!’” He switched to a deeper tone a moment later, mimicking Garnet this time. “‘I’m not going to say anything, but I expect you to understand that was wrong.’”

“Huh, you got those two prudes pegged!” Stan said with an impressed laugh.

“Will you guys please let me be a secret wrestler too!?” Steven begged. “I’m so stifled!”

Amethyst and Stan pondered this request for a moment, both of them giving the young Gem a look of scrutiny before the con man spoke up. “Well… we still need to nab that tag team belt… Otherwise, I’d say no. But I guess it wouldn’t hurt to give the Purple Puma brand a little more… childlike whimsy. It appeals to the kids.”

“But you have to promise not to tell Pearl or Garnet!” Amethyst urged desperately. “Got it?”

Steven grinned widely, bouncing on the balls of his feet with excitement as he gave them both high fives to join their team. “Deal!”

The next night, Purple Puma arrived at the warehouse to greet her agent with her new partner, who was more than elated to simply be there. Steven had quickly put a costume together, slicking his hair back, donning suspenders and a whisker mask, and preparing a business suitcase as a prop.

“Presenting: Tiger Millionaire!” Steven proclaimed to Stan and Amethyst as they stood outside of the ring before the match. “Rich feline industrialist from Jungle Island, once the single child of the wealthy Tiger family, he clawed out his own destiny making money in the coconut mines!”

“That’s a pretty solid backstory, kid,” Stan nodded, quite impressed. “I think we can work with
“Thanks!” Steven grinned. “What’s Purple Puma’s backstory?”

“Pumas are cool,” Amethyst said simply. Soon enough, the bell rang, signifying that the match was about to begin. “Come on!” the purple Gem grabbed her new partner’s arm and hurried for the ring. “We have a fight to win!”

“Two local heroes in the ring tonight!” Mr. Smiley began to announce as the challengers stepped into the ring. “They build hospitals for the sick and they build muscles that look slick! Give it up for Concrete Heat and Chunk Truck! Facing off against Purple Puma and our newest, newest competitor: Tiger Millionaire!”

Of course, the crowd booed and hissed Purple Puma and Tiger Millionaire both, but Steven hardly cared as he prepared to enter the ring alongside Amethyst. “Whoa there, Tiger,” the purple Gem laughed, blocking him with her muscular arm. “I’m just using you to get the tag team belt. I’ll do all the actual fighting.”

“Do I still get to wear the costume?”

“I don’t care!”

“Okay!” the young Gem smiled as he gave his partner a thumbs up. With a fierce roar, Purple Puma leapt into action, charging at Chuck Truck and easily knocking him down. Steven cheered her on from the sidelines, though he let out a startled gasp as he noticed Concrete Heat approaching her from behind. “Ame—I mean, Purple Puma! Look out!” He was a moment too late, however, as the construction wrestler managed to trap Puma by shoving a traffic cone over her head, blocking her vision.

“Oh! What a gross misusage of safety equipment and your tax dollars, folks!” Mr. Smiley commentated.

“That’s not fair!” Steven exclaimed, clutching the rope around the ring tightly.

“It may not seem fair, but hey, anything goes in wrestling!”

“It does?!” the young Gem asked, eyes widening as an idea came to him.

“Oh YES it does!”

“Then it looks like this tiger’s gotta turn cheetah!” Steven said with determination, leaping into the ring.

“Hey, kid!” Stan called from the sidelines upon seeing the young Gem throw himself into the fight. “What are you doing?!”

“I’m making an offer they won’t be able to refuse!” Steven called back, holding his suitcase in front of him. “Hey Chuck Truck! I’ll give you a million jungle bucks to throw the match!”

“Wha-? Is that… a bribe?!” the conman exclaimed in disbelief that soon turned to pride. “Wow! I didn’t know he had it in him!”

Fortunately, Chuck Truck easily fell for Tiger Millionaire’s scheme as he rushed forward towards the suitcase. “Why, we could fill a thousand potholes with—” He was abruptly cut off as the lid of Tiger’s suitcase flew up, decked the wrestler in the face and knocking him back several feet.
“Yeah!” Stan cheered excitedly. “Nice one, kid!”

Purple Puma was quick to leap back into the fight, freeing herself from the traffic cone and taking advantage of the confusion to knock both of her opponents out in one fell swing, easily winning the match. As the audience booed in disappointment, Steven happily joined Amethyst in the ring so the two of them could celebrate their victory together. “Way to go, Tiger!” the purple Gem grinned down at her partner, both of them reveling in the adrenaline and excitement of the moment.

As it turned out, Purple Puma and Tiger Millionaire made an unstoppable duo. As they clawed their way towards the championship, their strategy in the ring was like clockwork: Steven would provide distractions and tricks against their opponents, Amethyst provided the muscle to take them out, and Stan would provide advertising and merchandise and benefited from it all the while. Together, all three of them were ruthless in both the ring and with the bets, and there wasn’t a sign of their momentum slowing down in sight.

The only caveat was keeping the whole thing hidden from Pearl and Garnet. There had been a few close calls; Pearl spotting a stray jungle buck on the floor here or Garnet coming across a discarded whisker there. But for the most part, Steven and Amethyst had managed to keep their moonlight wrestling a well-guarded secret. That is, until the night of the championship match.

“Ladies and gentlemen, fans of wrestling, welcome to the tag team championship!” Mr. Smiley proclaimed as the pumped crowd went wild. “In the ring tonight: they stomped their way through the tournament and into our hearts! Give it up, ya’ll for Dashing Danny Doober and Handsome Hank Hackleschmidt! Only one thing would make these men look better folks: the tag team belt! But standing in their way are kings of the jungle; they’ll eat your kids and fire your parents! Oh, yes! It can only be: Purple Puma and Tiger Millionaire!”

The crowd practically screamed their hatred at Puma and Tiger, nearly all of the spectators wanting to see the despised duo lose. The only ones in the audience who weren’t jeering were Dipper, Mabel, and Soos, though that was largely because they had just arrived.

“Why are we here again?” Dipper asked, having to nearly shout to be heard over the crowds.

“Because this poster I found near the Mystery Shack said that this is supposed to be the ‘rumble of the ages!’” Soos exclaimed, holding up said poster.

“We couldn’t possibly miss out on the rumble of the ages!” Mabel cheered, caught up in the excitement as she stood up on her chair. “Fight! Fight! Fight!”

“Wait a second…” Dipper frowned as he glanced up towards the ring. “Is that… Steven and Amethyst up there?”

“Whaaaa?” Mabel asked, squinting to get a better look. “Nah, don’t be silly! That’s Tiger Millionaire and Purple Puma! Duh!”

Clearly not convinced, Dipper merely rolled his eyes as he leaned back in his chair. “Whatever you say, Mabel.”

The match was about to begin as the two teams took to the ring, however, before the bell could go off, a sudden interruption halted everything. The warehouse floodlights abruptly turned on as two figures jumped into the ring from above, absolutely shocking Steven and Amethyst as the saw the two very upset Gems before them.

“Pearl?! Garnet?!” the young Gem exclaimed, completely aghast.
“What are you doing here?!” Amethyst demanded, ignoring the gasps of the crowd.

“Whoa!” Mabel whispered down in the audience. “I didn’t know Garnet and Pearl were wrestlers!”

“I highly doubt they are…” Dipper noted, though he had to admit things had just gotten a bit more interesting.

“What are we doing?! What are YOU doing?!” Pearl asked harshly, holding up a flyer for the match.

“I-I thought we could use some promotion!” Steven said defensively as Amethyst shot a glare his way.

“Looks like we have some new opponents!” Mr. Smiley declared over the mic.

“No you don’t!” Pearl protested firmly. “This match is cancelled!”

“Hey!” Stan exclaimed as he angrily strode into the ring himself. “You can’t just come in here and end the match like you own the place! What about my profits?!”

“Grunkle Stan?” Dipper and Mabel asked in confused unison, wondering what their uncle could be doing in a place like this.

“So this is where he sneaks off to at night!” Soos exclaimed in realization.

“Oh, I should have known you were involved in this!” Pearl growled incredulously, glaring at the conman before turning to Steven and Amethyst. “And you two! I can’t believe you’ve been sneaking off to this… this circus of violence!”

“It’s not enough that you’re always on my case all the time,” Amethyst began, growing steadily more enraged by the moment as her hands curled into fists. “Now you have to ruin this for me too?!)

“Steven, Amethyst,” Garnet said, her tone dead serious as the two of them looked to her fearfully. “Go back to the temple. Now.”

“I don’t wanna!” Amethyst shouted, shoving the Gem leader without thinking. The entire crowd let out a shocked gasp at this, especially as Garnet summoned her gauntlets for a fight.

“Don’t do this,” she warned as her and Amethyst began to circle each other tensely. However, before an altercation could take place, Steven quickly jumped in between them.

“Guys! Stop!” the young Gem exclaimed, worried tears in his eyes as he looked between his guardians. He paused for a moment, reaching for the mic at his feet and taking in a deep breath before addressing the crowd. “I want to tell you Purple Puma’s backstory. He was the wildest cat in the jungle, so wild, the other cats couldn’t take it. So she—I mean he—went to look for somewhere he fit in, somewhere with other people who were misunderstood.”

“Yeah, I’m calling it,” Dipper said from his seat. “That is definitely Steven.” Of course, Mabel and Soos were quick to shush him, both of them emotionally caught up in Tiger Millionaire’s inspiring speech.

“That’s why we’re all here. To be wild and free, and body slam each other, and wear cool costumes, and make up nicknames, and… uh…” the young Gem stopped as he glanced towards Garnet with pleading eyes. “So can’t we just have this? Can’t we just wrestle?”
The Gem leader took the mic as she looked over the silent crowd, before giving a succinct answer. “No,” she said simply, though she continued after hearing the audience’s stunned gasp. “Because we are the… Notorious O-order of… Wrestling… Haters!”

“T-That’s right!” Pearl exclaimed, following along. “Um… we want to stop all wrestling everywhere! Are you going to let us destroy all wrestling?!?”

“You guys gotta save wrestling!” Soos shouted from the audience.


The crowd soon followed along in this supportive cheer as a fake fight ensued between Steven and Amethyst and Pearl and Garnet. No real blows were exchanged, but the latter two easily let Tiger and Puma “defeat them”, much to the audience’s excitement.

“What a stunning turn-around!” Mr. Smiley exclaimed. “The jungle duo are fighting back!”

“Yes!” Stan exclaimed with a wide grin as he watched the staged battle. “My money is saved! I’m gonna be rich!”

“They’ve taken down Captain Square!” Mr. Smiley announced as Garnet fell. “But wait! The good looking gang is back with a ladder! Are they planning on stealing the belt? No! Oh, they’re actually helping Tiger up!”

As Steven scaled the ladder to claim the champion belt, Amethyst knelt down beside Garnet, glancing away from the Gem leader with a guilty expression. “Sorry for… uh… sorry.”

“Same here,” Garnet said with solidarity, the conflict between the Gems finally sorted out.

“Tiger Millionaire has claimed the tag team belt!” Mr. Smiley announced as Steven held the belt up over his head triumphantly. “Tiger and Puma have won the championship! And saved wrestling!”

“What just happened?” Dipper asked as the crowd erupted into deafening applause, rather lost after the confusing match that had just unfolded.

“Tiger and Puma won, dude!” Soos cheered. “They’re the best duo wrestling’s ever seen!”

“They sure are!” Mabel agreed heartily. “I wonder who those two really are under those masks? Oh well; I guess we’ll never know!”

“I’ll admit, that was a pretty good story, Amethyst,” Stan complimented in his usual blunt way. “Better than Dipper’s anyway.”

“Hey!” Dipper exclaimed in protest.

“Oh, you only liked it because you made money in it,” Pearl deadpanned, crossing her arms.

“We sure have been falling for a long time, you guys,” Steven noted as he glanced down into the unending darkness below them.

“Oh no!” Soos exclaimed in horror. “What if we really are stuck in here forever!? We’ll have to spend the rest of our lives telling stories! I don’t think I have than many stories in me, dudes!”
“Aw, come on, guys,” Mabel reassured. “Your nerves are just getting to you! How about we pass the time by spinning? Everyone spin!”

“You got it!” Amethyst laughed, spinning freely in midair. “Come on, Garnet!”

The Gem leader easily complied, gracefully twirling about in the air, even as Pearl let out a tired sigh. Steven was more than happy to comply as well, but Dipper was a bit more stubborn, considering their situation. “Mabel…” he groaned in exasperation with his sister’s antics, though she was quick to spin him around in retaliation.

“Yay!” the girl exclaimed cheerfully as her brother let out a surprised shout, especially as she turned him sideways and began lightly jogging on top of him.

“Ow! Mabel!” Dipper exclaimed as his sister simply chuckled in amusement, Soos, Steven, and Amethyst joining in.

“Dipper’s pain is funny, but I’m starting to get bored,” Stan remarked once the merriment was over. “Soos, tell a story.”

“Really? Ok!” the handyman said with an eager grin. “This story is called ‘Soos’ Really Great Pinball Story’. Is that a good title? Does they have to be a puns or whatever?”

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Soos’ Really Great Pinball Story (Is That A Good Title? Do They Have To Be Puns Or Whatever?)

While the Mystery Shack’s storage room was mostly full of dust, it was home to one thing of note: a western-themed pinball machine, one that surprisingly still managed to function despite its apparent age. Dipper, Mabel, and Steven all cheered Soos on as he engaged in a game, on that had been going on for quite a while as the ball spun about the machine board.

“This is it, dudes,” Soos said with determination, pressing the paddles fervently. “After four long years of trying, I might finally get the high score on Stan’s creepy old pinball machine. If I do this, I’ll go down in pinball history, with the likes of Sal, Gaff, and of course, Poo.”

“You got this, Soos!” Steven encouraged. “No one plays pinball as good as you!”

“Yeah!” Mabel agreed. “You’re the pinball master!”

“Thanks, dudes,” Soos smiled, still focusing on the game. “I’m gonna need all the help I can get if I wanna win this!”

“Have you ever tried tilting the machine?” Dipper asked.

“I don’t know, dudes… Isn’t breaking the rules, like, breaking the rules?”

“Nuts to the rules!” Mabel declared as her, Dipper, and Steven gathered around the machine, each taking a side. “Tilt! Tilt! Tilt!”

The three of them did so as Soos zealously played, the boys joining in on Mabel’s chant as the ball bounced around the machine, racking up points. Of course, none of them heeded the machine’s verbal warning against tilting as they guided the ball towards the goal. With one final, heavy tilt, the ball managed to land in the coveted spot, the machine blaring with the lights and sounds of victory.
“Bulls-eye! New high score!”

The kids cheered in excitement as Soos happily entered his name into the scoreboard. “This is easily the best moment of my life! Totally beats that time I found a piece of pizza in the VHS player!”

“That ain’t right,” the pinball machine growled in a western drawl. “You cheated.”


“Oh, guys?” Dipper frowned as he noticed a strange electrical current begin to flow around the flashing game. “There’s an awful lot of green lightning coming out of that machine…”

“Nah, that’s the usual amount of green lightning,” Soos reassured.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Steven said with a casual shrug. No more than a second later, however, the lightning surrounding the machine lashed out and abruptly struck all four of them without warning. When they opened their eyes, the group found themselves in a world far different from the dusty storage room they had been in. All around them, dazzling lights flashed, loud buzzers blared and huge bumpers and paddles flicked. They were all quick to realize that they were, interestingly enough, all clad in western-themed clothing for some unknown reason.

“Whoa…” Steven looked around, stars of wonder in his eyes. “Where are we?”

“I think we’re inside the pinball game!” Dipper exclaimed upon looking up to see the machine’s backboard looming over their heads. “This is incredible!”

“Sweet Moses!” Mabel gasped with an excited grin.

“Awesome!” Steven smiled widely.

“Hushed exclamation of wonder!” Soos exclaimed in astonishment. “Dudes, if this is a dream, then I never wanna wake up!”

“That can be arranged…” the voice of the machine spoke up from the skull at the center of the game boards. “Welcome to Tumbleweed Terror, partners.”

“Hey, it’s the cowboy skeleton guy!” Soos said with a smile. “Did you zap me into your game to congratulate me on getting the new high score. I beat Poo, dude!”

“Pardon, and if’n I do recall, I did warn ya’ll not to cheat,” the skull said rather crossly.

“Oh, we’re sorry about that Mr. Skull Man,” Steven said with sincerity. “You’re not too mad, are you?”

“I reckon I am! I tried bein’ gentleman-like, but I’m plum sick of bein’ tilted. So now… I’m gonna tilt YOU!”

The machines warm lights quickly turned an ominous red as several pinballs began to roll along the tracks and onto the board. “Oh yeah? Well, take this!” Soos challenged, punching a nearby bumper only for it to repel the blow and accidentally hit himself in the eye. “Ow! And this!” He tried again, only to get the same results. “Oh! This hurts! I wish it was working better!”

The machine laughed maliciously as it began its first attack on its hapless victims, sending several
oversized metal balls at them at once. “Get yourselves ready for the... Multi-Ball!”

All four of them let out cries of fear as they made a break for it, the balls beginning to blitz about the board wildly. To avoid getting crushed, they took refuge behind one of the staged walls, hiding just out of the skull’s line of sight.

“Where are you?!” the machine demanded. “I ain’t finished teaching you a lesson about cheating yet!”

“Oh man…” Steven frowned as he peeked out from behind the wall. “What are we gonna do, guys? We can’t hide back here forever!”

“What we need to do is come up with a plan,” Dipper said with resolve.

“I’m trying, but it’s hard with that gorgeous pinball wench distracting me,” Soos nodded towards the nearby cutout of a can-can dancer, sending a flirtatious wave her way. “Okay. Don’t worry, guys; I know every inch of this machine. There’s a manual power switch inside. I can sneak in there and turn off the game, but we’ll have to distract the cowboy guy. Are any of you good at jumping up and down and making annoying noises?”

Steven and Mabel exchanged confident grins upon hearing this. “Mabel, are you thinking what I’m thinking?” the young Gem asked the girl with a knowing smirk.

“I sure am,” Mabel nodded, standing firm and ready for action as a directionless wind blew through her hair. “Steven, our time has come.”

“Alright, let’s go,” Dipper nodded as they began to file out from behind the wall before noticing they were one short. “Soos?”

“So…” the handyman began, leaning causally against the pinball wench. “Are you, like, doin’ anything later?” His flirting was put to an abrupt stop, however, as Dipper reminded him that his crush was a mere cardboard cutout by flipping her around. “Oh... right…”

“Come on out and show yourselves, varmints,” the skull said, swiveling around as it searched for its victims. As if on cue, the kids hopped up onto the three bumpers in front of it, hopping up and down as they made an effort to make as much noise as they could.

“Hey! Hey! Hey!” Mabel shouted, dancing wildly on top of her bumper. “Look at me and listen to what I’m doing!”

“Pay no attention to the man heading for the power switch!” Steven called, flailing about himself as Soos snuck around behind the bumpers, just out of the skull’s view.

“Something ain’t right here…” the machine mused curiously. “Let me see where this is goin’.”

Taking advantage of the distraction the kids were providing for him, Soos climbed into one of the small mine cars that led down into the machine’s interior. Despite all of the old, rather complex wiring, he easily located the power switch, though he stopped short as he noticed the disclaimer right above it.

“Hey, Soos!” Dipper called down to the handyman as discreetly as he could while Steven and Mabel continued to distract the machine. “What’s going on? Just press the switch already!”

“Okay, so I was gonna do that…” Soos began, awkwardly scratching the back of his neck. “But I’ve been thinking. According to this sign, turning off the power will erase the scores permanently.
That high score is like, my one big life accomplishment!"

“What?!” Dipper asked in disbelief. “Soos, if you don’t hurry up, we’ll all die in here!”

“Fair point. But what is life anyway, when compared to immortality of a high score?”

“Soos! Are you out of your-”

“There ya’ll are,” the machine cut in, having torn itself away from watching Mabel and Steven to locate Dipper. “Get ready to meet your maker, kids. My maker is Ballway Games in Redmond, Washington.” Without wasting another moment, the skull began heavily inhaling with a force so strong that it began sucking the kids in towards it. Fortunately, Dipper, Mabel, and Steven all managed to cling onto the nearest bumper, but they wouldn’t be able to hold on forever as the machine grew more adamant.

“Soos, help!” Steven called fearfully.

“Please!” Mabel cried, especially as her fingers began to slip.

“Turn it off!” Dipper shouted as the machine began to inhale harder.

“Uh…” Soos hesitated, quite conflicted. He knew well that his coveted high score was on the line, but was it really worth sacrificing his friends for? Especially when he hadn’t really gotten that high score on his own? Despite how much it was worth to him, the handyman knew, in the heat of the moment, what he had to do. Even if he really didn’t want to. “Goodbye, high score,” he sighed in defeat as he threw his weight against the large button, instantly shutting the machine off. In an instant, Soos, Dipper, Mabel, and Steven all found themselves awakening back in the storage room, outside of the game and back in their usual clothes. “Whoa! You dudes okay?” Soos asked with concern for the kids as they all sat together on the floor.

“Yeah! You did it!” Mabel cheered. “You saved us!”

“You’re a total hero, Soos!” Steven readily agreed with a beaming grin.

“Sorry you had to lose your high score though,” Dipper said with a frown.

“Eh, it’s ok,” Soos shrugged contentedly. “I’ve got a new life accomplishment now: saving you dudes!”

“Aw…” the kids gushed in unison, all of them happily dogpiling the handyman into a hug.

Indeed, all of them were quite happy to be free from the pinball machine and out of harm’s way. Yet even despite their celebration, one final question was still plaguing Soos. “You think that pinball wench will call me?”

“Sooooo… Amethyst began, causally leaning back as she floated in midair. “Who wants to start making guesses about how long we’ll be stuck in here?”

“I’m in,” Stan said, crossing his arms. “But only if there’s money involved.”

“We’ve already been falling for a few hours by now,” Steven guessed. “So we’ve gotta reach the end eventually, right?”
“Unless there’s nothing at the end…” Dipper said a bit crossly, still none too happy about their current plight.

“I sincerely hope we aren’t stuck falling forever,” Pearl said bitterly. “Especially since Gems have much longer lifespans than humans. Plus, even though we don’t need to eat, you humans do, which means you all will only be able to last in here a few days at the most.”

“Gee, thanks for cheering us all up, Pearl,” Stan remarked sarcastically, rolling his eyes.

“Maybe instead of stating the hard facts, you could try your hand at telling a story, Pearl,” Mabel suggested with an encouraging grin.

“Yeah!” Steven agreed. “I bet you have a bunch of good ones!”

“Well… while I don’t really understand the human custom of exchanging verbal stories for entertainment’s sake, I suppose I could spin a yarn of my own…” Pearl mused thoughtfully. “Oh, I know! I’ll tell you all of the epic, grand, heart wrenching saga of the Battle of the Bleeding Moon!”

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**Battle of the Bleeding Moon**

The once-pristine fields had been tarnished by carnage, flames, and discarded, broken Gem shards. The agonized cries of the fallen still echoed over the area as a smoky haze fell over the rugged earth, the few survivors of the battle clutching their wounds as they regrouped.

War-torn, yet still impossibly beautiful, the courageous Rose Quartz stood unshaken as she rounded up the last few of her devoted followers. After the torrent of violence they had just faced, they were few in number, and most of them were heavily injured to the point of retreat, save for two: the sturdy, steadfast, warrior Garnet, and the intelligent, intrepid strategist Pearl.

Rose said nothing to her two disciples as she regarded them with a simple nod, words not able to convey the horrors they had just seen. The battlefield before them seemed all the more eerie as it was bathed in a deep crimson, courtesy of the rare red moon resting in the starless sky. A “blood moon” as the humans called it.

In light of their triumph, it seemed as though the arduous skirmish had at last concluded, allowing the trio a moment’s rest. However, this much-needed reprieve was soon taken from them as the ground began to steadily rumble under them. In the lofty glow of the luminous orb of the night, a shadow emerged, large and fearsome. From the wreckage, it sulked towards the group on four legs, a husky body lumbering forward as it barred its porcelain white teeth in a low, feral growl.

“Careful,” Rose solemnly advised Garnet and Pearl as they summoned their weapons. “It’s corrupted.”

The other two Gems simply nodded as they bravely charged, tag-teaming against the treacherous beast simultaneously. With a courageous shout, Garnet swung a gauntleted fist at the monster’s jaw, but the creature was quick. As the Gem’s punch barreled towards it, the monster managed to ensnare her fist in its maw with an enraged roar, clamping down with its iron grip even as Garnet tried to pry herself away. On instinct, Pearl leapt into action to aid her teammate, slashing her sword across its bare back. Of course, the creature retaliated in a blind rage of pain, thrashing around as it tossed Garnet aside and set its ravenous sights on Pearl. The white Gem returned its dark glare firmly, her blade gripped tightly in her hand as she faced off against the menacing beast.
The shadowy creature let out another roar, the dim light of the blood moon reflecting in its opaque eyes. Yet despite this frightening display, Pearl was undaunted. The white Gem gracefully spun forward, her blade blazing as she stabbed at the monster. Her sword danced a sort of skill and agility that had only been achieved after countless years of practice and training, and because of those things, Pearl did not falter. It was only as the monster changed its strategy that the white Gem was caught off guard.

Seeing that it was making no progress with its current opponent, the beast spun around, using its thick, heavy tail to knock the white Gem off her feet without any warning. Pinned down by the creature’s surprising strength, Pearl could only watch with growing horror as the monster turned to face the only Gem left standing on the battlefield: Rose Quartz herself.

As always, Rose faced her foe with a level head and hardened resolve. Her durable shield materialized over her outstretched forearm as she stepped forward, her torn white gown dragging on the soiled ground beneath her. Sensing the power radiating from the Gem before it, the monster lurched forward, its fangs poised as it hissed hungrily as it prepared to strike.

“Rose!” Pearl screamed as she scrambled to her feet. However, as she watched the monster leap high into the air, its shadow encompassing the crimson moon above, a painful realization struck her. He creature was going in for a fatal attack, and even if she hurried, she would be far too late to rescue her beloved liege.

Time seemed to come to a grinding halt as the white Gem stood frozen, fearful tears brimming in her eyes as she watched the next few seconds unfold on baited breath. Despite the monster’s impending direct assault, Rose still stood ready to meet it squarely. The pink Gem’s mellifluous voice rose in a courageous, admittedly intimidating shout, a blinding, blush glow radiating from her gem as the creature bore down on her. And, with one strong, unflinching wave of her hand, Rose Quartz boldly met the monster’s attack and——

“Pearl,” Garnet quickly interrupted the white Gem’s dramatic retelling, much to everyone’s confusion. “Maybe you should save that story for another time.”

“Huh? But why?” Mabel asked with a dismayed frown. “It was getting good!”

“Yeah, I was like, totally gripped by it,” Soos agreed with a nod.

“Hm… You might have a point, Garnet,” Pearl considered. “After all, the Battle of the Blood Moon was a rather violent escapade… It might be a bit too much for the kids to handle.”

“What? No way!” Dipper protested, equally as engaged. “We can handle it!”

“Yeah! I wanna know how Mom stopped that monster!” Steven urged.

“Wait… Isn’t this the story about that one time Rose-” Amethyst began, before Garnet succinctly cut her off.

“Yes. And let’s just say, it wasn’t pretty.”

“Leave it to Pearl to tell a story that’s rated R,” Stan deadpanned as the kids all groaned in disappointment at the unfinished tale. “And what was with all that fancy jargon you were using? ‘Luminous?’ ‘Mellifluous’? Are those even real words?”
The white Gem shot a pointed glare the conman’s way before crossing her arms. “I was trying to deliver the tale as eloquently as I could. I figured using some of the finer points of the English vocabulary would spice it up a bit.”

“I’m sorry you weren’t able to finish your story, Pearl,” Steven said with a sympathetic frown. “But maybe we should go for something a little… lighter this time. Garnet, do you have any good stories?”

“I don’t tell stories,” Garnet replied shortly.

“Well… maybe I could help you come up with one!” the young Gem offered with a bright smile. “We’ll call it… Garnet’s Universe!”

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**Garnet’s Universe**

A burst of radiant light spread out on the warp pad, disrupting the usual calm of the peaceful forest. The magical glow faded to reveal a lone figure standing upon the pad, the strong, brave leader of the Crystal Gems themselves: Garnet.

With a magnificent flip, Garnet leapt off the warp, casually readjusting her cubical hair as she landed. She wasted not a moment on getting started on her search for the special Gem artifact she had come for, knowing that it was a treasure of great importance. Yet, as watchful as she was, the Gem leader stopped in her tracks the moment she sensed a mysterious shadow sweeping through the trees above.

“You!” she shouted to the unknown figure. “Reveal yourself!”

The shadow did as they were told, dropping down from the tree line as their blade met with Garnet’s gauntlets squarely. “Hopper the morning to you, Garnet!” the small, cheerful frog greeted with a smile as she leapt down, sheathing her katana. “Nothing like some morning training to get the blood pumping, am I right?”

“Hopper,” Garnet nodded. “Nice to see you too.”

“By the way, have you seen Hoppy?” Hopper asked curiously, glancing around. “She was hoppin’ excited to train with us!”

No sooner had the frog mentioned Hoppy, then the rabbit warrior herself jumped from the trees, launching herself at Garnet with a courageous battle cry. Of course, the Gem leader easily caught Hoppy by her sword, flashing a confident grin. “Garnet.”

“Hoppy,” the Gem leader greeted.

“Wow, Garnet!” Hopper exclaimed, reading her handheld power monitor as Hoppy landed on the ground beside her. “I can tell you’ve been training. Your power levels are hoppin’ high!”

“Yes Hopper, but they could always be higher,” Hoppy said, always the more serious of the two. “We should train more. I nearly had the jump on you that time.”

Before the Gem leader could respond, their meeting was suddenly interrupted as two more animals rushed through the clearing: an energy-filled squirrel and a disgruntled bluebird. “Chatter, slow down!” the female bird tweeted in exasperation. “I can’t keep up!”
“Well, maybe you should flap those wings of yours a little faster, Chirpy!” Chatter teased, before noticing the Gem leader’s presence. “Oh, hiya, Garnet! Long time no see!”

“Well, maybe you should flap those wings of yours a little faster, Chirpy!” Chatter teased, before noticing the Gem leader’s presence. “Oh, hiya, Garnet! Long time no see!”

“Hello, Chatter,” Garnet greeted the male squirrel, not minding as Chirpy perched atop her afro. “You too, Chirpy.”

“So, are you here on a super important mission, Garnet?” Chirpy asked with immense curiosity.

“I am,” Garnet nodded. “There’s a special Gem artifact to recover around here.”

“I wonder what it is this time,” Hopper said zealously. “Maybe a magic power amulet, or a flying power carpet, or maybe an enchanted power onion!”

“Whatever it is, we should hurry. There’s somebody at home that I need to get back to,” Garnet said, pulling out a treasured photo of her and Steven that she always kept on hand. The Gem leader’s animal companions all gathered around the picture to get a better look.

“Who’s that?” Chatter inquired.

“My most favorite person in the world,” Garnet replied with a fond smile.

“Have you ever told him that?” Hoppy asked.

“No…”

“Why not?” Chirpy peeped up.

“Because…” Garnet clenched her fist. “I’m not… strong enough…”

“Will we get to meet him soon?” Hopper asked, hopeful.

“Not yet,” Garnet said, putting the picture away. “He’s not ready to learn I have secret animal friends.”

No sooner had this conversation ended than someone fell through the trees, landing on the ground before the group with a thud. He was an odd-looking man, clad in simple clothes with his hair formed into the shape of a ring atop his head as he lay on the ground, seemingly unconscious.

“Oh my!” Chirpy exclaimed, flittering just above the man’s prone form. “Who is this?”

“Whoever he is, his power levels are hoppin’ pretty low!” Hopper reported after glancing at her power monitor.

“I can revive him,” Garnet said calmly, picking the man up by his shirt before. The Gem leader grabbed a water bottle from her hair and took a swing, before backhanding the unconscious man in an attempt to rouse him. Fortunately it worked, as he let out a gasp of awakening as Garnet dropped him to the ground.

“Ha ha!” the man laughed in relief as he slowly rose to stand. “Thank you for saving me!”

“Tell us your name, stranger.”

“My name is Ringo,” the man introduced himself cheerfully. “I am but a humble caretaker of the shrine atop yonder mountain. But I need help! An innocent Bearman wanted to see the shrine. Such a sweet, sweet Bearman. Naturally, I obliged. Inside the shrine rested the Sacred Magic Gem of Ultimate Power! But it was then that the Bearman conned me! He stole the gem and used its power
to banish me from my own shrine! Ever since then, I’ve been searching for someone strong enough to help me, and it seems as though my search is at last over!"

“Aw… that’s such a sad story!” Chatter exclaimed with a sympathetic frown.

Garnet simply nodded in agreement upon hearing this tale of woe and trouble, a sense of justice and resolve filling her. “That gem must be contained. No one should have that much power.”

“Oh, you can have the gem,” Ringo said with a wave of his hand. “I just want my precious shrine back.”

“We’ll get it back for you.” Garnet assured as Hoppy, Hopper, Chatter, and Chirpy all cheered their support. Ringo leapt for joy as he began to lead the way towards the shrine, though the Gem leader lingered behind for a moment as she took out her precious photo of her and the young Gem once more. “Don’t worry, Steven. I’ll be home soon.”

The trek to the shrine was a relatively short one, and even as the motley crew approached it, they could see the large, imposing Bearman Ringo had spoken of towering high as he sat guard at the gate. “Oh my Chirp!” Chirpy exclaimed, beating her wings together nervously. “He looks really scary!”

“And mean!” Chatter added.

“And his power is off the charts!” Hopper announced as the power monitor flashed red.

“Be careful, Garnet,” Hoppy warned. “Don’t hop off more than you can chew.”

The Gem leader nodded as she stepped forward towards the Bearman, who had not even noticed her arrival yet as counted through a stack of cash. “Bearman! Give us the gem!” she demanded firmly, showing no fear at all.

“Huh?” the Bearman glanced up with a look of confusion that quickly turned to anger as he spotted Ringo amongst the group. “You again? Oh, I see what this is…” The Bareman scowled as he stood, punching his large fists together as a show of his strength. “Well, I hate to break it to you, but if you want the gem, you’ll have to defeat me first!”

“So be it,” Garnet said bravely as her gauntlets formed around her fists. With a determined shout, she leapt into action, ready to strike. The Bearman was indeed strong, however, as he met her punch squarely, pushing steadily against the Gem leader’s gauntlet. Garnet let out a gasp as her strength suddenly broke, and the Bearman took advantage of the moment to give her a solid left hook. The others gasped in surprise as Garnet barreled into them, all of them crying out in fear as they fell off the mountain and landed on the branches of a tree that caught them all.

“I was right!” Chatter piped up. “He was mean!”

“See?” Ringo said pointedly. “I told you he was strong!”

“Then we’ll just have to get stronger,” Garnet said with resolve, turning to Hoppy.

“Training time!” the rabbit exclaimed excitedly, stars in her eyes.

The group took their training to the serenity of the nearby waterfall, taking time to meditate beforehand. Garnet, Hoppy, and Hopper all sat under the falls, with Chatter and Chirpy perched not too far away, while Ringo showered and hummed obliviously to himself. As soon as she had properly prepared, the Gem leader rose to stand, summoning her gauntlets as she took in a deep
Garnet could feel her power flowing through her as she made her gauntlets expand and grow to twice her size.

“Weighted gauntlets…” the animals all whispered in awe, even as Garnet stumbled back, trying to support their hefty girth. Clearly, the Gem leader was struggling to uphold her own gauntlets, even as she threw her first punch with a strained shout.

“She just gained ten power from that one punch!” Hopper shouted, her eyes wide as she gaped at her power monitor.

“But she needs more than that to defeat that Bearman!” Chirpy exclaimed with concern.

“Don’t worry! This is Garnet we’re talking about here!” Chatter reassured. “She’s as powerful as they come!”

Garnet hardly heard any of this however as she trembled under the weight of her gauntlets, letting out a groan as she began to falter. Unable to support them any longer, the Gem leader let her gauntlets slam into the water with a huge splash, sweat beading on her forehead as she tried to catch her breath.

“Come on, Garnet! You can do this!” Hoppy encouraged. “You just gotta remember what you’re fighting for!”

As Garnet heard this, the image of her and Steven appeared in her mind for a brief moment. They stood together, smiling, happy, and peaceful. But as much as the Gem leader treasured all the time she had with Steven, she knew that the only way she could return to him was to defeat the Bearman and claim the lost gem. And the only way she could do that was to grow stronger.

With a fierce shout, Garnet forced her fists up once more, punching the air with a great amount of force. Yet she didn’t stop there. Instead, the steadfast Gem leader kept going, throwing punch after punch as they grew faster and heavier with each blow.

“7000. 8000! 10,000!” Hopper read as her power meter kept rising higher and higher until it finally broke from the pressure. “Numbers have no meaning!” But all the same, Garnet kept pulling punch after punch, until she performed a magnificent leap into the air, completely knocking off the top of a nearby hill with a single blow.

The Gem leader landed squarely back down on the forest floor, standing confident and undaunted before her amazed companions. “I’m ready.”

Determination filled the entire group as they made haste back to the mountain shrine, ready to square off against the Bearman in a fair fight this time. Upon noticing their arrival, the Bearman was clearly less than pleased.

“Back again, eh?” he asked challengingly. “Looks like you’re hungry for another delicious beating.”

“Actually, that last one spoiled my appetite,” Garnet retorted sharply.

“Ohhhh!” the others all gasped at this clever dig.

“How dare you insult my cooking skills!” the Bearman growled angrily, already sending a punch the Gem leader’s way. This time, however, Garnet met it with the mere palm of her hand, much to the Bearman’s shock. “What?! Impossible!” With a bitter snarl, the Bearman threw several more punches, all of which Garnet dodged with ease before striking him with a heavy blow to the
stomach. Incapacitated, the Bearman recoiled in pain as he collapsed to his knees. “Oh… Everything hurts…” he groaned in agony, clutching his injury.

“No, give back the gem,” Garnet scolded firmly.

“But I’m the sworn protector of the gem!” the Bearman protested, failing to notice Ringo sneaking towards the shrine behind him. “What did that little lying punk tell you?” He happened to glance over just as Ringo reached the shrine, letting out a horrified gasp as the thief claimed it as his own. “No!”

“Ha! You dummies fell for it!” Ringo cheered with a sinister grin as he held the gem aloft. “Now the Sacred Gem of Ultimate Power is mine!” The thief snickered deviously as he inserted the gem into the ring in his hair, transforming him into a much more powerful version of himself. “Ultimate Ringo!” he shouted in triumph, gripping his newly formed staff tightly.

“Curse you, Ringo!” the Bearman threatened, still lying on the ground in defeat. “I’ll make you pay for this!”

“Aw… what’s the matter?” Ringo taunted snidely. “Can’t bear to see me win?” Knowing he had won, Ringo shot a burst of his newfound power at the Bearman, instantly transforming him into a delicious fried treat as Garnet and her companions gasped in shock.

“An on-”

“-ion-”

“-ring!”

“We’ll avenge you, Bearman,” Garnet reassured the bear-turned-onion ring as Ringo laughed maniacally in the background. “Ringo! You must be defeated!” the Gem leader challenged.

“Ahem, it’s Ultimate Ringo,” the villain pointed out before using his scepter to transport his foes to a bizarre, unnerving dimension of floating rings.

“Whoa! What is this place?” Chirpy asked in frightened awe.

“Welcome to my Ringo Zone!” Ringo proclaimed as he arrived in this new world himself. “It is here where my powers are strongest. You wanna stop me? Go on; it will amuse me. And after I beat you, maybe I’ll destroy the planet. Just ’cause I can!”

“You monster!” Hoppy and Hopper shouted as they ran for the villain, their blade brandished. Ringo easily took them both out however, using his new powers to cast them aside as though they were mere playthings.

“Hoppy! Hopper! No!” Garnet exclaimed as she watched her comrades go down, injured in the line of battle. “Now this is bad…” the Gem leader said to her two remaining companions, who were too small and weak to go up against Ringo as Hoppy and Hopper had.

“Oh no!” Chirpy tweeted in anxious dismay. “Garnet, what are you going to do?!”

Garnet was silent for a moment as she observed her opponent carefully, while Chatter cut in. “You do have a plan, don’t you, Garnet?”

The Gem leader set her jaw, her fists clenched tightly at her sides. “I always do.” With steady movements, Garnet lifted her cubical hair off of her head, dropping the heavy square to the ground.
“W-w-weighted hair?!?” her companions exclaimed in amazed unison.

“Without her weighted hair, Garnet’s power is hop-tastic!” Hopper reported, looking over her new power meter.

“Ringo!” Garnet angrily shouted towards her foe, who was busy celebrating his supposed victory. The Gem leader leapt for him, her gauntlets at the ready as Ringo jumped to meet her attack.

“Ultimate!” the villain laughed as him and Garnet squared off, exchanging a seemingly endless barrage of brutal punches. Neither of them faltered for what seemed like ages, until Garnet accidently let her guard down for just a moment. And that was all Ringo needed to land a blow squarely to the Gem leader’s jaw, sending her brutally plummeting to the ground.

“Garnet!” Hoppy, Hopper, Chatter, and Chirpy all cried, fearful for their friend’s wellbeing but unable to go to her rescue.

Though pain racked her form, the Gem leader slowly pulled herself up, knowing that she had lost this battle. “I-I’m sorry, Steven…” she said morosely as she pulled her picture out. “I… I wasn’t strong enough…"

Before she could stop him, Ringo pulled the picture right out of Garnet’s hand, looking over it with a smug smile. “Ah, what a nice photo,” he said, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “But something’s not quite right… Oh! I know!” Using the gem’s power, Ringo seamlessly transformed the picture into an onion ring, callously eating it whole. Garnet let out an appalled gasp at this as she watched her enemy devour her prized memento, and in that moment, she knew she couldn’t give up.

With an enraged shout, Garnet rose to her feet, her gauntlets clenched into tight, deadly fists. As power flowed through her, the Gem leader’s afro reformed atop her head, larger and even more impressive than before as she took to the air. Her animal companions watched in stunned silence as her and Ringo faced off once more, with Garnet easily getting the advantage as she fended the villain off with a heavy kick. As Ringo fell, Garnet grew her gauntlets to a massive size, putting her glowing fists together as she rocketed towards him at a frightening speed, letting out a courageous battle cry all the while. Ringo was completely unprepared as Garnet barreled down upon him, smashing him into the ground in an incredible explosion and defeating him at long last.

“Hip hop hooray!” Hoppy and Hopper exclaimed in cheerful triumph as Garnet returned to normal, coming off her power high.

“Yay! We knew you could do it, Garnet!” Chatter bounced up and down excitedly.

“That was chirping fantastic, Garnet!” Chirpy proclaimed happily as she hovered near the Gem leader. Garnet simply accepted their praise with a humble nod as she took the gem away from the defeated, heavily injured Ringo, satisfied that her mission was complete. After a great struggle and many hardships, Garnet had come out on top, just as she always did.

“And so, Garnet used the gem to return the Bearman to his original form. And as for Ringo, he stayed trapped in the Ringo Zone, forever. That day, Garnet learned a valuable lesson: that being strong was about more than how many mountains you can punch in half. It was about love. And there was no greater love than Garnet’s love for Steven,” the young Gem concluded his tale. “The end!”

“I liked it,” Garnet approved with a nod, even if Steven had come up with most of the story himself.
“The part with the bear guy was ok, but the rest was absolute nonsense,” Stan complained, crossing his arms. “Just like the rest of these stories. Magic tonics? Talking animals? Soos winning at something? Where do you guys come up with this stuff? I’ll tell you a good story for a change. It’s called: ‘Grunkle Stan Wins the Football Bowl’!”

Grunkle Stan Wins the Football Bowl

The entirety of the football stadium held its breath in excitement as the last few moments of the big game dragged on torturously slow. The home team was at a close disadvantage, and it would take a miracle for them to win the day. But just as everyone was about to accept defeat, a lone figure emerged from the pile of tackling players, football in hand, as he made a beeline for the end zone.

It was none other than the team’s newest and most unlikely superstar: Stan Pines. The conman raced for the end of the field, unpursued by his opponents, and as he reached it, the crowd went completely wild. Stan let out a triumphant laugh as he threw the ball down in a touchdown, breaking out into a celebratory dance in the end zone as his teammates approached him.

“Mr. Pines,” one of the burly players began with a small, grateful smile. “I thought old folks were useless, but you taught me and my gloating friends a lesson.”

“Here is your football winning trophy, Mr. Pines!” a gorgeous model smiled warmly as she arrived in the cup of the giant trophy that had just been pulled onto the scene.

“Thanks, beautiful woman!” Stan exclaimed, happily accepting the admiration coming his way. “But I couldn’t have done it without my sidekick: Footbot!”

“Thank you for building me, Daddy!” a small, squat robot expressed as he marched up to the conman. Stan, the football players, and the beautiful woman all laughed in cheerful triumph together as fireworks shot off across the field in light of the conman’s stunning victory, while Footbot made one more affectionate proclamation for his creator. “I love you, Stan.”

“Boooooo!” Nearly everyone, save for Stan himself, didn’t shy away from showing their distaste for the conman’s short, rather dull story.

“What?” Stan asked, not getting their unfair critique. “That story was great! I even threw in a talking robot for the kids!”

“Yeah, but it was a total snooze-fest,” Amethyst said with a yawn.

“At least my story had some intrigue,” Pearl said pointedly. “Even if I never got to finish it…”

“Hmph, everybody’s a critic,” Stan scoffed sourly.


Trooth Ache
“Easy with that bear, Corduroy!” Stan called to Manly Dan as the lumberjack struggled to restrain a grizzly at the end of the driveway. “I need him in showroom condition. This attraction is gonna make me a fortune!”

“Aw… They’re hugging!” Mabel gushed with a grin as Dan tackled the bear to the ground roughly.

“So let me get this straight,” Dipper said, giving his grunkle a skeptical look. “You plan is to teach a bear to ride a bicycle?”

“Nah,” the conman shook his head. “Come on, everyone’s seen a bicycle-riding bear. No, instead, I’m gonna teach this bear… how to drive!”

And indeed, the conman tried. Dipper and Mabel held onto their seats for dear life as Stan sat passenger alongside the bear, who was swerving the car all over the road. “And the yellow light means speed up!” the conman instructed the bear, who let out a gruff roar in response. Of course, it only took a few moments of such reckless driving to be noticed by the police, and soon enough, the flashing lights of a patrol car were blinking in the rear view mirror. “Uh oh…” Stan gulped as Sherriff Blubbs and Deputy Durland stepped up to the vehicle.

“Heh, what seems to be the problem, officers?” Stan asked the cops, putting on a front of innocence.

The officers exchanged a furtive glance upon seeing a bear sitting in the driver’s seat as Blubbs spoke up. “There better be a darn good explanation for this.”

“Oh there is,” Stan insisted. “You see, I’m a very old man, not long for this earth. And the doctors assigned me a seeing-eye bear to drive me to the hospital in case of an emergency.”

In the back seat, Mabel frowned caustically upon hearing this obvious lie, yet the cops seemed to nearly buy it. “Is that right?” Blubbs asked. “Then where’s your doctor’s note?”

“Why, its right here, inside my jacket!” the conman grinned slyly as he quickly scribbled a note inside of his suit jacket. “There you go!” He seamlessly presented the note, which simply read “Stan is sick and needs a bear. –Dr. Medicine”. The cops looked over the note for a moment or two before nodding in apparent acceptance.

“Well, I can’t argue with Dr. Medicine,” Blubbs shrugged, giving Stan a nod go on ahead.

“To the hospital, honeypants!” the conman exclaimed to the bear, who growled as he floored the gas pedal.

Even if Stan wasn’t bothered by his habit of blatantly lying, Mabel certainly was after seeing such a shameless demonstration of it. Unlike her miserly uncle, the girl believed that honesty was an important and necessary value, which was why she didn’t shy away from approaching the conman about the situation later on that evening.

“Grunkle Stan?” Mabel began as she approached her uncle, who was busy painting rocks to make them look gold. “How could you lie to those police officers? Don’t you know lying is always wrong?”

“Mabel, when you get to be my age, you’ll learn that you sometimes have to bend the truth for the greater good,” Stan replied as he picked up the nearby plate of spaghetti and helped himself.

“Hey, have you guys seen my spaghetti around here?” Dipper asked as he entered the room, not
“No…” the conman said inconspicuously, craftily hiding the spaghetti behind his back as he turned to face his nephew. “But I bet Soos has. You know how he likes to eat.”

“This is a dark day…” Dipper glowered, heading off to confront the handyman. “Thanks, Grunkle Stan!”

“See?” Stan said to Mabel once Dipper had left. “Greater good.”

Mabel clearly wasn’t convinced as she let out an aggravated groan at her uncle’s insistence on lying. For his own sake, she knew she had to put an end to it, but she couldn’t do it alone. She was going to need some help.

“And he just won’t stop lying! I don’t know what I’m gonna do…” Mabel sighed as she relayed the situation to Steven while the two were hanging out in the attic later on.

“Hm…” the young Gem mused thoughtfully. “I don’t know, Mabel… I don’t think it’s really possible to force someone to tell the truth… Or if something like that is even the right thing to do…”

“But it is if it ends up keeping Grunkle Stan out of trouble!” Mabel protested, before a sudden idea struck her. “Wait! I have an idea! We should check out Dipper’s journal!”

“That’s a good idea,” Steven agreed as Mabel pulled the journal out from under Dipper’s bed. “There’s bound to be something in there that might help!”

Mabel nodded as she flipped through the journal for a moment, before perking up at an article that happened to catch her eye, which she didn’t hesitate to read aloud.

“Buried underneath a tree stump in the deep forest are the truth teeth, which forces upon the wearer the inability to lie.”

“Well, what do you know?” Steven asked as he exchanged a knowing grin with Mabel. “I guess you really can force someone to tell the truth!”

Fortunately, it didn’t take Mabel and Steven too long to find the truth teeth out in the woods, which was why the girl decided to implement her new plan that very night. She took care to be especially quiet as she snuck into Stan’s room, making sure the conman was fast asleep before she discreetly slipped the golden teeth into his mouth in place of his usual dentures. Wanting to test them out, Mabel gave her uncle’s nose a squeeze, which easily managed to wake him up.

“Wha? What’s going on?” Stan asked groggily as he darted upright in bed. “Huh? Mabel?”

“Quick question,” Mabel cut right to the chase. “What really happened to Dipper’s spaghetti plate?”

“I ate it, because I have little to no concern about other people’s possessions or emotions,” the conman answered forwardly, pausing for a moment in confusion afterwards. “Well that was strangely candid. Almost as if I’m unable to lie… Well, good night!” Mabel grinned widely as she watched her grunkle go back to sleep, satisfied that the truth had triumphed over his former lies. At least, for now.

**

Mabel could scarcely contain her excitement the following morning as Stan prepared breakfast for her and Dipper. While the conman had his back turned, the girl didn’t hesitate to pass on the secret
about the truth teeth to her brother in a hushed whisper.

“You what?” Dipper asked Mabel in disbelief. “That’s a horrible idea!”

“No, it’s great!” Mabel exclaimed. “Now he has to tell the truth!”

Dipper wasn’t as easily convinced, but all the same, he decided to test the integrity of the teeth himself as Stan served them breakfast. “Grunkle Stan, what do you do in secret every day during your lunch break?”

“Usually, I spend the hour aggressively scratching myself in places I shouldn’t mention,” the conman admitted freely. “Now I’m going to avoid making eye contact by pretending to read this newspaper and going to the bathroom without washing my hands.”

Both twins expressed their disgust at this as Stan took his leave, clearly not bothered by his sudden reveal. “Well, that was disturbing,” Dipper cringed, even if Mabel was quick to reassure him.

“Don’t worry, Dipper. The truth is always a good thing.”

As it turned out, the truth wasn’t as good as Mabel had originally thought. With the truth teeth in his mouth, Stan no longer had any sort of filter on anything he said whatsoever, which caused a handful of problems. The conman had already succeeded in openly insulting several of the Mystery Shack’s customers by making rude, offhand comments about their appearances and behavior. As Stan prepared his tax forms later that day, he boldly admitted his regular tax fraud on every single last one, though Dipper had made sure to shred them in order to keep his uncle out of legal trouble later on. The twins found Stan’s newfound honesty particularly hard to live with when he confided his rather dark musings about the meaning of life, or lack thereof, to them. And of course, Stan’s loose lips caused even more issues between him and the Gems when Steven stopped by with them the next day. The Gems scarcely even had a moment to say hello before the conman began telling them his honest opinions of them with hardly any prompting at all.

“Well, look who it is,” Stan said, hands on his hips as the Gems passed by the front of the shack on their way to town. “You know, I’ve always wanted to tell you guys that you’re pretty much the worst neighbors in history.”

The Gems exchanged a rather surprised glance upon hearing such a candid statement coming from the conman, who usually sugar-coated everything. “Whoa, Stan,” Amethyst spoke up with a nervous laugh. “I know you aren’t too crazy about us, but that was a bit harsh, don’t you think?”

“Actually, I don’t mind you too much, Amethyst,” Stan admitted, though his tone was still casual as ever. “In fact, I’d even be willing to call you a pretty good friend of mine.” The purple Gem stifled a flustered blush after hearing this as the conman cast a caustic glance towards Garnet and Pearl. “It’s those two I can’t stand.”

“And what exactly is that supposed to mean?” Pearl asked pointedly.

“It means, I think you’re annoying,” Stan said specifically to Pearl, showing little remorse for his honestly. “And stuffy, and boring, and a control freak. And that nose of yours could probably be used as a lethal weapon, it’s so sharp!” The white Gem scoffed in offense as the conman prepared to unload the truth onto Garnet, who was already wearing a rather cross expression. “And as for you, I-”

“Ok, Grunkle Stan!” Dipper hurriedly cut in before Stan could offend the powerful Gem leader. “How about we head inside?”
“What?” the conman frowned. “Was it something I said?”

As the twins began to usher their brutally honest uncle into the shack, Steven was quick to urge the Gems to go the other direction, especially since he understood why Stan was being so open. “D-don’t worry, you guys!” the young Gem assured with an anxious laugh. “I’m sure he didn’t mean it!”

“Hey, have I told you kids that I think I have a growth forming on my back?” Stan said to the twins as they prepared to go inside. “Just wanted to be honest with you guys.”

“I can’t take it anymore, Mabel!” Dipper whispered to his sister harshly, thoroughly fed up with Stan’s non-stop truth telling. “We have to get those teeth out of his mouth!”

“But then he’ll be a liar again…” Mabel said with a hesitant frown.

“Could it possibly be any worse than this?!” Dipper reported, though that was only an invitation for things to indeed get worse. For before the Gems could leave or the Pines could get inside, a police patrol car rolled onto the scene, with a very perturbed Blubbs and Durland stepping out of it.

“So, after further investigation, it turns out there is no Dr. Medicine in Gravity Falls,” Blubbs addressed Stan with a suspicious glance.

“You better have a darn good explanation for this,” Durland scowled as he brandished his nightstick.

“Oh, and I do,” Stan nodded, ready to tell them the complete truth, much to the twins’ shared alarm. “You see, I lied to you. In addition, I’ve been parking in handicap spaces, shoplifting fireworks, and smuggling endangered animals across multiple state lines. Also, you’re fat.”

Blubbs dropped his mug of coffee in shock upon hearing this, and likewise, all of the Gems let out a unified gasp of surprise. “Yikes…” Amethyst whispered to Garnet. “Is Stan trying to dig his own grave other there?”

“I’d say he gets what he deserves if he ends up getting arrested at the end of all of this,” Pearl scoffed, crossing her arms bitterly.

“Is all of this true?” Blubbs asked the conman, clearly growing angrier by the second.

“No!” Dipper jumped in before Stan could answer. “No, it’s not true. Right, Mabel?”

“Uh… well…” Mabel stammered, knowing she was caught between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, she could be honest and end up sending her uncle jail. But on the other, she could blatantly lie to the police of all people, making her no better than Stan himself used to be. “Sirs, I have to be completely honest with you. Our Great Uncle Stan is… he’s…” The girl bit her lip as she swallowed her usual honest tendencies, just this once. For Stan. “Stan is… secretly a crime fiction writer!”

“What?” Blubbs and all three of the Gems asked in bewilderment.

“Yeah! He was just telling you about a character in his upcoming page turner: Crime Grandpa! He’s never committed a crime in his life,” Mabel forced a wide grin, trying her best to uphold this ruse. “Also… h-have you lost weight?”

“Finally!” Blubbs exclaimed in delight. “Someone noticed…”
“Wow, an author!” Durland smiled excitedly. “Can you teach me how to read?”

“What?” Stan raised a confused eyebrow. “An author?”

“Yep! A real master of fiction!” Mabel assured as her began pushing Stan back into the shack as the cops took their leave. “Good night, officers!”

“Whoa, Stan can write?” Amethyst asked in amazement as the Gems and Steven began the trek back to the temple.

“Who could have guessed?” Garnet deadpanned, the sarcasm clear in her tone.

“Hey, you alright?” Dipper asked Mabel with concern after they closed the door to the shack behind them.

“I can’t believe I lied…” Mabel groaned, feeling immensely guilty for it.

“Mabel, it was for the greater good,” Dipper reassured, placing a supporting hand on her shoulder.

“Yeah… The greater good…” Mabel grinned, starting to feel a bit better.

“Hello? Police?” Stan began after dialing up the police on the phone. “I forgot to tell them about my massive tax fraud… No, tax fraud.”

Of course, the twins were quick to tackle Stan after this, much to his confusion, especially as they wrench the truth teeth right out of his mouth. “We have to find a place to get rid of these!” Mabel exclaimed desperately, refusing to let them get anyone else in trouble ever again. Of course, upon hearing tell of a bottomless pit which could be used to dispose of almost anything, she realized that she had discovered the best place to discard of them.

“And I never saw that box full of magical teeth again,” Mabel finished, though she stopped short upon seeing the very box she had pushed into the pit floating not too far away. “Oh wait, there it is.”

“Again, I like the part with the bear, but the rest of it seems pretty far-fetched,” Stan remarked.

“Mabel, we already know that story!” Dipper complained. “We just lived through it!”

“If we’re living through the story right now, then how does it end?” Soos asked rather philosophically.

“It doesn’t,” Garnet answered succinctly, not getting any deeper than that.

“It feels like we’ve been falling forever…” Amethyst whined, resorting to floating upside down to alleviate some of her boredom. “Can’t we just jump outta here?”

“Jump off of what?” Pearl asked with a scowl. “There’s nothing in here but vast, bleak, unending, miserable darkness!”

“Aw… come on you guys! Don’t be like that!” Steven encouraged. “Why don’t I tell a story this time?”

“But Steven, didn’t you already tell a story?” Dipper asked.
“Well, yeah… but that was Garnet’s story, right Garnet?” Steven asked as the Gem leader gave a thumbs up in response. “But the story I’m about to tell is all mine. And I call it… Cat Fingers!”

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*Cat Fingers*

As the Gems warped into the temple from their latest mission, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel were all present, since the twins had come up to the temple to hang out for the afternoon. After everyone exchanged a round of greetings, Amethyst flashed a broad grin, indicative of her mischievous mood as she hopped off of the warp pad.

“Hey, you guys wanna see something cool?” Amethyst asked with a goading grin, ignoring the warning glare Pearl sent her way. Already knowing that her teammates weren’t exactly getting along, Garnet took her leave and stepped into the temple, not particularly wanting to deal with their bickering at the moment.

“Yeah!” all three kids answered in excited unison as they leapt off the loft to meet the purple Gem.

“Then check this out.” Amethyst’s smirk deepened as her gem flashed, before she fluidly shapeshifted into a seal, complete with playful barking and all.

“Amethyst, please,” Pearl groaned in aggravation.

“Whoa!” Mabel exclaimed as her and Dipper gaped in awe. “You can shapeshift?!”

“Sure can,” Amethyst winked as she easily shifted into Mabel, eliciting an amused chuckle from the girl. “All of us Gems can do it.” The purple Gem went from one form to the next without even trying as she changed from Mabel to Dipper, who had to do a double take to make sure his eyes weren’t deceiving him. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“Really cool!” Steven agreed. “I wish I could shapeshift like you!”

“You could probably learn,” Amethyst shrugged, turning back into herself.

“Really?”

“Sure,” the purple Gem answered as she pulled up Steven’s shirt to reveal the gem on his navel. “You got a gem, don’t you?”

“Hold on a minute,” Pearl cut in. “Don’t bite off more than you can chew, Steven. After all, shapeshifting can take years to master and you’re still learning the basics of using your gem.”

“So if all Gems can shapeshift, then that means you can do it too, Pearl?” Dipper asked curiously.

“Well, of course-” Pearl began, though Amethyst was quick to cut her off after shifting into the white Gem and teasingly mocking her.

“Well of course I can! I’m perfect!” the purple Gem mimicked, before goadingly tapping her bottom with a “Whomp! Whomp!”

Annoyed, Pearl pushed Amethyst off to the side as she continued her explanation. “As I was saying… Shapeshifting is a natural Gem ability. We can turn into objects, we can change parts of our bodies, or… We can do that…” The white Gem rolled her eyes as she glanced over at Amethyst, who was still playfully hitting her rear.
“I wanna try it all!” Steven exclaimed, stars in his eyes.

“Yeah!” Mabel agreed. “Oh! Steven, shapeshift into me first!

“Like I said, you might want to take it a bit slow at first,” Pearl cautioned before Amethyst got in her space and slapped her bottom once more. Fed up with the purple Gem’s antics, she headed outside as Amethyst turned back into herself.

“Alright!” Steven exclaimed, cutting to the chase. “Show me how to change into a, uh… huge lion!”

“Actually, for once Pearl is right,” Amethyst advised. “If you’re gonna do this, you’ve gotta start with something easy. Like… a cat!”

“Oh my gosh!” Mabel screed excitedly as her and Dipper took a seat on the nearby couch to watch. “Steven, you’re gonna be the cutest cat ever!”

“I sure am!” Steven heartily agreed, nodding for Amethyst to go on.

“Ok, so just follow my lead. First, think of what you wanna be, and then, just shake it out!” With a smooth, fluid move of her body, the purple Gem easily slipped into the form of a fluffy purple cat before urging Steven to do the same. “See?”

“It can’t be that easy,” Dipper said, still in shock over seeing something as incredible as shapeshifting with his own eyes.

“But it is,” Amethyst smirked, despite her feline form. “Now you try, Steven.”

“Okay…” the young Gem took in a deep breath, shaking his arm as he focused on one thought alone. “Caaaaaaatttttt!”

“Nah, you’re too tense,” Amethyst shook her head. “Just relax and feel it. Bio-rhythms, bro.”

“Feeeeeellll it!” Steven strained, pressing his fingers against his temples.

“You can do it, Steven!” Dipper encouraged.

“Yeah! Cat it up!” Mabel cheered.

Steven continued to struggle and groan, getting no clear results as Amethyst resumed her usual form. “Eh, if you’re not ready, we can try later.”

“N-no, wait!” Steven protested, still trying his hardest. “I… can do it!” The young Gem closed his eyes tightly, feeling something about his form change, though when he opened his eyes a moment later, he was dismayed to find he was far from a feline like he had hoped.

“Well, it was a good try,” Amethyst shrugged, though everyone was abruptly silenced by a small meow that seemed to come out of nowhere. With a gasp, Steven opened up his clenched fist to reveal a small, living cat head atop his index finger. The cat finger let out a bright cry, its tiny ears pert as it looked around with a cattish grin.

“AHHHHHHH!” Mabel screamed, overwhelmed with the precious sight before her. “Steven, you did it! And it’s so cute!

“And… kinda creepy…” Dipper admitted, noting that the rest of Steven’s finger was oddly normal.
“This is so cool!” Steven gushed as he moved the cat finger around a bit as it began to purr contentedly.

“You should take that show on the road,” Amethyst suggested with a laugh. “I bet everybody will *flip* when they see it!”

The kids all readily agreed to this, though the cat finger was the most vocal of all of them as it kept up its cheerful chirping all the way out the door.

“K, Steven, that will be $1.05,” Wendy said as she rang Steven up for the can of soda he had just bought at the shack.

“Mmm, okay…” Steven said with a leading grin, placing the change on the counter. “Here’s a nickel. And a buck!” The young Gem laughed as he held his cat finger up, a dollar held in its maw.

“Whaaaaat?!?” Wendy and Soos exclaimed in shocked unison.

“Steven turned his finger into a cat!” Mabel exclaimed brightly. “It’s just the more *adorable* thing you’ve ever seen?!”

“Man, that is so rad!” Wendy smirked, petting the cat’s white fur with her finger.

“Are you making it purr, dude?” Soos asked curiously, patting the top of the feline’s head.

“Eh, it kinda does what it wants,” Steven shrugged.

“Hey, kids,” Stan greeted as he entered the gift shop. “What’s going on?”

“Mr. Pines, I’d like you to meet my new friend!” Steven ran over to the conman, presenting his cat finger. “He’s *purreased* to meet you! Ha!”

“…Kid, that thing is freakish,” Stan said, though he quickly thought of a way to capitalize on it. “It’s just the kind of new attraction I’ve been looking for!”

“Really?” Steven asked excitedly.

“Yep! People will come from miles away to see it! It’s cute and weird, all wrapped up into one convenient package! What’s not to love?” The conman grinned broadly as he reached out to poke the cat finger, only for it to growl and bite him in retaliation. “Ouch!” Stan exclaimed, drawing his hand back as he glared at the cat. “What’s that thing’s problem?"

“Oh, sorry!” Steven apologized, withdrawing the still growling cat. “Bad cat finger!”

“Well, at least it’s a good judge of character,” Wendy remarked with a sarcastic laugh.

“It probably just wants to play, dude,” Dipper remarked casually.

“Oh my gosh!” Steven gasped. “You’re right! And he doesn’t have any friends!” The young Gem was quick to rectify this problem, however, as he shook out his hand, turning the rest of his fingers into cats of all different colors. They all let out a chorus of meows as Mabel rushed over with an overjoyed squeal to pet each one of them.

“You have a goldmine on your hand there, kid!” Stan exclaimed excitedly, more than ready to profit off of the young Gem’s strange new ability.

“Steven, are you sure that’s such a good idea?” Dipper asked with concern as he watched the cat
fingers wiggle about freely.

“Of course it is!” Steven assured with a smile. “I mean, look at how happy the all are! In fact…” After taking in a deep breath, Steven shook out his other hand as cats popped upon on all of his other fingers as well. “Ah ha! One big happy litter!”

“Yo, dude, you mind if I get a picture of your awesome cat fingers?” Soos asked, holding up his phone.

“Sure!” Steven smiled as he held up all ten of his feline fingers while the handyman snapped the picture. “Mind if I see?” Soos handed Steven the phone, though the young Gem was quick to drop it as his cat fingers hissed in pain upon mere contact with it. “Yikes! I guess cat fingers don’t function well as… fingers.”

As it turned out, cat finger really didn’t function well as fingers, as Steven was quickly discovering. Even a task as simple as retrieving a sandwich from the fridge was made near impossible thanks to the whining felines on his hands that cried in protested every time he tried to touch something. “Come on, you guys!” the young Gem pleaded with the hissing cats. “I’m just getting a snack!”

“Steven!” Amethyst exclaimed as she emerged from the temple, noticing his struggle. “Need some help?”

“Nah, i-it’s cool!” he exclaimed, still trying to get a good grip on the sandwich.

“Oh good!” Amethyst grinned, heading for the door. “See ya later then.”

“Huh?”

“We’re taking the Gem sloop down the river to go beat up some giant crayfish.”

“What?” Steven’s eyes widened as he heard this, even as his sandwich fell to the ground. “Uh, Amethyst, wait up!”

The Gems were already aboard the sloop as they prepared to embark downstream as Steven bounded towards them, trying to silence his mewing cat finger. “I wanna go on the Gem sloop!” he called as Garnet started to untie the boat. “I wanna see giant crayfish! Wait! WAIT!”

“No!” Steven exclaimed as Steven started wading into the creek.

“Come on!” Amethyst laughed. “You can make it!”

Steven tried his best to, though he didn’t make it very far before the cat fingers began to hiss loudly after getting a little wet. The Gems all gasped in surprised confusion upon hearing the odd noise. “Steven, what’s going on?” Pearl asked with a concerned frown.

“I-it’s nothing!” the young Gem exclaimed, holding his fingers up so they could see. “I just turned all my fingers into cats!”

Amethyst let out an amused snort at this, though Pearl was much less than pleased. “We have to stay and help Steven!”

“We can’t,” Garnet said shortly as the sloop began to flow downstream. “Those crayfish can’t wait any longer. We’ll help Steven when we get back.”
“Amethyst, I blame you for this!” Pearl scolded.

“Eh, that’s fair,” Amethyst shrugged with little concern.

“Steven! Just try to stay calm!” the white Gem called to Steven, who was growing more worried over his plight by the minute.

Though it took quite a bit of doing, Steven had managed to call Dipper and Mabel in the hopes that they could help him out in some way.

“Oh, Steven, are you sure you wanna get rid of them?” Mabel asked, patting the top of one of the cats’ heads, only for it to hiss at her sourly. “Well, aren’t you guys in a grumpy mood?”

“I just want regular Steven fingers again,” the young Gem frowned down at the meowing cats. “And I don’t mean little me heads on my fingers! I mean my regular fingers!”

“Well, it was easy enough for you to turn all of them into cats,” Dipper said. “So it shouldn’t be too hard to turn them back, right?”

“Hopefully… Here goes!” the young Gem sucked in a deep breath, focusing on turning his fingers back to normal only for a spot on his head to suddenly shift into another cat. All three kids let out a panicked scream at this, especially as Steven’s whole arm morphed into a cat as well. “Stop!” he exclaimed desperately as his foot turned into yet another feline. “Guys, help!”

“W-what are we supposed to do?!” Dipper exclaimed, watching with horror as more and more of Steven’s body began to turn into cats.

“Let’s get the Gems!” Mabel suggested. “They’ll know what to do!”

“N-no! They’re not here!” Steven shouted over the countless cats meowing over top of each other.

“Ok, what about a hospital!?” Mabel pressed, kneeling down next to the shape-shifting young Gem with concern.

“What kind of hospital is going to know how to deal with something like this?!” Dipper retorted.

“W-wait! I have… an idea!” Steven exclaimed, struggling against the squirming cats all over him. “My… my dad! H-he can help!”

The twins exchanged a doubtful glance at this, though they knew they really had no other options at this point. After all, the cats were growing more aggressive by the moment, and there was no sign of stopping them. They had to do something, lest Steven be consumed by the fluffy felines entirely.

Despite the fact that the emerging cats were wildly out of control, Dipper and Mabel had somehow managed to get Steven onto the Mystery Cart and haphazardly drive him to Greg’s carwash. Needless to say, the former rock star was both shocked and distraught to realize that the frightening mass of cats the twins had brought to him was actually his son.

“W-what’s wrong with him?!?” Greg exclaimed fearfully, glancing down at Steven with wide eyes.

“Dad!” the young Gem exclaimed through the cats overwhelming him. “I turned my fingers into cats, but now they’re taking over my body!”

“Wait… you were… shapeshifting?” Greg asked with obvious discomfort. “Oh man… You know I
don’t know much about all this magic stuff, buddy…”

“There has to be something you can do to help him, Mr. Universe!” Mabel urged worriedly.

“I-I’ll try…” the wash operator gulped, reaching towards his son, only for one of the many cats to bite him and throw him aside with its precious strength.

“No!” Steven scolded at the hissing felines. “Bad! Bad cat fingers!” As the young Gem backed up, he accidently stepped into a puddle, which of course, sent the cats into a frenzy that managed to repel the twins away as well.

“Steven!” Dipper and Mabel exclaimed in equal concern.

“It’s no use, you guys!” Steven mourned, unable to feel much of his body thanks to the squirming cats. “Oh, my life is over! I can’t go on magic adventures! I can’t even open the fridge! And I’ll never be able to even touch water again because these things hate it so much!”

“Wait, that’s it!” Dipper exclaimed in realization. “Mr. Universe! Spray Steven with the hose!”

The former rock star complied, letting out a frightened cry as he sprayed his catified son with as much water as the hose could put out, though that only deterred the cats slightly. “It’s not even!” the young Gem cried, glancing over at the carwash. “Dad, turn on the super wash!”

“No! I won’t do it! It’s too dangerous!”

“You have to! I’m a monster! An adorable monster!”

“No, you’re not!” Greg argued, tears in his eyes. “You’re my son!”

“Dad! Please!” Steven cried as the cats began consuming him entirely.

“Hurry, Mr. Universe!” Mabel begged as her and Dipper rushed over to Steven to help push him into the wash. Though he was still incredibly hesitant about this plan, Greg complied, flipping the wash switches on as soon as the young Gem was inside. Dipper, Mabel, and Greg all watched fearfully, cringing all the while as Steven was sprayed by the heavy jets of water on all sides. The cats howled in agony as they were suppressed more and more, and Greg had his hose at the ready as Steven finally emerged from the wash, ready to attack any remaining cats if necessary. Fortunately though, as the steam cleared, they all found Steven, clothes torn but thankfully cat free at last as he lay on the ground, exhausted from the experience.

“You guys…” the young Gem breathed with a small smile as he picked himself up. “We did it…”

Everyone smiled in relief at this, though they were all quick to let out a fearful scream as a cat popped up on one of Steven’s fingers again, even if Greg was quick hose it away.

Steven watched from the riverbank as the Gem sloop pulled up, Pearl leaping off first as she rushed towards the young Gem with concern. “Steven! Let me see it,” she frowned, taking his hand only to find that his fingers were completely normal. “Wha-? Y-you got them to go away?”

Steven gave the white Gem a confident smile, proud that he had managed to overcome his problem without the Gems’ help. “Well, it just goes to show that you should always listen to me, and never listen to Amethyst,” Pearl concluded succinctly.

“That’s fair,” Amethyst shrugged.
“It goes to show that that you should have a little more faith in Steven,” Garnet corrected as Pearl blushed in embarrassment.

“Yeah, that would have been a total CAT-astrophe!” Steven joked. The Gems laughed half-heartedly as they began their trek back to the temple. “But I’m feeling much better MEOW!” The young Gem chuckled heartily as the others all groaned in exasperation. “What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue?!”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Garnet said, shooting down the parade of cat-puns. At least, for the moment.

“And I still have a LITTER of cat jokes left in me!” Steven said as he finished up his story. “I’m FELINE fine! Everything PURRFECT!” Everyone else moaned over the corny puns, even if their annoyance was lost on the young Gem. “Come on, you guys! I’m just KITTEN around!”

“Kid, please,” Stan scowled. “We can’t take anymore.”

“Well, I guess everyone’s told a story now,” Soos said. “So… what now?”

The entire group was silent as they mused over this for a moment, trying to decide what came next. After all, they had been falling for quite some time now, to the point that it seemed they would never reach the end of the bottomless pit. Or so it seemed.

“Wait, do you guys see that?” Dipper asked, noticing an approaching brightness from below.

“You mean the huge white light?” Amethyst asked casually. “Yeah, that’s just Pearl’s gem blinding all of us.”

“Actually… that’s not me…” Pearl frowned, glancing down with a concerned expression as the light began to grow.

“What is that?!” Soos exclaimed in alarm.

“That must be the end!” Steven gasped, eyes wide.

“But where are we going?!?” Mabel exclaimed fearfully.

“Not good!” Stan yelled as the white light began to engulf them all. The entirety of the group let out a unified, fearful cry as they were blinded by the light, which swallowed the darkness of the pit altogether. After a few more seconds of freefalling however, they were all met with an surprisingly hard surface as they abruptly fell onto what they could only assume was the ground. Their suspicions were confirmed as they all opened their eyes to see that they were no longer in the bottomless pit at all.

“Where… where are we?” Stan asked as everyone began to pick themselves up off the ground.

“Look!” Mabel gasped, pointing towards the nearby Mystery Shack. “The shack! Which means… we came right back out the top!”

“But… how is that possible?” Pearl asked in confusion. “By all accounts, we should have hit the bottom of… something!”

“Maybe this pit wasn’t as bottomless as we thought,” Garnet said, adjusting her shades.
“Well, at least we’re finally outta there,” Amethyst said, smirking towards the pit. “Though I wouldn’t really mind going in again now that I know where it leads…”

“I don’t think any time has passed…” Dipper mused, glancing down at his watch. “It must be some kind of wormhole.”

“Yeah, dude,” Soos agreed with a nod. “That sounds sciency enough to be true.”

“A wormhole!” Steven exclaimed in awe. “That’s amazing!”

“And crazy,” Stan scoffed. “No one will ever believe us!”

“Maybe this is one story we should keep to ourselves,” Mabel concluded.

“Agreed,” everyone assented in unison. Of course, the situation only repeated itself again as Stan leaned against the sign next to the pit, only for it to break and send him pummeling back into the pit once more. The rest of the group stood by, watching blankly, despite the conman’s frightened scream that only faded as he fell thanks to his own bad luck.

“Hey, Stan!” Amethyst called, running for the pit herself before freely leaping in with a laugh. “Wait up!”

“Should we help them?” Steven asked with a concerned frown, peeking down into the pit they had all just gotten out of.

Of course, no one was too enthusiastic about wasting any more time aimlessly falling, which was why Garnet was fortunately the one to express what they were all thinking. “They’ll be fine.”
Chapter 14: Lion and Waddles

Chapter Summary

In which time travel is confusing, pink pets are adorable, and paradoxes are inevitable

Chapter Notes

Well, here's my rendition of the Time Traveler's Pig! I hope you all enjoy it, because even though its mostly by the books, there are parts of it I really love! :D

GSV KZHG, RM HGLMV, XZMMLG YV XSZMTVW
GSV KIVHV, GMFT, RH PMLDM GLIIVZMTV
GSV UFGFIV, ZUZI, RH WRHGZ, ZMW HGIZMTV

Construction was nearly complete on the various rides and stalls were set up right outside the Mystery Shack, which had been converted to a temporary fairground as part of Stan’s newest money-making scheme: the Mystery Fair. Of course, the conman had generously advertised the even throughout the town, but at the price of cheaper, lower quality attractions. Needless to say, that wouldn’t stop him from exuberantly charging for admission, tickets, games, food, and so on.

“There she is, Mabel,” Stan grinned proudly as he surveyed the fair with his niece. “The cheapest fair money can rent. I spared every expense!”

Before Mabel could respond, a sudden snap sounded from above, followed by two familiar, fearful screams. One of the sky tram cars crashed to the ground from its high wire, bringing down its two passengers, Dipper and Steven, down with it. Thankfully, both boys were uninjured, despite the fact they had fallen quite a ways to the ground.

“Wow!” the young Gem exclaimed in amazement. “I didn’t know this ride had a huge drop in it! That makes it even cooler!”

“Uh, no,” Dipper frowned, a bit more shaken up from the potentially deadly experience. “I think the sky tram is just broken. Also, most of my bones.”

“Ha! This guy!” Stan chuckled easily. However, his good humored-mood soon dissipated as the Gems rushed onto the scene mere moments after the tram crash.

“We heard the crash!” Pearl exclaimed with a frightened gasp as she watched the two boys carefully emerge from the broken tram. “Oh my! It’s worse that I thought!”

“Are you both alright?” Garnet asked much more calmly, seeing that Pearl was overreacting once again.

“Yeah, we’re ok,” Steven said with a relaxed grin.

“Somehow…” Dipper said sarcastically, glaring at Stan.
“Great! Cause I wanna go next!” Amethyst said with a daring smirk.

“Me too!” Mabel chimed in eagerly.

“Oh no, you don’t!” Pearl admonished, her hands on her hips. “That ride is too dangerous, just like the rest of this ramshackle fair. Though considering your complete disregard for public safety, Stan, I shouldn’t have expected anything more.”

“What?” the conman asked caustically. “You really think I’d actually be able to make a profit off this fair if I cared about getting ‘permits’ or ‘certifications’? Speaking of which, that reminds me. Kids, I have a job for you. I printed up a bunch of fake safety inspection certificates. Go slap one on anything that looks like a lawsuit.”

Stan handed each of the kids a pile of fake certificates, none of which looked very authentic. “I highly doubt this is legal,” Garnet commented as she took one of the certificates Steven was holding and looked it over.

“When there are no cops around, anything’s legal!” Stan remarked proudly.

Seeing that there was no arguing with this logic, the kids took off, hoping to finish this task quickly so they could have time to enjoy the fair. The Gems also left, deciding to stick around the fair just in case they had to rescue any civilians from the run down attractions.

“Soos, how’s that dunk tank coming?” Stan asked as he glanced over at the handyman, who was in the middle of blowtorching the tank’s target to keep it firmly in place.

“Almost ready to go, Mr. Pines,” Soos reported with a grin.

“Ha! You got it rigged from here to Timbuktu!” Stan grinned as he knocked on the target to test it, only for the seat not to budge an inch. “There’s nothing on Earth that could knock me into that tank!”

“Yeah, except for like a futuristic laser arm canon.”

The conman gave the handyman a curious glance at this, but decided not to comment. “Hey, you haven’t seen my red screwdriver, have ya?” Stan asked as he rummaged through his toolbox. “Darn thing went missing.”

“Maybe some magical creature or paranormal thing-um took it,” Soos suggested.

“Please,” Stan scoffed. “You’ve been spending too much time with those kids. Now, let’s see where I put that thing…”

Unbeknownst to the conman as he continued to search in vain for his screwdriver, it had already been absconded by a mysterious figure lingering nearby. “The mission is proceeding as planned. Over,” the man spoke into his highly technological watch, glancing around suspiciously before using the screwdriver to fix his constantly shifting camouflage jumpsuit. He worked quickly, considering the fact that he couldn’t stay in this time period for too long. He had a job to do.

“It’s 12 o’clock!” Stan announced from the dunk tank, ignoring the shrill screech his megaphone gave off. “The dunk tank is now open! Step right up and dunk me, folks!” The conman glanced over the already plentiful tourists walking by, spotting several gullible patrons worth heckling.
“I’m talking to you, cut-offs! That’s right! Muffin-top, high-pants! Who wants a piece of me?!”

By now, a sizable crowd had already gathered around the tank, all of them ready to dunk Stan after hearing his uncalled-for insults. The conman grinned greedily as he watched all of them pay for their three balls, though despite all of the tourists’ best efforts, none of them were able to hit the rigged target, much to their disappointment. “Ha ha!” Stan laughed triumphantly, still sitting high and dry. “Come back anytime, folks! Oh, well look who it is!”

The Gems stopped short as they walked past the dunk tank, none of them looking too invested in participating until Stan began to pick fun at them as well. “You know, you three act all big and tough, but I bet you all the money I have in my wallet that none of you can dunk me.”

“Ha!” Amethyst laughed, already running up to the table, ready for such a challenge. “You’re on!”

“We don’t want your money,” Garnet remarked, crossing her arms.

“Yes, I believe bragging rights will be enough in this case,” Pearl nodded with a smug smirk.

“Whatever you say,” Stan shrugged, already knowing that the Gems didn’t stand a chance. After all, he had Soos rig the target with durable metal, so it could withstand incredible amounts of force, with the Gems specifically in mind. “Get ready to look stupid.”

The Gems shared a scowl at this, though it was short lived as Garnet stepped forward, summoning her gauntlets and taking aim. “Allow me,” she said as Pearl and Amethyst backed out of the way. However, before she could launch her attack, Stan was quick to stop her.

“Whoa, whoa!” the conman exclaimed, his eyes growing wide with sudden panic. “None of that magic stuff around here! You three have to play fair, just like everyone else.”

“Hm…” Garnet glowered, dissipating her gauntlets as she picked up a regular ball. Even without her weapons, the Gem leader was still very strong, as could be seen from how she reeled up her pitch before letting the ball loose. However, much to the surprise of all three Gems, the ball simply bounced off the target, flying back at them with great speed. Garnet was quick to catch the ball once more, gripping it tightly as she prepared to try again.

“That’s right! Keep it up!” Stan encouraged, glad to see Pearl put down a rather sizable wad of cash onto the counter so they could have several more turns. “I’ll be here all day. And from the looks of it, you three will be too.”

The Mystery Fair had a wide variety of rather odd snacks and treats on sale for its patrons, all properly themed for the event. Among these unique concessions were corn dogs somehow formed into the shape of question marks, which were what Dipper and Wendy were enjoying as they strolled through the fair together.

“How do they get them into this shape?” Dipper asked as he looked over the literally questionable corn dog. “It’s unnatural.”

“But Dipper, they’re so…” Wendy began, trailing off with a smirk as she held her corn dog up to the end of a sign and read it aloud. “Delicious?”

The two of them shared a laugh over this, though it was short lived as some of the mustard from Wendy’s corn dog accidently dripped onto her sleeve. “Aw, boo,” she rolled her eyes in slight
annoyance. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be right here!” Dipper laughed a bit awkwardly as he watched Wendy leave to get a napkin, though not without hurriedly whispering something else, knowing she wouldn’t hear him. “I love you!”

Dipper let out a wistful sigh as he continued to watch Wendy go, smiling softly as he thought of her and little else. He was abruptly brought out of this love-struck state, however, when a familiar roar sounded from behind him.

“Oh!” he cried in alarm, though it soon turned to aggravation as he turned to face the disgruntled pink beast. “Lion!”

“Lion, how many times do I have to tell you?” Steven said with a frown as him and Mabel sat upon the pastel cat, who was still glaring coldly at Dipper, just as he usually did. “You should be nicer to Dipper. He’s my friend, just like Mabel is!”

“Yeah, and Lion loves me!” Mabel gushed, reaching to scratch Lion’s ear affectionately, which he gladly accepted. “You know, Dipper, maybe you just need to show Lion a little love! Then he won’t look like he wants to eat you all the time.”

Dipper crossed his arms as he exchanged an impassive glance with Lion, who was quick to turn his nose up in distaste. “I don’t think so,” the boy shook his head, hardly interested in forming a bond with the pink beast. “Steven, are you sure it’s such a good idea to have Lion out here with so many people around?”

“What?” the young Gem asked with a confused grin. “No way! Lion’s super tame. He wouldn’t hurt a fly! Well… except for maybe that fly he chased down and killed yesterday, but… bad example.”

“Speaking of chasing things down…” Mabel said with a wide grin. “Don’t think we didn’t see you getting all romantic with Wendy earlier, Dipper!”

“Eh, it’s no big deal,” Dipper said with a shrug, though it was hard to hide his growing smile.

“Yes, it is!” both Mabel and Steven exclaimed in excitement, and it wasn’t too long before Dipper joined them in it.

“Okay, you’re right, it is!” he said with newfound zeal. “Isn’t it amazing? I just dove right in! I said, ‘Hey, you wanna hang out at the fair?’ And you know what she said?”

“No, what?” Steven asked, thoroughly engaged.

“Yeah, I guess so!” Dipper exclaimed, making out what had been a rather casual response to be more than that. “It totally worked! Mabel, all your advice about just going for it is finally paying off!”

“When are you gonna learn, Dipper?” Mabel asked with a confident smirk. “I’m always right about everything!”

Before the conversation could continue, Lion suddenly snarled once more, hunching down low despite the fact that Steven and Mabel were still on his back. “Whoa, Lion!” the young Gem exclaimed. “What’s going on?” He paused, however, as he caught a whiff of something strange in the air. “Hey, do you guys smell a gallon of body spay?”
The answer to this question became clear as Robbie walked up to the kids, a bored expression on his face as he addressed them. “Hey, have any of you dorks seen Wendy around?”

“Who wants to know?” Dipper asked, glaring at the teen with clear disdain.

Robbie didn’t answer as he instead glanced down at Lion, raising a suspicious eyebrow. “What is that thing?” he asked, not noticing that the pink beast was still softly growling distrustfully. “The world’s most girly stuffed cat?”

“This is my lion, Lion,” Steven said, not caring about the redundancy.

“Sure, and I’m a panda,” Robbie deadpanned, clearly not believing the young Gem’s claim of actually owning a lion. “But yeah, I got some new super tight jeans and I thought Wendy might wanna check ‘em out. So where is she?”

“You know, I think I saw her in the bottomless pit,” Dipper said with clear sarcasm. “Why don’t you jump in there after her?”

“Maybe I will, smart guy,” Robbie scoffed harshly, roughly bumping into the boy as he walked past him. However as he passed by Lion, the pastel beast finally let his dislike for the moody teen show as he snipped at him, managing to catch his sneaker in his maw and trip him up.

“Hey!” Robbie exclaimed angrily as he reclaimed his shoe. “Stupid pink mutt. Stay outta my way!”

The teen continued to bitterly rant to himself as he walked off, leaving all three kids in a rather sour mood from the encounter. “Aw, Lion…” Steven frowned as he consoled his still-angry companion with a gentle pat. “I’m sure he didn’t mean that whole thing about you being stupid. You’re super smart!”

“Ugh, Robbie is such a jerk,” Mabel remarked with a glower.

“Yeah, but he’s a jerk with tight pants and a guitar,” Dipper said, remembering how easily Robbie had managed to steal Wendy away at the party several nights ago. “I need to keep him away from Wendy at all costs.”

“Don’t worry, Dipper,” Steven reassured. “We’ll help you!”

“Really?”

“You bet!” Mabel agreed with resolve. “We’ll be there with you, brother. Whatever happens, me and Steven will be right here, supporting you every step of the way. Right after we get some cotton candy.”

“…Really?” Dipper asked with a sigh, knowing that Mabel was notorious for flaking on him when he needed her most.

“It’ll just take us a minute,” Steven said. “Lion loves cotton candy, and who are we to deny him of it? Right, Lion?” The pink beast let out a stoic roar in response as he began to head off with Steven and Mabel in tow. “We’ll catch up with you later, Dipper! Good luck!”

“Thanks,” Dipper said with a half hearted grin as he also left to find Wendy. “I’m gonna need it…”

As it turned out, Lion’s presence at the fair actually did cause quite a stir, though Steven and
Mabel hardly noticed as they proudly rode him around. Many of the fairgoers let out frightened screams at the sight of the large predator, even if Lion couldn’t have cared less about any of them as he toted the kids around. If anything, Steven and Mabel found that they didn’t have to wait in line for anything thanks to the pink beast, as a simple disgruntled growl from him easily cleared crowds away.

The pair was still parading around on Lion, having gotten their cotton candy as they headed back towards Dipper, though they did so at a rather leisurely pace so they could enjoy the sights. All the while, Mabel and Steven took turns feeding the pink beast bits of cotton candy, which he hungrily devoured with a contented purr. “Steven, have I ever told you that you are so lucky?” Mabel asked as she happily rubbed Lion’s fluffy side.

“How am I lucky?” the young Gem asked in confusion.

“Well, you have Lion,” the girl said with a small smile. “Who is probably the cutest lion—no, the cutest cat of any kind, in the whole world!”

“Yeah, he is pretty adorable,” Steven grinned proudly at his companion. “Even if he’s not always the best listener… Are you, Lion?”

The pink beast didn’t even respond as he continued to munch on his cotton candy without a care in the world. “See what I mean?” the young Gem asked with a laugh.

“Still, he’s just so great,” Mabel said with a somewhat wistful sigh. “He sorta makes me wish I had an adorable pink pet all my own.”

“Well, I think Lion’s one of a kind…” Steven frowned. “But there are plenty of other pink animals out there that would make neat pets. Like… flamingos, and, um… well, I’m sure there are tons of pink fish, and… uh…”

“PIGS!” Mabel practically screamed out of nowhere.

“Oh, yeah! Pigs! How could I have forgotten about them?”

“No, look!” the girl shouted excitedly, directing the young Gem’s gaze to a nearby stand, which happened to be a game in which one could win a piglet by guessing its weight. “Pigs!”

“Oh my gosh! Come on, let’s go!” Steven exclaimed, just as interested as Mabel was as he immediately began to guide Lion in that direction. Just as they had before, the fair patrons easily got out of the beast’s way as he hurried over towards the pigpen allowing both kids to slide off his back as they arrived.

“Aw… look at them all!” Mabel gushed with a delighted smile as she looked over the various pigs rolling around in the mud. “I want them all!”

“If’n you can guess the critter’s weight, you can take the critter home!” the stand’s operator announced, overhearing the girl’s excitement.

Both kids gasped at this, their wide smiles only growing. “Well, Mabel, it looks like you might just get to have a pink pet of your very own!” Steven said, though his smile quickly faded as he happened to glance over at Lion, who was nearly ready to leap into the pen and make one of the pigs his next snack. “Lion, wait! Those pigs aren’t bacon! Yet!”

As Steven hurried to restrain Lion, Mabel continued to look over the pigs, before setting her sights on the smallest of the bunch. The pig was undoubtedly adorable, very pink, and its large, doleful
dark eyes were set on the girl in a blank, yet contented gaze as it oinked at her.

“He said ‘Mabel’!” Mabel gasped in awe. “Either that or doorbell. Did you say ‘Mabel’ or ‘doorbell’?”

The pig oinked once more, and the girl was quick to interpret the noise as her name this time, which only made her adore it even more. “Oh, look!” Mabel’s delight was suddenly shattered as she heard a familiar mocking voice from behind. She glanced away from the pig for a moment to see Pacifica and her friends passing by, laughing over how she was bonding with a pig. “Mabel found her real twin.”

The heiress and her friends continued to laugh snidely as they walked off, ignoring the bitter glare Mabel was sending their way. “Pacifica!” the girl whispered harshly before turning back to the stall. “Sir, I must have that pig!”

“Ah, ol’ fifteen-poundy!” the operator declared, looking over at the pig. “So, how much you guessin’ he weighs?”

“Um… fifteen pounds?”

“Are you some kind of a witch?” the operator asked with a suspicious glance, though he obliged and handed the girl her new pig nonetheless. “Well, here’s your pig!”

Mabel hardly heard the nearby crowd applaud her as she happily held her new pig, smiling down at it lovingly, her heart swelling with deep affection for the adorable animal. Steven rejoined her just a moment later with Lion following not too far behind, even if he was still eyeing the other pigs hungrily.

“Whoo… well, that was exhausting,” the young Gem let out a deep breath. “So, how’d it go?”

“See for yourself!” Mabel proudly declared, holding her pig out for Steven to see.

“Whoa! Mabel, he’s so cute!” Steven exclaimed, giving the pig a gentle stroke on the head, which he accepted with a happy oink. “What are you gonna name him?”

“Hm…” Mabel mused thoughtfully, looking down at her prize with an inquisitive smile. “I think I’ll go with… Waddles! You know, because he waddles!”

“I doubt there’s ever been a better name for a pig,” Steven agreed. “And I bet Lion and Waddles will be great friends! If Lion doesn’t mistake him for food like the other pigs…”

“Oh, I hope not… But let’s try it anyway!” Mabel gently put Waddles down on the ground in front of Lion, as both her and Steven stood close by, ready to separate the two of them in case their first interaction turned disastrous. Waddles sat calmly before Lion, hardly even daunted by the large beast in front of him, even as Lion began to tentatively sniff the pig in inspection. Steven and Mabel both crossed their fingers, hoping that their pets would get along as good as they did. However, just as Lion lowered his head in what looked like an attempt to lash out and bite Waddles, he did something unexpectedly tender instead. He licked him.

“Aw…” Both pet owners gushed fondly as the two pink animals got acquainted with each other, somehow instantly hitting it off despite their drastically different species. Neither Steven nor Mabel could really contain their shared elation as they rushed forward, both of them embracing their respective pets in tight, affectionate hugs. Mabel especially wrapped Waddles up into a warm embrace, knowing that she had scarcely ever treasured anything as much as she treasured her new pig. “Everything is different now,” she whispered happily as she continued to hold Waddles close.
to her, knowing that she never wanted to let go.

In contrast to Garnet’s approach of throwing a ball at the target with all her might, Amethyst took a more brutish approach of tossing as many balls as she could at once. Since the purple Gem was a much better sport when it came to Stan’s games and cons than Garnet or Pearl was, she was laughing right along with the conman as she shapeshifted more arms and used them to catapult balls towards the target wildly, despite the fact that few of them even got close to hitting the target.

“Amethyst, please!” Pearl scolded as the purple Gem scooped up even more balls, forcing her to put out even more money for them to play. “If you keep this up, we’ll run out of money!”

“Aw, don’t worry, P,” Amethyst rolled her eyes. “I know you have an unlimited stash tucked away in your gem.”

“What?!?” Stan exclaimed, sitting up straight in his spot in the tank. “R-really? How much money are we talking here?”

Pearl smirked slyly upon hearing this, realizing that she could very well gain the advantage through this. “Oh, well I really don’t know,” she said with false innocence. “But maybe I could come up with a rough estimate if you were to… take a little swim.”

Stan was quick to catch onto the game she was playing, and despite his greed, he knew he could play it even better. “Nice try,” he said knowingly. “But I’m nobody’s fool. And besides, all of that cash will be mine anyway before the day is through.”

“Not if we stop playing,” Pearl reminded with a cold glower.

“Yeah, but are you guys really gonna give up so easily?”

The Gems exchanged a glance at this, before they all looked towards the target with resolve. If they could take on countless monsters and conquer them all, then they could easily topple the conman into a mere dunk tank, even if it seemed impossible.

“We’re the Crystal Gems,” Garnet said boldly, knowing that this was a rather trivial matter, though it was one that they would triumph in nonetheless. “And we never give up.”

Despite the fact that neither Mabel nor Steven had shown up yet to help him, Dipper was doing a fairly good job of making sure him and Wendy stayed clear of Robbie. So far, there hadn’t been any signs of the moody teen, which Dipper took as a great sign as it allowed him more one-on-one time with Wendy as they continued to explore the fair.

“Whoa, check it out!” Wendy’s excited exclamation broke through Dipper’s alert focus as she pointed out a nearby stall. It was a ball toss game, and the featured prize for winning was a large, colorful stuffed animal of indeterminate species. “I don’t know if it’s a duck or a panda, but I want one!”

Knowing that this would be a perfect opportunity to impress the cashier, Dipper took this chance, leading the way to the game with every intention of winning one of the stuffed animals for her. “My uncle taught me the secret to these games,” he said as the two of them approached the stand.
“You aim for the carnie’s head, and take the prize when he’s unconscious.”

“Ha ha, nice!” Wendy chuckled in amusement.

“One ball please,” Dipper said as he handed the carnie a dollar.

“You only get one chance,” the carnie said gruffly as he handed the boy a ball and stepped out of the way to the stack of bottles. Wendy smiled in encouragement as she gave Dipper two thumbs up, giving him the confidence boost he needed as he raised the ball and took aim.

“And a-one and a-two and a-three!” With as much force as he could muster, Dipper threw the ball at the bottles, only for it to ricochet off of them upon contact and come flying back. Time seemed to slow down and speed up all at once as the ball sped towards them before finally hitting Wendy squarely in the face.

“Ah! My eye!” the cashier cried in pain as she quickly covered the eye the ball had hit.

“Oh my gosh!” Dipper exclaimed in panicked concern, instantly feeling guilty. “Wendy! I’m so sorry! Are you ok?”

Wendy let out a groan as she uncovered her now-bruised eye. “Does it look swollen?”

Dipper gasped, horrified and shocked that he had managed to indirectly give his crush a black eye. “U-uh, it’s ok! Everything’s gonna be fine! I’ll… I’ll go get some ice!” Not wasting a single second, he hurried off, rushing for the icebox on the porch of the shack and grabbing a large bag of ice to take back to the cashier. However, as he began to run back to her with the ice on hand, he had a hard time finding her through the thick crowds traversing the fair. “Where is she?” Dipper muttered to himself anxiously, running through the crowd blindly. He was so caught up in trying to sift through the fairgoers that he didn’t even notice that someone else was running in his direction until he in avertedly collided with the goggled man. The bag of ice burst open as Dipper fell back onto the ground, the cold cubes scattering all around him as they spilled out of the bag. “Hey! Watch where you’re going, man!” he scolded in exasperation as he tried to scoop the ice bag into the torn bag. The man he had bumped into didn’t respond as he quickly grabbed the tape measurer he had dropped before running off into the crowds once more.

After Dipper had finished gathering all of the ice he could salvage, he began to head back towards Wendy once more, though he immediately stopped in his tracks when he finally spotted her from a distance. His heart instantly sank the moment he saw that she was with Robbie, who had offered up his snow cone as a cold compress for the cashier’s swollen eye.

“Ok, just ease your eye into that freezy cone,” the teen coaxed with an easy grin.

“Thanks, Robbie,” Wendy said with a warm smile as she let him hold the cone to her eye. “That’s really sweet. The gesture, and the flavored syrup.”

“Yeah, good thing I was at the right place at the right time,” Robbie said with an awkward chuckle. “Y’know… I’ve been meaning to ask you… We’ve been spending a lot of time together lately and I was wondering if… um… if you wanna… go out with me?”

Wendy pondered this for a moment, still not spotting Dipper as he stood across the way, gripping what was left of the bag of ice until his knuckles were white. He dropped the bag altogether though as the cashier finally gave her answer. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Sweet!” Robbie cheered, not hesitating to wrap an arm around his new girlfriend’s shoulder as the two of them walked off. As they left, all Dipper could do was watch in distraught silence, his
expression frozen into one of horror and dismay. Despite his best efforts, he had been just a few moments too late, allowing Robbie to swoop in and solve the problem that he had caused in the first place. Dipper knew that if his throw hadn’t missed in the first place, then none of this would have happened. But as it stood, what had first been a minor accident had snowballed into a monumental disaster, one that had succeeded in completely ruining everything.

The boy was in such despair over what had just happened that he hardly even noticed the pink beast that had strolled up to him, carrying three passengers now, including the pig that was proudly perched atop his head. “Dipper, look!” Mabel exclaimed, bouncing up and down in excitement. “I won a pig! His name is Waddles! Isn’t he the cutest thing ever?”

“Don’t forget about Lion, Mabel,” Steven laughed. “You know, between Lion’s cuteness and Waddle’s cuteness, we could have a cute-off!”

“But it’d be a tie!” both of them exclaimed simultaneously, breaking down into shared laughter.

Despite Steven and Mabel’s apparent glee, Dipper could only let out a sorrowful sigh as he muttered to himself in disappointment. “Everything is different now…”

Though Mabel was in the midst of swooning over how Lion was gently nuzzling Waddles, Steven managed to hear this saddened statement. “Is something wrong, Dipper?” he asked with newfound concern. Dipper didn’t reply as he simply pointed to Wendy and Robbie, who were happily laughing together as they boarded the Tunnel of Love and Corn Dogs.

“Oh…” Steven and Mabel said in realization, exchanging a guilty glance as they remembered their promise to help Dipper win Wendy over.

“Sorry, bro-bro…” Mabel frowned. “We were gonna come help you, but… we kinda got caught up winning Waddles and… well, yeah…”

“Hey, but look on the bright side,” Steven said, trying his best to be encouraging. “Even if things didn’t work out between you and Wendy, you still have us! And of course…” the young Gem grinned as he coaxed Lion over, while Mabel held Waddles up lovingly.

“Lion and Waddles!” the two of them proclaimed happily.

Dipper cringed as Waddles gave him a lick on the cheek, while Lion barred his teeth and growled in annoyance. The boy simply pushed past both animals, not in the mood for either sentiment. “Thanks, but no thanks,” he said dejectedly as he let out a long sigh. “It’s no use… I’ll never have a chance with Wendy now. It’s over…”

As night began to fall over the Mystery Fair, the crowds of patrons hardly died down, even as the colorful array of carnival lights lit up the area. The Gems had hardly noticed the sun’s descent as they remained at the dunk tank for most of the day, all three of them growing increasingly more frustrated with the continual smug grin Stan had been giving them the entire time. Still, they weren’t able to give up until they had succeeded in dunking the conman, even if it was just for the satisfaction of the simple victory.

“C’mon, just face it already,” Stan said a bit boredly as Pearl stepped up to take yet another turn. “You three are never gonna dunk me. Might as well step aside and let everyone else have a shot.”

The trio glanced behind them briefly to see the rather long line that had congregated behind them,
all of them clearly rather impatient with the lengthy wait time for the game as they shouted their dissent.

“Yeah!”

“Get out of the way!”

“We wanna waste our money too!”

Of course, in their stubborn resolve, the Gems hardly paid them any mind as they simply turned back to Stan once more. Pearl glared bitterly at him as she gripped the ball in her hand even tighter, her determination perhaps even stronger than Garnet or Amethyst’s considering her disdain for the conman. “We told you,” she said, her voice low and rather threatening as she took aim. “We!” she shouted, throwing the ball quickly. “Are!” Without missing a beat, the white Gem grabbed another ball and chucked it at the target with little calculation. “Not!” Pearl tried once more, fueled by annoyance more than anything else. “Leaving!” Her voice rose with each word as she tossed more and more balls, only for the ones that did manage to hit the target to bounce right off. “Until!” Stan could only respond to her growing rage with an amused, somewhat spiteful laugh, taking pride in the fact that he knew the secret of the tank and the Gems didn’t. “We!” As Pearl hurled more and more balls, Garnet was quick to put more money down on the counter to make up for her turns, even if Amethyst was laughing just as much as Stan was. “Dunk!” Absolutely livid by this point, the white Gem threw her last ball with as much force as she could muster. “You!”

Considering how hard Pearl had thrown the last ball, it was no surprise that it bounced against the target hard, and was sent zooming back towards the Gem. Instead of catching it this time, they dodged it, allowing it to fly freely past them and soar above the fair unrestrained.

Dipper hardly even noticed the ball fly over him as he listlessly lay on the skee ball game, staring up into the dusky sky despondently. Still trying their best to console and cheer him up, Steven and Mabel had gone to the trouble of comically dressing Lion and Waddles up, even if doing so to the pink beast was something of a challenge.

“Paging Dr. Waddles,” Mabel said in a deep voice, holding the pig up to her saddened brother. “We’ve got a boy here with a broken heart.”

“We’ll need 10 CCs of smiles, STAT!” Steven exclaimed, playfully pressing against Lion, who remained as still and stoic as always.

Both of them laughed heartily, though they stopped when they noticed that Dipper wasn’t joining them. “Come on, man. These are the jokes,” Mabel frowned.

“Mabel, Steven,” Dipper finally spoke up, still not looking at either of them as he continued to stare straight up. “Have either you guys ever wished that you could go back and undo just one mistake?”

“Nope!” Mabel proclaimed as she sat down with Waddles in her lap. “I do everything right, all the time!”

“I think we all have things we regret,” Steven said a bit more seriously. “But Garnet once told me that we need to move past our mistakes so we can try better next time.”

“Garnet always has the best advice,” Mabel noted with a nod.

“I know, right?” Steven agreed.

Dipper, on the other hand, wasn’t as convinced. “I mean, Wendy only went out with Robbie
because he was there with the ice,” he began as he climbed off the scee ball board. “And she needed the ice because she got hit with the baseball, and I would have had the ice if it wasn’t for-” He stopped short with a gasp as he happened to spot the very stranger he had run into earlier, who had indirectly caused him to lose Wendy, slip through the nearby crowd. “That guy!”

Though there were admittedly confused, Mabel and Steven followed Dipper as he rushed after the man, finally managing to catch up with him as he stopped behind one of the fair tents. “Hey, you!” Dipper called rather angrily as he approached the jump-suit clad, fully bald man. “Toolbelt! You ruined my life?”

“Huh?” the man asked, both confused and slightly startled at the sight of the three kids.

“Don’t huh me!” Dipper scolded. “I’ve seen you before! What’s your deal? Are you following us around?”

“Yeah… You do seem kinda suspicious…” Steven noted, glancing over the man’s strange apparel.

“And why are you bald?” Mabel interrogated. “What’s all that about?”

The man groaned in aggravation, realizing that there would be no fleeing this time. “I can’t believe this! My position has been COMPROMISED!” he exclaimed, quickly pushing several buttons on his intricate watch. “Assuming stealth mode!” The kids all watched in awe as the man’s jumpsuit suddenly changed, projecting several photorealistic landscapes onto it, though none of them really camouflaged him correctly. “Color match! Initiating color match! Come on! Dang it!” he grew increasingly panicked as he horridly took a screwdriver out and did his best to repair the broken device.

“That was amazing!” Steven exclaimed in a wide smile. “Almost as cool as shapeshifting! Well, almost…”

“That watch is so fancy,” Mabel mused with interest. “And super techy! Are you from the future or something?”

“Uh, NO!” the man exclaimed defensively, even if it was clear he was hiding something. “Who told you that?! MEMORY WIPE!” He was quick to throw said wipe at Mabel, though she was quite undaunted as the wet napkin hit her in the face.

“This is a baby wipe,” Mabel frowned as she removed the napkin.

“All right… You’ve cornered me…” the man sighed in relent, knowing he had been caught. “I’m a… time traveler…”

“Whoa! So do you have like a time traveling car or something like that?” Steven asked, completely intrigued.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the time traveler scoffed. “A car is nowhere near practical enough to be used to travel through time. Not like this!” He grinned proudly as he held up what he claimed to be his time machine, though none of the kids were too impressed with it.

“Is that a tape measurer?” Dipper asked, raising an eyebrow at the small device.

“You shut your time-mouth!” the man exclaimed hotly. “I’ll have you know this is sensitive, extremely complicated time equipment.”

“Is this making any sense to you guys?” Dipper asked Steven and Mabel, who were both just as on
the fence about all this as he was.

“Not really…”

“I think he’s just crazy.”

“Oh, you don’t believe me?” the time traveler asked challengingly. He grinned as he pulled the tape out of the measurer, before letting it snap back as he suddenly teleported out of sight, only to reappear seconds later clad in old English attire. “Guess where I was!”

“Whoa!” all three kids exclaimed in unified amazement.

“That’s right,” the time traveler crossed his arms and smirked. “Fifteen years ago, there was a costume shop right here! One second.” With a flick of the tape measurer, he disappeared again, only to return wearing his jumpsuit, which was lightly flaming thanks to the charge of the trip. “Ah! Aw, heck!” he exclaimed, beating the small flames down. “Pat! Pat down!”

“So… who are you again?” Mabel asked, realizing they hadn’t gotten the time traveler’s name yet.

“Blendin Blandin,” he introduced himself, holding out a holographic ID card for them to see. “Time Anomaly Removal Crew, year twenty seventy-twelve. My mission is to stop a series of time anomalies that are supposed to happen in this very location! B-but… I haven’t found any anomalies yet! I don’t know if it’s some sort of time paradox, or if I’m just really tired, or what…”

Blendin let out an exhausted sigh as he took a seat on a nearby barrel, giving the kids a chance to exchange a glance of continued bewilderment. A sudden idea came to Dipper though as he happened to glance up to see Wendy and Robbie blissfully riding the Ferris wheel together. Against all odds, might just get a chance to go back and correct the mistake he had made earlier yet. If he could just get his hands on that time travel device, then he would still have a chance with Wendy after all.

“Hey, so since you’re all worn out and everything, maybe you could use a break,” Dipper suggested to Blendin with a somewhat anxious grin, knowing he had to be careful about how he did this. “You know, to help you get your focus back and everything.”

“Definitely, definitely,” Mabel agreed after catching the wink Dipper had sent her way. Thankfully, the twins were so in sync with each other that they really didn’t have to verbally relay the plan to each other; they just knew. “Might we recommend one of the various attractions at the Mystery Fair?”

Though Steven wasn’t aware of the plan just yet, he still ended up helping, mostly out of his generous nature. “You can even have the rest of my ride tickets!” he offered kindly as he handed the time traveler his tickets. “Enjoy!

Blendin seemed to consider this for a moment before smiling in agreement as he stood. “You know what? What the heck! I’m worth it!”

“Yeah, and while you’re gone, maybe we could hold onto your time machine for you,” Dipper said leadingly. “You wouldn’t want it to get broken, would you?”

“Oh no, I know what you’re up to!” Blendin said firmly as he shook his head, keeping the measuring tape out of the boy’s reach. “You just wanna play around with time travel, don’t you?”

“Well… kinda… Maybe… Yes…”
“Well, forget it! It’s out of the question! Didn’t you hear what I said about this being a highly sensitive piece of equipment?!”

“But we’ll be super careful with it! We promise!” Steven reassured, though Blendin still wasn’t having it.

“No,” he said with resolve, attaching the tape measurer back to his belt as he began to leave. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m off to enjoy your primitive carnival attractions. But I’ve got my eye on you!”

The time traveler continued to stammer awkwardly as he went over to the nearby spinning barrel ride, handing one of his tickets to Soos, who was operating it. “One please.”

“Oh, sorry, dude,” Soos frowned as he noticed Blendin’s loaded tool belt. “But you’re gonna have to leave your belt off during the ride. One of your tools might fly off and accidently fix something.”

Blendin scowled upon hearing this, though he hesitantly complied, giving into his desire to ride the barrels. “Guard it with your life,” he said firmly as he handed the belt to the handyman.

“I’ll watch it like a hawk, dude,” Soos saluted as Blendin boarded one of the barrels. The handyman set the belt down beside him as he started the ride, though he looked away from it as he watched the time traveler enjoy himself. “Like a hawk!” he reassured, even if he wasn’t paying any attention to the belt. This easily allowed Dipper and Mabel to sneak up behind Soos, stealthily swiping the belt, or more specifically, the measuring tape away while neither the handyman nor the time traveler were looking.

“I can’t believe you guys stole his time tape,” Steven frowned a bit guilty as he sat inside the shack with Dipper and Mabel, all three of them huddled around the time machine. “That doesn’t really seem right…”

“We’re not stealing it, Steven,” Dipper corrected. “We’re just… borrowing it.”

“Even though he told us not to!” Mabel proclaimed proudly. “So… I guess it is kinda stealing, if you wanna read into it like that… Hm…”

“How we got it doesn’t matter,” Dipper shook his head after all three of them pondered the morals of the situation for a moment. “What matters is that sitting right in front of us is a ticket to any moment in history.”

“Let’s go get two dodos and force them to make out!” Mabel exclaimed in excitement.

“I dunno, guys…” Steven said uneasily. “Time travel can be kinda dangerous. It can get you into a lot of trouble, especially if you try to use it to gather a huge army of your past selves. Trust me, I know…”

“That’s why we’re going to be smart about this,” Dipper reassured. “All that talk about time paradoxes kinda freaked me out. All I’m gonna do is go back and fix my mistake. If I don’t miss that ball throw, I won’t hit Wendy in the eye, and Robbie won’t comfort her, and they won’t start going out.”

“I’m coming too!” Mabel said as she hugged Waddles even closer to her. “I wanna relive the
greatest moment in my life: winning Waddles!"

"Are you coming too, Steven?"

"Well…” the young Gem said hesitantly. “As long as there aren’t going to be any crazy versions of my past selves trying to kill me… then count me in.”

"Okay,” Dipper said with resolve as he pulled out the tape until it read several hours ago. “See you guys later.”

"You mean earlier!” Mabel joked as she put Waddles on the floor, more than ready to win him again in the past.

Without any further ado, Dipper released the tape, allowing it to snap back as the trio gave each other a three-way high five. Slowly yes steadily, time froze in place, not just inside the shack, but everywhere else too. And, as soon as time had come to a complete halt, it soon began to rewind itself as the kids disappeared, the time machine pushing them back into the past by approximately six hours.

The trio reappeared in the exact same spot instantaneously, though a bit worse for wear as a small flame sparked up on Dipper’s hat, though he was quick to pat it out before it could spread. “So? Did it work?” Steven asked eagerly.

“Only one way to find out!” Mabel grinned as she led the way out the door. Upon opening it, the kids were both surprised and pleased to see that it was daytime once again as the bright midday sun shined down upon the bustling fair.

“It’s twelve o’clock!” Stan’s voice rang out over his megaphone from the dunk tank. “The dunk tank is now open! Step right up and dunk me, folks! I’m talking to you cut-offs!”

The kids exchanged excited smiles as they realized that they had indeed been transported into the past, to the exact time they had wanted to go back to. “Do-over?” Dipper asked Steven and Mabel with a daring grin.

“Do-over.”

“Do-over!”

The trio was quick to disband after this, with Steven and Mabel rushing for the win a pig game as soon as the young Gem had located Lion. The carnie was in the midst of announcing the rules to the game as the kids rushed up to the pin, Mabel already grabbing Waddles and holding him tight. “If’n you can guess-"

“FIFTEEN POUNDS!” Mabel quickly interrupted as Steven successfully held Lion back from trying to snack on the other pigs. “And yes, I am a witch!”

“Well, time to round up a mob,” the carnie said, lighting a torch as the kids departed.

“Lion, meet Waddles,” Steven smiled as the two animals stood apace from each other. “Waddles, Lion. Huh, you know this is kinda redundant.”

“Yeah, but it looks like they still love each other!” Mabel gushed happily as the pig and lion gently nuzzled each other. “They’re destined to be best friends, just like us!”

Steven laughed brightly in agreement with this, and Mabel joined in as she watched Lion amicably
let Waddles climb up into his mane and settle for a warm nap. Of course, the pig didn’t have too long to rest as his new owner was already planning all of the ways they could strengthen the bond between the two animals with the young Gem.

Meanwhile, Dipper had easily managed to locate Wendy, his confidence restored as he knew that history certainly couldn’t repeat itself in this instance. Right?

“Hey, Wendy!” the boy greeted as he caught up with the teen.

“Oh, there you are,” Wendy grinned. “Hey, what happened to your hat?”

“Uh, nothing!” Dipper said quickly, realizing he still had a scorch mark on his hat from traveling through time. “Hey, look! What’s that?”

“Whoa!” Wendy gasped in excitement as she hurried over to the ball game stand while Dipper let out a sigh of relief. “Check it out! I don’t know if it’s a duck or a panda, but I want one.”

Dipper nodded with a broad grin as he paid for a turn, hoping that he could avoid the mistake he had made last time. “You only get once chance,” the carnie reminded as he handed the boy a ball.

“That’s what you think…” Dipper muttered to himself with a clever smirk. “One panda-duck, coming right up!” Wendy gave him a thumbs up as he took aim, taking care this time that he did so correctly to avoid repeating his previous mistake. “Okay, Dipper,” he said to himself, taking in a deep breath. “Second chance, don’t mess this up.”

After a moment of mental preparation, he finally threw the ball, cheering as he managed to knock down all of the bottles and win the game. However, against all odds, the ball bounced off the wooden back of the stand after it had hit the bottles, flying back and pelting Wendy in the eye in almost the very same way it had the first time.

“Ah! My eye!” the cashier exclaimed, quickly covering her injured eye.

“What?!” Dipper gasped, completely appalled that the very same thing had happened twice, despite his precautions.

“Does it look swollen?” Wendy asked, cringing as she uncovered her black eye.

Dipper didn’t reply as he glanced down at his hands in distraught confusion, wondering what could have possibly gone wrong this time. “That’s so weird…”

“Oh, hey Robbie,” Wendy greeted the moody teen as he arrived with a snow cone, prompting Dipper to glance up with steadily growing dread considering he knew what was about to unfold. Once again, Robbie comforted the cashier, offering his snow cone to her swollen eye as they went into nearly the exact same exchange as they had the first time.

“So anyway…” Robbie said casually. “We’ve been hanging out a lot and I’ve been wondering if, maybe… you would wanna… go out with me?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Wendy replied, much to Dipper’s dismay as he realized in horrified shock that things had turned out exactly the same as they had before, even if that should have been completely impossible. Time travel was supposed to have fixed this problem, but instead it had duplicated it identically. And to Dipper, it made no sense whatsoever.

“And the exact same thing happened twice,” Dipper explained to Mabel and Steven as they fed Lion and Waddles a sugary meal of candied apples and funnel cake. “It was spooky.”
“That is weird…” Steven agreed with a frown. “I can’t say I know a whole lot about time travel, but all the movies make it seem like changing one little thing should change everything. So why didn’t that work for you, Dipper?”

“Ooo, maybe it’s a time curse!” Mabel suggested as she picked Waddles up. “Waddles, can you say ‘time curse’?”

The pig simply oinked in response as the girl fawned over him once more. “Aw… Your face is so fat!”

“Is it possible that the forces of time naturally conspire to undo any new outcomes?” Dipper mused, though his intellectual line of thought was lost on the others. “Nah, it couldn’t be. I just need to try again. Third time’s the charm!”

“Yeah, how hard could it be?” Steven asked as they all gathered around the tape measurer once more.

“To the past!” Mabel proclaimed as Dipper pulled the tape once more, sending them back only about an hour this time. The three of them assumed that this would be the last time they’d have to make the trip, for after all, how hard could it really be to change fate itself?

As it turned out, changing fate was very hard, to the point of being nigh impossible. After accidentally hitting Wendy in the eye for the third time, Dipper had resolved that he would continue going back and trying again until he had finally gotten it right. But as he reversed time with Mabel and Steven over and over again, and continued to inadvertently pelt Wendy’s eye in a variety of different ways, he found that each time was even worse than the one before it.

Perhaps the worst time of all had been the one in which Dipper had tried to avoid playing the ball game altogether, hoping that he could dissuade Wendy from the prize and move onto something else. “Um… Wendy? How badly do you want that stuffed animal thing?”

“More than anything in the world, Dipper,” Wendy said with absolute sincerity.

“O-okay…” the boy sighed, already bracing himself for another failure. Aiming as best as he could, he tossed the ball, only this time, he managed to set off something of a chain reaction. The ball struck the carnie rather brutally as it bounced off of him and into one of the stuffed animals, before flying into a hanging sack of game balls, which broke upon the impact and spilled all over Wendy, knocking her to the ground painfully.

Of course, before Dipper could even try to help the injured cashier up, Robbie had already arrived on the scene, scowling at the boy and shaking his head as he helped Wendy get back on her feet. Dipper didn’t even have to listen to the conversation that unfolded between the two teens after that to know that they were going to start dating for what felt like the hundredth time for him.

Despite the fact that Dipper was having no success to speak of, Mabel was having nothing but success as her and Steven won Waddles and introduced him to Lion every time they traveled back through time. They found that, every single time, the two animals hit it off perfectly, and though their bond never really carried over to each new timeline, the kids were content in simply watching every adorable interaction between their pink companions. The shine that Lion and Waddles had taken to one another was a strange, yet unique one, one that neither Steven nor Mabel could really explain, but they reveled in it nonetheless. Every new memory they formed with their beloved pets
and each other would certainly be treasured, as they were all very fond and happy ones. From
giving the animals sugary carnival treats, to proudly parading around the fair on Lion, to taking
them on as many rides as they would fit on, Steven and Mabel both knew that they were bonding
with their pink pets in ways that they would certainly never forget.

The kids had lost count of how many times they had gone back in time, though they had arrived in
the past a bit earlier than usual this time so Dipper could plan out a proper strategy to avoid failing
again. “If I just average the wind speed…” the boy muttered to himself as he focused on the rather
complex scientific equation he had scribbled on the side of a popcorn machine. “Factor in cotton
candy…”

“Face it, Dipper,” Mabel interrupted as her and Steven sat atop Lion. “You’re obviously fated to
have a bad day at the fair, just like I’m fated to be with Waddles!” She grinned happily as she held
up the small sweater she was in the middle of knitting, one that she was designing especially for
her prized pig.

“And how Lion and Waddles are fated to be best friends!” Steven added cheerfully, patting Lion’s
side as the pink beast yawned stoically.

Dipper wasn’t really paying either of them any mind as he continued trying to figure his plan out,
even if things weren’t coming together as he hoped they would. “There’s just one variable
missing…”

“What’s a variable?” Mabel asked curiously as she popped her head up into the empty space of the
glass where the equal sign was. Dipper gasped upon seeing his sister, realizing that all at once,
everything had become clear.

“Mabel, that’s it!”

“What’s it?”

“You are!” Dipper exclaimed with an excited grin. “And you too, Steven! You guys are exactly
what I need for my plan to work perfectly!”

“Then I guess we have to help,” Steven said with a small laugh.

“Yeah, but what about Waddles?” Mabel frowned, knowing she had yet to win the pig in this
timeline.

“It’ll just take a few minutes,” Dipper assured, already grabbing his sister’s wrist and leading her
off as Steven followed on Lion. “Let’s go!”

“Are you gonna go, man?” Wendy asked Dipper as they stood before the ball game, noticing that
the boy seemed rather distracted. Dipper, on the other hand, had taken just a moment to make sure
that everything was going to add up exactly how he had calculated it, and indeed, conditions were
optimal. The wind was just right, Steven and Mabel were both in place; there was no way he could
fail this time.

“And a-one, and a-two, and a-” With a forceful flick of the wrist, Dipper threw the ball, only this
time, instead of tossing it towards the bottles, he threw it straight up into the air.

“Aw, dude! You missed!” Wendy frowned, confused as to why he had been so off.
“Did I?” Dipper asked with a sly smirk, watching as his plan began to unfold. Gravity succeeded in bringing the ball back down as it rolled down the side of the game tent, flinging it up into the air once more. As the ball sailed is way, Steven sat high atop Lion’s back, baseball bat in hand as he gave it a generous whack towards the Mystery Shack. From there, the ball struck the weather vane before rolling down the gutter. Mabel tilted the gutter up from her spot on the roof as the ball flew off of it, sending it careening towards the dunk tank.

The crowd gathered around the tank all gasped as a new ball veered their way, one that surprisingly wasn’t thrown by any of the Gems. Garnet stilled her latest throw as the trio watched the mysterious new ball bounce off the target, eliciting yet another triumphant laugh from Stan as the crowd booed in aggravation.

“Oh, come on!” Pearl groaned in exasperation.

“Where did that ball even come from?” Amethyst asked in considerable confusion as Garnet threw her ball and missed yet again.

Regardless, the ball continued its intended journey as it zoomed back towards the ball game, flying in between Dipper and Wendy and straight into the bottles, knocking them all down in one fell swoop. The ball still didn’t stop however as it bounced off the back of the stand, flying upwards this time as it tore through the top of the tent and into the air again.

Wendy applauded Dipper’s success as he grinned widely, absolutely relieved to see that things had finally, at last, gone his way. “Your stuffed creature of indeterminate species, miss,” the carnie said as he handed the cashier one of the duck-pandas.

“Awesome!” Wendy smiled as she gave the stuffed animal a squeeze. “Thanks, dude!”

“Anytime,” Dipper said smoothly as he took off his hat, catching the ball in it just in time.

“There you are, Wendy,” Robbie said as he arrived, though this time, Dipper was anything but concerned about the moody teen.

“Hey, Robbie,” Wendy greeted, even if she was still fawning over her new stuffed animal.

“So… I was wondering if I…” Robbie began, stammering a bit this time. “If you… you, uh…”

“Hey, look what Dipper got for me!” Wendy interrupted him, showing off the duck-panda proudly. Dipper flashed the teen a somewhat smug grin, more than satisfied to see Robbie’s disappointed scowl after how many times he had won in other timelines.

“Pfft, whatever,” the teen rolled his eyes caustically. “Can’t even tell what species it is. Stupid.” Clearly embarrassed, Robbie pulled his hoodie up and tightened it, sheepishly walking away in defeat.

“What’s his deal?” Wendy frowned, unsure of why Robbie was being so sour about what she assumed was nothing. “Looks like I came to the fair with the right guy.”

Dipper resisted the urge to cheer upon hearing this, even if his elation was hard to contain in light of how he had finally righted his wrong of the past. As Wendy headed onto the next attraction, he turned to see Steven and Mabel not too far behind him, both of them anxious to see how things had gone. Not wanting to tip the cashier off, he simply gave them a smile and a thumbs up, which they both silently cheered over.

“Nice! I’m glad things finally worked out!” Steven said brightly.
“Anytime, broseph,” Mabel winked at her brother as her and the young Gem boarded Lion. “Now to win my pig. Let’s-AH!” The girl let out a sharp, horrified scream as she turned to the win a pig game, only to see a sight that nearly brought tears to her eyes. Waddles, *her* Waddles, was in the arms of Pacifica Northwest, who was currently in the process of leashing the pig, despite his loud squeals of protest against her.

“He’s all yours!” the carnie announced to the heiress. “No one else’s! Ol’ Fifteen Poundy! Yours. Forever!”

Steven as also quite dismayed to see this sigh as he placed a consoling hand on Mabel’s shoulder. “Oh, Mabel… I’m so sorry…”

Mabel didn’t respond, but she was finally moved to tears as the frightened pig happened to look over in her direction as Pacifica began to drag him off, letting out a shrill cry all the while, one that absolutely tore at Mabel’s already-breaking heart.

“NOOOOOOOO!”

After his victory at the ball game, Dipper found that the rest of his afternoon had only gotten even better as he enjoyed the rest of the fair with Wendy, completely free of having to worry about Robbie or anything else getting between them. The two of them had played countless more games, watched the amusing escapes of the Gems still fruitlessly try to dunk Stan, and rode every ride at several times without tiring.

“That was even more awesome the third time!” Wendy laughed as her and Dipper got off the Tunnel of Love and Corn Dogs once more. “Hey, look! Funnel cake! Let’s go get some, Dipper!”

The boy was more than ready to follow his crush, though he stopped short as he heard a familiar, yet distant scream. It became steadily louder though, and Dipper quickly discovered that it was indeed coming from Mabel as her and Steven rode up towards him on Lion. The girl was clearly distraught as she cried at the top of her lungs in both panic and grief, despite the young Gem’s best efforts to console her.

“AHHHHHHHHHHH!” she screamed loudly before ultimately burying her face into Lion’s mane, though that only muffled the sound somewhat.

“What’s-” Dipper tried to ask, though his sister was quick to cut him off.

“AHHHHHHH!”

“Mabel, what’s-”

“AHHHHHHH!”

Seeing that he was getting nowhere with Mabel, Dipper decided to go for a different approach. “Steven, what’s wrong with her?”

“Um… she sort of… lost Waddles…” Steven said hesitantly, though the very mention of what had happened only made Mabel sob once more.

“What?”
“We messed up the timeline!” Mabel wailed miserably. “While we were busy helping you, Pacifica came along and won Waddles before I could! She TOOK Waddles, Dipper!”

“Oh, Mabel… I’m sorry,” Dipper said with sincere sympathy.

“It’s ok,” Mabel sniffled as she hopped off Lion. “We… we just need to back and do things differently.”

“Mabel!” Dipper exclaimed as she took the time machine from him, though he was quick to swipe it back. “Look, I did the math. In any other timeline, Wendy ends up going out with Robbie. I can’t mess this up again!”

“But if we don’t go, I’ll lose Waddles forever!” Mabel argued, reaching for the tape measurer as Dipper kept it out of her reach.

“I said no, Mabel! Now stop it!” Dipper said harshly, refusing to let her ruin his happy ending.

“But this isn’t fair!” Mabel protested, pushing against her brother as she tried her best to grab the time machine.

“Guys, stop fighting!” Steven pleaded worriedly, hating to see his friends quarrel like this. “There’s gotta be a way we can go back and do things so they’ll work out for everyone, right?”

“No!” both twins exclaimed in angry unison as they continued to bicker. However, as they grappled for the time machine, it soon fell out of their reach, causing the end of the tape to get caught by one of the passing ride cars. Dipper and Mabel both jumped for it, even as the ride dragged the tape quite a ways out before ultimately breaking free.

Steven gasped as the end of the tape was sent flying back to the measurer, and without even thinking, he urged Lion forward. “Dipper! Mabel! Wait!” the young Gem cried as the pink beast pounced upon them both. Just as they reached the twins, the time machine propelled all four of them back in time, though much further than they were used to going.

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Dipper, Mabel, and Steven all landed on top of Lion as they arrived in another time period altogether. The fair was gone completely, as was the Mystery Shack, and in its place was a simple dirt path surrounded by thick woods.

“When are we?” Dipper asked with a frown as he slid off Lion.

“The real question is: when are we?” Mabel asked with a laugh, though Steven quickly cut in and corrected her.

“Actually, I think Dipper already-”

“Yeah, I already-”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, it’s the same thing.”

The kids all paused after this short misunderstanding as a low rumbling became apparent from not too far away. “Do you guys hear that?” Dipper asked with growing concern. As the rumbling grew louder, the kids all turned to see a herd of wild buffalo rounding the path as they all stampeded
towards them blindly. They barely had time to panic, however, before Lion leapt into action, going low and scooping all three of them onto his back as he began to bound down the path. Considering his great speed, the pink beast was unable to stop himself from slipping over the edge of the nearby cliff. The kids all cried out in fear as they fell, though thankfully Steven had the wits about him to form a bubble around all of them out of panic alone. Fortunately, they didn’t fall too terribly far as they soon broke through the canvas of a covered wagon rolling down the cliffside path below.

“Be on the lookout for mountain lions, travelers!” one of the settlers towards the front of the wagon train called to the rest of his companion.

“I believe I just saw one fall from the sky!” one of the other pioneers exclaimed, glancing back towards the trail.

“You’re probably just having hallucinations from your bout of dysentery, Jonathan!” another settler scoffed.

“For a new life awaits us on this… Oregon trail!”

Despite the padding of Steven’s bubble, the kids and Lion still landed in the covered wagon rather roughly, though the pink beast managed to cushion their fall yet again. “Where are we?” Mabel asked as she glanced around the packed wagon. “The 70s?”

“You sent us back 150 years, genius!” Dipper scolded harshly. “It’s pioneer times!”

“Then where are all the parrots and peg legs?” Steven asked incredulously.

“That’s pirate times, Steven.”

“By Trembly!” the wagon’s driver exclaimed as he glanced back to see the trio of kids. “Fertilia! It seems as though you’ve given birth to three more children!”

“It seems I have,” the heavy-set pioneer woman sitting at the back of the wagon spoke up, a herd of children surrounding her. “More little hands to render the tallow.”

“Tallow?” Mabel asked with a laugh. “What?”

“And they’ve even tamed a furious mountain lion!” the pioneer man proclaimed. “Quite impressive!”

“Oh, Lion’s not a mountain lion,” Steven clarified as he scratched the pink beast’s ear. “He’s just a plain ol’ lion. Well… I wouldn’t exactly call him plain since I’m pretty sure most lions usually don’t come in pink…”

“Mother, look!” one of the pioneer boys exclaimed as he pointed to Mabel. “Her mouth is full of silver!”

“These are called braces,” Mabel exclaimed, grinning wide so the boy could see.

“Mabel, we can’t start messing with the past!” Dipper reminded, still rather frustrated with her. “Remember all that stuff about time paradoxes and everything?”

“Oh, said the guy who messed with the past all day and cost me my pig?” Mabel retorted crossly. “I’ll mess with the past all I want! Check it out,” she said to the boy as she pulled a calculator out of her sweater and handed it to him. “A magic button machine! And shoes that blink!” The girl
stomped her foot down, allowing her light-up sneakers to blink as she flashed Dipper a vindictive grin.

“Stop it!” Dipper exclaimed as he took the calculator back from the awestruck pioneer boy.

“Oh, I wanna try!” Steven said readily as he took a bag of candy out of his pocket and gave it to another pioneer child. “Here you go! Food from the future!”

“They taste like pure sugar!” the girl exclaimed happily as she tried a few candies before devouring them all hungrily.

“Really?” Steven frowned, checking the package. “Huh, they’re supposed to be wild berry flavored…”

“Hey, sister!” Mabel said to the pioneer mother, ignoring her brother’s annoyed protests. “Guess who gets to vote in the future? Ladies! Up top!” She exchanged a high five with the confused woman before quickly explaining it. “That’s called a high five. Teach it to your friends!”

“Alright, that’s enough!” Dipper snatched the time machine away from Mabel while she was distracted. “I’m gonna set the timeline right!”

Before either Mabel or Steven could stop him, Dipper pulled the tape out once more, causing the three of them and Lion to disappear from the wagon and reappear in a different time period once more. They didn’t even have time to gather their bearings before they noticed the massive T-Rex towering over them, roaring hungrily as it opened its huge maw. The kids fearfully screamed at the sight of the dinosaur, and though Lion growled back at it challengingly, Dipper frantically pulled the tape out again before any confrontation could take place.

The group reappeared in what they could only describe as a dystopian future. The dark cityscape around them was in absolute ruins as soldiers wielding highly advanced weaponry ran by, screaming in fear. They all fled from what seemed to be a giant floating baby, who floated above the scene and laughed in a disturbingly deep voice as he destroyed everything in his path with his laser eyes.

“This future seems neat!” Mabel said with a grin, despite the fact that Dipper and Steven were thoroughly concerned. Not wanting to risk another moment in this disastrous landscape, they quickly transported themselves back into the past again, though as Mabel claimed the time machine once more, Dipper gave chase and Steven followed, leaping onto Lion’s back just so he could keep up with the twins.

The kids only barely noticed the half-finished Gem temple in the hills behind them as they ran around the space where the Mystery Shack would eventually be. Mabel laughed triumphantly as she held the time machine up as she ran, only for Dipper to tackle her a moment later. Still wanting the twins to patch things up, Steven clumsily fell off Lion and ran over to them in an attempt to stop them. What the young Gem hadn’t anticipated, however, was for the end of the tape to be accidentally pulled out as they all fought for it.

“Lion!” Steven gasped in sudden fear as he glanced back at his pink companion, who was already rushing for the trio. However, he was just a few seconds too late this time as the kids abruptly vanished into the future without him.

Neither Dipper nor Mabel noticed how distraught Steven was as they arrived in a more modern setting, more specifically, at Lake Gravity Falls on the opening day of fishing season. “I’m coming, Waddles!” Mabel proclaimed as she reclaimed the measuring tape.
“Hey!” Dipper protested, accidently dropping the calculator as he chased after her.

“Guys, wait!” Steven cried in an absolute panic. “We left Lion behind! We have to go back and get him!”

The young Gem’s pleas fell on deaf ears however as Mabel pulled out the tape once more, too caught up in her argument with Dipper to even notice Steven’s plight. The kids skipped through time yet again, this time to the unveiling of Wax Stan and the Wax Gems in front of the Mystery Shack. Thankfully, no one in the crowd noticed the arguing kids, even as Steven tripped over a stray chord and lost his flip flop. The trio didn’t stay in the same period too long, however, as the tape was pulled out again, landing them in front of the Mystery Shack as the Centipeedle mother thrashed about angrily, just as it had the day the kids had first met.

“Dipper, Mabel, please!” Steven practically begged as the twins continued to fight. Still though, they paid him no mind, both of them focusing on achieving their own ends in a blind pursuit. The flower clip in Mabel’s hair fell out as she fell trying to cling onto the measuring tape, but she was quick to pull it out again as both Dipper and Steven fell onto her.

The kids were quite unprepared to land in a frigid snowdrift in front of the shack, clearly many years ago as it was bereft of any of its usual tourist trap décor. And none of them were prepared for the time machine to begin sparking as they all reached for it once more.

“Ouch!” Mabel exclaimed as the overheating measurer burned her hands. “This thing is getting hotter!”

“What did you do?!” Dipper exclaimed panicked as she dropped the time machine into the snow, bright electricity surrounding it.

“I don’t know!” Mabel shouted defensively, trying to reach for it again.

“Oh no! Is it broken?!” Steven asked with growing dread. However, his question was soon answered as the electric field lashed out from the machine, transporting it and all three kids through time again. Mere moments after the kids had disappeared, a young man opened the shack door and peeked his head out, wondering what all of the prior commotion had been.

“Is someone out there, Stanford?”

“Doesn’t look like it. It must be more of those invisible Gem monsters you warned me about. Now, where were we, Rose?”

Much to the alarm of all three kids, they reappeared in what looked like absolute darkness. “W-where are we?” Steven asked worriedly, still immensely concerned about Lion.

“There’s nothing but inky blackness for miles!” Dipper exclaimed fearfully. “Mabel, look what you did! We’ve transported to the end of time!”

Upon realizing their terrible fate, all three of them let out horrified screams, for certainly they would be stuck in this infinite darkness for the rest of their lives. However, Mabel was the first one to realize that things didn’t quite add up. “Wait, why does it smell so bad in here?” Confused, she reached out and soon found a door handle. Upon pushing it open, light flooded their vision, allowing them to see that they were back at the Mystery Fair, though they had arrived in the outhouse for some reason.
“Look! We’re back in the present!”

“But which present?” Dipper asked, though he soon got his answer as he looked towards the ball toss game and saw Wendy happily hugging the stuffed animal he had one for her. “Yes!”

“No!” Mabel cried in misery as she spotted Waddles desperately trying to escape Pacifica. “Dipper, give me that thing!”

She grappled for the time machine again, only for Dipper to escape from her by climbing on top of the outhouse, where he could keep it out of her hands. “Look, Mabel, its over, okay?! Give it up! I’ve worked too hard to lose this!”

“But Dipper, we need to go back!” Steven exclaimed, just as distraught. “We have to go find Lion! He got separated from us somewhere, but I don’t remember when! He has no way to get back!”

Dipper paused upon hearing this, feeling genuine sympathy for the young Gem, but he was quick to steel himself, remembering just what was at stake here. “Steven, I’m sorry, but we can’t,” he said firmly, a part of him somewhat glad to see the temperamental pink beast go. “I know Lion means a lot to you, but I don’t wanna risk messing up the time stream any more than we probably already have.”

“But—” Steven began, tears in his eyes, though Mabel was quick to cut in, already fully sobbing.

“But what about Waddles?” she asked hopelessly. “He was my soulmate, Dipper! My soulmate! I can’t just give him up like that!”

“But I don’t know…” Mabel said emptily, wrapping her arms around herself tightly. “But it’s not fair that both me and Steven have to lose our pets!”

“Yeah,” Steven agreed morosely. “Dipper, you don’t get it. When I found Lion out in the desert a few months ago, it was like… like we were meant to be best friends, you know? It just doesn’t feel right to leave him stranded somewhere in the past… He’s probably lost, alone, scared…”

“Steven, he’s a lion,” Dipper deadpanned, still as resolute as ever. “If anything tries to threaten him, he can just rip it to pieces.”

The young Gem heaved a heavy sigh, realizing just as much as Mabel was that there would be no changing Dipper’s mind. “I guess you’re right…” he said sadly as he joined the girl in hitting his head against the side of the nearby totem pole out of absolute despair.

“Come on, you guys,” Dipper said, rolling his eyes. “You can’t guilt trip me out of this. Not this time.”

Neither of them answered as they continued to knock their heads on opposite sides of the pole, their expressions awash in emotional agony and loss. “Alright, Steven, you have every right to be upset about this, but Mabel, I know you,” Dipper said as he climbed down from the outhouse. “You’re gonna forget about this in a day! I’ll even prove it!” Confident that he was right, he used the time machine to skip ahead a single day. “See?” he asked, only for his broad smirk to disappear when he saw his sister and the young Gem still beating their heads lightly against the pole. “Okay… maybe you’ll forget in a week…” Going forward even further, Dipper grew slightly guilty when he saw that the pair was still there, both of them starting to look disheveled, though they hardly noticed in their ongoing grief. “A month! They’ll be better in a month!” Speeding through time
once more, Dipper frowned in disbelief to see that Steven and Mabel hadn’t moved at all, even though they had been there an entire moth. Vines had started to grow around their legs and their clothes and hair were filthy, but the pain in their expressions was as clear as ever.

“Waddles…” Mabel moaned pitifully, knocking her head on the pole once more.

“Lion…” Steven wailed, doing the same as tears streamed down his face.

“And when you look to your left, you’ll see Miserable Mabel and Sad Steven,” Soos said as he led a tour group past the inconsolable pair. “The kids who went bonkers after their had their dreams shattered by some heartless jerk. Oh, hey, Dipper!”

Dipper didn’t respond as he simply stood there for a moment, watching with worry and regret as his sister and his friend poured out their endless misery. In all of his pining after Wendy, he had never intended to hurt either Steven or Mabel, and yet by inadvertently separating them from their beloved pets, he knew that he had. As much as he hated to admit it, this wasn’t a problem that time would be able to heal for either of them. This was something only he could fix, and unfortunately, he knew that there was only one way to set it all right.

It had taken a bit of guesswork, but Dipper eventually managed to end up in what he assumed was the right time period, based on the brief visual cues he had gotten from it when they rushed through it earlier. Indeed, the Gem temple was only half done and the shack didn’t exist yet, but Lion was nowhere to be seen, much to his annoyance. Fortunately though, the pink beast’s paw prints were clearly visible in the dirt path, and they lead up towards the hill behind the temple.

“He couldn’t have made it easy for me, could he?” Dipper deadpanned to himself in exasperation as he began the long trek up the hill. He wasn’t completely sure exactly what time period he was in, though that didn’t worry him as much as actually trying to convince Lion to come with him did. Dipper knew full well he didn’t have the best relationship with the pink beast; he hadn’t formed the sort of close comradery with Lion that both Steven and Mabel easily had. If anything, there was quite a bit of a hostile strain between them, but Dipper knew he had to put that aside, at least for a while. After all, he was doing this for Steven.

Thankfully, he didn’t have to walk too terribly far before the trail of paw prints went cold and arrived at Lion, who was busy preening himself as he sat in the midst of a clearing in the wood. Not wanting to get on the pink beast’s bad side any more than he already was, Dipper tucked away behind a nearby tree, hoping to approach Lion slowly and carefully. After all, Steven wasn’t there to calm the pink beast down in case he suddenly lashed out this time. However, before Dipper could emerge from his hiding spot, he froze as Lion snapped his head in his direction, clearly not noticing his presence. The boy gasped as he met the pink beast’s fiercely glaring gaze, realizing that Lion’s eyes were somehow not only strangely pupilless, but also glowing brightly. He growled, not just bitterly as he always did at Dipper, but almost a bit warningly, as if he was telling the boy to stay away for some reason. Immensely confused and honestly afraid, Dipper complied, especially as he heard approaching footsteps from the other side of the clearing.

“Don’t worry, Pearl!” a female voice called back to higher up on the hill from somewhere in the woods. “I’ll be back in a moment!” Lion’s eyes returned to normal and he stopped growling as a woman emerged into the clearing. Her beauty and familiarity took Dipper aback as he peeked out from behind the tree and noticed the woman’s pure white gown and twisting pink curls.

“Wait…” he muttered to himself breathlessly. “Is that… Steven’s mom?!”
The woman, Rose Quartz, Dipper remembered, gasped as she caught sight of the pink beast resting in the clearing, his sights set solely on her as he remained completely still. “Oh my!” Rose exclaimed, her voice smooth and very pleasant as her full pink lips cracked a coy smile. “Look at what we have here! I’ve never seen such a magnificent animal like you in these parts before…”

Expectantly, Lion was quite amicable as he stood and walked towards Rose, brushing up against her as he let out a low, affectionate purr. “Oh, and you’re so sweet too!” Rose laughed warmly, giving him a gentle scratch on the ear. “I have to say, I’m a big fan of your color. You’re what the humans call a… lion, right?”

As if responding to her question, Lion let out a short, calm roar, which elicited another laugh from the pink Gem. “Well, you certainly have quite a colorful personality, don’t you? Wait here; I want the others to see you! Amethyst would simply love to shapeshift into you and I’m sure Garnet and Pearl will like you too! I’ll be right back, my friend!”

Lion loyally stayed put as Rose turned to leave, giving Dipper his cue to come out from his hiding spot. However, he was so awestruck from seeing the legendary Rose Quartz herself that he didn’t notice the twig near his foot until he accidently stepped on it, breaking it with a clear snap. Of course, Rose heard this as she quickly spun around, her long pink spirals spinning with her as she caught sight of the boy, who was too surprised and nervous to even try to retreat, even as Lion cast an annoyed glare his way.

“Oh, hello there,” Rose greeted with a kind grin as Lion came to sit beside her once more. “Uh… hi,” Dipper stammered, completely at a loss for words as he remembered that this meeting shouldn’t actually be happening. He quickly made a mental note not to mention a single thing about Steven to Rose, lest he cause some major time paradox that would cause the young Gem to cease to be entirely.

“I haven’t seen you around here before…” the pink Gem said with a hint of confusion. “Are you one of the children from Gravity Falls?”

“No… not really,” Dipper replied, knowing that much was mostly true.

“Well, that would explain why you don’t really dress like the humans in town do…” Rose mused before smiling and extending out a friendly hand. “I’m Rose Quartz. What’s your name?”

The boy hesitated for a moment, not wanting to say or do anything that would throw the time stream off any more. However, he figured that since the pink Gem was no longer around in the present, it probably wouldn’t hurt too much for him to simply answer her question. “It’s Dipper,” he said hesitantly as he met Rose’s hand and shook it.

The pink Gem seemed to notice the boy’s apparent nervousness as her gentle smile widened. “It’s very nice to meet you, Dipper,” she said warmly, but not patronizingly, which was something Dipper admittedly appreciated. “Now what brings you all the way up here? My friends and I are in the middle of building our temple, so it’s a little dangerous around here right now, what with Garnet flinging rocks and Pearl carving into the cliff side and Amethyst—well, Amethyst tends to do whatever she wants, to that in and of itself can get a little dangerous.”

Dipper couldn’t help but join Rose in laughing at this, his initial shock wearing off as he realized that the pink Gem, despite how highly the other Crystal Gems spoke of her, was much more down to earth than he had been led to believe. And aside from that, he had so many questions to ask her, about Gems in general, their history, the author of the journal, Gravity Falls, and so much more. But as he glanced over at Lion, still sitting beside Rose, he abruptly remembered why he was here
in the first place. His pressing questions would just have to wait.

“I’m actually here for him,” Dipper said, pointing to Lion, who simply tossed his mane in exasperation.

“Oh, is this your lion?” Rose asked, putting the pink beast on the head.

“Uh… not really… He belongs to a friend of mine, but… um… he ran off so I’m helping my friend look for him.” Dipper smiled anxiously as he finished, knowing that he had to tread on careful ground since he was in the past. “Yeah, that works…” he muttered to himself, hoping that Rose would buy it and not press him any further.

“Well then, by all means,” the pink Gem fortunately did buy it as she stepped aside to let the boy approach Lion. Dipper frowned, clenching his fists tightly at his sides as he slowly stepped up to the pink beast, who expectantly growled louder and louder with each step he took. “Oh come now!” Rose patiently scolded Lion, who immediately stopped snarling upon hearing her voice.

“That’s no way to act! This nice boy came all the way up here searching for you. You could at least show some appreciation!”

Lion huffed a relenting sigh upon hearing this, but he not only begrudgingly allowed Dipper to not only get in close, but he actually bent down to let him climb onto his back. Dipper was quite surprised that Lion was being so compliant, since he usually only behaved this well when Steven was around, but he accepted it nonetheless, knowing he had to hurry back to the present. “Um, thanks,” he said to Rose, still wanting to ask her all of his questions, though he figured that would give too much away.

“You’ve welcome,” Rose nodded with an amicable grin. “I’m glad I was able to help. I’m sure your friend will be very happy to be reunited with his pet.”

“Believe me, I know he will,” Dipper said, knowing that he was only half done, however, as he remembered Mabel.

“Rose! Where are you?!” a voice that Dipper recognized as Pearl’s sounded out from the nearby woods, alarming the boy quite a bit. After all, meeting Rose was nowhere near as much of a risk to the timeline as encountering the other Gems would be, since they were still very much around in the present.

“Coming, Pearl!” the pink Gem called back with an amused laugh. “Oh, she always worries so much about me… But all the same, I have to go. It was very nice meeting both of you though!”

“It was nice meeting you too,” Dipper said with a small smile of sincerity, knowing that meeting Rose Quartz face to face was really a rather impossible, but incredible opportunity. “I guess I should be going too, then.”

The two of them exchanged short, friendly farewells before Rose departed first, disappearing into the woods she had come from to rejoin the other Crystal Gems. Dipper simply watched her go for a moment, still in slight disbelief at what had just happened, though Lion was quick to snap him back into reality as he let out a bored roar.

“Yeah, I know,” the boy said as he pulled out the time machine. “That was a close one.”

Lion soon began growling again as Dipper tried to configure the tape measurer for their next destination, but this time, the boy was having none of it. “Okay, Lion,” he began, his tone firm and resolved. “I get that you don’t like me for some reason, and that’s fine. To be honest, I’m not too
fond of you either.” Of course, the pink beast’s snarls grew louder upon hearing this, but Dipper still didn’t back down. “But I know you’re important to Steven. And since it was partially my fault that you ended up getting stuck here, I owe it to Steven to get you back to him. So, can we just agree to get along with each other, at least until we get back to the present?”

Lion scowled, but he seemed to agree with a terse nod, most likely because of the admonishments Rose had given him earlier. Content that the pink beast would behave, Dipper pulled out the measuring tape again, this time using it to return to the future, or rather, another blank slate timeline at the fair. After all, he had only retrieved one lost pet. He still had one more to find.

“Whoa!” Wendy exclaimed as her and Dipper approached the ball game. “I don’t know if it’s a duck or a panda, but I want one!”

Dipper sighed, briefly glancing back towards Lion, whom he had let wander free to go find Steven. Of course, finding the pink beast had presented its own unique challenges, but allowing Mabel to have her way and win Waddles was another kind of challenge altogether, one that he was desperate to avoid even though he knew he had no choice. “Wendy?” he began, hoping that he could ease the trauma of what he knew was about to happen in some small way. “I just wanted to say that… well, I just wanted to say that people make mistakes, and when they do, you should forgive them. And also that tight pants are overrated.”

“Dude, you lost me,” Wendy frowned in confusion.

“I know…” Dipper sighed again as he paid the carnie for a turn. “One ball please.”

“You only get once chance,” the carnie said, handing him a ball.

Dipper knew that he would get nothing from putting the inevitable off any longer, he took aim, putting basically no effort into it this time, since the result would obviously be the same no matter what. “And a-one, and a-two, and a-” With a rather weak throw, he sent the ball flying, only for it to instantly bounce back and hit Wendy in the eye, just as it had countless times in other timelines.

“Ah! My eye!” the cashier cried, covering her injured eye just as Robbie came running up, right on cue.

“Hey, Wendy, are you ok?” he asked with concern, offering up his snow cone to her eye again as he began to lead her away. “You know this is the perfect time for me to, uh… ask you something…”

“It is done,” Dipper said in resignation after they had left, knowing he had lost his chance with Wendy permanently this time. However, he had no time to grieve for no more than a second later, he was tackled from behind in a tight hug as Mabel’s joyous shouting rung in his ears.

“DIPPER!” the girl screamed in absolute elation as Waddles trailed behind her. “THANK YOU! THANK YOU! THANK YOU!” In response to his owner’s happy outburst, the pig let out a cheerful oink himself as he rubbed against her leg.

“He’s saying thank you in pig!” Mabel translated with a wide grin. “Aren’t you, Waddles?”

The pig oinked again as Dipper gave his sister a small smile, glad to see that her bright disposition was back once more. He wouldn’t admit it to her, but he knew that he had missed seeing her as happy as she usually was. “I couldn’t break your heart, Mabel,” he said with complete sincerity.
“Besides, there’s no way Wendy can date Robbie all summer, right?”

No more than a moment later, Steven came up, riding on Lion as he hugged the pink beast’s neck affectionately. “Thank you so much, Dipper!” the young Gem exclaimed in sheer joy as Lion purred contentedly, glad to be reunited with his master. “I can’t believe you went all the way back and got Lion for me! Looks like you two really can get along after all!”

“I guess we can,” Dipper said, though he gasped as he remembered his chance encounter with Rose. “Oh, and Steven, you’ll never guess who I ran into while I was looking for him!”

“The guy on the $20!?” Mabel guessed with intrigue.

“No,” Dipper said, rolling his eyes before turning back to the young Gem. “Steven, I met your mom!”

“Really!?” both Steven and Mabel gasped in shock.

“Y-you… you met my mom?” Steven asked, his eyes wide with curiosity before he quickly leapt into a fast round of questions. “What was she like? Was she just as nice and pretty as the Gems say she was? Was she funny? Was she hanging out with the Gems? Were they fighting some huge gem monster together? Did she…”

Before Dipper could catch up with all these questions, much less even try to answer them, the young Gem was abruptly cut off as they were interrupted by a very livid Blendin Blandin. “YOU THREE!” the time traveler exclaimed angrily, snatching the time machine away from Dipper before he could hide it. The kids gasped fearfully as they realized they were all busted for their time traveling shenanigans, and even Lion and Waddles were a bit on edge as the pink beast stood protectively before the pig. “Do you have any idea how many rules you just broke?!” Blendin exclaimed in a panic. “I don’t actually know; I wasn’t there with you. It was probably a lot, right?”

The kids didn’t get a chance to respond as two officers, clearly from the future based on their attire alone, appeared on either side of Blendin, having transported back into the past the same way he had. “Blendin Blandin…” one of the officers, named Dundgren based on his nametag, said coldly, already gripping the time traveler’s arm tightly as his partner grasped the other one.

“The Time Paradox Avoidment Enforcement Squadron!” Blendin gasped fearfully, trying to escape their tight hold.

“That’s right,” the other officer, Lolph, said, his tone just as steady and icy. “And our phones have been ringing off the hook! There are settlers high-fiving in the 1800s and calculators littered across eight centuries!”

“You’re under arrest for violation of the Time Traveler’s Code of Conduct,” Dundgren said as he tightly handcuffed the distraught time traveler and began to lead him away.

“But it wasn’t me!” Blendin pleaded. “It was those kids! And their leaders: Lion and Waddles!”

“That’s a lion and a pig, Blendin,” Lolph deadpanned.

“Augh! I’ll get you for this!” Blendin shouted back at the kids angrily. “I’ll go back in time and make sure none of your parents ever meet!”

The time traveler continued to stammer threats at the kids as the officers dragged him off, though they didn’t really carry any weight. “Well, we’re still here,” Dipper said with an amused grin.
“Guess he forgot to go back,” Mabel laughed.

“Thank, goodness!” Steven smirked in relief, his smile widening as he turned to see Lion letting Waddles nap on his belly as he rolled over. Despite all of the time travel disasters they had been through, it was good to see that the lion and the pig still got along famously, something that wouldn’t change regardless of the timeline.

“Ha! You Gems sure are suckers!” Stan laughed smugly as the exhausted Gems took a much needed break from their endless round of ball tosses. “Even if you three never give up, you can’t keep this up forever.”

“Yes we can!” Pearl retorted harshly.

“No, you can’t,” Stan crossed his arms. “Because the fair closes at 11 tonight.”

“We’ll definitely dunk you before then,” Garnet said confidently, already grabbing another ball.

“Then by all means, keep tryin’!” Stan encouraged. “Not only will I get all your cash, but I’ll get the sweet, sweet satisfaction of getting to watch you get gradually more annoyed. Things couldn’t get any better! Still, it’s kind of a shame that you three are hogging all the fun… Why not let someone else have a try? Hey, biceps!” the conman called to Lolph and Dundgren as they dragged Blendin past the tank. “I’m talkin’ to you, haircut! Take your best shot!”

Needless to say, the time officers were not amused with such heckling as Lolph pulled his laser gun out, not hesitating to shoot it straight at the target, blowing it to pieces before walking away. Stan let out a gasp of appalled shock as the bell rang and the seat under him gave way, sending him plummeting into the water below as the crowd cheered in retribution.

“Aw, come on!” Amethyst exclaimed angrily. “How come those guys were allowed to cheat when we weren’t?”

“Yeah! I could have done that from the beginning!” Pearl protested bitterly, crossing her arms.

“Oh, well,” Garnet smirked as she wrapped her arms around her teammates’ shoulders. Pearl and Amethyst soon grinned along with her as they looked over to Stan, who was struggling to get up out of the tank, only to slip and fall right back in. “At least somebody finally dunked him, even if it wasn’t us.”

“Wow…” Steven said in amazement after listening to Dipper recount his encounter with Rose. “My mom sounds so cool! I wish I could meet her! But… I guess that’s sorta impossible… But oh well! At least I still have you, Lion!”

Lion let out a roar in response as he balanced Waddles in his mane, all while the pig nuzzled into the soft fur happily. “Aw… I don’t think those two will ever stop being adorable!” Mabel gushed with a huge grin. “So, I guess we never found out who was causing all those time anomalies Blendin was looking for.”

“Wait, you guys…” Dipper said as he reached a sudden realization. “I think it was us!”
“Really?” Steven asked in confusion. “But how?”

“Well, I mean we did meddle in all those time periods were chased each other through… It only makes sense if it was us.”

“Ugh, my brain hurts,” Mabel groaned.

The kids shared a laugh over this, though Dipper stopped as soon as he noticed Wendy and Robbie sharing a caramel apple from across the way. “Oh geez, I gotta deal with this all summer?” he asked in exasperation, knowing that he would never really approve of seeing his crush with someone like the moody teen.

“You thinking what I’m thinking?” Mabel asked Steven with a daring grin upon seeing her brother’s annoyance.

“Yup,” the young Gem nodded. “We’re on it!”

Steven was quick to send Lion off as Mabel pointed out the caramel apple in Robbie’s hand to Waddles, who let out a hungry squeal upon seeing the food. The pig charged for the teen, startling him and causing him to drop the apple, which Waddles was quick to start munching on. Disturbed by the pig’s behavior, Robbie backed away, only to be even more frightened by a sudden, loud, hostile roar from Lion, who was standing right behind him. The teen let out a fearful cry as he accidentally bumped into the nearby table, which just so happened to have a tub of hot water meant for cider on it. The tub immediately spilled over right onto Robbie, or more specifically his pants, which began shriveling up upon contact with the scolding liquid.

“Ah! My pants!” he cried as he fell onto the ground, his pants too small for him to remain standing any longer. “They’re shrinking!”

Nearly everyone at the fair was able to see this embarrassing scene, from Stan and the Gems over near the dunk tank, to Steven, Dipper, and Mabel who were over near the ferris wheel, to Wendy who was standing nearby. And of course, they all were unable to contain their amused laughter at Robbie’s mortifying predicament, especially the trio of kids as the lion and the pig returned to them.

Dipper stopped laughing briefly, however as he felt Waddles brush up against his leg, while Lion, quite surprisingly, gave him a gentle head-butt on the arm. It was as though both animals were seeking his approval, and in light of what they had just done, he was more than happy to give it. “That’ll do, you two,” he said with a smile of satisfaction. “That’ll do.”

“Blendin Blandin,” the giant, immensely powerful baby who presided over the world of the future spoke, addressing the frightened time traveler as he stood awaiting his sentence. “You have broken the eternal laws of space time!”

“I beg your mercy, Time Baby!” Blendin cried, hoping that his sentence wouldn’t be too severe, especially since none of the anomalies had been his fault.

“To repay for this crime, I sentence you to clean up all the anomalies!” Time Baby proclaimed, shaking his rattle in place of a gavel to seal the punishment.

Blendin knew that he could have had it much worse, which was why he didn’t argue against this sentence as Time Baby’s power sent him back to all of the time periods affected by anomalies. It
was a dull job, but the time traveler did it nonetheless as he gathered the calculator the kids had dropped in front of Lake Gravity Falls, the shoe they had misplaced at the wax figure unveiling, and the hair clip lying before the Mystery Shack during the Centipeedle attack. As he was retrieving the clip, however, Blendin didn’t even notice that the Crystal Gems were staring right at him, having paused from the battle upon seeing the mysterious stranger blip onto the scene out of nowhere until one of them spoke up.

“Uh…” Pearl began, catching the time traveler’s attention. Despite knowing he had been caught, Blendin didn’t make a big deal out of it as he prepared to zip through time again.

“You saw nothing,” he said, his tone serious as he pulled the tape out of the measurer and disappeared entirely, much to the confusion of all three Gems.

“Who was that?” Garnet asked, adjusting her shades.

“Eh,” Amethyst shrugged, leaping right back into the heat of the battle against the Centipeedles. “I’m sure he wasn’t important.”
Chapter 15: Arcade Mania

Chapter Summary

In which video game references abound, Mabel, Pearl, and Amethyst meddle, and Garnet beats some meat

Chapter Notes

Alright! So here's my take on Arcade Mania and Fight Fighters! Enjoy!

The Gems’ latest mission had led them deep underground, to a system of vast, maze-like caverns many miles away from Gravity Falls. Fortunately, their path was illuminated by the glow put off by crystals of all shapes and sizes clinging to the stony walls of the caves as they crossed its narrow paths, taking care to be as quiet as possible as they did so. Before their arrival, Garnet had stressed that remaining unseen was of the upmost importance if they ever wanted to apprehend the rouge monster they were in search of. However, their trek was anything but noiseless thanks to Steven’s bulky jacket, which squished obnoxiously and accidentally with every step he took. Pearl hurriedly shushed him, knowing that such racket would certainly give their position away. The young Gem gave her an apologetic expression, though he could do little as his jacket continued to swish in response to his every move.

“Ugh, Steven!” Pearl whispered in annoyance as she turned to face him. “This is a stealth mission! You’re making too much noise! Take off the jacket!”

“But I don’t wanna catch a cold!” Steven protested, wrapping his jacket tighter around himself to block out the chilled air of the caverns.

“Then why are you wearing sandals?” Pearl asked caustically.

The young Gem guiltily glanced down at his choice of footwear, though he didn’t really bother to explain it. “I can be quiet! See?” He held his arms out straight so that they wouldn’t swish against his jacket again. “Stealth!”

“We’re getting close,” Garnet interrupted calmly, adjusting her shades as she led the way. Without any further ado, the others followed, though Amethyst couldn’t resist the chance to play a harmless prank on the younger Gem. As she walked behind Steven, she smirked playfully as she mimicked the squishing of his jacket perfectly, catching Pearl’s attention and ire almost instantly.

“Steven!” the white Gem scolded harshly.
“It wasn’t me!” Steven exclaimed defensively. “It was Amethy-AH!” All thoughts of being quiet left the young Gem’s mind as he felt the rocky ledge underneath him begin to give way, already leading to what would be an inevitable, very far fall. Pearl and Amethyst gasped as they realized they were too slow to rescue him, though Steven was adamant about remaining quiet, even as he fell by sticking his arms out straight once more. “Stealth!” he screamed as he finally slipped over the edge and plummeted in a freefall, only to land safely in Garnet’s arms at the bottom.

“Wow!” the young Gem exclaimed breathlessly as he smiled at his savior. “Thanks, Garnet! You didn’t just save me; you also helped me make a stealthy landing!”

“Don’t mention it,” Garnet said with a small smirk as she put Steven down, preemptively summoning her gauntlets as the caves began to rumble. The young Gem gasped in surprise as a massive, crystalline, crablike creature emerged from a wide, nearby hole, its spiky back jagged and vaguely star shaped. The Gem leader was as unnerved as ever as the monster shot a barrage of spikes at her and Steven, which she easily blocked using her open palm.

Pearl and Amethyst were quick to join the pair after this, leaping down from above with their weapons already at the ready to fight this beast. “Stay down,” Garnet commanded Steven, who had no chance to respond as Amethyst scooped him up and began running him to safety.

“Come on, poofy,” she laughed, giving his padded jacket a squeeze.

“But what about Garnet?” Steven frowned, glancing back at the Gem leader, who had already engaged the monster in battle. She was clearly holding her own just fine, however, as she deftly flipped out of the way of every attack the monster sent her way. As the creature lashed its outer arms out at her, Garnet swiveled away from it before bringing her gauntleted hand down on its inner arms brutally. Stars were in the young Gem’s eyes as he cheered the Gem leader on, watching in amazement as she shoved her free hand into the stunned monster’s open maw. The beast let out a shrill scream as it abruptly exploded into blue dust, leaving nothing more its smaller spikes and a jagged gem behind.

“Oh my gosh, that was so awesome!” Steven gushed excitedly as he ran up to Garnet, who had already safely bubbled the gem. “Garnet, you’re so awesome! How’d you beat that thing so fast?”

The Gem leader had no chance to answer as Pearl cut in in a sudden panic. “Look!” she gasped as the remaining spikes sprung to life, curling up into drill-like shapes as they leapt into the air. “The little ones didn’t explode! They’re drilling away!” And indeed they were; the smaller creatures were quick to spiral down into the earthen ground before any of the Gems could catch them.

“I got ‘em!” Amethyst called as she ran towards the nearest hole, leaping headfirst into it, despite the fact that she didn’t really fit into it.

“Let them go,” Garnet said succinctly, transporting the bubbled Gem back to the temple. “They’re just parasites. If they want to be a problem, they’ll have to answer to me.”

“So cool!” Steven exclaimed in hushed admiration over how amazing the Gem leader was.

Before the Gems headed back to the path, Garnet was sure to collect Amethyst from the hole she had attempted to jump into. The purple Gem grinned widely as Garnet lifted her up by her foot, her hair messy and her face covered in dirty. “I swallowed a rock!” she proclaimed happily.

“Well, at least the main monster is gone,” Pearl sighed in exasperation. “We might as well head home for now.”
“You know, we all worked so hard to find that monster,” Steven began as they headed for the warp pad. “We deserve a reward!”

“Any chance that reward is gonna be… edible?” Amethyst asked eagerly.

“Nope,” Steven smiled as he shook his head.

“Darn it…” the purple Gem crossed her arms in visible disappointment.

“Sounds like you already have something in mind, Steven,” Pearl said with an amused laugh,

The young Gem beamed cheerfully, already bounding towards the nearby warp pad excitedly. “I sure do!”

The Mystery Shack had been closed for the afternoon thanks to an incident involving Stan’s latest failed attraction: the “screeching skunk”. While the shack had its shattered windows repaired and the offending skunk odor cleansed, the conman had begrudgingly given his employees the rest of the day off and, after much persuasion on Soos’s part, they had all ended up at Funland Arcade.

“This is it, dudes,” Soos said to Stan and Mabel as they surveyed the wide array of flashing and beeping games and screens. “My favorite place in Gravity Falls. Everything I know I learned right here. A frog taught me how to cross the street. When my house was haunted, I learned how to eat ghosts, and that machine over there taught me how to dance.”

The trio turned their attention to the nearby dance game, where Old Man McGucket was happily dancing a wild jig, despite the fact that the machine was clearly out of order. “Yahoo! I’ve been jiggin’ here for seven days straight!”

“Uh, Soos?” Mabel asked worriedly as she picked up the unplugged plug next to the machine.

“Shh, let him have this,” the handyman assured as they both left the old man to his fantasies. Meanwhile, Stan had wandered to another nearby machine, initially unimpressed by flashy presentation of the arcade games. Regardless, he complied with the game out of curiosity as it instructed him to insert a token, even if he was hesitant to let go of the quarter.

“Congratulations! You win!” the game pronounced as soon as the conman inserted the coin, much to excitement. It was short lived, however, as the screen flashed “insert token” a moment later, which only served to aggravate Stan and his miserly mindset.

“You really think I’m gonna spend all my pocket change on you, ya dumb machine?” he asked with a challenging grin. “Then you’ve got another thing coming! I’m not just some gullible sap that can’t walk away from some aimless gamble!” Stan laughed triumphantly as he began to walk away from the game, only to immediately rush back to it and begin shoving coin after coin into it for the simple satisfaction of winning.

While Soos and Mabel continued to explore the rest of the arcade, Dipper and Wendy had already taken to the fighting game Fight Fighters, and were currently on their fifth consecutive competitive round. The two of them were unable to contain their shared laughter and excitement, though they briefly paused as the intro cutscene played out.

“Dr. Karate! You killed my father again!” the muscular hero Rumble McSkirmish proclaimed with vengeance.
“HHNNNGHHH!” Dr. Karate growled gruffly in response.

“YOU TAKE THAT BAAACK!”

“Fight!” the announcer shouted as the round began. Without any hesitation, Dipper and Wendy both began mashing buttons as their characters dueled on screen with extensive, complex, brutish attacks.

“Yes!” Dipper cheered as he managed to snatch a narrow victory at the last second.

“K.O!” the announcer blared. “The winner: Rumble McSkirmish!”

“Winners don’t lose!” Rumble exclaimed in triumph.

“Aw, what?” Wendy laughed, smirking slyly. “I had that round in the bag. You cheated.”

“YOU TAKE THAT BAAACK!” Dipper exclaimed, mimicking Rumble’s deep, masculine voice. The pair shared an amused laugh before the game caught their attention once more with the announcement of round two.

“Hey, check it out,” Wendy said to Dipper, neither of them taking this round very seriously. “I’m gonna punch the ref.” Even though the ref was in the background, she made it look as though Dr. Karate was beating him up, even after the fight had officially begun.

“Let’s gang up on him!” Dipper laughed as he began to do the same with Rumble. Though neither of them were landing successful blows on each other, they were still having the time of their lives playing by their own, made-up rules. That is, until they were abruptly and rather rudely interrupted.

“Wendy!” The pair turned away from their game to see Robbie approaching, a stack of posts in his arms. Fortunately, Wendy didn’t seem to notice Dipper’s clear, disgruntled scoff upon the moody teen’s arrival. “What’s up, babe?” Robbie asked smoothly, wrapping an arm around his new girlfriend’s waist.

“Hey, Robbie,” Wendy greeted, letting out a small laugh as Robbie gave her a small kiss on the cheek. Upon seeing this, Dipper bit his lip so hard that he practically drew blood just to keep himself from audibly letting out his angry protest. “What are you doing here?”

“I was just putting up some flyers for my band,” Robbie said, holding up one of the flies for ‘Robbie V. and the Tombstones’. “Yeah, I’m playing lead guitar. No biggie.”

“Are you wearing mascara?” Dipper asked skeptically as he stole a glance at the poster.

“Uh, it’s eye-paint for men,” Robbie retorted pointedly.

“Dipper was just showing me this great game,” Wendy said, nodding to the paused game behind them.

“Oh yeah?” Robbie asked, roughly pushing past Dipper as he stepped up to the controls. “Well then how about you sit this one out, okay champ?”

“But we just started this round,” Dipper protested, not at all impressed with the teen’s condescending tone.

“Whoa, whoa, hey!” Robbie exclaimed defensively. “Relax, man. I’m just trying to spend a little quality time with my girlfriend, alright?”
“It’ll just be one round, okay?” Wendy said to Dipper, giving him a reassuring smile.

Not wanting to look bad in front of the cashier, Dipper hesitantly complied, even if hearing Robbie refer to Wendy as his girlfriend made him sick. But even so, he stood by, arms crossed in disappointment as he impatiently watched the couple play the game together.

“So, hey,” Wendy began in the midst of mashing buttons. “I’m gonna go camping tomorrow with my dad and brothers tomorrow, so I won’t be around for the weekend.”

“Oh, cool, cool,” Robbie said, even though it was clear he wasn’t really listening as he was focused on the game. “Watch out!”

Though Wendy hardly noticed in the midst of playing, Robbie easily slid his arm over her shoulder and subtly sent a smug, triumphant smirk back at Dipper. The boy returned the expression with a hostile glare, his ire for the teen only growing. He may had lost Wendy to Robbie at the fair, but Dipper wasn’t about to contentedly stand by and let his rival win in the long run.

“Opponent sighted!” the game blared quite fittingly. “Fight!”

“Ta da!” Steven exclaimed as he stood outside of the simple corner building with the Gems. “We’re here! Funland Arcade! The best place in Gravity Falls! …Aside from the Mystery Shack… and the temple, of course.”

The Gems exchanged a confused, somewhat disinterested glance at this. None of them had really been expecting this to be the reward that the young Gem had referred to, and despite his enthusiasm, none of them really shared it. “Do we have anything else to do?” Pearl asked Garnet, hoping that there was a way they could get out of this.

“We don’t,” the Gem leader said succinctly, crossing her arms.

“Um, don’t you need money for this place?” Amethyst asked.

“Oh, don’t worry!” Steven reassured, reaching into his backpack. “This one’s on… ME!” The young Gem’s grin widened as he pulled out a huge sack of coins out of his bag.

“Steven, where did you get so much money?” Pearl asked curiously.

“The same way I make all my money,” Steven smiled. “By helping Dad at the carwash. Only this time, I asked him to pay me in quarters so we could come here and play games together. Now come on! This is gonna be great!”

Knowing that they didn’t really have much of a choice, the Gems followed Steven inside, all three of them somewhat unimpressed by the rows of games and machines. “Welcome to a world of funtronic gameventions!” the young Gem proclaimed excitedly.

“Humans find such fascinating ways to waste their time…” Pearl remarked, glancing around at the arcade patrons, all of them deeply engrossed in their games.

“We sure do!” Mabel exclaimed cheerfully as her and Soos met the group near the doors. “Hi, you guys! What brings you all to the arcade?”

“Are you dudes all fans of the fine art of gaming too?” Soos asked with a smile.
“Hardly,” Garnet replied shortly.

“Yeah, this place is kinda lame…” Amethyst commented with a disinterested frown.

“What?” Steven asked in confusion. “Aw, come on, you guys! This place is the best!”

“Yeah, arcades are awesome!” Mabel heartily agreed. “Maybe you guys just need to find games that are right for you!”

“They say there’s a game here for everyone here at Funland,” Soos added. “Or at least that’s what its slogan says.”

“Then let’s go find a perfect match for each of you!” Steven proclaimed, starting this mission off with the white Gem. “Pearl, I think I know the perfect game for you!”

“Um… alright…” Pearl said, allowing the young Gem to take her hand and lead her away. “If you say so…”

“Hey, Mabel, can you-” Steven began, though the girl quickly cut him off.

“Already way ahead of you!” Mabel grinned as she grabbed Amethyst by the arm, Soos following not too far behind. “Come on, Amethyst! You’ll love this game!”

“Whatever you say, dude,” Amethyst shrugged, up for anything.

“Road Killer?” Pearl asked with a concerned frown after Steven sat her down at a car racing game.

“Yeah, you pick the car you like and just go for it!” the young Gem explained.

“But, which one of these buttons is my turn signal?” the white Gem asked, wanting to properly follow the rules of the road.

“None of them,” Steven laughed. “Have fun!”

Pearl frowned as the young Gem left, but she gripped the steering wheel anyway. “Vroom! Vroom!” the game’s announcer exclaimed gruffly. “Kill the road!”

“I don’t think that’s possible, but okay…” Pearl said as she pushed the gas down lightly, not immediately concerned with the many cars that were speedily passing her by.

“This is Skee Ball!” Mabel proclaimed as she stood before the row of Skee Ball games with Amethyst and Soos. “It’s super simple. You just roll the ball into the hole thingys and win tickets!”

“What are the tickets for?” Amethyst asked coyly.

“For prizes! What else?” Mabel laughed, nodding towards the ticket counter, which was full of prizes. The trio watched as Onion traded his huge stash of tickets in to Mr. Smiley in exchange for an actual working moped.

“Whoa, that Onion dude is like, the ticket master,” Soos said, thoroughly impressed.

“Cool,” Amethyst laughed, eager to give the game a try.
“Good luck!” Mabel exclaimed as she left both Amethyst and Soos behind at the Skee Ball games, both of them trying to outcompete each other to see who could make more goals.

While Steven and Mabel paired Pearl and Amethyst up with their respective games, Garnet had remained near the entrance, her arms crossed and her expression as stoic as ever. However, the Gem leader didn’t protest as the kids teamed up to try and find a game that was right for her.

“Teens of Rage,” Steven introduced the fighting game they had decided to try first. “This game is perfect for you, Garnet!”

“Yeah, you’re already great at fighting in real life, so now you can apply those skills in a world of colorful pixels and 80’s hairstyles!” Mabel agreed confidently.

“You seem like a Joe Rock kinda gal,” Steven said as he picked out Garnet’s character for her while the Gem leader remained silent in observation. “His special move is… forward, forward, back, tap towards circle, medium kick—oh wait! Maybe that’s just an aerial move…”

“Just punch and you’ll be fine!” Mabel concluded, though Garnet took that advice a bit too literally. Without need for any further instruction, the Gem leader threw a brutal punch at the screen, her bare fist shattering it upon contact and breaking the game instantly.

“I did it,” Garnet said with subtle pride as she looked to the kids. Steven and Mabel exchanged nervous glances at this, hoping that no one had seen what could quite possibly get them kicked out of the arcade.

“Uh, let’s try something else,” Steven suggested quickly, leading Garnet to another game. “Okay, Punch Buddy. This is a game you can actually punch.”

“This one can’t possibly go wrong,” Mabel said with a smile. “It’s like this game was made for you, Garnet!”

Once again, the Gem leader said nothing as she threw a punch at the machine. Unfortunately, the force behind her fist was more than the machine could handle, and once again, she managed to brutally break the game with a single blow. “I win again,” Garnet said, holding her fist out in triumph.

“Ah!” Steven exclaimed fearfully. “What are we gonna do?”

“Oh, I know!” Mabel exclaimed with a snap of her fingers, leading the way to yet another game. “We have this one in the arcade back home, and it’s one of my favorites! Meat Beat Mania!”

“Great idea, Mabel!” Steven agreed with a relieved smile as Garnet came to stand before the game. “There’s no violence in this game. Just shake the meat to the beat!”

Garnet took the ham controllers that Steven handed to her, doing what he had instructed as she began to shake the meat in the directions shown on screen. While many stumbled at the game after just a few moves, the Gem leader seemed to excel at it as she shook the meat in perfect timing and in all the right directions without fail.

“Awesome!” Steven cheered as Mabel applauded Garnet’s success. “Garnet, you’re so good at this!”

“Yeah, you’re the Meat Beat Master!” Mabel proclaimed, even though Garnet didn’t respond as her attention seemed to be solely focused on the game and the game alone.
“We’re gonna go check on the others,” Steven informed her. “But we’ll be back in a bit. Keep it up!”

Once again, Garnet offered no response as she continued to rhythmically shake the meat. Despite the Gem leader’s success at her new game, Pearl was having anything but in *Road Killer.* “You’re horrible!” the game criticized the white Gem, who was in dead last place.

“Stop saying that!” Pearl retorted angrily, gripping the wheel even tighter, even if she didn’t increase her speed.

“Having fun?” Steven asked as him and Mabel approached the game.

“Why am I doing so badly?!” Pearl asked in complete bewilderment. “I’ve been following all of the proper driving ordinances to the T and I haven’t crashed into anything!”

“Pearl, that’s not the point of this game!” Mabel laughed. “The point is that you’re supposed to crash into everything!”

“What?!” the white Gem asked, appalled. “That’s horrible! And completely unrealistic. Everyone knows that crashing a vehicle can be completely fatal to humans! Why would anyone make a game centered around something so dangerous!?"

Pearl continued to ramble on about the implausibility of the game as Steven and Mabel happened to notice Amethyst and Soos near the Skee Ball machines, doing something that made them both gasp. The purple Gem was straddles atop the rings of the game, happily shooting Skee Balls directly into the 100 point hole as Soos tossed them to her from below. Of course, tickets were pouring out of the machine, though the kids were quick to hurry over and put a stop to it.

“Amethyst, Soos! What are you guys doing?” Mabel asked with concern.

“Don’t worry, hambone,” Soos assured with a grin as he tossed another ball up to Amethyst. “We just figured out an easier way to win more tickets.”

“Yeah!” the purple Gem quipped. “We’re gonna win an airplane!”

“Yup, the remote control one with neon lights on the wings,” the handyman added. “It’s like, 2 million tickets, but I’m pretty sure we’re at least halfway there.”

“You guys can’t do that!” Steven exclaimed as he took the next ball out of Soos’s hand. “That’s cheating! You’re gonna get us in so much troub-”

“Hey!” The young Gem was cut off by Mr. Smiley, who was standing near the destroyed *Teens of Rage* cabinet looking quite disconcerted. “Any of you kids know what happened to *Teens of Rage*?”

Steven and Mabel gulped in anxious unison, neither of them too keen on the idea of getting kicked out of the arcade. “Let’s run!” the young Gem exclaimed.

“Right!” Mabel agreed, grabbing Soos as they hurried away.

“This place is fun!” Amethyst laughed as she hopped down from the Skee Ball machine and followed.

“Pearl, we’re leaving!” Steven called to the white Gem, who was glaring viciously at *Road Killer.*
“Ugh, good!” she exclaimed harshly as her car finally crashed for the first time.

“You’re fantastic!” the game finally congratulated, aggravating Pearl even more.

As the group headed for the door, an alarm suddenly blared, catching them all off guard. Mabel and Steven fearfully froze, terrified that they were going to get in trouble for the damage Garnet had done to the machines, but as it turned out, the alarm went off for another reason entirely.

“Mabel!” Stan exclaimed as he rushed for the door, a huge sack of change in his arms. “Grab your brother! We’re hitting the road!”

“Grunkle Stan, what did you do?!” Mabel asked in shock.

“Hey, I’m just taking back all the change that rickety machine swindled from me!” the con man said defensively. “The money’s mine anyway, so what’s the problem?”

“The problem is that’s stealing!” Mabel exclaimed, even if she knew this was regular behavior for her grunkle.

“Exactly, and that’s why we gotta get outta here before Smiley catches me and calls the cops,” Stan urged, hurrying out of the arcade. “I’m in no mood to go to jail today! Let’s go!”

“Grunkle Stan, wait!” Mabel called as her and Soos horridly followed him out.

“Yikes!” Steven exclaimed, knowing that the situation was getting worse by the minute. “Garnet, come on! We gotta go!”

The Gem leader didn’t so much as turn to face him as she continued to play Meat Beat Mania intensively. Steven was tempted to go over and get her, but he stopped short as he heard Mr. Smiley’s upset cries from across the arcade. “Oh man! Someone stole all the change from Insert Token?! And—no! Not you too, Punch Buddy!” the arcade owner exclaimed in horror as he fretted over the broken game. “Who did this to you?!”

“Ah!” Steven gasped as Mr. Smiley angrily glanced around, knowing that the Gems would make prime suspects in this case of property damage. Unfortunately, Garnet was still engrossed in her game, and despite the young Gem’s attempt at trying to move her, she remained as still as a statue, save for her arms. “Ugh, ok! We’ll just see you at home then!” he called, knowing there wasn’t another moment to waste as he rushed out with Pearl and Amethyst in tow.

Miraculously, neither Stan nor the Gems had avoided getting caught at the arcade the previous day, which was why the Pines were able to rest easy as they played a stake-less game of poker. Since Steven had come down to the shack to hang out for the morning, he joined them, even if he had no idea how to play, but then again, neither did Mabel.

“King me!” the girl proclaimed triumphantly as she threw her hand down, which consisted of two kings.

The others let out a groan of aggravation at this, save for Steven, who applauded cheerfully. “Wow, Mabel! You’re really good at this!”

“It’s not fair,” Stan growled in annoyance. “She doesn’t even know what we’re playing!”
“Go fish?” Mabel guessed with an innocent smile.

“I thought we were playing that game where you stick the card to your forehead and have to guess what it was,” Steven frowned, just as lost as a card fell off his forehead.

The game was suddenly interrupted by the shrill sound of an electric guitar blared loudly from right outside the shack. “Dude, I think I’m picking up a radio station inside my head,” Soos remarked.

“Try blinking to see if you can change the channel!” Mabel suggested enthusiastically.

The handyman did so, only to no effect. However, as a high-pitched voice rose over the guitar screeches, it soon became clear where the dissonant music was coming from. “Ugh, sounds like Robbie,” Dipper scoffed with clear disdain.

“Robbie?” Stan raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t he that jerky twerp who’s always making goo-goo eyes at Wendy?”

“He called me ‘Big Dude’ once,” Soos frowned. “I mean, I know I’m a big dude, but it still kinda hurt.”

“Should I sic Waddles on him again?” Mabel asked as the pig sitting in her lap chewed on her sweater.

“I could always call Lion down to help,” Steven offered, more than ready to do so.

“No, I’ll handle this,” Dipper said with resolve as he stood up from the table. After all, since Wendy wasn’t around, he would have no qualms about telling the moody teen what he really thought of him. The rest of the group oooed in suspense as he left, all of them anxious to see whatever conflict was about to unfold.

“Wendy!” Robbie shouted more than sung as he stood outside the shack, his guitar plugged into the amp he had brought with him. “Wendy! Wendy! Wendy! C’mon out, girl! C’mon down!”

“You do realize she’s not here, right?” Dipper asked caustically as he stepped out of the shack, his arms crossed as he glowered at the teen.

“Uh, yeah,” Robbie scoffed, though he didn’t really mean it. “…Wait, what?”

“You do realize she’s not here, right?” Dipper asked caustically as he stepped out of the shack, his arms crossed as he glowered at the teen.

“Uh, yeah,” Robbie scoffed, though he didn’t really mean it. “…Wait, what?”

“She’s out camping with her family,” Dipper said, though he sarcastically muttered his next statement. “Maybe if you actually listened to her for once, you’d know that.”

“What was that?” Robbie asked with a sharp glare, having clearly heard him.

“Uh, I just said she’s not here,” Dipper replied defensively.

“No, no, no!” Robbie said with a goading grin, clearly not buying it. “You wanna get into it, huh? Let’s get into it, kid!” Dipper took a nervous step back as Robbie stepped forward boldly, his hands already curled into fists. “You think I don’t know what’s been going on? It’s obvious you’ve got a thing for my girlfriend, don’t you?!”

“What?” Dipper let out a forced scoff, even if he knew the teen was exactly correct. “No! C’mon, man!”

“Yeah, I’m sure Wendy’s just dying to go out with a 12 year old who wears the exact same shorts
Robbie said with burning sarcasm. “Hey, here’s an idea: why don’t I call her right now and see if she wants to go on a date with you?”

“No! Don’t!” Dipper practically begged, knowing that he would be completely mortified if Wendy ever found out about his crush on her.

“No, don’t!” Robbie mocked spitefully, already dialing Wendy’s number on his phone. “What are you gonna do about it, huh? What are you gonna do?”

Dipper was completely panicking by this point, so much so that he reached for Robbie’s phone without really thinking. Just as Wendy picked up on the other end, he smacked the phone out of the teen’s hand, and of course, it shattered into broken pieces the moment it met with the ground.

“My phone!” Robbie exclaimed in angry alarm, quickly turning on the boy responsible for breaking it.

“I-it was an accident!” Dipper exclaimed anxiously. “I’ll buy you a new one! I-”

“Oh no, you’re not getting off that easy!” Robbie scowled as he picked the younger boy up by the collar and prepared to throw a punch.

“Hey!” Stan exclaimed, poking his head out of the nearby window and stopping the teen just in time. “I know a fight when I see one! Stay right there!”

As the conman disappeared back into the shack, Robbie scoffed, throwing Dipper to the ground roughly. “You got lucky this time, kid,” he said coldly, yet threateningly. “But you won’t be next time. You. Me. Circle Park. 3 o’clock. We finish this.”

Without sparing another word, the teen sulked off, his hands shoved in his pockets as he sent the boy one more hostile glare. Dipper remained on the ground as he watched Robbie go in stunned, fearful silence, not even noticing as Stan emerged from the shack with a bucket of popcorn.

“Aw, he’s gone!” the conman exclaimed in disappointment. “I was just gonna call the boys over to place a few bets. The smart money’s on Skinny Jeans.”

“What was I thinking?!” Dipper frowned apprehensively as he paced around the living room after having told everyone about what had just happened. “I can’t fight Robbie! I’ve never even been in a fight before! Just look at these noodle arms!” he exclaimed, holding out his muscle-lacking arms for emphasis.

“Just bonk him over the head!” Stan suggested dryly. “It’s nature’s snooze button.”

“Boys,” Mabel scoffed, rolling her eyes. “Why can’t you just learn to hate each other in secret? Like girls do!”

“Sure, listen to your sister,” Stan snickered teasingly. “Maybe you can share dresses too! Ha!”

“Dipper, maybe you should just tell Robbie that you don’t wanna fight him,” Steven said with a small, encouraging smile. “After all, my dad always says that violence is never the answer. Though it is a little confusing when the Gems are always telling me that violence usually is the answer…”

“Are you kidding me? I can’t just reason with him!” Dipper exclaimed hotly. “He nearly beat me
to a pulp when I tried that before! Maybe I’ll get lucky and he’ll just forget about it. Hopefully it’ll all just blow over…”

“I dunno, dude,” Soos remarked. “Teenagers are dangerous. Those hormones turn them into like, killing machines.”

“R-really?” Dipper asked with growing concern.

“Oh yeah,” the handyman nodded gravely. “My cousin Reggie got in a fight with a teen once. The guy broke like, all his arms, all his legs, and I think, killed him or something. I don’t know. Me and Reggie were just talking about it.”

Upon hearing this frightening anecdote, Dipper began nervously hyperventilating, his eyes wide as he backed into the corner. “I can’t stay here! What if Robbie comes back?! I gotta hide!”

“Look, kid,” Stan began apathetically. “You got yourself a choice here. You can either go face him like a man, or you can hide like a wimp.”

“Or…” Steven cut in as a sudden idea came to him. “You could ask for help!”

“Help from who?” Dipper asked in confusion.

“Well…” the young Gem grinned. “If I needed help fighting someone, I would get it from someone who’s really good at fighting in the first place. And I just so happen to know someone who’s the master of fighting…”

“Which one of the Gems did you have in mind?” Dipper asked knowingly.

“How’d you know they were a Gem?”

“Who else could they be, Steven?”

“You got me,” Steven laughed. “I was thinking maybe you could ask Garnet for some pointers. Just yesterday she beat a huge gem monster all on her own without breaking a sweat! She could definitely help.”

“I hate to admit it, but the kids got a point,” Stan interjected. “Out of all three of them, ol’ Square Hair is probably the toughest. If nothing else, she can at least show you how to throw a decent punch.”

“I… guess it wouldn’t hurt to ask,” Dipper shrugged, knowing he didn’t really have too many other options. After all, 3 o’clock would roll around far too soon, especially if he did nothing to protect himself before it.

“Great! Then let’s go ask her!” Steven exclaimed, hopping up from his chair. “Though… I haven’t seen Garnet since we left her at the arcade yesterday… She never came back to the temple last night, which is really weird for her…”

“Maybe she’s still at the arcade!” Mabel suggested. “She seemed to be really into Meat Beat Mania, so she might have stayed there so she could get the high score!”

“Then that’s where we’ll look first,” the young Gem concluded already heading out the door. “C’mon, Dipper!”

“S-Steven, wait up!” Dipper called, knowing just how hard it was to keep up with Steven when he
was this enthused.

“Poor Dipper,” Mabel shook her head as she watched her brother leave while the rest of the group disbanded as well. “Having to ask for help because he’s unable to face his fears…”

“Fears are for chumps,” Stan remarked stoically as he stepped into the kitchen as Mabel followed with Waddles in tow. “That’s why I don’t have any.”

Though Mabel didn’t really believe this, she pushed the thought away as she watched her uncle struggle to retrieve a can off a high shelf. “You want me to get you a ladder?”

“We don’t have any,” the conman said quickly.

“What?”

“You know, studies show that keeping a ladder in the house is more dangerous than owning a loaded gun. That’s why I own ten guns, in case some maniac tries to sneak in here with a ladder.”

“Grunkle Stan, why you ackin’ so cray-cray?” Mabel asked both sassily and suspiciously.

“You’re the one who’s ackin’ cray-cray!” Stan retorted defensively. “I gotta go.”

“Why would Grunkle Stan be so weirded out by ladders…?” Mabel mused to Waddles before she reached a sudden realization. “Of course! I think he has a secret fear of heights! We’ll have to test him to be sure. Or we could just leave well enough alone… Nah!”

No sooner had the girl reached this conclusion then a loud, brutal crash abruptly sounded from right outside. Seeing as how Stan and Soos were both in the gift shop, Mabel curiously took it upon herself to check out what the commotion was all about, only to gasp in surprise at what she saw when she stepped out the kitchen door. A seemingly endless array of small, drill-like creatures were raining down onto the shack’s lawn from the skies above, only for several of them to be skewered through as they fell by a familiar spear. Mabel’s excitement over the situation only grew when she spotted Pearl and Amethyst running towards the attacking creatures, their weapons launching towards the small drills continually.

“It’s the little guys!” Amethyst exclaimed in alarm.

“They’re everywhere! Why didn’t we see this coming?!” Pearl shouted as she dodged out of the path of the spiraling creatures.

“You know, we could really use Garnet right about now!” the purple Gem huffed, lashing her whip out at the row of drill creatures speeding towards her.

“I do know!” Pearl retorted rather harshly. “But she’s not here, so we have to take care of this! Now come on!”

Amethyst simply nodded as her and Pearl stood back to back. The purple Gem grinned daringly as she pulled a second whip out of her gem, while the white gem also retrieved another spear from her own. Simultaneously, they both held their weapons out widely as the drill creatures surrounded them, but before the minute monsters could attack, the two Gems began to spin in tight, fast circles as their weapons blazed around them. Mabel watched with an awed grin as Pearl and Amethyst cut a swath through the monsters as though they were a pair of constantly spinning blades. As soon as the outlying drill creatures saw that their kin were being cut down, they quickly retreated, burrowing deep into the ground and leaving only holes in the lawn behind.
“Well, we didn’t get rid of all of them,” Pearl sighed as she finished spinning and let her weapons disappear. “But maybe they’ll stay down there until Garnet gets back… Hopefully…”

“Oh my gosh, you guys!” Mabel practically squealed as she rushed towards the Gems. “That was so cool! Pearl, you were all like whoosh! And zip! And Amethyst, you were like pow! And bam! It was incredible!”

“Thanks,” Amethyst chuckled easily. “Guess we really can get things done without Garnet, eh Pearl?”

The white Gem sighed in exasperation, frowning down at the holes the drill creatures had left behind. “We only just drove them away for now. We should really wait until Garnet gets back to track the rest of them down…”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” the purple Gem agreed. “Garnet is the boss.”

“Really?” Mabel asked, always curious about how the dynamics between the Gems worked. “I knew it!”

“Well, we’re all a team,” Pearl explained. “Garnet just has heightened perception that guides us towards our mission objective.”

“Yeah,” Amethyst clarified. “She’s the boss.”

“Then it’s a good thing Steven and Dipper went to the arcade to find her,” Mabel grinned.

“Mabel, I highly doubt that Garnet stayed at the arcade all night,” Pearl shook her head. “She goes off on missions without us all the time. She’s probably doing something very important.”

“Well, what a coinkydink!” Mabel quipped excitedly. “I’m doing something very important too! I’m gonna help Grunkle Stan get over his fear of heights!”

“Good luck with that,” Amethyst scoffed, crossing her arms. “Stan’s been scared of heights pretty much forever. This one time, me and Stan were trying to break into the mall after dark, so we had to climb up this ladder to the roof and he totally flipped out! It was hilarious.”

“Amethyst, why in the world were you and Stan trying to breaking into the mall?” Pearl asked disapprovingly.

“For kicks,” the purple Gem answered simply.

“Wait a minute… That gives me an idea!” Mabel exclaimed with a bright smile. “You guys should help me help Stan! I mean, you guys aren’t afraid of anything, right?”

“Nope,” Amethyst grinned broadly.

“Well, I wouldn’t say we aren’t afraid of anything…” Pearl corrected. “But I can say that heights have never really bothered us.”

“Great!” Mabel cheered, already heading back towards the shack. “Then this will work perfectly!”

“Now hold on a minute, Mabel. I… I’m not sure if we really have the… time to help Stan right now,” Pearl said with a fake smile, not wanting to admit to the girl that she just didn’t want to. “We have to wait for Garnet to get back so we can…”

“Aw, come on, Pearl,” Amethyst urged. “G could be gone for hours! We might as well do
“But we—” the white Gem began to protest, though she stopped the moment she saw the pleading looks both Mabel and Amethyst were giving her. As much as she wanted to say no, she ultimately sighed in defeat, unable to resist such puppy dog eyes. “Alright fine,” she said as the girl and the purple Gem cheered happily, both of them more than ready to begin this task. “We’ll help. But only until Garnet gets back.”

“So why exactly did Garnet spend the night at the arcade?” Dipper asked Steven in confusion as the two of them approached Funland Arcade.

“Well, me and Mabel showed her Meat Beat Mania yesterday,” Steven began. “And she really stared got into it. Pearl and Amethyst think she’s on a mission or something, but… I don’t know… I think she might still be here.”

“I hope so…” Dipper said with a trepid frown. “Maybe if I’m lucky, I can get Garnet to scare Robbie off for me.”

“But Dipper, I thought you were just going to ask Garnet for some fighting tips, not ask her to fight for you,” Steven retorted with uncertainty in this new plan.

“Well, yeah…” Dipper replied half-heartedly as they arrived at the arcade. “But it’ll just be safer to have Garnet come along when I go to face Robbie. Nobody will even have to fight anyone! One look at her gauntlets and he’ll be sent running in fear!”

“Hm…” Steven frowned, even though he didn’t try to deter Dipper from this idea just yet. Instead, the two boys quickly located the Gem leader, who, surprisingly enough, was still deeply engrossed in the very same round of Meat Beat Mania she had started the previous day.

“Whoa…” Dipper mused as him and Steven came to stand beside Garnet, who did not so much as even acknowledge their presence. “You weren’t kidding. Look at how high her score is!”

“I know, right?” Steven smirked. “She’s really good. She’s probably broken at least twenty world records by now!”

“That’s great and everything but can you maybe get her to stop for a minute so I can ask her for help?” Dipper asked, unnerved by the fact that Garnet seemed to focusing only on the game and nothing else.

“Um… I can try,” Steven shrugged, coming to stand in front of the game as he looked up at the Gem leader. “Uh, Garnet?” he tried, only to get no response as she continued flinging the controllers to the fast rhythm. “Garnet? Garnet! Come on, snap out of it! We really need your help!”

Despite the young Gem’s pleas, Garnet was unresponsive as she continued to shake the meat to the beat, just as she had been doing all night. Seeing that Steven’s attempts weren’t working, Dipper decided to try and grab her attention himself. “H-hey, Garnet? Are you ok?” he asked tentatively, reaching up to try and take one of the meat controllers from her only to have his arm smacked away by a bold swipe of her elbow. “Ow! What the heck?!?”

Steven gasped at this, glancing up at the Gem leader only to see that she hadn’t even noticed that she had accidentally hit Dipper. “Garnet! I’m sure you didn’t mean it, but that wasn’t very nice!”
he exclaimed with concern. Still, though, Garnet didn’t respond, her tight focus devoted to the game just much as ever.

“What’s wrong with her?” Dipper asked in equal worry.

“I don’t know…” the young Gem said, placing a hand against the Gem leader’s leg, though she didn’t move an inch. “I guess she’s having such a good time that she doesn’t wanna go. I’m sorry, Dipper; it looks like she won’t be able to help you out after all.”

“I’m sorry too,” Dipper said with returning fear. “Especially since I only have a few hours left until Robbie pounds me into the ground.”

“Maybe he’ll just forget all about it, like you said,” Steven tried to reassure. “And if not you could always just stay here until 3. There are plenty of arcade cabinets to hide under.”

“I guess I don’t really have too many other options, do I?” Dipper sighed in defeat as he sulked off, hoping that Robbie wouldn’t show up at the arcade in the next few hours.

“Okay! Well in the meantime, I’ll be here, trying to pull Garnet away from the game!” Steven called out after him before he turned to the Gem leader once more. “Ok, Garnet, can you—Whoa!” the young Gem paused as he glanced towards the screen in amazement, deciding to simply watch Garnet’s incredible skill for a moment or two. “I’ve never seen anyone get so far!”

Dipper scowled as he mashed the buttons on *Fight Fighters*, not even caring that he was losing the current round as his thoughts were primarily concerned with fears of Robbie. Considering what he had faced during the summer alone, from rabid gnomes and gem monsters to multibears and manotaurs, Dipper liked to think he didn’t scare all too easily. Yet Robbie was a different kind of threat to him entirely. The teen was a rival; a constant competitor he had to face if he ever hoped to win Wendy’s affections. But by all accounts, Robbie had already won instead, and Dipper had only made things worse for himself by challenging that fact. And because of that, all he could really do now was hide away like a coward and hope that everything would turn out alright, even if it probably wouldn’t.

“Stupid Robbie,” the boy muttered to himself bitterly as he continued to play the game. “He’s such a jerk!”

“K.O!” the machine blared, adding insult to injury as it informed Dipper that he had lost.

“Continue?”

“A winner never runs away from a fight!” Rumble McSkirmish encouraged gruffly.

“That’s easy for you to say,” Dipper sighed as he pulled another quarter out of his pocket. “You have more than one life. Ugh, I wish one of these guys could fight Robbie for me…” Absently, the boy started to insert the coin into the machine, only for it to slip out of his hand and roll onto the floor. He didn’t think much of it as he bent down to pick the quarter up, only to spot something vaguely etched into the lower corner of the machine. Curious, Dipper brushed off the thin coating of dust to reveal a string of arrows that appeared to be some sort of cheat code for the game.

“‘To unleash ultimate power’?” Dipper read in confusion. “I do like things that are ultimate.” Thinking that it wouldn’t cause any harm, he decided to try the code out in the game, inputting the complex order of directions and button hits in the proper sequence. However, the moment he finished putting the code in, the screen went completely black, as though power to the machine had
been abruptly cut entirely. “Huh, guess it didn’t work.”

Dipper was quickly proven wrong however as the game flared back to life in a bright flash, the screen seeming to glow with an otherworldly light. “What the-!?"

“SELECT YOUR CHARACTER!” the game commanded, just as it usually did.

“Um… Rumble McSkirmish?” Dipper tried, shielding his eyes from the machine’s bright light. The glow only seemed to intensify while the game shook as something, or rather, someone began to emerge from its flashing screen. Dipper watched in immense fascination as a collection of colorful pixels materialized from the game and into real life, a loud, bold voice accompanying them as they did so.

“KickkickkickkickPUNCH!” the now out of game Rumble McSkirmish exclaimed as he performed a roundhouse kick right out of the game. His large, imposing pixled form landed squarely in front of Dipper, who could scarcely believe what he was seeing.

“Whoa! You’re real?!” the boy asked in amazement, gladly giving the muscular warrior a high five. “Ow!” Dipper retracted his hand quickly out of pain. “Your pixels are really sharp!”

“Greetings, child-boy!” Rumble proclaimed, over-emphasizing on every syllable, just as he did in the game. “I am Rumble McSkirmish from the U.S.A! Punch! Kick! Punch! Kick!”

“Ouch!” Dipper exclaimed after having been on the receiving end of one of Rumble’s wild, showy kicks. “Cool!”

“Change machine!” the warrior exclaimed to the token dispenser nearby, misunderstanding its purpose. “Change me into a powerful wolf! HYAAAA!” Without any provocation, Rumble karate-chopped the machine, destroying it instantly.

“Oh man, Steven would love this!” Dipper laughed in amusement. “I wonder where he-”

“Hey, Dipper!” the young Gem greeted as he rounded the corner, as if on cue. “What’s goin’ on? Are you still worried about your fight with—WHOA! Who is that?!” Steven gasped as he noticed Rumble’s presence.

“Steven, I’d like you to meet Rumble McSkirmish,” Dipper introduced with a wide grin.

“From Fight Fighters?!” Steven asked in incredulous awe as he looked to the beefy warrior.

“I will fight with honor and with my MUSCLES!” Rumble quipped as he gave the ground a heavy punch.

“Yeah!” Dipper nodded enthusiastically. “I just put in this cheat code I found and it brought him right out of the game! This is great! With Rumble around, Robbie will be so scared, I won’t even need to fight him. Looks like I won’t be needing Garnet’s help after all.”

“Well, that’s… good I guess…” Steven frowned, not sure if he agreed with this plan. “She’s still really enjoying Meat Beat Mania. She even blazes through the Grilling-Glazed Lightning Round that happens every ten minutes! It’s… kinda scary, to be honest…”

Before Dipper could reply, Rumble interjected, his pixels flashing red as he bounced up and down in his idle animation. “I need power ups!”

“Power ups?” Dipper frowned in confusion. “Like… what?”
“Oh, I know!” Steven exclaimed. “A lot of games have food as power ups! Like the power truffles in Super Plumber Mustache Brothers or cow’s milk in the Tale of Helga: Fife of Dimensions! So maybe Rumble’s just hungry!”

“I hunger for justice and punching!” Rumble exclaimed, keeping in line with his in game catch phrases.

“I don’t know if we can get you any justice or punches…” Dipper said as him and Steven prepared to leave the arcade with Rumble in tow. “But we’ll see what we can do.”

“Alright, everyone,” Mabel began as she addressed Pearl, Amethyst, and Waddles. “It’s time to begin Operation Get Stan Over His Fear of Heights! I came up with that name.”

“It’s very… creative, Mabel,” Pearl said with a small, encouraging smile.

“So, what’s the plan?” Amethyst asked curiously. “Are we gonna throw Stan off a building or something?”

“What? No!” Mabel frowned in confusion. “Why would we do that?”

“Wait, you mean that’s not how humans get over being afraid of heights?” the purple Gem asked, bewildered.

Pearl sighed in aggravation over Amethyst’s naiveté as she turned back to Mabel. “What exactly would you like us to do?”

“Just follow my lead,” the girl smirked daringly. “I’ve got a plan.”

The two Gems did as she said as the followed her into the den, where Stan was fast asleep on the recliner, snoring away. Pearl frowned with distaste as Amethyst let out an amused chuckle, though Mable was quick to quiet her before breaking out into an abrupt, loud shout. “Happy Great Uncle’s Day!” the girl proclaimed, presenting her uncle the box she had been holding behind her back as the conman awakened with a start.

“Wha-!?” Stan exclaimed in surprise, though it was quick to turn into confusion. “Mabel? Amethyst? Pearl? What are you three doin’ here?”

“Well, obviously we’re here to celebrate… what was it again?” Pearl started, trying her best to help the girl out, even if she wasn’t all too enthusiastic about it.

“Great Uncle’s Day!” Mabel chimed, pushing her present into Stan’s hands. “It’s a totally real holiday and not one I just made up!”

“But I thought we were here to help Stan get over-” Amethyst was abruptly cut off by shushes from both Mabel and Pearl as Stan opened the box. The conman frowned in confusion as he took out a pair of elegant red pumps.

“High heels? You shouldn’t have!” Stan said with a grin that quickly turned to a bewildered look. “Seriously. What? What is this?”

“What’s wrong?” Mabel asked interrogatingly. “Are you saying these heels are too high? Do they make you uncomfortable? HM?”
“Maybe…” Stan said, suspicious of his niece’s harsh manner.

“Are you kidding?” Pearl scoffed incredulously. “Those heels are literally only about three inches high.”

“Aha!” Mabel exclaimed, startling her grunkle. “I knew it! You do have a fear of heights! Admit it!”

“What? That’s why you brought me these?” Stan frowned, dropping the high heels in light of this news. “You should be ashamed of yourself! And on Great Uncle’s Day no less. And no, I don’t have a ‘fear of heights’.”

“You sure about that, Stan?” Amethyst asked casually. “Don’t you remember that one time we tried getting into the Chaaps factory and we had to climb up the-”

“Okay! Okay!” Stan said in a rather hurried panic. “W-we don’t have to talk about climbing or anything like that!” The conman froze as he realized his very apparent terror at the mere mention of heights had given him away, especially as his niece gave him a knowing look. “Alright, fine. You got me. I have a fear of heights. Is that really so cray-cray?”

Not sparing to discuss this insecurity any further, Stan quickly retreated out of the room and into the kitchen, leaving Mabel as resolved as ever to do something now that she was certain of her grunkle’s phobia. “This isn’t over,” the girl said with bold determination. “We’re gonna free Grunkle Stan from his fear of heights, even if it kills him!”

“So we’re going through with the plan to throw him off a building then?”

“No, Amethyst,” Mabel and Pearl answered in exasperated unison as the trio began to plan the next stage of their mission.

Despite Rumble’s nigh-unstoppable desire to punch everything in his path, Dipper and Steven had somehow managed to get him back to the shack leaving minimal property damage in their wake. The warrior occupied himself with cleanly karate-chopping a fly out of midair as the boys searched the fridge for something that could pass as a power up.

“Ok, Rumble,” Steven began with a friendly smile. “What are some of your favorite foods?”

“My favorite feuds are the ones in which my enemies taste defeat! HYA!” the warrior shouted as he slammed his fist into the counter, leaving a sizable dent.

“Um… ok?” the young Gem frowned, unsure of how to respond.

“Well, we don’t have any traditional power ups like turkey legs, pizza boxes or gold rings,” Dipper reported after having checked the fridge over. “How about… half a taco?”

“Place it on the floor,” Rumble commanded, his voice a rigid as ever. The boy did so, watching in amazement with the young Gem as the video game warrior merely looked at the taco for a moment before it disappeared in a blip of light. No more than a second later, the taco rematerialized alongside other various power ups in the pixelated menu that briefly appeared above Rumble’s head, confirming it had been added to his inventory.

“Cool!” Steven laughed, waving his hand over the place on the floor where the taco had been to
confirm that it truly was gone.

“I wish I could do that!” Dipper exclaimed, equally as impressed.

“Now I must defeat the world’s greatest fight-fighters!” Rumble proclaimed boldly. “Take me to
the Soviet Union!”

“That’s gonna be tough… for a number of reasons…” Dipper frowned.

“If you like fighting, I happen to know of three Gems here in Gravity Falls that are great at it!”
Steven quipped enthusiastically. “I’m sure they’d love to go a few innocent rounds with you.”

“Maximum power?” Rumble questioned readily.

“Actually,” Dipper cut in with a plan of his own in mind. “I was have someone else in mind for
you to fight. His name is Robbie V. and he’s kinda like my arch enemy.”

“Did he kill your father?” Rumble asked, taking the band poster that Dipper had handed to him.

“Did he?!” Steven gasped in alarm as he looked to Dipper, who rolled his eyes and replied.

“Well, he’s dating the girl I like and he posts an annoying amount of status updates.”

“And then he killed your father?!” the warrior demanded, crumbling the poster in his large hands.

“Uh, sure,” Dipper shrugged, even if he knew that wasn’t true. “Anyway I was hoping you could,
you know, scare him off for me so I don’t have to fight the guy.”

“Hahaha! You’re question makes my shoulders bounce!” Rumble laughed heartily before he leapt
into a string of flashy attacks. “Fire ball! Uppercut! Downer cut! Bowl of PUNCH!” The warrior
shouted as he took a bowl of punch from the fridge and downed it in one gulp before smashing it
brutally.

“Um, Dipper? Are you sure this is such a cool idea?” Steven asked with concern. “I mean,
Rumble’s really cool and everything, but he seems a little… intense.”

“So he’s a bit enthusiastic,” Dipper shrugged, not watching as Rumble continued to cause more
destruction in the background. “I don’t see what the problem is.”

“Well… isn’t asking Rumble to fight Robbie for you sort of like cheating?” the young Gem
questioned.

“Maybe a little…” Dipper replied, though he didn’t really think much of it. “But it’ll all be worth it.
Besides, this is just like what we planned on asking Garnet to do; Robbie will take one look at
Rumble and he’ll go running for his life.”

“Hm… I’m still not sure about this…” Steven admitted sheepishly.

“C’mon, Steven. When have any of my plans ever not worked out?” Dipper asked with confidence,
though he quickly retracted that statement before the young Gem could reply. “Don’t answer that.”

“I am ready to FIGHT!” Rumble roared brazenly, growing tired of being idle.

“So you’ll protect me from Robbie then?” Dipper asked the warrior expectantly.

“Challenge accepted!” Rumble declared as a pixelated start button appeared before him. “Press
start to begin!”

Dipper hesitated briefly before doing so, exchanging a glance with Steven, who simply shook his head worriedly but otherwise didn’t try to stop him. Regardless of whatever problems asking Rumble for help could cause, the boy knew that it had to be better than simply accepting a no-doubt brutal beating at the hands of the moody teen. And so, even if he wasn’t sure what he was getting himself into, he pushed the flashing red button anyway, more than ready to watch Robbie get what was coming to him.

“Amethyst for the last time!” Pearl’s voice rang out from the den. “We are not going to throw Stan off a building!”

“Oh no!” Steven gasped in sudden alarm. “It’s the Gems!”

“Rumble, stay perfectly still,” Dipper commanded carefully, even though the warrior continued to steadily bounce up and down in his idle animation. “I said stay still!”

“This is as still as I can stay!” Rumble exclaimed, still constantly rocking back and forth in his battle-ready stance.

Okay, this plan is definitely gonna work!” Mabel said excitedly as her, Amethyst, and Pearl prepared to put their next idea into action.

“Hopefully, it does,” Pearl crossed her arms. “Especially since our last plan was a complete disaster…”

“Hey, how was I supposed to know that just watching someone jump off of something high would freak Stan out?” Amethyst asked boredly.

“Amethyst, you nearly cracked your gem in that rough landing!” Pearl scolded.

“Yeah, but I didn’t. That’s why it was so cool.”

“It was pretty cool,” Mabel admitted, recalling how the purple Gem had flung herself off of the temple hill without any reservations. “But I don’t think Grunkle Stan thought so… He said he wouldn’t be caught dead on top of anything that high. I don’t know what we’re gonna do…”

“Well, we don’t necessarily have to start that high up…” Pearl remarked. The white Gem didn’t really want to admit it, but she was finding herself becoming strangely invested in this endeavor, despite her usual disdain towards the conman. “Why don’t we try something shorter and work our way up?”

“Yeah!” Mabel agreed zealously. “Like baby steps!”

“So what? Are we gonna get Stan to climb up on a chair or something? Cause that sounds really boring,” Amethyst said, craving more excitement and entertainment from this ordeal.

“No…” Mabel mused, glancing around as the three of them stood on the shack’s porch while planning. A slow grin crossed her face as she looked towards town, spotting a particular, promising structure rising just over the treetops. “But I think I’ve just thought of a way for us to step up our game, if you catch my drift…”
“I… don’t think we do…” Pearl frowned, not following.

“You will!” the girl grinned brightly, heading on inside so she could retrieve Stan while the Gems waited outside. “Hey, Grunkle Stan!”

Startled by his niece’s sudden appearance once more, the conman spit out the soda he had been drinking while watching TV. “What is it now?” he asked sourly, still rather embittered by the temple incident earlier.

“How would you like to go take a walk with me, Amethyst, and Pearl to nowhere in particular while wearing a blindfold?” Mabel asked, feigning innocence.

“Eh, beats just sitting around here getting old,” Stan shrugged as he rose to stand, though he paused as he realized that his niece’s cheerful grin was just a bit too wide. “Wait a minute… you’re not planning on taking me someplace super high up, are you?”

“Oh, Grunkle Stan, I would never!” Mabel gasped as she pretended to be hurt. “Scout’s honor!”

Stan seemed to buy this as he watched her throw a sweater on with a design of fingers raised in a promise. “Okay then, let’s go.”

Mabel smiled mischievously as Stan led the way out of the house, proud of just how clever she was. She chuckled to herself as she knew that her grunkle hadn’t happened to notice the crossed fingers on the back of her sweater, completely contradicting whatever promise she might have made.

Dipper, Steven, and Rumble made a rather odd-looking trio as they walked down Main Street, heading towards the park so the warrior could face off against Robbie. Three o’clock was almost upon them, but unlike before, Dipper felt practically no anxiety or fear about the oncoming confrontation. With Rumble on his side, there was no way he could lose.

“Tell me my opponent’s special moves!” the warrior demanded, shuffling forward in his rigid walking cycle.

“Does Robbie even have any special moves?” Steven asked Dipper with a confused frown.

“Aside from brooding, probably not. But don’t worry,” Dipper reassured Rumble. “As soon as he sees you, he’s gonna wet his pants.”

“His wet pants will be no match for THIS!” Rumble suddenly brandished a metal pipe from seemingly out of nowhere, swinging it wildly around as both boys gasped in alarm.

“Whoa! Where’d you get that from?!” Dipper asked with concern.

“I punched an oil drum!” Rumble reported boldly.

“That’s… well, I’m not gonna lie, that’s really cool,” Steven admitted. “But it’s also really dangerous!”

“Trust me, you won’t need that,” Dipper said to Rumble. “Just give him a good scare.”

“Yes…” the warrior said rather ominously. “With THIS!” With another battle cry, Rumble picked up an unsheathed sword that was randomly lying in the middle of the street, slashing it around
broadly.

“That’s even worse!” Steven cried fearfully.

“Man, this street has really dangerous litter…” Dipper commented worriedly. Still, the group continued on their way to the park, even though the boys had to detract the video game warrior away from whatever he could find and fashion into a weapon along the way. Dipper wasn’t at all surprised to see that Robbie was already at the park waiting for him when they arrived just in time, though he wasn’t all too worried either. After telling Rumble to stay behind for a moment, Dipper and Steven went on ahead to meet Robbie by themselves, at least at first.

“Well, well, well!” Robbie exclaimed with interest as he noticed the two boys approaching. “Look who decided to show up! I thought you chickened out. Oh, and it looks like you brought your dorky little friend with you to watch you get pummeled into the ground. Where’s your big, scary lion at now, kid?” the teen asked Steven teasingly.

“At home, napping probably,” the young Gem answered with a frown. “But Robbie, are you really sure you wanna fight Dipper? Maybe the two of you could just sit down and settle all this with a calm, friendly talk instead!”

“Yeah, and maybe after that we can all bake cookies and pick flowers!” Robbie mocked with a condescending roll of his eyes. “Give me a break. We’re gonna settle this like men and not like little girls!”

“Look dude, I don’t think you wanna fight me,” Dipper said, knowing that Steven’s attempt to be diplomatic, while thoughtful of him, was never going to work. “Let’s just call this thing off before someone gets hurt.”

“You scared, huh? Is that it?” Robbie laughed, already cracking his knuckles in anticipation.

Dipper smirked at this, more than ready to see the look of complete terror that would be on the teen’s smug face in just a minute. “Okay, you asked for it,” he shrugged before snapping his fingers. On cue, Rumble emerged from behind the tree he had been waiting near and approached the group, already taking up his usual battle-ready stance.

“Who’s your friend?” Robbie asked, more confused than alarmed. “And why is he… blurry?”

“T-this is Rumble,” Steven introduced, still not agreeing with this plan, even if he knew it was too late to stop it.

“And he just so happens to be the greatest warrior that’s ever lived!” Dipper added, crossing his arms. “So, do you still wanna fight me now, Robbie?”


“How can you laugh when you killed this boy’s father?!” Rumble demanded harshly.

“Wait… what?” the teen asked, confused.

“Alright, Robbie, this is your last chance,” Dipper said, his tone serious, yet confident. “Back down, or this guy’s gonna go nuts.”

“You should probably listen,” Steven urged worriedly, not wanting to see anyone get hurt, even Robbie. “Rumble’s really, really strong!”
“Please,” Robbie jeered, still unphased by the girthy warrior. “How about YOU back down, kid?” he asked Dipper, standing over him threateningly.

“You asked for it,” Dipper shrugged again before calling his bodyguard into action. “Rumble, go!”

Robbie simply laughed at this, assured that Rumble wasn’t a threat, but he was quickly proven wrong as he saw the warrior swing a heavy punch his way. The teen gasped as he narrowly ducked out of the way. “What the-?!” Robbie tried to ask, clearly alarmed as Rumble roughly grabbed him by the collar of his hoodie and lifted him up into the air. “Whoa! Hey! What’s happening!” the teen cried as he struggled against the warrior’s iron grip.

“I didn’t wanna have to do this, man, but you gave me no choice,” Dipper said with little sympathy, ignoring Steven’s very worried expression. “Maybe now you’ll-”

“HA HA!” Rumble laughed triumphantly as he suddenly slammed Robbie to the ground brutally, paying no mind to the teen’s cry of pain.

“Ah!” Steven gasped fearfully, cringing as he watched Robbie land roughly. “He’s taking things too far! I knew this would happen!”

“I-I can stop him!” Dipper exclaimed, even if he wasn’t all too sure. “Rumble, you can stop! I think Robbie’s had enough-”

“RUMBLE… THROW!” the warrior shouted as he picked the injured teen up and tossed him high into the air, even as the two younger boys gasped in horror at the violence they were witnessing.

“Rumble, you have to stop!” Dipper protested, his eyes wide with growing fear.

“Yeah!” Steven agreed fretfully and pleadingly. “If you keep this up, you’ll end up-” The young Gem was cut off as Robbie painfully landed on the metal playground bars behind them, groaning in agony as he did so.

“That guy’s crazy!” the teen shouted in terror as he clumsily slipped off the bars. Rumble gave him no reprieve, however as he sent a fireball spiraling his way. Terrified, Robbie screamed as he quickly retreated into town, wanting to get as far away from the crazed video game warrior as possible.

“What the heck was that?!” Dipper asked Rumble harshly. “You were only supposed to scare him; you nearly killed him!”

“I will not rest until the man who dishonored you is DESTROYED!” Rumble roared brazenly, his fists alight with pixeled flames.

“But I don’t think Robbie-” Steven began, though the warrior was hardly listening as he let out another loud battle cry and took off after the teen, his vendetta as strong as ever.

“This isn’t good,” Dipper said, still rather shell-shocked by what had just happened.

“We gotta do something before Rumble really hurts Robbie!” Steven exclaimed with immense concern, already running after the warrior as Dipper immediately followed. “Come on!”

Not wasting any time to stop and rest, Dipper and Steven followed Rumble and Robbie all the way
across town, both of them concerned that the warrior would end up gravely injuring the moody teen if they didn’t. While it was true that neither of them were incredibly fond of Robbie considering his smug, condescending attitude, neither Dipper nor Steven wanted to watch him meet his end at the pixely hands of Rumble McSkirmish. Which was why they were resolved to do whatever they had to in order to stop the warrior’s violent rampage.

“Somehow I knew he’d come here first,” Dipper said as him and Steven arrived at the barrel factory, where Rumble was still relentlessly perusing Robbie.

“Really? What could have made you think that?” Steven asked, watching as the teen ran down the scaffolding against the building, narrowly jumping over the barrels that the warrior was constantly throwing at him. “Now that you mention it, this does seem sorta familiar…”

“Rumble, listen!” Dipper called up to the enraged warrior. “You gotta calm down, man!”

Of course, the warrior was too engrossed in the heat of battle to listen as he preformed a high leap off the building the moment Robbie scampered onto the ground himself. Panicked, the teen let out another fearful cry as Rumble continued to chase him, leaving both of the younger boys in the dust as they continued through town. “He won’t listen!” Steven exclaimed anxiously.

“Well, we gotta get him to listen,” Dipper said with resolve, already running ahead. As they chased after the video game warrior, they noticed that he stopped to punch through literally any obstacle that stood in his path, though that hardly slowed his momentum down. The amount of property damage he was sustaining was frightening enough on its own, but the fact that he was doing so while on the hunt for a specific target was even more terrifying.

“Rumble, wait!” Steven called after the warrior. “You don’t have to do this!”

“Y-yeah!” Dipper agreed, though somewhat breathlessly as fatigue began to wear on him. It wasn’t surprising though, considering the fact that they had essentially been running all over town in their pursuit. “At least pace yourself! You might get a cramp—ow!” The boy slowed to a stop, panting in exhaustion as he tried to soothe away the cramp he had gotten in his side himself. Though he wasn’t as tired, Steven paused to make sure his friend was alright, though his concern soon turned to dread as the ground under them suddenly started to shake.

The young Gem gasped as a startling amount of drill creatures suddenly burst from the paved street in front of them, spiraling into the air briefly before they came down in a maelstrom of destruction. On instinct, Steven managed to form a bubble around himself and Dipper, watching with wide eyes as the drills bounced off of it and burrowed into the ground once more.

“W-what are those things?!” Dipper asked in alarm.

“They’re these drill guys that were part of a bigger monster me and the Gems defeated yesterday!” Steven exclaimed, cringing as he noticed the defense of his bubble was starting to wear thin. “But I don’t know why they’re here now!”

“As if things couldn’t get any worse!” Dipper groaned, knowing that Rumble was certainly gaining on Robbie, even in the midst of this sudden attack. “Steven, go get the Gems and get rid of these things!”

“But that might not work!” Steven stressed anxiously. “The four of us didn’t actually beat the monster; it was Garnet who—That’s it! We need Garnet!”

“But isn’t she still at the arcade?!” Dipper asked, practically having to yell to be heard over the rain
of drills coming down.

“Don’t worry,” Steven assured as his bubble finally burst, leaving both boys relatively defenseless. “I’ll go get her! As soon as she finds out that the town is in danger, she’ll come and save the day, just like she always does!”

“She better!” Dipper exclaimed in exasperation as he took up a nearby trash can lid to use as a temporary shield against the drills. “Or else Robbie won’t be the only one who has to worry about getting killed!”

Knowing they had no time to spare another word, both boys quickly parted ways, running in opposite directions with different missions. As Steven went to retrieve Garnet, Dipper continued to chase after Rumble, hoping that at the very least he could do something to stop one of these pressing threats.

“Okay, Grunkle Stan,” Mabel said with a wide grin as she winked knowingly to Amethyst and Pearl. “You can take off the blindfold… now!”

The conman did as she said, removing the blindfold the purple Gem had forced on him only to see a sight that made his seize up with horror. Stan, Mabel, Amethyst, and Pearl were all standing on the narrow platform surrounding the water tower, positioned many feet above the ground. Though it gave them all a grand view of the town, Stan was anything but amazed as he gaped down at the ground below with wide eyes. “Yeah, that’s pretty much what I was expecting,” he said with a hint of dry acceptance in his tone.

“Now, I bet you’re wondering: ‘how did they get me all the way up here’?” Mabel asked knowingly. “Well, it’s because the three of us are super clever!”

“It was quite simple, really,” Pearl began to explain eloquently. “We were going to just have you climb up the ladder, but I devised a better idea: to build a complex series of levers and pulleys to rig an elevator to lift you up here.”

“And then when I pointed out that plan was dumb, I just shapeshifted into a hot air balloon and brought all of us up instead,” Amethyst smirked proudly, ignoring the annoyed glare the white Gem was sending her.

“Wow, you’re doing better than I thought you would, Grunkle Stan!” Mabel beamed cheerfully. “Now just let go of the handrail…”

“Nope,” the conman said, his voice very tight as he gripped onto the handrail for dear life, refusing to steal a glance at the distant ground.

“Hey, do any of you guys smell anger and hormones?” Mabel asked with a frown. Her question was soon answered, however, as the trio was joined by a new member. Robbie scrambled up the ladder and onto the tower platform, apprehensively peering around the side of the tower to make sure he had not been followed as he frantically caught his breath.

“Finally!” the teen breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m safe!”

“Hey, Robbie! Get your own water tower!” Mabel exclaimed crossly.

“SHHH!” he quickly quieted the girl. “Keep it down! He’ll find us!”
“CHALLENGER SIGHTED!” a loud, enraged voice sounded only a second later as Rumble arrived on the scene, much to Robbie’s horror.

“Who is that?” Pearl asked, confused as she looked down over the railing.

“Whoa, that guy looks crazy!” Amethyst chuckled as she joined the white Gem. “I think I like him!”

“YOU CAN RUN BUT YOU CANNOT HIDE!” Rumble shouted as he delivered a firm punch to one of the legs of the water tower, shaking its foundation. Everyone on its platform let out a collective cry of fear at this, though the situation only seemed to get worse as the ground itself shook once more. Since the drill creatures had been randomly popping up all over town, it wasn’t too outlandish for them to appear around the water tower as well, burrowing up out of the ground before soaring into the air. Rumble paid them no mind as he continued to go after Robbie, but the Gems took notice of the minute monsters the moment they made themselves apparent, especially as they began to cluster around the tower, drilling the very ground out from underneath it.

“They’re back?!” Amethyst exclaimed, startled over this sudden turn of events.

“I knew this would happen!” Pearl shouted, already summoning her spear and taking aim at the attacking creatures. “We only barely managed to drive them off last time, remember?”

“Whoa, there’s so many of them!” Mabel gasped with growing fear. “What are we gonna do?!”

“There’s only thing we can do!” Stan cried, his fear of heights crippling him all the more in light of how their perch was being constantly shaken. “Accept our impending deaths and pray that it’ll be quick!”

“Oh please, nobody is going to die,” Pearl said firmly, even if her tone was a bit uncertain as the water tower shuddered again. “Hopefully…”

“We need Garnet!” Amethyst called over the sounds of punching and drilling as she stretched her whip out as far as it could go and lashed it out at Rumble. The warrior simply grabbed the end of the whip and pulled it down, though fortunately the purple Gem let go of it just in time.

“We don’t know where she is!” Pearl retorted, just as stressed out over the situation. Still though, Garnet’s leadership was sorely missed. Even though each of the Crystal Gems were formidable, skillful warriors in their own right, they were nothing unless united by their powerful, levelheaded leader. But without her, all Pearl and Amethyst could do was repel the drill creatures as best as they could from their high vantage point and hope that she would miraculously appear to rescue them all yet.

By the time he made it to Funland Arcade, Steven was practically ready to collapse from exhaustion from both running and dodging the still-raining drill creatures. Despite his fatigue, however, the young Gem knew that he didn’t have time to rest, especially when he saw that Garnet was still somehow playing Meat Beat Mania as intently as ever.

“Garnet!” Steven shouted, running for the Gem leader. Of course, Garnet didn’t respond as she continued to fling her arms about in perfect sync with the intense rhythm the game was putting out. “Garnet, you gotta come quick!” the young Gem practically begged in desperation. “Those little drill guys are back and they’re a problem! And this crazy-strong warrior from Fight Fighters is running around and—and he’s a problem too! We need your help!”
Steven anxiously watched Garnet for a moment, expecting her to break out of her ongoing trance with the game and go with him. However, the Gem leader simply ignored him again, shaking the meat controllers as her score raised ever higher. “Garnet, please!” Steven pleaded, pushing against her steady form to try and move her, even if she remained planted in place. “T-this is serious! The whole town is in trouble! Why won’t you listen to me!?"

The young Gem’s anxiety only grew as Garnet remained as immovable as ever, even though she threw her arms in basically every direction as the game commanded. Steven set his jaw as he realized that he had no other choice. If she refused to acknowledge him from below, then he would just have to get on her level.

“Garnet!” Steven grunted as he began the difficult trek up the Gem leader’s tall form. “Why—are—you—so—hard—to—climb?!” The young Gem was even more exhausted as he reached the top of her cubical afro, though his hand slipped as he nearly fell off of her entirely. As he righted himself, Steven accidently swiped his hand over the Gem leader’s shades, knocking them off her face. The young Gem watched breathlessly as the visor fell, disappearing into a burst of light as it hit the ground. When he looked back to Garnet’s face, let out a stunned gasp at what he saw.

Steven had never seen Garnet without her iconic shades before, but he couldn’t deny that he was absolutely amazed and shocked at the sight now. Against all odds, she had not just two eyes, but three, one red, one blue, and the third, purple one resting at the center of her forehead. Not surprisingly, all three of them were all centered upon the game in nothing less than a complete trance, especially her third one. The extra eye flashed with the colors shown on screen, its small, contracted pupil moving rapidly with the game’s movements.

“Oh my gosh!” Steven exclaimed in awe, though he let out a fearful cry as he clumsily fell off the Gem leader and onto the ground. Despite his amazement, the young Gem knew that this was no time to pause and gawk. He had a job to do. “Don’t worry!” he exclaimed boldly, though Garnet didn’t hear him. “I’ll save you, Garnet!”

Knowing that the only way to rip the Gem leader away from the game was to end it, Steven quickly unplugged the game. He breathed a sigh of relief as the screen went black and Garnet froze, only for her to throw her controllers up into the air and take a step towards the machine. Her eyes were still hyper-focused on the game as she placed her hands on the sides of it and used her electricity powers to power life back into it, despite it being unplugged. Without missing a beat, Garnet caught the controllers as they fell and picked up her frenzied gameplay right where she left off.

“The rhythm has her!” Steven gasped fearfully. “The only way to defeat… the beat… is with meat!” With bold resolve, the young Gem picked up the player 2 drumstick controllers, inserting a coin into the machine as he prepared to compete against Garnet and her immense skill at the game. “I have to win!” he exclaimed, hoping that doing so would free the Gem leader from this rhythmic trap.

“It’s a player two barbeque! Let’s meat it!” the game announced as two player mode was about to begin. “Prepare your meats! Shake it!” As the game started, Steven leapt right in, shaking his controllers as directed, even if he was nowhere near as fast as Garnet. “Tenderize!” Of course, unlike the Gem leader, the young Gem couldn’t keep up with the fast beat forever, which was why he soon faltered after only a few minutes. “Player one wins! Player 2, you’re toast!”

“No!” Steven cried, wordily glancing towards Garnet as he inserted another coin and tried again. He knew well that this was his last quarter, and if he lost this time, then the Gem leader could very well be lost two, which was why he wasn’t about to lose again.
“Let’s meat it! Rack those ribs! Spice it up! The thrill is in the grill!” the game continued to goad as Steven competed against Garnet, only to lose once again to her perfect rhythm. “You’re toasted!”

“Oh come on!” the young Gem shouted as he dropped his controllers in defeat. “Aw, I can’t do it! Garnet, snap out of it, please!” Steven cried, resorting to begging once more, even though it didn’t help. “What’s wrong with you?!” Fear soon turned to anger as the young Gem glared at the game that had his mentor entranced in its colorful graphics and catchy music. With no other plans in mind, Steven simply grabbed the game’s main console and began to pull on it, hoping that he could somehow pry it off. “You need to stop playing—this horrible game! AUGH!” With strength that he didn’t know he had, the young Gem managed to rip the grill-shaped console off its tight hinges. He briefly held it over his head for a moment before roughly bringing it down with an angry shout, smashing it into the still-bla ring game screen over and over again until it finally went black once and for all.

Tears were in the exhausted young Gem’s eyes as he finally let go of the console, hanging his head in despair as he realized that Garnet would probably just use her powers to turn the game back on. However, the exact opposite happened instead.

“Steven?!” The young Gem gasped as he heard Garnet’s shocked voice from behind him. The tears had started to stream down his cheeks, though this time in joy as he turned to face his beloved mentor with a wide, overjoyed smile.

“Garnet!” Steven cheered, noticing that the Gem leader had closed her third eye as she looked down towards him with clear concern. “You’re back!”

Garnet broke into an amused smile upon hearing as she waved her hand over her face, a new pair of shades concealing her trio of eyes once more. “You won,” she beamed, placing her hands on her young ward’s shoulders. Still overwhelmed with relief, Steven buried his head into her chest in a tight, warm embrace, one that Garnet was more than happy to return.

“I’m so glad you’re free, Garnet!” Steven exclaimed with a huge grin, though there was a hint of worry in it. “Everything’s turned into a disaster without you!”

“I know,” Garnet said with returned sincerity. “Which is why we have to go. Amethyst, Pearl, Dipper, Mabel, Stan, and even Robbie all need our help.”

“Wha-?” Steven frowned, quite confused. “But how did you know-”

“Ah, so it was you!” Mr. Smiley’s angry exclamation broke up the conversation as he rounded the corner to see the sparking ruins that used to be Meat Beat Mania. “You've been breaking my games!”

“Uh…” Steven began, unsure of how to explain the damage he had done to the game.

“Like I said, I have to go,” Garnet said to Steven, already heading for the door. “Goodbye, Steven!”

“Garnet, wait!” Steven called, though she had already left. The young Gem laughed awkwardly as Mr. Smiley sent him an expectant glare, before he turned on his heel and prepared to retreat as well. “I-I gotta go help-”

“Oh, no, no, no,” Mr. Smiley said, grabbing the young Gem by his shoulder and keeping him firmly in place. “Don’t you go flippity floppin’ outta here! You gotta pay me back for all those
“B-but I don’t have any money!” Steven protested, knowing he had just spent his very last quarter. Not that it would be enough to cover all of the damage anyway.

“Then you better start workin’ it off, son,” Mr. Smiley was quick to push a broom and dustpan into the young Gem’s hands before he walked off.

“Darn it!” Steven frowned in disappointment, already starting to get to work cleaning so he could finish quicker. “I’m gonna miss all the action!”

Fortunately for Dipper, he had happened to run into Soos on the way back to the park, and the handyman had generously offered to give him a ride there. Despite that, the boy had been completely unprepared for the sight that awaited him when they arrived. Rumble had cornered Robbie up on top of the water tower, where Mabel, Stan, Amethyst, and Pearl were all huddled as well for some reason, while the drill monsters burrowed the ground around it, attempting to knock it over. As the video game warrior delivered a rather brutal punch to the side of the tower, it shifted far to the side, to the point that everyone on it had to cling onto the railing just to remain on it.

“O-oh boy,” Stan gulped nervously, finding that he was forced to look at the ground as the tower leaned over.

“We—we’re safe, right?” Mabel asked with concern.

“Of course, we are, Mabel,” Pearl assured, despite her own growing dread. “We—”

“Pfft, yeah right!” Stan retorted bitterly. “Of course we’re not safe! This thing is on stilts! High, high up!”

“Yeah, and it’s a looong way down too,” Amethyst pointed out anxiously.

“Not helping!” all of the others exclaimed in annoyed unison. As the drill creatures dug even deeper into the ground, the tower’s foundation rocked once more, this time knocking Robbie off of it completely. The teen let out a fearful cry as he fell towards the ground, only instead of hitting the ground, he met a much worse fate as he was instead caught by Rumble.

“FINISH HIM!” an unseen announcer proclaimed as Rumble held Robbie up and prepared to deliver a brutal blow.

“No, no! Don’t finish me!” Robbie begged desperately.

The warrior disregarded this plea as his angry glare intensified, a fireball forming around his ready fist. However, before he could land the punishing hit, Rumble was abruptly stopped by a coin that happened to lightly strike his head from behind. “HWAAAA?”

“Rumble!” Dipper called boldly as the warrior whipped around to face him. “I have something I need to tell you!” The boy took in a deep breath, knowing that the only way to stop this madness was to come clean. “Robbie… Robbie didn’t kill my father.”

“HUUUUUUUH?!” Rumble questioned in shock. “Then who did?!”

“What? No one!” Dipper clarified. “I… I sort of… lied to you…”
“HWUUU?!” the warrior gasped, alarmed. “Well then you’re actually a… BAD GUY?!”

“I… guess I kinda am…” Dipper frowned, somewhat ashamed of what he had done. “I’m sorry, man.”

Rumble didn’t really hear this apology however as he hung Robbie from a nearby tree branch by the hoodie before going into a lengthy cuscene monologue. “My entire journey, a lie! My honor has been disgraced! Sensei warned me not to join the path of evil… the boy has led me astray! If Robbie V. is not the last stage, then it must be… YOU!” the warrior shouted, lividly towering over Dipper as his pixels flashed in response to his rage. Another start button appeared next to the boy, glowing red as it prompted him to press it, though he was much more hesitant to this time.

“Don’t fight him, dude!” Soos urged worriedly as he ran over to the boy. “That guy’s got a black belt wrapped around his black belt. You could get killed! Unless some sorta miracle happened, I guess.”

“I have to,” Dipper sighed in resignation, already anticipating the pain he was about to endure. “I started all this, and I’ve got to at least try to stop it.”

“You sure you wouldn’t rather hide like a wimp?” Soos asked with a frown. Dipper didn’t respond verbally as he simply shook his head, pressing the start button with finality in his expression. “Fight like a man it is.”

“READY?!” the game announcer demanded as Rumble took up his usual fighting stance. Dipper attempted his own fighting stance as well, even if his was much less solid and certain than the warrior’s. “FIGHT!”

With loud battle cries, both fighters charged for each other, Rumble with rage and fury and Dipper with fear and dead. Of course, the warrior was the first one to launch an attack as he loudly exclaimed what his first move was, just as he always did. “FIREBALL THROW! LIGHTNING BALL THROW! FIRE!” Rumble yelled, shooting large bursts of both fire and lightning at Dipper. The by only narrowly dodged the attacks, though he could do little to protect himself from the wide roundhouse kick Rumble sent his way. Dipper let out a cry of pain as he was knocked back quite a ways by the blow, while Rumble simply laughed in mocking triumph. “HAHA! You fight like a girl! Who is also a baby!”

Incensed by this teasing remark, Dipper quickly picked himself up off the ground and rushed for the warrior. With a surprising amount of force and a courageous shout, the boy threw his fist up at the video game character, landing a square uppercut to the jaw. While Rumble briefly fell to the ground, he was quick to jump up once more, largely unharmed by what had actually been a relatively weak attack.

“Oh, come on!” Dipper exclaimed in exasperation as he turned on his heel and retreated away from the enraged warrior. Rumble perused, throwing fireball after fireball at his opponent, all of which fortunately missed. Seeing he had few other options, the boy hurriedly scrambled up the nearest tree, hoping that the warrior couldn’t climb. And, amazingly enough, his planned seemed to work as Rumble paced around under the tree that Dipper had scaled, unable to even glance up at him.

“NO! I have no looking up animation!” Rumble cried, straining his neck muscles only to fall flat to the ground as a result. Relieved, Dipper laughed as he jumped down from the tree, standing over the downed warrior alongside Soos.

“So, what should I do with him? Roll him up and put him on my wall?” Dipper asked with a joking smirk.
“Dude, we should rock, paper, scissors for him,” Soos suggested. However, Rumble had only been momentarily defeated as he was quick to call out a special move, even despite his flat state.

“FIST! PUNCH! RAAAIIIIN!” he shouted loudly. In response, pixelated fists began to rain down from the sky, making the situation even worse as the drill creatures turned their attention away from the water tower to the nearby action. Even as they were being pelted by both fists and drills, Dipper and Soos ran for cover, though only the handyman really made it to shelter as Rumble jumped up from the ground and stopped the boy before he could.

“HAHA! Never underestimate that I have PUNCHES!” Rumble laughed, though he growled as he began to gear up for his finishing move, his entire form flowing with fire. Dipper’s eyes widened in fear upon seeing this, knowing that there would be no running from what was sure to be a world of hurt.

Rumble let out a battle cry as he pulled his fist back, energy surrounding it as he charged up his brutal finishing move. “SUPER POWER NINJA TURBO ULTRA HYPER MEGA MULTI ALPHA META UBER PREFIX… COMBO!”

Dipper only had time to take in a sharp, terrified gasp as he watched Rumble’s flaming fist start to fly towards him, though he quickly shut his eyes, not wanting to see it hit him, since he was sure he would feel it hard enough. However, instead of utterly K.Oing him, something that was nothing short of a miracle happened.

Rumble froze as his fiery fist struck an open palm, one that managed to stop his intense attack instantly. Both the warrior and the boy were quite surprised to see that a new fighter had entered the fray, one that, much to Dipper’s great relief, was on his side.

“Garnet!” the boy exclaimed in immense relief, grateful that she had just saved him from untold pain.

“Stay behind me,” Garnet commanded him firmly, her gauntlets forming around her fists as she took a step back from Rumble.

“What is this?!” the warrior exclaimed, clearly shocked. “A new challenger approaches?!”

“Player 2! Enter your name!” the announcer called, and surprisingly enough, the Gem leader did so.

“Garnet, of the Crystal Gems!” she proclaimed boldly, more than ready to square off against the video game warrior.

“Very well, Garnet, of the Crystal Gems!” Rumble growled angrily. “If you are an ally of evil, then I shall defeat you as well! Face my fists of FURY!”

“We’ll see about that,” Garnet said calmly as her and Rumble began to circle each other.

“Round 2, Ready?! FIGHT!”

Though Rumble tried to make the first move, Garnet beat him to it as she threw a heavy punch, one that knocked the warrior back quite a bit. Still, Rumble was resilient as he charged for the Gem leader, flying towards her with flames surrounding both his fists. Garnet met them squarely, however, locking her hands around his fists as she lifted him up and tossed him aside as though he weighed nothing at all. As the Gem leader and the warrior continued to brawl, Dipper and Soos watched in stunned amazement from the sidelines, both of them silently cheering Garnet on, even if she clearly didn’t need the encouragement. With swift, smooth movements, the Gem leader
avoided a left hook Rumble sent her way and countered it with a heavy low blow, striking the
warrior in his exposed gut. It was clear Rumble was on his last leg, his pixels flashing a warning
shade of red as he tried to lash out with one last kick, but Garnet barely even flinched, even as the
attack struck her in the jaw. The Gem leader simply readjusted her shades as she went in for the
final blow, a brutal uppercut that sent Rumble flying high into the air before he came crashing back
down in defeat.

“FATALITY!” the game announcer declared. “GAME OVER! PLAYER 2 WINS!”

“No!” Rumble shouted in both agony and anger as his pixels began to dissolve into nothingness.
“VENGEANCE SHALL BE MINNNNNEEEE!”

The warrior’s final threat faded into thin air just as he was sent back into the game he had come
from, leaving only the Gem warrior who had defeated him behind. She didn’t revel in her victory,
however, as she simply turned towards Dipper, who had been watching the entire battle with his
jaw dropped in amazement, even if he hadn’t bothered to get up from the spot where Rumble had
knocked him down. Still, he tentatively accepted Garnet’s outstretched hand as she helped him to
his feet.

“T-thanks, Garnet,” Dipper said with a small smile, still a bit shaken after everything that had
happened. “You really bailed me out there. That guy would have destroyed me!”

“I know,” Garnet said, placing her hands on her hips. “That’s why I came to help.”

“Um… where’s Steven?” the boy asked, noticing that the young Gem wasn’t with his mentor.

“He’s… cleaning things up,” Garnet replied with a hint of a smirk. “But you really have him to
thank for saving me so I could come here in the first place.”

“Well, I’m glad he was finally able to get you away from that game,” Dipper said, aptly relieved.
“And I gotta admit: you beating Rumble was probably the coolest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“All in a day’s work,” Garnet shrugged, though her casual manner became a bit more serious as she
kneled down to the boy’s level. “Dipper, I know you planned on asking me to fight Robbie for you
before you found Rumble. And while I could tell you how that was the wrong way of going about
things and that it wouldn’t have done any good, I don’t think I need to.”

“Yeah…” Dipper frowned as he gingerly reached a hand up to the black eye Rumble had managed
to give him. “I’m pretty sure I learned my lesson… Even if it was the hard way.”

“Sometimes the hard way is the only way that works,” the Gem leader said with a soft smile as she
rose to stand. “Now if you’ll excuse me…” Garnet trailed off as she gracefully leapt towards the
water tower, which was still being beset by drill creatures. Dipper watched as the Gem leader went
to go rescue the others, but his attention was soon diverted by a very livid Robbie.

“Who—who was that guy?!” the teen asked sullenly as he approached the boy, just as angry as
ever. “Why is it that whenever you’re around, there’s always ghosts or monsters or whatever?!”

“I don’t know, man,” Dipper simply shrugged.

“That guy almost broke my neck!” Robbie exclaimed in blatant fury. “You know how mad I am
right now?!”

“So… I guess you and I have to fight now, huh?” Dipper asked hesitantly, though he had finally
come to terms with it. “Go ahead, man. Do your worst. I just wanna get this over with.”
“Oh, man, I am SO gonna enjoy this!” Robbie grinned darkly as he raised his fist, only to pause as he noticed that Dipper made no effort to shrink away or flee. “Uh… aren’t you gonna run? Or get that square-haired lady to fight for you or something?”

“Nope,” Dipper shook his head, resolved to stand his ground.

“…Are you sure?”

The boy nodded, though this only seemed to deter the teen as he lowered his fist and scoffed in annoyance. “It’s not even worth it! I play lead guitar, so I gotta save my hands.”

“Hey, guys!” Wendy greeted as she ran towards both boys, having just gotten back from her camping trip. “I heard some crazy screaming back here, and… based on what’s going on at the water tower… it looks like something pretty wild happened…” The cashier frowned as she glanced back at the tower, where Garnet was in the midst of rescuing the others by taking out the drill creatures without any problem.

“Wendy?!” both Dipper and Robbie exclaimed, surprised to see the girl again so soon.

“You’re back!” the boy said with a smile.

“Yeah, man,” Wendy said casually, though her smile quickly faded as she noticed how rough both boys were looking. “Whoa, why are your faces all jacked up? You guys weren’t fighting each other, were you? I hate it when guys fight!”


“Why would we be fighting?!” Robbie asked just as defensively. “Never!”

“Yeah, we were just trying to stop two other guys from fighting each other!” the boy said, coming up with an on the spot excuse.

“Cool!” Wendy smirked, her tone quite impressed. “It makes me happy to see my two boys hanging out. I got some unpacking to do. I’ll text you guys later.” The cashier gave her boyfriend a kiss on the cheek, and though Dipper was more than ready to sigh in disdain over this, he smiled instead as Wendy affectionately ruffled his hair as she left.

“Did you hear that?!” Dipper asked excitedly as soon as Wendy was out of earshot. “She called me one of her two boys!”

“She was looking at me though,” Robbie replied crossly.

“Look, Robbie, if we stay at each other’s throats like this, we’re both gonna lose Wendy,” Dipper began. “We need to make a cold war pact.”

“Okay. What’s that?”

“We need to learn to hate each other in silence.”

“You mean, like what girls do?” Robbie asked in confusion.

“Yeah, exactly!” Dipper nodded, knowing that this truce would be so much easier than having video game warriors fight the teen for him. And hopefully, much less painful. “Like girls do…”
Even though they were all abjectly horrified, Pearl, Amethyst, Mabel, and Stan all remained atop
the water tower as Garnet took on the drill creatures, sweeping through their large numbers and
cutting them down as though they were nothing. The two Gems had been elated to see their missing
leader return, and while they usually would have offered their support to her in a battle like this,
they found themselves rather paralyzed from their spot on top of the platform, which was leaning
far to the right by now thanks to the drills. Fortunately, the group only had to wait a few minutes as
the Gem leader defeated the last of the parasites, before she leapt onto the tower herself.

“Ready to get down?” she asked with a small, knowing grin as everyone else nodded intently.
Garnet didn’t immediately get them down however, as she stood by for a moment, giving Pearl and
Amethyst a rather inquisitive look. “Why didn’t you two come find me when these parasites
attacked?” she asked, her tone calm, not angry.

“Oh-oh, well… we didn’t know where you were!” Pearl exclaimed bashfully.

“Yeah! And we’ve been helping Mabel and Stan out all day!” Amethyst protested, hating the
thought of being in trouble.

“I know,” Garnet cracked a smile. “So did it work?” she asked Mabel, who was clinging onto the
water tower for support.

“No!” the girl cried fearfully. “I thought that this would help Grunkle Stan get over his fear of
heights, but I was wrong! So wrong!”

Don’t be so sure about that,” the Gem leader said, nodding towards the conman, who was just
getting over his shock.

“I… I survived!” Stan exclaimed with immense relief. “I survived and I feel great! Wait, let me do
a cocky dance just to make sure.” The conman did so, disregarding how high up he was this time as
he let out a triumphant laugh. “Haha! Deal with it world! Stan Pines has cured his fear of heights!”

The others, save for Garnet, all watched Stan with looks of shock that this horrifying experience
had managed to shake his phobia once and for all. “I… can’t believe this worked…” Pearl
deadpanned dryly.

“Believe it,” Garnet assured. “Now, let’s get down, shall we?”

“Finally!” Amethyst exclaimed impatiently, heading down the ladder. “Heights are the worst!”

“I agree,” Pearl sighed in relief. “It’ll be a long time before I climb anything again!”

“You two know you could have just leapt off of the tower and you would have been fine, right?”
Garnet asked her teammates, who both merely face palmed at their own oversight.

“Hey, you comin’, kid?” Stan asked Mabel as he prepared to climb down after the Gems.

“Uh-uh,” Mabel shook her head, fear still written all over her expression.

“What’s the matter?” the conman asked with an amused grin. “YOU got a fear of heights now?
Haha!” Stan’s levity quickly faded though as he noticed the genuine terror on his niece’s face. “Uh
oh.”
“So where were you all this time, G?” Amethyst asked incredulously as the trio began to head back to the temple.

“At the arcade,” Garnet answered simply.

“R-really?” Pearl asked in bewilderment. “But… but we thought…”

“You thought wrong,” the Gem leader replied, as stoically as ever. “And I’m sure you’ll both be surprised to know that Steven was the one who ended up coming to get me. You owe this rescue to him.”

“Oh my goodness!” the white Gem exclaimed in sudden alarm. “I almost completely forgot about Steven! Where is he?! Is he alright?!”

“He’s fine,” Garnet assured. “He’s still at the arcade.”

“Should… we go get him?” Amethyst asked with a frown.

“No,” the Gem leader answered quickly, not wanting to step foot in that place again any time soon. “I think I’ve had enough video games for one century.”

“Whew!” the young Gem exclaimed in exhaustion as he stood before Mr. Smiley, who was inspecting his work. “Well, I think I cleaned the entire place top to bottom, Mr. Smiley! Have I paid off the machines me and the Gems broke yet?”

“Not even close, kid,” Mr. Smiley answered blatantly. “But it would probably take a year or more of manual labor to work off a debt that big! Haha!”

“Heh, yeah…” Steven frowned anxiously, hoping the arcade owner wouldn’t make him work that long.

“You’re just lucky I’m a generous man, Universe,” Mr. Smiley sighed as he began to escort the young Gem out. “You’re free to go. But uh… maybe you shouldn’t bring those friends of yours around here again… In case you haven’t noticed, they’re kinda… destructive.”

“They do like breaking things…” Steven said with a fond laugh. “Thanks, Mr. Smiley! And again, I’m really sorry about all your games!”

“Eh, don’t sweat it, kid!” the arcade owner called out after the young Gem as he left. “That Steven Universe is a good kid, even if he does keep some wacky company,” Mr. Smiley grinned as he went back inside the arcade to lock up for the night. As he was making sure that all the machines were shut off, the arcade owner happened to notice a discarded quarter lying on the ground near the Fight Fighters cabinet. He smiled as he bent down to claim the coin as his own, though as he did so, he happened to notice a cheat code scrawled on the bottommost corner of the game.

“What’s this now?” Mr. Smiley asked, intrigued. Tentatively, he inserted the coin he had found into the game, and on the title screen, he entered the cheat code, curious to see what it would do. After all, the last thing he wanted was for any game-breaking secrets about any of his games to get out, lest he make less money on them. Still, the arcade owner was quite surprised to see the screen light up brightly as the code went to work, the announcer blaring with one, all-important command for the second time that day. And it was a command that, despite his better judgement, Mr. Smiley complied with as he chose his favorite fighter, Blitz Blazer, out of the roster and into real life:
“SELECT YOUR CHARACTER!”
Chapter 16: Summerween

Chapter Summary

In which trick or treating happens, Pearl doesn’t understand human traditions, and Stan and Amethyst punk some kids

Chapter Notes

Well, here’s a chapter that ended up being a lot better than I thought it would, especially considering I had been dreading writing it for the longest time. But anyway, here’s my take on Summerween! Enjoy!

Since Dipper and Mabel had been staying with their grunkle for several weeks now, they had enough time to get used to his very haphazard driving. Which was why they were not at all surprised when Stan suddenly swerved his car into a parking lot, crashing into a handicap parking sign without regret as the vehicle jerked to a stop. The conman hadn’t made their destination clear beforehand, but Soos seemed to know where they were heading as he had been excitedly fidgeting in the passenger’s seat for the entire ride.

“Here we are!” Stan proclaimed, stepping out of the car as the others followed. “The Summerween Superstore!”

The twins exchanged a confused glance before they turned their attention to the store before them, which had temporarily been dubbed as the “Summerween Superstore”, just as Stan had said. “Wait, Summer-what?” Dipper asked, aptly confused.

“Summerween!” Stan clarified, pulling out a calendar with the date circled on it. “The people of this town love Halloween so much, they celebrate it twice a year. And wouldn’t you know, it’s today!”

“Do you always carry that calendar in your pocket?” Dipper questioned caustically.

“…Yes.”

“Summerween?” Mabel frowned, still trying to grasp the unusual concept. “Something about this feels unnatural…”

“There’s free candy!” Soos informed the twins, who both instantly broke into wide smiles upon hearing this. Not wasting another second, the group hurried into the store, all of the splitting up to
explore as soon as they got inside. While Dipper and Mabel made a beeline for the costume aisle and Stan began sifting through the props and decorations section, Soos entertained himself with pressing the talking skull on one of the many candy bowls for sale.

“*I’d lend you a hand... but I don’t seem to have any!*” the skull quipped with a cackle, much to the handyman’s amusement.

“This guy tells it like it is!” Soos laughed, reaching to press the skull again before he was stopped by the nearby cashier.

“Sir, could you please stop pressing that skull?” the store worker asked, clearly quite irritated.

“Ma’am, make these heads less hilarious and you’ve got yourself a deal.”

The cashier groaned in misery as the handyman disregarded her and pushed the annoying skull once more. Meanwhile, across the store, Stan heaved a large barrel of fake blood onto his back, more than ready to use it to frighten the unsuspecting trick-or-treaters that evening. “Ha ha! When the kids come to my door tonight, they’re gonna run away screaming from Stan Pines, Master of Fright!”

As Stan plotted his staged scares and Soos persisted in pressing every skull head on display, Dipper and Mabel laughed recklessly as they accidentally knocked their shopping cart into a stack of jack o’ melons, knocking them onto the floor in an absolute mess, which only got worse as the blood barrel the conman was toting started leaking. The cashier watched all of this unbridled chaos unfold from behind the counter, growing increasingly frustrated with each passing moment. “Have the police come and eject the Pines family from the store please,” she deadpanned into her walkie talkie.

“NOT TODAY!” Stan shouted with a daring grin as he threw a smoke bomb down in front of the counter. The resounding blast blinded the cashier long enough for the twins and Soos to follow the conman out of the store with their Summerween gear in toe.

“You paid for this stuff, right, Grunkle Stan?” Mabel asked as they ran for the car.

“Of course!” Stan reassured as they all piled into the vehicle. In reality, he had done no such thing as the cashier soon realized upon picking up the crayon-scribbled “Stan Buck” the conman had left behind.

“I hate Summerween,” the cashier scowled harshly, not even bothering to look as Stan’s car crashed into a telephone pole in the parking lot, which plowed into the inflatable Summerween decoration, easily deflating it. Of course, the Pines paid this no mind as the car simply switched direction and drove away, all of them more than excited for the Summerween celebration to come.

“I LOVE Summerween!” Steven proclaimed with a hearty laugh as he put the finishing touches on his costume. Connie chuckled in amusement over his verve as she also completed her homemade costume.

“Making these costumes was a lot of fun,” the girl agreed as she finished braiding her hair. “But I’m still not sure if I understand... Why are we celebrating Halloween in the middle of summer again?”

“It’s not Halloween, it’s Summerween!” the young Gem proclaimed. “It’s a Gravity Falls tradition that’s been around pretty much forever. My dad says the town’s been celebrating it even before he...
moved here years ago!"

“Yeah, but why?” Connie frowned. “Is it too hard for everyone to wait until October?”

“Oh, we celebrate Halloween in October too,” Steven clarified, putting the gloves for his costume on. “Summerween is just… well, the summer version of that!”

Admittedly, Connie was still quite confused by the odd idea of celebrating any holiday twice a year, though she couldn’t help but join in on Steven’s apparent elation over it. “It sounds like it’s a lot of fun.”

“It is!” Steven nodded with a wide grin. “I’ve celebrated it every year and I know you’ll love it, Connie! People light up jack o’ melons, dress up in crazy costumes, give out candy… It’s gotta be my favorite holiday of the whole year!”

“Do the Gems celebrate Summerween too?” Connie asked curiously, looking over towards the temple door.

“Eh… not really…” the young Gem frowned. “They used to take turns with Dad taking me trick-or-treating when I was younger, but now they let me go on my own. I wish they would join in on the fun though; with their shapeshifting powers, I bet they could pull off all sorts of amazing costumes!”

“Well, at least Lion seems like he’s into it,” Connie laughed, glancing over at the pink beast, who had actually allowed Steven to put a pirate’s hat and eyepatch on him without too much of a fuss.

“He’s up for anything as long as there are sweets involved,” Steven smirked, putting his clear helmet on. “And… done! Introducing… Steven the Spaceman!” The young Gem grinned proudly as he wore his astronaut costume, his voice echoing thanks to the fishbowl-turned-helmet he was wearing.

“You look great, Steven!” Connie gladly applauded. “Hold on a second, I’m almost done with mine too. I just gotta grab something…” The young Gem waited patiently as she did so, though he let out an amazed gasp when she stood before him in her completed costume.

“Ta da!” Connie exclaimed, one hand on her hip and the other on the plastic sword she was wielding.

“Whoa!” Steven exclaimed in awe. “You’re the coolest knight I’ve ever seen, Connie!”

“I told you, Steven,” Connie laughed good-naturedly. “I’m not just a knight. I’m Joan of Arc, heroine of France!” To emphasize her point, the girl playfully thrust her sword out before putting hanging it back at her side. “My parents usually pick my Halloween costumes out for me, but since Summerween isn’t technically Halloween, I got to pick my own. So I figured I’d do something original, you know.”

“Yeah,” Steven agreed as he readjusted Lion’s pirate hat, glancing back at the girl with a warm grin. “I’m sure everyone will love it. I know I do!”

“Thanks…” Connie blushed lightly, absently twisting her braid a bit tighter as she smiled down to the floor. This sweet exchange didn’t last too much longer, however, as the warp pad suddenly lit up, the trio of Gems teleporting into the temple in their usual flashy fashion.

“Hey, you guys!” Amethyst greeted the kids with a blithe grin as soon as the light from the warp pad faded. “What’s going on? Gettin’ ready for Summerween?”
“We sure are!” Steven enthusiastically quipped. “What do you guys think of our costumes?”

“They’re both very nice,” Garnet said with a small smile. “Steven, you’re looking far out.”

“Ha! Far out!” the young Gem laughed at the subtle joke. “I get it! Like space!”

“Oh, and Connie, that’s a wonderful Joan of Arc costume!” Pearl exclaimed with an encouraging grin. “We were actually friends with her back in the day.”

“You guys were friends with Joan of Arc?!” Connie asked in amazement, though she was quick to remember that the Gems were hundreds of years old. “I-I mean… thank you, ma’am.”

“Are you guys sure that you don’t wanna join us trick-or-treating tonight?” Steven asked the Gems with a hopeful smile. “Mabel called just a while ago and invited us to go with her and Dipper! It’s gonna be a lot of fun!”

“Hey, who said I wasn’t going trick-or-treating?” Amethyst asked with a sly grin. “You know I can’t resist all that free candy.”

“Yeah, but Amethyst, you go by yourself every year.”

“True. I guess you could say I’m a… lone wolf,” the purple Gem snickered as she shapeshifted into a wolf and let out a rouge howl. “But the best way to hit the most houses is to do it without anyone holding me back. Plus, it means I can hit all of the same houses over and over again without getting caught.”

“Honestly, Amethyst, it’s just shameful that you would use your shapeshifting powers for something so… trivial,” Pearl scolded, crossing her arms. “Celebrating the same holiday twice a year is already an inane concept as it is; it doesn’t need to be made any worse with shenanigans like that.”

“Aw, c’mon, Pearl,” Steven frowned. “Summerween isn’t so bad! I know you’ve never really liked it, but it’s a lot of fun. Maybe you should come with us tonight and see for yourself! You can dress up as anything you want…”

“Steven, I can do that literally any other day of the year,” Pearl deadpanned, not convinced. “I’m sorry but… human holidays have never really been my thing, especially one as baseless and aimless as… Summerween.”

“Aw…” the young Gem sighed in clear disappointment before he turned to the Gem leader. “What about you, Garnet? You wanna come score some candy with us?”

“No thanks,” Garnet said apathetically, already heading back to the temple. “But have fun anyway.”

“Yes, and be safe!” Pearl called as she followed the Gem leader through the open doors. “It can get cold after dark out there, so stay warm! And be sure to only go to well-lit neighborhoods! And-”

“Yeesh, P, they get it,” Amethyst rolled her eyes as she headed for the temple as well. “See you guys out there tonight! I’ll be the one with all the candy.” The purple Gem let out one last laugh as the temple door sealed shut, leaving the kids behind.

“Aw, man...” Steven sighed again as he plopped down onto the couch. “I was really hoping I could convince one of them to come trick-or-treating this year... Especially Pearl; she always used to put on a happy face when her, Garnet and Amethyst would go with me when I was little, but I could...
always tell she never really liked it. If she’d just come with us now though, I know I could get her to feel the Summerween spirit!”

“Well… look on the bright side, Steven,” Connie encouraged, placing a hand on the young Gem’s shoulder. “You’ve already got me to feel the Summerween spirit, and I’ve never even celebrated it before!”

Steven was quick to perk up again after hearing this, his former excitement returning as he hopped to his feet. “You’re right, Connie,” he smiled, though there as still a hint of disappointment in in. “I mean, even if Pearl doesn’t wanna come trick-or-treating tonight, there’s always next year!”

“And there’s always regular Halloween,” Connie reminded.

“Yeah!” Steven agreed readily, already running over to Lion as the girl followed. “But for tonight, we should get going! We have a whole night of costumes and candy ahead of us! Summerween, here we come!”

With Stan, Soos, and the twins all working in conjunction with each other, the shack had been quickly and heavily decorated for Summerween, leaving Dipper and Mabel with plenty of time to start working on their costumes. Soos had already prepared his weeks in advance, and he was more than content to sit in his wrestler costume and snack on spare candy while the twins prepared themselves for the evening to come.

“I’m so excited!” Mabel cheerfully exclaimed, throwing an extra layer of glitter onto her unfinished costume.

“We’re gonna have the best costumes, get the most candy…” Dipper listed, equally as enthused.

“And get the biggest stomach aches ever!” Mabel chimed in happily.

“Yeah!”

“Yeah!”

“Dude, I’ve never seen you guys so pumped,” Soos grinned as the twins exchanged a high five.

“Well, we don’t wanna brag or anything, but back at home, me and Dipper were sort of the kings of trick-or-treating,” Mabel smirked, pulling out one of the many themed scrapbooks she usually had on hand, flipping through the pages their various costumes of the past. “Twins in costumes, the people eat it up!”

“Which is why we’re pretty much guaranteed to walk away with a huge haul of candy after tonight,” Dipper said with marked confidence.

“Just be careful out there, dudes,” Soos cautioned seriously. “It’s a night of ghouls and goblins. Not to mention… the Summerween Trickster!”

“The Summer-what-what?” Mabel asked in confusion, noticing the handyman’s ominous tone.

“The Summerween Trickster,” Soos repeated before going into the tale. “The Trickster goes door to door, so the legend goes, eating children who lack the Summerween spirit.”

“Well you don’t have to worry about us; we’ve got plenty of spirit to go around,” Dipper assured,
helping himself to the nearby bowl of candy, though he coughed the few pieces he had eaten up upon realizing how terrible they tasted. “Ugh, what is this stuff?! I’ve never even heard of these brands. Sand Pop? Gummy Chairs? Mr. Adequate Bar?”

“This is all cheap-o loser candy!” Mabel exclaimed, pushing the bowl of lame candy away.

“Quiet your discontent, children,” Soos warned, still trying to maintain his foreboding tone. “Least the Trickster overhear.”

“Your cape is caught in your fly, Soos,” Dipper informed the handyman caustically.

“Touché…” Soos nodded, not correcting the problem as he ate a gummy chair instead.

“Guess we shouldn’t be all too surprised that Grunkle Stan wouldn’t bother to splurge on candy,” Dipper said to Mabel with a frown.

“Even on Summerween, of all holidays!” Mabel crossed her arms, turning her nose up at the loser candy as her brother went to dispose of it.

“Goodbye, loser candy!” Dipper said with littler remorse as he dumped the unwanted candy out the window and into the trash can outside. Of course, what he didn’t see as he did this was the obscured figure, shrouded in shadow silently and stillly watching from a distance all the while.

No sooner had Dipper started to head back to the den than the doorbell rang, and seeing as how he was already up, he went to go answer it. Thinking that it was the first round of trick-or-treaters, he took what remained of the loser candy with him with the intention of getting rid of the rest of it.

“’Sup, squirt,” Robbie said apathetically, his arm wrapped around Wendy’s waist.

“Hey, Dipper,” the cashier grinned casually.

“Wendy!” Dipper exclaimed, though he played his flustered surprise off with an awkward laugh. “W-what’s up, guys?”

“I left my jacket here,” Wendy said as she retrieved it from the coat hanger near the door. “Again…”

“What’s with the candy?” Robbie asked, eyeing the candy on the floor. “You goin’ trick-or-treating or something?”

“Shut up, Robbie,” Wendy laughed before Dipper could even answer. “Of course he’s not going trick-or-treating. That’s kid’s stuff, right dude?”

“Oh, y-yeah!” Dipper quickly answered, just as nervous as he usually was in front of his crush. Of course, he knew it was a lie, but he couldn’t risk telling the truth and having Wendy thinking that he was childish. “I mean—no, I’m totally not going trick-or-treating. It is for babies, after all. I guess…”

“Then you should totally come to this party with us,” Wendy said. “Tambry’s parents are out of town, and it’s gonna be off the chain! Sour Cream is gonna D.J and Jenny’s sneaking us a whole bunch of free pizzas. It’ll be insane.”

“Not surprised you didn’t hear about it,” Robbie scowled, though he handed the younger boy a flier
for it nonetheless.

“Oh, well maybe I’ll see you guys there!” Dipper said with a small smile, even if he instantly felt guilty for saying so when he remembered how his evening was already supposed to be full.

“If you’re not too busy playing dress up,” Robbie scoffed as him and Wendy headed out.

“It’s at nine!” the cashier reminded as they got into the moody teen’s van. “Don’t forget!”

Dipper waved as the couple drove away, his fake smile fading as soon as they were out of sight. He sighed as he looked down to the party flyer, knowing that, once again, he had gotten himself into quite a bind. And even worse, he knew that it would be hard one to get out of, especially as he realized what the most difficult part would be. “How am I gonna tell Mabel?”

Mabel was a firm believer in the concept of “the more, the merrier”, especially when it came to trick-or-treating. Which was why she had gotten not only Steven and Connie to come along with her and Dipper, but she had also asked Candy and Grenda to accompany them as well. Both girls gladly accepted the offer, more than happy to hang out with their fairly new friend while collecting as much candy as possible.

“Grunkle Stan, these are my friends, Candy and Grenda!” Mabel smiled as she introduced the pair to the conman as they stood near the door.

“I am so sweet I could eat myself,” Candy said with a proud grin over her very fitting Summerween costume: a piece of candy.

“Hello, Mr. Pines!” Grenda, who was dressed as a witch for the evening, greeted in her usual gruff voice.

“You got a cold, honey?” Stan asked with a confused frown. “Something wrong with your voice there?”

“What do you mean?” Grenda asked in bewilderment. “Why would you say that?”

“…No reason…” Stan said a bit awkwardly. Still a bit unnerved, the conman simply shrugged and took off for the other room, dramatically throwing the cape of his vampire costume out behind him.

“Is Waddles coming with us?” Candy asked Mabel.

“I wish he could, but he has some very important meetings to attend!” Mabel joked blithely as Waddles happened to stroll in, donned a small business casual suit. The girls all let out adoring squeals upon seeing this precious sight, especially as Mabel picked her pig up and gave him an affectionate hug.

“Tonight is gonna be so great, you guys!” Mabel exclaimed with a huge, excited grin, perking up even more as she looked down at her strawberry jelly costume. “Now all we gotta do is wait for—”

The girl was suddenly cut off as the front door flung open to reveal a familiar pink beast and his two riders. “Did someone say Steven and Connie?!” the young Gem asked with a theatrical grin.

“No… but I was about to!” Mabel laughed.
“Aw man…” Steven snapped his fingers. “If only we had been just a few seconds late. That would have been perfect!”

“Wow, Steven! I didn’t know you had a pirate lion!” Candy exclaimed as her and Grenda instantly began fawning over Lion. The pastel beast simply accepted the affectionate pats and ear scratches as he took a seat near the door after Steven and Connie dismounted him.

“Well, he’s not usually a pirate…” Steven smirked. “But for tonight, you can call him Captain Lion of the S.S. Summerween!”

“He’s so cute! And so PINK!” Grenda shouted, shoving her face into Lion’s mane. By this point, the pink beast was more than used to it thanks to Mabel doing so regularly, so he didn’t really protest. He soon left the room however as Waddles padded out, the two pink pets heading off to settle down for a nap together.

“You guys have such great costumes!” Mabel gushed cheerfully. “Connie, I am loving that knight thing you’ve got going on!”

“Actually, I’m not just a knight,” Connie corrected with a small smile. “I’m actually-”

“You are Joan of Arc, right?” Candy asked knowingly.

“Um… yeah, actually I am,” Connie laughed, somewhat surprised. “How’d you guess?”

“It was sort of obvious,” Candy shrugged with a sly smirk.

“So, what about Dipper?” Steven asked Mabel. “He’s coming trick-or-treating with us too, right?”

“Oh man, you guys, just wait until you see Dipper’s costume! It’s amazing!” Mabel exclaimed, growing even more excited as she spotted her brother heading down the attic stairs. “Here he comes now!”

Mabel’s wide smile fell, however, the moment she noticed that Dipper was, in fact, not wearing his costume, but was merely clad in his usual clothes instead. “That is a very good Dipper costume,” Candy concurred, adjusting her glasses.

“I’d give it a solid 10 out of 10!” Steven agreed heartily. Mabel, however, was nowhere near as amused.

“What the hey, bro bro?” she asked with concern. “Where’s your costume?”

“Look, I can’t go trick-or-treating,” Dipper began, glancing away from his sister out of guilt. He had realized early on that he couldn’t very well tell her the truth of the matter, lest he get on her bad side for quite some time. So instead, he made something up. “I’m… uh, really sick.” He coughed weakly for extra emphasis, hoping that Mabel would buy it, even if she didn’t look too convinced. “Must have been that bad candy from earlier. Go on without me.”

“Oh, Dipper, I’m so sorry!” Steven exclaimed with sincere sympathy. “Of all the nights to get sick on, this has to be one of the worst!”

Dipper had figured that Steven would be an easy sell with his sick act, but much to his alarm, Mabel seemed to be much harder, especially as she crossed her arms and gave him a caustic expression. “Oh, come on! Fight through it!” she urged. “You’ve never let anything keep you from going trick-or-treating before! Where’s your Summerween spirit?”
Before Dipper could even reply, a loud knock sounded on the nearby door. Thankful for the interruption, the boy went to answer it, only to be met with a very tall, rather imposing stranger. The mysterious figure was clad in a rather tattered patchwork suit jacket and wide-rim hat, his face obscured by a smiling jack-o-lantern face mask. His physical appearance alone was already quite strange and unsettling alone, but his deep, chilling voice only made him seem more eerie. “Trick or treat,” he said, holding out his bag expectantly.

Despite this stranger’s creepy manner, Dipper largely wasn’t fazed by him as he simply let out a sarcastic scoff. “Dude, really? Aren’t you a little old for this?”

“But I-“ the stranger began, though he didn’t get a chance to finish before the door slammed shut in his face.

“Why’d you close the door?” Mabel scolded Dipper with an unimpressed frown. “That was rude!”

“I told you, Mabel, I’m just not feeling it tonight,” Dipper said defensively, letting out another fake cough to prove his point.

“That’s no reason to slam the door on someone!” Mabel protested harshly. “And honestly, I think a little trick-or-treating will make you feel better.”

“I’m not going trick-or-treating!” Dipper retorted firmly.

“Guys, stop it!” Steven pleaded, stepping between the twins before the argument could continue.

“Summerween is about everyone being together to get sugary treats! You shouldn’t fight on such a great holiday!”

“Thank you for proving my point, Steven,” Mabel said pointedly, sticking her tongue out at Dipper, who merely rolled his eyes in exasperation.

“Huh? But I wasn’t-“ the young Gem was cut off as a round of knocking on the door sounded once more.

“Is that guy’s still out there?” Connie asked with a concerned frown.

“If he is, I’m not getting it,” Dipper said, crossing his arms stubbornly.

“Well I am!” Mabel exclaimed crossly as she opened the door and faced the towering stranger. “I apologize for my brother. He came down with a case of the grumpy-grumps.”

“SILENCE!” the stranger suddenly shouted, his deep, gravely voice becoming even more frightening. “You have insulted me! For this you must pay… with your LIVES!”

Mabel largely didn’t heed this threat as she instead let out a light laugh. “Aw, what a cute little mask! You’re a funny guy, aren’t you?”

“Funny, am I?” the stranger asked threateningly, slinking forward into the shack using his unnaturally gangly limbs. Sudden fear crept into all of the kids as they shrunk back away from him, his rather menacing form draped in the shadows of the room. However, before he could act, he was interrupted by the arrival of another trick-or-treater.

“Hello!” the young boy greeted cheerfully and innocently as he stood before the open door. “My name is Gourney!”

Before anyone could really do anything, the stranger whipped around in a flash and snatched
Gourney up in his large hand and devoured the boy whole. The remaining kids all gasped in shock and horror at this terrifying sight, especially as the poor child screamed in terror as he disappeared. “Remember meecee!”

As the stranger finished gobbling Gourney up, the others all screamed in alarm, all of them instantly realizing that whoever this man or beast was, he was indeed a grave danger to them all. “There’s only one way to avoid meeting this same fate…” the stranger began ominously as he hung over the kids heads menacingly. “I need a treat. If you can collect 500 pieces of candy and bring it to me before the last jack-o-melon goes out… I will let you live…”

“Five hundred treats in one night?!” Dipper asked incredulously. “That’s impossible!”

“You can’t really expect us to do that!” Connie protested, despite her fear. “Even with all six of us, trick-or-treating at once, that’s still not enough time to-”

“ENOUGH!” the stranger shouted lividly, sparking all new terror into the kids. “The choice is yours, children… You must trick-or-treat… or DIE!” The stranger let out a chilling laugh as he slunk out of the house and seamlessly crawled onto its roof, slithering across it until he disappeared into the dark shadows of the night. The kids had run out after him, all of them objectively horrified in light of the threat he had issued upon them.

“Huh,” Steven said, probably the least shaken by the experience, since his life was so frequently put in danger. “You know, most of the time when people do the ‘trick’ part of trick-or-treating, they don’t put a curse on people… They just toilet paper the house or something; at least that’s what Amethyst does…”

“Oh my gosh, Mabel,” Dipper began rather sourly, knowing that his sister was to blame for this disaster. “Do you realize what this means?!”

“I do,” Mabel began, a huge smile dawning on her face. “It means you have to come trick-or-treating with us! Yay!”

“Who was that guy?” Grenda asked worriedly.

“It’s the legend Soos told us about!” Mabel realized. “It’s true!”

“What legend?” Connie asked with a frown.

“It was about some trickster guy, or something like that,” Dipper said, still giving Mabel a cross look.

“It was about some trickster guy, or something like that,” Dipper said, still giving Mabel a cross look.

“Oh no!” Steven gasped in sudden fear. “You don’t mean the Summerween Trickster, do you?!” The twins both nodded, despite their frustration with each other and their growing panic over the situation. “This is bad, you guys,” the young Gem frowned nervously. “Really bad!”

“Oh come on,” Dipper scoffed, trying to calm his frayed nerves and fears. “We don’t know for sure if that guy was the Summerween Trickster. He could have just been some crazy guy in a costume, just like everyone else running around tonight.”

“What’s goin’ on out here, dudes?” Soos interjected as he poked his head out of the shack. “I heard a ruckus. Heheh. That’s a funny word. Ruckus.”

“Some monster is making all of us trick-or-treat or he’s going to eat us!” Connie exclaimed with clear dread.
“I got a picture,” Candy said, holding up her phone with a picture of the frightening stranger on the screen.

“The Summerween Trickster!” Soos confirmed in alarm. “Oh man, you dudes are in crazy bonkers trouble!”

“How are we gonna get that much candy in one night?” Dipper asked anxiously. “There’s no way!”

As everyone else began to panic, Mabel was quick to catch everyone’s attention before it could go too far. “Listen up, people!” she began authoritatively. “Now, some people might say being cursed by a blood-thirsty holiday monster is a bad thing.”

“I wet myself,” Grenda interjected plainly.

“But that monster messed with the wrong crew!” Mabel continued brazenly. “With Candy’s spirit, Grenda’s strength, Steven’s heart, Connie’s bravery, Dipper’s brains, and… Soos here, we’ll get 500 pieces of candy and have fun doing so, even if it takes all night!”

The gang let out a collective rallied cheer, all of them inspired by this encouraging speech, though Steven raised his hand as it died down. “Yes, Steven?” Mabel asked with a grin.

“Well, I was just thinking that if we need to get 500 pieces of candy, we’re gonna need some help,” the young Gem said thoughtfully. “After all, the more people, the more candy we’ll get, right? So we should get the Gems to come with us!”

“But Steven, I thought the Gems didn’t trick-or-treat,” Connie reminded with a frown.

“They probably will when they find out a crazed monster is threatening to eat us,” Steven shrugged with an excited grin. In reality, the young Gem was more enthused about the idea of getting the Gems to go with them than anything else, but if it helped get the Summerween Trickster off their backs that would definitely be a nice bonus.

“Great idea, Steven!” Mabel agreed readily. “I’m sure their shapeshifting powers will make them an unstoppable trick-or-treating force of nature! To the temple!”

“W-wait!” Dipper broke through the collective verve, still hoping to get out of this situation any way he could. After all, the party started at nine, and he definitely didn’t want to miss it if Wendy would be there. “But I’m sick, remember?”

“Dipper, what’s worse?” Mabel asked dryly. “Getting eaten by a horrifying monster, or coming trick-or-treating with us?”

“Well…”

“Come on!” Mabel exclaimed, not taking no for an answer as she grabbed her brother’s arm and headed off after everyone else, their mission set in stone.

“Ah, Summerween,” Stan said to his reflection as he finished putting his fake fangs in to complete his costume. “Those kids aren’t gonna know what hit ‘em!”

As if on cue, the doorbell rang, and the conman didn’t hesitate to answer it, his first attempt at a scare tactic fully already set up. “Trick or treat!” the group of children at the door exclaimed in
unison as Stan opened it. He flashed a wide, fake grin at the kids, though he kept up his façade as he greeted them.

“What can I do for y—ugh... Ah! Oh no! No!” he suddenly cried, letting out a pained scream as his face began to slowly and sickeningly melt off, to reveal a bare skull underneath. The majority of the kids all screamed in horror upon seeing this and quickly fled, and Stan simply laughed triumphantly he watched them go, removing the fake skull mask from his face. “Suckers! Hahaha—huh?” The conman’s wide grin suddenly faded as he glanced down to notice that two boys still remained, neither of them looking the slightest bit afraid of what they had just seen.

“Can we have candy now?” one of the boys, who was dressed as a soldier, asked impatiently.

“What’s the matter with you kids?” Stan asked in bewilderment. “That was the scariest thing you’ve ever seen, right?”

The kids exchanged a moderate glance at that, both of them showing how underwhelmed they really were without even needing to reply. “Well, have you seen this?!” Stan exclaimed dramatically, letting out another cry as he began pulling a chain of sausages from his costume. “Guts! Very real guts!”

“Uh, we’ve been watching horror movies since we were like, two years old,” the boy dressed as a mummy informed caustically.

“Yeah, we’re not scared,” the soldier boy said, crossing his arms.

“Oh, you will be,” Stan said ominously, using his cape to cover his face as he temporarily retreated back inside. After all, he wasn’t about to lose this battle without a fight. “You will be…”

Knowing they had not a moment to waste, the kids (and Soos) all hurried for the Gem temple as fast as their legs could carry them. And as soon as Steven burst in through the door, he didn’t hesitate to catch the attention of the only Gem he happened to catch sight of. “Pearl! Pearl! Pearl!”

The white Gem spun around right before she reached the temple door, a startled gasp escaping her as she caught sight of the distressed group flooding into the house. “What?! What?! What?!” she asked in alarm.

“Peaaaarl!” Mabel cried, running forward to Pearl along with Steven. “We need your help! It’s super important!”

“W-what is it?!” the white Gem asked, her eyes wide with concern.

“We need you…” Steven began, trying his best not to smile as he remembered the gravity of the situation. “To come trick-or-treating with us!”

Pearl’s earlier worry instantly fizzled away upon hearing this. “Steven, I already told you: I don’t ‘trick-or-treat’.”

“I know, but we really need you to!” Steven pleaded desperately. “We’ll all die if you don’t!”

“Oh come on, Steven. You don’t need to be so dramatic about this.”

“Actually, he’s not being dramatic,” Dipper cut in. “This crazy monster threatened to eat all of us
if we don’t get 500 pieces of candy by the end of the night.”

“Monster?!” Pearl asked, her concern returning as she already started to summon her spear. “Well, whoever this ‘monster’ thinks he is, he’s not about to eat any of you if I have anything to do about it.”

“So you’re going with us?” Steven asked with hopeful stars in his eyes.

“I never said that,” the white Gem shook her head, still not keen on the idea of celebrating Summerween. “But I’ll be more than happy to take that monster out long before it can even try to harm any of you.”

“I dunno, dude,” Soos interjected with a frown. “They say the Summerween Trickster isn’t really easy to find, even on Summerween.”

“And we don’t really have a lot of time to just go looking all over town for him either,” Dipper said with a hint of impatience, still hoping to get this all over with long before the party started.

Even despite the apparent drastic straits the kids were in, Pearl still wasn’t all too fond of the idea of going with them, much to Steven’s growing worry. “Why don’t you ask Garnet or Amethyst to go with you all?” she asked with a nervous smile.

“Ok! Where are they?” Mabel asked, glancing around the temple.

“They’re… not here…” Pearl said as her shoulders slumped in defeat. “Alright, fine. I’ll go with you. But only until we find this so-called ‘Summerween Trickster’.”

“Hooray!” Steven and Mabel cheered in elated unison, though Pearl was quick to break through it as she began heading for the door.

“Ok, let’s hurry it up,” the white Gem urged, ushering everyone out as she let out a tired sigh. “The sooner we get this over with, the better.”

The streets of Gravity Falls’ suburbia were swarming with happy trick-or-treaters of all ages, from the bright-eyed youth to the young at heart who simply wished to join in on the fun. Steven, Connie, Dipper, Mabel, Pearl, Soos, Candy, and Grenda all made a strange, yet motley crew as they made their way through the busy neighborhoods. The jack-o-melons in front of every house gave them a rough timer on how long they had left until the Trickster made good on his frightening threat.

“I don’t understand why we can’t just buy our candy and be done with it,” Dipper remarked pertly, knowing that would be a much quicker solution to this problem.

“Exactly!” Pearl agreed huffily. “Honestly, if you kids need the money for that, I’d be more than happy to give you it so we wouldn’t have to waste time… doing this.”

“Oh, come on, you guys! Show a little Summerween spirit!” Steven encouraged, still resolved to help the white Gem see the fun to be had during the holiday.

“Yeah, and just buying candy?” Mabel scoffed. “That sorta takes the fun out of trick-or-treat-or-die.”
“I’m trying to take the die out of trick-or-treat-or-die,” Dipper said, not at all amused with how lax Mabel was being about the die plight they were all in.

“Well, hopefully this first house will give us a good head start,” Steven said with a smile as he led the way.

“Steven, I wouldn’t exactly call your dad’s carwash a ‘house’,” Connie said with a joking smirk.

The young Gem simply shrugged, realizing he couldn’t argue with this logic. Still, the group made their way to the wash, where Greg was sitting outside, fast asleep with a relatively empty bowl of candy sitting beside him. “Dad!” Steven called, running towards his father eagerly. “Dad, wake up! We need candy and we need it now!”

“Oh boy…” Pearl muttered with slight disdain for the former rock star as she hung back a bit. “Here we go…”

It didn’t take too long for Greg to be startled out of his snooze, especially as Steven leapt onto his lap. “Huh? Oh hey there, Schtoo-ball!” he greeted with a kind grin. “Your costume looks great!”

“Well, I do owe the idea to you, Dad,” Steven laughed, giving his father an affectionate hug. “Where’s your costume?”

“Heh, well the store ran out of toilet paper, so I didn’t have enough to become a ‘full-fledged’ mummy,” Greg laughed, scratching the back of his neck. “But at least I won’t be running out of TP for a while. Anyway… you kids are here for some candy, aren’t you?”

“Yeah!” the others all exclaimed with unified smiles, holding their bags out.

“Well, you want it, you got it!” the former rock star grinned, reaching into the bowl at his side, only for his smile to quickly fade. “Oh… uh… This is kinda… embarrassing…”

“Let me guess,” Pearl spoke up, her tone dry and rather sarcastic. “You ran out of candy, didn’t you, Greg?”

“Well… kinda…” Greg glanced away guiltily, already knowing full well about the white Gem’s disliking of him. “I started out with a whole bunch, but I guess some kids snuck by and took it while I was… taking a quick shut-eye…”

“Are you sure you don’t have any candy left?” Dipper asked anxiously. “Like, at all?”

The carwash operator frowned as he shook his bowl out, only for not a single piece of candy to fall out. “Nope, looks like I’m all cleaned out. Sorry, kids.”

“So are we,” Pearl said coldly, growing even more impatient with their mission.

“Dad, we’re in big trouble,” Steven began apprehensively.

“If we don’t get 500 pieces of candy, a monster is gonna EAT US ALL!” Grenda exclaimed as loudly as ever.

“What?!” Greg gasped in concerned alarm. “Oh man, if I had known that, I would have bought more candy just for you kids!”

“Aw, its ok, Mr. Universe!” Mabel reassured. “There’s still plenty of houses we can hit! We’ll get that candy in no time!”
“Well, good luck!” Greg called encouragingly, waving the kids goodbye as they headed off. While he was half tempted to go with them to ensure their safety, he figured Pearl would be able to do a better job at it that he really could. “Try not to get eaten! Oh, and have fun!”

Seeing as how their first stop had been an unfortunate bust, the group quickly made haste to the first house they could find, which happened to be Lazy Susan. The waitress, who was dressed as a ball of yarn for the evening, answered the door, several of her many cats clinging to her.

“Trick or treat!” everyone, save for Dipper and Pearl, greeted brightly.

“Well aren’t you all the cutest!” Lazy Susan grinned. “And is everyone in costume? Chimney sweep…” she said as she glanced at Grenda, clearly getting her costume wrong, which was a running theme as she continued down the line with Soos. “Elephant man… Squeegee…” she nodded at Candy. “Tin can…” she said of Connie’s costume. “Aquarium…” she guessed Steven’s costume. “Pencil…” she said of Pearl, even though the white Gem wasn’t wearing any costume. “Ant farm…” she glanced at Mabel, though her smile faded as she looked to Dipper with confusion. “Oh, and what are you supposed to be?”

“Uh, actually, I’m not dressed up as anything,” Dipper answered somewhat impatiently. “We’re kind of in a hurry here.”

“Oh. I see,” the waitress said curtly, handing out one lone piece of candy to everyone in the group, save for Dipper. “Enjoy!” Susan exclaimed, slamming the door as soon as she had handed out the candy.

Needless to say, the kids were not all too pleased with their meager collection of candy thus far. “One piece of black licorice?!” Grenda scowled, holding the lame piece of candy up.

“Circus peanut?” Candy frowned as she tossed said peanut back into her bag. “This is loser candy.”

“Ugh,” Pearl groaned in revolt at the lollypop she had been given, disgusted merely by holding a piece of food. “Here you go, Steven,” she said, quickly tossing the candy into the young Gem’s bag.

“Thanks, Pearl!” Steven quipped happily, excited over even the two measly pieces of candy he had.

“Seven pieces of candy?!” Dipper exclaimed in disbelief at their bad luck. “At this rate, this is gonna take forever!”

“We’ve gotta step up our game,” Mabel said with resolve. “Dipper, you have to put on your costume!”

“I told you, I’m not up to it, Mabel!” Dipper protested with another fake cough, even if he knew Mabel still wasn’t falling for his act.

“Oh, really?” a dark, familiar voice asked ominously. The group let out a collective gasp as they all turned to see the Summerween Trickster himself, perched atop a nearby streetlight as he peered down at the kids. Everyone watched in fearful silence and hanging dread as the Trickster slowly climbed down at pole and down onto Soos. The handiman froze in terror as the monster reached his thin-fingered hang into his bag, pulling out the sole piece of candy inside and inspecting critically. “Hm, I’ve seen better.”

“That’s the monster you were talking about?” Pearl asked, initially unnerved though she quickly shook it away and replaced it with determination as she summoned her spear. “This will be easy.”
“Pearl, wait!” Steven called with sudden concern as the white Gem deftly hurled her weapon towards the Trickster. Much to her surprise, however, the monster caught it easily in his large hand as he preformed a magnificent backflip off of Soos and onto the pavement several feet away.

“What the-?!?” Pearl exclaimed in shock, though she was quick to call forth another spear from her gem. This time she went in for a more direct assault, leaping for the Trickster with a courageous battle cry. The kids gasped in shared amazement as the white Gem’s blade landed a direct blow to the Trickster’s chest, only instead of crying out in defeat, he laughed mockingly instead. Pearl watched with dismayed shock as her spear began to sink into the Trickster’s strange, shadowy skin, until he managed to absorb the weapon completely. Before she could even really try again, the monster knocked the white Gem away from him with a heavy backhand, sending her flying to the ground roughly.

“You fool!” the Trickster shouted, his voice sounding even more threatening than usual. “You can’t defeat me! There’s no use in even trying! So tick tock, children…” His voice grew cold and quiet once more as he grabbed the nearest jack-o-melon and blew it out. “Time’s running out…”

Without another word, the Trickster slipped into the shadows once more, leaving a very stunned, frightened group of kids behind. Even so, Pearl was still resolved to defeat this monster, even if she didn’t quite understand what it was, especially after it had managed to best her this time. “Come on!” she ordered the others. “We have to go after that… that thing!”

“We don’t have time!” Connie exclaimed in apparent panic. “We only have a few hours left and we barely have any candy to show for it!”

Despite the terrifying encounter they had just had with the Trickster, Mabel cracked a smirk upon hearing this, and it only grew as she glanced towards Dipper knowingly. “So what was that about being too sick to wear a costume?”

“If this plan doesn’t scare those little punks, I don’t know what will!” Stan smirked as he got his next scare ready, knowing that the two boys from earlier were still waiting outside his door, expecting their candy. However, what he didn’t notice as he gathered his supplies was the purple Gem reclining at the kitchen table, her hand in a bowl of Summerween candy as she gladly helped herself.

“Yo, Stan!” Amethyst greeted laxly. “What’cha doin’?”

“Not now, Amethyst,” the conman said, his tone serious as he walked past her. He stopped short however before he left the room and quickly turned to her in confusion. “Wait… Amethyst? What are you doing here?”

“I’m here for candy, duh,” the purple Gem rolled her eyes as she eat another handful of candy, shapeshifting into a clown so she could claim she had a costume. “Why else would I be here?”

“Ugh, fine,” Stan huffed impatiently, knowing there would be no getting rid of her easily. “Eat whatever you want. I have brats to scare.”

“Oh, you’re trying to chase trick-or-treaters away again?” Amethyst asked, leaning forward in interest. “I wanna help!”

“No way, I work alone!” Stan stubbornly exclaimed. “Besides, don’t you have some trick-or-treating to do yourself? Or are you just gonna mooch off me like you usually do?”
“Well, I was gonna do that…” the purple Gem laughed slyly, reverting to her original form. “But this sounds a lot funnier.”

“Like I said, I don’t need any help,” the conman said firmly, heading for the front door even as Amethyst followed. “And if you need proof, then just watch the master at work.”

“Whatever you say, ‘master,’” Amethyst deadpanned as she took a seat at the bottom of the stairs to watch.

“Alright, you got me, kids,” Stan said in faux defeat as he opened the door and addressed the boys. “You guys win. I guess I’m not as scary as I used to—Oh! No! Augh!” The conman recoiled in agony as Waddles burst out of his shirt, squealing wildly all the while. “Why!? Why is there a pig jumping out of my chest!!”

Amethyst simply face-palmed upon watching this lame attempt and clearly, neither of the boys were the least bit frightened by it either as their impatient expressions remained. “Candy!” the both demanded just as vehemently as before, not willing to take no for an answer this time. For a moment, Stan only stood there, stupefied as he looked down at the undeterred kids, before he suddenly shut the door on them once more and retreated inside out of embarrassment.

“Nice one,” the purple Gem chuckled, applauding patronizingly. “Really liked how bored they both looked. But it looks like the master has lost his touch a little. That was just painful to watch.”

“Oh, please! Those kids are little unscarable freaks!” Stan exclaimed bitterly. “You really think you could do any better.”

“Dude, I know I could do better,” Amethyst said confidently, hopping up from her seat. “But because I feel sorry for you, I’ll help you out. Between the two of us, those dorks will be so scared, they’ll be screaming for a month!”

“Steven… I don’t know if this is such a good idea…” Pearl frowned upon hearing the plan the young Gem had just purposed to her.

“Of course it is!” Steven encouraged. “You can use your shapeshifting powers to make all sorts of costumes, just like Amethyst does! Everyone will be so impressed; we’ll be rolling in candy!”

“Now hold it,” the white Gem said, crossing her arms. “I said I would go trick-or-treating. I never said I would do it myself. Personally, I’m still in favor of going after that disgusting monster and taking him down in one fell swoop.”

“But we don’t know where he is and time is running out,” Connie protested pleadingly. “Please, Miss Pearl! We need your help!”

“Yeah!” Grenda agreed boisterously. “Costume it up, Pearl!”

“Only you can save us all!” Candy added just as anxiously.

“We’re like, counting on you, dude,” Soos urged with a frown.

“I’m sorry, kids,” Pearl began, still completely against the idea of indulging in what she considered to be nothing more than a silly human holiday. “But I just don’t-”
“Pearl,” Steven began, looking up at the white Gem with a morose, yet begging expression as he grabbed her hand. “Please. Just… do this for us… for me… Just this once… okay?”

Pearl’s stony resolve instantly crumbled upon seeing how desperate the young Gem was. Even despite her unflinching ways, if there was one thing the white Gem had never been able to resist, it was Steven and his charm. Just like his mother, Pearl figured. “O-okay…” she said with a relenting sigh. “But I’m not shapeshifting. I don’t need to when I can do this!”

The kids all watched in amazement as Pearl’s gem began to glow as she hovered her hands near it, her usual clothes changing almost instantly into an elegant Victorian-style gown, which was still the light blue color pallet of her ordinary wear. “Hm… a bit archaic… but it’ll do,” the white Gem said in satisfaction, experimentally spinning around in her new, homemade dress.

“Wow, Pearl!” Steven gasped, stars in his eyes. “You look amazing!”

“You’re like a princess!” Grenda exclaimed with an awed grin.

“Technically, I’m a countess from 19th century Europe, but thank you,” Pearl corrected eloquently. “It’s honestly amazing just how impractically humans dressed back then… You’d think, considering all of the sickness and primitive technology they had back then, that they would have tried something more functional!”

“Oh!” Mabel called everyone’s attention as she returned to the group. “Introducing for the first time in public… Peanut Butter and Jelly!”

The girl was the first to applaud her brother as he stepped forward, fully and finally clad in his costume: a jar of peanut butter. The group let out a collective “aw” at how adorable both twins looked in their matching costumes, which only made Dipper even more uncomfortable, since he figured he probably looked absolutely ridiculous.

“You guys look so CUTE!” Steven gushed with a delighted grin.

“Steven, that is honestly the last thing I ever want to hear,” Dipper deadpanned with an annoyed scowl.

“You both do look pretty adorable,” Pearl said with a bemused laugh.

“I will make it internet famous!” Candy quipped as she pulled out her phone and snapped a photo.

“Hey! Erase that!” Dipper protested, knowing that he would be completely mortified if any of this leaked online. “Ugh, let’s just get this over with, okay?”

“I couldn’t agree more…” Pearl muttered, frowning down at her costume, already irritated by its bulkiness.

“Over with! Over with!” the others chanted excitedly, already heading off to the next house. With every member of the group finally cooperating, certainly they would be able to collect 500 pieces of candy and then some with plenty of time to spare.

With Dipper and Pearl both participating, the group found that their trick-or-treating success suddenly and inexplicably increased dramatically. Of course, most people were absolute suckers for the costumed twin act, which Dipper and Mabel were more than happy to play at every house they stopped at. Several of the homeowners they encountered were so enchanted by the matching pair that they unloaded full bowls of candy on them, raking their candy count up at a remarkable speed. However, as exciting as this was, Mabel was even more elated at the fact that Dipper,
Despite his earlier resistance and reservation, actually seemed to be genuinely enjoying himself. The twins cracked jokes, shared laughs, and reminisced on memories from Halloween trick-or-treating gone by. In all honesty, it was easy to forget the Trickster’s deadly threat looming over their heads when they were having so much fun together.

In much of the same way, Steven grew increasingly ecstatic to see that Pearl was starting to come around and take a liking to trick-or-treating as well. The white Gem was usually rather reserved and disinterested when it came to what she deemed as “human” activities, and indeed she acted the very same way this evening. At least, at first. The young Gem, wanting Pearl to genuinely have a good time, decided to spice things up and suggest to her that she change her costume with each house, since she could so easily do so on a whim. Though initially hesitant, the white Gem soon complied, stoically accepting any candy offered her with the occasional sarcastic or bored remark. But with the more houses they hit, the lighter her mood became. As Steven suggested different costumes for her to try, from an Egyptian pharaoh, to a graceful ballerina, to a brazen cowboy, Pearl couldn’t help but appreciate her young ward’s creativity and spirit towards a holiday that she had largely believed was trite and pointless. And as it turned out, Steven’s spirit was infectious as Pearl gradually began to catch it herself throughout the evening. The young Gem’s eyes lit up with joy as he watched his mentor grin excitedly every time someone complimented one of her elaborate costumes, or gave her a little extra candy in awe of them. Steven knew that he didn’t often get a chance to hang out with Pearl one-on-one like this, and he was grateful for it; especially since she seemed to be having just as good of a time with him as he was with her.

Of course, despite the fun they were all having, the group didn’t forget that they were on a rather tight time limit. One by one, the jack-o-melons began going out as the night wore on, prompting them to start rushing as their candy count worked its way into the hundreds. Soon enough, their haul got so big that they had to start carrying it around in a wheelbarrow instead of individual bags. And yet, between the eight of them, they managed to bring in almost exactly what they needed in just a few hours of hard work and constant costume changes on Pearl’s part.

“497, 498, 499!” Mabel counted as the group stopped for a brief break. “We did it! We just need one more piece of candy!”

Everyone let out a triumphant cheer at this, elated that they were so close to the end of their harrowing quest. “And its only 8:30,” Dipper added with a relieved grin as he checked his watch. “Perfect timing!”

“Perfect timing for what?” Connie asked in confusion.

“Uh… nothing!” Dipper said quickly, flashing an innocent grin. After all, even despite their success, he knew Mabel, and probably everyone else for that matter, would be rather upset with him if they found out he had been rushing them in the hopes that he could still make it to the party later on.

“This was so much fun!” Steven smiled widely. “It’s almost a little sad that it has to end…”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but… I agree,” Pearl acknowledged, placing a hand on her young ward’s shoulder. “I wasn’t really into all this trick-or-treating business at first, but it turns out I’m actually having… fun…” The young Gem gasped in absolute delight as he beamed up at his mentor upon hearing this, stars in his eyes as she affectionately ruffled his hair.

“Dude, I’m gonna go around and grab the truck,” Soos said as he began to head off. “Soos, away!”

“Last one to the last house is a pair of wax lips!” Mabel challenged with a laugh as her and Candy hurried off.
“Not me!” Grenda shouted as she bounded off after them, Steven and Connie following not too far behind.

“Guys, wait up!” the young Gem exclaimed, despite the concerned warning Pearl called after them as she was quick to tail them all.

“Wait, kids! Don’t run! It’s dark out here and you might trip and fall and skin your fragile human knees! Wait!”

Dipper let out a contented sigh as he watched everyone run off, leaving him alone with the wheelbarrow full of candy. “The perfect timing for me to go to Wendy’s party,” he said to himself with satisfied confidence. “And the best part is that no one needs to know I was trick or treating.”

His calm manner quickly dissipated, however, as he happened to spot Robbie’s van rounding the nearby corner as it drove down the street. Dipper quickly panicked as he scrambled to take off his costume and hide it and the wheelbarrow of candy behind the closest bush he could find before Wendy could see.

“Hey, Dipper!” the cashier called as the van stopped in front of the boy, who was leaning against a tree trying to play it cool.

“Oh, hey, Wendy,” Dipper said evenly, quickly nudging a piece of his costume that was still peeking out from the bush under it. “What’s up?”

“Are you still coming to the party?” Wendy asked with a smile.

“What are you even doing out here?” Robbie asked dryly.

“Oh, um… I’m just… on my way to the party!” Dipper said quickly, hoping it would be a believable excuse. “I’m just stopping to watch the trick-or-treaters. Reminds me of when I was a kid.”

“Yeah, ok,” Wendy laughed in amusement. “See you at the party, then!”

“Later, guys!” Dipper called out after the teens as Robbie drove off. Of course, he didn’t see the rest of the group returning until Mabel spoke up from behind him.

“You… you’re going to a party?” the girl asked, hurt already penetrating her tone.

“Mabel!” Dipper gasped in startled surprise. “Well… I… About the party, I-”

Mabel clearly wasn’t hearing any excuses as she threw the last piece of candy at him roughly, sending a bitter glare his way. “That’s why you were acting so weird and trying to hurry us! You’re not sick at all! So if it wasn’t for this crazy monster, you were gonna ditch us! On our favorite holiday!”

The others let out a shared “ooo” upon hearing this accusation, but Mabel disregarded them as she continued, growing more upset with her brother by the second. “What happened to the Dipper who used to love Halloween!?!” she asked, both distraught and frustrated before she took a glance around and noticed that something was clearly missing. “And where’s all the candy?!”

“Relax,” Dipper reassured, hoping to calm his sister’s growing anger. “I left it right here behind this bush.” He hurried to move the bush aside, only to freeze up after glancing behind it. “Oh, no…”
“What’s wrong?” Steven asked with growing concern, already dismayed upon watching the twins fight. Taking in an anxious breath, Dipper pushed the bush aside to reveal that the wheelbarrow had accidently tipped over the nearby high creek bank. The majority of the candy was already clearly lost as it steadily floated downstream, completely unsalvageable as it drifted further and further away from them.

“What did you do?!” Mabel practically shouted at her brother, her unusual fury quite clear.

“I—I didn’t—” Dipper began nervously, though he was quickly cut off by Pearl.

“I can’t believe this!” the white Gem exclaimed hotly, her police officer costume instantly reverting back to her usual clothes in light of her sudden anger. “All of our hard work, gone! All this time spent going door to door and running a fool’s errand was all for nothing! I should have trusted my instincts and stayed back at the temple! I always knew that this holiday was nothing more than a silly waste of time!”

Despite Pearl’s blatant fury, she let out a startled gasp upon hearing the sudden sound of shattering glass. With a surprised gasp, she looked to Steven, who had thrown his spaceman helmet on the ground and let it break, his expression awash in both grief and anger. Pearl’s grew wide upon seeing this, knowing that she had made a grave mistake, but before she could even try to correct it, the young Gem spoke up.

“I know you don’t like this…” Steven began, his voice soft, yet clearly hurt as he glanced at his feet. “I know you never have… But… I thought that, maybe I could finally show you how much fun this could be! But I was wrong.”

“S-Steven, I—”

“I thought you were finally giving this a chance!” the young Gem exclaimed, tears streaming down his face. “That you were giving me a chance! This wasn’t just about trick-or-treating! This was about us spending time together! About us having fun together! You never wanna do regular human stuff with me! But… I think I get it now…”

“Steven, wait…” Pearl tried again, her tone gentle, but Steven simply turned away in rejection.

“I’m sorry for asking you to come with us, Pearl… I won’t bother next time…”

Tears were starting to fill the white Gem’s eyes as Steven began to sulk away, not even looking back at her. Mabel did the same thing as she gave Dipper a cross scowl, just as upset with him as Steven was with Pearl.

“Mabel, come on…” Dipper began, hoping to reason with his sister despite their rough falling-out. However, before he could, the other members of the group happened to notice something that was quite unnerving.

“Uh… guys?” Grenda spoke up, glancing around at how much darker the neighborhood had gotten over the past several moments. Clearly, trick-or-treating had reached its end as the last few jack-o-melons were snuffed out, leaving the group in the darkness and out of time.

“Oh no!” Connie exclaimed in anxious fear. “All of the jack-o-melons are out!”

“And we do not have any candy!” Candy added, just as fearfully.

“The Trickster’s gonna eat us all!” Grenda shouted wildly.
“Right you are…” the Trickster’s menacingly deep voice spoke up from behind all of the frightened kids, prompting even Mabel and Steven to spin around in sudden fear. “So children… where is my candy?”

“We had all 500 pieces, I swear!” Dipper exclaimed, panicked. “Look, its right down there! We can still get it!”

“I’m afraid it’s too late,” the Trickster said, just as sinister as ever as he towered over all of them. “This was your last chance…”

The Trickster prepared to lash out at the children, but before he could he was met by a spear that pierced him all the way through. “Everyone, run!” Pearl demandingly, and everyone was quick to do so, all of them rushing past her in the opposite direction. The white Gem stood firm before the Trickster, spinning another spear even as the monster absorbed her first one once again. “I don’t what you are, but I’m not about to lose to you again!”

“Insolent little twig! I’m not here for you!” the Trickster growled as he launched himself over the white Gem’s head. Pearl scowled as she jumped after him, shouting powerfully as she tried to bring her spear down at him. As he went for the fleeing children, he swatted at the white Gem once more, this time with an extra dark arm that had suddenly burst from his body. Though she hadn’t been expecting this, Pearl dodged it all the same, slicing through the limb and watching as it dissolved into what seemed to be mush on the ground below.

Despite the white Gem’s best efforts to slow the Trickster down, he still managed to catch up with the kids, snatching Candy up with his large hand before doing the same with Mabel. “Ah! Dipper!” the girl cried fearfully, reaching out for her brother, who instantly stopped in his tracks upon seeing his sister get grabbed.

“Mabel!” Dipper called fearfully, though he was all too soon caught by the Trickster as well. The monster tried to grab Connie next, though thankfully, Steven managed to save her just in time by pushing her out of the way. Seeing the danger that the kids were in, Pearl lashed her spear out again, though the Trickster countered her by grabbing it and flinging her aside brutally. The white Gem crashed into the pavement, though she hurried to pick herself up again, knowing she absolutely couldn’t be defeated this time.

However, just as the Trickster prepared to devour the kids he had caught so far whole, he was stopped by nothing less than a complete miracle. Out of nowhere, a truck crashed into the monster, the impact causing his gangly, many-armed body to explode into countless disjointed pieces. The kids went flying in light of this, though Pearl was quick to leap into action, catching Dipper, Mabel, and Candy before they could meet a rough landing with the ground below.

“We’re alive!” Grenda cheered triumphantly. “Yeah!”

“Whoa…” Soos gasped as he stopped his truck after hitting the Trickster, glancing out the window at the messy scene behind him. “That wasn’t, like, a regular pedestrian, was it?”

“It was the monster!” Connie exclaimed as everyone ran towards the handyman’s truck.

“Thanks, Soos,” Dipper said with immense relief. “I’m just glad it’s over, right?” he asked Mabel, though she simply turned her nose up at him and walked away, still very upset with him. Dipper couldn’t help but feel immensely guilty at this, knowing that Mabel was giving him the cold shoulder over what he did, and he realized that he deserved it. He knew that she would have been angry with him over all of this regardless, but lying about it had most likely definitely made it all infinitely worse. Honestly, Dipper didn’t really even care about going to the party anymore after
seeing how the very idea of him bailing had made Mabel so upset. The boy had always been sensitive to a fault when it came to his sister, and if she wasn’t happy, neither was he. Which was why he was determined to fix what he had broken.

“Hey,” Dipper said to Mabel as he jogged to catch up with her while she headed to the truck. He paused for a moment, however, upon noticing that her elbow had been scuffed in the encounter with the Trickster. It was a relatively minor scrape, but whole new layer of remorse filled Dipper all the same upon seeing this, since he knew that Mabel would have never gotten hurt if he hadn’t incurred the monster’s wrath in the first place. “A-are you ok? That cut doesn’t hurt too much, does it? There’s probably some bandages back at the shack.”

Once more, Mabel didn’t respond as she held her injured elbow, but instead turned away from her brother and his show of concern bitterly. As if to further show her current disdain for him, she hopped into the front seat of the truck alongside Steven and Soos, slamming the door roughly in Dipper’s face before he could try to take a seat beside her. Seeing as how Connie, Candy, and Grenda had already filled the back seats, the boy simply sighed in defeat as he climbed into the truck bed and took a seat beside Pearl, who was looking quite dejected herself.

“So… some night, huh?” Dipper asked the white Gem solemnly as the truck slowly rolled down the darkened streets.

Pearl sighed morosely as she hugged her legs tightly to her chest, still feeling quite guilty about how she had hurt Steven’s feelings. “Tell me about it…” she remarked dryly.

“I think it’s safe to say we both really messed up tonight,” Dipper frowned, though he felt somewhat better knowing that there was someone who could relate to how low he was currently feeling. “Big time.”

“I should have never gotten so upset like that,” Pearl said, her tone filled with regret. “The truth is, Steven was right… I never wanted to give Summerween a chance… To be fair, I guess it was a little pretentious of me.”

“Yeah, but… you had fun, didn’t you?” Dipper asked as he glanced at the white Gem. “I mean, you said so yourself, so…”

Pearl let out a small, rather bitter laugh at this, before veering onto a different tangent entirely. “I’ve never really understood you humans and your odd customs… And I’ve never really bothered to try until… until Steven came along. I just… I guess I owed this to him in some way. But I failed… and I feel terrible for it…”

“Welcome to the club,” Dipper said sardonically. “I’ll be lucky if Mabel ever talks to me again after how I lied to her and tried to flake on her… Halloween used to be our favorite holiday. Every year we used to go trick-or-treating together and every year we’d have the time of our lives. And we both thought Summerween was going to be even better, but it’s really just been-”

“A huge disaster…” Pearl finished with a heavy sigh.

For a while, the boy and the white Gem simply sat there in shared remorseful silence, the only sound being that of the steady rumble of the truck’s engine as it rolled down the road. However, this calm slowly began to unravel as the Trickster’s scattered remains began to slither across the ground on their own accord, chasing after the truck as they started to regroup and reshape. No one noticed this, however, until a large, dark hand suddenly gripped the side of the truck bed. Dipper and Pearl gasped in alarm upon seeing this, especially as the truck jerked thanks to the sudden, drastic shift of weight. Everyone inside the truck also, panicked, especially as they watched the
Trickster himself, somehow reformed only now bereft of any clothing save for his creepy mask, climb upon the back of the truck.

“H-he’s back?!” Dipper gasped fearfully, staying down as Pearl jumped to her feet and summoned a spear. “But how?!”

“It doesn’t matter how he came back!” Pearl shouted with cold resolve, taking up a battle ready stance. “What matters is that this time, he’s going down for good!”

The Trickster didn’t offer any reply as he lunged forward, as adamant as ever as he let out a blood thirsty roar. Pearl retaliated by slicing through one of his many arms fiercely, though she scowled in annoyance when the limb grew back only seconds later. Meanwhile, the kids inside the truck were all but freaking out as Soos swerved the truck in an attempt to shake the Trickster, only to no avail. In light of this, however, the handyman wasn’t really paying much attention to where he was going, until Steven happened to take a glance at the view through the front window.

“Soos! Stop the truck!” the young Gem shouted in terror, though his warning was drowned out by the girls’ collective screaming. Ironically enough, the truck soon came to a stop regardless as it crashed through the front window of the Summerween Superstore, throwing both the white Gem and the Trickster off the bed roughly. Everyone else was quick to scramble out of the truck immediately following the crash, and they all quickly scattered throughout the store to hide before the Trickster could catch any of them. Pearl continued to combat him the best she could, but at most she was serving as a distraction to deter the monster away from the others while they took refuge and tried to come up with a plan. All of the kids, as well as Soos, had taken to hiding under empty store shelves, even as the violent battle between the white Gem and the Trickster waged on.

“It’s blocking the only exit,” Dipper reported anxiously as he glanced around the corner. “Everyone, stay quiet!”

“Oh, so now you’re worried about the monster,” Mabel retorted in a cross whisper as she sat alongside him. “I thought all you cared about was Wendy!”

“Mabel, you know that’s not true,” Dipper said softly, hoping to finally reconcile with her. “This was about more than Wendy or the party… I… I just… felt like we were getting a little too old for trick-or-treating.”

“That’s exactly why we need to go trick-or-treating, Dipper!” Mabel exclaimed, her voice still in a hushed whisper despite her clear frustration. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’re getting older! There’s not that many Halloweens left! I guess… I didn’t realize it was already our last one…”

Upon hearing this, all at once Dipper understood where Mabel’s former anger had come from. She hadn’t been upset with him for lying, or even trying to avoid trick-or-treating. She was upset because of something that wasn’t his fault and something he couldn’t really fix. Dipper hadn’t put much thought into it before, but indeed, him and Mabel were steadily getting older, especially as the days leading up to their thirteenth birthday at the end of the summer. Time was running out for many of their beloved childhood traditions, including trick-or-treating. And as much as either twin might have hoped otherwise, there was no way to stop it.

However, before Dipper could properly try to console Mabel over this, the Trickster let out another angry roar as he knocked Pearl to the ground. The white Gem’s spear went flying as the monster managed to restrain her with its several arms, holding onto her firmly despite her struggling.

“Oh no!” Connie exclaimed, looking back at Steven with worry upon watching this unfold. “Pearl’s in trouble! We should do something!”
Normally, the young Gem would have completely agreed and rushed forward into the fray. But after he briefly looked over at Pearl from behind the shelf, Steven simply pushed himself against his hiding spot once more, crossing his arms stubbornly. “She’ll be fine. She’d rather be fighting than trick-or-treating anyway, so she’s probably enjoying this.”

“It really doesn’t look like it…” Connie cringed as she watched Pearl take another heavy blow. “Steven, I know your upset with her, but I’m sure she didn’t mean what she said about Summerween.”

“That’s not the point, Connie!” Steven exclaimed fretfully. “The point is that I wanted her to come out and have fun with us! She works so hard all the time; she needed to let loose and have a good time! But I tried to force it and that’s why everything went wrong!”

Unbeknownst to the young Gem, Pearl had happened to overhear all of this, even as she broke free from the Trickster’s hold on her. Her shoulders sank as she realized that Steven wasn’t completely angry at her; he was angry at himself too. He believed that his own failure to appease her and get her to enjoy Summerween was his fault, that all of this was his fault. Of course, the white Gem knew this couldn’t be further from the truth, which was why she was resolved to prove him otherwise.

“We have to escape,” Candy said, returning everyone’s attention to the matter at hand.

“But what if he sees us?” Grenda asked with growing concern as the Trickster turned to look for the kids once more.

“If only there was something we could use to cover our bodies and faces with,” Soos mused as he hid in a rack of costumes. “You know, like a disguise of some kind…”

The kids all exchanged a glance at this, everyone reaching the same idea at once. Within minutes, they had all clad themselves in new costumes, mostly consisting of dark, hooded robes to help conceal them in the shadows. They took care to be as quiet as possible as they snuck around the store shelves, taking advantage of the fact that Pearl was still keeping the Trickster’s attention. The white Gem had caught onto their plan the moment she saw them tip-toe by, but she kept their cover for them by trying to divert his attention as they crept towards the store exit. That is, until the unthinkable happened.

“Hahaha!” one of the novelty skull bowls cackled blithely out of nowhere, catching everyone’s attention instantly. The kids froze in their tracks as they spun around to see Soos standing near the skull bowls, more than ready to amuse himself with one of their many corny quips once more.

“Soos, stop!” Dipper called in a warning whisper.

“Please!” Steven pleaded anxiously.

“Don’t you dare!” Mabel hissed just as vehemently.

“Sorry, dudes, but today’s been way too stressful,” Soos said as he held his hand over the skull. “I need some levity.” Everyone let out a collective fearful gasp as the handyman pressed the skull, though thankfully, it remained silent.

“It must be out of batteries,” Connie breathed a sigh of relief, though panic filled the kids once more as they watched Soos take out a fresh back of batteries and insert them in the skull bowl.

“Soos, no!” the kids all exclaimed in horrified unison, knowing he would blow their cover completely, especially as the skull cracked a very loud joke.
“No matter the score, I’m always a-head!”

Soos chuckled upon hearing this pun, slapping his knee in amusement. “This cackling head’s the voice of a generation!” the handyman grinned, preparing to tap the skull again. However, right before he could, the Trickster happened to sneak up on him from behind. Soos only had a chance to gasp in fearful surprise as the monster grabbed him and swallowed him whole. However, instead of cowering away in fear from the Trickster in light of this, the kids decided to fight back this time.

“Hey, monster!” Dipper shouted fiercely, catching the Trickster’s attention before he could turn it back onto Pearl. The kids had all taken up various plastic costume weapons available throughout the store, and while they weren’t as powerful or sharp as the white Gem’s spear, they would have to do.

As Candy and Grenda tag-teamed on the Trickster with rubber maces, Mabel went after him with a fake axe, slicing wildly and freely. Dipper and Connie took a similar approach, both of them combating the monster with plastic swords, though all while Steven was still struggling to find a weapon of his own to fight with. However, the young Gem soon found one in the foam shield that Pearl herself was presenting to him with a small, apologetic smile.

“Pearl?” Steven asked, looking up at her with confusion and the smallest hint of lingering hurt.

“You know, I don’t think this thing is as strong as your actual shield…” Pearl mused with a growing grin. “But I think it will work for now.”

“But… but I thought…” the young Gem stammered, quite surprised at the white Gem’s change in demeanor. “Don’t you just want to fight the Trickster yourself, without our help?”

“Now, why would I ever want to do that?” Pearl asked coyly, taking up a faux costume spear to replace her real one. “I mean, working alone? That’s not really part of the Summerween spirit now, is it?”

Steven gasped in sudden joy upon hearing this, stars in his eyes as he grinned up at the white Gem. “You really mean it?” he asked, hopeful.

“Of course, I do,” Pearl confirmed warmly before she took up a battle ready stance. “Now… let’s ‘trick-or-treat’ this monster, shall we?”

“…What?” Steven frowned, not getting the white Gem’s attempt at a joke.

“Let’s just defeat it, ok?” she sighed, giving up on humor for now as both her and Steven leapt into action.

Despite the Trickster’s multiple sets of arms, he apparently wasn’t able to focus on multiple targets at once as everyone ganged up on him at once. The monster roared angrily as he swept his arms out wildly and without calculation at any kid in his line of sight, though they all kept their wits about them and stayed clear of his attacks. While their foam and plastic weapons weren’t exactly sharp, the blunt force of them was enough to hack off their foe’s thin limbs, causing them to dissipate into pieces of apparent darkness. However, Grenda was the first one to notice something was amiss about the Trickster as she brutally pounded one of the his arms off, watching in confusion as several small pieces of candy slipped out of the fresh “wound”.

“Salt water taffy?” the girl questioned upon noticing a particular piece. “Gross!”

“What?” Dipper stilled his sword in confusion upon hearing this, until he confirmed it for himself by tasting a piece of the Trickster’s grounded remains. “Wait… it is?”
“So… is he bleeding… candy?” Connie asked in bewilderment as she kicked at one of the monster’s discarded limbs.

“Ugh, that’s even more disgusting than actual blood if you ask me,” Pearl shuddered in revulsion.

“Haven’t you figured it out yet?” the Trickster asked darkly, taking advantage of the distraction to produce enough arms to snatch up every member of the group at once. “Don’t you recognize me?! Look at my face! Look closely…” The monster at least removed his mask to reveal a face composed of peppermints, licorice, and candy corn. Despite this though, he was still quite unnerving in appearance as he glared at the group, especially as they realized exactly what their foe was made of.

“Loser candy!” Mabel gasped in apt shock.

“Oh, no wonder he wanted us to get him candy!” Steven exclaimed. “We just wanted more of it for himself! Literally!”

“That’s right!” the Trickster hissed, squeezing all of his victims simultaneously. “Did you ever stop to think about the candy at the bottom of the bag that no one likes? Every year the children of Gravity Falls throw away all of the ‘rejected’ candy into the dumb. So I seek revenge… revenge on the picky children who cast me aside. I’m made of every tossed piece of black licorice, every discarded bar of old chocolate filled with like, that white powder stuff on it. You know that stuff!”

“I hate that stuff!” Mabel exclaimed with disdain.

“No one ever wanted to eat me…” the Trickster lamented, though his manner quickly turned menacing as he prepared to do just that, much to the horror of his victims, until a low scratching sound caught his attention. “What is that?”

The answer quickly became apparent when, quite out of nowhere, Soos burst out of the Trickster’s candy-composed chest, letting out a shout as he came out, covered in sticky sweets. “‘Sup, bros?” the handyman greeted calmly a moment later, largely not fazed by having been eaten alive. The Trickster, however, wasn’t doing as well himself. The monster began to cough up jellybeans as he collapsed to the ground in pain from the heavy wound he had received.

“Soos?!” the others all exclaimed in stunned unison, surprised and relieved that the handyman was even still alive.

“You dudes want some of this?” Soos asked as he snacked on a heart-shaped collection of candy, which had clearly been the Trickster’s vital ‘organ’. Disgusted, the kids all shook their heads, especially as the Trickster continued to groan in agony. That is, until he heard what the handyman had said.

“Wait…” the monster paused. “You actually think I taste… good?”

“Mm, sure,” Soos shrugged as he took another bite out of the heart. “Good enough, I guess.”

“All I’ve ever wanted was for someone to say that I was good!” the Trickster exclaimed with a smile, crying candy corn tears of joy. “I’m so happy!”

“Aww… Poor guy,” Steven said with a sympathetic grin. “You didn’t have to go such drastic measures by trying to kill us! If you had just said that you wanted someone to enjoy you, then we would have helped you out!”
“Speak for yourself, Steven,” Dipper muttered, crossing his arms. “That loser candy is pretty terrible.”

“Huh, the crying makes it sorta weird…” Soos frowned down at the Trickster as he took another bite. “But I guess I’m still eating.”

“Ew…” Pearl gagged in complete disgust, turning away from the candy carnage. “This is why I don’t eat. The things you humans will put in your mouths are just… unthinkable.”

No more than a moment later, the young boy the Trickster had swallowed earlier, Gorny, happened to break through the monster’s chest just as Soos had. Despite his horrifying experience, the boy was still smiling as brightly as ever.

“‘Sup, Gorny,” Soos greeted casually.

“I’ve been twaumatized!” Gorny exclaimed cheerfully, which was a sentiment that all of the kids could easily agree with after the harrowing night they had.

“Come on, old guy!” one of the two boys shouted as he pounded on the shack’s door for about the hundredth time. “Give us our candy already!”

“Yeah! We already TPed your house and everything!” the other kid called angrily, glancing back at the mess of toilet paper on the lawn behind them.

At last, the door finally opened, ‘Stan’ stepped out, acting dramatically disappointed as ‘he’ leaned against doorway. “Oh no! I guess you little twerps are no match for my lackluster scaring techniques! What is a poor old man like me to do?!”

“There’s no way this is gonna work…” the real Stan muttered to himself as he watched Amethyst’s act. Her shapeshifting abilities had helped in creating a near exact replica of the conman to serve as the lure, while Stan himself was left to go in for the scare itself. The one thing he wasn’t too sure about was the purple Gem’s method of executing her spur of the moment plan.

“Enough stallin’, old guy,” one of the boys scoffed unsympathetically. “Where’s our candy at?”

“Well, I guess I can’t keep your treats from you any longer, can I?” Amethyst asked, throwing her voice to make it as gruff and gravely as Stan’s was. “Come on in and get it.”

Neither boy noticed the cunning smirk on the purple Gem’s face as the passed by her and into the shack, where the real Stan was waiting right around the corner. On cue, the conman jumped out from his hiding place, trying to be as frightening as possible as he appeared before the kids. “Boo!”

“Aww, come on,” one of the boys rolled his eyes tiredly. “You really think some lame jump scare is gonna scare us?”

“Yeah, how’d you even sneak in here ahead of us?” the other boy asked callously. “Probably some dumb parlor tri-” The boy cut himself off as he turned around to see Amethyst, still masquerading as Stan, standing right behind them.

“Boo,” the purple Gem said simply, crossing her arms as she gave Stan a sly wink. Both boys paled as they glanced back and forth between the two conmen, making it clear that they had seriously underestimated him.
“T-there are two of you?!” one boy asked in alarm.

“Sure are, kid,” Stan remarked with growing confidence upon seeing the plan starting to work. “Didn’t you know? I’m not your ordinary, run of the mill, crusty old man.”

“Yeah,” Amethyst added, smirking down at the boys. “I multiply every time punk little kids like you tick me off. And then… I EAT YA!” The purple Gem growled viscously as she quickly shapeshifted her upper half into a salivating, grotesque, wolf like monster and barred her sharp teeth at them. The boys cried in terror upon seeing this, finally scared out their wits as they took off running out of the shack, leaving their full bags of candy behind without even bothering to go back for them. The conman and the purple Gem laughed in triumph as they watched the kids flee, their plan having succeed perfectly.

“Well, looks like the master’s still got it,” Amethyst complimented as she gave Stan a friendly slap on the back.

“Eh, you did most of the heavy work on this one,” Stan shrugged with a humble grin. “But yeah. We’ve still got it.”

The pair laughed warmly once more for a moment until the conman’s smile gradually faded as he looked to the purple Gem, still disguised as him. “Um… Amethyst? Could you maybe stop shapeshifting as me? It’s kinda… creeping me out…”

“Huh?” Amethyst glanced down at herself, though she was quick to comply, knowing how the conman felt about shapeshifting. “Yeah…” she laughed awkwardly as she returned to her usual form. “Sorry about that…”

After the battle against the Trickster, the kids, along with Pearl and Soos, had decided that they had had enough Summerween adventures for one night, which was why they all returned to the shack to take a much needed rest. Despite their victory, none of the kids were in very high spirits, however, seeing as how, even after everything they had been through, none of them had no candy to show for their trick-or-treating efforts. As they entered into the den, they found that Stan and Amethyst were already there, relaxing in light of their success as they watched TV together.

“Amethyst, what are you doing here?” Pearl asked the purple Gem in confusion after a brief round off greetings was exchanged.

“I was just helping Stan scare off some dorks,” Amethyst said with a casual grin. “What’s new with you?”

“Well… I went trick-or-treating and was almost brutally defeated by an insane candy monster,” Pearl informed rather tiredly.

“Cool!” Amethyst exclaimed with interest. “Sounds like you had fun!”

“Yeah…” Pearl said with a soft, resigned smile as she glanced across the room at Steven. “I guess I did…”

As it turned out, the conman and the purple Gem weren’t the only ones hanging out in the den. Much to Dipper’s surprise, Wendy was also there, sitting at the table as she carved a jack-o-melon to pass the time.
“Wendy!” the boy exclaimed, blushing in slight embarrassment as he realized he was still wearing his costume.

“Hey, Dipper,” the cashier greeted with an easy grin. “I didn’t see you at the party. Where were you?”

“I… I, uh…” Dipper paused, taking a glance at Mabel, who looked away with a sad expression. He had already damaged his bond with his sister enough for one night; he wasn’t about to do so any more. “I was trick-or-treating,” he admitted shamelessly, putting an arm around Mabel’s shoulder. “With my sister.”

The girl smiled warmly upon hearing this, knowing that this time, her brother was genuinely proud. Their evening may not have been perfect, but in the end, it had all turned out alright, in more ways than one. “Yeah…” Mabel said, returning Dipper’s affectionate gesture.

“Cool,” Wendy smirked. “The party was lame anyway. Robbie ate a lollipop stick-first and had to go home sick.”

Dipper tried his hardest not to laugh at this, though the thought of the moody teen embarrassing himself like that filled the boy with endless amusement. At the same time, Mabel let out a disappointed sigh as she frowned down at her empty bag. “Aw, man… We went to every single house and we didn’t even get to eat any candy!”

“I still don’t think tonight was a total waste though…” Connie said with a small shrug. “I mean, even though we were being hunted down by the Trickster all night, we all still got to hang out together.”

“Yeah!” Steven agreed with a wife grin. “And really, isn’t that what Summerween is really about?”

“Uh, no, dude,” Amethyst said plainly. “It’s about candy.”

“Speaking of candy…” Stan said with a coy smirk. “How’s this for candy!”

The kids all gasped in surprise and excitement upon seeing the two huge bags of stolen candy the conman pulled out from behind his chair. There was enough for everyone as they all gathered around the TV to relax and enjoy the treats, including Pearl, even though she refrained from eating anything as usual. As the television blared with corny old-timey horror films, Mabel’s attention was suddenly caught off guard as Dipper gently put a band-aid on her scuffed elbow, even though she had largely forgotten about the cut herself. She gave him a warm smile in light of this, one that he was more than happy to return. It was a small gesture, but one that the girl appreciated nonetheless. Especially since it reminded her that, for every time her brother frustrated her or upset her, he would still always be there for in the end. They would always be there for each other.

“You know, everyone,” Stan broke up, catching everyone’s attention. “I’ve been thinkin’. Summerween isn’t really about the candy or the costumes. Or ever scaring people. It’s a day when the whole family can get together and celebrate what really matters: PURE EVIL!”

Everyone in the room joined the conman in a maniacal laugh at this, all of them sharing the sentiment. However, as soon this burst of twisted levity was over, the room returned to silence once more, only for it to be broken by a rather blatant, rather disturbing statement from Soos. “I ate a man alive tonight.”
Chapter 17: An Indirect Kiss

Chapter Summary

In which Dipper and Mabel go on their first Gem mission, Steven tries to cry, and ship teasing happens

Chapter Notes

Well, I must say that this is probably my favorite chapter out of this story yet! I've been looking forward to this one for a long time and I think it turned out even better than I had been hoping for! Enjoy my take on An Indirect Kiss!

SVZORMT SZMWH ZIV SIIIW GL URMW
YFG SVZORMT HKRG RH LMV LU Z PRMW

The trek up the temple hill was usually quite a long, tiring one, especially on such a balmy summer’s day. Fortunately, Lion made the uphill journey easy, even if he was utterly exhausted by the time he had finished toting Steven, Connie, Dipper, Mabel, and Waddles up it. As the kids reached their intended picnic destination, they all dismounted the pink beast, who didn’t hesitate to flop down into the grass for a much-needed nap as Waddles trotted over and nuzzled down next to him.

“Hurry up, Steven!” Connie urged the young Gem, who was still draped over Lion’s back rather languidly.

“Yeah! The special batch of Mabel juice I made isn’t gonna drink itself!” Mabel added brightly as she spread the picnic blanket out onto the grass.

Steven simply responded with a gloomy groan as he let himself slip off of Lion and onto the ground, where he lay without even making the effort to pick himself up.

“Oh no,” Dipper said with a frown as he glanced over at the despondent young Gem. “Not this again…”

“What’s wrong with him?” Connie asked worriedly, taking a step closer to Steven.

“He’s a… little upset because of what happened the other-” Dipper began to explain before Steven hurriedly cut him off.

“I’m fine!” the young Gen exclaimed, quickly scrambling to his feet and forcing a fake, reassuring smile onto his face.

“Really?” Mabel asked, not convinced. “Because just yesterday, you were talking about how you felt-”

“I-I feel great!” Steven laughed lamely, taking a seat on the picnic blanket with the others. “Really,
The young Gem’s smile faded into a morose frown once more as he glanced away, particularly not wanting Connie to see him so miserable. Still, the girl easily noticed his clear, lingering pout, which only made her worry for him even more.

“Are you sure you’re ok?” she asked as she grabbed a sandwich out of the picnic basket and handed it to him with the twins helped themselves to their own.

“Yeah…” Steven said dejectedly as he took the sandwich and began passively nibbling on it. Connie, Dipper, and Mabel exchanged a concerned glance as they watched him, none of them used to seeing the usually very chipper young Gem be so down. Still, Steven had made it clear that he didn’t want to discuss his apparent sorrow, which was why Connie hesitantly changed the subject.

“So… um… Is this fence new?” she asked, referring to the freshly-painted white picket fence lining the perimeter of the hilltop.

“Uh, Connie?” Dipper whispered quickly, hoping that Steven wouldn’t overhear. “You might wanna avoid mention the fence. It’s sort of a… sore subject.”

“What? Why?”

“Hahah! Yeah, the fence is new!” Mabel rushed in to say with an awkwardly loud laugh. “Now why don’t we forget it’s here and talk about something completely different? Like, we could talk about how… about… Oh! About how cute Lion and Waddles are! Look at them over there, sleeping like precious pink little babies!”

Despite Mabel’s obvious attempts to cheer him up, Steven wasn’t so easily swayed. “It’s new…” he sighed heavily. “And how it got here is, uh, a long story.”

“Steven, you don’t have to tell it if you don’t want to,” Dipper said sympathetically, understanding exactly why the young Gem was so forlorn.

“Aw, but I wanted to tell Connie our side of what happened!” Mabel pouted as she crossed her arms.


“You bet it is!” Mabel quipped enthusiastically. “And it’s an amazing one! Packed full of drama, action, and suspense!”

“Mabel!” Dipper scolded at how insensitive his sister was being to the young Gem’s feelings.

“What? I’m just stating the facts.”

“It’s… sort of a magic story…” Steven said hesitantly, not at all fond of the idea of recounting it.

By this point, however, Connie was more than intrigued. “Will you guys tell it to me? Please?” she pleaded, sending Steven specifically a small, hopeful smile.

“Sure!” Mabel heartily agreed.

“Only if Steven’s ok with it,” Dipper said, though he was quick to add another statement. “Because to be honest, it is kind of an awesome story.”
“Steven?” Connie asked, looking to the young Gem once more fervently.

Despite the grief even thinking about the memory caused him, Steven found that he was helpless against Connie’s inquisitive, begging gaze. Which was why he quickly caved. “Ok, ok,” he sighed relentlessly. “It’s not a happy story, but... here goes. It all started the other day when the three of us were hanging around up here with Amethyst…”

Amethyst let out a mischievous laugh as she skipped along the edge of the cliff, completely ignoring the daunting drop immediately to her right. Steven, Dipper, and Mabel all followed not too far behind, but they remained a safe distance away from the cliffside as they watched the purple Gem fool around.

“Amethyst, be careful!” Steven cried warningly, his eyes wide with dread as he watched Amethyst cartwheel dangerously close to the edge.

“Amethyst, why are you getting so worked up?” Amethyst chuckled teasingly. “Aw... Do you care about me or something?”

“Yes!” the young Gem whimpered, his expression awash with fear and worry.

“Oh, Steven, I didn’t mean to make you—Whoa!” the purple Gem gasped as she pretended to teeter backward, only to immediately catch her balance with a taunting laugh. “Made you guys look!”

“Um, Amethyst? Have you thought that maybe balancing on the edge of an incredibly high cliff isn’t the... smartest idea?” Dipper asked with muted concern.

“Pfft,” Amethyst scoffed, rolling her eyes as she did another flip. “You know who you sound like, Dipper? Like Pearl. And you know what Pearl does?” The purple Gem’s smirk widened as she shapeshifted into Pearl, perching atop her tiptoes on the cliff edge. “Well, you see, kids, I simply love to... nag, nag, nag, nag!” Amethyst mimicked the white Gem’s proper mannerisms, sticking her tongue out playfully as she shapeshifted back into herself.

Though Dipper was anything but by this teasing and Steven was still wrapped up in immense fear, Mabel let out an entertained laugh. “Ha! You and Pearl to nag a lot, bro-bro!” the girl smirked as she elbowed her annoyed brother. “You should try loosening up. And if you need some help, I’ll show you how! Hey, Amethyst, make some room!”

“Sure thing!” the purple Gem chuckled, seeing no danger in this idea at all. “Join the party!”

“Uh, no,” Dipper quickly cut in, grabbing his sister by the arm before she could even begin to make her way over to the edge. “Mabel, you’re not doing this.”

“And there you go again, being a big ol’ nag!” Mabel huffed in aggravation.

“I am not being a nag!” Dipper protested in frustration. “It’s just I—Well, what if you fell, huh? That’s like, a several hundred foot drop! And then you wouldn’t be having so much fun anymore because you wouldn’t be alive.”

“Dipper’s right!” Steven agreed anxiously. “It’s too dangerous for anyone, including you, Amethyst! If you keep it up, you’re going to fall, and get hurt, and—”
“Steven, please,” Amethyst placed a hand on her hip as she stood at the very tip of the cliff. “I’m a Gem warrior. I’m not gonna fall~” The purple Gem barely even had time to finish her sentence before she did just that. The thin patch of earth she was standing upon suddenly gave way from underneath her as she began to freely plummet down the cliff face. “Ugh, this is so embarrassing!” she groaned in aggravation, face-palming as she fell.

From the top of the hill, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel watched the purple Gem’s quick descent with silent horror. They all cringed in unison as they heard her rough landing as she hit the ground, though she didn’t stop there. There was enough force behind her fall to send her rolling down the rest of the hill, down near the temple path and towards the Mystery Shack. Amethyst let out several grunts of pain as she spiraled down the forest floor, unable to stop herself from ramming into several trees until she finally came to a stop near the shack itself. Yet even so, the purple Gem managed to call up a reassurance to the trio still on the hill. “I’m ok!”

Even despite this, the kids didn’t hesitate to hurry down the hill as fast as they could to check on Amethyst and make sure she really was alright. Still, it took a while, since even going down the hill was something of a lengthy hike. By the time they made it to the shack, Steven and Dipper were both ready to collapse on each other out of sheer exhaustion, even though Mabel still had quite a bit of energy to spare.

“Took you guys long enough,” Amethyst said, as she watched the trio arrive. She clearly looked quite a bit worse for wear from her brutal fall; her hair was disheveled and littered with leaves and twigs, her clothes were ripped (even more than usual) and soiled and her lavender skin was lightly scarred, yet other than that, she looked relatively unharmed.

“Are you really ok?!” Steven asked with immense concern, disregarding his own breathlessness.

“Eh,” Amethyst shrugged nonchalantly. “I’m a little beat up, but I’ll live.”

“Ok, how are you not seriously hurt from that?” Dipper asked, bewildered. “You fell off a cliff! I know guys are super-durable or whatever, but you can’t be that durable.”

“Uh, yeah we are,” the purple Gem argued with a proud smirk. “We’re like ROCKS.”

“Literally!” Mabel chimed in blithely.

“Are you sure you’re ok?” Steven pressed, not convinced by Amethyst’s bravado.

“Yes, Steven, I’m fine,” Amethyst huffed before a sly grin crossed her features. “Well… except for this!”

The kids gasped in unison as the purple Gem pushed her hair aside to reveal her other eye, which was swollen to the point that it was double the size of what it should have been. None of them had much of a chance to react to it though as Garnet and Pearl quickly rushed onto the scene from the temple path.

“Amethyst!” Pearl gasped in horror as she noticed the purple Gem’s enlarged eye. “Quick! Show me your gem!”

“Fresh!” Amethyst slapped the white Gem’s hand away as she reached the pull down her shirt to get a better look. She wasn’t able to stop Garnet from doing so, however, as the Gem leader calmly tugged the top down to reveal a small, but still noticeable crack in the purple stone. Knowing she had been found out, Amethyst blushed in embarrassment and glanced away from the others.

Pearl gasped once more as she pulled away from Amethyst, her eyes wide with fear. “Amethyst!
Your gem is cracked!”

“Rude!” the purple Gem said crossly, covering her gem up once more. She paused, however, catching her cool upon noticing the concerned looks the kids were giving her. “I-it’s not a big deal! Plus, now I have this cool googly eye!”

Despite Amethyst’s lack of concern over the matter, Garnet and Pearl were nowhere near as amused. The white Gem was just about to scold her once again before the group was abruptly interrupted.

“Hey!” Stan exclaimed sourly as he emerged from the shack and stormed over. “What’s all the racket out here?! I’m trying to give a tour in there, and all this yelling is distracting my paying customers!”

“Grunkle Stan, Amethyst cracked her gem!” Mabel reported, completely invested in the unfolding situation. “I don’t really know what that means, but it sounds super serious!”

“Amethyst cracked… wait, what now?” Stan asked, clearly not following.

“Like I said, I’m fine,” the purple Gem reassured, crossing her arms. “It’s just a little scratch.”

“A little scratch?” Pearl repeated, appalled. “Amethyst, you should know how serious this is! How did this even happen?”

“She fell off the cliff,” Steven said point-blank.

“And then she rolled down the hill, hitting every tree along the way,” Dipper added.

“Did not!” Amethyst protested quickly.

“The cliff… of course!” Pearl said, frowning up at the towering hill. “How could I have been so blind!? We need to put a fence up there, so this will never happen again!”

“I’m surprised you three haven’t already done that,” Stan remarked a bit sarcastically. “That cliff is a lawsuit waiting to happen. You know… if you wanted a nice fence up there, I’d be more than willing to hire Soos out to build one for you… At the low cost of one hundred dollars an hour, of course.”

Pearl was about to protest this idea, but in the end, she was countered by Garnet, who stoically shook the con man’s hand in agreement with this idea. “Deal.”

“And that’s how the fence got here,” Steven said quickly, hoping that Connie wouldn’t press him for any further information. “The end!”

“Wha—but… that’s not how the story ended!” Mabel exclaimed. “There’s so much more to it than that!”

“Yeah, what happened to Amethyst?” Connie asked curiously.

Not wanting to get into the meat of the tale, Steven let out a long groan of protest as he crossed his arms and looked away.

“You know we can’t just leave it there, Steven,” Dipper pointed out.
“C’mon! Tell me the rest!” Connie urged.

“Or at least let me and Dipper do it! Pretty please?” Mabel suggested though the young Gem wasn’t too fond of this idea either.

“Mmm, I don’t wanna…” Steven said with extreme hesitance.

“Steven?” Connie frowned with concern, noticing as the young Gem refused to meet her gaze. “Steven…” she said a bit flirtatiously, noticing that he was beginning to crack. “Steven!” she finally exclaimed impatiently, which was what at last got him to comply.

“Okay, fine,” Steven sighed in defeat as the others cheered. “But only if you guys tell the sad parts for me,” he said to the twins.

“Steven, we weren’t there for most of the sad parts,” Dipper said, though Mabel was quick to jump in and agree.

“You got it! And we’ll be sure to tell the high-stakes, adventurery parts too!”

“And one more thing,” Steven said as he turned back to Connie. “Let me try on your glasses?”

“Only if you give me the rest of your juice,” Connie bartered.

“Okay, but it’s mostly backwash,” Steven warned.

“Good enough.”

“Ew,” Dipper cringed in relative disgust as the pair swapped items, ignoring Mabel as she bounced up and down in excitement over telling the rest of the story.

“How do I look?” Steven asked with a grin as he tried the pink-tinted glasses on.

“…I have no idea,” Connie squinted, only making out colored blobs through her impaired vision.

“Steven, you look great!” Mabel said hurriedly, wanting to get on with the tale. “Let’s get back to the story! So, there we were, all of us really worried about Amethyst…”

“So what’s the problem?” Steven asked as soon as Stan and Garnet had solidified their deal. “Amethyst falls off stuff all the time.”

“It’d be fine if it was just her body, but her gem is damaged,” Pearl said, rubbing her temples to ease away her stress.

“And that’s… bad?” Dipper asked, even if he already assumed it was.

“Yes,” Garnet replied, crossing her arms. “Very bad.”

“No, it’s not,” Amethyst scowled, still trying to pass her accident off like it was nothing.

“Please,” Stan scoffed dryly, not believing the seriousness of the matter either. “That little cut? Just pour some rubbing alcohol over it, slap some duct tape on it, and she’ll be fine.”

“Sounds like a good plan to me,” Amethyst shrugged in agreement.
“Are you both insane?!” Pearl exclaimed hotly. “This isn’t just some little scrape on the knee! Amethyst’s gem is cracked! The very core of her being! You can’t just something like… tape of all things to fix it!”

“So… how do we fix it?” Steven inquired.

The white Gem’s harsh manner instantly softened upon hearing this question as she let out a sad sigh. “Well, before… we had Rose.”

“Steven,” Garnet began, kneeling down to the young Gem’s level. “Your mother had healing tears that flowed from her gem. She felt real love for those around her, and she felt real sorrow when they were hurt. You have the Rose Quartz gem now. I know that power is in you too.”

“Whoa…” Mabel gasped as she looked to Steven in absolute amazement. “Steven, if you really do have magical healing powers, that would be the coolest thing ever!”

“Yeah, it would!” Steven readily agreed, more than excited to try. “Amethyst, show me your Gem!”

“Yeah, alright,” Amethyst said calmly, pulling her top down to reveal the cracked stone.

“Oh boy, this oughta be good,” Stan commented sarcastically.

Steven took in a deep breath of determination, posing dramatically as he closed his eyes and prepared to try and summon tears. “The power… to heal!” he whispered intensely, hoping that he bore the same magical tears that his mother had.

Of course, if his initial attempt was any indication, it didn’t really appear as though that was the case. The young Gem strained hard as he stood before Amethyst’s gem, though he only succeeded in working up more of a sweat than any tears. “It’s not working…” Steven said in dismayed exhaustion as he paused to take a break. “I guess I’m just too tough to cry.”

“Just yesterday you were crying about snakes,” Pearl pointed out in exasperation.

“They don’t have any arms!” Steven whimpered fretfully.

“And weren’t you crying just a while ago about the view from the hill is?” Dipper asked just as caustically.

“Maybe…” the young Gem hesitantly admitted. “I can’t help it! Gravity Falls is just so beautiful!”

“Well, look on the bright side, kid,” Stan said, placing a hand on Steven’s shoulder. “Considering how much of a sap you are, I’m sure you’ll have tears pouring all over Amethyst’s gem in no time. Wait… that came out wrong…”

“Amethyst might not have that much time to wait,” Garnet said firmly, already having developed another plan. “We have no choice. We’ll have to get some water from Rose’s healing spring.”

“Healing spring?” Dipper repeated in confusion.

“Oh yes!” Pearl exclaimed with renewed hope. “Why didn’t I think of that? The water from Rose’s fountain can heal just as well as her tears could! We should go there right away!”

“Guys, I’m fine!” Amethyst reassured with a wave of her hand. “I’m not gonna get any wo-r-r-r-r-“ The purple Gem continued to drag her r out as her face twisted up, a result of her gem’s damaged
condition. Finally, when her face returned to normal, she continued speaking, only this time, her words were oddly backward. “Esrow. Ees? I dlot uoy! Ho, tiaw…”

“Yikes…” Stan cringed, a hint of concern in his expression this time.

“Neat!” Mabel exclaimed brightly. “I wanna learn how to talk backward too!”

“Oh no! This is getting more serious by the second!” Pearl gasped anxiously. “That’s it! Amethyst, you have to stay here so you won’t exacerbate your crack!”

“Wa, tahw? Tub I annaw emoc!” Amethyst protested, her speech still scrambled.

“No,” Garnet insisted, somehow understanding her. “Amethyst, you need to stay.”

“Oh, I could stay too and take care of her!” Steven suggested. “And who knows? Maybe I could finally get myself to cry and just heal her with my tears!”

“I’d say that’s worth a try,” Garnet agreed with a hint of an encouraging smile.

“But it’s such a long hike up to the temple…” the young Gem frowned as he looked up the path. “And Amethyst, you’re in no condition to walk that far…”

“I dluoc od ti fi I detnaw ot,” Amethyst remarked crossly.

“You know, you’re totally right, Steven!” Mabel exclaimed, catching onto where he was going with this. “If only there was someone who would selflessly open up his home to his injured friend while Garnet and Pearl go to get some fountain water for her…”

Stan had well noticed the puppy-dog eyes both Mabel and Steven were giving him, but even despite them teaming up on him, the con man wasn’t so easily moved. “No,” he said firmly. “Nope, no way. I have a business to run and chumps to swindle. And in case you didn’t know, this is a tourist trap, not a hospital. I don’t have time for any of magical Gem nonsense today.”


“Seriously, Grunkle Stan?” Dipper asked, though he wasn’t all too surprised by his uncle’s most recent show of selfishness. “Would it really kill you to just let Steven and Amethyst hang out here for a few hours? What harm could it possibly cause?”

“I don’t even think I have the energy to answer that question, kid,” Stan scoffed before he turned to the Gems. “Besides, past experiences have taught me not to get too involved with you guys. It causes me too many migraines.”

“Please, Mr. Pines!” Steven begged desperately. “We need you! Amethyst needs you! You guys have been friends for years! You gotta help her out, just this once! So, will you…? Please?”

Stan scowled down at the young Gem for a moment, stubbornly set in his decision. That is, until he happened to glance over at Amethyst, who despite looking quite surly herself over all this, had just enough hidden panic in her eyes to break the con man’s icy resolve.

“Ok, fine!” he exclaimed begrudgingly, ignoring Steven’s sigh of relief. “But only because it’s Amethyst. Don’t think I’d be doing this for either of you two,” he glowered at Garnet and Pearl.

“We wouldn’t expect you to,” Garnet deadpanned.

“And I’m tacking on another fifty bucks to that fence,” Stan said, not wanting the Gems to think
him as soft for agreeing to this. “Consider that the… hospitality fee.”

“Ugh, fine,” Pearl rolled her eyes in annoyance. “Let’s just go, Garnet. We don’t have any time to waste!”

Before the pair of Gems could really head off though, they were halted once more, this time by Dipper. “Um, hey, you guys? Well, I was just thinking…” he trailed off, pausing out of hesitation. In truth, he was about to present an idea to them that he had been dwelling over for a long time, but at last the opportunity seemed to be presenting itself. Still, he knew there was a large chance that they’d say no, especially considering the circumstances. Nevertheless, Dipper worked up his courage and asked them anyway, hoping there was some small chance that they’d agree to it. “M-maybe me and Mabel could go with you guys to the spring. I mean, y-you guys probably don’t need any help, but just in case you did—”

“We’d be more than up for it!” Mabel readily leaped in, her eyes wide with excitement at the prospect her brother had just suggested. “Please let us come, you guys! I’ve always wanted to go on a magical, action-packed Gem mission! It’ll be so much fun!”

“Mabel…” Dipper groaned in embarrassment, knowing that his sister’s overenthusiasm could ruin everything. After all, he knew that the Gems would never allow them to accompany them if they didn’t think they were anything less than absolutely serious about this task. And if Mabel’s behavior was any indication, then clearly they weren’t.

“Oh, I don’t know if that’s such a good idea, kids…” Pearl said with an apprehensive smile. “It’s true that Rose’s fountain isn’t… explicitly dangerous… per say…”

“Then what’s the problem?” Dipper asked, trying his best to hide how desperate he was for this chance.

“Yeah, you guys should totally let Dipper and Mabel go with you!” Steven urged before he turned to the twins. “Seriously, going on a Gem mission will change your lives! All of the action, magic… everything else, it’s incredible!”

Upon hearing this, the twins were even more excited at the idea of going with Garnet and Pearl, even if the latter still wasn’t convinced. “Dipper, Mabel, listen…” the white Gem began, treading as carefully as carefully as she could. “I… I really don’t know how to say this, but… a Gem mission… Well, it might be a little too much for you…”

“What?” Mabel asked, mirroring Dipper’s sudden dismay perfectly. “No way!”

“Yeah, we can handle it!” Dipper protested. “We found the light canons, didn’t we?”

“Yes, but that was right here in Gravity Falls,” Pearl pointed out. “Rose’s fountain is not only far away, but it’s completely unfamiliar to the two of you. There’s no telling what could happen. And… well, you’re both only… human. Most Gem locales are dangerous enough for us, much less you. We just don’t want to see either of you get hurt, right Garnet?”

“They can come,” Garnet suddenly spoke up, and her very answer filled both twins with absolute elation.

“See? That’s what I was—wait, w-what?!”

“You said so yourself, Pearl: this isn’t going to be a dangerous mission,” the Gem leader reassured. “We’re just going to Rose’s fountain, taking a bit of water, and coming back. It’s easy. Like they said, they can handle it.”
“A-are you sure?” Pearl asked, still having her doubts. Still, Garnet simply nodded, her stance as firm as it usually was.

“You really mean it, Garnet?” Mabel asked, looking up at the Gem leader with a huge smile.

“I do,” she affirmed once more. “But only if your uncle is ok with it.”

“Eh, what do I care?” Stan said with little concern. “Go ahead and babysit the little knuckleheads for me for a few hours. I have a feeling I’ll be doing plenty of babysitting of my own with these two,” he nodded to Steven and Amethyst.

Dipper and Mabel exchanged immensely excited grins upon hearing this, both of them exhilarated over whatever adventure they were about to face. Garnet and Pearl gave them little time to celebrate, however as they already were making their way up the path towards the temple.

“Shake a leg, you two!” Pearl called, though Garnet slowed her pace a little to allow the kids to bid each other farewell.

“I’m so excited for you guys!” Steven exclaimed to the twins as Stan and Amethyst headed inside the shack. “You’re gonna have such a great time! I wish I could go with you, but me and my potentially healing tears are needed here.”

“Speaking of which… here, Steven,” Dipper said, pulling the journal out of his vest and handing it to the young Gem. “When the Gems were talking about your mom’s healing powers, I remembered reading something in the journal that mentioned it. So maybe you could use it to help you figure out how to get them working. You know, if crying doesn’t work out.”

“Whoa…” Steven said, stars in his eyes as he carefully held the mysterious tome. “Thanks, Dipper! With the journal’s help, I’ll be a magical healer in no time!”

“Yeah, well just don’t let anyone else see it, ok?” Dipper asked, glancing around cautiously to make sure no one was eavesdropping.

“Why not?”

“Because Dipper’s paranoid,” Mabel interjected.

“No, I’m not! It’s just I-” he cut himself off with a sigh, not sure of how to explain it to the young Gem in a way that made sense. “Just… don’t show it to Stan or Amethyst. They don’t need to know about it.”

“Um, if there’s stuff about the Gems in there don’t you think they should know about it?” Mabel questioned, and Steven nodded his agreement with the sentiment.

Dipper refrained from answering this question, a part of him regretting bringing up the journal at all now. He knew that they’d both probably just laugh at him if he actually confided to them that he was genuinely afraid of the Gems confiscating the journal if they discovered it. Which was why he entreated Steven one more time, only with much more sincerity as he further pressed the important book into the young Gem’s hands. “I’m just not… ready to tell them about it yet, ok?”

“Um, if there’s stuff about the Gems in there don’t you think they should know about it?” Mabel questioned, and Steven nodded his agreement with the sentiment.

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“…Ok, I guess…” Steven said with clear hesitance as he wrapped his arms around the journal tightly. “But I don’t like it.”
Before Dipper could further reassure the young Gem, Stan happened to poke his head out of the shack rather impatiently. Fortunately, Steven was quick to hide the journal behind his back, just as Dipper had advised, before the con man could see it. “Kid, you better get in here,” he said gruffly. “Amethyst’s shouting about how she wants you, I guess. It’s kinda hard to tell since everything she says is backward now.”

“I’ll be there in just a second!” Steven called before quickly turning back to the twins with a small, hopeful smile. “Well, putting all this journal stuff aside, I hope you guys have a great time with Garnet and Pearl. And good luck finding the fountain!”

“Good luck to you too, Steven!” Mabel beamed brightly as she and Dipper began hurrying off after the Gems. “I hope you can get yourself to cry! Oh, I mean—I hope your tears work! Er, um… I meant to say—”

“Ok, Mabel,” Dipper cut her off, briefly waving back at Steven as they parted ways. “I think he gets it.”

“So the Gems really let you guys go with them on their mission?” Connie asked the twins, completely engaged in their story.

“Yeah they did and it was awesome!” Mabel gushed zealously.

“Well, it was awesome whenever we weren’t fighting for our lives,” Dipper added more rationally.

“Oh come on, bro-bro, those were the best parts!” Mabel elbowed her brother teasingly.

“It sure sounds a lot better than what happened at the shack…” Steven muttered morosely, though thankfully no one heard him.

“Wait, but I thought Pearl and Garnet said going to the fountain wasn’t going to be dangerous,” Connie frowned.

“That’s what they thought,” Dipper smirked slyly. “What the Gems didn’t know, and what me and Mabel didn’t know, was that this mission was going to be a lot more dangerous than we could have imagined…”

“Wait, so we actually get to use the warp pad?” Dipper asked Garnet and Pearl as him and Mabel stood before said pad up at the temple.

“Yes…” Pearl said with a frown, not understanding his apparent awe at the concept.

“Like, the warp pad?” Dipper pressed again, still trying to wrap his head around the concept.

Both Gems nodded, not seeing what was so special about it, even as Mabel let out a squeal of excitement. “Oh my gosh! Is the fountain in another dimension?! Is that dimension full of all sorts of magical Gem stuff?! Can we take pictures?”

“Wait, the fountain isn’t in another dimension,” Pearl explained eloquently. “It’s here on earth, just like all of the places we warp too. It’s just too far away for us to simply walk there.”
“Ok, but how does it work?” Dipper asked, ever curious. “Is it like, magic or teleportation or-”

“Step up here and find out,” Garnet said with a small, somewhat amused smile. The twins exchanged a brief glance at this, though Mabel was the first to run towards the pad, grabbing Dipper’s arm and pulling him after her.

“Is everybody ready?” Pearl asked, grinning down at the excited kids, who both nodded eagerly. Despite her earlier reservations, the white Gem had seemed to come around to the idea of the twins accompanying them on this mission. After all, it wasn’t going to be dangerous, so what was the harm in letting them tag along? “Then keep your arms and legs inside the warp stream and… here we go!”

Dipper and Mabel gasped in awed wonder as the world lit up around them and the Gems. The ground ceased to exist underneath their feet as the temple disappeared into bluish glow surrounding them on all sides. It didn’t take long for the twins to realize that as much as they were apparently floating, they were also rising up alongside the Gems as they sped through the warp stream, where time itself seemed to be nonexistent. Mabel laughed as she let herself float a little bit higher, performing a free flip in midair for fun.

“Mabel, please be careful!” Pearl urged, pulling the girl back down to their level. “If you keep fooling around like that, you could easily fall out of the stream!”

“What’s out there?” Dipper asked, straining his eyes to try and look past the pillar of light encompassing them.

“A whole lot of nothing,” Garnet remarked vaguely, adjusting her shades.

No more than a few seconds later, the group arrived at their intended destination, landing squarely on another warp pad as the light cleared to reveal their surroundings. “And here we are!” Pearl announced boldly. “Rose’s personal garden!”

“Whoa…” both twins muttered in awed unison as they surveyed the area. Despite its name, the place looked like anything but a garden. Instead of being lush and thriving, the local vegetation was choked with thistles and brambles, all of which congregated to a massive cluster of the encroaching plants not too far away from the warp pad. Overall, the garden had a forlorn, lonely atmosphere to it, as though it had been abandoned and untouched for years on end, which, considering Rose’s absence, it probably had.

Pearl hardly seemed to notice this at first however, as her and Garnet stepped off the warp pad, the twins following not too far behind. “Oh, I remember how much Rose used to love this place…” she said with a nostalgic smile. “And of course, at the center of the garden is Rose’s fountain, overflowing with her healing, lacrimal essence!”

“I don’t see it,” Garnet pointed out, putting her hands on her hips as she glanced around.

“Wha-” Pearl gasped in alarm as she noticed the collection of tightly-knit brambles before them, completely enveloping the majority of the garden. “H-how did this happen?!”

“So is the fountain in the middle of all those giant thorns?” Mabel asked with a frown.

“Probably,” Garnet replied calmly, even if Pearl was nowhere near that state.

“N-now, now!” the white Gem exclaimed, clinging tightly onto Garnet’s arm for emotional support as she steadily began to panic. “Let’s keep it together! Our memories of Rose can’t be tainted by some overgrown brambles! Look at them,” she scowled harshly down at the imposing
vines. “They’re a mess without her guidance! Directionless, pathetic, clinging things. It’s going to be ok, Garnet!”

The Gem leader simply shrugged, clearly not as concerned about their predicament as Pearl was. “Sure,” she said simply.

“Y-you really think so?” Pearl asked, her anxiety getting the better of her. “Well, then, let’s find a path! It’s what Rose would have wanted us to do, after all!”

“Is Pearl… ok?” Dipper asked Garnet with concern as the white Gem forged on ahead.

“Pearl gets a little… emotional about anything concerning Rose Quartz…” Garnet said, frowning at the white Gem as she tore her spear through the vines in a passionate rage. “But she’ll be fine.”

“Healing tears… go!” Steven exclaimed, standing over Amethyst as he tried his best to force tears to come. The purple Gem herself let out a bored sigh as she lay sprawled on the shack’s couch, still seemingly not too worried about her current condition as she watched the young Gem’s earnest efforts.

“Nod’t ecrof ti, nam! Uoy’ll teg a pmarc ro gnihtemos,” Amethyst commented with an amused smirk.

“I don’t know what you said, but don’t worry,” Steven reassured with determination. “All I need to do is tear up a little, and your gem will be as good as new. Then, Garnet and Pearl will come back and see that I saved the day! It’ll be awesome!”

“Revetahw uoy yas, Rm. Cigam-Relaeh,” the purple Gem grinned, rolling her eyes.

“Yo, dude, how’s it going?” Soos asked as he entered the den with Stan and Wendy following not too far behind. “Are your magical fairy tears working yet?”

“No… not yet…” Steven frowned. “And they’re not fairy tears. Just Gem tears.”

“Oh, well that’s what Mr. Pines called them,” the handyman shrugged.

“That’s ’cause they’re something out of a fairytale,” Stan remarked dryly. “You’re wasting your time, kid. There’s no such thing as ‘healing tears’, or whatever it is.”

“Yes, there is!” Steven protested devoutly. “My mom had them!”

“Listen, kid,” Stan began caustically. “Back when she was around, me and your mom were never on good terms, but I’ve known her and the Gems for years and for all that time, I never heard anything about healing tears.”

“But Mr. Pines, don’t you just argue with the Gems all the time?” Soos asked, not entirely sure of why the con man would have learned of such a thing considering his past with the Gems.

“That’s beside the point,” Stan said, crossing his arms. “The point is it’s all a huge sham that Garnet and Pearl told you about just to make you feel better. Like how I ate all the cookies Mabel made and I told her I would buy her the stuff to make more when I really have no intentions of doing so. Or when I tell Dipper that he won’t have such a bad time during puberty when he’ll probably hate every awkward second of it.”
“Pfft, don’t listen to Stan,” Wendy scoffed to Steven, her hands on her hips. “He’s just salty because he had to close the shack early with you guys being here and everything.”

“That’s not why I closed it!” Stan countered crossly. “Business was slow today anyway and, uh… I wanted to clean the register tills out! Yeah…”

Wendy rolled her eyes at her boss’s usual surly ways before turning back to the young Gem with an encouraging smile. “Well, even if he doesn’t think so, I think you can do this, Steven.”

“Me too, dude!” Soos wholeheartedly agreed.

“Og Maet Nevets! Ma I thgir?” Amethyst cheered jokingly.

“Thanks, you guys,” Steven said with a bashful blush. “Every bit of encouragement helps. Now if I could just make myself cry…”

“Now that you mention it, that’s such a weird way to heal someone,” Stan complained coldly, though it was somewhat apparent this was just a facade. “I mean, who actually cries when someone else gets hurt? If Rose had been smart, she would have just bottled up her pansy tears and sold them to gullible saps like some sort of miracle elixir.” The conman paused immediately after he said this, his eyes growing wide at the idea of making money. “You know what? I’ll be right back. I’m gonna go get some bottles in case this actually works out…”

As the con man took his leave, Soos and Wendy stood near the couch alongside Steven so they could get a better look at the damage to Amethyst’s gem for themselves.

“Yikes…” Wendy remarked with a frown upon seeing the sizable crack. “That does not look good. Does it hurt or anything?” she asked Amethyst.

“He, ton yllaer. Ti tsuj selgnit a elttil. Sselnu I evom a elohw tol, neht ti... adnik struh. A elttl,” Amethyst explained in her scrambled language.

“Uh… I have no idea what you just said, dude,” Wendy said in absolute confusion.

“So like, is there a time limit on how long it takes until the whole thing breaks or…?” Soos trailed off awkwardly, not sure how to finish the question.

“I don’t think so…” Steven frowned. “But Garnet and Pearl made it seem like it would be a big deal if it got any worse…”

“Ho, tahw od yeht wonk?” Amethyst commented sarcastically, before her eyes got wide with a sudden idea. “Nevets! Nevets!” she exclaimed loudly, tugging on the young Gem’s shirt with excitement.

“Um… are you trying to say my name?” Steven asked, raising an eyebrow.

The purple Gem nodded vigorously as she delved into her plan with as much clarity as she could. Which really wasn’t much clarity at all thanks to her backward speech. “Fi ruoy ydob nac't yrc no sti nwo, uoy'ev attog ekam ti!” she exclaimed, only to get a blank stare from the group gathered around her. To demonstrate what she was trying to say, Amethyst lifted her hand and kicky slapped it across her own face, ignoring the pain as she drug her finger down her face to pretend she was crying.

“Oh, is this charades?” Soos asked with a grin. “Hm… ok… first word. Uh… funeral?”
“That’s… probably not what she was aiming for, Soos,” Wendy remarked, crossing her arms.

“Wait!” Steven exclaimed with a gasp of realization. “I get it! Pain! Pain can make one cry.”

Amethyst nodded once more, a proud grin on her face. At the same time, the young Gem glanced around the den furtively, his brow knitted in tight focus. “Let’s see… where is pain…?”

“Whoa, dude, you’re not actually going to force yourself to cry by hurting yourself, are you?” Wendy asked with sudden concern.

“I figure it’s worth it if it can help save Amethyst,” Steven shrugged as he hurried to the kitchen. “And I’m not going to do anything too bad. Just enough to bring the tears on. Hey, Soos, do you mind reaching up on this shelf and grabbing a plate for me so I can break it and step on the glass?”

“Sure thing, dude,” Soos amicably replied, though Wendy was quick to leap in with disagreement with this idea.

“O-ok there,” the cashier rushed into the kitchen to stand between Steven and the plate cabinet. “Maybe we should come up with another idea. Preferably one that involves less glass.”

“What was that?” Soos asked as he handed the young Gem another plate that had been sitting on the table instead. “We’re doing something else?”

“You, guys, wait—” Wendy rationally tried to stop Steven, but she was ultimately too late as he happily slammed the plate onto the floor. What the young Gem hadn’t expected, however, was the resulting shower of broken glass, as well as his own hesitance. Instead of freely stepping onto the remains of the plate in his bare feet, he stumbled back on a knee-jerk reaction, accidently bumping into the dish cabinet behind him. Amethyst darted straight up from her spot on the couch, letting out a gasp as she noticed the plates begin to wobble as though they were going to fall right on the young Gem. Completely forgetting about her damaged gem, she leaped off the couch, ramming into Steven and knocking him out of the way just as several plates fell off the shelf and shattered on the floor.

“That was too close…” Wendy said, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Are you dudes ok?” Soos asked Steven and Amethyst with apt concern.

“I’m fine!” the young Gem replied as his mentor slowly slid off him to lie on the floor. “And Amethyst is—” Steven gasped in shock as he noticed that the crack in her gem had grown quite a bit, cleaving into its damaged surface even further. “Oh man! You fell right on your gem!”

“N-nod't yrrow ro gnihtyna… M'i-i doog,” the purple Gem groaned with a weak smile as she let out a small cough. At this, however, her body suddenly seemed to glitch out randomly, her physical form unexpectedly shifting as her head swapped places with her right foot. Amethyst let out a frustrated growl at this change, knowing that a cracked Gem had little to no control over things like this.

“Dude, that would be freaky awesome if it wasn’t so sad,” Soos said with sincere sympathy.

“What’s with all the racket in here?!” Stan shouted as he stormed into the kitchen, gasping in alarm as he noticed the broken plates scattered on the floor. “And what happened to my plates?!”

“Oh… we were trying to get me to cry by making me feel pain and, well—it’s a long story…” Steven frowned guilty, pulling Amethyst up as much as he could without irritating her condition any further.
“Somehow I knew something like this would happen,” Stan sighed in exasperation, rubbing his temples as he glanced over at the disfigured purple Gem. “Sheesh, Amethyst, you’re looking worse than usual.”

“On esrow naht uoy, Nats,” Amethyst deadpanned, though it lacked her usual verve.

“Quick, everyone! Help me get her back onto the couch!” Steven urged the others. Soos and Wendy were quick to comply, and though Stan was a bit more hesitant, he eventually helped too as they all hoisted the injured purple Gem back onto the safety of the couch. “Now don’t move, Amethyst,” the young Gem commanded firmly, a new idea coming to him as he remembered the journal that he had tucked away in the attic for safekeeping. “Can you guys watch her for a minute?” he asked the others earnestly.

“Why? Where are you going?” Wendy asked, raising an eyebrow in confusion.

“I… I-uh…” Steven bit his lip anxiously, remembering the promise he had made to Dipper. “I’m just gonna run to the bathroom and see if splashing hot water in my eyes will make me cry!” he lied hurriedly, already running up the steps. “Be back in a second!”

Stan shook his head as he watched the young Gem leave. “I’ll never understand that kid.”

Dipper and Mabel followed Garnet and Pearl closely, but not too closely, as they rounded the perimeter of the garden, trying to find a way through the mess of brambles to access the fountain. All the while, the white Gem continued to slip into regular bouts of panic and dramatic woe of the garden’s current disastrous state, and each time, the Gem leader would simply calm her and reassure her that everything would be alright. Throughout much of this, the twins simply observed, both of them still rather amazed that they were on an actual, legitimate Gem mission in the first place. Yet even if this was their first Gem mission, Dipper was determined to make sure that it wouldn’t be their last and only.

“Mabel, listen,” Dipper began, grabbing his sister’s arm as he slowed his pace to the Gems wouldn’t overhear. “I’ve been thinking…”

“Something you do way too much,” Mabel noted with a teasing smirk.

“I’m serious,” Dipper said with an exasperated groan. “And you should be too. We’re lucky to even be on this mission at all. Which is why we need to prove to Garnet and Pearl that we can actually help and that we’re not just tagging along like this is some sort of field trip.”

“I get what you’re sayin’, bro-bro,” Mabel winked slyly. “We gotta kick it into overdrive!”

“Um, maybe let’s not do that,” Dipper quickly said, pulling Mabel back before she could eagerly catch up with the Gems.

“What? But you just said-”

“I know what I said. But if we ever want the Gems to take either of us seriously, then we have to take this seriously. And… well, uh… you can sometimes get kind of… over excited, Mabel…”

Mabel let out an appalled gasp at this, clearly upset. “Dipper! I can’t believe you’d even accuse me of something like that! Who do you know that’s more serious than I am?”
“Literally everyone,” Dipper remarked plainly.

“Well, I take offense to that!” Mabel exclaimed crossly. “I guess I’ll just have to prove to you and the Gems that I’m the most serious adventurer there is!”

“Good!” Dipper agreed with a relieved smile. “That’s trying to tell you! Now that we’re on the same page, let’s catch up with—” He paused briefly however, stopping along with Mabel as he glanced around the area to find that the Gems were nowhere in sight. “Huh? Where are Garnet and Pearl?”

“Ha! Now look who’s not taking things seriously!” Mabel remarked matter-of-factly. “While you were fussing at me, you got us separated from the Gems! Nice going, ‘Mr. Thinker’.”

“B-but there were just in front of us a second ago!” Dipper protested, not wanting to admit that he hadn’t been paying attention to where they were going. “Did they find a path inside or something?”

“Guess there’s only one way to find out!” Mabel said as she zealously headed towards the cluster of brambles. “We’ll just have to find our own way in ourselves!”

“Mabel, wait!” Dipper called warningly as Mabel reached out to brush the overgrown vines aside, only for them to reach out to her instead. Both twins gasped in alarm as the nearest set of brambles curled up on its own accord before they quickly spiraled down and clasped tightly around Mabel’s arm. The girl let out a cry of panicked pain as the thorns tore through the sleeve of her sweater and dug into her arm, cutting in deeper every time she tried to wiggle herself free from them.

“Mabel!” Dipper gaped fearfully, not hesitating to run to his sister’s aid. Yet even so, the bramble’s grip on Mabel was strong, and it refused to break even with both twins fiercely pulling against it. To make matters even worse, more vines snaked out from the thick collection and this time converging on Dipper as they wrapped securely around his torso. The girl let out a cry of panicked pain as the thorns tore through the sleeve of her sweater and dug into her arm, cutting in deeper every time she tried to wiggle herself free from them.

“H-how do we get out of this stuff!?” Mabel struggled to exclaim, especially as the thistles drew dangerously close to her face.

“I-I… I don’t-” Dipper began to say, before a sudden idea came to him. One that could hopefully save them both. “Wait! Mabel, do you have your grappling hook with you!?”

“Uh, of course I do!” Mabel retorted, though her voice was strained from the heavy grip of the vines around her. “But I can’t reach it!”

“Where is it?” Dipper asked, hoping he could get a hold of it with his free hand, since both of Mabel’s were covered with brambles.

“It’s falling out of my sweater! Hurry!”

Dipper did so, straining against the vines dragging him away from Mabel as he reached towards the grappling hook that had halfway slipped out from underneath her sweater. It took some doing and quite a bit of struggling, but soon enough his fingers latched onto it, allowing him to get a good enough hold on it. Acting quickly, Dipper used the one of the sharp hooks to cut his other arm free from the vines, which he used to grab Mabel before he aimed the grappling hook at the mass of
brambles ahead. Even if he wasn’t sure his spur of the moment plan would work, he fired the hook and hoped that there was some small chance that, as it tore through the vines, it would somehow latch onto something concrete.

And by some stroke of luck it did. Neither twin had time to so much as even breathe as they both suddenly lurched forward, clinging onto each other for dear life as they broke free from the vines. They were able to do little but shield their faces as they plowed through wall upon wall of sharp brambles, which cut and scrapped them even more as they sped past them. The moment they broke through the last of the thorns and into a wide open space again, Dipper relinquished his tight grip on the grappling hook, allowing him and Mabel to finally stop and fall to the ground in absolute exhaustion.

“Ah! Headache!” Steven’s sudden cry of pain happened to interrupt the story at a rather suspenseful moment.

“Then give me back my glasses!” Connie exclaimed in frustration over how the tension of the tale had been broken.

The young Gem quickly nodded as he took the glasses off and handed them back to Connie. “So what happened next?” she asked, turning back to the twins. “Did you guys catch up with the Gems? And Steven, what happened back at the shack?”

“Yeah Steven, why don’t you take over for a while?” Dipper suggested.

“Tell her what you told us about the journal!” Mabel exclaimed before rushing a whisper to Connie. “Spoiler alert: it’ll make you cry.”

“Mm…” the young Gem groaned, still not enthusiastic about telling his side of things. “Ok, I guess… So I was up in the attic, looking in the journal to see if I could find anything about my mom’s healing tears…”

“Ok, let’s see…” Steven said to himself as he began leafing through the thick book in search of answers. “Where would the part about healing tears be…? In the ghost section? Nah… Invisible wizard? Cool, but no… Oh, I know! It’d be in the part about the Gems!”

Excited over his new lead, the young Gem sped through countless pages until he finally stopped on the section that contained information about the Crystal Gems. As curious as he was to read every word written concerning his guardians, he brushed past them, knowing he had a job to do. Still, Steven couldn’t help but think about how wary Dipper had been about the possibility of the Gems learning about the journal. Certainly, the young Gem figured, they already knew about it if they were written about in it. Didn’t they?

Shaking such distracting thoughts out of his mind, Steven continued on through the journal, instantly stopping the moment he spotted the page about Rose Quartz. For a moment, he paused as he stared at the detailed drawing of his mother on the crinkled brown page in front of him, taking in the sight of her as he did every time he saw a new visage of her. She was presented just as beautifully as she always was, her perfect curls and graceful gown both immaculate and flawless as her eyes were shut and her face set in a peaceful, benevolent expression.
Steven frowned as he looked intently at the drawing, suddenly feeling quite inadequate by comparison. Everything he had ever heard about Rose Quartz gave him the impression that she was perfect; more than perfect really. She was incredible, intelligent, brave, compassionate, strong, magical, legendary, and everything in between. Everything that Steven knew he wasn’t.

Still, the young Gem wanted to be like her though. He wanted to live up to her greatness and not just live in her shadow. The Gems expected it of him and he expected it of himself. And he knew that if his mother was still around, she would likely expect it of him too. The only problem was, he wasn’t sure if he could even begin to try.

Steven didn’t even notice the warmth that was starting to well up behind his eyes until he remembered what he was supposed to be doing. And as he remembered that getting himself to cry was a large part of that, he gasped as he jumped to his feet, bouncing up and down excitedly. “Oh, oh! I’m getting all emotional!” he exclaimed, hoping that he wouldn’t lose it. “I think its happening! I can feel it!”

Once more, the young Gem began straining, desperately trying to force his emotions to pour forth through his tears. Despite his best efforts, however, he was still left with little results aside from exhaustion and disappointment. “Aw, come on! I had it!” he exclaimed in frustration, flopping down onto the floor beside the journal. “There’s gotta be something in here that can tell me how to do this! Anything!”

Determined now than ever, Steven skimmed over Rose’s page, disregarding any information that didn’t concern healing. When he did finally get to a small passage subtitled “healing tears”, he held his breath in anticipation for a moment before reading it aloud, throwing his voice to sound academic for added effect.

“After an accidental and particularly nasty run in with a hornet’s nest, I learned of another one of Rose’s unique abilities, perhaps her most miraculous one yet. As it turns out, she has healing powers! Her tears are capable of completely treating both minor and major physical injuries, from broken bones, to heavy wounds, to even the bothersome sinus headaches I get during allergy season. Interestingly enough, Rose’s tears work not only on humans, but on Gems too. At least that’s what Amethyst says, and considering how reckless she often is, I’m inclined to believe her.”

“Yeah, yeah, I already know all this stuff!” Steven huffed in annoyance. “Tell me how they work!”

“How Rose’s healing tears work:”

“Yes!” the young Gem cheered upon seeing the very next line, though his smile quickly fell when he tried to read it.

“Rg dlfl hvn zh gslfts Ilhv’h svzrmt gvzih nzmruvhg uiln svi Tvn, gslfts lu xlfihv, gsvb klf uiln svi vbh (zh gvzih hsflw vl). Dsr ov R’n mlg xlnkovgvob hfv ru R fnwmwlgzmw rg, svi vckoznzgrlm lu gsvn nkorkvh gszg gsvb ziv ufvovw yb rmgvmhv vnlgrlmh, hfxs zh tiru li xlnkzhrlm. Ksbhrxzo kzrm izivob vevi yirmth gsvn zylfg, yfg gsvm ztrm, Ilhv ziwob vevi vckvirmxvh ksbhrxzo kzrm xlnhrwvirmt sld hgilmt zmw wfiyov hsv rh. R hfkklhv R’oo mww gl vl ufjgsvi ihvixzis rm gsv ufjgiv gl ovzim gsv vczxg hxrvmxv ysvrmw gsrh ksvmlnvrlm. Yfg uli mld, R szev gl zwnrg R’n evib tizgyufo uli Ilhv’h zrw. Ru mlg uli svi, R’w yv hfuuvirmt uiln kzrmufo slimv hgrmth uli dvph!”

“Seriously!?” Steven exclaimed in frustration. “Why is it all in code?! I can’t understand it! I don’t understand anything!”

Discouraged, the young Gem pushed the journal away from him out of anger, bitterly glancing
away from it as he stood up and fumed. “This should be easy! Why is it so hard!?” he groaned in exasperation. “Why… why can’t I cry!?”

Steven paused as his angry shout bounced off the attic ceiling, leaving only an empty, bitter silence in its place. Even so, the young Gem’s vexation soon ebbed away into sad resignation as he slowly reclaimed the journal, lying down on the ground beside it. Once again, he looked to Rose’s image in the old book, letting out a long sigh as he reached over and gingerly put his hand on it.

“It’s just… I mean…” he began hesitantly, speaking to the image of his mother as though she could really hear him. “I don’t know how to feel about you, but everyone else does. And they’re always talking about how great you were and how much they miss you… I… I wish I could have met you… Then I could be sad and cry healing tears… like you…”

Connie’s sudden sniffle caught Steven off guard as he recounted this rather sad part of the story. As the young Gem glanced up, he was surprised to all three members of his audience were on the verge of tears themselves. He should have figured this would happen considering how genuinely sad he had been during that moment himself.

“Are… are you guys ok?” the young Gem asked with concern.

Connie was the first to nod, still heavily invested as she took a sip from her juice box, even despite her pressing tears. “Keep going.”

“Uh… maybe you guys should pick it up for now…” Steven said to Dipper and Mabel, hoping they could lighten things up.

“Huh?” Dipper blinked, having not expected the story to switch back to them at such a tearjerking juncture. “Oh, um… sure, Steven. Uh, where were we…?”

Mabel sniffled, drying her damp eyes as picked things up, though will a bit less of her usual verve. “We… we had just gotten out of the vines and we were all cut up from them, sorta like Grunkle Stan’s face whenever he tries shaving…”

For a moment or two, the twins simply lay on the ground in the aftermath of the vines’ vicious attack, simply trying to recover from the traumatic near-death experience. They didn’t even bother to get up and see if the bristles were still after them, but after a moment of relaxed, almost peaceful stillness, they realized that the onslaught was over. For now.

“Are… are you ok?” Dipper finally asked breathlessly, noticing that his vest had been claimed by the vines as they were dragged through them, though somehow his hat remained intact.

“Yeah… I think so…” Mabel sat up, cringing at the many lightly-bleeding cuts her arms and legs now sported, as well as the countless holes torn in her sweater.

“Good,” Dipper said with relief, though it soon turned to frustration. “Mabel, what were you thinking?! Those vines could have killed us!”

“Hey, how was I supposed to know they were alive?” Mabel retorted defensively as she rose to stand. “And you gotta admit; my grappling hook saved the day. Told you it’d bail us out someday.”

“Ugh, whatever,” Dipper rolled his eyes as he also stood, brushing himself off. “Where are we
anyway?”

The twins paused as they glanced around for a moment, noticing walls upon walls of brambles surrounding them on all sides. It was clear they were inside of the dome of vines, a fact that could be told from how dark everything was since the only light was curtsey of a single beam of natural sunlight coming in from above. But what that light was falling upon was by far the most interesting aspect of the clearing.

“Wait…” Dipper began, taking a step closer to the familiar looking statue. “Is that-”

“It is! It has to be!” Mabel gasped in sudden excitement, already running towards it. “We found the fountain!”

Rose’s fountain was undeniably hers, thanks to the massive stone statue of the pink Gem at its center, her eyes shut and her palms opened up towards the sky as she stood upon a raised pedestal. Four other, smaller visages of Rose sat on each of the four corners of the fountain, all of them looking content and relaxed. Yet aside from its beauty, there was one disconcerting fact about the fountain that the twins noticed above all else: nothing was flowing from it.

No more than a second after this realization, both Dipper and Mabel were startled by a sudden boom, followed by a large boulder crashing into the clearing through its opposite end. The rock had seemingly come out of nowhere, though its source soon became clear as Pearl’s anxious voice became apparent. “We probably could have gotten in without hurdling a giant rock into Rose’s most precious sanctuary,” the white Gem sad with a nervous chuckle, glancing back at Garnet as she stepped through the whole the rock had made. “But if you’re ok with it, I’m fine too!”

“Garnet! Pearl!” the twins exclaimed in relieved unison as they rushed towards the Gems, grateful for the reunion.

“Dipper! Mabel!” Pearl gasped with immense concern as she met the twins halfway. Her distressed emotional state was clear as she wrapped both twins into a tight, secure hug while fretting over their many minor injuries. “We’ve been searching all over for you two! Just look at you! What on earth happened?”

“The vines came alive and attacked us,” Mabel said as though it was the plainest thing to ever happen.

“But…” Dipper quickly cut in before Pearl could even begin to worry. “We beat them back. All by ourselves. And we even found the fountain!”

“You sure did. Good job, both of you,” Garnet said with a small smile as she joined the group. Her smile soon faded, however, as she glanced towards the fountain itself. “This isn’t right…”

Everyone followed the Gem leader as they approached the fountain, giving them a better view over its walled side and into its deep, empty bowl. “The fountain isn’t running,” Garnet reported, as stoically as ever.

“W-what?!” Pearl gasped in alarm. “What’s wrong with it?!”

“I’m not sure…” the Gem leader replied thoughtfully.

“Maybe the power’s out?” Mabel asked jokingly.

“Or maybe it’s just clogged somewhere,” Dipper suggested much more rationally.
“We’ll go find out,” Garnet said, already looking back to the wall of brambles. “You two stay here.”

“Garnet, a-are you sure that’s such a good idea?” Pearl asked hesitantly, glancing at the twins with concern. “Last time we left them alone, the kids got hurt. We wouldn’t want that to happen again.”

“But Pearl, we’re fine,” Dipper protested, knowing the last things he wanted the Gems to see them as on this mission was a burden.

“Yeah! These little cuts hardly hurt at all! See?” Mabel asked, proving her point by giving her brother a light smack on the arm.

“Ow! Mabel!” Dipper glared at his sister, knowing that such a strike would have hurt even with the additional sting from his cuts.

“Point is, maybe we could find a way to fix the fountain from here in case you guys don’t find one,” Mabel suggested with a pleading smile.

“I’m still not sure this is such a good idea…” Pearl said with a fretful frown, though Garnet was quick to ease her nerves.

“They’ll be fine,” the Gem leader reassured calmly as she placed a hand on her teammate’s shoulder. “Now, let’s go.”

Pearl wanted to protest further, but she sighed in relent as her and Garnet began to head in the opposite direction. “Be careful, you two!” she called back to the twins as they disappeared back into the cluster of vines. “And stay away from the brambles this time!”

“You don’t have to tell us twice!” Dipper called back with a hint of sarcasm in his tone.

“Garnet, are you really sure about this?” Pearl asked the Gem leader as soon as they were out of the twins’ earshot.

Garnet nodded stoically, though she knew that the white Gem needed more affirmation than that. “They wanted to come with us so they could prove themselves to us. We might as well give them that chance.”

“But… but they’re human…” the white Gem said apprehensively.

“Pearl, you’ve been on this planet for hundreds of years,” Garnet replied simply as they forged on ahead. “You should know not to underestimate humans by now.”

Meanwhile, Dipper and Mabel had unanimously agreed that the best approach to trying to find out what was wrong with the fountain would be to inspect it from all angles. They split up to scrupulously examine the structure from the outside by meandering around it. Indeed, the fountain seemed to be as dry as a bone, its deep bowl showing signs that it hadn’t been full in a very long time. Still, both twins figured that there had to be some way to get it working again, one that they were equally determined to discover.

“Have you found anything yet?” Dipper called to Mabel from the other side of the fountain.

“Not yet!” she answered, poking her head up over the fountain wall.

“You’d think there’d be like a switch or a lever or something…” Dipper pondered with a frown.
“Maybe the tiny statues of Rose have something to do with it,” Mabel suggested with a shrug, glancing towards one of the smaller statues.

“Oh my gosh, Mabel! That’s actually a great idea!” Dipper exclaimed with a smile, leaping on this newfound lead immediately.

“Like I keep telling you, bro-bro, you’re not the only one who comes up with good plans,” Mabel said with a proud smirk as she followed her brother to the nearest statue. While much smaller than the one in the center, the visage of Rose was still roughly life-sized, dwarfing both twins by comparison. The statue’s hands were folded and covered with thick moss, occasionally dotted by small pink flowers as Rose’s expression was presented as calm and contemplative as usual.

“Hm…” Dipper mused, a hand to his chin as he took this setup in.

“Whatcha thinkin’, Dippin-Dots?” Mabel asked as she stood alongside him, her hands on her hips. “I’m thinking that maybe the moss on her hands might be covering up some way to activate the fountain…”

“Oh, sort of like a haunted house sort of deal… Well let’s get up there and brush that stuff off then!”

“Uh, that might not be the best idea considering what happened at the convenience store the other week…” Dipper said with clear hesitance, remembering the perilous situation concerning the moss well.

“Hey, we’ve already dealt with killer vines today,” Mabel said as she began scaling up the statue. “Deadly moss couldn’t be any worse than that.”

Knowing that there would be no dissuading his sister, Dipper begrudgingly joined her in climbing up the statue on the other side. Fortunately for both of them, this moss didn’t seem to be the same kind as what had been on the hill, as it didn’t move and showed no signs of doing so. Still, as they worked together to brush the moss off, they were both equally dismayed to find that the statue’s hands were glaringly empty.

“Well, I guess that was a waste of time,” Dipper deadpanned in disappointment.

“Eh, it’s no biggie,” Mabel said with an encouraging grin. “We still have three more statues to try. And if all else fails, then maybe the big one will get it started.”

“It’s worth a try at least,” Dipper sighed, knowing this could take a while. He paused before trying to dismount the statue however, upon catching onto the sound of a sudden low rumbling coming from nearby. “Do you hear that?”

Before Mabel could respond, a sudden crash rattled the entire fountain, nearly knocking both twins off of the statue. Panicked, they glanced down towards its source, the bowl of the fountain, from which masses of brambles were quickly starting to dart towards them.

“Not again!” Mabel exclaimed, her eyes wide with renewed fear.

“Quick! Get off the statue!” Dipper warned, more than ready to jump the small distance to the ground. However, they were both a moment too slow as the vines caught up with them, latching onto their wrists and ankles with a vengeance before ripping them off the statue and dragging them down the side of the steep bowl. Somehow, they avoided any major injuries during this, save for even more cuts and bruises, but they knew they wouldn’t be that lucky for too much longer,
especially as it seemed the vines were ready to finish the job.

Neither twin had much time to orient themselves as they landed at the bottom of the fountain, though fortunately the vines unsnaked themselves from around their limbs as soon as they did. But that was hardly any consolation now that they were able to see the writhing mass of brambles only a few feet away from them at them, as well as the fact that they had little chance of escaping them.

“I don’t understand! Why are they acting like this?!?” Dipper asked in alarm as him and Mabel stood and pressed their backs into the wall of the fountain.

“Maybe they’re mad about us being here! Like the convenience store moss was!” Mabel exclaimed, gasping as the separate vines began to coil together into one large one.

“Ugh, you know for as amazing as Rose apparently was, her plants all seem to be crazy and murderous for some reason!” Dipper groaned in exasperation.

“What are we gonna do!?” Mabel asked in clear desperation as the vines curled up, preparing their final assault.

“I… I, uh…” Dipper began, his heart pounding a mile a minute as the situation got worse by the second. He had assumed from the beginning that there might be some level of danger when it came to a Gem mission, but something as deadly as this was more than he had bargained for. “I don’t know!”

“What do you mean you don’t know!?” Mabel retorted, glancing at her brother with wide eyes. “You always have a plan or something to get us out of stuff like this! So come up with one!”

“It’s not that easy, Mabel! In case you haven’t noticed, there’s no way out of here!”

“Then we need the Gems’ help!”

“Well, duh, but who knows where they are!?”

“So… what you’re saying is…?” Mabel trailed off upon noticing her brother’s expression of defeat.

“I… I don’t have a plan this time…” Dipper hesitantly admitted, glancing away in saddened resignation. “I’m sorry, Mabel. And I’m sorry for saying you aren’t serious earlier. I mean, we never would have made it this far without your grappling hook.”

“That’s it!” Mabel gasped with newfound excitement, already reaching into her sweater for the hook. “Looks like you came up with a plan to save our butts after all, bro-bro!”

“Mabel, you won’t be able to hold those vines off forever with that thing!” Dipper exclaimed, knowing this plan would stall the inevitable at best.

“I don’t need to,” Mabel gave her brother a sly wink, already taking aim upwards. “I just need to get us out of here.”

Just as the vines began to spiral towards the twins, Mabel hurriedly grabbed Dipper and fired the grappling hook, letting it soar up towards the main statue of Rose until it latched onto one of her open hands. They immediately zoomed upwards, flying out of the range of the vines and up towards the statue. Still, the brambles didn’t relent as they lurch aggressively after the twins, seeming to defy gravity as they chased them on their brief ascent out of the fountain. The twins gasped in shared horror as they noticed this, especially as they stopped in midair, hanging only by a
threat off of the statue’s hand as the brambles still headed ever upwards at them.

“I-I wasn’t expecting that!” Mabel exclaimed fearfully, noticing as Dipper’s grip on her tightened quite a bit.

“Look!” he exclaimed in sudden alarm, glancing up at the hand they were hanging from. As if matters couldn’t get any worse, the hand was starting to crumble from the weight they were putting upon it, and it only intensified as the statue began to inexplicably quake. Certainly, if the hand gave way, then they would instantly fall back into the violent horde of vines, from which there would be no escape at all this time.

And yet, right as the hand broke off and the twins were sent plunging back towards the fountain, something that was nothing less than a miracle happened.

Out of nowhere, a massive surge of water burst out from the statue’s eyes, raining down upon not only the twins, but upon the vines below as well. The moment the sparkling, pink tinged water poured upon them, the brambles instantly retreated, washing away into nothingness as the bowl of the fountain was almost immediately filled to the point of overflowing. The twins splashed into the now-deep water, giving them a smooth landing as they plunged into its warm, yet refreshing depths.

With the fountain reactivated, it was as though the entire garden received new life. As the healing waters calmly poured down from the statue’s eyes like tears, the walls of brambles bloomed away into an abundance of gentle pink flowers. The blossoms rained down upon the fountain peacefully, the water seeming to glisten in the open sunlight that was now available to it.

It took both Dipper and Mabel a moment to regather their bearings as they floated limply apart from each other in the fountain’s deep waters. The moment they happened to bump into each other was what brought them both back from their initial shock, prompting them to swim up to the surface to get some much needed air. As they broke the surface of the water, they both had to pause for a moment to take in the renewed beauty of the garden, even if it was slightly marred by the fact that the main statue was now missing a hand.

“AHHHH! Dipper! We did it!” Mabel squealed happily, giving her brother a joyous hug. “We got the fountain to work again!”

“Mabel, what are you talking about?” Dipper asked, struggling to stay afloat as Mabel’s overbearing hug nearly submerged him.

“We broke the hand! That must have unclogged the fountain!” Mabel laughed triumphantly.

“Wait… really?” Dipper asked, not sure if he entirely believed it, and yet the evidence seemed to be clear. “I… I guess we did! And look!” With a huge smile, he held his arm up out of the water so Mabel could see that it was clear of all of the countless cuts and scratches he had gotten during their battle against the vines. The girl gasped in amazement as she checked her own arms, only to see that her wounds had been cleanly healed as well.

“Wow! I guess this stuff really is magical healing water after all!” Mabel exclaimed in absolute elation.

“Oh thank goodness!” Pearl’s relieved voice suddenly caught the twin’s attention. They both turned towards one of the garden gates to see that the Gems had returned, standing over the fountain with their arms interlocked.
“Did you guys see what we did?” Mabel asked as her and Dipper swam to meet them at the edge of the fountain. “We figured out what was wrong, fixed it, and brought the fountain back to life!”

“And it was all thanks to Mabel’s grappling hook,” Dipper said, giving his sister a grateful smile.

“Don’t forget about that big brain of yours, bro-bro,” Mabel chuckled fondly.

Despite this touching moment between the twins, Garnet and Pearl exchanged a somewhat confused glance upon hearing this claim. “I’m pretty sure me and Garnet unplugging a clogged chamber was what brought the fountain back to life,” the white Gem informed with a semi-awkward smile.

“You don’t think us breaking the statue’s hand had a little to do with that?” Dipper asked with a frown.

“You broke the statue’s hand?!” Pearl gasped in newfound horror, but once more, Garnet calmed her down.

“You two may not have activated the fountain, but you still did a good job on the mission overall,” the Gem leader said with a soft smile.

“I don’t think we really did anything…” Mabel mused.

“You did what you were setting out to do all along,” Garnet said, reaching out her hands to help the twins out of the fountain. “You showed us that you both can hold your own on a mission.”

“So… the chances that you guys will bring us along on missions in the future are…?” Dipper asked hopefully.

“Quite likely,” Garnet said simply.

“Are you kids sure that you would want to go on a mission again?” Pearl asked with something of a coy smile. “It seems like you had a bit of an… ordeal on this one…”

“Are you kidding? Of course we wanna come on more missions!” Mabel exclaimed readily.

“Yeah! This was amazing! You know, aside from the whole nearly-dying on more than one occasion thing,” Dipper nodded in eager agreement.

“Well, if you say so,” Pearl laughed in amusement as Garnet bottled up some of the fountain’s precious water.

“We have what we came for,” the Gem leader said, leading the way back to the warp pad. “Let’s head back. Amethyst is counting on us.”

Steven was abruptly broken out of his contemplations over his mother by a sudden, shrill series of screams coming from downstairs. The young Gem quickly leapt to his feet, tucking the journal away somewhere safe as he rushed downstairs, already knowing that the screeching was coming from Amethyst.

“What’s going on?!” Steven asked with frightened concern as he ran into the den, only to find a sight that made him stop in his tracks.
“Uh, well… we kind of have a situation here, dude…” Soos said, nodding to the mess of purple limbs, stretched out thinly as they were strewn all over the den. Steven’s eyes widened as he tracked the disjointed limbs back to Amethyst, who, while being literally all over the place, still somehow had her head, which Stan was currently holding so it wouldn’t be lost amidst everything else.

“H-yeh, Nevets…” Amethyst spoke up, her voice relatively weak to match her tired expression. “S-detrats gniyrct tey? Esuac I dluoc esu a elttil pleh…”

“What happened to her?” Steven frowned anxiously as he stepped over the purple Gem’s various snake-like limbs.

“Why don’t you ask Stan?” Wendy remarked dryly.

The con man shot his employee an annoyed glare as the young Gem looked to him for answers. “First of all, I wanna say that this wasn’t my fault,” Stan began defensively. “I was just trying to fix Amethyst up using a little homemade remedy I picked up during my jewel smuggling days. Turns out using hot wax and a butter knife only ended up making things worse.”

“Oh man…” Steven frowned, steadily starting to panic. “Amethyst, where’s your gem?”

The purple Gem simply responded with a nod of her head towards the couch, where the majority of her body still rested, including her gem. Steven hurried over to it, noticing that the crack in it had grown quite a bit, easily making the situation even more frightening than it already was.

“Oh… oh no…” the young Gem murmured morosely, running a hand through his hair. “What am I going to do? I… I don’t think I can fix this…”

“Aw, c’mon, dude, don’t give up so easily,” Soos reassured, placing a hand on Steven’s shoulder. “You got this!”

“Y-you’re right,” Steven said with resolve, even if he still wasn’t so sure. “I can’t give up! I gotta do this! For Amethyst…”

As the young Gem continued to strain towards tears over Amethyst’s gem, Stan happened to take an apprehensive glance down at the purple Gem’s head in his hands, not as weirded out by this as he was admittedly worried. “You know, you can’t really give up either,” he said to Amethyst, making sure that none of the others could hear him. “F-for the kid’s sake, of course. Cause if anything happens to you, then he really will be crying.”

“Ti’s ton ekil I nac yllaer od hcum tuoba gnikcarc, Nats…” Amethyst sighed, glancing down to the floor. “Tub ti’s ecin ot wonk uoy yllautca od erac, neve fi uoy nod’t tca ekil ti.”

“Uh… well…” the conman looked away awkwardly as well, inferring what she had said based on the bittersweet grin she was sending him alone. “It’d be pretty boring of you to… ya know… kick the bucket, or whatever it is Gems do just from falling off a cliff. Especially considering all of the crazy messes we used to get ourselves into back in the day.”

“Heh, haey esoht erew eht syad…” Amethyst said with a small, bitter laugh. “Sseug won si sa doog a emit sa yna ot llet uoy… woh hcum I hsiw sgniht dluoc eb ekil taht niaga…”

“You know I can’t understand a word you’re saying, right?” Stan said with a small, rueful smile.

“Haey… I wonk.”
This exchange was abruptly interrupted by a loud, frustrated groan from Steven. “Ugh! I can’t do it!” he shouted, flopping down onto the couch beside the purple Gem’s body. “I can’t do anything right!”

Soos and Wendy exchanged an anxious glance upon hearing this, neither of them really sure how to comfort the despondent young Gem this time. Amethyst took notice of this as well, which was why she nodded her head towards Steven, silently telling Stan to carry her over to him. Steven cringed as he looked over at Amethyst’s face as the conman gently placed it into his lap, immeasurable guilt filling him as he was reminded that this was something he was powerless to stop.

“Amethyst, I’m so sorry…” the young Gem choked, not even thinking about how he was actually on the verge of tears this time. “I tried! I really did! But… I guess it wasn’t good enough… And now, I’m going to lose you, and it’s all my fault…”

Before the purple Gem could even respond to this, she glitched out once more, a sign that she was steadily growing weaker and weaker by the second. She let out a rough, coughing laugh as she wanly grinned up at Steven. “Hah, uoy c-care… about me…” she said quietly, her words slow and slurred, yet somehow understandable.

Steven let out a small, tearless sob as he heard this, instantly pulling as much of the purple Gem as he could into a tight, desperate hug. The others all watched on in melancholy, doleful silence, though they all suppressed a gasp of hope as they noticed the young Gem at last begin to tear up.

“Please let me be a magic healer…” Steven whispered softly, closing his eyes as he let his pressing tears fall. The first tear struck Amethyst’s gem squarely, landing right on the imposing crack. The young Gem gasped as he opened his eyes, a brief smile crossing his face as he waited for the stone to seal itself up again. And yet, as a second passed, and then another, and then another, nothing changed at all. The gem was still as cracked as ever.

“Oh, come on!” Steven exclaimed in distressed frustration as the others groaned out of the suspense of the moment being broken.

No more than a second later, the front door of the shack burst open, the twins rushing in with Garnet and Pearl not too far behind. “We’re back!” Dipper announced with a satisfied grin.

“And we got healing tears!” Mabel proclaimed brightly, waving the bottle of fountain water Garnet had given her.

“At least somebody has them…” Steven remarked bitterly under his breath.

“Yeesh, you two look like you’ve been through the ringer,” Stan commented as he took in the sight of his grand nibblings, noticing how tattered their clothes were, even if they somehow sported no apparent injuries. “What happened?”

“It’s a long story…” Dipper said with a somewhat tired sigh.

“My goodness! Look at how much bigger the crack got!” Pearl exclaimed as she hovered over Amethyst fretfully. “What were you doing all this time?!”

“I d-ndid't od n-gnihton…” Amethyst replied, her voice still quite weak.

“Well, Amethyst, I hope you’re ready for some healing magic, ‘cause we’re about to bring it!” Mabel exclaimed, holding the bottle of healing water high over the purple gem.
“Mabel, wait!” Dipper quickly stopped her before she could pour the precious water. “Be careful with that stuff!”

“Are you kidding? I’m being super careful!” Mabel scoffed as she shook the bottle up for good measure.

“Just let me do it,” Dipper said, rolling his eyes in exasperation as he reached for the bottle.

“No way! I wanna do it!” Mabel protested, holding the bottle out of his range. The twins continued to argue as they both grappled for the bottle a bit, until it inevitably slipped out of their hands. Everyone gasped in horror as the bottle fell, but fortunately before it hit the ground, Garnet managed to smoothly catch it in the nick of time.

“Careful,” the Gem leader advised before handing the bottle off to Steven instead. The young Gem frowned as he examined the pale pink liquid inside, noticing how it shimmered slightly from the magic it contained. He knew that even holding the bottle of his mother’s healing tears was made even more disheartening by the fact that he couldn’t produce them himself, even if he had tried as hard as he could. Still, he put such thoughts aside for the moment as he slowly poured the water directly onto Amethyst’s gem. Upon mere content with the cracked stone, the water seemed to take on a radiant glow, which it transferred onto the gem itself as it instantaneously closed the wide crevice up and smoothed it over until not a sign of it remained. The moment her gem was healed, Amethyst’s scattered body immediately pulled itself together, and elated over her renewed condition, the purple Gem leaped off the couch, letting out a laugh of triumph.

“Alright!” she cheered happily, pulling Steven into a close hug. “Look at this guy, saving my life and junk!”

“Come on, Amethyst,” Steven said with an embarrassed blush. “You know it wasn’t really me.”

“Hey, did you guys bring back any more of that healing water?” Stan asked Garnet and Pearl. “Cause I think we could capitalize big time on something like this. And by we, I of course mean me.”

“Aw, don’t be so down, Steven,” Wendy said with a reassuring smile. “At least you finally managed to get yourself to cry. That’s gotta count for something, right?”

“Yeah, but they weren’t healing tears…” Steven sighed morosely.

“Oh, Steven…” Pearl said, taking on a slightly condescending tone as she placed a hand on the young Gem’s shoulder. “Of course you don’t have healing tears! You’ll never have any real magic powers, and we don’t want anything else to do with you!”

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“She didn’t really say that, did she?” Connie asked in disbelief.

“No, she didn’t,” Dipper corrected. “Her and Garnet were actually really supportive. Weren’t they, Steven?”

“Well, that’s what it felt like…” Steven heaved a heavy sigh.

“Is that why you’ve been feeling so low?” Connie asked, still as concerned as ever for the young Gem.
Steven simply shrugged sadly, somehow feeling even worse now that the story was done. “Aw, cheer up, Steven!” Mabel encouraged, wrapping an arm around his shoulder. “So what if you don’t have healing tears? That’s not the worst thing in the world, is it?”

“I guess not…” the young Gem frowned, not convinced.

Connie bit her lip as she took in Steven’s continued depression, unsure of what she could really do to help it, especially since he seemed so set in his sorrow. “Um… you can have your juice back,” she said with a small smile, offering the mostly empty box to him.

“Nah, it’s ok,” Steven waved the box away as he looked down. “It’s just… Everyone expects me to be like my mom… What if I never get those powers?”

“Then you’ll be like us,” Connie reassured as Dipper and Mabel nodded their sincere agreement. “That’s not so bad.”

“Yeah, and you still have the shield thing, don’t you?” Dipper asked with a smile. “That’s pretty cool.”

“And even if you didn’t, we’d still hang out with you, Steven,” Mabel encouraged warmly. “You’re the best!”

“B-but… if I don’t have powers, then I can’t hang out with Amethyst or Garnet or Pearl!” the young Gem protested, gripping his pants tightly as tears began to well up in his eyes. “And I-I can’t go on missions, and… and…”

Steven trailed off with a soft gasp as he realized that Connie had placed her hand over his. He was at a complete loss for words as he looked up to her with a red blush, which only intensified as he noticed her sweet, semi-flustered smile.

“You don’t need any powers to be here with me…” she said softly as she began to lean in a bit closer to him. Steven simply gaped at her, his eyes wide and his heart suddenly pounding out of nowhere.

“Wait… what’s going on?” Dipper asked in confusion, though Mabel was quick to quiet him upon witnessing this touching scene.

“Shh! You’ll ruin the moment!” she whispered, a giddy, delighted smile claiming her features. Both twins watched on in silence as Connie drew in a bit closer to Steven, the wind lightly tousling their hair as they both reddened in slight embarrassment. And yet, right was it seemed as though the girl was going to kiss the young Gem, she suddenly pulled back, letting out a groan of newfound pain as she did so.

“Ow!” she exclaimed sharply, holding a hand against her head to chase away her sudden migraine.

“What’s wrong?” Steven asked with concern.

“I think-” she cut herself off with a sigh, squinting her eyes tightly. “There’s just—something’s wrong with my glasses…” With the hopes of getting rid of her headache, Connie removed her glasses, only to gasp in alarm at how startlingly clear everything around her was. “My… my eyes! I-I can see!”

“What?!” Steven, Dipper, and Mabel all exclaimed in unified bewilderment.

“I can see without my glasses!” Connie confirmed, equally as shocked.
“Whoa! Are you secretly wearing contacts, Connie?” Mabel asked inquisitively.

“No!” Connie shook her head, still reeling over being able to view the world with her natural eyes. “I’ve never even worn contacts before! I don’t understand…”

“Wait!” Steven gasped in sudden realization. “What if… D-did… did I just heal your eyes?!”

“But how would that even happen?” Dipper asked in absolute confusion. “You weren’t even crying and even if you had been, your tears didn’t work on Amethyst! What could have…?”

He trailed off as everyone slowly directed their gaze towards the empty juice box Connie was still holding. The water still clinging to its straw, or backwash rather, was oddly sparkling, giving the kids a pretty good answer as to how the girl’s eyes had been miraculously healed.

“The juice box!” Steven gasped in awe as Connie abruptly dropped the box out of shock. “I don’t have healing tears! I have healing spit!”

“Gross…” Dipper cringed in disgust.

“Cool!” Mabel grinned in delight.

“What am I going to tell my parents?!” Connie asked anxiously. “What am I going to tell my optometrist?!”

“I don’t even know!” Steven laughed joyously as he jumped to his feet. “Oh, thank you, Connie!” Unable to contain his excitement, the young Gem warmly embraced the girl, who was still stunned by this turn of events.

“Um… y-you’re welcome?” she replied, unsure of whether she should be happy or terrified.

“Steven, we have to go tell the Gems!” Mabel said as her and Dipper also stood up. “They’ll flip out over this!”

“And if they don’t at least they’ll be as confused as we are,” Dipper said with an amused, yet still somewhat befuddled grin.

“Yeah!” Steven agreed, already running towards Lion. “They’re never gonna believe this! Aren’t you coming, Connie?”

“Oh… I’ll catch up with you guys…” Connie said, glancing down at her glasses tentatively.

“Ok! See you later!” Steven cheerfully bid her farewell as him and the twins boarded Lion and began the trek down the hill.

Connie stood up herself as she watched them go, taking in a deep breath as she tried to take it all in. She had known from the moment she met Steven that he was special, but this was something extraordinary. For a moment, the girl had to stop and simply ponder over how her friendship with the young Gem had changed seemingly everything for her. Before meeting him, she had always been rather quiet, sheltered and reserved. Yet meeting Steven had somehow made her open up, as though he had helped her out of the shell she had seemed to live her life in. Something about his confidence, his cheerfulness, his spirit always seemed to inspire her, to invigorate her, to remind her that the world was filled with adventure, excitement, even magic.

And now, his spit had healed her eyes, through what she could only describe as an indirect kiss. She wasn’t sure if she really understood it, or if she really wanted to. But what she did understand
that things were different now. She was different now. She couldn’t explain it, but deep down she knew.

Which was why she remained silent as she stood alone on the hill, the wind blowing her hair about aimlessly. After a brief moment of consideration, she took her glasses and easily popped the pink lenses out of them before calmly putting them back on.

After all, for as much as things tend to change, they really do stay the same.
Chapter 18: Measure Up

Chapter Summary

In which Dipper tries not to be so smol, Steven makes a fuck ton of sentient watermelons, and Gideon starts to fucking lose it

Chapter Notes

Well, here we are with another chapter, and this one is a rather odd combo, but I think it works in some places. So here you are, my combination of Little Dipper and Watermelon Steven! Enjoy!

GSV OLMT ZMW GSV HSLIG
GSV GZOO ZMW GSV HNZO
GSVIV'H VMLFTS DZGVINVOLM HGVEVMH
GL TL ZILFMW ULI FH ZOO

Gideon scowled as he brusquely flipped through the pages of the second journal in his dimly lit room, intent on finding what would hopefully be the perfect method of retribution. For the past several weeks, the child psychic was still quite scornful over his recent embarrassing defeat, as well as the loss of his magical amulet. Yet he wasn’t at a complete loss without it. As long as he had the secrets contained in Journal 2 in his possession, then he had the key to his revenge.

“Zombie attack? Never works, they don’t take orders,” Gideon dismissed the notion as he turned the page. “Blood rain? Ew, that’d mess up my suit. Demon caterpillars? Drat!” Frustrated, the child psychic slammed the journal shut. “There must be a perfect way to exact my vengeance on the Pines family and those darn Crystal Gems! It’s not enough to harm ‘em. I need to take somethin’ from them. Something that’ll do the Pines in… Something that’ll destroy the Crystal Gems! Something that’ll give me ultimate power…”

The child psychic pondered this for a moment, knowing that whatever he took would have to achieve all of these goals at once. It wasn’t a matter as simple as making up for his own failure. It was to remove the large obstacle that the Gems posed for him. It was to eliminate Stan as both a competitor and a rival. It was to get back at Steven for stealing Mabel away from him. It was to make both Steven and Dipper pay for getting between him and Mabel. It was to make Mabel see the error of her ways for rejecting him.

It was to get even.

Indeed, Gideon had quite a long list of individuals he had a vendetta against. But even so, he was determined, to the point of near-obsession, with completely triumphing over every last one of his enemies. And as he glanced over at the popsicle stick replica of the Mystery Shack sitting on his desk, an idea of how to do so finally came to him.

“Of course!” the child psychic exclaimed, a sinister smirk crossing his features as he held the
Since it was a rather slow morning at the Mystery Shack, the Pines family had taken to passing the time in front of the TV, a somewhat boring pastime but a suitable one in place of anything eventful happening. Of course, the relative calm didn’t last too long, for as they were about halfway through a rerun of *Duck-tective* when the doorbell suddenly rang.

“Whelp, looks like its show time,” Stan remarked to the twins as he rose from his recliner. As was his practice, he put on his best faux charming grin, ready to put his scamming skills to work. “Welcome to a world of mystery!” the con man greeted brightly.

“Stan Pines?” the suited man at the door asked coldly, clearly not impressed.

“The tax collector! You found me!” Stan gasped in alarm, quickly throwing a smoke bomb down before the supposed tax collector could continue. Taking advantage of the distraction, the con man rushed back into the den before tearing a photo off the wall to reveal a hidden, large stash of money. Dipper and Mabel exchanged a confused glance at their uncle’s frantic behavior, but they received no answer for it as he hurriedly searched the stones of the wall for something else. “W-which one of these is the trap door?!”

“Mr. Pines,” the business man interrupted as he entered the den, cutting Stan’s escape attempt off. “I’m from the Winninghouse Coupon Savers contest and YOU are our biiiiiiig winner!”

Stan’s terrified expression immediately turned to one of uncontainable joy upon hearing this news. His excitement only grew as a massive check for ten million dollars was carried in, accompanied by a rain of confetti and balloons. “At last!” the con man laughed triumphantly. “My one and only dream, which was to possess money, has come true!”

“We’re rich!” Dipper exclaimed, equally as elated. “I’m gonna buy a butler!”

“I’m gonna buy a talking horse!” Mabel chimed in with an eager grin.

“Just sign here for the money,” the business man instructed Stan, holding a clipboard out to him.

“You bet!” the con man readily did so. However, the moment he finished signing, the giant check was torn through by none other than Gideon, laughing victoriously as he got the jump on his enemies.

“Ha! Stanford, you fool!” the child psychic goaded. “You just signed the Mystery Shack over to lil ol’ me!” To further celebrate his success, Gideon broke into a short jig, reveling as he heard the twins take in a startled gasp. However, Stan was nowhere near as concerned.

“Uh, you might wanna take another look there,” the con man pointed out, nodding to the signature, raising an eyebrow as he read it out loud. “The shack is hereby signed over to… suck a lemon, little man?!”

Dipper and Mabel both breathed a sigh of relief as Stan cracked up over Gideon’s enraged shock over being so easily conned. “How dare you!” the child psychic growled, ripping the paper up furiously. “I am not a threat to be taken lightly!” Knowing that he could use some added height to prove his point, Gideon reached for the business man’s aid. “C’mere, hon, I need your arms.” The man didn’t protest as he lifted the child psychic up to the con man’s level, even if it was clear by
Stan’s bored expression that he wasn’t taking Gideon seriously whatsoever. “I’ll get you Stanford Pines! I’ll get you all!”

Gideon let his threats ring as he allowed the business man carry him out, not even noticing the Pines family all rolling their eyes at him as he exited. Once outside, he dismissed the cronies he had gotten to aid him in his failed scheme and began heading for home to begin planning his next move. All the while, the child psychic simmered with adamant fury, craving his long-awaited revenge even moreso after this latest humiliation. “Those fools won’t be laughing when I finally do steal that shack away from ‘em,” he muttered to himself petulantly. Of course, his already heated anger only burned hotter as he noticed the group heading down the path in the opposite direction. “‘Speakin’ of fools…”

Gideon’s clenched fists were practically shaking with additional rage as he watched Steven and the Crystal Gems walk towards the shack, all four of them smiling cheerfully as they conversed with each other. The young Gem’s grin faded a bit however as they approached the obviously perturbed child psychic. “Oh, um, hi, Gideon,” Steven greeted with awkward friendliness. “H-how have you been since-”

“Since you stole both Mabel and my amulet from me?” Gideon finished harshly.

“I think you mean the amulet you stole from us,” Pearl said, crossing her arms as she scowled down at the child psychic. “We’re still not sure how you managed to even get your hands on that artifact, but you can be certain that you’ll never see it again.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t have been able to steal it if ya’ll weren’t so incompetent,” Gideon bitterly remarked.

“Don’t forget that you were incompetent enough to lose it yourself,” Garnet pointed out calmly.

“Ha! Nice one, G!” Amethyst chuckled before smirking at the fuming child psychic. “I don’t even get why you’re so mad, kid. It’s not like we’re the ones who took it back from you.”

“That’s right… You did…” Gideon growled, glaring daggers at Steven.

“W-well, I mean… Me, Dipper, and Mabel kinda worked together, but, uh…” the young Gem trailed off, unsure of what his point was before starting over. “Look, Gideon. I do feel bad about how… badly everything went down and I’ve been meaning to apologize so… I’m sorry.” Steven grinned amicably as he offered his hand out to the child psychic to shake in armistice.

Gideon, on the other hand, was nowhere near ready to so easily forgive. “Ha!” he laughed mockingly, slapping the young Gem’s hand away in rejection. “You really think I’d just let all of this go just because you ‘apologized’?! You really are a fool if you think that’ll pacify me!”

“But I-”

“Mark my words, Steven Universe…” Gideon continued, his tone dark and ominous. “I’ll make you pay! I’ll make all four of you pay! Ya’ll will deeply regret ever mocking Gideon Gleeful, ya hear?! I’ll destroy you and those bothersome Pines alike! I’ll ruin everything you hold dear! I’ll-”

“Alright, that’s enough,” Garnet cut the child psychic’s incensed rant off as she abruptly picked him up. Despite his struggling and threats, the Gem leader ignored him as she firmly set him down on the path behind them before returning to the group without a single comment. Even as Gideon continued shouting out after the Gems, they largely disregarded him as they turned and continued on their way.
“Yeesh,” Amethyst remarked with an amused laugh. “That kid’s a mess. He was so mad I thought his poofy hair was gonna explode!”

“Honestly, I can’t remember the last time I’ve heard someone throw out so many hallow threats at us,” Pearl said, smirking slightly.

“It was annoying,” Garnet commented with disinterest.

“So… you guys don’t think he was being serious?” Steven frowned with concern.


All three Gems shared a laugh over this, though Steven didn’t really join in. He wasn’t exactly afraid of the child psychic’s threats, but he was a bit upset over how his attempt to make things right with Gideon had been a complete failure. True, Gideon had tried to kill both him and Dipper during their last encounter, but the young Gem was a firm believer that everyone deserved a second chance, even his worst enemies. Which was why it sincerely bothered him that the child psychic didn’t even want to meet him halfway.

Regardless, Steven put such thoughts aside as they reached the shack. Surprisingly enough, the young Gem had managed to convince his guardians to spend the afternoon there with him and the twins. What made things even better was the fact that Stan had invited Greg over to help him out with his most recent attraction. The former rock star’s van pulled up right as Steven and the Gems got there, and upon their collective arrival, Dipper, Mabel, and Stan emerged from the shack to greet them. A brief round of hellos was exchanged throughout the group, complete with Stan complaining about just how many people had congregated at his house, though the kids could tell from his sardonic smirk that he didn’t actually mind. The Gems also seemed to be in relatively good spirits as they freely and loosely joked around, something of a contrast to their usual serious manner. These various exchanges went on for a while until Greg broke it up, claiming that he had brought a surprise.

“You kids will love this,” the former rock star grinned as he went to retrieve something out of the back of his van. “Ta da! Watermelons for everyone!”

Steven, Dipper, Mabel and Amethyst cheered in excitement over seeing the large crate of fresh, delicious watermelons that Greg set down on the porch. “Whoa, where’d you get such a nice haul from, Greg?” Stan asked, clearly impressed. “You smuggle them out of Mexico or something?”

“Uh… no…” Greg frowned in confusion. “I just bought them from a roadside fruit stand. Eat up everyone! Uh, well… except for you guys, I guess…” The former rock gave Garnet and Pearl an awkward smile, remembering they weren’t fond of eating.

“Wow, thanks, Greg,” Pearl remarked with dry sarcasm.

Though Garnet and Pearl didn’t partake in the watermelon feast, Greg and the kids were more than happy to enjoy the sweet summer fruits. Oddly enough, Amethyst didn’t stick around with them, but instead made off with one of the watermelons before anyone could ask her what her intentions were for it. Soos, on the other hand did join them when he came in for work, and in no time at all, a spontaneous seed spitting contest had begun.

“Check this out, kids,” Greg grinned as he took a bite out of one of the watermelons. He spit two seeds out as he reclined back in his chair, letting them land squarely on his closed eyelids. “Heh? Heh? Betcha can’t top that.”
“I bet I can!” Steven exclaimed enthusiastically as he took aim at the can of soda sitting on the far edge of the porch. The young Gem spit a seed straight at it, cleaning knocking it off its perch. “Ha! Beat that!”

“Whoa! Nice aim, Steven,” Dipper complemented with a smile.

“That was impressive, my son,” Greg remarked to Steven. “But the name of the game ain’t distance nor accuracy.”

“It ain’t?”

“No, Steven. This challenge is all about who can spit seeds the coolest.”

“Oh! Oh! I wanna try!” Mabel volunteered eagerly. After taking in a deep breath, she launched a seed straight up into the air, grinning widely as it landed right on top of her intended target: Dipper’s hat.

“Ah! Mabel!” he exclaimed in annoyed surprise, already reaching to get the seed off.

“Pretty good, hambone,” Soos said as he finished munching on a slice of watermelon. “But I think I can do you one better.” Standing up from his seat, the handyman sat the empty watermelon rind down behind him before leaning over. The others all watched with intrigue as he spit three seeds out in succession, all of which slid up through the rind and flung over his head to land squarely back in his hand. “Beat that, dudes.”

Amazed, everyone applauded at this show of skill and luck, but even so, Steven was ready to try again. “That was cool… but was it this cool?!” the young Gem exclaimed after shoving several slices of watermelon into his mouth. “Hurricane… spit… spiiiin!” he shouted, his mouth full of seeds, which all wildly flew out as he spun around quickly. The seeds landed on everything in sight, including Stan as he happened to open the front door of the shack to come outside. “Haha! My hurricane spin is unbeatable!” Steven’s triumphant grin quickly faded, however, upon seeing the aggravated look the con man was giving him. “Oh… um… Sorry, Mr. Pines!”

“Honestly, I should have expected to come outside to find something like this going on,” Stan deadpanned, wiping the seeds off of his face and suit. “Greg, what have I told you about letting your kid spit seeds all over my porch?”

“I… Mr. Pines, you never told me anything about that,” Greg shook his head in confusion.

“Well, write this down for future reference: I don’t like it,” the con man said, crossing his arms.

“Heh, I’ll keep that in mind,” the former rock star laughed apologetically.

“And if you’re done playing around out here, could you maybe get in here and help me haul these mirrors around like you said you would?” Stan asked with fake impatience.

“Oh, right!” Greg got up from his chair, already heading for the door. “Guess this will be a throwback to when I used to work here, huh, Mr. Pines?”

“Sure,” Stan remarked stoically as he started to head in after Greg. “Soos, clean this mess up for me, would ya?”

“You got it, Mr. Pines,” Soos saluted compliantly as his boss shut the door behind him. “Yo, Mabel? Can you pass me that dustpan on that shelf up there?”
“I got it,” Dipper volunteered instead, considering he was closer to the shelf.

“Thanks, but Mabel’s taller,” Soos said, knowing that such height would be important to reach the high shelf.

“What?” Dipper asked, taken aback. “No she’s not. We’re the same height. We always have been.”

“Mm… I don’t think so…” Steven shook his head as he glanced between the twins.

“You might wanna check again, dude,” Soos agreed, pulling out his tape measurer as Dipper and Mabel stood back to back so he could properly check. Steven stood apace from them so he could confirm as the twins were measured, nodding as he offered his conclusion.

“It’s true!” the young Gem proclaimed. “Mabel’s taller by exactly one millimeter!”

“What?!” Dipper exclaimed in disbelief.

“Whoa, don’t you see what’s happening, Dipper?” Mabel asked with an ever growing grin. “This millimeter is just the beginning. I’m evolving into the superior sibling! Bigger! Stronger!”

“Like some sort of alpha-twin!” Soos added enthusiastically.

“Yeah! Alpha-twin! Alpha-twin!” Mabel cheered triumphantly.

“Come on, guys,” Dipper rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Nobody even uses millimeters. It only makes you taller than me in Canada.”

“Wait, that’s how that works?” Steven asked in confusion.

“You know, Dipper, I’ve always wanted a little brother,” Mabel began with a teasing smirk. “Who knew I already had one?! Ha!”

“Cut it out, Mabel,” Dipper said, already more than annoyed. “It’s not that big a deal.”

“Never mind, it’s not… Then it must be a little deal instead!” Mabel laughed heartily, ignoring her brother’s aggravated sigh.

“Aaah, don’t feel bad, Dipper,” Steven said with reassuring empathy. “Heck, I’m even shorter than both of you guys, but only by a tiny bit.”

“Ha! Tiny! Another short joke!” Mabel cut in with a chuckle. “Nice one, Steven!”

“I overheard the sound of mockery,” Stan said as he poked his head out the door. “Where is it? Show me the object of ridicule!”

“I’m taller than Dipper!” Mabel proclaimed proudly.

“By one millimeter,” Dipper added quickly and defensively.

“Hey, hey! Don’t get… short with your sister!” Stan joked, unable to contain his laughter.

“Now Grunkle Stan, I hope you don’t think little of him,” Mabel remarked playfully.

“Haha! Yeah!” the con man agreed with a smirk. “And… and, uh… he’s short!” The two of them broke down into a laughing fit, not even noticing Dipper glare away in frustrated
embarrassment. At the same time, neither Soos nor Steven were too amused with this unprovoked teasing themselves.

“Come on, you guys, that’s mean and you know it!” the young Gem admonished with a frown.

“Yeah, maybe you dudes should lay off a teeny bit,” Soos agreed sympathetically.

“Ha! Teeny! Now Soos is in on it!” Stan exclaimed, slapping his knee.

Deciding not to even dignify his family’s jeers with a response, Dipper simply left, irritated with both them and his own apparently short stature. Steven and Soos shared a concerned glance as they watched him walk off, neither of them too keen on sharing in on Mabel and Stan’s spiteful levity.

“N-no, I didn’t mean that,” Soos clarified, shaking his head.

“Don’t you guys think you were being a little—I mean, sort of hard on Dipper?” Steven asked, giving the two of them a disapproving look. “So what if he’s a little shorter than you, Mabel? That’s not worth making him feel bad over, is it?”

“Steven, you wouldn’t get it,” Mabel sighed with renewed seriousness. “Dipper always has the advantage over me in everything. Brains, grades, basically every board game that exists… But now I’ve finally found something I’m beating him in! And it feels great!”

“Yeah but… don’t you think you went a bit too far with it?” Steven asked, his tone not angry, but not accepting either.

“Maybe…” Mabel said with a guilty frown that quickly faded into a sudden smirk. “But Dipper will forget about it. He’s got a… 3, 2, 1…”

“SHORT-TERM MEMORY!” Mabel and Stan exclaimed in bright unison, both of them bouncing into another round of heavy laughter once more, much to Soos and Steven’s shared exasperation.

“Ugh, stupid Mabel!” Dipper muttered to himself indignantly as he stormed off, wanting to distance himself from his teasing sister. “I’m not short!” He let out a small, frustrated sigh as he walked around the shack as he tried to think of a way to make Mabel eat her words. Still, the only way he could possibly do that was to miraculously grow that extra millimeter, which, by all accounts, was impossible. Yet even so, Dipper was quick to remember that he had witnessed the impossible before, especially as he came across a rather odd sight on the other side of the shack.

“Um… Amethyst, what are you doing?” Dipper asked the purple Gem with a confused frown as he watched her finish tying the end of her whip across a watermelon.

Amethyst smirked slyly as she turned to him, backing away from the watermelon as she tightly gripped her whip’s handle. “Just trying something out,” she said with a daring wink as she cracked her whip. The watermelon at the end of it flew up into the air, and before it could fall, the purple Gem preformed a wide spin, her whip unrestrained by the weight at its tip. And then, with a bold shout, Amethyst tossed the end of the whip skyward, flinging the watermelon up as it broke free from the whip’s hold and continued to sail into the air until it was no longer visible. “Cool…” Amethyst mused with a smile as she watched the watermelon’s continued ascent, not even caring if it would come down or not.

“What was the point of that?” Dipper asked, raising an eyebrow as he also watched the skies for
“I made a bet with Pearl a while back that I could turn anything into a weapon,” Amethyst explained, placing a hand on her hip. “Guess I can check watermelons off as a yes. It’s kinda crazy though; those things have pretty good reach.”

“Speaking of reach…” Dipper began, hoping that maybe the Gems could help with his plight. “I was just randomly wondering… is there any, oh, I don’t know, magical Gem thing that could make someone… taller?”

“What, you mean like this?” Amethyst asked, using her shapeshifting abilities to seamlessly add about two feet to her height.

“Well, yeah,” Dipper acknowledged with a frown. “But I can’t really do… that.”

“Pfft, what do you wanna be tall for anyway?” the purple Gem scoffed as she returned to her original height. “Tall people are boring. Like Pearl. Everyone knows that the shorty squad is where it’s at!”

“Apparently it’s not,” Dipper remarked with clear dissatisfaction. “Especially since being only a millimeter too short makes you a total laughing stock.”

“A millimeter? That’s what you’re being such a sad sack about?” Amethyst laughed. “Then clearly you’ve got other things to worry about than being too short.”

“Can you just tell me how I can get taller?” Dipper asked in exasperation, not in any mood to be badgered again.

“Fine, if it’ll get you to stop whining,” Amethyst rolled her eyes. “But you can’t tell Pearl or Garnet that I let you know about this. They’ll think I’m being ‘irresponsible’ or whatever.” The purple Gem smirked mischievously as she stepped closer to the boy, speaking quietly so she wouldn’t be overheard. “So listen up. Way deep in the woods there’s a whole bunch of these crystal things. According to Pearl, they’re leftovers from some giant magical Gem weapon that was broken super long ago. But anyway, these things can make stuff grow or shrink whenever the light hits them. Pretty cool, huh?”

“That is cool!” Dipper replied in amazement at the concept. “But wait… this isn’t just you trying to prank me, is it?”

“Dude, if I wanted to prank you I would have just told you that you can grow just by standing in the sun like a plant does,” Amethyst said bluntly. “But if you do get one of those crystals, I’d love to borrow it sometimes. I could pull some totally awesome pranks with that!”

“I’ll… keep that in mind…” Dipper said with slight trepidation as he prepared to head off into the woods. “Thanks for the tip, Amethyst!”

“Sure thing, dude!” the purple Gem called out after the boy as he departed. She smiled in satisfaction as she watched him go, not even noticing as the watermelon finally landed (and splattered) on the ground behind her. “Yeah, there’s no way this could turn out badly.”
hour or two of searching through the woods, he at last happened upon a clearing decorated with a vast array of luminous, glittering crystals, ranging in all sizes from minute to massive. Intrigued, the boy decided to get a bit closer, though he did tread carefully, especially upon seeing a very small deer and an oddly miniature eagle pass by. Obviously the crystals had something to do with it, but Dipper hardly had any time to properly investigate them, he was startled by a sudden low growl coming from a mountain lion peering through the trees nearby.

“Is that mountain lion tiny or just far away in perspective?” the boy asked with uncertainty, knowing it was hard to tell considering the effects of the surrounding crystals. He quickly got his answer, however, as the lion lunged forward from the forest at full size. “Ah! Perspective! Perspective!” Dipper gasped as he fell backwards, defenseless against the lion’s impending attack. Fortunately though, the lion happened to pounce through a pink beam of light that was being refracted by some of the crystals, causing the creature to shrink until it was roughly the size of a peanut. Instead of crying out in pain, Dipper laughed as the miniscule lion jumped on him, scurrying through his vest before running onto his thumb and biting it lightly. “It still hurts, but less!” he noted with an amused smile.

Having seen the crystals in action, Dipper stood to claim one for himself. He was even more impressed with their abilities as a butterfly flew through a blue beam of light from one of the crystals, growing the tiny insect up to massive proportions. While he didn’t really want to be that tall, he still used his Swiss army knife to chip of one of the smaller crystals, though, remembering what Amethyst had told him, he avoided holding up to the light until he could figure out specifically how it worked.

Fortunately though, Dipper had brought a means of doing exactly that. After a quick search through his backpack, he found the flashlight he usually kept on hand, knowing that it could provide a convenient source of controlled light. Working with what he had on hand, he tied the crystal to the flashlight so that the beam would shine directly on it, before using a nearby pinecone as a test subject. After a few practice flashes, Dipper deduced that the color of the beam depended on what side of the crystal the light hit, and so he started with the pink beam. “Smaller…” he noted as the pinecone shrunk down to the size of a seed as the light touched it. “Bigger,” he grinned as he flipped the crystal, turning the light blue before shining it upon the pinecone. As long as he kept the light trained on it, the pinecone continued to grow, until it had surpassed even the trees in height, much to Dipper’s alarm. “Um, too big!”

With his new size-altering flashlight in hand, Dipper headed back for the shack, more than ready to prove Mabel wrong about being the so-called “alpha twin”. But what he wasn’t ready for was the sight that awaited him upon returning to the shack, one that everyone else was well in the middle of investigating.

Surrounding the Mystery Shack were countless watermelons, all fully grown yet very oddly shaped. Steven was the first to realize this as he explored the newfound watermelon patch with the Gems, Mabel, and Soos.

“Holy watermelon!” the young Gem exclaimed, curiously picking up one of the large watermelons, noticing that there was something strangely familiar about its appearance. “Is this… Can it be…? They’re me! They’re all me!”

“Whoa, let me see!” Mabel hurried up to Steven, inspecting him and the watermelon he was holding side by side and seeing the resemblance. “Wow! You’re right! Look at these guys—they’re so adorable!”
“Looks like you have a twin now too, dude,” Soos said to Steven. “Only you have like… a ton of them. And they’re all watermelons.”

“I know!” Steven grinned, holding the watermelon rendition of himself up to the Gems as they approached. “You guys, look! The watermelons all look like me! They must have grown from all the seeds I spit out earlier. Isn’t it neat?”

“Hm…” Garnet mused, taking the watermelon from the young Gem and inspecting it. “This is really impressive.”

“I suppose…” Pearl agreed with a worried frown. “Your mother did have the power to grow sentient plant life in a short amount of time to act as her defenders…”

“But Rose’s plants moved and stuff,” Amethyst picked up a relatively smaller watermelon. “These guys don’t do anything.”

“Amethyst, be careful!” Steven cautioned as he took the tiny melon, which was only about half his size from her. “Aw… This one’s just a baby! So precious…”

“You should call him Baby Melon!” Mabel suggested enthusiastically.

“Dude, that name is super clever! How’d you come up with it?” Soos asked with sincere awe.

“Um, hey, guys,” Dipper said as he joined the group, making sure to keep the flashlight out of sight. “What’s going on?”

“Dipper, check it out!” Steven exclaimed excitedly. “I grew a whole bunch of watermelons that look just like me!”

“…Uh, good job?” Dipper gave an awkward thumbs up, not really wanting to tell the young Gem that the life-sized watermelons were slightly unnerving.

“Oh come on, Dipper, you should be more excited about this,” Mabel smirked teasingly as she sat Baby Melon down beside him for comparison’s sake. “At least we finally found something shorter than you!”

Dipper let out a disgruntled sigh upon hearing this, though he was quick to perk up upon remembering the enhanced flashlight sitting in his bag. “Keep laughing it up, Mabel,” he said with a confident grin as he maneuvered around the watermelons to head inside. “Who knows? I might just gain a millimeter or two someday soon.”

“Ha! That’ll be the day!” Mabel called out after him as he went inside. As Dipper headed in, Stan headed out with Greg not too far behind him, and needless to say the con man was anything but pleased upon seeing the abundance of watermelons littering his yard.

“What the heck happened out here?!” Stan asked in alarm, only barely managing to not crush any of the watermelons as he walked through them. “Which one of you planted a watermelon field out here without asking me, or at least paying me, first?”

“Um… that was me, Mr. Pines,” Steven raised his hand guiltily. “All the seeds I spit out earlier sorta grew into… this. But you gotta admit: they are all pretty handsome, aren’t they?”

“Just charming,” Stan deadpanned, not even bothering to be confused as to why the watermelons bore such a resemblance to the young Gem. “Soos, I thought I told you to clean up all the seeds.”
“Oh, yeah… Sorry, Mr. Pines!” the handyman apologized. “I kinda got distracted when you and Mabel were making fun of Dipper earlier.”

“Ugh… This is really weird…” Greg commented with slight disgust as he accidently stepped on one of the watermelons, bothered by their obvious resemblance to his son. “What are we gonna do with all of them?”

Steven gasped as he came up with a sudden idea, grinning as he looked down at Baby Melon. “We could give them away! I’m sure everyone would love to have their very own Watermelon Steven!”

“Hey, hey, hey!” Stan cut in quickly. “Who said anything about just giving these puppies away?”

“Well do you have a better idea in mind?” Pearl asked sharply.

“Course I do! I’m—I mean, we’re gonna sell them! Right here at the Mystery Shack!” the con man exclaimed with a broad grin as he placed a hand on the young Gem’s shoulder. “They’ll be our newest hot seller. For the low price of five—no ten—no twenty dollars a pop, anyone can take home their own Human-Shaped Watermelon of Mystery!”

“Oh, that is a better idea!” Steven exclaimed enthusiastically, stars in his eyes.

“Glad you like it, kid, ‘cause you’re gonna be the one out here selling ‘em,” Stan informed the young Gem. “Everyone around here generally ‘trusts’ you, so I figure you’ll make it an easy sell, especially since these things are weirdly shaped like you for some reason…”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Pines! I won’t let you down!” Steven saluted. “By the time I’m done, everyone in Gravity Falls will have a Watermelon Steven to love and cherish! And eat, I guess, if they really wanted to.”

“Now hold on just a minute, Steven,” Pearl interjected with a disapproving frown. “Are you sure this is such a good idea? These are magical watermelons after all; just selling them to the regular people of Gravity Falls doesn’t sound like a very good—”

“Excuse me? Did these watermelons spring up on your yard?” Stan asked pointedly.

“W-well, no… but—”

“Then you have no say over what happens to them, do you?” the con man smirked as he began to lead the young Gem off so they could set up a table. “Now come on, kid. I—I mean, we have a fortune to make!”

“There,” Steven smiled as he finished positioning all of the watermelons around the table Stan was lending him. “That’s a mighty fine looking table, right Baby Melon?”

Of course, Baby Melon didn’t respond as he sat on the edge of the table, but the young Gem patted his head anyway as he took a seat and officially opened for business. However, instead of a customer, the first person to come by to see him was Mabel, who was still quite fascinated by the naturally sculptured melons.

“Hiya, Steven!” she greeted cheerfully as she skipped up to the table. “How’s it going? Sold any of these little cuties yet?”
“Not yet,” Steven replied. “Would you like to be my first customer, Mabel? I’m sure Mr. Pines will let me give you some kind of dis-”

“No discounts!” Stan shouted from inside the shack. “No exceptions!”

“Boo!” Mabel jeered as loud as she could so her uncle could hear her. “That’s no fair, Grunkle Stan! I really want one!”

“It’s called capitalism, pumpkin!” the conman retorted, still not bothering to come outside. “Get used to it!”

Mabel groaned loudly as she leaned against the table, not even noticing Dipper come outside until he addressed her and Steven. “Hey, guys,” he greeted with an upbeat smirk. “Notice anything… different about me?”

The two of them stared at him in confusion for a moment, until the young Gem gasped in realization. “Wait a second… Dipper! You’ve grown an extra millimeter!”

“W-what?!” Mabel exclaimed in disbelief. Immediately, she hurried to stand back to back with her brother, using her hand to check and see if it was true. She scoffed with dismay, however, as she confirmed it: some way or another, they were now exactly the same exact height.

“What can I say, sis?” Dipper asked with a shrug, relishing in Mabel’s clear annoyance. “Growth spurt.”

“Yeah, well mine happened first,” Mabel retorted, crossing her arms. “And I’m gonna be taller in the end anyway. It’s science, Dipper.”

“What? But we’re the same height now.”

Mabel didn’t offer much of a response as she simply launched into another round of chanting. “Alpha-twin! Alpha-twin!”

“Oh yeah?” Dipper asked challengingly. “Something tells me that I’ve got another growth spurt coming on right now…”

Mabel raised a suspicious eyebrow as she watched her brother nonchalantly head back into the shack. She could tell something was up, but she wasn’t exactly sure what. Regardless though, she was going to get to the bottom of the mystery behind this so-called “extra millimeter” Dipper had just so happened to gain. “This is weird…” she remarked to Steven. “I’m gonna go see what he’s up to. Good luck selling your watermelons, Steven!”

“Thanks!” Steven called after her as she headed inside. “And uh… good luck to you too?”

“Steven Universe!” The young Gem’s attention was soon caught by his first customers, Sherriff Blubbs and Officer Durland, both of whom were inspecting his stand with critical expressions.

“Oh, hi, officers!” Steven greeted politely. “Would you guys like to buy one of my Watermelon Stevens?”

“Would we?!” Durland asked with an excited grin, though he calmed down when Blubbs shook his head.

“What’s goin’ on here, kid?” the sheriff asked caustically. “You got a permit for this setup?”
“Um… I don’t have one…” Steven began apprehensively. “But Mr. Pines is letting me sell them here, so I’m sure he does! Don’t you, Mr. Pines?” The young Gem’s smile faltered when the con man failed to respond this time. “Uh… Mr. Pines?!” After receiving no reply for a second time, Steven came up with another plan on the fly, one that he hoped could get him out of this tight spot. “Um… Hey, Sherriff Blubbs! Officer Durland! How about I give you guys one on the house?”

“Mm… I don’t know…” Blubbs frowned. “It’s kinda weird lookin’…”

“Aw, sheriff, look!” Durland gleefully held one of the Watermelon Stevens up. “It’s got lil’ arms and legs! Can we keep it? Pretty please?”

“Oh… You know I can’t resist that face!” Blubbs sighed, his resolve crumbling into a grin as his partner begged. “Alright, kid. You got yourself a deal. We’ll go ahead and accept your bribe.”

“Yes!” Steven and Durland both exclaimed brightly. The young Gem happily waved the cops off as they carried their Watermelon Steven off, swinging it between the two of them like it was a child. Even if he hadn’t really sold one of his watermelons yet, Steven was still rather happy to see one go to a good home, which was why he was all the more excited when his next customer came by. “Hi, Sadie!” he greeted the cashier as she came by.

“Hi, Steven,” Sadie smiled amicably as she stepped up to the table. “What’s all this about?”

“Just a little side project that I got going on.”

“Oh really?” Sadie chuckled warmly. “That’s great. How’d you get such handsome watermelons?”

“Let’s just say there’s a little Steven in every one of them,” the young Gem said with a mysterious flair.

“Great sales pitch, dude,” the cashier remarked with an amused grin as she reached into her purse. “So, how much for one?”

“How much?” Steven frowned suddenly. “Oh man… what did Mr. Pines say again? They’re supposed to be… uh… I don’t remember!”

“Come on, I insist,” Sadie said, not wanting to just take one for free. “I love supporting local businesses.”

“Whoa!” The conversation was suddenly interrupted as Ronaldo happened to pass by, glancing up from his phone as he caught sight of the strange watermelons. “What’s going on here?!”

“Hey, Ronaldo!” Steven said with a smile, though it turned to confusion as the teen frantically returned his attention to his phone after snapping a picture of the watermelons.

“Don’t mind me, just doing some liveblogging about your weird watermelons,” Ronaldo said as he began typing away.

“Your blog?” Steven raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah! Keep Gravity Falls Weird!” the teen exclaimed enthusiastically, reading his blog post aloud as he typed it. “Check… out… these… weird… watermelon guys… down by… the… Mystery… Shack… it’s… really… weird…”

“Steven, you shouldn’t keep your customers waiting like this,” Sadie interjected, pulling a dollar out of her purse. “I’ll just give you five bucks and take one, ok?”
“Sadie, wait!” Steven exclaimed as the cashier left him the money and took one. He knew well that Stan had wanted him to sell the Watermelon Stevens for more than a simple five dollars, but he had a hard time doing so after Ronaldo caught wind of this.

“What?! You’re only selling them for five dollars?!” the teen asked in disbelief. “Hey, everyone! Come get a Watermelon Steven! He’s practically giving them away! Hurry up before they’re gone forever!”

Before Steven could even protest, a large crowd had gathered around the table, all of them offering five dollars apiece for his watermelons. Though he knew Stan probably wouldn’t be happy with him for selling them so cheap, the young Gem didn’t have the heart to tell his customers that they cost any more than that. And at such a low price, the watermelons sold quickly, to the point that in no time at all, Steven had sold quite a few of them and had gotten a decently-sized stack of money to show for it. All in all, the young Gem figured it wasn’t a bad turnout for his very first business venture.

As much as Dipper hated to admit it, Mabel was most likely right. In time, she would grow another millimeter and would be able to hold it over his head again, just like before. But even so, he was confident that things would be different. As long as he had the height altering crystal at his advantage, then he’d never have to worry about being shorter than her ever again.

Coincidentally enough, Dipper had just finished using the flashlight to make himself even taller when Mabel happened to burst into the attic, glancing around suspiciously. “Give it up, Dipper! I know—” she began in an accusatory tone, though she cut herself off with a gasp upon seeing that he was at least a foot taller than her now. “What happened?”

“Oh, you know… puberty and stuff,” Dipper shrugged calmly, realizing just how good it felt to smirk down at his sister.

“It doesn’t make any sense…” Mabel shook her head, bewildered. “Just a second ago, you were— Wait a minute! This is some kind of magicky thing, isn’t it? Was it a wizard or something? There’s a wizard in the closet, isn’t there? ISN’T THERE?!?”

“What? No!” Dipper exclaimed, though Mabel wasn’t buying it.

“You’re telling me that there is not a wizard in this closet. You’re telling me that if I open this door right now—”

“Fine! Open it!”

Mabel did so, glaring at her brother all the while. Of course, there was no wizard in the closet, but that still hardly convinced her otherwise. “An invisible wizard! Really, Dipper?!”

Stan had stopped monitoring Steven’s progress on selling the Watermelon Stevens a long time ago as he supervised Greg and Soos as they put together his newest attraction. Still, the con man was a bit surprised when he heard the doorbell ring out of nowhere. He half expected it to be one of the Gems, come to complain about the enterprise him and Steven had set up. However, he was even more annoyed upon seeing who was actually at the door. “Oh, it’s you…” he deadpanned as he glanced down at the child psychic.
“Oh, howdy, Stanford!” Gideon greeted with a dark grin, holding a jar and a bat up for the con man to see. “Listen closely. Inside this jar I have one thousand cursed Egyptian super termites. Hand over the deed to your property, or I’ll smash this jar with a bat and they’ll devour this shack with you inside!”

Stan simply rolled his eyes upon hearing this empty threat. “Hey, what’s that?” he pointed in the opposite direction. The child psychic took the bait and as he turned around, the con man pushed the jar of termites out of his hand, letting it break open onto the ground.

“Oh no!” Gideon screamed fearfully as the termites swarmed, consuming his wooden bat before moving onto attack him. “Get off! Get ‘em off me!”

Stan laughed in amused triumph as he watched Gideon run off, panicking as he tried to shake off the biting termites. “Hey, Soos! Greg! Get in here!” he called, chuckling all the while. “I wanna take pictures of this!”

The child psychic growled as he turned to face the con man again, enraged that yet another one of his plans had failed. “Ya’ll may have won this battle, but mark my words, Stanford! Your family has a weak spot, and I’m gonna find it!” Gideon threatened, though the boldness of his words was muddled as he shrieked over the termites filling his pompadour. “Ah! My hair!”

Defeated for now, Gideon sullenly retreated, still picking termites out of his hair as he did so. However, he stopped short upon noticing the large crowd gathered around Steven as he continued to sell his Watermelon Stevens. At first, the child psychic was tempted to go over there and disrupt the successful sales out of spite for the young Gem, but as he thought more about it, the more he realized that perhaps there was a chance he could use such strange watermelons to his advantage. After all, he figured, there was always a way to use one’s own hubris against them.

Regardless, Steven hardly noticed Gideon spying on him as he finished up with another round of customers. He had sold about half of his watermelons by now, and as he counted up his earnings, he realized he had a decent profit to show for it. “And another… and another…” the young Gem noted with a smile as he piled his dollars up. “Cool, one hundred pieces of money.”

Before Steven could put the rest of the Watermelon Stevens out for sale, however, he paused upon noticing someone crawl out from underneath his table. “Oh, hey, Onion,” he greeted the young boy with a friendly grin. As usual, Onion didn’t respond as he rose to stand before the table, holding his hand out to Steven expectantly. “Um… you want… my money?” the young Gem guessed, knowing just how vague Onion could often be. Still, he didn’t seem satisfied as he shook his head and pushed his hand further towards Steven. “You want to buy one of my Watermelon Stevens?”

Still, Onion declined, this time making his desire clear as he pointed to Baby Melon. “Oh, sorry, Onion,” Steven shook his head. “Baby Melon’s not for sale.”

The young Gem only had to look away for one moment, quick enough to turn towards his remaining stash of watermelons. As he glanced back at the table, his smile faded upon seeing that it was empty. Neither Baby Melon nor Onion were anywhere in sight.

“Omniiiiioooon!”

“Does he only respond to incantations?” Mabel asked Dipper, still trying to get the supposed invisible wizard to show himself. “Expecto wizzarium! Wizle! Wiz-”
“It’s not a wizard!” Dipper finally cut her off, annoyed with her antics. “I grew myself using this.” Knowing that Mabel would never leave him alone otherwise, he held out the flashlight for her to see.

“Uh… that’s a flashlight,” Mabel pointed out, not impressed.

“No, this,” Dipper pointed to the crystal tied to the light. “It’s some sort of magical Gem crystal. Amethyst told me that it-”

“Lemme see that thing!” Mabel snatched the flashlight, not even bothering to listen to the rest of her brother’s explanation as she made off with it.

“Mabel!” Dipper shouted in frustration, not hesitating to run downstairs after her. As the twins made it outside, they started grappling for the flashlight, nearly running into Steven as he hurried by them in pursuit of Onion and Baby Melon.

“Come on, Onion!” Steven shouted after the fleeing child in frustration. “Give me back my Baby Melon!”

Though Onion didn’t heed the young Gem’s cries, surprisingly enough, Baby Melon did. On its own volition, the small watermelon suddenly turned its head back towards Steven, breaking free from Onion’s grip and jumping out of his arms. Not wanting to get caught, Onion just continued running, but Steven stopped the moment Baby Melon ran into his warm embrace. “My Baby Melon!” the young Gem cheered happily, holding his prized melon close. “My precious… I never thought I’d see you again…” Steven quickly paused however as he took another glance at Baby Melon, his eyes widening as it winked at him with its seed eye. “You’re… ALIVE?!” he gasped in excited awe. “You know, I really shouldn’t be so surprised about this. We have to go show everyone!”

Steven smiled as he glanced around the immediate vicinity, glad to spot Dipper and Mabel first, though he didn’t immediately notice they were bickering yet. “Hey, guys!” he called, Baby Melon trailing behind him as he hurried towards the twins. “Check it out! Baby Melon is-”

“Not now, Steven!” both twins exclaimed in angry unison, engrossed in their own fight over the flashlight.

The young Gem frowned as he finally realized what was going on. “Wait… are you guys… fighting?!” he asked with dismay. After all, if there was anything Steven couldn’t stand, it was conflict, especially among friends. “What’s the matter?”

“Dipper won’t let me see his dumb magic flash-” Mabel cut herself off as she at last pried the flashlight away from her brother, only to accidently switch it on in the process. The beam happened to strike one of the Watermelon Stevens sitting nearby, causing it to grow at least ten times its original size.

“Whoa!” Steven gasped as Mabel dropped the flashlight out of shock. “Baby Melon, check it out! It’s a jumbo melon! How’d you do that?!” he asked the girl as she slowly reclaimed the flashlight.

“I don’t-” Mabel began again, shining the light on her hand only to let out a fearful shriek as it suddenly grew.

“It’s ok,” Dipper reassured as he grabbed the flashlight from her. “It can shrink things too.” Steven and Mabel watched in confusion as he flipped the crystal around and used the beam to return his sister’s hand back to its regular size.
“Wow…” Steven mused, thoroughly impressed. Mabel, on the other hand, had already gotten over her initial amazement.

“Normal hand karate chop!” she shouted, doing just that as she smacked her brother’s wrist and reclaimed the flashlight.

“Hey!” Dipper shouted in protest, running off after her.

Wanting to break up this ongoing argument and restore the peace, Steven hurried after the twins, Baby Melon sprinting not too far behind. “Guys, wait!” the young Gem cried after them. “You don’t have to fight! I’m sure we could figure out a way to take turns with the magic flashlight! Guys?!?”

The young Gem’s pleas fell on deaf ears however, as the twins continued to aggressively battle over the light. Every time one of them got control of it, they used it against the other one, from Mabel using it to size-up Dipper’s head to Dipper using it to shrink down Mabel’s. Of course, these instances were quickly restored, but it still didn’t keep Steven from perusing the arguing twins, begging them to simply talk things out, even though they paid him no mind. They both only had one thing on their minds: seizing control of the flashlight in order to determine who the “alpha-twin” really was. However, it was only as Baby Melon accidently barreled into Steven and Steven accidently barreled into Dipper and Mabel that the flashlight finally flew out of both of their hands.

Gideon had long since lost interest with Steven and his watermelons, having reached the conclusion that the non-sentient fruits would be of little aid to him. Still, as he continued picking off the occasional termite, the child psychic continued to angrily rant and rave nearby, frustrated by his own inability to do what he thought should have been a very simple task. “Curse the Pines family!” Gideon shouted, his fury momentarily more focused on them than the Gems considering how Stan had just humiliated him. “Curse Stan! Curse Dipper! Curse-” The child psychic cut himself off as the flashlight suddenly landed right in front of him, immediately catching his attention. “My, my, what delightful manner of dohickery is this?”

Dipper, Mabel, and Steven gasped in worried unison as they watched him pick it up, knowing that such a powerful tool could prove incredibly dangerous in the hands of their crazed, vengeful enemy. “This is bad…” Dipper muttered in anxious dread.

“What do we do?!” Steven whispered nervously.

“Cool it, guys,” Mabel said calmly. “Maybe he didn’t see us use it and doesn’t know it’s a magic flashlight that can grow and shrink things.”

Of course, considering the fact that the three of them were standing only about three feet away from Gideon, it wasn’t too hard for him to overhear this information. “Really?” Dipper deadpanned, greatly begrudging his sister’s big mouth.

The child psychic grinned deviously as he tested the flashlight out, switching it on and off a few times before turning it towards his hapless victims. Before Dipper, Mabel, or Steven could even try to protest or run, Gideon shined the flashlight on all three of them, as well as Baby Melon, who had pressed against the young Gem in an attempt to protect him. The pink beam began shrinking all four of them down, though to them it seemed as though the world around them was all too quickly growing. By the time Gideon finally turned the light off, he might as well have been a giant to the kids; even the grass towered over their heads, frightening all of them as they immediately realized just how much danger they were in being so small.

Gideon simply laughed in malicious triumph upon hearing the frightened cries of his now
miniscule enemies. He had gone from embarrassing defeat to having the upper hand with the mere blink of a flashlight. Which was why the child psychic sealed his victory by using his empty termite bottle to trap his shrunken foes before they could even try to get away.

However, what Gideon failed to notice as he reveled in his victory were the many sets of prying eyes that had witnessed the entire scene. And as soon as they realized that Steven in particular was in trouble, the remaining Watermelon Stevens didn’t hesitate to charge forward in an attempt to rescue him.

“Wha-?!?” Gideon spun around as he heard the Watermelon Stevens’ muffled war cries. He nearly dropped the bottle out of shock upon seeing that the watermelons were actually alive and mobile, but he managed to uphold his composure, even as they beset him. Still, he hadn’t expected for the living fruits to be so aggressive or hit so hard as they ganged up on him in an attempt to rescue Steven.

“Whoa! I guess they’re all alive!” the young Gem remarked from inside the bottle, which was being shaken up quite a bit as Gideon struggled against the watermelons.

“But why are they acting so crazy?” Mabel asked, struggling to remain upright as Gideon held the bottle out of the watermelons’ frenzied reaches. “Baby Melon way more chill than these guys!”

“I don’t know… Any ideas, Baby Melon?” Steven turned to the now-even tinier watermelon, who simply shrugged in response.

“Wait, that’s it!” Dipper exclaimed in realization. “Steven, see if you can get them to listen to you! Maybe they can save us from Gideon and take the flashlight back from him!”

“Um… I’ll try…” Steven frowned with uncertainty before raising his voice as much as he could. “Hey, Watermelon Me’s! If you guys aren’t too busy, then could you maybe—whoa!”

The young Gem was cut off as Gideon abruptly tilted the bottle, knocking all three of the kids (and Baby Melon) over as he scrambled up onto a nearby tree stump to escape from the revolting Watermelon Stevens. The child psychic was breathing heavily out of angry exertion after practically being mauled by the violent fruits, but even so, he wasn’t about to give up his advantage now, despite this sudden obstacle. Or rather, this newfound opportunity.

“Oh what? You lil’ melon heads want him?!” Gideon challenged, holding the jar over his head as the Watermelon Stevens focused their attention on it. “Well then, listen up! Unless you want me to smash this jar with all of ‘em in it, ya’ll are gonna listen to everything I say from here on out. Ya got it?”

Of course, the Watermelon Stevens had no intentions of simply complying with this blatant blackmail as they pressed up against the stump, but ultimately they still couldn’t reach the jar. Gideon flashed them a triumphant, smug grin, one that he also sent up towards Steven, Dipper, and Mabel, all of whom glared back in protest. “I said do you got it?!” he asked the watermelons again, this time more forcefully as he gripped the jar even tighter. Realizing there was really nothing they could do to protect their apparent master otherwise, the Watermelon Stevens all simply hung their heads in relenting shame, much to the kids’ shared horror.

“Wait! You guys, no!” Steven called out, beating against the side of the jar. “Don’t listen to him! He-”

“Face it, Universe!” Gideon cut him off sharply, holding the jar in front of his face. “Ya’ll lost! All three of ya! Your watermelon army is mine! Your magical shrinkin’ gadget is mine! And soon…
the Mystery Shack and vengeance will be MINE!”

The child psychic laughed manically as he tucked the jar safely under his arm, making sure to keep it as far away from the Watermelon Stevens as possible. The sentient fruits glumly followed their new master as he departed with the shrunken kids in tow. And, ironically and unfortunately enough, the Gems arrived on the scene just a few minutes late to witness all of this.

“Oh, I wonder where Steven is…” Pearl frowned as she noticed the young Gem wasn’t at his table. “He must have sold all of his watermelons by now… I’m still not sure if that was a good idea though…”

“Relax, P,” Amethyst said with a bored yawn. “They’re just watermelons. And besides, when does anything bad happen around here?”

“Friends, I wish I was a highway so I could have the honor of being rode upon by automobiles as fine as these ones right here!” Bud Gleeful said with an air of showmanship as he presented his customers with one of the several cars on his lot. Of course, the car clearly lacked much quality, for as soon as Bud tapped one of the vehicles, one of its hubcaps fell off and a possum squirmed out of its hood, hissing all the while. “Engine possum at no extra charge.”

Even despite this, the customers all went wild, excitedly waving their money around as they all scrambled to buy the car first. Bud smiled in greedy satisfaction, though he paused in confusion upon seeing his son pass by, toting a mysterious jar and a single file line of walking watermelons behind him. “Say there, son,” the car salesman called curiously. “What’s in the jar? And who are your… little friends?”

“That’s my widdle secret!” Gideon replied with a sickeningly sweet grin as he turned to face the onlookers. The crowd was instantly charmed as they all awed happily, though none of them noticed the contempt that filled the child psychic’s expression as he walked away. “Mouth-breathin’ fools…” he muttered sullenly as he went inside his house. He only gave his mother a short, very dry greeting as he passed by her, though Mrs. Gleeful offered no response as she continued nervously vacuuming the kitchen.

As soon as Gideon and all of the Watermelon Stevens had filed into his room, the child psychic didn’t hesitate to at last unscrew the jar and dump Dipper, Mabel, Steven, and Baby Melon onto his desk. Considering their small size, the kids knew that doing anything by way of escaping at the moment was out of the question, especially considering Gideon’s rather violent temper. “You three!” he extreme contempt as the miniature group huddled close to defend one another.

“What are you gonna do with us?!” Mabel asked fearfully.

“Why Mabel, I wouldn’t hurt a hair on your itty-bitty head,” Gideon laughed with faux warmth. “If you agree to be my queen!”

“We live in a democracy!” Mabel exclaimed rebelliously. “And never!”

“Maybe you’ll change your mind after THIS!” Gideon proceeded to pick Mabel up by the collar of her sweater, much to Dipper and Steven’s shared alarm.

“No! I’ll fight you until the day I-” Mabel’s struggling abruptly ended as Gideon held her up to a bag of one of her favorite sugary treats. “Gummy Koalas!” She didn’t protest whatsoever as the child psychic put her in the bag to silence her. Instead, she happily picked one of the gummy koalas
up and began munching on its large-by-comparison head, elated that the candy was half the size of her.

With Mabel momentarily pacified, Gideon turned his attention back on Steven and Dipper, who both knew they wouldn’t get by as easily. “As for you two…” the child psychic began darkly, turning the bright table lamp on them. “What’s the deal with these watermelons, Universe? Are they some sort of magical Gem thing?”

“Well, yeah,” Steven shrugged honestly. “I accidently grew them using-” The young Gem was abruptly cut off by Dipper, who had slapped a hand over his mouth to keep him from revealing any more to the enemy.

“We don’t have to tell you anything!” he exclaimed definitely, though he did back up a bit as Gideon turned his angry attention onto him.

“Oh really?” the child psychic asked challengingly. “Well I think my watermelon compadres aren’t too pleased with that. Right, fellas?”

Gideon glanced back at the group of Watermelon Stevens behind him, though none of them moved so much as an inch at his apparent command. “You seedy fools!” he shouted in frustration. “Get over here and intimidate them for me!”

Upon hearing this, the watermelons all exchanged furtive glances before lunging forward, attacking Gideon again instead of Steven or Dipper. “Augh! No!” the child psychic protested as he took a particularly brutal kick to the face. “Get off me, you over-ripe idiots!”

“Yeah! Get him!” Mabel cheered as she watched the fight from inside the bag of gummy koalas. “Kick his adorable butt!”

“Man, those guys really don’t listen well, do they?” Dipper remarked to Steven. “Not even to you apparently.”

“I’m not sure what their problem is…” Steven frowned as he glanced over at Baby Melon. “The Gems said that my mom used to grow magic plants that would listen to her, but… I guess I’m just not very good at it…” The young Gem glanced down in disappointment, though Baby Melon was quick to console him with a comforting hug. “Aw, Baby Melon! You’re the best! And I guess you’re even more of a ‘baby’ melon now that we’re all so tiny! Ha!”

Eventually, Gideon managed to repel the rebelling Watermelon Stevens as he picked himself up off the ground. The marauding fruits were more than prepared to attack again, however, the child psychic abruptly stopped them as he swiped Steven up and held him up threateningly. “Back away!” he shouted warningly. The young Gem’s eyes widened in fear as he found himself being squeezed tightly, to the point that he really couldn’t even try to wriggle free. “Back away or I’ll squish him like a grape!”

Despite their violent nature, the Watermelon Stevens begrudgingly stepped back, all of them glaring coldly at Gideon as he roughly placed Steven back on the desk. “I’ll give those watermelons this,” the child physic growled with distain. “They’re about as smart as you are, Universe.”

“Oh, thank you!” Steven smiled, not recognizing this as an insult.

“You might as well just let us go, Gideon,” Dipper said impatiently. “You have literally nothing to gain from keeping us here.”
“Oh, I don’t now?” the child psychic questioned coldly. “Then tell me… How exactly did you come across that magic flashlight? Hmm? Did somebody tell you about it? Did you read about it somewhere?”

Dipper hesitated, knowing that the answers to both of those questions was technically a yes. Still, the last thing he ever wanted to do was let someone like Gideon know about the journal, especially since it was tucked right inside his vest. So instead, he came up with another idea. “Lean closer and I’ll tell you!” he whispered, quickly and subtly motioning to Steven to cover his ears. Though he was confused, the young Gem did so, though he quickly understood why as Dipper sounded the nearby air horn right in Gideon’s ear as he leaned in.

“Ahhh!” Gideon screamed as he whacked the lamp away, glaring murderously at both boys. “Grrrr! I could squash you both right now!” he shouted hotly, holding his fist over the two of them. Still, he refrained, knowing that now wasn’t the time for such haste. Yet. “Steel yourself, Gideon. You can use them. You can use them…”

Stan grinned in broad satisfaction as he watched Soos and Greg finish setting up the myriad of mirrors in the parlor. The Mystery Shack’s newest attraction was far from complex, but the con man knew that it would still pull in the crowds regardless. After all, he had learned a long time ago that it took almost nothing to impress the impressionable masses.

“Soos, this maze of mirrors is your best idea that I’m taking credit for yet!” Stan remarked to the handyman with sincere pride. “We’re gonna make a fortune!” The con man took off his fez and smirked as he looked at his reflection on one of the many mirrors. “Hm… Have my ears always been this big?”

Soos hurried up to the mirror as Stan walked away from it, discretely putting on his boss’s fez as he stood boldly and wistfully before it. “One day!”

“Hey, Mr. Pines?” Greg asked as he approached his former boss. “Is Steven still outside selling his watermelons? I haven’t seen him around in a while…”

“What?” Stan frowned caustically. “That kid better not be shirking off! He’s supposed to be out there making me—I mean, making us money!”

“Don’t bother going out there and looking for him,” Garnet said as her, Amethyst, and Pearl entered the room. “He’s not there.”

“W-well then, where is he?” Greg asked with sudden concern.

“Aa, I’m sure he’s fine, Greg,” Amethyst remarked casually. “He’s probably just hanging with Dipper and Mabel, going on some sort of ‘whimsical’ adventure, or whatever those three do when we’re not around.”

The conversation was suddenly interrupted as the phone abruptly rang, but even as Stan went to go answer it, he left a deadpan comment in his wake. “All those watermelons better be sold, or that kid’s gonna hear it!”

“You have no right to scold Steven, Stan!” Pearl retorted defensively. “He-” The white Gem was quickly cut off before her rant could continue by Amethyst’s exclamation of wonder at the mirror maze.
“Whoa! Check out all the mirrors!” the purple Gem bounced up and down excitedly. “Last one in’s an uptight Pearl!”

“W-what?!” Pearl exclaimed, appalled as she watched Amethyst blindly rush into the maze. “Amethyst, get back here! Amethyst!”

Garnet and Greg were the only ones who remained as Pearl ran in the maze after Amethyst, and a lightly awkward silence soon filled the room. “Uh…” the former rock star spoke up, preparing to engage the Gem leader in conversation. However, before he could, Garnet simply and silently entered the mirror maze herself. “Good talk!” Greg called out after her with a flustered grin.

“Yeah?” Stan asked dryly as he answered the phone, somehow not surprised to hear Gideon’s voice on the other end.

“Stanford Pines, listen to me very closely,” Gideon warned, his tone dead serious. “And make sure you pass this message onto the Crystal Gems as well. I have your niece and nephew, as well as young Steven Universe. Hand over the deed to the Mystery Shack right now, or great harm will befall them!” A beat of silence passed before the child psychic spoke up again. “This is Gideon, by the way.”

Upon hearing this, Stan merely burst out laughing, not at all buying Gideon’s latest ploy. “Oh yeah, this has gotta be your worst plot yet,” the con man said, still chuckling before he briefly covered the phone. “Hey, you guys!” he called out to the Gems, who were freely running through the mirror maze. “Get a load of this! Gideon says he’s holding the kids ransom for the shack! Pretty hilarious, right?"

“Totally!” Amethyst agreed with a hearty laugh from her spot in the maze.

“More like completely ridiculous!” Pearl scoffed, still chasing the purple Gem.

Garnet gave no response and Stan didn’t wait for one as he spoke to Gideon once more. “You’re full of it, kid,” the con man remarked calmly. “They’re fine. I saw them playing in the yard just a few minutes ago.”

“I have them in my possession!” Gideon asserted in frustration. “And I have an army of my very own! You don’t believe me? I will text you a photo!”

“'Text me a photo’?” Stan repeated, confused. “Now you’re not even speaking English!”

“But–” Gideon was cut off as the con man abruptly hung up. “Hello? Hello? Augh!” Infuriated, the child psychic threw the phone against the wall in a fit of rage. Both Dipper and Steven had to quickly duck to avoid being hit by it, though they realized they had more to worry about as Gideon began to laugh eerily, growing more unhinged by the second. “What am I doing?” he asked himself with a wide, crazed grin. “I don’t need a ransom! I have THIS!”

The kids all exchanged fearful glances as the child psychic held the flashlight up. They had forgotten it as a factor in all of this, but they realized what a huge mistake that was now, especially considering the threat it could easily pose. “I’ll shrink Stan and take the shack for myself!” Gideon proclaimed deviously. “And while I’m at it, I’ll shrink the Gems too, and crush ‘em like the rocks they are!”

“You can’t do that!” Steven protested boldly, immensely concerned for the Gems’ safety, as well as Stan’s.

“Oh, I can’t?” Gideon retorted confidently.
“Yeah! We’ll stop you!” Dipper exclaimed defiantly.

“Really? You and what army?” the child psychic asked, nodding to the Watermelon Stevens still lining the room.

“Oh yeah…” Steven frowned apprehensively. “I guess we forgot about that…”

The tension of the moment was suddenly broken as Bud called for Gideon from downstairs.

“Gideon! The ice cream truck is here!”

“Oh! Comin’!” Gideon shouted back with an excited grin. However, before he left, he made sure to ensure that his captives would stay in line by setting his pet hamster, which was quite a bit larger than them, down on the desk. “Guard them, Cheekums,” he ordered sternly before running off, taking all of the Watermelon Stevens with him. “I’m coming!”

As soon as Gideon had left and Steven and Dipper found themselves standing face to face with the oversized Cheekums, they quickly found that he was far from an intimidating creature, especially as he let out a dormant squeak when Baby Melon affectionately hugged him. “Aw…” the young Gem gushed with a happy smile. “That is the cutest thing I’ve ever seen!”

“We gotta get out of here and save Stan and the Gems!” Dipper was quick to remind both Steven and Mabel of the dire matter at hand.

“I know!” Mabel agreed, shoving the head of one of the gummy koalas into her sweater for safekeeping. “I will see you later.”

“Yeah, but how can we help them?” Steven asked with a frown. “Gideon’s huge compared to us and he has all of the Watermelon Stevens!”

“And he has the flashlight,” Dipper added with an exasperated sigh. “On the bright side, at least you and me are the same height again, Mabel.”

“Actually…” Mabel frowned, and that alone prompted Dipper into demanding that they check again. It didn’t take long for them to find a ruler, and once again, Steven confirmed that Mabel was indeed just a millimeter taller.

“You’re still taller?” Dipper asked in disbelief. “Augh! How did this happen?”

“I guess it’s just another mystery,” Mabel shrugged blithely.

“Whatever,” Dipper scoffed, glancing down at the floor far below them. “Just another reason to get that flashlight back as soon as possible.”

“We’re gonna need a long ladder to get all the way down there…” Steven commented with a frown. Mabel, however, had another idea.

“Cheekums, to freedom!” she commanded as she sat atop the hamster, patting his sides. “To freedom!” Upon patting Cheekums again and seeing that he didn’t respond, Mabel came to her plan most likely wasn’t going to work. “Aw, you’re just a big ol’ dummy-dumb!”

“What is it, Baby Melon?” Steven turned to the small watermelon as it tugged on his shirt to grab his attention. “Do you have an idea?”

Baby Melon nodded vigorously as it grabbed the young Gem’s hand and pulled him to the edge of the desk. Curious, the twins followed, and the watermelon’s plan soon became clear as they caught
sight of the clothes hamper that had been spilled onto the floor during Gideon’s earlier altercation with the Watermelon Stevens. The pile of the child psychic’s powder-blue suits was thick enough that it would ensure a safe, cushioned landing, and so the kids took advantage of it as they leapt from the desk and into the clothes without injury. Considering their small size, sneaking downstairs was easy enough, but they proceeded with extra caution as they made it to the living room, where Gideon was greedily enjoying his ice cream.

“Clean me!” the child psychic commanded his father. As soon as Bud was finished wiping his face off, Gideon turned his faux charm back on. “Father, could you give widdle ol’ me and my watermelons a ride to the Mystery Shack?”

“Oh, I’d love to, sugarpot,” Bud replied with an amiable grin. “But I have a heck of a lot of cars to sell, I do!” The car salesman’s smile widened as he began lightly tickling his son, who laughed at first, though it all too soon turned into another fit of rage.

“N-no, no! DON’T TICKLE ME!” Gideon suddenly screamed furiously. With an enraged shout, he threw his tub of ice cream across the room, only narrowly missing his mother. “NEVER tickle me! What have I told you?! What have I—look at me—what have I told you?!”

“Ticklin’ is no laughing matter…” Bud said with a meek, apologetic frown.

“There you go,” Gideon said coldly, patting his father’s head.

“Do you still need a ride?” the salesman asked, hoping to appease his son.

“I’ll just take the BUS!” the child psychic growled hatefully, knocking over an end table as he abruptly left. The Watermelon Stevens followed after him, all them convinced that he still had Steven in his possession, hence why they were still contemptuously listening to him.

“Ah… precious memories…” Bud smiled obliviously as he reclined on the couch, not noticing the look of abject horror on his wife’s face.

“Just keep vacumnin’,” Mrs. Gleeful fearfully muttered to herself, trying her best to not think about how dysfunctional and violent her son’s behavior really was. “Just keep vacumnin’…”

With the coast clear, Dipper, Mabel, Steven, and Baby Melon made a run for it, escaping out of the house through the low dog door. As soon as they were outside, however, it became painfully apparent that they were at a horrible vantage point, since literally everything around them was much taller than them.

“We need to get higher…” Dipper remarked as he glanced around the car lot.

“Yeah, especially you, ‘cause you’re short,” Mabel laughed teasingly.

Before Dipper could even shoot back a retort, Steven cut in, desperate to keep the peace between the twins in this dire circumstance. “Guys, now’s not the time!” he urged. “We need to work together to come up with a plan, not fight!”

“Steven’s right,” Dipper agreed with resolve, even if he did have every intention of getting even with Mabel later. “And speaking of plans, I have one.” He nodded towards the dollar sign balloon floating nearby, and Steven and Mabel readily nodded in agreement. The group scaled the balloon’s rope and made it to the top of the dollar just in time to see Gideon and his army of Watermelon Stevens board the bus down below.

“How are we ever gonna catch up with them?!” Steven asked with dismay as the bus began to drive
off towards the shack.

“Oh flying discount dollar, if only you could fly us back to the Mystery Shack.” Mabel sighed wistfully as she patted the balloon.

“Maybe it can…” Dipper noted as he pulled out his pocket knife. It took some considerable doing due to the knife’s minute size, but eventually he managed to cut the rope enough that it snapped, allowing the balloon to break free with them on it. The kids cheered as the balloon soared with surprising speed, the winds in their favor as they chased after the bus Gideon was on. Using the balloon’s wings as rudders, they steered the balloon towards the Mystery Shack, roughly landing it on top of the totem pole mere minutes after the child psychic got there. Upon Mabel’s suggestion, the group used the flag line to zip line over to the shack itself, landing them on the roof just as Gideon stepped onto the porch.

“I’m comin’ for ya, Stanford!” Gideon exclaimed deviously, the flashlight secure in his grasp and the Watermelon Stevens still filing after him.

“I’m sorry, gummy friend,” Mabel said morosely as she held up the gummy koala she had saved, knowing it could come in handy now.

“It’s for the greater good,” Dipper reassured her as both Steven and Baby Melon nodded their silent agreement. Without any further reservations, Mabel let the gummy koala go, allowing it to drop squarely onto Gideon’s hair down below.

“Ugh!” the child psychic exclaimed in disgust, immediately noticing the sticky candy. “One of those infernal gummy koalas has gotten into my perfect hair! I can’t defeat Stan and the Gems looking like this!” After commanding the Watermelon Stevens to remain stationary, Gideon dropped the flashlight and hurried over to the nearby mirror to fix his hair, giving Dipper, Mabel, Steven, and Baby Melon the perfect opportunity.

“Ok, guys,” Steven whispered with apt seriousness. “We have to hurry and do this before Gideon gets back.”

“Right,” Mabel agreed, standing near the flashlight’s switch. “You gets get in front and I’ll re-grow you.”

Steven readily nodded his assent to this plan, but Dipper wasn’t as satisfied. “Wait… you’re gonna grow us back to equal height, right?”

“Dipper, that doesn’t matter right now!” Mabel groaned in exasperation, not understanding why he was so fixated on the matter.

“Well if it doesn’t matter, why don’t you just do it?” Dipper retorted crossly.

“Guys! Come on!” Steven took an anxious glance towards Gideon to make sure he was still distracted. “We don’t have time for this!”

“Why are you acting so weird?!” Mabel scowled at her brother. “Why can’t you just accept that I’m a little bit taller than you?”

“Dipper! Mabel! Please! Mr. Pines and the Gems are in danger!” Steven practically begged out of desperation, but once again, he was ignored.

“Oh, I’m acting weird? You’re the one who keeps calling me names and stuff!”
“Guys, cut it out! We gotta-”

“Oh what? You mean like little-”

“Don’t say it!”

“Little Dipper.” Gideon abruptly ended the argument as he snatched the kids and Baby Melon up before they could even turn the flashlight on, smirking smugly at them in light of his triumph.

“Well, lookie what almost happened! I dare say you would have defeated me, if it wasn’t for your sibling bickering!”

“Gideon, wait!” Steven started to protest as the child psychic reclaimed the flashlight, though he was hardly allowed to get a word in edgewise.

“Whatever it is you’re gonna say, Universe, save it!” Gideon snapped, though he quickly noticed the Watermelon Stevens press closer towards him upon seeing the young Gem. “And as for you lot,” the child psychic turned to the sentient fruits. “Ya’ll are gonna go in there and act as my loyal army, or else I’ll squash him and all of you with him!”

Once more, the Watermelon Stevens backed down, unable to act against Gideon as long as he held Steven captive. The young Gem took particular notice of this factor this time, but he didn’t get a change to plan on it as the child psychic turned and kicked the door to the Mystery Shack wide open, the flashlight poised to attack.

“The shack is mine, Stanford Pines!” Gideon proclaimed as he turned the flashlight on, letting it do its shrinking magic.

“No!” the kids exclaimed in distressed unison as they watched Stan’s fez fall to the ground unceremoniously. Gideon had just bested one of his targets; at this rate, he only had three to go.

The child psychic snickered triumphantly as he walked over to claim the supposedly small con man. “Well, well, Stanford, it appears I finally got the best of-” Gideon cut himself off with an alarmed gasp as he lifted up the fez to find not a shrunken Stan, but a shrunken Soos instead. “What?!?”

“Hm…” Soos mused, glancing around as he put his original hat back on. “Alright, something is definitely different here…”

More enraged than ever before, Gideon gathered up all of his tiny victims and tossed them roughly into the jar, shaking it as he fiercely demanded answers out of the handyman. “Tell me where Stan and the Crystal Gems are!”

“Never!” Soos proclaimed adamantly. “You’ll never find Stan and the Gems on the second floor to the left down the hall! …Wait, why did I say that?”

The kids looked to the handyman in dismayed disbelief as he relayed this information to the child psychic, and of course, Gideon jumped on this lead immediately as he shoved the jar into his suit pocket. “Oh, Stanford! I’m comin’ for ya!” he called as he flickered the flashlight on and off. “Shake a leg, you seedy simpletons!” he commanded the Watermelon Stevens, how marched after him down the hall.

Knowing that the situation had grown even more drastic, the kids (as well as Soos and Baby Melon) all beat against the side of the jar, though none of them really stood a chance at breaking it. Certainly, it would only be a matter of time before Gideon shrunk both Stan and the Gems down, leaving no one to defend the shack and ensuring his victory.
“I guess I kinda Soosed this one up, didn’t I?” Soos asked with a guilty frown.

“Nah, it’s not your fault, Soos,” Steven reassured. “I think that honor goes to someone else…”

Dipper and Mabel were both rather taken aback by the dry tone the young Gem had taken on, as well as the critical look he was giving both of them. As much as neither of them really wanted to admit it, he was right. Completely right. Their shared short-sightedness had, in a very literal sense, gotten them into this mess. And now, it seemed there was truly no way out.

“I… I guess this was sort of my fault…” Dipper admitted hesitantly. “I mean, I’m the guy who put that shrinking device together in the first place. It’s just… you kept teasing me, Mabel, like all day. What was that all about?”

Mabel sighed remorsefully as she glanced away from her brother. “I guess it’s that… you’re better than me at almost everything, and you always rub it in my face. You always come up with the best plans and you know, like everything… Sometimes… sometimes it feels like I just can’t… measure up to you. With this height thing, it finally felt like I was winning at something for once.”

“Aw, Mabel…” Dipper frowned empathetically. “You shouldn’t worry about measuring up to me. Heck, if anything, I should be trying to measure up to you. You’re creative, you’re funny, and you’re like, the biggest social butterfly I’ve ever seen.”

“You mean it?” Mabel asked with a small smile.

“Of course I do,” Dipper nodded firmly. “And now I feel like a big jerk about being so petty over this height thing all day…”

“Don’t you mean a little jerk?” Mabel joked with light laugh, one that Dipper, as well as Steven and Soos joined in on.

“Alright, I walked right into that one,” Dipper chuckled warmly. “Are we cool?”

“We’re cool,” Mabel smiled, giving her brother a solid fist bump of reconciliation.

“Yay! We’re cool!” Steven cheered happily as he embraced both twins before Baby Melon did the same to the young Gem.

“Let me get in there, dudes,” Soos joined the group hug, squeezing all of the kids fondly. Even if their situation seemed bleak, at the very least they were at last all in harmony with each other. And perhaps through that harmony, they would be able to find a way to save the day after all…

The Watermelon Stevens preceded Gideon as they entered the mirror maze room, acting as bodyguards on all sides of the child psychic as he caught sight of the con man standing amongst the countless mirrors. “Stanford!” he growled vengefully, refusing to be made a fool of again.

“Oh, hi, Gideon,” Stan greeted with little concern, though he did quickly take notice of the crowd of Watermelon Stevens. “Hey! Where’d you get those?! I swear, kid, you better have paid full price for all those melons, or I’m gonna-”

“Pay for ‘em?” Gideon interrupted with a cold laugh. “I don’t think so. They’re my own personal army! And together, we’re gonna destroy you and those darn Crystal Gems, and take this shack!”
“Sure you are,” the con man rolled his eyes. “By the way, I’ve been looking for someone other than Amethyst and Pearl to try out my new mirror maze. Then again, you’re an idiot. That’s the end of the sentence.”

The child psychic clenched his fists in rage as Stan ran off into the maze, laughing mockingly all the while. “You come back here!” he shouted, shaking his fist at his rival.

“Try and find me, twerp!” Stan called back from wherever he was in the maze.

Not wanting to waste a second, Gideon decided to kill two birds as he turned to his army of Watermelon Stevens with a new command. “Fan out and find the Gems!” he ordered harshly. “Or else!” The watermelons complied after the child psychic tapped the top of the bottle in his pocket as a grim reminder of what could happen to their true leader. However, what Gideon didn’t notice as he headed off into the mirror maze after Stan was that his tiny captives were making a break from their jar prison. And, by all accounts, they were succeeding.

Working together, the group had managed to tower on top of each other high enough to pry the jar open without the child psychic noticing. Fortunately, their small size was an advantage in this case, as it allowed them to climb out of Gideon’s pocket without being spotted.

“Oh, we need to get that flashlight back before Gideon finds Stan or any of the Gems,” Dipper firmly reminded the others.

“There it is!” Steven excitedly pointed to the nearby flashlight, which was resting in Gideon’s other suit pocket. Despite how close it was to them, trying to reach it using a straightforward approach could easily lead to disaster if they were caught. Which was why the unanimously agreed to carefully climb around to the child psychic’s back to avoid being detected.

“Whoa! His hair is so shiny!” Mabel exclaimed in wonder as she took in the pristine brightness of Gideon’s white hair.

“No!” Dipper quickly pulled his sister back before she could so much as touch it. “Don’t look directly at it!”

“His neck is really squishy!” Soos remarked as he jumped into the child psychic’s generous love handles. “Hey look! I’m making fat angles!”

“Ew! Termites!” Gideon cringed, feeling this sudden disturbance on the back of his neck. A mere swipe of the child psychic’s hand was enough to knock the handyman clean off, much to the kids’ shared alarm.

“Tell my storyyyy!” Soos called up as he fell. Thankfully, he made a safe landing in the shag rug down below, and even better, made an exciting discovery as he rose to stand. “Hey, there you are!” he exclaimed, picking up the half-eaten chip he had dropped days ago before taking a bite. “Thought you could get away from me, eh corn chip?”

Meanwhile, Gideon continued to peruse Stan through the mirror maze, growing increasingly frustrated that the con man was seemingly reflected all around him yet still out of reach. However, the child psychic was quick to remember his other targets, especially as he overheard two of them arguing nearby.

“There you are, Amethyst!” Pearl huffed in exasperation as she finally caught up to the purple Gem. “I can’t believe we wasted all this time chasing you through this mess of mirrors!”

“Hey, nobody told you that you had to run after me,” Amethyst retorted, rolling her eyes.
“Aha!” Gideon exclaimed as he leapt out from behind one of the mirrors, already aiming the flashlight at the two Gems. “Stay right where you are! You ladies are cornered!”

After a small bout of awkward silence, Amethyst and Pearl simply broke down into uncontrollable laughter at this demand. “Are you serious, dude?” the purple Gem chuckled mockingly. “You really think we’re afraid of you and some dinky little flashlight?”

“Oh you will be… after I do this!” Gideon quickly flipped the flashlight on, cackling wildly as the pink beam shined upon the two Gems. However, his supposed triumph soon turned to bewilderment as he realized his foes weren’t getting any smaller. In fact, they weren’t changing size at all. Instead, they simply stood there, staring in confusion at the child psychic as he desperately beat against the side of the flashlight in the hopes of getting it to work properly. From their vantage point, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel let out a shared sigh of relief as they realized, for whatever miraculous reason, the flashlight had no effect on the Gems at all.

“W-what?!” Gideon exclaimed, aghast. “Why ain’t it working?! It’s supposed to be working!”

“Oh… this is really embarrassing…” Amethyst remarked with an awkward frown.

“Wait a second…” Pearl squinted at the small crystal tied to the front of the flashlight. “No, it can’t be… Is that… a piece of the magnitude modulator?!”

“Magnitude what-now?” Amethyst asked, rolling her eyes as Gideon continued to try and fix the flashlight.

“The magnitude modulator!” the white Gem repeated, annoyed. “It was built by Gems ages ago in order to aid in construction by shrinking down or sizing up organic materials. That’s why it doesn’t work on us; we’re manifestations of light!”

“Oh, the size crystal things?!” the purple Gem exclaimed in realization. “Darn it! I thought I told Dipper not to tell anyone about that thing!” She quickly retracted this statement, however, upon seeing the questioning expression Pearl gave her. “Uh… I mean, I don’t know anything about them! Heh, yeah…”

“Listen, Gideon,” Pearl began, her tone very firm as she took a step forward. “You need to hand that flashlight over right now. Its empowered with ancient Gem technology, and you have no business—”

“You really think I’m gonna just hand such a powerful tool over to you?” Gideon scoffed, keeping the flashlight close to him. “Even if this didn’t work on ya’ll, I know something that will!” With a simple whistle, the child psychic beckoned all of the Watermelon Stevens to him in less than a minute. Pearl and Amethyst gasped in shocked unison upon seeing the army of familiar watermelons.

“They’re alive?!” the purple Gem asked in disbelief.

“They most certainly are,” Gideon said with a dark, satisfied grin. “And they’re about to take you Gems down a peg or two… Watermelons! Get them!”

At this command, the watermelons didn’t hesitate to pounce on the two Gems, their violent nature taking control. Regardless, Pearl and Amethyst were ready for the initial onslaught as they quickly summoned their weapons, slicing through the first several melons easily. Still, as crowded as they were, there was little they could do to keep Gideon from running off to continue his search for Stan.
“Garnet!” Pearl called out, wanting alert their leader of the situation immediately. “We’re under—”

“Attack, I know.” Garnet said calmly as she jumped down into the fray, her gauntlets already summoned to fight back.

“Steven’s watermelon guys came to life!” Amethyst informed her, lashing her whip out at one of them. “And somehow that punk Gideon got them to attack us!”

“It makes sense,” the Gem leader replied as she punched one of the watermelons to pieces. “Rose’s plants lived to fight.”

“But how in the world did Gideon of all people get them to listen to him?!” Pearl asked, cutting a watermelon’s head clean off. “They’re supposed to be listening to Steven!”

Garnet clenched her fists even tighter as she glanced in the direction the child psychic had taken off in, already knowing the reason why. “It’s because Gideon captured Steven and the twins.”

“What?!” Pearl and Amethyst exclaimed in horrified unison.

“That little scoundrel!” the white Gem hissed, gripping her spear as she prepared to chase after the child psychic. “We have to rescue them!”

“No,” Garnet quickly stopped her. “We have to take care of these watermelons. And besides, they have it covered.”

The other two Gems gave their leader a confused look, but listened to her counsel nonetheless as they continued brawling against the murderous melons. They knew better than to question Garnet on something like this, and even still, the kids had proven themselves capable of getting out of tight spots before. Certainly, they could do it again.

Satisfied that the Watermelon Stevens could handle the Gems, Gideon maneuvered his way through the mirror maze, ready to shrink Stan down the moment he caught sight of him. On a knee jerk reaction, the child psychic fired off a beam from the flashlight the moment he spotted the con man’s reflection in a nearby mirror. Of course, the light simply bounced off the glass onto another mirror, which rebounded it again and again without somehow hitting anything.

“Hey, Mr. Pines!” Greg called as he entered the parlor, carrying Stan’s fez. “I found your—” The former rock star was abruptly cut off as the flashlight beam suddenly bolted right past him, only missing him by a few inches as it struck the moose head on the wall next to him, instantly shrinking it down. “Yikes!” Greg exclaimed in alarm as he turned his attention to the chaos unfolding in the room down below him. On one side of the room, the Gems were engulfed in a rather intense battle against the Watermelon Stevens, and on the other, Gideon had taken to using the flashlight to break the surrounding mirrors so he could find Stan easier. Knowing that it was best to not get involved with magical situations such as these, Greg simply placed the fez on the banister and slowly began to back out of the room. “Uh… I’ll come back later…”

“Hey, watch the merchandise!” Stan shouted angrily as Gideon continued randomly smashing mirrors in a demented frenzy. After shattering several more of them, the child psychic’s plan finally worked as the con man himself appeared, storming towards him, aptly enraged. “You little troll! Those mirrors cost me ten—I mean, twenty five—five hundred—five hundred dollars each, and you’re paying for all of them!”
“Oh contraire…” Gideon smirked, holding the flashlight up. “It’ll be you who pays!”

“We’re too late!” Steven mourned as him, Dipper, and Mabel peeked their heads out of the child psychic’s suit.

“Grunkle Stan is doomed!” Mabel exclaimed woefully as Gideon took careful aim at Stan.

“Not entirely doomed!” Dipper corrected, coming up with a sudden idea. “Quick! To his armpit!”

“Uh… what?” Steven frowned in confusion as Mabel shook her head in absolute protest.

“Just come on!” Dipper urged, pushing both of them down into Gideon’s suit as Baby Melon complacently followed.

“What is that thing?” Stan asked with slight alarm as Gideon used the flashlight to back him into the nearby wall.

The child psychic didn’t really answer, however, as he launched into another villainous monologue, his victory secured. “Finally, after all these years, after every humiliation!” Gideon grinned wickedly, the flashlight flickering in preparation. “Your business, your family, everything will finally be mine! You have no one to protect you now! Prepare for the wrath of Gideon Glee—”

He cut himself off, biting back an involuntary laugh before trying again. “Gideon Glee—oh, oh, hahahaha!”

Stan simply watched in absolute confusion as Gideon suddenly collapsed to the ground, dropping the flashlight as he laughed uncontrollably. “Uh… I don’t even know how to respond to this…” the con man remarked with an uncomfortable frown.

“N-no! No! Stop it! Hahaha!” the child psychic continued to howl with unrestrained laughter, rolling around on the ground to try and shake off whatever unseen force was tickling him. Unbeknownst to him, his four tiny captives were the ones who were ultimately subduing him as they worked together by tickling him all at once. And as far as they could tell, their plan was working perfectly.

“Um, look, kid, I think this rivalry is getting to you,” Stan said over Gideon’s crazed chuckling. “I understand. I mean, I’m a pretty formidable foe. What can I say?”

Unable to regain his bearings, Gideon let out an enraged growl amidst his unstoppable laughter. Tired of whatever theatrics the child psychic was trying to play, the con man merely rolled his eyes and continued. “Hey now, come on! You’ll get me one of these days!” he patronized insincerely.

“Maybe you should, you know, run your evil plan by some friends next time. Workshop it. But first, get your issues in order there.” Seeing that Gideon was still in the midst of his frenzied fit, Stan decided that it was finally time to kick him out, literally. He used his foot to roll the child psychic across the floor, ignoring his laughed protest as he pushed him towards the door. “Up over the carpet, there we go, around the end table, and out the door.” Unceremoniously, Stan pushed Gideon out, allowing him to clumsily roll down the porch steps and onto the grass. Luckily, Dipper, Mabel, Steven, and Baby Melon managed to jump off the child psychic before it was too late, and they landed safely on the porch.

Free from the incessant tickling, Gideon scrambled to his feet, panicking as he realized the flashlight was gone. “My light!”

“You’re the light of my life too, pal,” Stan deadpanned, shutting the door in the child psychic’s face. “Wow, what a freak show.”
With the flashlight finally out of Gideon’s hands, the kids raced for it, all of them eager to return to their original sizes. Upon Steven’s insistence, Baby Melon was the first to be sized back up, followed by the young Gem himself. When the twins’ turn came around, Mabel was pleasantly surprised to see Dipper motioning for her to go first. “After you,” he said with an amicable smile.

“It’s ok,” Mabel also grinned as she shook her head. “You can go first if you want—whoa!” She gasped as her brother suddenly turned the light on, bringing her back up to her regular height. In light of this show of selflessness, she gladly did the same for him, though she didn’t let him slip away before doing a quick check out their respective heights out of sheer curiosity. “Hey, you let me keep my extra millimeter!” she exclaimed brightly.

“You earned it,” Dipper shrugged contentedly. After all, if he had learned anything after spending the day being only a few inches tall, it was that a mere millimeter didn’t matter in the slightest. Especially if it got in between him and his sister.

“Aww… Thanks, little brother!” Mabel laughed as she gave him a hug.

“Stop it,” Dipper succinctly said, not ready to fall right back into arguing with her after everything that happened.

“I’m so glad you guys are getting along again!” Steven grinned joyously. The shared delight of the moment was suddenly broken, however, as the sound of several of the mirrors breaking sounded out on the other side of the room. Baby Melon took particular notice of this as he started pulling on the young Gem’s arm desperately, abruptly reminding him of the other danger they still had to face. “Oh my gosh, you’re right, Baby Melon! We still have to go help the Gems! Come on, you guys!”

“We’ll catch up with you in a second!” Mabel called out after Steven and Baby Melon as they hurried into the maze. “So, I guess we should destroy this thing, huh?” she asked Dipper, holding out the flashlight to him. “You know, so it doesn’t fall into the wrong hands and junk?”

“Seems like the smart thing to do,” Dipper agreed as he untied the crystal from the flashlight before handing it to Mabel.

“Die!” Mabel shouted, throwing the crystal onto the ground and smashing it with her foot. No more than a second after she did so, however, a small, but familiar voice caught the twins’ attention.

“There you dudes are!” Soos called, shouting to be heard thanks to his still miniscule height. “I’ve been trying to get your attention!” And indeed he had, as he had used several small shards of broken glass to spell out “Help Soos!” on the ground. Dipper and Mabel exchanged a horrified glance as they looked between the tiny handyman and the size-changing crystal, shattered to hundreds of little pieces on the floor. It would take a while, but it was immediately clear what they needed to do.

“Glue?”

“Lots of glue.”

Steven was aptly shocked as he reached the altercation that was going on between the Gems and his watermelon look-alikes. With wide eyes, he watched as Garnet plowed her fists into the cluster of Watermelon Stevens clinging to her leg, rendering them to mere chunks. Pearl moved swiftly
and deftly, spinning her spear as she cut several of the watermelons in half like the fruits they were. Amethyst flung her whip out, catching quite a few Watermelon Stevens on his barbs, before drawing it back to her and crushing them mercilessly in the process. Anxiety filled the young Gem as he watched this violent display. He had never wanted his watermelons to hurt anyone; he had simply wanted to give them to good homes where they would be loved and cared for. But thanks to Gideon tricking them and forcing them into such senseless brutality, they were thoughtlessly opposing the Gems and meeting horrific ends because of it.

“Wait, don’t!” Steven called to the Gems, trying to break into the fray with the hopes of ending it. Unfortunately, the wall of Watermelon Stevens between him and them was too thick, so he would just have to find another way. “Come on, Baby Melon! We have to stop this!”

The Gems hadn’t noticed Steven’s arrival as they continued duking out with the melons, though it was quickly becoming apparent that they were vastly outnumbered. The watermelons had seemed to catch onto what a powerhouse Garnet was, which was why ganged up on her first. Though the Gem leader was fast, she wasn’t fast enough to shake off the daunting number of Watermelon Stevens all pouncing upon her at once, dragging her down with them. Steven gasped as he saw this, desperate to get both sides to stand down and get along. “Everyone! Please stop!” he shouted, hoping that the Watermelon Stevens would heed his command. “I’m ok, look! You don’t have to fight anymore!”

“Ahhh!” Amethyst’s frightened scream suddenly caught the young Gem’s attention. He spun around to see that the Watermelon Stevens had managed to subdue her, holding her down as several more of them dug a hole right outside the window. “They’re gonna put me in the ground!” The purple Gem continued to cry and thrash about, especially as another Watermelon Steven carried a large bouquet of violets up to the hole they planned on burying her in. “Those flowers are lovely!”

Before Steven could hurry over to help Amethyst, he was distracted by Pearl’s frustrated shout nearby. “Let go of my spear, you little twerps!” the white Gem growled, trying to tug her weapon away from the group of melons that had latched onto it. “I’ll destroy you!”

Knowing the situation was getting worse by the second, Steven swallowed hard, realizing that the Watermelon Stevens were in too much of a frenzy to listen to him whatsoever. “This is bad, Baby Melly,” he frowned apprehensively, turning to the small melon. “How do we end this carnage?”

Baby Melon remained still for a moment, closing its seed eyes as it met the young Gem’s fearful gaze. And then, in a move that Steven could have never seen coming, Baby Melon suddenly lashed out, punching him hard and squarely in the stomach. Steven let out a pained grunt as he fell back, and as soon as they heard this, all of the other watermelons instantly ceased their fighting. With almost one mindset, the Watermelon Stevens turned towards the smallest among them, leaving the confused Gems behind as they slowly began to approach it.

“B-Baby Melon?” Steven coughed, holding his injured stomach as he looked up to his small companion in bewilderment. However, Baby Melon’s odd actions soon became clear as the other watermelons all jumped on it, tearing the small melon apart in a horrifically vicious display. The young Gem gasped in alarm as he jumped to his feet, rushing into the horde and pushing his way through the watermelons as they began to calm down. “Let me through, you melon heads!”

Tears were already welling up in Steven’s eyes as he glanced down at what little remained of Baby Melon. The small melon had been beaten to pieces; only a portion of its rind was left in tact and it was filled with the chunked remains pink fruit. “B-Baby M-Melon…” the young Gem choked out a sob as he gently picked up what was left of his small companion. “I understand… You stopped
the watermelons from fighting everyone else… by making them fight you…”

Deeply upset over this turn of events, Steven stood, holding Baby Melon’s remains up for the other Watermelon Stevens to see. “Look what you’ve done!” he shouted morosely. “You think I wanted this?! You should all be ashamed! He knew this was what it would take to calm your rage! He… he understood true loyalty…”

A pregnant silence passed as the Gems exchanged a glance, all of them somewhat impressed with the firm manner their young ward was taking with his rebellious watermelons. “Go!” Steven commanded, pointing at the door. “Think about what you’ve done! And don’t come back until you understand what he did for me. For all of us!”

Finally listening to their intended leader, the Watermelon Stevens did so without complaint. Quietly and orderly, they all departed, exiting the shack and ultimately disappearing into the woods outside. Stan was quick to take notice of this as he saw several of them pass him by, and though he was alarmed that they could move on their own, he was even more alarmed that they were leaving. “Hey! Hey!” he shouted as he ran up to Steven and the Gems. “Why is my money walking out the door?!”

“They’re doing what they need to, Mr. Pines,” Steven remarked solemnly. “It’s the only way they can really grow.”

“They’re watermelons!” Stan protested gruffly. “They’ve already grown!”

“Um, did we miss anything?” Dipper asked as him, Mabel, and Soos joined the group. Fortunately, they had managed to reconstruct the crystal enough to restore the handyman to his full height again, but in doing so, they had missed the entire battle against the Watermelon Stevens.

“You guys sure did,” Amethyst remarked with a grin. “Steven just thrashed his watermelon guys! It was awesome!”

“Oh no!” Mabel gasped as she noticed the watermelon chunks the young Gem was holding. “Is… is that… Baby Melon?! What happened?”

“He made the ultimate sacrifice…” Steven sighed sadly, looking down at Baby Melon’s remains. “He was the true hero today…”

The young Gem’s melancholy was interrupted, however, as Garnet placed a consoling hand on his shoulder. “Spoken like a true king.”

“They don’t need a king,” Steven said with resolve. “They’re their own melons now.”

Regardless, everyone else (save for Stan, who was still quite disgruntled) joined in on Garnet’s show of pride. A long bout of silence passed as they all turned to watch the last of the Watermelon Stevens vanish into the woods, left to an unknown fate. Still, the others were a bit disconcerted as Steven began snacking on the sweet, juicy remains of Baby Melon, as if it had just been another watermelon. And, in a way, it was. Just another watermelon, who had happened to save them all.

In light of his most recent defeat, Gideon was more incensed against both the Pines and the Gems more than ever before. The humiliation of this ordeal alone had been enough to convince him that he could no longer afford to play his enemies simple games. Next time around, he would have to take things to a whole new level. He wouldn’t, he couldn’t rest until he had won.
“Aw, son, don’t you mind that Stanford Pines or those Crystal Gems,” Bud tried to console his son as he heatedly paced around the living room. “You’ll get your revenge one of these days.”

“No!” Gideon shouted furiously, flipping over a chair in his burning rage. “It’s not just about revenge! I want that shack! The physical building!”

“But why?” Bud asked, confused.

“Because it holds a secret you couldn’t possibly imagine…” Gideon said ominously, his treacherous resolve as clear as ever. “A secret that’ll help me get everything I’ve ever wanted… And no one, I mean no one is gonna keep me from gettin’ it…”
Chapter 19: Gems and Journals

Chapter Summary

In which the kids explore the temple and accidentally wreck shit and the Gems discover the journal and flip the fuck out

Chapter Notes

K, so I'm a little late uploading this here since I already put it up on fanfic.net, and tumblr, but here it is anyway! Chapter 19! Which is actually basically all original, so enjoy!

“3... 2... 1... GOLF!”

The announcer’s enthusiastic call was all Steven and Mabel needed to launch themselves into an intense round of Golf Quest Mini: Battle Royale. Dipper and Connie spectated from their spot on the bed as the two of them fiercely duked it out in a combatant golf match, completely engrossed in the fast paced action.

“Oh no! A wild windmill appeared!” Mabel gasped, lifting her controller up frantically.

“Whoever beats it has their score go back to 0!” Steven exclaimed, quickly mashing buttons. “I could really use that right now, especially since I’m close to hitting par!”

“Sorry, Steven, but it looks like I’m gonna sink this hole-in-one!” Mabel cheered as she landed the final blow on the windmill, reducing her score back to a perfect zero. Steven let out a fake groan of defeat but continued playing anyway in the hopes that he could somehow still come out on top.

“Wow! Mabel is really good at this!” Connie remarked to Dipper. “Isn’t this her first time playing this?”

“Yeah, but mini-golf is like Mabel’s element,” he replied with a grin. “There’s no beating her at it. Though... this isn’t exactly close to what mini-golf is life in real life...”

“Yes! I won!” Mabel exclaimed happily. A triumphant tune played from the game as her character knocked Steven’s off the screen with a hearty whack of her golf club. “Pay up, Universe!”

“Aw, man...” Steven signed, handing Mabel a huge bag of gummy worms, which she was more than happy to take.

“Mabel, please don’t eat all of those in one sitting,” Dipper advised sensibly. “You haven’t
forgotten about the funnel cake incident, have you?"

“Pfft, please, bro-bro,” Mabel scoffed, already preparing to shove a handful of gummy worms into her mouth. “This will be nothing like the funnel cake incident. I’ve learned a thing or two about self-control since then.”

“What’s the story behind the ‘funnel cake incident’?” Connie asked with a bewildered smirk.

“Believe me,” Dipper crossed his arms. “You don’t wanna know.”

“So, Steven…” Mabel gave the young Gem a challenging grin as she prepared to devour more gummy worms. “Up for another round against the champ?”

“I would, but my thumbs are a little sore after that last one,” Steven laughed. “But we could do something else! I’m sure we’ll run into some sort of weird or magical thing if we went into town. It’s like an everyday occurrence around here.”

“Yeah!” Connie chimed in her agreement. “I’ve been wanting to go on another adventure with you guys! We may almost die every time we go on one, but I gotta admit: they’re really fun.”

“Woo! Let’s go on a crazy fun mystery hunt!” Mabel jumped up, ready to go. “Or a high-stakes magic hunt. Whatever we run into first.”

“Why go on a mystery hunt when we have a whole book full of them?” Dipper asked with a grin as he pulled the journal out of his vest. “We could just pick something out of here and go looking for it. I’ve been meaning to add onto the notes about some of the creatures in here anyway.”

“You’ve been adding your own notes to it?” Steven asked curiously as they all crowded around to look at the journal. “That’s really cool, Dipper!”

“Eh, just a few pages in the back,” Dipper shrugged, flipping back to the blank pages he had jotted down his own discoveries on. “Nothing impressive. Not like all this!” With something of a dramatic flair, he turned the journal back to the beginning, where many of the diverse and strange oddities of Gravity Falls were documented in great detail. Dipper turned through the pages slowly so everyone could get a better look at their options for their potential adventure were.

“Floating eyeballs!” Steven exclaimed in amazement. “I bet it wouldn’t be too hard to spot them!”

“Giant vampire bats?!” Mabel gasped, stars in her eyes. “Yes!”

“No,” Dipper quickly turned her down. “I’ve read about them and they don’t turn into sparkling shirtless vampires, if that’s what you’re hoping for.”

“Darn it!”

“What about gnomes?” Connie asked. “They don’t look too-”

“No!” the twins exclaimed in immediate unison, both of them remembering their dangerous run-in with the gnomes all too well.

“The portal potty?” Steven laughed in amusement. “That sounds like fun! And we wouldn’t have to worry about taking a bathroom break until we found it.”

“Or how about barf faries?” Connie inquired, though she was quick to cringe away from the idea upon saying it out loud. “On second though… never mind.”
“We could always go looking for a hawktopus!” Mabel suggested, squinting to see what was written about it. “Looks like Mr. Author didn’t write anything down about it cause its ‘too stupid to study’. Huh, I wonder why.”

“I’m sure he had his reasons,” Dipper said, pulling the book away from her a bit. “Maybe we should just go looking for-”

He was abruptly interrupted as the front door suddenly slammed open. As the others whipped around to see who was intruding, Dipper quickly shoved the out of sight, anticipating that it was one of the Gems. His hunch turned out to be correct as Amethyst barged in, shapeshifted into a police officer and wielding a large water gun.

“Dumb police!” the purple Gem bellowed in a deep, playful voice, pointing her weapon at the kids up on the loft. “Uh… you guys are dumb!” Before they could even brace themselves, Amethyst fired a steady stream of water at them, easily dowsing them all as she let out a mischievous chuckle. While Steven and Mabel laughingly accepted the soaking, Dipper and Connie were a bit less receptive to it as they used their arms to shield themselves against the watery blast.

“Amethyst!” Pearl scolded as her and Garnet entered the house a moment later. “Stop that this ins-”

The white Gem found herself cut off as Amethyst turned to her, only to completely drench her and the Gem leader with little remorse. Garnet was hardly phased by this, but Pearl didn’t hesitate to show her heated annoyance. “Amethyst!”

“Oh man, I totally got all of you!” the purple Gem smirked as she shapeshifted back into her usual form. “Especially you guys!” she turned to the kids. “You should have seen your faces!”

“Sorry, kids,” Pearl apologized in exasperation as she wrung out her sash. “I tried to stop her before she came in, but of course, she wouldn’t listen.”

“Eh, no worries. That actually felt pretty good!” Mabel shrugged blithely, poking at her sopping sweater.

“Speak for yourself,” Dipper said, frowning at his dripping-wet vest.

“So what are you guys up to today?” Amethyst asked the kids with a casual grin. “Anything exciting?”

“Well,” Steven began. “We were gonna go out and look for some kind of monster or magical creature using the j-“

“JUST o-our intuition and luck!” Dipper quickly interrupted. The Gems tuned to him with unified confusion, but he did his best to play it off with an awkward laugh. “Y-you know… like you do…”

“Oh…” Pearl said after a beat of silence. “Well, if you are going monster hunting, please be careful out there! There are plenty of perfectly benign creatures in Gravity Falls, true, but there are even more ravenous, blood thirsty ones.”

“Are there any that you guys would recommend?” Connie asked curiously.

“Just don’t go looking for a lepeween,” Garnet advised stoically, leading the way to the temple door. “It’s not worth the annoyance.”

“And try not to get killed or anything,” Amethyst remarked jokingly. “We wouldn’t want to have to come save your butts.”
“Amethyst!” Pearl chastised as the purple Gem slipped into the temple with a sly laugh. “She didn’t mean that,” she said to the kids. “If you four get into any trouble, we’ll be more than happy to come and save you.”

“How will you guys know if we get into trouble?” Mabel asked with a frown.

“We’ll know,” Garnet assured, mysteriously adjusting her shades as she opened her own door to the temple and headed inside.

“Just be sure to exercise the proper amount of caution and you should be fine,” Pearl assured, using her Gem to open her specific temple door. “Oh, and take plenty of water with you! It’s hot out and you don’t want to get dehydrated.”

“Don’t worry, Pearl!” Steven called after the white Gem. “We will!”

“Very good,” Pearl nodded with a satisfied smile. “Have fun!”

With one final wave, the temple door shut behind the last Gem, leaving the kids alone once more.

“That was too close…” Dipper muttered in relief as he pulled the journal back out.

“Now that’s something I’d like to go investigate…” Connie mused, still looking to the temple door.

“What? The Temple?” Steven asked.

“Yes!” Mabel enthusiastically agreed. “The temple has got to be one of the most mysterious, probably coolest things in Gravity Falls! Aside from the Gems themselves, of course.”

“Yeah, except that the Gems said we’re not allowed inside, remember?” Dipper reminded with the slightest hint of bitterness in his tone. “Apparently it’s ‘too dangerous for humans’.”

“Dangerous-schmangerous!” Mabel scoffed, standing. “After everything that’s happened this summer so far, it couldn’t be too scary, could it?”

“Plus, why would the Gems live in there if it was so risky?” Connie wondered. “It doesn’t make a whole lot of sense when you really think about it.”

“Aww, come on guys,” Steven said with a defensive frown. “I’m sure the Gems have their reasons for not wanting us to go in there. We should respect that.”

“Yeah, but what if the reason why they don’t want is in there is because they’re hiding something.” Dipper said, masking his suspicion behind curiosity. After all, the journal alone was evidence enough for him that the Gems were keeping secrets of their own. Secrets that, for some reason or another, they didn’t want getting out. Secrets that, Dipper knew, would provide answers to many of his pressing questions and then some. “Steven, don’t tell me you’ve never wondered about what might be in there.”

“I… I have, but…” the young Gem bit his lip anxiously. “Well, I can’t even get in there! My Gem won’t open the door.”

“I’m sure you could do it if you tried, Steven,” Connie said with an encouraging smile. “I mean, you healed my eyes even though you thought you couldn’t. How is that any different from opening up a door?”

“Yeah!” Mabel exclaimed before launching into supportive cheers. “Steven! Steven!”
Steven looked away nervously as Dipper and Connie joined in the excited chant. Truth be told, he really did want to know what secrets the Gem’s mysterious temple held inside of it. But the last thing he ever wanted to do was go against his own guardian’s wishes. He had always listened well to what the Gems told him, for he trusted that they only wanted to keep him safe and happy. But at the same time, he did have his doubts every now and again. If the temple was so dangerous, then why had the Gems never divulged exactly why? Why had they never bothered to at least explain what was inside the temple and why they didn’t want him seeing it? He would have been quite content with just that, a mere clarification of it all, but like many matters, they had never trusted him with it. Which was why the young Gem finally caved into his friends’ curiosity, and his own.

“Ok, ok!” Steven rose to stand. “I’ll try it. But I can’t guarantee this is even gonna work.”

“Come on, Steven, you got this,” Dipper reassured as they all started to head down to the temple door. “If you can’t do this, no one can. Figuratively and literally, since you’re the only one of us who could possibly do this.”

“Um… thanks?” the young Gem frowned in confusion. As he came to stand before the imposing door, Steven swallowed hard. His apprehension only grew as he realized that Dipper, Mabel, and Connie were all watching him in intent silence. He could sense just how excited they were and just how much they wanted this. It was a feeling he honestly shared, especially as he lifted his shirt up and aimed his gem towards the door, staring hard at its replica at the top of the star. “Come on, door…” he whispered, straining in the hopes that it would make his gem work. “Open!”

Everyone held their breath in anticipation as they looked to the door. Of course, they all deflated in disappointed unison when it failed to show a single sign of budging. But by far, the most disappointed of them all, was Steven.

“Oh, come on!” the young Gem exclaimed, quite frustrated. “I could have sworn I was starting to feel some sort of magic!”

“Aw, don’t worry about it, Steven,” Mabel smiled as she put a consoling hand on the young Gem’s shoulder. “You’ll totally get it next time! Just like you did with your healing spit!”

“This is completely different!” Steven pulled his shoulder away. “You guys were all counting on me, and I let you all down. No wonder the Gems never let me in on anything… I’ll never be like them or my mom…”

“Steven, don’t say things like that!” Connie exclaimed earnestly. “You know that’s not true!”

“Yeah,” Dipper agreed with sincerity. “You’re just… It’s sort of like…” He paused for a moment, unsure of really how to properly comfort the young Gem, until he happened to come up with something he hoped would help. “Maybe you’re just a bit of a… late bloomer.”

“Sorta like you, Dipper,” Mabel began to tease, though her brother was quick to cut her off. “Not now.”

“The point is,” Connie brought the conversation back on track, taking Steven’s hand. “You’ll get there, Steven. It might just take some time. And if it does, then don’t worry about it. We’ll be here with you for every step of the way.”

The twins nodded their wholehearted agreement with this and Steven couldn’t help but smile as he wiped away the tears that were starting to come. “Thanks, you guys,” he said warmly. “I… I needed that. I guess I just get a little down whenever I try to compare myself to the Gems. But
you’re right, Connie. I can’t give up! I just have to keep trying! And then someday, I’ll finally be a full-fledged Crystal Gem!” The young Gem grinned boldly as he concluded his speech, though his smile faded as he realized the others weren’t looking at him at all. Instead, their gaze was fixated behind him, their eyes wide in shock and disbelief as a strange pink light fell upon them. “Uh… guys?” Steven asked in confusion. He quickly realized what all the amazement was about however, as Dipper turned him around to face the temple gate. “Whoa…”

The top gemstone on the door’s star was, against all odds, glowing a bright shade of pink. Steven quickly pulled his shirt up again to confirm that his own gem was indeed doing the same exact thing. A gentle chime sounded as the door began to peel back from the center in the vague shape of a rose, until it was completely gone. The kids gaped in awe at the side of the vast, pink, cloudy expanse that lay just beyond the doorframe, which was now finally within their reach.

“AHHH!” Mabel suddenly squealed in excitement. The silent wonder of the moment was abruptly broken as she locked Steven into a congratulatory hug. “Steven! You did it! You opened the door!”

“I… guess I did!” Steven grinned widely. “I don’t know how I did it, but I did it!”

“See? We knew you could do it,” Connie affirmed with a bright smile.

“Look at all this! It’s incredible!” Dipper exclaimed as he took a step closer to the open door and glanced inside. “It’s like some sort of endless sky in there. We have to go check it out!”

“But the Gems are in there! What if they catch us?” the young Gem asked, his further apprehension returning.

“Eh, the temple’s huge,” Mabel shrugged. “Or at least it is from the outside. We probably won’t even run into the Gems at all.”

“And if we do, then maybe they won’t be so mad,” Connie said. “Who knows? Maybe they’ll even be excited about you opening the door on your own.”

“I hope…” Steven frowned, not wanting to upset his guardians over something like this. Still, he couldn’t deny that this was an opportunity that he didn’t want to pass up. “And I guess there’s no harm in just looking around…”

“That’s the spirit!” Mabel exclaimed, giving the young Gem a small push towards the door. “Now let’s go! I’m so excited, I can hardly wait!”

The others laughed at her elated enthusiasm, which was something they all shared as they stood before the temple gate. None of them were quite sure about what they would find inside, but regardless, they were all completely thrilled for whatever adventure they were certainly about to face. And so, without any further hesitation, the four of them entered into the mysterious, magical temple, without even so much as thinking about a certain journal that had been left behind.

All four of the kids were encapsulated in absolute awe as they entered within the temple itself. Their first surprise was that, even though it looked like the scenery was nothing but clouds, there seemed to be some sort of solid ground supporting them so that they didn’t just fall through the endless expanse. Whatever room they seemed to be in apparently had no borders or boundaries whatsoever. There were no walls or breaks in the fluffy pink clouds to break through the vast skyscape, giving it the illusion that it went on forever, which it very well might have. But even so, aside from the clouds themselves, the room was empty, devoid of any other feature save for its
four intrepid guests.

Of course, the kids only had a moment to stare at their bewildering new surroundings before the door they had come through suddenly disappeared behind them in a puff of pink clouds. They all spun around in surprise at this, especially considering that there was not any sign of another exit in sight.

“That can’t be good,” Dipper remarked with a frown.

“Eh, I’m sure we’ll be able to get out of here somehow,” Mabel shrugged, unconcerned. “Can’t you just reopen the door for us again when we want to leave, Steven?”

“I don’t know,” Steven shrugged honestly, though he was really too elated to care at the moment. “But for now, look at all this! Its huge in here!”

“And so empty…” Connie mused, taking a step forward. “This can’t be all there is, can it?”

“It couldn’t be,” Dipper shook his head. “I mean, what would the Gems even use a giant empty room like this for anyway?”

“Maybe they use it to practice skydiving!” Mabel exclaimed. With a brazen laugh, she leapt into the air, before quickly plummeting and belly flopping onto the clouds beneath her. “Ah! What a soft landing!”

“Oh, I wanna try!” Steven grinned daringly. However, no more than a second after he had said this, the young Gem suddenly found himself standing atop a high platform that had just appeared completely out of nowhere. Steven gasped as he looked down at the others, who were quite a ways below him, all staring up at him in confusion.

“Whoa… How’d you do that, Steven?” Connie called up to the young Gem.

“I have no idea,” Steven said, his awed expression turning into a smile. “But still, this is perfect! Geronimo!” With an excited laugh, the young Gem leapt from his high perch, letting gravity pull him down into a freefall. However, his adrenaline soon turned to a sudden fear as he realized just how fast his descent really was. The cloudy ground might have been soft, true, but he wasn’t sure if it would be enough to cushion a fall from so high.

“O-ok! This might not have been the best idea!” Steven exclaimed fearfully as the others watched him with terrified concern. “I-I wish I had a parachute!” he cried, shielding his eyes from the clouds below. The moment the phrase escaped him, Steven instantly felt the speed of his fall greatly decrease. Shakily, he glanced up to a sight that filled him with a relief: against all odds, there was indeed a parachute strapped to his back, widely opened as it gradually and gently brought him back down to the ground. The moment he landed, the parachute suddenly disappeared into a puff of clouds, much like the platform did as soon as Steven had jumped off of it.

“Wow! That was crazy awesome!” Mabel exclaimed excitedly. “How’d you know that parachute thing would work?”

“I didn’t,” Steven shrugged. “I just sort of said it and it appeared! And I’m really glad it did. I thought I was a goner for a second there.”

“It’s almost like… like the room itself could hear what you wanted!” Connie concluded, her eyes wide with the realization.

“But that doesn’t make any sense…” Dipper frowned in confusion. “It’s just a room. How can it
know what anyone wants, much less give it to them?"

“It’s called magic, Dipper,” Mabel pointed out coyly. “And it’s my turn to try it! Room, can I please have a little of adorable puppies to play with? Oh, and can they have butterfly wings? And rainbow polka dots? Please?” She smiled expectantly, waiting for the colorful creatures to appear, only for the room to remain as silent and still as ever. “Hey, what gives? Where are my flying polka-dot puppies at?”

“Maybe something like that is too much for the room to handle?” Connie suggested.

“Maybe…” Steven mused with a nod. “Let me try. Room, can we get some puppies with butterfly wings and rainbow polka-dots?”

“That sparkle!” Mabel added.

“That sparkle.” As soon as Steven finished giving this request, the magical puppies themselves materialized instantly, flitting around the room as they glittered and barked happily.

Mabel could scarcely contain her elation upon seeing the floating puppies. “Yes! This is literally everything I have ever wanted!” she squealed, grabbing one of the puppies out of thin air and giving it an affectionate hug.

“This is just weird…” Dipper shook his head. “And I’m not just talking about the flying rainbow puppies. Though that’s weird too.”

“I think you mean adorable!” Mabel interjected, letting the puppy lick her face.

“The room seems to only grant your requests, Steven,” Dipper continued, turning to the young Gem. “Any idea as to why that might be?”

“I’m not sure…” Steven frowned. “I mean, each one of the Gems has their own door that goes into the temple, but I’ve never seen the one that opened for me before… I do remember Pearl talking about how my mom used to have her own room in here, but nobody’s been able to get into it since she’s been gone. So maybe, since I used her gem to open it, this is her room!”

“Then that would explain why the room only listens to you!” Connie exclaimed, her eyes wide. “Your gem must be connected to it in some way. It thinks you’re Rose!”

“Whoa…” Steven glanced down at the gem at his navel. “I… don’t really know how to feel about that.”

“I guess that makes about as much sense as anything else…” Dipper said, glancing around the already improbably skyscape around them. “Still, you gotta wonder how much this room can really do…”

“We can always find out,” the young Gem said with an eager grin.

“Yes!” Mabel cheered in agreement. “More puppies!”

“Actually, I was thinking something along the lines of… quadruple bunk-beds!” Steven exclaimed. Of course, a four tired-bunk bed instantly appeared underneath the kids, raising them all up as they sat on top together. “With slides! Water slides!” the young Gem added as four long, twisting waterslides jutted out from each side of the bed. The kids didn’t hesitate to enjoy them, each one taking to a different slide and laughing as they splashed down them. Each slide launched the kids into the air, but thankfully, none of them had to worry about falling as Steven called out his next
request. “Trampolines!” Sure enough, four trampolines appeared below the kids right as they landed, allowing them to bounce safely back onto the ground.

“Whoo!” Mabel cheered, flopping down into the clouds. “Let’s do that again!”

“Steven, this is great!” Dipper exclaimed with a laugh. “You can get literally anything you ask for in here! What do you have in mind next?”

“Oh, uh…. Hm…” the young Gem paused to ponder this, before blurring out the first thing that came to mind. “A tiny floating whale!”

Said tiny floating whale immediately poofed into existence, small and pink and smiling as it let out a light bellow. Steven and Mabel both fawned over the adorable creature as Dipper and Connie laughed in amusement. Indeed, it was as though the room could conjure up just about anything, from the simplest requests to the most complex. Or so it seemed.

“You know, as awesome as all this is, I sure am hungry,” Steven said after the excitement over the tiny floating whale died down. Right on cue, a donut appeared out of thin air, floating right next to the young Gem. “Well, don’t mind if I do!” he laughed, grabbing the donut. “In fact, donuts for everyone!” At Steven’s command, three more donuts materialized in front of Dipper, Mabel, and Connie, who happily took the treats. However, they all soon found out these donuts weren’t exactly edible as they all poofed away when the kids tried to eat them.

“Aw, what?” Mabel frowned, disappointed as she waved her hand around the space where the donut once was. “Come on! I was really looking forward to that donut!”

“Maybe I should have been more specific…” Steven mused. “Room, we want real donuts!”

Another round of donuts appeared, nearly identical to the first. And while the kids were expecting them to be tangible, once again, they were proven wrong as they tried taking a bite. “This is really weird…” Connie said with a bewildered frown. “I guess the room can’t make food for some reason.”

“Well, everything the room makes does seem to be made out of clouds…” Dipper mused. “So that might have something to do with it.”

“Aw, well. So what if we can use the room to make food?” Mabel shrugged contentedly. “We can still basically do anything else, right Steven?”

“Right!” Steven readily agreed, giving the tiny floating whale a hearty high five. “And since we can do anything, we might as well get started with some… fireworks!” Without missing a beat, a grand fireworks display began erupting in the pink skies above the kids, who all enjoyed it as they sat on the fluffy couch that the young Gem called up. They were all well aware now that it was all fake, but none of them really minded. After all, the memories they were making together within the moldable world of clouds were anything but fake.

The otherwise empty house was suddenly filled with the chime of the temple door opening, which itself was immediately followed by Pearl reprimanding Amethyst as the two of them emerged from the purple Gem’s room.

“Amethyst, how many times have I told you stop stealing my swords?!” the white Gem huffed, holding one of her many prized blades close.
“I didn’t steal it,” Amethyst rolled her eyes. “Your junk always falls down into my room! That’s what you get for having so many dumb fountains all over yours.”

“Oh please,” Pearl scoffed coldly. “You know I keep the majority of my collection in the center spire, all organized by size, shape, and sharpness. It’s a very effective system, unlike the complete disaster that is your room.”

“I have a system,” the purple Gem said, crossing her arms.

“If by system, you mean an awful, awful mess, then you certainly do. You should really let me clean it for you sometime.”

“Like that’s ever gonna happen.”

Pearl gripped her sword a bit tighter, scowling down at Amethyst in aggravation. She was just about to toss out a biting retort, but before she could, the temple door suddenly opened upon once again as Garnet stepped out, as stoic as ever.

“Oh, Garnet! I’m glad you’re here,” Pearl rushed to cling onto the Gem leader’s arm. “I was just scolding Amethyst about coming into my room and taking my swords again.”

“I didn’t take anything,” Amethyst protested, but the white Gem succinctly ignored her.

“Can you please lay down the law for her, Garnet?” Pearl pleaded. “For the millionth time.”

The Gem leader’s aloof expression didn’t change as she looked between her two teammates, before finally addressing the white Gem. “Nobody likes a tattle-tale, Pearl.”

Amethyst simply cracked up at Pearl’s abrupt shock over being humbled, which was why she followed Garnet away from the temple door much less enthusiastically.

“I guess the kids went mystery hunting after all,” Amethyst commented as she glanced up at the empty loft. “It’s kinda weird that they left all their stuff here though.”

“Don’t go raiding through their things,” Garnet instructed the purple Gem calmly as she watched her scamper up the stairs.

“I wasn’t going to,” Amethyst replied. “I was just gonna swipe a few of these gummy worms. And by a few, I mean the whole bag.” The purple Gem grinned greedily as she grabbed the bag of candy, though she paused before heading back down after noticing a rather strange looking book lying on the nearby bed. “Whoa... what’s that thing?” Her curiosity getting the better of her, Amethyst lifted the book up to get a better look at it. Though she had never been much into reading “human books”, she couldn’t deny that her curiosity as she looked over the rugged, red leather tome, wondering where it had come from and what it contained.

“Hey, you guys!” she called to Garnet and Pearl, running down the stairs as she held the book up. “Check this old book out!”

“Didn’t Garnet just tell you not to root through the kids’ things?” Pearl asked caustically.

“SHEESH, Pearl, you’re just on a roll with accusing me of things I didn’t do today, aren’t you?” Amethyst retorted dryly before turning her attention back to the book. “But look at this crazy thing. I mean, a six fingered hand?” She chuckled as she shapeshifted an extra finger onto her hand, putting it over the one on the book. “You gotta admit, that’s pretty cool.”
“Let me see that,” Pearl snatched the book away from her. She didn’t look all too impressed as she looked it up and down, turning it over in her hands. “What kind of book is this? It doesn’t even have a title! Unless… 3 is its title, but what kind of a title is that?”

“Maybe you’d find out if you opened it up,” Garnet deadpanned, crossing her arms.

“I-I was just about to do that!” Pearl exclaimed, fumbling to crack the book open to its first page. “Hm… Well, the name of its author is mysteriously missing…”

“Looks like the guy tore it out or something,” Amethyst commented. “Wonder why he’d do that… And what’s that thing on the other page say… ‘ad astra per aspera’? What the heck does that mean?”

“Oh, that’s Latin for ‘to the stars through difficulties’!” Pearl smiled. “Whoever did write this must have been very well read.”

Garnet took the book next, flipping the page as she read over it to herself silently. “Hm…” she mused, her expression unreadable as she turned through several more of its pages.

“What’s up, G?” Amethyst asked.

“This book seems familiar,” she replied, handing it back to Pearl. “I can’t pinpoint how, but it’s like… I’ve seen it before somewhere.”

“You’re right…” the white Gem frowned. “Every page details a different oddity of Gravity Falls! And all of these illustrations, these descriptions… none of them seem like they’re new at all…”

“Yeah, probably ‘cause we’ve ran into most of these things before,” Amethyst said, taking the book again. “I mean, gnomes, ghosts, the bottomless pit, the abominable bro-man, that weird stomach-faced duck thing… We’ve been here in Gravity Falls so long that all this stuff is normal for us now. But still… I do get what you guys are saying… All of the stuff written in here is pretty dang familiar…”

“But it doesn’t make any sense…” Pearl shook her head, watching as the purple Gem continued to slowly flip through it. “Wouldn’t we remember seeing something this pertinent and comprehensive before? Shouldn’t we-” Her question came to an abrupt halt as Amethyst turned the next page, revealing something that made all three Gems gasp in shocked unison. Until now, the book’s entries had all been merely detailing the mysterious facets of Gravity Falls. But suddenly, the Gems were met with vivid illustrations and in-depth descriptions on themselves. While the depictions of them were clearly from years ago, there was no denying it. Each of them had a full page about them, listing their skills, abilities, powers, and more quite intimately, as if the author had known them all personally. A ridiculous notion, considering the fact that the Gems had no idea where this book had even come from, but one that disconcerted them immediately.

“W-what is all this?!” Pearl asked, completely appalled as she ripped the book away from Amethyst. “Why is there so much information in here about us?!”

“Not just us,” Garnet scowled, her hands clenched into fists. “About Gem monsters, the temple, and-”

“Rose…” all three Gems said in solemn unison as they arrived to the page on their former leader. While Garnet and Amethyst were quite surprised at this themselves, Pearl in particular found it hard to take as she suddenly slammed the book shut, gripping onto its edges tightly.

“Who wrote this book?!” the white Gem demanded, her voice tight as it masked her true panic.
“And how’d they know all that stuff about us?!” Amethyst asked, her eyes wide in bewilderment. “Did they spy on us or something?”

“But who would have the nerve to do something like that?” Pearl glared at the book. “And why were they recording all of this anyway? What did they plan on doing with this information?”

“And why did the kids have it?” Amethyst continued, her mind racing just as much as Pearl’s. “Where’d they even get it from? And why-”

“Enough questions!” Garnet suddenly shouted, roughly taking the book away from the white Gem. Even behind her shades, her expression of adamant rage was clear to see. “It doesn’t matter where this came from or who wrote it. Whatever this book is, it’s clear that it contains information that’s far too sensitive to be allowed to fall into the wrong hands. Which is why there’s only one thing we can do.” Pearl and Amethyst watched nervously as their leader succinctly bubbled the book, letting it hover securely above her palm as she firmly began to lead the way into the temple. “We have to get rid of it.”

It was nearly impossible to keep track of time in the expanse of pink clouds, but the kids knew they had been in there for at least a few hours now. And in those hours, they had what could easily be described as the time of their lives. Almost anything they could think of could be brought to life within the room, so long as Steven said it aloud, and all four of them were more than happy to take advantage of this fact. From a towering, high-speed roller coaster, to a sprawling, beautiful ocean, to a petting zoo containing countless types of animals, all of them friendly. They enjoyed it all, heedless of how impossible it all was, since nothing was really impossible there. The fun had gone on for quite some time, until they all settled down to watch the recently-released *Dogcopter 3* on the massive screen the room had provided for them. They all enjoyed the movie, but by the time the credits started rolling, it was clear that they were all starting to get a bit restless.

“That was amazing!” Connie gushed as she sat up in her beanbag chair. “I’ve been waiting to see that movie for months! It was even better than I thought it would be!”

“And did you see those effects?” Dipper asked with a wide grin. “They were incredible! They totally make up for the lacklustre CG in *Dogcopter 2.*”

“I know, right?” Connie nodded in absolute agreement.

“Are you two done nerding out yet?” Mabel asked, giving the two of them a teasing smirk as she lay on her back. “You’ve been doing it for the whole movie.”

While Connie let out a small, somewhat embarrassed laugh at this, Dipper decided to use the opportunity for some playful retaliation. “Hey Steven, can I get a pillow over here?”

“Sure thing,” Steven smiled. “Room, one pillow please!”

As expected, a pillow appeared out of thin air, dropping down into Steven’s arms before he tossed it over to Dipper. The moment he caught it, he didn’t hesitate to throw it hard at Mabel, knocking her off her chair and onto the fluffy ground. She hardly protested though as she remained there, contentedly making what she referred to as “cloud angels”.

“Well, as fun as this is, we should probably start thinking about heading back,” Steven said, standing. “I’m sure the Gems are probably wondering where we are, and I don’t really want them to find out we were in here this whole time...”
“Aw, but I wanna see the rest of the temple!” Mabel protested.

“Yeah, there’s gotta be more to it than this,” Dipper said with a frown. “What about the other Gems’ rooms?”

“They’ll definitely catch us if we go into them!” Steven exclaimed anxiously. “And besides, I don’t think we can even get to any of the other rooms from here… Can we?”

“Maybe the room can help out with that,” Connie suggested. “There’s no way a place this big doesn’t connect to the rest of the temple, right?”

“Huh, I guess I hadn’t really thought of that,” the young Gem shrugged. “I guess it’s worth a try… Room, we’d like to go see the rest of the temple, please!” He paused for a moment, though quickly added something else upon remembering one of the limitations of the room itself. “Oh, and uh, can we get a real way out of here? It wouldn’t really do us much good if you gave us a fake one.”

The young Gem’s request was immediately granted as several of the clouds on the ground nearby parted, revealing what seemed to be another waterslide. However, this one was composed solely of water alone, and it twisted down through the clouds to an unseen point, one that was tinged with hints of blue rather than the constant surrounding pink.

“Will that really lead to another part of the temple?” Dipper asked as they all came to stand before the wide slide.

“There’s only one way to find out!” Mabel grinned mischievously before abruptly pushing her brother down the slide. She followed soon after, laughing she heard his cry of protest and, seeing no reason to hesitate, Steven and Connie followed suit and leapt onto the slide themselves.

The long waterslide twisted and meandered through the clouds, defying gravity as it looped and curled without restraint. Eventually though, all four kids began to notice the pink clouds dissipating, giving way to a midnight blue sky, marked with stars and flowing streaks of white. They only had a moment to enjoy the new scenery however, before the slide suddenly steepened drastically, to the point that it was more of a waterfall than anything else. All four of them were somewhat panicked as the waterfall dropped them all into a deep pool of water, though fortunately it was easy for them to swim up to the surface and get a better look at the new room they found themselves in.

Much like Rose’s room, this room had a peaceful aura to it, though it was conveyed in quite a different way. Several hovering fountains of differing heights and sizes flowed into the large lake, the largest being the centermost one. The easy fountains, coupled with the soothing night backdrop gave the room an elegant appeal, one that was not lost on any of the kids.

“It’s so relaxing in here!” Connie exclaimed with a smile. “I wonder whose room this is?”

“Oh, it’s Pearl’s!” Steven exclaimed, snapping his fingers. “I’ve seen peeks of it before when she opens up her door!”

“Huge elegant fountains seem like they’d be Pearl’s sort of thing,” Mabel said with a thoughtful nod.

“But if this is her room, then where is she?” Dipper asked, glancing around for any signs of the white Gem.

“M-maybe all the Gems left to go on a mission!” Steven said a bit apprehensively. “Hopefully…”
“Hey, guys? Is it just me or is that big hole in the middle of the pool starting to get bigger?” Mabel asked, nodding towards the wide indent where the central fountain poured into.

“It’s not getting bigger!” Connie gasped in sudden alarm. “It’s pulling us towards it!”

“Everyone, quick! Swim to the edge!” Dipper shouted. Everyone did so, fighting against the pulling current as much as they could, but in the end it was too strong for them. The gaping crater sucked all of them down it all too quickly, sending them plummeting down a very long, but thankfully mostly straight waterfall. Once again, they were deposited into another deep pool, though this time, it was in another room altogether.

Upon surfacing, the kids were met with a sight that was far different from the clean serenity of Pearl’s room. The room itself appeared to be something of a cavern, its walls consisting of sparkling crystals and jagged stones of various sizes and shapes. Much like the previous two rooms the kids had visited, this one was quite sizable, but unlike them, it was far from empty or organized. Mountains of what could only be described as clutter where at almost every turn, composed of anything from old food, to broken electronics, to ancient artifacts, to household items and everything in between. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to the mess, but it still fascinated the kids nonetheless as they emerged from the waterfall pool to get a better look.

“What is this place? The Gem’s trash room?” Dipper asked with a caustic frown.

“No, actually I think its Amethyst’s room,” Steven said.

“Why does she keep all of this stuff?” Connie asked as they began to walk along one of the makeshift paths through the clutter. “Does she ever even use any of it?”

“I think she just keeps it around for decoration,” Steven shrugged. “She likes to bring back stuff from missions all the time, so I guess this is where she puts it all.”

“Hey, check it out!” Mabel exclaimed as something up ahead caught her eye. The others followed her as she ran up to the purple bubble that was floating above a small pile of random garbage. Trapped inside of it was a rather small circular blue gemstone. “This thing probably belongs to one of those monsters the Gems fight all the time! It’s so cool looking!”

“Oh, so this is where they’re all bubbled away to!” Steven exclaimed in realization.

“It does make a lot of sense,” Connie nodded in agreement.

“Mabel, don’t mess with that thing!” Dipper warned as Mabel cupped the bubble in her hands. “What if it pops?”

“Come on, I’m just getting a better look,” Mabel scoffed, rolling her eyes. “I’m being super careful! It’s not gonna-”

Pop!

Instinctually, Mabel flinched away as the bubble abruptly burst, the gemstone dropping to the ground as it began to glow. With a concerned gasp, Steven hurriedly pulled Mabel away from it, especially as it began to rise up off the ground. The kids watched in silent terror as an almost humanoid shape formed around the gem, though it quickly shifted into a monstrous one. As the light cleared, the creature revealed its large, plantlike appearance; its head was a glowing blue bulb, protected by four thick navy petals, all of which lashed out with a roar. It was supported by several slithering vine-like appendages, two of which tapered out to sharp, thorny points. It easily towered over all of the kids as it let out a shrill hiss, its deadly vines poised to attack.
“Run!” all four kids exclaimed in frightened unison. Before the monster could even lash out, they had all turned on their heels and began frantically sprinting in the opposite direction. The monster was quick to pursue them, though thankfully the multiple piles of clutter gave them decent enough cover from its long range attacks.

“Nice going, Mabel!” Dipper exclaimed in annoyance as they all continued running.

“Hey, how was I supposed to know it was just like a regular bubble?!” Mabel retorted defensively. “I thought it was made out of glass or magic or something!”

“We can’t keep running from that thing forever,” Connie took an anxious glance back at the monster. “Maybe we should split up so we can divert its attention and come up with a way to defeat it!”

“Or,” Steven smiled as he noticed what was right up ahead. “We can lose it in that tunnel up there!”

The others glanced to what the young Gem was referring to: a thin, relatively narrow tunnel carved into the stone wall. It was wide enough for all of them to easily fit into, but small enough that the monster most likely wouldn’t be able to squeeze into it. In all actuality, it would probably be their safest option, which was why they took it as they hurried into the corridor, still not slowing their pace as the monster continued slinking after them. Yet as they had hoped, the monster’s bulky body became stuck almost as soon as it barreled into the tunnel. The creature let out an enraged squeal as it tried to free its vines, which were pinned against the walls, but to no avail. For all its struggling, the monster was completely immobile, a sight that filled the kids with overwhelming relief.

“Well, that was a close one!” Mabel exclaimed, letting out the breath she had been holding in.

“So… is that monster just supposed to stay here, or…?” Dipper trailed off, taking an anxious step back as the creature attempted to lash out again.

“Amethyst will probably find it and take it out when she gets back to her room,” Steven said as he started moving on down the tunnel. “For now, we might as well keep going.”

“I don’t think we really have a choice…” Connie said, frowning back at the monster, which was totally blocking the way they had come through. The remainder of the tunnel was quite long and twisting, but thankfully fully illuminated by the glow of the pink crystal walls on all sides. The further away they got from the still writhing monster, the better the kids all felt, even if its angry shrieks could still be heard for quite a while.

“So… who’s in favor of going back up to Rose’s room and playing with the flying puppies again?” Mabel asked in relative exhaustion.

“At this point, I kind of just want to leave the temple altogether,” Dipper said with a tired sigh. “I mean, it’s awesome in here and everything, but now I can sort of see what the Gems meant when they said it was dangerous.”

“Yeah…” Steven said, frowning remorsefully. “Maybe we should have listened to them after all. They’re usually right about this sort of thing.”

“Well… maybe there’s a way out up ahead,” Connie said with a small, hopeful smile. “Or at the very least maybe it won’t lead to another death trap.”

“Wait a second…” the young Gem suddenly stopped before they could round the next corner. “Do
you guys hear that?"

The others stopped and listened, confused at first, until they heard hints of familiar voices coming from not too far away. They were too distant to make out any clear words, but even so, they were immediately recognizable. “It’s the Gems!” Mabel gasped in newfound excitement. “We should go say hi!”

“Are you crazy?” Dipper asked harshly. “We can’t let them see us! Do you have any idea how much trouble we’ll be in if they find out we’re in here and that we let a Gem monster loose?!”

“I agree with Dipper,” Connie said with a fretful frown. “We should just focus on finding a way out of here before anything else happens.”

“But the Gems are right up ahead,” Steven said nervously. “I guess we’ll just have to sneak past them... somehow...”

The kids made sure to be as quiet as possible as they inched on ahead, until eventually, the end of the tunnel came into sight. The corridor let out into another large room, though it was clear the opening was several feet up from the ground below. All the same, the room was lofty, relatively hot, and had a very high ceiling, which accommodated for the countless bubbled Gems frozenly floating near it. At the center of the room was a circular pit of bright, burning lava, and gathered around it were the Crystal Gems themselves. Though their high vantage point kept them from being immediately spotted, the kids still made sure to press against the sides of the corridor to avoid being seen. Still, they couldn’t help but stop for a moment and watch the Gems as they paced around the room almost apprehensively.

“What are they doing down there?” Connie asked, confused.

“I don’t know…” Steven frowned. “I guess they’re having a meeting or something?”

“Shh!” Mabel quieted the two of them. “I wanna hear what they’re saying!”

Garnet had come to stand still in front of the lava pit, her hands curled into fists. All the while, Pearl continued to pace fretfully, while Amethyst sat near the edge of the room, looking through what appeared to be a book, though none of the kids could see it too well from their position.

“Man, I’ll give whoever wrote this thing this: they knew their stuff,” the purple Gem remarked, casually flipping through pages. “Plus, they did a pretty good job at drawing me, so props to them.”

“Amethyst, be careful with that thing!” Pearl snapped, taking the book away from her. Only now that it was closed were the kids able to clearly see the book clearly. And the moment he saw the golden six-fingered hand on its cover, Dipper froze in what was nothing less than absolute horror.

“The journal?!” he exclaimed, completely forgetting about trying to be quiet and unseen. He quickly remembered though as the Gems glanced around, apparently having heard him, though they were soon shrugged it off and returned to their discussion. Even so, Dipper was anything but relieved. He had worked so hard and had been so careful to keep the journal concealed, especially from the Gems. He had spent so long fearing that if the Gems ever did actually discover it, then certainly he’d lose it and the answers it potentially held forever. Yet even despite how cautious and attentive he had been, they had managed to find it all the same. And, based on their clearly troubled expressions, they were anything but pleased by the discovery.

“How’d they find it?” Connie asked in confusion.

“Looks like somebody was a bit of a scatterbrain and left it lying on the bed,” Mabel said
Dipper let out a frustrated groan as he face palmed, pressing against the wall of the tunnel again. “I can’t believe this! What am I gonna do now?”

“Maybe you could ask them to give it back?” Steven suggested with an awkward smile.

“Yeah, that’ll work out just great,” Dipper deadpanned. “Hey, Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl, I know you guys didn’t want us in your temple, but here we are anyway! Mind if I have that journal that’s filled with a bunch of secrets about you guys back? Thanks!”

“You really think that’ll work?” Mabel asked, not detecting his sarcasm.

“Of course it won’t work!” Dipper snapped, beyond stressed over the entire situation. “They’d probably just laugh right in my face!”

“I don’t know, Dipper… Is this really such a bad thing?” Steven asked carefully. “I mean, maybe it’s for the best that the Gems know about the journal. It’s only fair since there’s so much written in it about them. And who knows? Maybe they even know who the author is!”

Dipper was prepared to disagree with this idea, but before he could, one particular statement from Garnet caught his attention. “Both of you need to stop fooling around with that book,” the Gem leader firmly commanded Pearl and Amethyst. The white Gem didn’t hesitate to shyly hand the journal over to her, allowing her to bubble it once more. Garnet’s expression was solemn and resolved as she guided the bubble to hover over the lava pit. “It’s time to destroy this thing before it destroys us.”

Upon seeing the lava slowly begin to flow upward and rise up towards the bubbled journal, Dipper was completely incapable of remaining silent and out of sight any longer. “No!” he shouted, forgetting how high up the exit of the tunnel was as he leaned out of it. Time seemed to speed up as he started to fall out of the opening, and while Mabel reacted quickly by trying to catch him by the arm, she began to fall as well. Likewise, Steven and Connie also tried their best to grab the twins before they slipped out of the tunnel, but alas, they all managed to accidentally pull each other down, sending them plummeting together into the room in full view of the Gems.

“What the…? What are you guys doing in here?” Amethyst asked in absolute bewilderment.

“H-how did you four get into the temple?!” Pearl demanded, clearly much more panicked at their presence.

“Um… I sort of… opened the door…” Steven admitted sheepishly.

“You… Wait, what?!”

Before the conversation could go on any longer, a sudden familiar screech startled them all, one that came from the very same tunnel the kids had emerged from. All four of them shared the same immediate fear upon hearing it, and their fears were confirmed as the monster from earlier dropped down into the room only a few feet away from them and the Gems.

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“The monster?!” Mabel exclaimed in alarm.

“B-but we trapped it! It was stuck! How did it break free?!” Connie asked in disbelief.

“Hey, isn’t that the slinker?” Amethyst asked with a confused frown. “I thought it was bubbled in my room!”
“Why in the world would it be bubbled in that disaster instead of in here?!” Pearl glared at the purple Gem while summoning her spear.

“Hey, don’t look at me! At least I’m not the one who popped it and let it lose in the temple, which is what I’m guessing you guys did,” Amethyst gave the kids a pointed look. None of them really replied, but instead glanced away guiltily.

“We don’t have time to point fingers,” Garnet said firmly, clenching her gauntleted fists as the slinker began to lurch towards them. Fortunately, as she did so, the bubbled journal floated a bit away from the lava pit to the other side of the room. “However that thing was freed, it’s going right back where it came from. Gems, let’s go!”

“Wait!” Steven called. “We can help you guys!”

“No,” Garnet put her hand in front of the kids, abruptly rejecting them.

“But why not?!” Dipper protested crossly, quite tired of being underestimated. “We’ve already proven to you three several times that we can handle this sort of thing! Why won’t you just trust us?!”

“Because you’re not even supposed to be in here in the first place!” Pearl snapped in frustration. “We told you it was dangerous, but you didn’t listen!”

“You didn’t trust us,” Garnet said much more calmly, though it was clear she was rather irritated as well. “Which is why we can only trust ourselves with something like this.”

“Sorry, you guys,” Amethyst said with a hint of sympathy. “But you gotta sit this one out. Don’t take it too personally, k?”

Before any of them could further object, the Gems leapt into battle against the slinker. Garnet got the first jump on it, aiming her punches for its main body, though the monster’s long tendrils were quick to latch firmly onto her wrists and throw her aside. Pearl attempted to cut her way through the snapping vines with graceful spins of her spear, but their strength proved too much for her as one of them managed to pry her weapon away from her. Amethyst went next, her whip aimed for the central bulb, but the monster preempted her attack and caught her by her midsection, squeezing tight as it held onto her with an iron grip.

The fact that the tide of this fight was quickly turning against the Gems was not lost on any of the kids. While the all the action was playing out a safe distance away from them, they watched it unfold intently, all of them still wanting to help even if they had been advised against it, though none of them were quite sure as to how. That is, until Dipper happened to spot the journal, still bubbled on the other side of the room.

“That’s it!” he exclaimed, already starting to rush over to it. “There has to be something about how to defeat that monster in the journal!”

“But the Gems told us not to get involved!” Steven exclaimed, casting a nervous glance towards the nearby fight.

“We have to do something, Steven!” Dipper retorted resiliently. “Whether they like it or not, the Gems need help. They need the journal’s help. They need our help!”

“Yeah!” Mabel agreed brightly. “So let’s give it to them!”

“The Gems probably won’t be very happy about this…” Connie pointed out, but nonetheless, she
boldly joined the twins. “But they’ll thank us for it later.”

Steven frowned apprehensively as they all turned to him expectantly, awaiting his consent with the plan. The young Gem knew that they had already gone against the Gems’ instructions countless times today alone, and for each instance, he couldn’t help but feel incredibly guilty. The trust of his devout guardians was the last thing he had ever wanted to lose, but now it seemed as though he already had. Yet at the same time, Steven couldn’t help but feel his own trust in the Gems had been shaken quite a bit. Rarely were they ever truly honest or straightforward with him. They had so many secrets that they constantly refused to let him in on, secrets that he should have been allowed to know. After all, he was a Crystal Gem too, right?

Yet even so, the young Gem understood just how much of an extenuating circumstance this was, especially as he glanced over at the Gems, who were still struggling against the slinker. True, they had ordered them to keep out of the matter, when push came to shove, Steven would always, always work towards protecting those he cared about above all else.

“Ok,” he said with resolve. Dipper, Mabel, and Connie all offered him small, consoling smiles, all of them realizing just how difficult of a choice this likely was for him to make considering his deep respect for the Gems. But, if they could manage to aid them against all odds, then it would well be worth it in the end.

Thankfully, the kids were able to reach the journal before it could float to high out of their reach. Acting quickly, Dipper grabbed the bubble and, upon Mabel’s insistent request, allowed her to pop it. He couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of relief upon holding the journal in his hands again, especially after how close it had been to being burned into mere ashes. Still, he knew this was no time to celebrate; he rapidly flipped to the section pertaining to Gem monsters, searching for an image or description of the one that the Gems were currently squaring off against. And, fortunately enough, it took very little searching at all to find it.

“Here it is!” Dipper exclaimed with a relieved smile before reading the entry aloud. “The Slinker: This Gem creature receives its name from how it moves, by using its long, vine-like tendrils to ‘slink’ across the ground. Plantlike in appearance, the slinker makes use of its unassuming form for stealth and camouflage. However, it can be quite vicious and aggressive when provoked. The best way to subdue this monster is to confuse it. Entangle it in its own vines and it’ll be as harmless as a regular flower.”

“So just tie all of its vine things together?” Mabel asked. “That sounds easy enough!”

“We gotta let the Gems know!” Steven exclaimed, turning towards the brawl. “Hey, you guys! We know how to stop the slinker!”

“S-Steven, please!” Pearl exclaimed harshly as she struggled between two of the slinker’s vines. “We told you kids n-not to get involved in this! We can handle it!”

“We told you kids n-not to get involved in this! We can handle it!”

“But you guys are kinda losing!” Mabel called. “No offense!”

“Uh, maybe we should hear them out, you guys!” Amethyst said to Garnet and Pearl as she tried to wriggle free from the slinker. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’re not doing too hot over here!”

The two of them exchanged a tentative glance, both of them knowing just how of a tight spot they were in. In their frustration with the kids, they weren’t fighting with as much clarity as they usually would, making this a losing battle. But perhaps, maybe it was time to embrace the aid the kids were more than willing to give instead of stubbornly pushing it away.
Without a word, Garnet and Pearl turned to the kids, expectantly awaiting their apparent advice. And knowing that time was of the essence, Dipper didn’t hesitate to divulge it. “You have to tangle it up in its own vines! That should tie it up long enough for you guys to beat it!”

The Gems didn’t waste time deliberating whether or not to utilize this plan, since they all immediately realized how much sense it made. Upon breaking free from the slithering vines, they fanned out, Garnet taking the initiative by firmly catching two of its tendrils as they sped towards her and tying them together tightly. Pearl leapt gracefully over the slinker, all while another vine chased after her, only to collide and twist with another vine on its other side. Amethyst used her whip to fake the slinker out, making it look as though it was another vine, that is, until she stomped down on one of the real ones, tying up with the last free one there was. As the slinker struggled to free its tangled tendrils, the Gems went in for the final assault. As Amethyst made sure that the monster remained incapacitated, Pearl kept its snapping bulb at bay while Garnet plunged her fist into the area between the slinker’s body and head, grabbing onto the gemstone inside. With a swift, final pull, the Gem leader tore the gem away, causing the slinker to poof away almost instantly. In wake of its defeat, Garnet wasted no time in bubbling it once more, allowing it to float up and join the huge collection of bubbled gems.

Despite the Gem’s successful victory, there was little celebration over it. As the adrenaline of battle faded, a sort of uneasy tension took its place, especially as everyone slowly came to meet in the middle of the room. Still, the kids couldn’t help but glance away nervously as the Gems stood over them, disappointment and confusion written all over all three of their faces. After a long silence, surprisingly enough, Steven was the first one to speak up.

“Um… so…” the young Gem began carefully, his tone already apologetic. “I know you guys are probably really mad at all of us, and you kinda have a right to be but… we just wanted to see what the temple was like!”

“Yeah!” Connie added defensively. “We didn’t mean to free that monster or cause any trouble at all! Steven’s gem opened the door, so we figured we’d check it out. We’re sorry if we upset you.”

“That’s not the point,” Garnet said coldly, crossing her arms. “The point is we warned all four of you against coming in here. Now, hopefully, you all understand why we didn’t want you in the temple. Every monster we’ve ever fought and defeated is contained here. Playing around in here is like playing in a minefield.”

“We only wanted you kids to be safe…” Pearl said, her tone gentle and kind. “We understand that you’re all eager to help us, and we appreciate your enthusiasm. But sometimes we just have to draw the line in order to protect you.”

Steven, Mabel, and Connie smiled and nodded in acceptance with this sincere explanation, but Dipper was anything but pacified, especially as he glanced down at the journal in his arms. “So, your idea of protecting us is not filling us in on anything then?” he asked with the slightest edge of accusation.

“Oh… what are you talking about?” Amethyst asked in marked confusion.

“I’m talking about how you guys never want to tell us anything!” Dipper said in clear frustration. “If you had just told us that we shouldn’t go in the temple because it’s where all of the monsters are bubbled, then we would have listened and stayed out. But you never gave us a reason why we shouldn’t be in here and you just expected that we wouldn’t want to figure out that reason for ourselves.”

“And we’re sorry about that,” Garnet replied truthfully. “But that doesn’t change the fact that you
“all still disobeyed us.”

“Yeah, but it’s over with,” Mabel said with a tentative smile. “Everything’s ok now, isn’t it?”

“No, it isn’t!” Dipper cut in again, far too perturbed to back down now. In truth, he realized he was probably pressing his luck and being far too bold, but at the same time, he wanted answers. Answers that he knew were far past due. “This isn’t just about the temple. This is about how mysterious you three are all the time! Why are you keeping so many secrets?”

“S-secrets?!” Pearl asked, appalled. “Like what?”

“Like… well…” Dipper paused, knowing that he had far too many questions concerning the Gems that had yet to be concretely answered. “Well, for starters, what are you guys really? Where did you come from? What’s the deal with you powers? Why… why were you trying to get rid of this?” he asked, holding the journal up.

The Gems all exchanged an uneasy glance as they looked at the journal, almost as if it was something they were unanimously afraid of. Before Dipper could pull it away, Pearl took the journal from him, ignoring him reaching out for it in protest. “Where did you kids find this book?” the white Gem asked incredulously, her eyes wide as she looked down at the four of them.

“I… I found it on the hill a few weeks ago,” Dipper admitted a bit hesitantly, unsure of how the Gems would react. They were silent for a long moment, their expression unreadable as they glanced between him and the journal, until Pearl spoke up again.

“Dipper…” the white Gem began, her tone notably unsettled. “If you’ve had this book for that long… then why did you never show it to us? You do know it has… quite a bit of information about the three of us in it, don’t you?”

“We know,” Steven spoke up anxiously.

“Huh? Steven, you knew about this thing?” Amethyst asked, looking to the young Gem in disbelief.

“Um… yeah…” Steven admitted remorsefully. “We all did. We just didn’t tell you guys because…”

“Because I was afraid that you’d react to it exactly like you did,” Dipper interjected, glancing down. “By trying to get rid of it.”

“You don’t understand,” Garnet said, shaking her head. “The information about us in that book is extensive, extensive enough to be a clear danger to us all. Pearl, Amethyst, and I have survived for hundreds of years because we believed the same thing Rose Quartz did: that we need to constantly keep our guards up, no matter what the situation is.”

“But… how would the journal be dangerous to you three?” Connie asked, confused. “Didn’t you allow all of that stuff to be written about you?”

“We most certainly did not!” Pearl exclaimed, handing the journal off to Garnet. “We’d have to be completely daft to let someone write that much information about us!”

“What? But didn’t you know who the author of it was?” Dipper asked, feeling as though the answer to the most important question had already slipped out of his fingers. The uncertain glance the Gems exchanged only seemed to confirm it, but they said it aloud nonetheless.
“We… we don’t know who wrote this,” Garnet said, her usually stoic tone surprisingly troubled. “But none of us can deny that it does look familiar.”

“So you’ve seen it before?” Mabel asked.

“Nah, probably not,” Amethyst frowned. “But it sure does feel like it.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense,” Dipper shook his head. “The author makes it sound like he knew you three, or at least like he knew Rose.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Pearl was quick to scoff. “If Rose had allowed some mysterious person to write half of a book about us, then she would have let us know!”

“I dunno…” Amethyst said with an skeptical frown. “Would she have?”

“Of course she would have!” the white Gem snapped harshly. “Rose would have never kept a secret like this from us!”

“So… if Mom never kept secrets from you, then why do you guys keep secrets from us?” Steven asked, the hurt in his expression clear.

“Aw, Steven…” Amethyst began, though the young Gem quickly interrupted.

“I mean… I understand that everything you guys do is important and that it’s important for protecting the earth and everyone in it,” Steven continued, his tone calm, yet still conflicted. “But… you don’t have to do that alone! We want to help you! This is our home and we want to keep it safe just as much as you guys do! We know it can be dangerous sometimes, but we’re not afraid! Right guys?”

Dipper, Mabel, and Connie all nodded in firm agreement, but even still, the young Gem wasn’t finished with his appeal quite yet. “We know we didn’t trust you on the temple thing, and we’re sorry. But trust is a two way street. All we want is for you guys to trust us, for you to let us help you! So… can’t we all just… learn to trust each other so we can work together and protect what we all care about?”

None of the Gems could really hold back their proud smiles upon hearing their youngest member deliver such a heartfelt, inspiring speech. Amethyst nodded with a side smirk as Pearl dried her teary eyes, all while Garnet placed a gentle hand on Steven’s shoulder. “Steven, your mother always believed that trust was something that shouldn’t be so easily given away,” the Gem leader began, her tone patient. “She believed it was something that should be earned, and that everyone should give others the chance to earn it. And… perhaps… we haven’t given you four that chance. Until now.”

The kids exchanged relieved smiles upon hearing this, all of them feeling as though everything was starting to smooth over. “So… you guys are going to stop leaving us out of everything?” Connie asked, hopeful.

“We’re going to try,” Pearl said with an affirmative nod. “After all, you four have certainly proven that you have determination and tenacity to spare. It really is quite admirable, to say the least.”

“Plus, you guys are pretty cool to have around,” Amethyst said with a casual grin. “When you’re not accidently letting monsters run wild in the temple. Not that that sort of thing isn’t fun or anything. Honestly, it kinda is.”

“Yay!” Mabel cheered happily. “We’re all friends again! It feels so good to get rid of all of that
“You can say that again,” Steven sighed contentedly, glad that he was able to somehow make peace in light of everything that had happened.

Despite the fact that the strain between them all had been lifted, Dipper was still the only one not completely satisfied, especially as he looked to the journal in Garnet’s hands. “So… I guess you guys are still gonna burn that thing, huh?” he asked glumly, the prospect both unbearable yet inevitable. “I guess I understand if you do. I mean, it’s not like it’s really mine anyway and besides, it does have a lot of information in it that you probably wouldn’t want getting out…” Dipper knew that he was trying to convince himself that he was accepting of the journal’s impending destruction than he was trying to convince the Gems. Still, he was quite surprised as he glanced up to see Garnet handing the journal back to him. “Huh?” he asked in absolute bewilderment. “I don’t understand. I thought—”

“There are a lot of secrets in this journal,” Garnet acknowledged, still holding out to him. “Not just about us, but about Gravity Falls as a whole. But secrets are only really dangerous when they fall into the wrong hands. There’s no real need to destroy the journal as long as it’s in the right hands. And as far as I’m concerned, it is in the right hands with you, Dipper.”

Dipper was hardly able to hide the complete shock on his face as Garnet pressed the journal into his hands, relinquishing it back into his possession. “A-are you sure?”

“Yes, Garnet, are you sure?” Pearl echoed, just as uncertain with this idea.

“I am,” the Gem leader nodded with a small smile. “I’m certain the journal and the information it contains will be safe with Dipper. That is as long as he makes sure to be careful with it.”

“Yeah, and use it to help us fight off Gem monsters!” Amethyst added with a smirk. “That thing’s got all the answers!”

“O-oh, yes, of course!” Dipper nodded enthusiastically. After all, the Gems were essentially trusting him with their own well kept secrets. And that was a trust that he wouldn’t dare betray. “I’ll be super careful with it! And I won’t let any of you down! I promise.”

“That’s all we ask,” Garnet said with an accepting nod.

“Soooo, it looks like all’s well that ends well, huh?” Mabel asked with a bright grin. “What do you guys say we hang out a little longer, maybe explore the rest of the temple? Hm?”

“I… think maybe you kids have seen enough of the temple for one day…” Pearl said with an amused smile as Garnet used her gems to open the door leading back to the house.

“But we can always save exploring the rest of it for another day!” Amethyst added daringly. “Especially since this guy can open the door all by himself!” she grinned, pointing to Steven.

“Heh, it’s no big deal…” the young Gem said bashfully as they all headed through the door.

“Are you kidding? It’s awesome!” the purple Gem exclaimed insistently. “You’re getting to be just as magical as the rest of us, Steven!”

“Yeah…” Steven smiled, taking a single glance behind him as the temple door shut. “I guess I am…”
Considering all of the kids were rather tired after the adventure they had been through and that it was starting to get late, it didn’t take long for them to bid each other farewell. Connie left first since it took her longer to get home, and while the twins hung out with Steven and the Gems a bit longer, soon enough they departed to begin the short trek back to the Mystery Shack. It was a good feeling for all of them to part on quite amicable terms considering what had transpired between them all, but in the end, they had all walked away with a newfound sense of trust and respect for each other. And that was something they could all be proud of.

“Well, looks like all your worrying about the Gems flipping out over the journal was for nothing,” Mabel said to Dipper as the two of them headed down to the shack. “They were totally ok with it!

“Mabel, they did flip out,” Dipper pointed out, glancing up from the journal has he flipped through it to look for any potential damage. “I’m just lucky they actually gave it back to me. If anything, now I have to be even more careful with it because of that.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Mabel rolled her eyes, not quite understanding her brother’s concern. “So… you wanna show it to Grunkle Stan next?”

“Are you kidding? After all that?” Dipper asked caustically. “I’d just as well never show it to anyone else ever again if it’s going to cause that much trouble.” Ignoring Mabel’s teasing shrug, he turned his attention back to the journal, though he stopped in his tracks upon noticing a page that he had never really seen before. “Huh… That’s weird…”

“What’s wrong” Mabel asked, stepping beside him to get a look.

“This page…” Dipper frowned in confusion. “Everything here is in code except for one word…”

“What word?”

He didn’t answer right away but instead pointed to the odd word out, one that was nearly lost in the sea of scrambled cryptograms all around it, almost as if it didn’t want to be found:

“Homeworld…”
While Stan usually viewed Steven as an over-cheerful nuisance at best, there was one circumstance for which the con man always happily welcomed the young Gem to the Mystery Shack: free labor. And fortunately for Stan, that was something Steven was always more than happy to volunteer for, which was how he had ended up spending the better half of his morning helping the twins and Soos haul storage boxes around the shack.

“Thanks for letting me hang out today, Mr. Pines!” Steven said with a bright grin as he carried a large box past the conman. “Carrying all these boxes is great exercise!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Stan waved his hand as he continued to count through a stack of money. “Just be
careful with that stuff, kid. Customers don’t want to buy broken garbage. Just regular garbage.”

“Grunkle Stan, why did you have us bring down all of this junk from the attic anyway?” Dipper asked as him and Mabel sorted through the various boxes.

“Because apparently someone needed more room for their sweaters…” Stan said pointedly.

“Oh, come on, Grunkle Stan,” Mabel said with an apologetic smile. “My sweater collection grows by at least one new sweater every day! Each of them needs enough space, or else they won’t be as poofy as I like them to be. And that cramped closet just wasn’t cutting it.”

Stan simply rolled his eyes upon hearing this lengthy explanation as he continued his own. “So I figured that instead of letting all this stuff sit up there and collect dust, we might as well go through it and see if there’s anything worth selling here in the shack. Tourist season is starting up, which means the shack is gonna need some hot new inventory that I don’t feel like spending any money on, so this seems like the perfect alternative.”

“Oh, you mean like a yard sale?” Steven asked.

“It’s not a yard sale,” Stan corrected. “I like to call it a… turnover. We’ll clean a few of these old trinkets up, brand them as ‘limited edition’ merch, and folks will eat it up like it’s going out of style! It’s a business model that that can’t fail!”

“I don’t see why anyone would want to buy any of this stuff at all,” Dipper said with a skeptical frown as he pulled a broken coffee mug out of one of the boxes. “It all just looks like random garbage to me.”

“You kids find anything sellable in there?” Stan asked Steven and Mabel as they rooted through another box.

“I found a bunch of fancy old pens!” Steven exclaimed with a smile. “But… I don’t think they have any ink left in them…”

“Ah well, I just won’t give customers any way to test them out before they buy them,” Stan shrugged.

“I found this neat old book,” Mabel held up the rather old book she had discovered. “Radical Fashion for Total Nerds, 1983 edition! It even has pictures! Check out this trendsetter!” She flipped the book open to reveal an image depicting the traditional gaudy, neon style of the 80’s, complete with oversized blazers and multicolored pants. “Can I keep it, Grunkle Stan? Pretty please?”

“No way,” Stan took the book from her. “Some nostalgic nutcase out there will buy something like this up in a heartbeat. If you want it, then its $20, base price, no haggling.”

“Aw…” Mabel’s shoulders sagged in disappointment. “I could have gotten so much inspiration out of that book!”
“You wanna know a good way to get inspired? By finding me more stuff to sell,” Stan said caustically before glancing over at his nephew. “Dipper, why haven’t you found anything yet? All I see sitting next to you is a pile of trash!”

“That’s because there’s nothing in here but trash,” Dipper replied dryly. And indeed, upon searching through the contents of the box in front of him, he had found nothing of note other than a notebook with all of its pages strangely ripped out and a few broken sea shells. In fact, he was just about ready to put everything back in the box and take it outside to the trash before he happened to check the box one more time only to find that it wasn’t actually empty after all. “Huh? What’s this?” Dipper frowned in confusion as he pulled the last item out of the box: a mirror.

Upon a first glance, it appeared to be an average-sized hand mirror, round and set in a rather elegant silver frame. However, what was genuinely interesting about it was the strange, tea-drop shaped blue gemstone fixed to the back of the mirror, a rather deep crack etched into its otherwise smooth surface. Dipper only had a moment to glance over it though, before Mabel took interest in it and snatched it away to get a better look.

“Ooo, what a pretty mirror!” she exclaimed, grinning widely at the mirror. “Almost as pretty as the person inside it. Isn’t that right, Mabel?” She let out an amused chuckle at her own reflection before handing the mirror off to Steven so he could see it.

“Whoa… It’s is so fancy…” Steven remarked with an intrigued smile as he held it up. “I wonder where it came from…”

“This thing looks way too interesting to just be sitting at the bottom of a box of old junk…” Dipper mused as he took the mirror again, turning it over in inspection. “Grunkle Stan, how long have you had this?”

“Heck if I know, kid, but I do know this,” Stan said as he swapped the mirror from his nephew. “It’s gonna make me a fortune! Just look at this old thing! Chances are I probably won’t even have to lie about this mirror being a rare antique, because it already is one!”

“I bet that mirror belonged to some rich dude back in the day,” Soos said, glancing at the mirror. “Like a king! Or a TubeTube star!”

“Well now it belongs to another rich guy,” Stan grinned broadly at his reflection in the mirror. “Me! Or at least it does until I sell it for-” The conman cut himself off, his smile quickly fading into a disappointed scowl as he turned the mirror over. With a disgruntled scoff, Stan tossed it back over to Dipper, who only barely managed to catch it.

“What’s wrong?” he asked in confusion, steadying the mirror in his grasp so it wouldn’t fall and shatter on the floor.

“Haven’t you seen that rock on the back of that thing?” Stan asked caustically, crossing his arms. “It’s broken. And like I said earlier, no one wants to buy broken garbage. Even if they can see themselves in it.”

The kids exchanged a glance at this, none of them really sure what the problem was. True, the gemstone on the back of the mirror was cracked, but other than that, it seemed perfectly intact. Then again, none of them could really claim to know anything about antiques or selling them as Stan probably did. But on the same hand, considering the fact that the con man was known to brand beaten up three day old cans of soda as antiques and pawn them off to unsuspecting tourists, it was hard to say if he really knew anything about antiques himself.
“Aw, it’s a shame the mirror is broken, Mr. Pines,” Soos remarked sympathetically. “But it’s not totally ruined. And who knows? Somebody might still buy it.”

“Yeah, for a few bucks at the most,” Stan scowled. “It’s not even worth the effort in trying to sell it. I’m trying to make big bucks here, not chump change.”

Steven smiled brightly at the mirror as Dipper handed it over to him again. The young Gem largely disregarded the con man’s sullen feelings toward the artifact as he was met by the sight of his own cheerful reflection. It had never taken much to impress Steven, but a discovery this unique and fascinating was more than enough to easily excite him. “It doesn’t seem broken to me!” he quipped cheerfully.

“Aside from that stone on the back, it’s not really broken at all,” Dipper said, not really sure what all the fuss was about.

“Oh! Oh!” Mabel exclaimed in sudden excitement as she looked to her uncle with pleading eyes. “Grunkle Stan, can we at least keep the mirror? You don’t want it, so why not let us have it instead? Please? Please? Please?”

“Alright! Alright! Fine!” the conman exclaimed in exasperation. “Take the dumb thing. At least if you kids have it, then they’ll be less clutter lying around the gift shop.”

Mabel and Steven shared an elated gasp upon hearing this and while Dipper was relatively less excited, he still smiled in amusement nonetheless. Excited, the young Gem leapt up from his seat on the ground, holding the mirror triumphantly. “This thing is great! You know who would love something this cool? The Gems!”

“Yeah!” Mabel readily agreed, jumping to her feet as well. “We should totally go show it to them! Come on!” Not wanting to waste another moment, she grabbed Dipper by the arm and pulled him up as well, dragging him along after her as they ran out the door after Steven.

“Kids, wait!” Stan called after them. “We’re not done going through these-” The conman was cut off as the door slammed shut behind the trio. “Boxes…” He sighed in annoyed defeat as he turned to the handyman. “See, Soos, this is why I don’t believe in giving away things for free. I knew I should have charged those kids for that piece of junk mirror.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Pines. I’ll help you finish cleaning out these boxes,” Soos said with a dutiful grin as he flipped through Radical Fashion for Total Nerds. “Just as soon as I figure out where I can get these ‘totally tubular’ sunglasses…”

Though the kids had made the trek up to the temple, they quickly found that Gems were out on another mission. Still, they weren’t too disappointed by this as they agreed that they always just show the Gems the mirror later on. So rather than returning to the shack (and to work), they decided to take their new, shared artifact and head into town instead.

“Mirror, mirror, in my hand, who’s the best Mabel in the land?” Mabel playfully asked mirror, quickly answering her own question as she looked to her reflection. “‘Why, you are, Mabel, of course!’ Well, thank you, mirror! How nice of you to say that!”

“Oh, let me try!” Steven exclaimed, taking the mirror and holding it a distance away from him. “Now I see me…” With a quick flip of the wrist, he turned the mirror over to its non-reflective side. “Now I don’t! Now I see me,” he turned the mirror over again. “Now I don’t!”
“You guys sure are excited about that mirror,” Dipper remarked with a bemused grin as Steven and Mabel broke into gales of laughter.

“Oh come on, Dipper, don’t act like you’re not,” Mabel retorted teasingly. “Even you gotta admit this mirror’s pretty amazing.”

“It’s only a mirror,” Dipper deadpanned. “It’s not like we made any huge, incredible discovery by finding it.”

“Says the guy who found it and said it looked ‘interesting’.”

“Compared to all of the other junk in that box, yeah it was. But on its own it’s just an ordinary old mirror.”

“I don’t know if I’d call this mirror ordinary…” Steven mused, smiling at the mirror. “I actually think it’s pretty special. I don’t know how to explain it, but I can just… feel it, you know?”

“You can feel it?” Dipper questioned skeptically. “Steven, that doesn’t make any-”

“What’s it feel like?” Mabel interrupted, quite intrigued.

“Hm… It’s sort of like-” Before the young Gem could really get his explanation out at all, he happened to run right into Lars as him and Sadie were setting up tablets outside of the Big Donut. The kids had been so focused on discussing the mirror that they had hardly even noticed that they were coming up on the convenience store, until now of course.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going, you little-” Lars began to harshly hiss, though he quickly stopped himself as he met Sadie’s disapproving glance. “Sssssteven!”

“Oh! Sorry, Lars!” Steven exclaimed. “We’re just excited about this mirror here and we-”

“Mirror-schmirror,” Lars scowled, unconcerned. “Just keep on walking. Can’t you three see we’re trying to work out here?”

“Lars, don’t be rude!” Sadie scolded before turning to the kids. “Sorry, you guys. He’s probably just a little stressed since we have to set this extra seating up before the summer rush starts rolling in.”

“Wait, Gravity Falls gets a summer rush?” Dipper asked in confusion.

“Sure,” Sadie grinned casually. “Folks come from all over the place, most of them wanting to ‘get in touch with nature’ whatever that means. It’s nothing to really get excited over. Just more people running around town for a few weeks. But Lars has big plans.”

“You bet I do!” Lars exclaimed with a daring smirk. “All of those out-of-town summer babes traveling away from home without their boyfriends, if you know what I mean.”

“Nope,” Steven said with an innocent shake of his head.

“He means he’s going to hit on girls, Steve,” Dipper explained dryly.

“Ohhhh…. I still don’t get it.”

“Oh, that makes me wonder if any cute boys are going to be coming to town!” Mabel quipped excitedly. “I have a feeling my pool of potential dreamboats is about to get a lot bigger!”
“Maybe I’ll get a few numbers…” Lars said with a wistful sigh, still caught up in his own fantasy. “Maybe I’ll even… call one!”

Sadie couldn’t help but hold back a snicker at this, though there was a hint of bitterness in her tone as she offered a retort. “Yeah, well… m-maybe I’ll meet some new friends!”

“That’s a great idea!” Steven exclaimed, stars in his eyes. “New special friends to have all sorts of summer fun with! Like what the three of us are!” The young Gem smiled brightly as he turned to the twins.

“Oh my gosh! You’re right, Steven!” Mabel brightly agreed. “We’ve already had so much summer fun together. Maybe if we keep using the mirror to guide us, we’ll find even more!”

“Guys, I already told you, it’s just a regular mirror,” Dipper said, somewhat exasperated with their zeal. Still, he was quick to run after them after noticing that they were already starting to head off without him. “Hey! Wait up!” he called, hurrying after them.

“Next time you see me, I’ll be on the arm of a hot woman!” Lars called out after the kids confidently.

“You can stop talking about it now,” Sadie said with an uncomfortable frown.

With their newfound hunt for summer adventure on, Steven and Mabel had taken to walking down the sidewalk backwards, allowing the mirror to relay their path to them. By the time Dipper caught up to them and noticed their backwards stride, he was undoubtedly confused. “What are you guys doing?” he asked with a frown.

“We’re gonna walk backwards into whatever adventure the mirror can find for us!” Mabel replied enthusiastically.

“You should join us, Dipper!” Steven encouraged. “That way whenever we find it it’ll be a surprise for all of us.”

“Steven, I’m not gonna-” Dipper began to protest, but Steven and Mabel were both quick to counteract him by spinning him around anyway. To keep him from turning back around, they positioned him between them, though at the very least the mirror was passed on to him so he could keep track of where they were going.

Of course, walking backwards as they were, it wasn’t exactly easy for them to remain on the sidewalk, even with the mirror giving them a rather limited point of reference. For this reason, it didn’t take them too long to stumble backwards into the street, which was thankfully free of any traffic. At first.

“May-or Dew-ey, May-or Dew-ey,” Mayor Dewey’s campaign van droned as the politician turned the nearby corner as it began to roll down the street the kids were on. Considering it was still something of a distance away, the trio hadn’t had a chance to take notice of the van yet as it steadily zoomed towards them. Thankfully though, the mirror did instead.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going, you little-”

“Huh?” Dipper questioned, though Steven and Mabel had heard this warning quite clearly as well, though they were all confused as to why it had come out in Lars’ voice. Still, it prompted their gazes towards the mirror, where it had seemingly come from, allowing them to see the van as it continued heading their way without slowing down.
“Nooo!” all three kids exclaimed in frightened unison as they spun around, embracing themselves for a painful impact. Thankfully though, the van screeched to a stop just a few feet away from them as Mayor Dewey leaned out of it, offering them an annoyed scowl as he scolded them through his megaphone.

“Car wash kid! And uh…” he gave the twins a look of confusion. “Aren’t you two staying with Pines over at the Mystery Shack?” Dipper and Mabel prepared to answer, but Dewey was quick to cut them off before they could. “Ah, it doesn’t matter. What does matter is why were you kids walking in the middle of the street?!”

“I don’t know,” Steven shrugged honestly. “Why were you driving your van down this street? Isn’t your office two minutes away from here? You could have just walked.”

“I’m the mayor!” Dewey protested sourly. “I’m not gonna walk anywhere. Now, go get run over somewhere else. I’m late for a speech.”

Turning his nose up at the kids, the mayor succinctly drove off, his van still proclaiming “Mayor Dewey” all the while. Steven frowned and the twins both lightly glowered as the grumpy politician left, but they could hardly focus on that in light of the miraculous warning they had received moments ago.

“What just happened?” Dipper asked, looking to the mirror. Unlike before, however, the mirror actually somehow managed to give some form of a response. Its reflective surface suddenly whirled into something of a recording of Steven and Mabel laughing from earlier, proving that it had indeed been the one to give them the warning about the van. All three of the kids froze in complete astonishment at seeing this, none of them able to believe their eyes or ears, until Steven spoke up, voicing his amazement.

“Whoa!” Steven gasped in awe, taking the mirror. “You can talk?!”

“You can talk?!” the mirror repeated in the young Gem’s voice perfectly.

“Oh my gosh! This is so cool!” Mabel remarked with a huge grin. “It really is like a magic mirror! Ask it something, Steven! See if it’ll answer!”

“Um… ok…” Steven cleared his throat, giving the mirror a friendly smile. “So what’s it like being a mirror?”

The image in the mirror whirled again, this time to something Dipper had said earlier. “It’s only a mirror.”

“Ok, this is kinda weird…” Dipper pointed out with an uncomfortable frown. “Am I the only one who thinks that? I can’t be the only one who thinks that.”

“Weird? No way!” Mabel shook her head. “This mirror’s the best! Can you repeat anything?” she asked the mirror itself.

“Yeah!” the mirror exclaimed in Mabel’s voice.

“Then that gives me an idea…” she said with a mischievous smile, glancing over at the nearby town square, where Mayor Dewey was preparing to give his speech to the gathered crowd.

“Hello, Gravity Falls, my friends!” the mayor began with bravado, standing atop his van. “It’s great to be here to celebrate the start of the summer season. A warm summer breeze wafts through the air.”
“Ok, Steven, do it now!” Mabel urged the young Gem, having relayed her plan to him as they stood on the fringes of the crowd.

Steven smirked as he agreed, placing his palms to his mouth and letting out a very loud, very clear fart noise. “PFFFT!”

Of course, the nearby crowd snicker softly at this, but both Steven and Mabel knew this would only be the tip of the ice burg. Dipper gave them a questioning look, unsure of where they were going with this, but Mabel was quick to reassure him by pointing to the mirror.

“We all look forward to the sounds of the summer season,” Dewey continued his speech, having not heard the offending noise. However, it immediately sounded again, this time courtesy of the mirror, which immediately understood the joke the kids wanted to make.

“PFFFT!”

“The smell of the mountain air…”

“PFFFT!”

“The hot wind blowing through the trees…”

“PFFFT!”

“The time to take that pressure that’s been building up all year and just let it out!”

“PFFFT!”

By now, Dewey had clearly noticed he was being mocked, especially as the crowd broke out into full-fledged laughter. Steven and Mabel high-fived their success, both of them feeling as though they had easily gotten even with the surly mayor as the speech ended and the crowd disbanded.

“Wow, you picked that up fast!” Steven remarked to the mirror, which simply imitated his laughter in reply.

“Ok, I gotta admit, that was pretty funny,” Dipper said with a laugh, though he was quick to get serious once again. “But I’m still not sure if we should be playing around with that thing.”

“Oh boy, here comes ‘Mr. Fun Police’ again to ruin our fun…” Mabel sighed in exasperation.

“I’m not trying to ruin anything,” Dipper retorted defensively. “I’m just saying we should be careful. We don’t even know how that mirror works or where it really came from! All we know about it is that it’s been sitting in a box in Stan’s attic for who knows how long. And from the way he acted, he didn’t even seem to know it could do… this.”

“Maybe the mirror just wanted to keep the fact that it could talk a secret…” Steven said, smiling down at the mirror once more. “Is that what you were doing? Were you keeping how special you were a secret from everyone?”

The mirror hesitated answering for a moment, but eventually did so by using a nervous snippet from Sadie. “M-maybe…”

“Well, that was vague,” Dipper remarked, still giving the mirror a suspicious look.

“Come on, Dipper, can’t you just loosen up and have fun for once instead of questioning everything?” Mabel asked pleadingly. “So what if it can talk back to us? You said so yourself: it’s
just a mirror. It’s not like its dangerous or anything.”

“You know, considering the crazy things we’ve seen in this town so far, I’m kind of regretting saying that,” Dipper frowned fretfully.

“I’m sure you’ll warm up to the mirror eventually, Dipper,” Steven assured with a warm grin. “After all, it’s got so much personality! And that’s saying something considering it can only repeat what we say.”

“…Sure, Steven…” Dipper said with palpable uncertainty. After all, despite its unique ability, it was still only a mirror. It couldn’t possibly possess any genuine form of sentience or desire.

Could it?

While Steven and Mabel were already quite invested in the mirror before, now that it could actually interact with them, they were practically enthralled with it. As the trio continued to walk through town, the two of them continued to ask the mirror questions, most of which it was able to answer with responses it had witnessed recently. The way it made use of its material though, was quite creative to say the least. It would reply in snippets of sentences from anyone who it had overheard, from Stan and Soos, to Sadie and Lars, to even Steven, Dipper, and Mabel themselves. Suffice to say its memory was quite impressive, yet it didn’t seem to mind the rather trivial questions Steven and Mabel were posing to it at all.

“Ok, I got one,” the young Gem said before addressing the mirror. “What’s the funniest joke you’ve ever heard?”

The mirror responded in exactly the way Steven had been expecting, with a refrain of the fart noise from earlier. “PFFT!”

“What a classic!” Mabel laughed along with Steven, enjoying the mirror’s sense of humor. “Oh! I have another one. Now that we know you can talk, mirror, I’ve been meaning to ask you… who’s you’re favorite Mabel?”

“Why, you are, Mabel, of course!” the mirror imitated her playful manner from earlier.

“Yes! I knew you’d say that! You’re so smart, mirror!”

“Come on, Mabel. The only things the mirror actually knows is what it’s heard other people say,” Dipper said somewhat caustically, clearly not impressed.

“Yeah, but it uses that stuff to come up with some pretty great responses,” Steven said. “Why don’t you try asking it something, Dipper?”

“Um… ok…” Dipper frowned as he took the mirror. “I’ll start with something simple. How long were you in that box for?”

The mirror’s image flashed once more, going back to a snippet of something Dipper himself had said earlier. “…who knows how long.”

“That’s what I’m asking you!”

“Don’t be rude!” the mirror scolded in Sadie’s voice.
“The mirror’s right, Dipper,” Steven chastised. “You should be nice to it, like me and Mabel are. Maybe then it’ll really answer your questions.”

“Yes! You should say you’re sorry to it,” Mabel urged as Steven nodded his agreement.

“You guys can’t be serious,” Dipper rolled his eyes. Yet even so, Steven and Mabel were quite insistent on having him make amends with the mirror for some reason, so in the end, he begrudgingly did so. “Fine... I’m sorry, mirror.”

“Well, thank you!” the mirror replied blithely via a statement from Mabel. Dipper raised a curious eyebrow at it, not sure if it was even being sincere or not considering its rather playful response. Even so, he still couldn’t say that he appreciated the mirror’s rather sarcastic attitude, which was oddly enough quite clear in how it used the limited words available to it.

“Great! Now we’re all summer fun buddies again!” Steven quipped happily. His bright smile only grew as he noticed they were passing in front of Funland Arcade. “Whoa! Check it out! Looks like Mr. Smiley replaces the old Meat Beat Mania machine Garnet broke with the new Extra Spicy edition!”

“No way! I’ve been dying to play the new one!” Mabel gushed as the trio headed inside the arcade. “I heard they added a skillet special mode and everything! Let’s play a round, Steven!”

“Yeah!” Steven readily agreed as Mabel started heading over to the game. “You don’t mind holding onto the mirror for us while we play, do you, Dipper?”

“Um, I guess not,” Dipper shrugged even though he still didn’t have that high of an opinion of the mirror after their apparent “fight”.

“Thanks!” Steven called as he joined Mabel at the machine, leaving Dipper alone with the mirror.

“So… um… hi,” he greeted the mirror a bit awkwardly. Of course, the mirror didn’t hesitate to repeat it right back to him.

“So… um… hi.”

“Are you just gonna repeat everything I say?” Dipper asked with an annoyed frown.

“Are you just gonna repeat everything I say?”

“That’s not funny, you know.”

Instead of repeating this statement, the mirror flashed back to Steven and Mabel laughing again, showing that it was clearly amused. And while Dipper didn’t really want to indulge it and its aggravating teasing, he couldn’t help but give in and let out a small chuckle of his own. “Ok, ok, you got me. I hate to admit it, but you’re actually kind of clever.”

“You’re actually kind of clever,” the mirror retorted.

“Wait, are you actually being serious or are just mocking me again?” Dipper asked, unable to read the mirror’s intent.

The mirror’s image whirled again, but it didn’t get a chance to actually answer before it was interrupted. “Hey, Dipper!”

“W-Wendy!” Dipper spun around in surprise to face the cashier. However, his smile quickly faded
upon seeing who she was with. “And… Robbie…”

“S’up, dork,” Robbie said aloofly.

“Who were you talking to just now?” Wendy asked, grinning as she raised a curious eyebrow.

“Wha—Oh! No one! No one at all,” Dipper said quickly, trying to play it off with an awkward smile. After all, there wasn’t a very high chance of the teens believing him if he tried to introduce them to the odd concept of a talking mirror.

“So you were talking to yourself?” Robbie conjectured condescendingly. “Tch, figures. And what’s with that girly mirror you have there?”

“O-oh, it’s not mine,” Dipper replied, anxiously glancing down at the mirror. He knew this was something of a lie, since mirror basically belong to him, Mabel, and Steven in common, but even so, he didn’t want to risk embarrassment in front of Wendy. “I was just holding it for—Hey!” he exclaimed as Robbie suddenly swiped the mirror away from him.

“Man, look at this thing! It’s older than my grandma,” the teen remarked with a sarcastic smirk as he looked over the mirror.

“Come on, man, give it back!” Dipper protested, knowing just how devistated Steven and Mabel would be if something were to happen to the mirror.

“Seriously, Robbie, don’t be a jerk,” Wendy crossed her arms, clearly not impressed by her boyfriend’s behavior.

“It’s cool, babe, I’m just checking it out for a sec,” Robbie reassured, snidely grinning at his own reflection. “I don’t know where you got this piece of junk from, kid, but you might as well take it back. It looks like it belongs in some old lady’s basement or something.”

While Dipper wasn’t exactly keen on outright mentioning the mirror’s unique ability, he wasn’t very keen on letting someone like Robbie pass it off as completely uninteresting either. “I dunno, Robbie,” he said somewhat coyly. “I wouldn’t exactly call that mirror a plain old piece of junk.”

“Oh, what? Is it like a ‘magic’ mirror or something?” Robbie scoffed. “Yeah right. I bet you dug this dumb thing up out of a dumpster somewhere. Well, I—”

“PFFFT!” the mirror suddenly interrupted with its favorite gag. Startled, Robbie let out a frightened cry as he dropped the mirror, though fortunately, Wendy managed to catch it right before it could hit the ground.

“Whoa!” the cashier exclaimed, handing the mirror back to Dipper with a wink. “Close one.”

“W-what the heck was that?!” Robbie asked in alarm. “What did that crazy thing just do?!”

“Hey, I told you it wasn’t an ordinary mirror,” Dipper remarked with a satisfied grin.

“Ugh, I should have known that mirror was weird, just like you, kid,” Robbie retorted bitterly.

“Geez, Robbie, chill out,” Wendy scoffed, rolling her eyes. “Even you have to admit that was pretty funny.”

“No it wasn’t! It was—” the moody teen cut himself off as he let out a frustrated sigh. “Whatever. If you need me, I’ll be fixing my hair in the bathroom. At a normal mirror.”
“Yeesh, somebody’s a poor sport,” Wendy remarked to Dipper as Robbie stormed off. “But seriously, dude, that mirror is sweet. How does it work? Is it like a tape recorder or something?”

“I’m honestly not sure how it works,” Dipper said, smiling at the mirror. “Steven, Mabel, and I found it earlier today at the shack.”

“Well, it’s easily the coolest thing anyone’s ever found there,” Wendy said with a laugh. “You know, I’d love to hang out, but I should probably go make sure Robbie didn’t pee his pants or anything. See you later!”

“Bye!” Dipper enthusiastically called out after his crush as she left. As soon as she was gone, however, his attention was quick to turn back to the mirror as he offered it a grateful grin. “Ok, I take back everything I said about you before. What you just did was awesome!”

In response, the mirror repeated another phrase he had said earlier. “That was pretty funny.”

“Pretty funny? It was hilarious!” Dipper laughed. “Robbie totally had it coming. The look on his face was priceless! I can’t believe I’m saying this to a mirror of all things but… thanks.”

“Thanks,” the mirror repeated after what seemed like a moment of hesitation.

“Wait… what?” Dipper’s smile faded into a look of confusion. “Are… are you really trying to thank me?”

“Yeah!” the mirror answered in Steven’s voice.

“I… I don’t understand. What for?”

Instead of relying on a single past phrase or word, the mirror suddenly did something entirely different. This time, it combined words it had heard out of context into a completely new phrase, flashing from an image of Wendy, to Mabel, to Stan, in that order. “You—found—me!”

Needless to say, Dipper was quite surprise that the mirror could even do something like that on its own, but he was even more bewildered by the vague message it had just relayed to him. “W-what?”

“Whoa!” Steven’s excited exclamation caught Dipper off guard as him and Mabel returned, having overheard the mirror’s combined statement. “It made something new! How’d you get it to do that?”

“I don’t know… It just sort of… did it on its own…” Dipper said, giving the mirror a curious look.

“Ooo! Mirror, say something else!” Mabel urged, pulling the mirror away from her brother.

“Mabel—is—hilarious!” the mirror exclaimed, this time combining material from Steven and Dipper.

“Aw, thanks, mirror!” Mabel blushed with warm grin. “You’re so sweet!”

“You’re so sweet!” the mirror parroted, showing that it could still repeat phrases exactly as they were.

“No, you’re so sweet!”

“No, you’re so sweet!”
“No, you’re so sweet!”

“Ok, Mabel, that’s enough!” Dipper cut in, annoyed with the repetition.

“Just when I thought this mirror couldn’t get any cooler, it does!” Steven beamed at the mirror.
“There’s so much stuff we could do with it! Oh! I wonder if it still remembers its favorite joke…”

“PFFFT!” the mirror quickly answered, eliciting a laugh from all three of the kids.

“It never seems to forget that one,” Dipper remarked with an amused smirk.

“Man, it really got a lot of mileage out of that joke,” Steven said, holding the mirror. “You’re pretty funny for a mirror.”

“You’re pretty funny for a mirror.”

“I’m not a mirror!” Steven chuckled.

Once again, the mirror combined statements to create a new, correct statement, utilizing words from Steven and Lars. “You’re pretty funny for a—Sssssteven!”

“There you go!” the young Gem gave the mirror a hearty thumbs up.

“Got any other words of wisdom for us, mirror?” Mabel asked as they left the arcade.

The mirror whirled in response to this, constructing a rather complex sentence from almost all of the people it had heard before. “Sssssteven—Dipper—and—Mabel—are—my—new friends!”

The kids exchanged surprised smiles at hearing this, all of them a little bashful after hearing the mirror say something so heartfelt so directly. “Really?” Steven asked it. The mirror repeated a laugh in response, followed by a “Yeah!” from the young Gem himself, showing its sincerity.

“Oh, mirror, you’re our friend too!” Mabel gushed cheerfully, laughing along with the mirror as it replayed another chuckle.

“You know, normally I wouldn’t really consider something like a mirror as a friend,” Dipper began with a small smile. “But…”

“Oh my gosh!” Steven gasped happily. “Dipper! You warmed up to the mirror, didn’t you?”

“Maybe… Just a little…” Dipper shrugged, not wanting to admit how he actually had come to appreciate the mirror after all.

“This is so great!” Mabel bounced up and down happily, though she gasped as she remembered something. “Oh! You know what? We still haven’t shown the mirror to the Gems yet!”

“You’re right!” Steven exclaimed, turning to the mirror. “The Gems will love you!”

“Nooooo!” the mirror suddenly exclaimed, taking its panicked response from when the kids had nearly been run over.

“Well… that’s concerning…” Dipper frowned, unsure as to why the mirror would be suddenly frightened by the prospect of meeting the Gems.

“Oh, I’m sure it’s just being a little shy,” Steven said, giving the mirror a comforting smile.
“Yeah, I mean, it did take the mirror a while for it to start talking to us,” Mabel added. “It’ll just have to get used to the Gems too!”

“Ok, but… are you guys sure that showing the mirror to the Gems is a good idea?” Dipper asked, not convinced. “You do remember how much they freaked out over the journal, don’t you?”

“But this is totally different,” Mabel protested. “For starters, the mirror isn’t full of all sorts of super-personal junk about the Gems like the journal was.”

“And besides, we agreed that we were all going to trust each other,” Steven said earnestly. “What better way to start then by letting the Gems in on our latest discovery?”

Considering how disastrous the journal incident had nearly been, Dipper still wasn’t completely sure if introducing something like the mirror to the Gems would work out as well as Mabel and Steven were expecting it to. Still, he couldn’t deny that the young Gem was largely right; the bond of trust established between them and the Gems was still quite new. Perhaps this would be a good way to strengthen it. “Alright, fine,” Dipper finally agreed. “Let’s go show the Gems.”

“Noooo!” the mirror screamed again, but Steven was quick to reassure it.

“Don’t worry,” the young Gem laughed warmly. “They’re a good audience.”

By the time the kids made it back to the temple, night had already fallen. While the Gems had been away when they tried to show them the mirror earlier, they had fortunately returned from their mission, and even better, were all three relaxing together in the den as the kids arrived.

“Guys!” Steven exclaimed as the trio burst into the house. “Wait till you see-”

“Yo! Ste-man! Dipstick! M’bel!” Amethyst greeted each of the kids with playful nicknames.

“Hello, kids,” Pearl said much more politely as she stood beside a rather towering, yet very neat pile of random objects.

“Howdy,” Garnet nodded with a cool grin, pointing a finger gun at the trio. “Bang.”

“Um… what’s with the huge pile?” Dipper asked, looking at the organized stack in the center of the room.

“Pearl got in one of her ‘cleaning moods’ today,” Amethyst explained with a bemused smirk, ignoring the white Gem’s annoyed glare. “So she did… that. You guys wanna see something hilarious?” The purple Gem’s grin grew mischievous as she grabbed a nearby stuffed animal, sitting it on the edge of the pile. Pearl only let it remain there for a split second, however, before she swiftly thrust her spear through it.

“You don’t understand!” the white Gem scolded, the stuffed bear still impaled on her weapon. “Symmetrical means both sides have to be the same!”

Amethyst simply laughed as Pearl removed the stuffed animal from her spear, throwing it down into a pile of other various miscellaneous items the purple Gem had attempted to add to the stack.

“M.C. Bear-Bear!” Steven gasped in horror at his ruined stuffed bear. Still, he was quick to push the thought away in favor of his excitement over the mirror. “Okay, that’s great. Anyway, check
this thing out!”

With a huge smile, the young Gem held the mirror up so his guardians could see it. The moment they did however, they all froze, their mouths agape in a shared expression of silent shock.

“You guys are speechless, aren’t you?” Mabel asked playfully. “That’s understandable. This mirror is pretty amazing.”

“W-where…” Pearl began, regathering her bearings as she took a step closer to the kids. “Where did you three find that mirror?”

“It was stored in a box down at the Mystery Shack,” Steven said simply.

“What?!” Pearl exclaimed, absolutely bewildered. “All these years of it being missing and Stan of all people had it all along?! Amethyst, you didn’t give that to him, did you?!”

“Uh, no,” Amethyst said defensively. “Don’t look at me. You’re the one who lost it in the first place, remember?”

“Wait… You guys know something about this mirror?” Dipper asked in confusion.

None of the Gems answered immediately, all of them exchanging something of an apprehensive glance before Garnet finally replied. “That’s no ordinary mirror. We found it at the Galaxy Warp centuries ago.”

“Y-yes!” Pearl added, wringing her hands nervously. “It’s a Gem-powered mirror that can capture and display any event it’s witnessed in all of Gem history!”

“Whoa… really?” Steven asked, stars in his eyes.

The white Gem seemed to start to calm down as she knelt down beside the young Gem, putting her arm around him. “I’m so glad you kids were the ones to find it! You’re in for a real treat! It’ll offer you everything you’ve ever wanted to know about our fellow Gems and our culture.”

“Hold on,” Dipper interrupted, very intrigued by this new information. “You mean there are other Gems?”

“Of course there are!” Amethyst exclaimed with a chuckle. “There are tons of us out there!”

“Wow!” Mabel exclaimed in clear awe. “Well, where are they all?! We wanna meet them!”

The Gems were silent for another awkward beat, and from their expressions, it was clear to tell that none of them really knew how to answer this question. Still, Garnet went in with another succinct, level-headed response. “That’s… impossible. Let’s just leave it at that.”

“What? Why?” Steven asked with a frown. Before they could press for any further information, however, Pearl jumped in again.

“O-okay!” she exclaimed nervously, turning the kids’ attention back to the mirror. “Why don’t we activate this mirror and give it a little test run?” After quickly clearing her throat, Pearl addressed the mirror in a firm, authoritative tone. “Show us the Galaxy Warp.” Oddly enough, the mirror was for once, completely still and silent, an absolute contrast to how it usually so freely interacted with the kids. “Show us the Galaxy Warp!” Pearl tried again, this time more firmly. “Oh, come on! I know you’ve seen it!” She tugged on the mirror, glaring at it. She sighed in disappointment, however, upon turning it over and seeing the cracked stone on the back. “I suppose it is in pretty
rough shape. It must finally be broken.” She shook her head as she handed the mirror back to
Steven. “What a shame.”

“But it’s not broken!” Mabel pointed out. “It’s been talking to us all day.”

“Wait, what?” Pearl asked, taken aback.

“Yeah! It’s like a person!” Steven added with a smile. “Here, we’ll show you. Say “hey”,” he
instructed mirror, which for some reason, refused to respond. “Lil’ buddy…” he urged gently, but
still, the mirror would not comply. “Uh… excuse us.”

The twins joined Steven in turning away from the Gems so they could converse with the mirror in
private. “Come on, mirror!” Mabel encouraged. “Don’t be shy! The Gems won’t bite! Well,
Amethyst sometimes does, but they won’t bite you!”

“Um… guys? I’m really not sure about this…” Dipper muttered, taking an anxious glance back at
the Gems and noticing their disturbed expressions.

“Oh, it’ll be fine,” Steven reassured before addressing the mirror again, practically pleading with it
this time. “You wanna come out, don’t you? You have so much to say and funny noises to share
from across the ages. Are we not summer fun buddies?”

There was a long beat of silence following this question, as though the mirror was silently debating
with itself. But in the end, it finally gave in, producing its favorite joke once again: “PFFFT!”

“There’s the mirror we know and love!” Mabel cheered happily.

“You just couldn’t help yourself, huh?” Steven asked with a laugh.

The mirror constructed another original phrase again, having momentarily put its earlier fear away
for the kids’ sake. “Just for—you—guys!”

The Gems all watched on with wide eyes as the mirror launched into round after round of repetitive
laughter, which Steven and Mabel easily joined in on, though Dipper was far too nervous to,
considering the circumstances. “It’s… talking to them?” Pearl whispered incredulously. “It
shouldn’t be doing that. I-it should just be following orders.”

“Garnet, do something…” Amethyst muttered between clenched teeth.

The Gem leader did do something as she rose to stand, towering over the kids as she stepped
towards them. “Steven, Dipper, Mabel,” she addressed the trio, her voice somehow even colder
than it usually was.

Upon seeing Garnet approaching, the mirror quickly switched from laughter to a panicked cry yet
again, alarming the kids quite a bit. Still, even as they subtly shrinked away from her, the Gem
leader did not back down. “You should give the mirror to us. It will be safer where we can watch
it.”

“Yeah! Let’s bubble it!” Amethyst growled, cracking her knuckles.

“Nooooo!” the mirror wailed in what almost seemed like desperation. The kids looked to it in
frightened confusion, none of them really sure of what to make out of this sudden dark turn of
events.

“H-how will it be safer?” Mabel asked apprehensively, not wanting any harm to befall the mirror.
“It just will be,” Garnet answered vaguely, the low light of the room making her face seem mysterious and unnerving. “Now don’t make me take it away from you three.”

As the mirror howled in fear once more, Steven hugged it close to him, his eyes wide as he turned towards his guardian. “It doesn’t want to go with you! Can’t you hear it screaming?”

“Steven, it’s just a mirror, a tool,” the Gem leader said dismissively. “It can’t want anything.”

“You’re wrong!” Dipper spoke up, already regretting his boldness the moment he said it. Still, as nervous as he was internally, the last thing he wanted was for the Gems to abscond with the mirror and leave it to a fate unknown. “It talked to us! It has a personality and everything! You can’t just-”

“I can,” Garnet asserted. “And I will. You three should have never found that mirror in the first place. You’ll thank us for this later.”

By this point, all three kids were quite distraught, especially as Garnet began to reach out to take the mirror by force. The mirror itself continued screaming in protest all the while, the faces in it constantly changing, especially as it saw the Gem leader’s hand begin to ascend towards it. The trio had no idea to do in this moment of conflict. It was true that they had promised they would start trusting the Gems more, but how could they trust them in a matter like this? The mirror’s desperation and fear was startlingly clear, to the point that all three of them easily shared in on it. But even despite their unified terror, there was one thing they knew for certain: they weren’t about to hand over their new friend so easily.

“NOOOOO!” The mirror shrieked, somehow louder than ever before, at last prompting the horrified kids to action.

Unable to contain his growing dread any longer, Steven let out a frustrated growl. “It wants to be with us!” he shouted, roughly slapping Garnet’s hand away as it was just shy of reaching the mirror. However, the broad motion managed to strike the Gem leader in the face as well, easily knocking her shades from her face.

Steven, Dipper, and Mabel immediately froze as Garnet bent over, shielding her face for a moment. The steadily building tension in the room seemed to finally peak, even as Pearl and Amethyst gasped loudly in the background. It was clear that whatever was about to happen, there would be no turning back from it now.

In a swift movement, Garnet finally looked up at the kids, her three eyes fixated on them in a hostile glare. White Steven had already seen the Gem leader without her shades before, the twins hadn’t, which was why they were even more shocked and frightened to see her burning, three-eyed gaze. However, they only met it for a moment to take in her absolute fury before they all reached the same exact conclusion at the same exact moment.

Without even needing to agree on anything, the flight instinct kicked on for all three of the kids. Before Garnet could even try to take the mirror from them again, they all bolted out the door, rushing down the stairs together as Steven called back his distraught apology. “I-I’m sorry!”

In light of the kids’ hurried retreat, Amethyst and Pearl approached Garnet slowly, noticing that the Gem leader was still seething with controlled rage as she put her shades back on and clenched her fists. “Those three kids are in big trouble.”

“G-Garnet, wait!” Pearl called fearfully as the Gem leader stormed out after the trio, intent on catching them. “I’m sure they didn’t understand what they were doing!”
The mirror had at last stopped screaming, but that hardly made matters any better as the kids fled from the temple, all three of them aptly terrified. And certainly, they had every right to be. Not only had their trust in the Gems been completely shaken, if not broken entirely, but now they genuinely felt as though they had to worry for not just the mirror’s safety, but their own. Of course, they knew the Gems wouldn’t dare hurt them, but the prospect of being found and forced into turning the mirror over to them was almost just as terrifying for all three of them. Which was why they had taken to running through the nearby woods blindly, only taking a break as they found a large tree to hide behind, far enough away that it would at least give them time to plan their next move. For a moment, they all panted to catch their breath and alleviate some of the fear they were feeling, though it hardly helped, especially as an all new round of anxiety set in.

“What do we do?! What do we do?!” Mabel asked in an absolute frenzy.

“Oh… I-I don’t…” Steven bit his lip, glancing to the mirror at an absolute loss.

“We are so dead!” Dipper exclaimed, resisting the urge to pace around out of panic. “They’re probably chasing after us even as we speak! How are we supposed to keep the mirror from them if they find us?!”

“We can’t let them have it!” Mabel said, her expression awash with dread. “It doesn’t like them! It likes us! It should be with us!”

“What’s their problem with you anyway?” Steven asked the mirror itself, taken aback by the wild terror reflected in his eyes. However, the image in the glass quickly changed, its surface glowing brightly in the surrounding darkness. “A-are you trying to say something?”

The mirror’s image shifted quickly, its message distorted and very disjointed as a sign of its own fear. “Away from home,” it began in Lars’ voice, though it whirled to show several other faces as it relayed a desperate plea. “Let—me—OUT!”

“What? What’s it talking about? Let who out?” Dipper asked, shaking his head in confusion.

“We don’t understand!” Steven exclaimed to the mirror.

“Steven! Dipper! Mabel!” Pearl’s distant call echoed through the woods, reminding the kids that they were quickly running out of time.

“Oh no! They’re coming!” Mabel whispered in worried dread.

“Please!” Steven pleaded with the mirror, tears practically in his eyes as he looked to its shifting surface. “We want to help you! What can we do?!”

Suddenly, the mirror’s image changed to something completely different. Instead of using borrowed responses, it relayed what seemed to be a visual demonstration to the kids. They were immediately able to make out their own silhouettes in the mirror’s surface, all three of them clinging onto the mirror together. The vague scene continued to play out as they pulled on the stone on the back of the mirror, until it was at last free.

None of them were entirely sure what would happen if they did this, but even so, none of them really had time to question it. Which was why, after a terse nod of resolved agreement, they all three grabbed onto the blue stone as much as they could, getting a good grip on it before they started pulling on it together. Even with their combined effort, it was certainly a struggle
considering how deeply the stone was embedded into the mirror. They were so engrossed in their task that none of them noticed as the water from the nearby stream began to creep from its bed on its own accord, slinking across the ground towards them as it formed a large, intricate pattern beneath their feet. Still, even as the Gems’ calls for them grew closer and closer, they knew they couldn’t give up. The mirror was depending on them. Which was why, after what seemed like ages of struggling, the finally managed to pry the stone free from its long-time prison.

The mirror shattered instantly the moment the stone came loose from it, but the kids had no time to even worry about that as the stone flew free from their grasp, gliding towards the stream on its own accord. It stopped just shy of the creek side, hovering in midair as it glowed in an ethereal light that illuminated the entire forest. The trio watched with silent awe as a strangely humanoid body emerged from the gem, short hair and a dress billowing out from it until the light finally faded. And as it did, a feminine figure now hovered in the air, but only briefly, before collapsing to the ground on all fours.

Needless to say, the kids were absolutely bewildered as they stared at the woman, still doubled over on the ground, with their jaws dropped in equal shock. Still, curiosity got the better of them as they slowly and cautiously approached her, allowing them to get a better look at her as she remained still and unmoving. Her predominant color scheme was clearly blue; from her simple sundress, to her short, yet flowing hair, to the still-cracked gemstone positioned on her back, to even her skin, all of them were varying shades of blue. She had a slim, likely agile figure, one that carried a certain unspoken grace to it even as she was hunched over on the ground. However, as the kids got close to her, she finally gathered her bearings, glancing back at them as she heard them approach. Her features were also graceful and pretty, but was by far the most startling thing about them were her eyes, which were devoid of pupils and could only be described as mirrors themselves. The kids found themselves being reflected through them as she looked to them, her expression weak and weary, yet overwhelmed with gratitude at the same time.

“T-thank you…” she said, her voice soft yet sincere. Slowly, she began pushing herself up from the ground, only to start to fall forward again. Fortunately though, Steven and Dipper both managed to catch her and help her stand to her full height, which was only a little taller than the kids themselves. “You three... You actually talked to me. You helped me!” She offered them a small, warm smile as she glanced between the three of them. “Let’s see... it’s... Steven... and Dipper... and Mabel... right?”

While still quite awed by her sudden appearance, the kids couldn’t help but smile and nod, confirming her guess. The woman’s smile widened a bit. “I’m Lapis,” she introduced herself. “Lapis Lazuli. Are you three really Crystal Gems?”

“Oh, we’re not,” Mabel corrected, pointing to herself and Dipper. “But Steven is!”

“Yeah!” Steven nodded with a bright smile.

“O-oh…” Lapis frowned, looking to the twins. “So then... what are you two?”

“Um... we’re... human,” Dipper said, confused.

“Really?” Lapis asked curiously. “Two humans and a Crystal Gem... But... you set me free.”

“But—wha-?” Steven questioned, not understanding what she was talking about. However, before Lapis could properly explain, their exchange was suddenly interrupted by the arrival of the Gems themselves.

“Kids!” Garnet shouted warningly, her gauntlets already summoned. Amethyst and Pearl gasped as
they noticed the frightened Lapis, summoning their weapons as well in preparation of a fight. However, it was a fight that the kids saw coming, and it was one that they were resolved to prevent.

“Wait!” Steven cried, running up to the Gems alongside the twins with the intent of shielding Lapis from them. However, as they quickly found out, Lapis could protect herself well on her own.

“YOU!” she hissed at the Crystal Gems, her hands clenched into tight fists at her side. Behind her, the stream water suddenly swelled, forming into the shape of a massive fist that towered over all of them. The kids gasped in horror upon seeing this, but even so, they could hardly stop Lapis as she flew into a fit of rage.

“You three knew I was in there, and you didn’t do anything!” she shouted, completely outraged. “Did you even wonder who I used to be?!” As this cry left her, she slammed the water arm she had conjured down upon the Gems. While Pearl and Amethyst managed to roll out of its path, Garnet was caught under it, though thankfully her formidable strength allowed her to uphold it.

“Steven! Dipper! Mabel! Run!” Pearl cried to the kids, her expression awash with concern as this chaos unfolded. Still though, they had no intentions of leaving, especially not now.

“W-what are you doing?!” Dipper asked Lapis, alarmed at her flex of power. However, she was far too enraged with the Gems to even bother to offer a response at all.

“I’m Lapis Lazuli!” she declared fiercely, both power and pain emanating in her tone. “And you can’t keep me trapped here anymore!”

Without turning towards the creek, Lapis caused the water to lift once more, raising it up well beyond the creek bed to form something of a path that lead downstream. “They’re not going to let us leave…” she scowled, her hands clenched into tight fists as she looked to the kids.

“Leave?” Steven asked, confused.

Lapis didn’t respond immediately, but instead lashed some of the creek water out at the approaching Gems, pushing them away and buying herself some time. “Steven, Dipper, Mabel, come with me,” she offered, holding her hand out to them.

“Where?” Steven questioned, his eyes wide.

“Home,” Lapis responded resolutely.

“Y-you mean the creek?” Mabel asked nervously.

“No,” Lapis shook her head, taking a wistful glance up into the night sky. “I mean home.”

The kids all exchanged anxious glances at this, none of them entirely sure about where she was referring to. Even so, none of them had the heart to turn her down, though they couldn’t very well go with her either, regardless of where she wanted to go. Lapis seemed to understand this as she gaged their silence, but her expression fell as she realized this all the same.

“Fine…” she relented sadly, allowing the wall of water blocking the way between her and the Gems to fall. She looked to the kids one last time, her face full of both lingering rage and untold despair all at once. “Don’t trust them,” she warned them, nodding to the Gems before she turned to the creek. “Goodbye.” Without another word, Lapis stepped into the creek bed, allowing the walls of water to wash over her. Due to the immense overflow, the creek spilled over in a heavy wave, one that easily knocked the kids back quite a ways, completely drenching them.
By the time the kids had regathered their bearings and finished coughing water up from nearly being drowned, they glanced up to see that Lapis had vanished and the stream’s flow had returned to normal. Concerned, the Gems rushed over to them, and Pearl in particular fretted over them, pulling all three of them into a tight, protective embrace.

“Steven! Dipper! Mabel! Are you three alright?” the white Gem asked, still hugging them tight.

“We would be if you let us breathe, Pearl,” Dipper said tightly as the white Gem squeezed them all.

“O-oh, yes! Of course.” She quickly relinquished her hold on the trio allowing them to recover from what had just transpired both physically and mentally.

“So… that was another Gem?” Steven asked, looking worriedly in the direction Lapis had fled.

“Yes…” Pearl let out a long, remorseful sigh.

A long beat of silence passed, in which no one really knew what to say. After all, what could really be said after how everything had changed so abruptly and drastically, all in one night? Still, however, Garnet was the one to finally break the silence, her tone dour and stoic as she addressed the young Gem. “Steven, you’re grounded.”
Chapter Summary

In which Lapis is LaPISSED and the gang goes back to take back the falls (literally)

Chapter Notes

And here we finally are with my rendition of Ocean Gem and the end of arc 2!
Enjoy!!!!

“**I’m grounded?!**” Steven asked the Gems in absolute dismay. It had only been a few hours since the near-catastrophe that broke out after the young Gem and the twins released Lapis Lazuli from the mirror, but the Gems were still quite adamant. After they all trudged back to the temple, the Gems had made Steven’s punishment for doing so quite clear, and they had even gotten Stan involved so he could discipline Dipper and Mabel over the matter. While the conman didn’t initially understand the tumultuous events the Gems had detailed to him, he still wasn’t too impressed with the twins throwing themselves into danger as they had. Needless to say, all three kids knew they were in deep trouble, but even so, they hardly regretted what they had done. Really, in their shared opinion, they had a good deed by freeing Lapis from her mirror prison, especially after the unique bond they had indirectly formed with her. Still, they seemed to be the only ones who thought so.

“**Yes, you’re grounded!**” Pearl exclaimed, crossing her arms.

“**You disobeyed an order,**” Garnet said stoically

“**And as far as I’m concerned, you two knuckleheads are grounded too,**” Stan added, glowering at the twins.

“**Huh? What for?**” Mabel asked with a confused frown.

“**For not telling me that mirror could talk!**” the conman retorted crossly. “**Do you know how much money I could have made off of an attraction like that?!!**” Of course, the Garnet and Amethyst sent him a disapproving glare upon hearing this, which was what prompted Stan to add: “**Oh, and uh, for setting loose some sort of crazy water witch, or something like that. I dunno.**”

“**So now we’re gonna bury you three ‘til you’ve learned your lesson!**” Amethyst exclaimed, holding up a shovel.

“**Aah! That’s not how grounding works!**” Steven gasped fearfully.

“**Are you guys seriously grounding us just for helping someone?**” Dipper asked in bitter disbelief.
“Lapis was* trapped* in that mirror. Probably for a really long time from the way she acted. We did the right thing by helping her out!”

“Are you really sure about that?” Amethyst asked caustically.

“Perhaps we should remind you that she violently and viciously assaulted us with water?” Pearl added caustically.

“Yeah, but she only did that after you guys tried to attack her first!” Mabel protested earnestly. “Don’t act like you wouldn’t do the same if someone threatened to punch you in the face!”

“That doesn’t matter now,” Garnet said coldly.

“Uh, I think it matters a lot,” Dipper said, giving the Gems a critical look. “You guys said you found the mirror hundreds of years ago. If you knew Lapis was trapped in there all that time, why didn’t you ever try to free her?”

“It wasn’t that simple, Dipper,” Pearl began. “It’s true we did know a Gem was powering the mirror, but we didn’t know whether or not she would be… dangerous or not if we set her free. It would have been a risk to us and quite possibly the rest of the world.”

“But if you guys had freed her back then, maybe she would have thankful and you guys could have been friends!” Steven exclaimed, completely earnest.

“Uh… I hate to break it to you, Steven, but that probably wouldn’t have happened…” Amethyst said with a frown.

“Why not?” Mabel asked curiously.

“It’s because they can’t get along with anyone,” Stan remarked sarcastically, ignoring the harsh look the elder two Gems sent his way.

“There’s no point in thinking about what could have been,” Garnet concluded, crossing her arms. What’s important now is that with a Gem as powerful as Lapis Lazuli roaming about, the entire town could be in danger,”

“But Lapis doesn’t want to hurt anyone,” Steven spoke up, his expression awash with concern. “She just wants to go home, wherever that is for her. What’s so bad about that?”

“Oh, Steven…” Pearl glanced away guiltily. “‘Home’ for Gems is… well, it’s… you see… it-”

Fortunately, the white Gem was saved from having to provide an answer as the front door of the house suddenly burst open, revealing a very exasperated, very flustered Greg.

“Dad?” Steven looked to his father in confusion at the sudden intrusion as everyone turned to him. The former rock star was panting heavily, covered in sweat as he leaned against the doorway to catch his breath and address the group.

“Uh… you guys? There’s sort of a… situation going on down at the lake…” he informed the Gems breathlessly.

“Greg, we don’t have time to deal with whatever might be happening down there,” Pearl groaned in annoyance. “We kind of have a situation of our own to deal with here.”

“Yeah, well… you guys might wanna check this one out,” Greg said with a nervous frown as he...
led the way out the door. “It’s a bit of a doozy…”

Apparently whatever was happening at the lake was quite an ordeal considering almost the entire town had gathered on its shore. The townsfolk all gazed out across Lake Gravity Falls in disbelief, murmuring anxiously among themselves and growing even more concerned as they looked to the top of the waterfall. And as the Gems and the Pines arrived on the scene, it didn’t take them too long to see what the cause of alarm was.

The lake in its entirety was now inexplicably empty. Where there was once a vast, deep expanse of glistening water, there was now only a dry, deep pit, dotted with the occasional sunken boat or island spire. However, even more shocking than that was the fact that instead of flowing down into the lake as it should have, the waterfall was instead, somehow completely defying gravity and flowing upwards from the top of the cliff. The massive pillar the new waterfall created ascended skyward to the point that where it ended could no longer be seen thanks to the cover of clouds surrounding it, but it was clear that it was at least miles high into the air.

Like the rest of the awed townsfolk, both the Pines and the Gems craned their gazes upward to take in the sight of the imposing liquid tower, both the kids and the adults equally stunned by it. “Well, that’s something you don’t see every day,” Stan remarked, adjusting his glasses to make sure his eyes weren’t deceiving him.

“What happened?” Dipper asked, completely bewildered.

“That’s what everyone’s trying to figure out…” Connie said as she joined the group, having already been there before them.

“Connie!” Steven exclaimed with a small smile of greeting. Connie, on the other hand didn’t return it.

“Where have you guys been?” she asked Steven and the twins with a concerned frown. “The whole town’s been going nuts ever since the waterfall started… doing that.”

Before the trio could respond, the sudden screech of a megaphone caught everyone’s attention as Mayor Dewey managed to spot the Gems from across the shore. “Hey! It’s those magical ladies!” he exclaimed, marching over to them hotly. “What’s going on here?”

“The lake is gone, obviously,” Garnet replied simply.

“That’s right!” Dewey groaned, dismayed. “And the waterfall is flowing up instead of down! This town is called Gravity Falls for a reason! This is false advertising! Aw, we’re gonna lose all our summer business!”

“And all the tourist babes!” Lars lamented, not noticing Sadie as she rolled her eyes.

“Who’s gonna buy my fries?!” Fryman asked worriedly.

“And my pizza!” Kofi Pizza added angrily.

“And our bacon coffee!” Lazy Susan exclaimed with immense concern.

“Who’s going to read all of the steamy gossip in the Gravity Falls Gossiper?” Toby Determined wailed in his usual awkward way.
“Who’s gonna have fun at Funland Arcade?!” Mr. Smiley frantically demanded.

“Who’s going to spend money at the Mystery Shack, by far the best tourist trap in Gravity Falls?!” Stan panicked above them all. All of the townsfolk were silent for a moment as they gave the conman a curious look before Mayor Dewey addressed the Gems again.

“As mayor,” he began rigidly, still shouting at Garnet through his megaphone. “I demand that you explain this disaster immediate-” The Gem leader was quick to cut him off by easily slapping the megaphone out of his hand, causing him to shrink away from her fearfully.

“It was Lapis Lazuli,” Garnet explained succinctly.

“Wait, Lapis did this?” Mabel asked, confused.

“Oh yes… I suppose that would make sense…” Pearl mused as she projected a holographic projection of Lapis from her gem. The townsfolk all murmured in muted amazement upon seeing this, but the white Gem hardly noticed. “Considering her ability to manipulate water, this would be an easy feat for a Gem like her.”

“But why would Lapis steal the lake?” Steven asked with a frown. “She’s a Gem, like us.”

The Gems exchanged an apprehensive glance upon hearing this, none of them having the heart to completely tell him the truth. Still, Pearl looked away as she gave an almost morose answer, one that seemed all the more pertinent as she continued to project the image of the mysterious blue Gem. “There’s a lot you don’t know about Gems, Steven…”

It didn’t take long for the Gems to grow tired of Mayor Dewey desperately begging them to emend the situation and get the lake back to normal. After briefly assuring the townsfolk that they would handle the problem, they had gone back to the temple along with the twins, Stan, Soos, Greg, and Connie so they could figure out what to do about it.

“How could I have known that the Gem contained in that mirror would be so powerful?!?” Pearl exclaimed fretfully.

“Who cares about her? How are you three gonna get the waterfall back?” Stan asked sullenly. “You heard what Dewey said! Without the lake, no tourists are gonna bother coming to this backwoods town. No tourists means no visitors to the shack. And no visitors to the shack means I won’t make any money! And if I don’t make any money… oh, I don’t even wanna think about that!”

“Geez, chill out, Stan,” Amethyst rolled her eyes. “Don’t have a heart attack. We’ll deal with it. Somehow…”

“Maybe if you dudes just ask this Lapis lady to give the waterfall back nicely then she’ll do it,” Soos suggested amicably.

“That won’t work. Lapis isn’t the kind of Gem that can be reasoned with,” Garnet replied dismissively and unwaveringly.

Steven, Dipper, and Mabel exchanged a glance upon hearing this, all of them ready to protest this claim since they had been the ones to interact with Lapis the most. But instead, the three of them found themselves pulling away from the conversation so they could have their own discussion
“This is bad, you guys,” Dipper said with a worried frown. “Really bad. And I can’t help but feel as though we’re kind of responsible for it.”

“Yeah, I mean, we were the ones who let Lapis out…” Mabel bit her lip apprehensively. “But how were we supposed to know that she’d go crazy and steal the lake?”

“She must have a good reason for it,” Steven said, even if he wasn’t so sure himself. “If only we could go talk to her and see what’s wrong…”

The three of them were silent for a moment or two, pondering over the matter at hand. However, when they did reach the obvious conclusion, they did so at the exact same time. “That’s it!” they exclaimed in near-perfect unison. None of them had to relay what they were all thinking as they hurried to the other side of the house to discreetly prepare for the journey ahead. It would likely be quite laborious and dangerous, true, but it was their shared burden to bear, one that they were determined to shoulder together.

Since the Gems, Stan, Soos, and Greg were so engrossed in their own fruitless debate about what to do, they failed to notice Steven packing his cheeseburger backpack up, Dipper making sure he had the journal on him, and Mabel checking over her grappling hook. However, what the adults didn’t notice, Connie did, especially as the trio started heading for the door.

“Where are you guys going?” she asked, directing everyone’s attention toward them. Hesitantly, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel turned to face the rest of the group, all three of them feeling the inquisitive looks being sent their way. Even so, they weren’t about to let any resistance from anyone get in the way of what they knew needed to be done.

“We’re leaving to fix what we did to Gravity Falls,” Steven said with firm resolve.

“We’re the ones who set Lapis free from the mirror,” Dipper added, just as adamant. “Which means it’s our fault that the lake and the waterfall is gone.”

“So now we’re gonna go take back the falls!” Mabel proclaimed daringly. “Or get really thirsty trying.”

For a long moment, the trio was silent as they tried to gage everyone’s reactions. For the most part they seemed to be unreadable though, as they all stared at them wordlessly. The silence lasted just uncomfortably long enough that it prompted Dipper to speak up once more.

“You guys aren’t gonna try and… stop us or anything?” he asked tentatively.

“Because if you are, then we won’t listen!” Mabel stomped her foot down in faux defiance. “We won’t stop, we won’t rest until we bring that waterfall back! Right, Steven?”

“Right!” Steven readily proclaimed. “I mean, we might stop for a snack break or something like that, but we’re going to do this, no matter how hard it might be!”

With valiant smiles, the trio prepared to set off out the door, only to be stopped as Greg placed a hand on Steven’s shoulder. “Wait up, kids,” the former rock star said with a sincere smile. “I’m coming with you.”

“I want to help you guys too!” Connie volunteered eagerly. “Also, I feel weird being in your house if you’re not here, Steven.”
As if he had overheard the conversation, Lion padded over and placed an affectionate paw on top of the young Gem’s head, letting out a roar of consent that implied that he wanted to come along as well. Greg, Stan, and Soos all let out nervous gasps as they saw the pink beast, but their brief fear was interrupted as Pearl cleared her throat.

“Clearly, we’re coming too,” the white Gem said with a broad grin.

“You’re ungrounded, by the way,” Garnet said, clearly impressed by their resolve.

“Whoo!” Amethyst cheered excitedly, jumping up onto the counter. “Road trip!”

“Dudes, I’m totally down for a magical road trip!” Soos exclaimed with a smile. “Especially if you got snacks like you said.”

“Wow, you guys… thanks!” Steven beamed, glad to see they had some support in this endeavor after all. To know that the Gems in particular consented to this mission and were willing to lend their aid was quite reassuring to all three of the kids, especially considering how sour things had gone between them all the previous night. Perhaps their approval of this journey was indeed a way of them showing that they not only did indeed trust them, but they believed in them as well.

“What about you, Grunkle Stan?” Mabel asked the conman, considering the fact that everyone else had already volunteered to go. “Aren’t you coming too?”

Stan scoffed as he crossed his arms, pretending to put on a mask of apathy as he easily relented. “Yeah, sure, whatever, kid,” he said with a wave of his hand. “But only because my profits depend on that waterfall.”

“Yeah!” Amethyst shouted with a wild grin, already booking it for the door. “Let’s go! This is gonna be great!”

“Amethyst, wait!” Pearl scolded, running out after the purple Gem. Garnet calmly followed, with Stan, Soos, and Greg not too far behind, leaving just the kids and Lion to bring up the rear.

“Are you guys sure you’re ready for something like this?” Connie asked Steven, Dipper, and Mabel with a worried frown. “I mean, this whole thing seems like it might be kind of dangerous…”

“Pft, dangerous-schmangerous,” Mabel scoffed brazenly. “We’ve been up against worse! Like robotic lake monsters, or candy-obsessed monsters, or living vines, or insane watermelons! Basically, we fight a lot of monsters and plants.”

“I… really need to hang out with you guys more…” Connie remarked, concerned.

“The point is, this’ll be easy,” Steven reassured. “All we need to do is find Lapis and ask her to return the waterfall. She’ll listen to us. We’re friends.”

“But what if she doesn’t give it back?” Connie asked.

The trio exchanged a tentative glance at this, knowing that if this possibility could certainly complicate things. After all, Lapis’ motivation for stealing the waterfall in the first place didn’t really make that much sense to them. And while it was true they had hit it off with her while she had been stuck in the mirror, there was no telling if such sentiments would carry over to potentially hostile situation such as this. Despite their brave resolve, they all still had their shared doubts over the task ahead of them, which was why there was really only one response Dipper could give to Connie’s inquiry: “That’s a good question…”
Mayor Dewey sat in what used to be the shallows of Lake Gravity Falls, disheveled and unshaven as he tried desperately to refill the empty lake with a mere garden hose. As he mournfully sobbed over what he believed to be the death of the town’s tourist season, he failed to notice the colorful van and pink lion speed past him, setting out towards the floating cliffs. The road to the top of the waterfall wasn’t easily accessible, nor was it very direct, so it would take a few hours to get there. But the intrepid members of the collective caravan were hardly concerned with the distance of their journey. For the most part.

“Stan, could you please move over a little?! Between you and Amethyst and all of this garbage back here, I have no room!” Pearl exclaimed, severely annoyed. Since the kids had all piled onto Lion for the trip that left everyone to ride in Greg’s rather cramped van. Of course, the former rock star was driving and Garnet sat with him up front, which left Stan, Pearl, Amethyst, and Soos to ride in the back, which unfortunately for them, was packed with most of Greg’s belongings. Needless to say, it was a very tightly cramped setup.

“Why are you even complaining, Pearl? You’re the skinniest one out of all of us!” Stan retorted sullenly. “But if you really need so much precious ‘personal space’, why don’t you ask Amethyst to move instead?”

“Ugh, fine,” the white Gem rolled her eyes in exasperation as she glanced over at the purple Gem beside her. “Amethyst, could you—”

“Shh, P, keep it down!” Amethyst interrupted, not even looking over at Pearl. “I’m trying to watch Soos play this cool video game!” She hardly noticed the irritated scowl the white Gem sent her way upon hearing this, but instead focused her attention back on the handyman’s Game Guy, only for him to lose a life a moment later.

“Aw, man! I thought I had it that time!” Soos frowned in defeat.

“Mind if I try?” Amethyst asked with a daring smile.

“Sure thing, dude.” The handyman handed the game over to the purple Gem, who immediately controlled the character to run straight into the first enemy she saw, resulting in an immediate game over.

“Nice!” Amethyst cheered, not noticing Soos’s confused frown. “I won!”

“Ugh, I can’t believe those kids roped me into going on this crazy train,” Stan said with a scowl.

“But Mr. Pines, I thought you volunteered to come along on your own,” Soos pointed out.

“Ohhhh! He’s got you there, Stan,” Amethyst added playfully.

“Can it you two!” the conman snapped. “And how come Garnet gets to sit all nice and comfy up front while the rest of us are squeezed together back here like a bunch of sardines?”

“Because I called shotgun,” Garnet replied, glancing back with a small smirk.

“I’ll give you a $20 to switch places with me,” Stan offered the Gem leader, leaning forward and whispering so the others wouldn’t hear.

“You and I both know you won’t,” Garnet calmly called his bluff.
The conman leaned back at this, crossing his arms in defeat. “Fair enough.”

“Aw, come on, you guys, it’s not so bad,” Greg said with a smile. “I live back there so I would know.”

“That’s not really reassuring, Greg,” Pearl deadpanned bluntly.

“I know! How about we turn on some tunes to lighten the mood!” the former rock star suggested, putting a tape in. “This was one of Rose’s favorites.” A heavy metal song began to play, jamming through the stereo as the entire van thumped from its loud bass. Pearl and Amethyst cringed uncomfortably, neither of them fans of such music, but Soos seemed to enjoy it well enough as he cheerfully banged his head along with it. Stan, on the other hand, was nowhere near as amused.

“Geez, Greg! Turn that mess down!” he shouted over the music. “You’re gonna bust my hearing aid out!”

“Oh! Sorry, Mr. Pines!” Greg laughed awkwardly as he quickly turned the music down a bit before glancing over at the Gem leader beside him. “What do you think, Garnet?”

Garnet simply gave him a rather incredulous look for a moment, clearly not impressed by the raucous tune, before she abruptly kicked the door of the van open and leapt out, rolling on the ground for a ways with a straight face all the while. Since Steven, Connie, Dipper, and Mabel were all riding alongside the van on Lion, they were somewhat confused upon seeing this, but none of them questioned it. After all, it didn’t seem too out of ordinary for the Gem leader.

The road that lead up to the top of the waterfall consisted only of dirt and gravel and it was rather narrow, meaning that the van could only go so fast on it. Dusk was starting to fall upon Gravity Falls, casting the imposing tower of water in an ethereal light. Really, the tower in and of itself was something of a beacon for the group, a constant reminder of their destination that only grew taller and more intimidating the closer they got to it.

The seating situation in the van had at last been rectified as Garnet had taken to reclining atop it while Pearl drove and Stan rose shotgun. Soos, Greg, and Amethyst, were all peacefully snoozing in the back with the promise that they’d wake up once they got there. Compared to the adults, the kids had been much more quiet as they rode on Lion, the weight of the situation falling upon them more and more every time they so much as glanced at the tower of water ahead. While they were indeed on a full-fledged adventure, none of them really felt too compelled to talk about it, especially Steven, Dipper, and Mabel. Overall, they still felt rather guilty over what had happened to the waterfall, but the guilt only really extended that far. In setting Lapis free from the mirror, they had only acted out of compassion and a desire to help their newfound friend. How could they have known that such a simple act would ripple into a catastrophe like this?

Still, as anxious as they were all feeling, Steven was the first to break the ongoing silence and voice his concerns. “I can’t believe Lapis would do this. Gems shouldn’t fight each other.”

Pearl glanced over at the young Gem upon hearing this, sucking in a deep breath as she realized it was time to finally provide him with some much-needed honesty, especially considering the circumstances. “…We’re always fighting Gems, actually.”

“What?!” Steven and the twins gasped in equal shock.

“But why?” Mabel asked in concerned alarm. “If there are other Gems out there, wouldn’t you all
“Well… it’s not that simple…” Pearl frowned uncomfortably. “Oh, how do I put this? All Gems aren’t necessarily… good…”

“W-what do you mean?” Connie asked apprehensively.

Suddenly, Amethyst leaned forward in between Pearl and Stan, having awoken from her nap upon overhearing the conversation as she added her two cents. “All those monsters we fight used to be just like us! Right, Pearl?”

The white Gem sighed remorsefully, but nodded nonetheless. “Yes… But they’ve become corrupted and broken. We have to take care of them, subdue them, contain them. It’s the best we can do for them… for now…”

“Wait…” Dipper began, still trying to grasp the concept as he remembered all of the monsters the Gems had squared off against over the course of the summer so far. “If all of those monsters are really Gems, then how did they get like… that?”

Pearl and Amethyst exchanged an uneasy glance, though thankfully, Garnet provided a terse answer from atop the van. “It’s a long story.”

Dipper groaned in annoyance upon hearing this, knowing that “it’s a long story” usually meant it was a story he wasn’t going to hear. Something that he was becoming more and more accustomed to with anything concerning the Gems. “Just how many mysterious secrets do you guys have?” he asked, disgruntled.

“Forget it, kid,” Stan spoke up caustically. “You’d be here all day trying to count all of the secrets these three try to keep from everyone.”

“Come on, Stan,” Amethyst prodded jokingly, though she was really trying to push the conversation away from them. “Don’t act like you don’t have any dirty laundry of your own.”

The conman didn’t respond immediately as he subtly shifted in his seat a bit before giving a dry, unassuming reply. “Not as much as you guys, that’s for sure.”

Though Pearl was more than ready to shoot back a heated response, but before she could, the glow put off by the tower of water caught everyone’s attention as they broke through the trees and made it to its base.

Somehow, the tower was even more spectacular and frightening up close. The lake water it was made of seemed to glisten in the moonlight of the early evening, and as it soared miles high into the air, dark clouds swirled around it almost ominously. Though they had all been looking at it for the past several hours, now that they were a few feet in front of it, it seemed to take on an entirely different appearance altogether.

“That’s some… magical destiny stuff right there…” Connie noted in muted awe, taking her glasses off.

“Guys, I just had the best idea for an album cover,” Greg said, peering at the tower in amazement through the van’s window.

“This is it,” Garnet said, leaping down from the roof of the van. “Lapis Lazuli is here.”

“Sheesh, she sure is into dramatic overkill, isn’t she?” Stan remarked as everyone got out of the
van to stand before the tower. Likewise, the kids slowly unmounted Lion, though like the adults, they were rather wary of approaching the tower immediately.

“I still don’t understand. What does she want with the waterfall?” Pearl asked, shaking her head in confusion.

“Whoa… look at all this!” Connie exclaimed as she stepped a bit closer to the waterfall. “It’s like a giant aquarium!” And indeed it was. Countless fish, both big and small, swam freely in the water of the tower, unaware of the new shape it had taken.

“Yo, dudes, look! Isn’t that the Gobblewonker?” Soos asked, pointing out the largest creature in the tower, which was none other than the mythical monster itself. “I guess Old Man McGucket wasn’t so crazy after all.”

“Either that or he built another giant robot,” Amethyst deadpanned casually.

“So how exactly are we supposed to get Lapis to-” Dipper began, though he was abruptly interrupted by, ironically enough, Lapis herself.

“You shouldn’t be here!” the blue Gem’s voice thundered from her spot high atop the tower, the anger in it quite clear.

Acting on a sudden burst of bravery, Steven rushed forward towards the tower, knowing that they couldn’t leave until this problem was fixed. “Lapis Lazuli!” he called as loudly as he could, though he assumed she could hear him regardless. “It’s us! Steven, Mabel, and Dipper!”

“Yeah!” Mabel added, taking a bold step forward. “And we’re here to talk to you! And you know, getting the waterfall would be super nice too.”

At this, the water near the base of the tower began to ripple, sloshing and remolding until a large aquatic visage of Lapis’ face appeared, glaring down at the kids. “Go away!” she ordered harshly. “Before I make you!”

“But I thought we were summer fun buddies!” Steven exclaimed worriedly.

Suddenly, the water shifted once more, this time reverting to the same image the mirror had latched onto, of the kids screaming in unified panic. “Nooooo!”

“But we set you free from the mirror!” Dipper protested brazenly. “Doesn’t that mean anything in all this?”

“No, it doesn’t!” Lapis hissed, her face appearing in the water again. “It doesn’t change the fact that I was trapped in there for thousands of years, only to be used as a tool by everyone! Humans… Crystal Gems… You’re all the same! You only care about this place and nothing else!”

Pearl and Amethyst were particularly agitated upon hearing this, knowing well what Lapis was alluding to. Still, Garnet was the one to restrain them as they prepared to leap to the kids’ defense. “Easy,” she advised. “Let them handle this.”

“What do you mean?” Steven asked, confused at Lapis’ apparent fury. “We’re all Gems, right? We just want to help you!”

“You don’t understand!” Lapis accused, anxiety washing over her expression as her face retreated back into the tower. “Just leave me alone…”
“Wait!” the trio called in unison as they all ran towards the tower. After all, they had come to get the waterfall back, and they weren’t about to leave until they did so. But even so, Lapis was just as resilient. And as Steven, Dipper, and Mabel began pushing against the tower, the blue Gem finally lashed out.

Out of nowhere, three hands suddenly shot out from the water tower, grabbing the kids roughly. Their already immediate shared alarm spiked as three figures attached to each hand swiftly stepped out of the tower, each of them identical to one of the kids, save for their watery composition. “I said….” Lapis began, her voice speaking through the water clones. “Leave me alone!”

Before either Steven or the twins could attempt to free themselves from the iron grip of their aquatic doppelgangers, they were abruptly and brutally pushed away. Each of the water clones shoved the kids back hard with heavy streams of water, though thankfully the Gems managed to safely catch them as they flew backwards.

Even so, Lapis was only getting started. No more than a moment later, exact water duplicates of the Gems themselves emerged from the tower. Much like the doubles of Steven, Dipper, and Mabel, their eyes were softly glowing and set in a fierce glare at their originals, easily giving away their violent intent.

“Everyone! Stay behind us!” Pearl commanded as her, Garnet, and Amethyst took up fighting stances. “We’ll handle this.”

“Sounds good to me!” Greg exclaimed, fearfully fleeing to take refuge behind a nearby rock.

“Y-yeah! You don’t have to tell us twice!” Stan agreed as him and Soos quickly ran to join Greg. For once, the kids didn’t protest with this plan either as they stood behind the Gems. After all, Lapis had already demonstrated the surprising strength of her water clones to them mere moments ago. But certainly, the Gems would be able to bravely defeat them. Or so they hoped.

With their usual graceful boldness, the Gems summoned their weapons, more than ready for the fight ahead. However, the water clones were quick to repeat the action like mirrors, somehow creating liquid weapons of their own. Despite what they were made of, they still looked to be every bit as dangerous as the originals, giving the Gems the impression that this fight wouldn’t be all too easy.

“Uh oh…” Amethyst muttered worriedly upon seeing this.

“Stand together,” Garnet commanded firmly. “Don’t let them separate us.” Only mere seconds after the Gem leader had said this, her water duplicate suddenly rushed forward, landing a heavy punch to the original’s jaw. Garnet flew backwards, crashing into the nearby woods and knocking down several trees along the way. Her double was in hot pursuit, landing near the sizable crater Garnet’s rough landing had created. The Gem leader forced herself to rise again, cracking her neck and raising her gauntlets to prepare for the melee ahead. Simultaneously, the two Garnets leapt at each other, and as their fists met in a brutal collision, they were both launched backwards a bit by the equal momentum. From there, a barrage of fast, heavy punches ensued, each of them landing evenly against the others’ with no sign of a break in sight. Eventually though, Garnet managed to gain a bit of an advantage by ducking under one of her copy’s swings, retaliating by sending her fist sailing through the water clone’s head. Still, the liquid was quick to reform itself seconds later around her fist, catching it and using the Gem leader’s surprise against her as it kicked her away into a nearby rock.

As soon as Garnet had jumped away from the rock and back into her brawl, Amethyst’s whip coiled around it. The purple Gem slung the large stone towards her water clone, though its
malleable aquatic form allowed it to swivel out of its path. Still, Amethyst tried again, catching another rock with her whip and chucking at the double again, only for it to once again divide its shape to avoid it. Annoyed, the purple Gem threw a maelstrom of rocks, trees, and anything her whip could wrap around to try and dismember her water doppelganger, but each time, it was to no avail.

“Oh, come on!” she shouted in exasperation after what felt like the hundredth failed attempt. Of course, her water double saw this as the perfect opportunity to play the offensive as its whip wrapped around her ankle unexpectedly. Amethyst let out a startled cry as she was sent flying, only to be slammed into the ground unrelentingly. As the dust cleared from her fall, however, the purple Gem had adopted a new strategy as she shapeshifted into her much bulkier Purple Puma persona. “Well, as long as we’re playing fair…” she smirked daringly, leaping high into the air to land a heavy body slam down on her opponent.

“Whoa, no way!” Mabel gasped in amazement as she watched the fight between the purple Gem and her copy. “Amethyst was Purple Puma all along?! Who could have guessed?”

“You can’t be serious…” Dipper deadpanned to his sister over what he believed what an obvious assumption.

Nonetheless, Pearl was engrossed in her own battle as she skillfully guarded against her water copy’s spear. The two had been exchanging broad, heavy swings for a while now, with neither of them making any headway. That is, until the white Gem managed to at last land a direct hit, slicing her duplicate cleanly in half. She let out a small, relieved laugh at this, though it soon turned to shock as the two decomposing halves of her clone suddenly reformed themselves into two new, separate clones. “Ugh…” Pearl groaned, summoning another spear to counteract the two now poised against her. “I hate fighting me!”

With the kids, Greg, Stan, and Soos had been advised against getting involved in the ongoing danger, Lion was fortunately there to protect all of them as he faced off against the clones of Steven and the twins. While they didn’t really have any weapons, they were still quite tricky on their own as they dodged Lion’s barrage of supersonic roars with ease.

“Come on, Lion!” Connie shouted in encouragement.

“You can take us!” Steven added just as boldly.

“You’re a war machine, Lion!” Mabel cheered. “An adorable war machine!”

Of course, despite Lion’s strength and the verbal support the kids were providing him with, he could still do nothing as the trio of clones suddenly lashed out, knocking him into Greg’s van with a heavy blast of water.

“Oh no, not the van!” Greg exclaimed in dismay, running towards his damaged vehicle.

“Revenge!” Steven rallied brazenly in light of what had just happened, raising the water gun he had brought along.

“Revenge!” Dipper, Mabel, and Connie all cheered in agreement, more than ready to fight back, even if they had been told not to. However, before they could blindly rush into the fray, they were abruptly interrupted.

“Hold it!” Stan exclaimed, rushing to stand in front of the kids. “I’m all about revenge as much as the next guy, but you four are in way over your heads with this one. So you kids just hang back and
let me handle them instead, got it?"

“What are you going to do?” Dipper asked, confused.

“Let’s just say I didn’t bring these babies along for nothing,” the conman smirked as he pulled out a pair of brass knuckles. “Sooos! Watch the kids! This could get ugly.”

“You got it, Mr. Pines!” Soos saluted dutifully as he rounded up the kids. “Come on, dudes. Those water guys could mess you all up big time!” Though the protested a bit, they ultimately complied and followed the handyman as they took to a safe distance away from the fight as Stan challenged the remaining water duplicates.

“Hey, you wet punks!” the conman called, brandishing his brass knuckles as he stood ready for an impending brawl. “You’re itching for a fight? Well come and get one!”

Of course, the water clones immediately did so as the doubles of the twins both rushed forward. Regardless, Stan was ready for them as he threw the first punches, aiming both of his blows low so that they’d hit. The clones dodged his fists however, briefly disbanding as they swerved around him before reforming behind him once more. Stan only had a moment to spin around before both fake twins launched a heavy stream of water at him, which he only narrowly managed to duck away from, though he still got rather drenched by it.

“Ugh…” the conman groaned as he stood again, wringing the water out of his suit jacket. “You know, it’s kinda weird fighting you two since you look so much like—”

Stan was abruptly cut off as he found himself suddenly ambushed by Steven’s water clone from behind. Fortunately though, he noticed the copy surging towards him just in time and reacted accordingly by spinning it around and kicking it away. While he was distracted however, the water clones of the twins made their move as both of them teamed up to blast the conman from behind. Unfortunately, Stan wasn’t quick enough to counteract it this time, and before he knew it he found himself being brutally knocked to the ground without warning.

“Grunkle Stan!” Dipper and Mabel both exclaimed in concerned unison upon watching their uncle fall, but even so, Stan wasn’t about to stay down for too long.

The conman let out a hiss of pain through his clenched teeth as he gingerly touched his already aching back, but nonetheless, he quickly picked himself up to all fours. “I’m gonna be feeling that in the morning…” he cringed, glaring over at the nearby water clones as they slowly approached him, ready to attack once more. “Oh what? You three want some more? Well bring it on!” he goaded as he slowly tried to stand again, only for his sore back to hold him back. “Ah, just… just give me a minute, and I’ll… Y-you three will be—ow!”

The water clones were certainly not about to give Stan any time to recover, but fortunately their attention was soon diverted away from him and to all new opponents instead. “Hey!” Steven shouted as he fired his water gun at his own water clone. Likewise, Connie and the twins joined him in bravely standing against the liquid trio, none of them willing to back down this time. “It’s us you want, not him!”

“Yeah!” Mabel added, holding up her grappling hook brazenly. “Give us your best shot… um, us!”

Taken in by this new challenge, the water doubles leapt into action against the group, much to Stan’s sudden alarm. “Kids, wait!” he called, not hiding his growing panic. “Sooos, I thought I told you to watch them!”
“I was!” Soos called out defensively as he peered over the rock, revealing that he had been heavily doused. “But alas, I was no match for their determination and Steven’s water gun.”

“Sorry again, Soos!” Steven called back before turning his attention back to the approaching water clones.

“Uh, how exactly are we supposed to fight these guys?” Dipper asked, concerned by their relative lack of a concrete plan. “The Gems can’t even defeat their water clones, so how are we supposed to get rid of ours?!”

“Like this, I guess,” Connie shrugged, picking up a few nearby rocks and making the first move by chucking them at the water duplicates. Steven was quick to join in by firing his water gun at his own clone, which did succeed in halting its approach, if only for a brief moment. The doppelgangers of the twins however, were completely undeterred.

Seeing this, Mabel retaliated first, launching her grappling out at her own double with skillful aim. The hook hit its mark, splashing through the copy’s aquatic form and immediately causing it to break apart. Mabel let out a small, triumphant cheer as her double began to dissipate as she pulled the hook back to her, only for the clone to reform perfectly seconds later. “Hey, no fair!” she shouted, scowling at the copy. “You’re cheating!” Like all of the water copies, it showed no sign of responding as it held its arm out, a water grappling hook forming it its hand just as the Gem’s duplicates’ weapons had. “Whoa… cool!” Mabel remarked, surprised. She hardly had any time to be impressed however as her copy fired off its own grappling hook at her, forcing her to leap out of its path. “Ok, I take it back! Not cool!”

As Mabel narrowly dodged her duplicate’s shots, Dipper found himself relatively defenseless against his own water clone as it took a more direct approach by barreling right into him. Both of them ended up knocking each other to the ground, breaking into a small tussle though it didn’t take the water copy long to gain the upper hand and pin Dipper to the ground. He gasped in frightened alarm as the duplicate’s arm turned into a thin, narrow stream of water, which he only barely managed to roll out of the way from as it shot towards him in a heavy torrent. The clone paused momentarily to re-aim and try again, but this time Dipper attempted to catch the copy’s fist as it slammed down towards him. It only partially worked though, as he did block some of the clone’s attack but not most of it. A downpour of water still rushed from the clone’s arm, not only completely drenching Dipper but practically waterlogging him. With the copy’s firm hold on him, he was lucky to get even the briefest gasp of air amidst the water he was being bombarded with, even despite his struggling. All too quickly he was growing lightheaded from a steadily increasing lack of air, but fortunately, before he could fall completely unconscious, he was miraculously rescued.

Dipper didn’t even notice that his water clone had been cleanly knocked away from him until he realized he could breathe freely once again. Still, even that was a considerable act considering the fact that he had nearly drowned and his lungs were still filled quite quite a bit of water. The world was something of a bleary blur in his vision, which was why he was only able to feel someone gently hoist him up and roll him over so he could properly cough all that water up.

“Come on, kid. Just let it out,” Stan’s voice was uncharacteristically caring as he aided his struggling nephew by patting him on the back. “But at the same time, you might wanna hurry it up. Those guys don’t stay down for very long.”

Though he was still trying to recover from his near-death experience, Dipper couldn’t help but weakly glance up at his uncle in confusion over what had just unfolded. “G-Grunkle Stan… w-what-” he tried to say, but he ended up cutting himself off with another bout of painful coughing.
“Shh. Just take it easy and let that big brain of yours rest for a while,” Stan said, his expression and
tone surprisingly sincere. Still being as careful as possible, he scooped Dipper up into his arms
before glancing over at Mabel and noticing that she was in rather dire straits herself. “Oh come on!
Her too?!” the conman exclaimed in dismayed exasperation. “Just how danger-prone are you
kids?”

Despite the fact that Mabel had been able to outmaneuver her clone’s grappling hook several times,
she wasn’t able to do much as it adopted a new method of attack. Abandoning its grappling hook,
the duplicate lashed a whip of water out, one that easily caught Mabel off guard and knocked her
off her feet. With her own grappling hook knocked out of her each, she didn’t even have a means of
defending herself as the clone launched another tendril of water at her, wrapping it tightly around
her ankles. She gasped fearfully as the duplicate slowly began dragging her towards it, forming
another massive, somehow solid swath of water as it did so. Her eyes widened with frozen terror as
she realized the clone was lifting the mass of water up with the intent of crushing her with it, and
while she tried her best to escape from its tight grip, it was quickly becoming apparent that her
struggle was in vain.

Thankfully though, before Mabel even had time to shield herself from the attack, Stan hurried to
her rescue with Dipper still in tow. Mere seconds before the clone’s heavy projectile came down on
her, Stan swept her up with his free arm, not even looking back as the water slammed down while
he ran in the opposite direction.

“Grunkle Stan, what are you doing?!” Mabel asked, alarmed at how suddenly he had appeared to
save her. “I thought you hurt your back!”

“Hey, my bad back’s never stopped me before,” the conman retorted, still running out of the water
clones’ range. “I mean, it still hurts—a lot, but I’m not about to let you two get beaten up by
yourselves. That would just be embarrassing for all of us.”

Mabel frowned upon hearing this, but her confusion soon turned to immense concern as she noticed
her listless brother still propped against Stan’s other arm. “Dipper!” she gasped, shocked at how
pale and dazed he looked. “What happened to you?! Are you ok?!”

Dipper nodded, giving her a small, yet reassuring smile, seeing as that was about all he had energy
for at the moment. “Y-yeah…” he breathed, his voice still rather weak, though it was clear he was
steadily recovering. “I…I’m good…”

“If by ‘good’ you mean you almost drowned, then yeah, kid, you’re doing great,” Stan remarked
sarcastically. “That’s exactly why the three of us are booking it from this fight. The Gems have got
it covered.”

“But what about Steven and Connie?” Mabel asked, casting a worried glance at the pair. The two
of them were still trying their best to land a solid hit on the young Gem’s water clone with rocks
and the water gun. For several minutes, the copy had been either unphased by these attacks or
simply dodged them altogether. But after a while, the copy seemed to grow tired of this and finally
launched a rather violent offensive. Without warning, its arms shot out as fast blasts of water, both
of them not only hitting Steven and Connie, but trapping both of their heads in nigh inescapable
water bubbles and suspending them several feet above the ground. Instantly, they both began to
struggle as the only air they had available to them now was their held breaths. Still, it didn’t take
long for both of them to begin to lose the fight and start sputtering for oxygen that was just out of
their reach. Connie was the first to lose her breath, which alarmed Steven quite a bit as he glanced
over at her and saw her accidently suck in a large breath of water. Thankfully though, the two of
them received their own rescue, courtesy of Greg’s van. Out of nowhere, the vehicle barreled into all
three of the kids’ water clones, easily taking them all out in quick succession.

Steven and Connie both fell to the ground hard, gasping for air and coughing up water. Neither of them were as bad off as Dipper had been when he had nearly drowned, but they still had to take a few moments to recover from the jarring experience as Greg stopped the van right in front of them.

“Yo, are you dudes ok?!” Soos asked, leaning out of the passenger’s seat.

“W-we’re fine,” Steven reassured, getting his breath back first. “Right, Connie?”

Connie was still a bit breathless, but she nodded nonetheless. Still, Greg was hardly relieved. “Is this a normal magical mission for you?!” he asked his son with frightened concern. “Because I’m not so sure how comfortable I am with you going on theses any-”

The former rock star was abruptly interrupted as his van suddenly shot up into the air thanks to the water clones rocketing it upward from underneath. Greg and Soos let out frightened screams as they were catapulted over all of the kids and Stan, who could only watch in shocked horror as the van’s front end crashed into trees nearby.

“Dad!” Steven gasped, not hesitating to rush over to the crashed van.

“Soos!” the twins exclaimed, just as concerned. Still though, Stan insisted on carrying them both, but likewise he ran over to the van just as the pair slowly started climbing out of its wreckage.

“Are you guys ok?!” Connie asked, noticing that they both looked a little worse for wear.

“Ugh, a few bumps and bruises, but I think I’ll be ok,” Greg groaned, flopping onto the ground to catch his breath from the traumatic experience. “But my poor van won’t be…”

Begrudgingly, Stan finally put Dipper and Mabel down so he could help Soos get out of the van on the other side. “You gonna be ok, Soos?” the con man asked with masked concern. “Because I’m not paying you for any time you might need off after this.”

“Nah, I’m good, Mr. Pines,” Soos reassured, carefully rising to stand. “But that was totally crazy. I like, saw my whole life flash before my eyes and junk!”

Though everyone was still fretting over Greg and Soos, the trio of water clones wasn’t about to give them any time to rest. Steven in particular noticed that they had started to approach them again, orbs of water forming over each of their palms in preparation to attack. The young Gem paused for a moment, glancing away from the clones and to his friends and family, pretty much all of whom had been injured in some way or another by them. In their brief regrouping moment, Stan cringed as he tried to stretch his injured back out while Mabel helped Dipper steady himself on his feet all while checking over her own various cuts and bruises she had gotten herself. Greg and Soos were still in the midst of checking themselves over for any unseen injuries as Connie let out another bout of coughing to get the last of the water out of her lungs.

As Steven watched all of this, his hands slowly clenched into tight fists at his sides. It was one thing for Lapis to sic her water puppets on the Gems; after all, she had already made her distain for them quite clear and it was somewhat understandable considering her lengthy imprisonment in the mirror. But to attack powerless humans so viciously and unrelentingly? It was completely uncalled for. The young Gem understood that Lapis was acting out of self-defense, but even so, he couldn’t simply let all of this go. His friends had gotten hurt in this battle, and that was something he wasn’t about to take lightly. Which was why he intended on putting a stop to this unending battle, once and for all.
“Lapis!” Steven shouted, his voice firm and incensed as he turned towards the tower again. “We don’t wanna fight anymore.”

Apparently, the blue Gem didn’t heed him as the trio of water clones all prepared to launch their next attacks. With synchronized movements, they lobbed their water orbs at the group, prompting Steven to act on an impulse and step in front of all of them. “I said,” he began boldly, instinctually holding his arm out in front of him as his gem began to glow. “I don’t wanna fight!”

In a brilliant flash of light, a familiar pink shield formed on the young Gem’s arm, disbanding the bursts of water right as they struck it. The others watched on in amazement as Steven upheld his shield, not even noticing as it seemed to emit some kind of sonic reverberation that completely dissolved the trio of water clones altogether. Likewise, the Gems’ clones were also dissipated by the unseen wave, and fortunately so, since they were all bordering on defeat themselves. Still, even as all of the clones were defeated and his shield slowly melded away, Steven stood firm, taking a resolved step forward towards the tower.

“Steven?” Connie questioned in confused worry, but the young Gem didn’t speak a word of his intent. However, what she couldn’t glean, Dipper and Mabel immediately did.

“Steven, wait!” they exclaimed, both of them rushing forward to catch up with him. Surprisingly, Steven did stop just shy of the tower, but he didn’t turn around to face them, at least not immediately.

“He can’t let you guys do that. Both of you almost got hurt really badly. There’s no telling what could happen up there…”

“But we’re fine, Steven,” Mabel reassured with a small smile. “I mean, sure we nearly drowned or got crushed or whatever, but we made it out ok!”

“The three of us let Lapis out of the mirror together,” Dipper said, completely unshaken. “Which means we’re still in this together, no matter what. So we’re going with you, whether you like it or not.”

“B-but…” Steven began to protest, but in the end all he could do was sigh in relent. The twins were far from wrong of course; they all shared the responsibility for this disaster and they all deserved the chance to fix it together. “Ok… Then I guess… I guess we’re doing this, huh?”

“You bet we are!” Mabel exclaimed zealously. “Let’s get this waterfall back to normal!”

Steven and Dipper nodded their resolute agreement with this as the young Gem faced the tower once more. “Lapis! We’re coming up to see you!” he called, craning his neck up towards the tower’s unseen top. “So please don’t drown us.”

“Guys, wait!” Connie gasped, finally realizing what her friends were about to do.

“Kids!” Stan exclaimed, alarmed that the twins were willing to leap into such danger again so soon.
Even so, the trio didn’t heed any deterrence as they interlocked hands, took in deep breaths, and made a bold, unified leap into the tower itself. For a moment, they all freely floated in the water, but apparently Lapis decided to show some mercy by forming a large hand of solid water underneath them so they wouldn’t have to swim all the way up to her. The hand acted as something of an elevator, quickly lifting the trio up through the tower, which, unsurprisingly, stretched miles high into the air. It didn’t take them very long to pass through the layer of clouds swirling around the tower and into the clear, starry night sky, which only became more radiant the closer they got to it. Of course, since it was composed of mostly the lake’s water alone, the tower wasn’t tall enough to breach through any atmospheric layer, but even so, the ground was no longer clearly visible as the kids finally reached its pinnacle.

Even as they broke through the top of the tower, the kids were still largely immobile thanks to the large bubble of water trapping everything but their heads, fortunately allowing them to breathe. And there, standing atop the water only a few feet away, was Lapis Lazuli herself.

The blue Gem looked firm and fierce as she glared at the kids, her mirror-like eyes reflecting only ire at her former friends. “What are you three doing here?” she asked, her tone threateningly icy.

“What?” Mabel asked, confused at the harsh reception.

“I think the better question is what are you doing here, Lapis?” Dipper retorted defiantly. “You stole the lake and the waterfall, and you nearly killed us all! What’s up with that?”

Lapis glanced away, the slightest hint of guilt in her expression as she responded dismissively. “I already told you; you don’t understand…”

“Then help us understand!” Steven exclaimed earnestly. “Why can’t we work this out? Gems should be friends. We-”

The young Gem was abruptly cut off as Lapis pulled the water bubble all three of them were in closer to her. “Don’t you know anything?” she asked bitterly. “Your friends, the Crystal Gems, they don’t really care about other Gems! All they care about is the Earth. But I never believed in this place…”

The blue Gem’s tone became more gentle and wistful as she turned her gaze towards the stars, or more specifically, a bright, brilliant one far off in distant space. Lapis’ shoulders drooped as she walked away from the kids, letting the bubble holding them finally burst as they all fell onto the surface of the tower. Steven, Dipper, and Mabel were all still rather confused, but nonetheless, they walked over and joined the blue Gem in sitting down and gazing up at the night sky.

“So… is that why you stole the waterfall?” Steven asked, glancing over at Lapis and noting her sad expression. “So you could go to… space?”

“Yes…” Lapis sighed, closing her eyes. “All I want, all I’ve ever wanted… is to go home…”

“Wait… home…” Dipper repeated, his eyes widening as he remembered something. “Do you mean… Homeworld?”

The blue Gem nodded, though she did give him a look of slight questioning. “Yes…? That is Gems come from, isn’t it?”

“What? I’ve never heard of Homeworld before!” Steven exclaimed, bewildered. “Dipper, how’d you know about it?”

“I saw it in the journal, but I didn’t know what it meant until now,” Dipper explained, though it was
clear he was beside himself with this discovery. “But this is crazy! If Gems really are from space then that means that they’re… they’re basically aliens!”

“What’s an alien?” Lapis asked, confused.

“Aliens are like these little green guys with big heads and huge eyes,” Mabel explained blithely. “Well, at least the aliens on TV are. But I don’t think any of you guys look anything like that.”

“Mabel! An alien is anyone who doesn’t come from Earth,” Dipper clarified, briefly exasperated, though his amazed excitement quickly returned. “The Gems being aliens would explain so much but it also raises so many new questions! I wish I had the journal with me so I could.” He abruptly stopped short as he glanced over at Lapis, who had by now turned her attention back to the stars, still pining away for them despite their incredible distance. Suddenly, Dipper couldn’t help but feel a bit guilty over how he had gotten so carried away by something that could certainly wait, and in doing so, he had forgotten the very reason why they had journeyed this far and risked this much in the first place. True, they had come to get the waterfall back, but even more than that, they were there to help the one who had stolen it in the first place. “S-sorry…” he muttered to the blue Gem somewhat sheepishly.

“It’s ok…” Lapis assured quietly, closing her eyes and bowing her head once more.

“Lapis…” Steven spoke up, his tone solemn, yet resolved. “We… we all know how important home can be. But that’s why we’re here. You took the waterfall, which is an important part of our home.”

“I’m only using this waterfall because my Gem is cracked,” Lapis said defensively. “All I need to do is draw from this planet’s streams and rivers and eventually the ocean. If I can just get enough water and stretch it far enough…” She trailed off, taking another look at the star that was Homeworld and sighing in defeat as she remembered just how far away it was. “Oh, who am I kidding? This is never going to work…”

A long bout of silence passed between the four of them, the only noise being that of the steadily blowing, brisk winds of their high vantage point. The kids could all three feel the palpable melancholy that even Lapis’ silence gave off, but even so, none of them knew how to really help her. After all, despite her desperate actions, the blue Gem was far from malicious. She was lost, only recently released from thousands of years of imprisonment and homesick for familiarity of a planet she was willing to do anything to go back to. The kids definitely wanted to assist her in returning to the mysterious home she missed so much, but what could they possibly do to get her there at all?

“Oh! Oh! I have an idea!” Mabel exclaimed excitedly as she leapt to her feet. “Steven, you could fix Lapis’ gem with your healing powers!”

“Whoa, you’re right!” Steven smiled wide in realization. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of that!”

“Wait, you have healing powers?” Lapis asked incredulously, turning to the young Gem, who nodded vigorously. “Do they… work?”

“They work,” Dipper confirmed. “But how they work is sorta… weird.”

“Yeah…” Steven said with an awkward frown. “But I can give it a try if you want.”

“O-okay…” Lapis said, though she was still somewhat uncertain as she turned to let the gem on her back face him. “What should I do?”
“Um… Just hold still and…” Steven trailed off before giving his hand a generous lick. The healing
spit on his palm sparkled for a moment as he held it up, before quickly bringing it down onto
Lapis’ cracked gemstone. The blue Gem shuddered a bit from the strange sensation, but even so,
all three kids kept their eyes trained on the blue stone, hoping that something miraculous would
happen. And indeed, a few seconds later, the gemstone became enveloped in a luminous, renewing
light. Instantly, the crack fused itself shut as light still poured from the gem, and in a flourish, two
equal burst of water emerged from it. They took the shape of wings, akin to an angel’s, wide and
graceful and beautiful.

Overwhelmed with joy, Lapis smiled blissfully as she gave her returned water wings a small,
experimental flap before turning to the kids, who were all staring at her with equal stunned awe.
They were even more amazed to see that her eyes were no longer empty mirrors, but were normal,
with pupils and navy irises to match her blue color scheme. “Thank you, Steven!” she exclaimed
happily. “Thank you all, really. For letting me out of the mirror and… and for this.” With a small,
melodious laugh, she flapped her wings once more, grinning at them all the while.

While Dipper and Mabel were still completely speechless, Steven found his voice again as he
wiped the remaining spit off his hand. “No prob, Bob,” he said simply and quietly.

Lapis frowned at this, somewhat confused. “…It’s Lapis,” she reminded plainly, not understanding
the young Gem’s idiom.

“No, Lapis, that’s just an expression,” Dipper explained after another beat of awkward silence.

“Oh,” the blue Gem said, though she still didn’t really get it. Even so, she turned towards the stars
once more, but not before taking one last glance back at the kids. “Well, okay. Bye.”

Without much more of a farewell, Lapis took off with a single, mighty flap of her powerful wings.
Instantly, she was soaring, rocketing away from the tower and the kids, who could only watch her
leave in wide-eyed wonder. For a moment at least.

“Oh! Bye, Lapis!” Mabel called out after the blue Gem after her initial surprise wore off. “We hope
you make it home safely! Don’t forget to write!”

Steven and Dipper were still both a bit too stunned to offer such a fond farewell themselves as they
watched Lapis grow smaller and smaller as she flew off into the distance. It was bittersweet, at the
least, to see such a new friend leave so soon, but they couldn’t help but feel good about it in the
end. For everything that had happened, they had succeeded in their mission in the end; they had
helped the blue Gem, in more ways than one, and in doing so, they had saved their own home.

Of course, they had no time to celebrate, for as they were still watching Lapis fly away, the tower
startled to violently quake and shift beneath their feet. Without the blue Gem’s power to keep it
sustained, the tower quickly started falling apart and gravity reacted accordingly. The group that
was still at the foot of the tower immediately noticed this, especially as it began to break apart on
all sides.

“W-what’s happening?!?” Stan asked in alarm as the ground began to shake along with the tower.

“The whole tower’s coming down!” Garnet exclaimed, looking up to its distant top.

“What about the kids?!” Greg gasped in frightened concern.

As this question was posed, Connie and Lion exchanged a determined glance, both of them
instantly knowing what they needed to do. And both of them knew that they had not a moment to
waste in getting into action.

As the tower instantaneously collapsed, there was nothing Steven and the twins could do to keep themselves from falling. Amidst their shared, terrified screams, the only thing they could think of to do as they plummeted was cling onto each other, even if they knew well that would do nothing to save them. Fortunately though, they didn’t have to face the frightening prospect of hitting the ground as Connie and Lion suddenly and unexpectedly came to their rescue. The pair emerged from one of the pink beast’s temporal portals alongside the descending trio, surprising them, but absolutely relieving them nonetheless.

“Guys! Grab my hand!” Connie shouted about the din of the water crashing down all around them as she stretched her own hand out to them.

While they were still holding onto each other, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel all reached out for Connie at once, their hands all coming just a bit shy of hers. Steven was the first to reach her, however, and soon enough they had all latched onto each other in some way as Connie pulled them safely onto Lion with her.

Seconds later, they all soared out of another portal at the bottom of the crumbling tower, rejoining the others. The Gems, Greg, Stan, and Soos all sighed in unified relief upon seeing Steven and the twins, but even so, there was no time to breathe easy, especially as the rest of the tower splashed down around them.

As dawn rose over Gravity Falls, Mayor Dewey let out another miserable sob as he was still trying, in vain, to refill the lake with his garden hose. He had remained there all night and had barely even restored a fraction of what the lake used to hold, yet as despondent as he was, he initially didn’t even notice as water began flooding back into the lake until a wave washed over him in the shallows.

The waterfall returned rapidly as the last of the tower fell, causing it to tumble over the cliff with an incredible amount of force so it could refill the lake. Greg’s van rolled over the cliff along with the falls, but thankfully, Steven had managed to safely secure everyone inside a large bubble beforehand. He made sure to keep it up as they crashed into the lake and even as Pearl drove it up out of the depths of the lake and onto the shore. Only after they had all made it onto the beach did he finally release the bubble, breathing a long-awaited sigh of relief as he did so.

“That’s how you do it!” Amethyst congratulated, giving the young Gem a playful punch on the arm.

“Nice one, kid,” Stan added with a broad, genuine smirk.

As the bubble finally dissipated, the van dropped a bit, eliciting a laugh from the kids and Amethyst. Of course, a few seconds later, the toll of the damage it had already received, as well as the weight of the large group on its roof, finally took its toll on the vehicle. With a loud crash, the wheels gave way and its hood popped open, smoke pouring from it.

“W-well,” Pearl laughed awkwardly, glancing over at Greg as she held the broken steering wheel. “What’s that thing you always say about the pork chop and the hot dog?”

Greg didn’t respond as he simply balked in horror at what had become of his van, knowing that everything that had happened to it would not be an easy fix. Yet even so, everyone else was quite
happy.

"Yes!" Stan cheered happily as he looked out over the restored lake. "The Mystery Shack is saved!"
He was quick to correct himself, however, upon noticing the caustic look Garnet was giving him.
"Uh, I mean... Gravity Falls is saved, I guess. If you wanna look at it like that."

“Look!” Connie exclaimed as Garnet finished helping everyone off the roof of the van. Steven, Dipper, and Mabel turned their attention to see a large crowd of townsfolk rushing towards them, all of them cheering excitedly over the fact that their lake had been returned to them. And indeed, they had every reason to celebrate. The waterfall once again flowed normally from the floating cliff, pouring into the depths of the wide lake that glistened in the light of the morning sun, just as it always did. It was an encouraging sight to see after everything that had happened, one that told of both a peaceful resolution and of a new beginning.

Still, as the people of Gravity Falls lauded the kids as their heroes of the day, not everyone was as content. “So… Lapis made it off planet,” Garnet said to Pearl as the white Gem came to stand beside her.

“If she makes it back to Homeworld… What could that mean for us?” Pearl asked the Gem leader, worry written all over her expression.

Garnet simply looked to the sky, not bothering to address the ancient memories that even mentioning Homeworld stirred up for both her and Pearl. “We wait and see,” she said calmly, knowing that was really all they could do for now.

The elated townsfolk were more than happy to hoist the kids up on their shoulders and parade them around, and while Steven, Dipper, and Mabel didn’t mind all of the adulation they were getting, they still couldn’t help but take a shared glance up at the bright sky above. They knew, that somewhere up there, a Gem by the name of Lapis Lazuli, who had been trapped for so long and dreaming of home for all that time, was steadily flying towards it at long last. And while they knew that the chances of ever seeing her again were slim, their parting still hadn’t seemed very much like a definitive goodbye. It truly felt like somehow, someway, they would meet her again, even if it seemed impossible. After all, it wouldn’t be the first time the impossible had happened.

“Bye again, Lapis!” Mabel called blithely, waving up to the fading star that was Homeworld.

“See you around, Lapis,” Dipper gave his own sincere farewell to the blue Gem, even if he knew she couldn’t hear him.

“Yeah, see you, Lapis,” Steven added onto Dipper’s goodbye, a warm smile on his face as he watched Homeworld finally disappear as the light of day fully filled the sky. “Wherever you are…”
Chapter 21: Irrational Treasure

Chapter Summary

In which history is a mystery, Pacifica's a bitch (for now), Steven and Mabel are pure and cute, the kids pull a sword out of Lion (not like that), and Amethyst tries to bust Stan out of the stocks

Chapter Notes

And so begins our third arc! I hope you all enjoy my rendition of Irrational Treasure, as well as a few SU episodes that I happened to sprinkle in! (also, arc 3 uses the A1Z26 cipher! Enjoy!)

Downtown Gravity Falls didn’t often receive high volumes of traffic, given that the town itself was rather small. However, today seemed to be an exception to the norm, which was something the Pines family was discovering as they headed to town to run some errands. Stan growled in exasperation as he hit the breaks of his car for what seemed like the tenth time in a row, begrudging the fact that they had left the Mystery Shack almost a half an hour ago now. Still, the twins hardly noticed this as they passed the time by sharing a helping of nachos in the back seat. Mabel helped herself to two of them, artistically inspired as she often was, and carefully fixed them to the studs on her ears, effectively inventing an entirely new type of jewelry.

“Nacho earrings!” she proclaimed in a laugh. “I’m hilarious!”

“That’s debatable,” Stan deadpanned before turning back to the cluttered streets and honking his horn. “Come on, what’s with all this traffic?! And why is it all… covered wagons?” He paused, staring incredulously at the genuine horse-drawn wagons passing in front of the car, watching them in confusion for a moment before coming to a startling realization. “Oh no,” he gasped, already throwing the car into reverse. “No! No! Not today!”

“Grunkle Stan, what’s going on?” Dipper asked in alarm, gripping the seat tightly to steady himself against the conman’s frantic driving.

Stan didn’t provide much of an answer as he glanced out the back window, hoping to make it out of town as soon as possible. “We gotta get out of here before it’s too late!” His attempted escape was quickly halted, however, as soon as another covered wagon rolled into the empty space behind the car, blocking the road. “They’ve circled the wagons! We’re trapped! Nooooo!”

Indeed, the car was completely surrounded by wagons and their riders, all of whom were clad in 19th century fashions. The twins both looked out the car window, bewildered by such the sight that
was strange enough to make them feel as though they had stepped back into another era entirely. Still, Mabel couldn’t help but grin cheerfully as she took a glance out the window to see a cow standing only inches away from it. “I have a good feeling about today!”

Since they were getting nowhere in the car, Stan and the twins got out and started heading down Main Street on foot, allowing them to see the extent of its old-fashioned facelift. All signs of modernity had been hidden away by facets of the mid-1800s, from covered wagons, to merchant stalls, to Indian teepees to even the old fashion clothing the townsfolk wore as they milled about and took place in various activities. There was a certain feeling of festivity in the air as banners and flags hung across the town square and various activities and events unfolded across different booths and stalls. It was certainly a change from the usual humdrum hustle and bustle of downtown and while this wasn’t lost on Dipper or Mabel, Stan was far from enthusiastic about it.

“Ugh, it’s Pioneer Day,” Stan remarked, rolling his eyes in annoyance. “Every year these yahoos dress up like idiots to celebrate the day Gravity Falls was founded.”

“Welcome to 1863!” Toby Determine exclaims as he walked past the conman.

“I will break you, little man!” Stan threatened harshly, frightening Toby enough to easily chase him off.

“Grunkle Stan, what’s so bad about Pioneer Day anyway?” Dipper asked incredulously. “It seems harmless enough.”

“Yeah, and look at all the old-timey cool stuff you can do!” Mabel added, pointing to several of the festival booths. “Candle dipping, gold panning, and-” She stopped short upon spotting a man who was being officially married to a woodpecker. “And… that, I guess.”

“Oh yeah. I remember reading about this,” Dipper said, recalling it from a passage in the journal. “Apparently it used to be legal to marry woodpeckers in Gravity Falls.”

“Oh it’s still legal,” the man said as he passed by with his new woodpecker bride. “Very legal.”

“See what I mean? This holiday brings out the crazy in everyone in Gravity Falls,” Stan said with disdain. “And that’s saying something considering how crazy everyone in this town is already.”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but we actually agree with you on this one, Stan,” Pearl said as the Gems, Steven, and Connie arrived. Since the young Gem was quite enthusiastic about any sort of festivity, he had invited Connie to join him in heading into town for her first celebration of it and he had even managed to convince the Gems to come along as well, despite their longtime sour opinion on it. And, after the kids exchanged a brief round of greetings, Steven was the first to speak up in defense of Pioneer Day.

“Oh, come on, you guys!” the young Gem exclaimed. “Pioneer Day is great! It’s like we’ve stepped into some weird alternate dimension where people ride horses instead of cars and don’t bathe! You gotta admit that’s pretty cool.”

“Oh, Steven? It’s not so much that we stepped into an… alternate dimension then that we stepped back in time,” Connie corrected with a good-natured smile. “Not literally, of course, but still.”

“Whoa… Still cool!” Steven quipped in amazement.

“Ugh, this is almost as boring as Pioneer Day itself,” Amethyst groaned. “Can we go yet?”

“I’m already way ahead of you three on that one,” Stan spoke up, already preparing to take his
leave. “I’ve already stomached enough Pioneer Day for one lifetime. And if you two come back to the shack talking like these people, you’re dead to me,” he coldly remarked to the twins, who exchanged a sly grin and proceeded to do just that.

“There’s a carpetbagger in the turnip cellar!” Dipper proclaimed, taking up a western accent and making over exaggerated arm motions.

“Well, hornswabber my haversack!” Mabel exclaimed heartily.

“Oh! I wanna try!” Steven bounced up and down on the balls of his feet before doling out the extent of his “old-timey speak”. “Um… Ya’ll!”

This easily elicited a laugh from Dipper, Mabel, and Connie, but Stan and the Gems were nowhere near as amused. “Dead to me!” the conman reiterated as he stormed off, not bothering to stick around a moment longer.

“So… can we leave now?” Amethyst repeated her previous question to Garnet and Pearl.

“Unfortunately, no,” the white Gem sighed. “You know how Pioneer Day is. Since the people of Gravity Falls get so into celebrating it, they usually completely abandon modern common sense and safety practices. And even if they decide to disregard those things for an entire day, that doesn’t mean we should.”

“We need to stick around to ensure public safety.” Garnet explained much more simply. “The last thing we want is a repeat of Pioneer Day 1968.”

“There were so many fish…” Pearl cringed, lost in the unpleasant memory.

“Oh, so is that why you guys don’t like Pioneer Day?” Connie asked the Gems.

“Nah. We’d still watch out for the people of Gravity Falls even if it wasn’t for dumb old Pioneer Day,” Amethyst said, her tone bored.

“The real reason why we detest this pointless holiday is because it’s all one big sham,” Pearl remarked, crossing her arms.

“Sham?” Dipper asked, immediately interested. “What do you-”

Before he could finish posing this question, however, the clanging of a loud bell rung out from the town square, catching everyone’s attention as an announcement went up. “Come on and come all for the opening ceremonies!”

“Oh, this is always the best part!” Steven exclaimed excitedly, already running on ahead. “Come on, you guys!”

Though Dipper and Connie were both still quite curious over the Gem’s insight on Pioneer Day, they could do little to quell Steven and Mabel’s excitement over it as they dragged them off to the crowd gathering in the square.

“Again, I ask, can we leave now?!” Amethyst sighed, slouching as the kids left.

“Amethyst…” Pearl groaned in annoyance, not bothering to remind the purple Gem that they were going to be there for the duration of the day.

“Fine. But I’m gonna keep asking until we can actually leave, so get used to it.”
Since Pioneer Day was one of Gravity Falls’ favorite and only festivals, it wasn’t surprising that most of the townsfolk had turned up for it. They had all gathered in front of the makeshift stage set up in the square, from which Mayor Dewey would address the town and officially get the Pioneer Day celebrations underway. The mayor sat upon the stage with a proud grin, not noticing how bored Buck was sitting beside him. On the other side of the stage sat the Northwest family, their position of wealth and prestige among the people of Gravity Falls giving them ample reason to be there. As Dipper, Mabel, Steven, and Connie made it to the front of the crowd, Sherriff Blubbs and Deputy Durland were just calling everyone to attention.

“Here-ye, here-ye! Ye old commencement ceremony is about to commence!” Blubbs called loudly since there was no microphone, as that would have broken the immersion of the Pioneer Day experience.

“Woo! I got a bell!” Durland cheered, ringing his bell happily. As distracted as the cops were, neither of them noticed a robber in the crowd make off with an elderly woman’s purse, even as she pointed it out to them.

“Oh no!” the woman cried, distraught. “Police! My purse!”

Blubbs and Durland only paused for a brief moment, before the latter merely continued ringing his bell with the same verve as before. “Ring ring! Ring ring! Woo!”

“He sure loves his bell,” Blubbs laughed, grinning warmly at his partner.

“Alright, that’s enough, officers!” Dewey said impatiently as he stepped to the forefront of the stage. The mayor flashed his constituents a flashy, albeit somewhat nervous grin as he launched into his prepared speech. “Hello, my fellow pioneers! Welcome to the Gravity Falls of 1863! On this fine day, we celebrate the birth of our beloved town and honor its fine founders: Nathaniel Northwest and my own great grandfather William Dewey!”

Upon the command of the sign held up by one of the mayor’s aids, the townsfolk offered an obligatory applause at this juncture before Dewey continued once more. “Of course, we all know the story of how Gravity Falls was founded way back in 1845, but for those of you who are unaware, allow me to briefly spin the heroic yarn. William Dewey and Nathaniel Northwest were a team of dashing, brave, intrepid pioneers, seeking to carve out their destinies in the wild frontier of the American northwest. Along their way, however, their wagon train they were leading was assaulted by a vicious, bloodthirsty monster! The other pioneers had all given up hope and prepared to turn back, but at the last second, William Dewey saved them all with his heroic, supernatural ability by turning into a fifty foot giant and carrying the wagons safely into this very valley we now stand in! The other pioneers were so impressed that they elected him to be the first mayor of Gravity Falls!”

Once again, the crowd applauded, but not everyone in it was so taken in by this outlandish tale. “What?” Dipper scoffed in disbelief. “That whole story seems pretty out there. And by out there, I mean impossible.”

“I guess it wouldn’t be completely out of the question though…” Connie shrugged, even if she wasn’t so sure herself. “Especially considering how strange Gravity Falls itself is.”

As the crowd continued to cheer their support of the heroic exploits of William Dewey, the mayor himself noticed the rather piercing glare that Preston Northwest was sending his way. “Dewey!” he snapped loud enough so that only the mayor could hear him. “Remember what we agreed on!”
“O-oh, right!” Dewey gasped anxiously, knowing that he had left a very important piece out of his speech. Not wanting to risk any potential funding from the wealthy family, the mayor was quick to correct himself. “A-Aha! But I e-erroneously forgot to mention that our dear town here would have never been discovered if not for the quick wit and impressive navigating skills of Nathaniel Northwest! C-certainly, he is the true hero in this town’s founding!”

As the townsfolk clapped once more, Dewey took a tentative glance back at the Northwests, sighing in relief as he got a terse nod of approval from Preston. Deciding against stumbling any further, Dewey unceremoniously ended his speech and moved on with the next part of the program. “And now, here’s our beloved town darling, Pacifica Northwest!”

Pacifica strode forward from her seat confidently, clad in an aptly trendy old-fashioned dress. She barely even regarded Mayor Dewey as she walked past him, her nose in the air as she grinned at the crowd below. “Howdy, everyone!” she greeted with faux welcoming in her tone. “You all know me, Pacifica Northwest, great-great granddaughter of Nathaniel Northwest. I’m also very rich.”

Without much prompting, the crowd clapped again, and Pacifica gladly soaked in the adulation before going on. “Now if you’ve got the pioneer spirit, we ask you to come on up and introduce yourself!”

Mabel let out a delighted gasp upon hearing this, her wide grin mirroring Steven’s sudden excitement as well. “Audience participation!” she quipped cheerfully.

“Finally, a chance for me to use this!” Steven exclaimed, pulling the ukulele strapped to his back forward.

“I don’t know, Mabel,” Dipper said with concerned caution, glancing up at the heiress on stage. “Isn’t that girl kind of like your arch-enemy?”

“Yeah, don’t you remember how terrible she acted at the party the other week?” Connie asked with clear disdain for Pacifica in her tone.

“Oh, that’s water under the bridge now,” Mabel said with a casual wave of her hand. “Come on, Steven!”

“Yeah!” the young Gem readily agreed, running up on stage along with her.

“Our first newcomer is—” Pacifica stopped short as she glanced over at who had joined her onstage, her smile immediately twisting into a hostile scowl. “Mabel…” she growled crossly.

“And don’t forget about Steven!” the young Gem quipped with a wide smile.

“Let’s get this Pioneer Day started!” Mabel exclaimed enthusiastically. “Right guys? USA! USA!”

“USA! USA!” the crowd joined in on the patriotic cheer in full force. In light of the high spirits, Steven began strumming a merry tune on his ukulele, before launching into a brief bout of song.

“Ohhhh... Way, way back in 1845, Gravity Falls became alive!” Steven sang as the crowd clapped along to the beat. “So now we’re here to celebrate! Pioneer Day, isn’t it great?!”

Steven was about to go into the second verse of his impromptu song, but he was soon interrupted by Pacifica. “Uh, what do you think you’re doing?” she asked the young Gem caustically.

“Singing a song!” Steven exclaimed blithely, strumming a few more chords on his ukulele.
“No, you’re not,” Pacifica deadpanned coldly. “You’re making a complete fool out of yourself. Sorry to break it to both of you, but Pioneer Day is for serious people, and you two look and act ridiculous. I mean, a puppy playing basketball?” she scoffed, eying the design on Mabel’s sweater. “And who even plays a ukulele anyway?” she rolled her eyes at Steven. “Are you two always this silly?”

“But… ukuleles are really cool!” Steven protested, somewhat offended. “And, i-it’s mine, and I like it!”

“Like I said,” Pacifica said dryly, flipping her hair. “Silly.”

“Hey, we can both be serious!” Mabel added, puffing her chest out to make her look more authoritative. “Right, Steven?”

“Right!” the young Gem exclaimed, throwing his ukulele over his shoulder as he also took up a mature stance.

“You do have nachos hanging from your ear, hon,” Pacifica pointed out to Mabel, her tone quite condescending. Mabel couldn’t help but blush in humiliation as she gently touched her nacho earrings, suddenly ashamed of her own creativity after having it called out in such a mocking way. “And as randomly singing songs in public,” the heiress said to Steven, still sore over how he had nearly upstaged her. “Just so you know, it’s not charming; it’s childish.” The young Gem frowned as he glanced back at his ukulele, far less enthusiastic about it than he had been before. Pacifica grinned in smug satisfaction, seeing that she had gotten the rise out of both of them that she had wanted to. “Wow, I’m embarrassed for you guys,” she said with a patronizing laugh. “Give them a hand, everybody!”

The crowd did so, save for Dipper and Connie, who could only watch with both worry and anger as Pacifica insulted and humiliated Mabel and Steven. The pair exchanged a sheepish glance but said nothing as they sadly sulked off the stage, deciding against subjecting themselves to any further embarrassment. “Now, who wants to hear more about me?” Pacifica addressed the crowd, still smirking triumphantly.

As Steven and Mabel somberly descended from the stage, Dipper and Connie were quick to meet them, both of them already having unanimously agreed on trying to lift their lowered spirits. Still, it was hard to do so when Pacifica and her family were still parading before the townsfolk like they were esteemed royalty.

“Everyone say Northwest!” Pacifica called as her and her parents lined up for a photo for the town paper. They all did so as the picture was snapped, and Pacifica, confident in her family’s prestige and status, let out a small, elitist laugh. “We’re perfect.”

Thankfully the crowd was so distracted by the Northwests that no one noticed Steven, Connie, Dipper, and Mabel as they slipped off, none of them too keen on sticking around after what had just happened. Based on their dejected expressions alone, it was clear to see that Pacifica’s sharp words had cut both Steven and Mabel deeply, which was strange since they were both usually so lively and spirited in everything they did.

“Hey, are you ok?” Dipper asked Mabel with concern as he put a hand on her shoulder.

Mabel sighed, disheartened as she took a glance back at the stage. “I need some old-timey butterscotch.”

“Same here…” Steven agreed glumly.
“Then we’ll get you both some,” Connie said with a reassuring smile, though she did briefly glare back at the stage. “Come on, let’s go.”

Considering how much Stan loathed Pioneer Day, he wanted nothing more than to escape from its annoying festivities as soon as possible. However, that was far from easy when most of the roads going in and out of downtown were closed for the occasion. Because of this, the conman tried to return to the shack via a dirt road instead, but this plan quickly failed as his car ended up stalling out in a large puddle of mud. Stan huffed out an agitated sigh as he tried in vain to drive out of the mud, though he fortunately happened to spot the town mechanic as he passed by.

“Hey there, uh, donkey boy!” Stan called to him, noticing that he was dressed for Pioneer Day and accompanied by a donkey. “Give me a hand with my car, huh?”

“Here in 1863, I have never heard of a ‘car’,” the man said, playing up the Pioneer Day act. “Pray-tell, what is this magic wheel box?”

“Aw, c’mon, Jim, you’re a mechanic for Pete’s sake!” Stan exclaimed, exasperated. “Cut me some slack!”

“‘Slack’? I am unfamiliar with this bold, new expression…”

“I can’t take this anymore!” Stan cried impatiently. “I’m getting dumber every second I’m here!”

A sudden whistle interrupted the conman’s frustration as Blubbs and Durland ran up, ready to halt any possible altercation. “Are we gonna have to intervene here?” the sheriff asked suspiciously.

“Oh look. The ‘constable’,” Stan mocked, not taking the officers seriously as he let out a laugh. “What are you gonna do? Put me in ‘ye stocks’?”

As it turned out, the cops did just that, effectively arresting the conman and throwing him in the stockade that had been set up near Main Street. Blubbs and Durland hardly heeded Stan’s protests as they locked him in the stocks, asserting that he was to serve out a sentence there for the rest of the day. Of course, it was more boring and embarrassing than an actual punishment, but Stan was still rather sour over it, especially since it meant that he would have to be further subjected to the insanity that was Pioneer Day.

Still, the conman figured he could still have some fun despite his humbling situation, especially as a certain child psychic happened to pass by. “Hey, nice outfit, Gideon,” Stan goaded, noticing his rival’s frilly nobleman attire. “You actually look less girly than usual.”

“Why, Stanford, I’m just a humble tomato farmer, selling his wares,” Gideon said, taking a tomato out of the sack on his back and tossing it right at Stan out of spite. “Whoops, I dropped one.” Before the conman could protest, the child psychic threw another one, letting out a devious chuckle as he did so. “Whoops, I dropped another one!”

Stan glared at Gideon hotly as he skipped off, his face covered with tomato. “Pioneer Day!” he shouted in absolute fury, wishing that he could get out of the stocks and teach Gideon a lesson. Of course, just when things didn’t seem as though they could get anymore humiliating for the perturbed conman, they did.

“Well, well…” Pearl said with a smug grin as her, Garnet, and Amethyst walked up to the stocks. “Looks like someone finally had the common sense to put you right where you belong, Stan. You
know, back in the real pioneer days, they used to lock the town’s most sleazy crooks in these very stocks. So I guess this is actually quite fitting.”

“Can it, Pearl,” Stan retorted crossly. “I think I’ve been through enough torture today. I don’t need any more from having to listen to you run your yap.”

The white Gem let out an appalled scoff at this while Amethyst simply laughed in amusement. “Good one, Stan! But seriously, being locked up in that dumb think looks like it’s even more boring that just being at Pioneer Day alone.”

“And that’s saying something.” Garnet deadpanned, her hands on her hips.

“Tell me about it,” Stan grumbled. “Hey, here’s an idea. How about you three do me a favor and bust me outta this thing, huh?”

“And why in the world would we ever do that?” Pearl asked caustically. “Chances are you probably got yourself into this mess by doing something illegal, so it’s only fair that you face the consequences.”

“So I insulted the cops. Who cares?” the conman scowled. “C’mon, just hook me up! If you help me out, I’ll… uh… I’ll stop complaining about you guys for a week. What do you say?”

Pearl and Garnet exchanged a furtive glance at this, not even bothering to offer a response as they began to walk off. “O-okay! How’s this? I’ll extend it to a whole month! Stan called out after them desperately. “And if I slip up and say something bad about you guys, then you can borrow the twins for a while! Take ‘em on your little adventures or use them to fix up the house or whatever! Come on! You’re not gonna get a deal like this anywhere else!”

By the time Stan finished pleading, Garnet and Pearl were already well out of earshot. Amethyst, on the other hand, had hung back, considering she harbored a bit of sympathy for the conman. “Don’t worry, Stan,” she whispered with a sly smirk. “I got you covered.”

“This isn’t going to be anything like the last time you broke me out of jail, is it, Amethyst?” Stan asked, clearly doubting her.

“Nah,” the purple Gem shrugged. “Mostly ‘cause I don’t have a battering ram on me this time. But just sit tight for a while. You’ll be outta here in no time. Trust me.”

After stocking up on a steady supply of butterscotch, the kids had taken to eating it in relative silence near the large statue of Nathaniel Northwest and William Dewey in the center of town. Steven and Mabel were still quite dejected as they sullenly ate their butterscotch and the longer Dipper and Connie watched them, the more concerned and frustrated they both became. True, Mabel and Steven did both have a tendency to act a bit eccentrically sometimes, but that was hardly the mark of shame that Pacifica had made it out to be. If anything, Dipper and Connie saw their cheerful zeal something to be admired, even if they didn’t always share in on it themselves. Yet that zeal was far from present now thanks to the heiress’s hurtful words, and unfortunately, there weren’t any signs of it returning anytime soon.

After hearing Steven and Mabel let out another round of sad sighs, Dipper finally decided that enough was enough. “Connie, we have to do something,” he whispered as Mabel and Steven were distracted. “I hate seeing those two so upset.”
“Same here,” Connie frowned. “It’s so quiet without Mabel cracking a joke or Steven playing his ukulele…”

“Well, hopefully it won’t be like that for long,” Dipper said with resolve. “I have an idea. Follow my lead.” After a brief bout of silence, he addressed the despondent pair. “So, um… how’s that butterscotch treating you guys?”

“It’s sweet…” Mabel said glumly.

“And sticky…” Steven added, just as morose.

“How about we go to the gold panning booth or something?” Dipper offered, hoping that distracting them could lighten their moods. “After all, anything’s better than just moping around here, right?”

“And it could be fun,” Connie added with a soft smile. “I mean, we probably won’t find any real gold, but we could always pretend. And if there’s two things you both like, its shiny things and pretending.”

“We appreciate what you guys are trying to do, but… no thanks…” Steven sighed dolefully. “We’re… just not up for it.”

“Actually… can I ask you guys something?” Mabel began tentatively. “Do you think me and Steven are silly?”

Dipper and Connie exchanged an anxious glance at this, neither of them really wanting to tell them the honest truth. And while their hesitance in answering spoke volumes already, the uncertainty in their answers confirmed it what Steven and Mabel had feared.

“Um, n-no?”

“Ah…. Not… always...?”

“Aw, man!” Steven sighed, flopping onto his back as he pushed his ukulele even further away from him. “Even you guys think so!? Why did nobody ever tell us?! No wonder the Gems are always leaving me out of stuff. They probably think I act like a clown.”

“Oh, Steven, I’m sure they don’t think that…” Connie reassured sympathetically. “And you both can be really serious when you want to be.”

“But not when it counts…” Mabel scowled petulantly. “The nacho earrings, the sweater… I thought I was being charming, but I guess people just see me as a big joke.” Not wanting to cling onto her silliness any longer, she tore off her nacho earrings and took off her sweater, tying it around her waist.

“Come on, Mabel, you love that sweater!” Dipper protested, knowing well that it was rare that his sister ever went around without one of her hand-made sweaters on.

“I did before Pacifica ruined it for me,” Mabel glared at the ground. “She ruins everything!”

“Ugh, Pacifica!” Dipper exclaimed with disdain as he stood and glared up at the statue behind them. “Why does she think that being related to the town founder means she can treat people like garbage?”

“I can’t stand how she goes around acting like she’s so much better than everyone!” Connie huffed
“Being rich shouldn’t give anyone *that* much of an ego. Someone needs to take her down a peg.”

“Wait a minute!” Dipper gasped in realization as he pulled the journal out of his vest. “I feel like I read something about Pacifica’s great-great-grandfather before.” After flipping through a few pages, he quickly found the section of the journal that detailed the history of Gravity Falls. “Of course! This is perfect! In my investigations—” he began to read in a deep, academic voice, though he stopped short upon noticing the strange looks the others were giving him. “S-should I do the voice?” he asked only for everyone to quickly turn him down. “Ok, then… I’ll just read it normally. *In my investigations and through several hints the Gems have given me, I recently made a discovery: Nathaniel Northwest and William Dewey may not be the true founders of Gravity Falls! I believe this secret is buried somewhere in the enclosed document. If only I could crack the code…*”

Indeed, a document was tapped to the opposite page, and upon unfolding it, the kids were met with a cryptic page filled with mysterious symbols and indecipherable codes. “Oh man, I knew that story Mayor Dewey told about the town’s founding sounded ridiculous!” Dipper exclaimed, already immensely intrigued by this mystery. “If this cover-up is true, it means that Pacifica’s entire family is a fraud. This could be a major conspiracy!”

“Just imagine how mad Pacifica will be when she finds out!” Connie said with a vindictive smile. “We have to find a way to prove this theory and tell the entire town! They deserve to know the truth.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Steven interrupted, his eyes wide and excited. “I want to help you guys solve this mystery!”

“Me too!” Mabel volunteered. “After all, conspiracies are serious, right?”

“Oh yeah, definitely,” Dipper nodded.

“Well, if we help you guys crack this code, then nobody could ever call the two of us silly ever again!” Mabel reasoned resolutely.

“Yeah!” Steven jumped to his feet, holding his ukulele over his head. “No more silliness for me! From now on, you can call me Serious Steven!” With a powerful shout, the young Gem prepared to slam his ukulele to the ground, though Connie was quick to stop him.

“Steven, wait!” she exclaimed fearfully. “You don’t have to break your ukulele to be serious!”

“Oh, good!” Steven sighed in relief, slinging the instrument over his shoulder again. “I… might have gotten a little caught up in the heat of the moment…”

“Ok, guys, let’s do this,” Dipper said with determination, holding his hand up for the others to high-five. “Mystery Kids?”

“I thought you hated that,” Mabel said, knowing her brother was none too fond of the title Soos had given the four of them a few weeks ago.

“It’s starting to grow on me,” Dipper shrugged with a small smile of acceptance.

“Woo hoo! Mystery Kids!” Steven cheered enthusiastically as all four of them high-fived. Without any further hesitation, the group set off to begin their search for the truth, unaware of the two figures who had been hiding behind the statue, eavesdropping on them the entire time.
Blubbs and Durland watched with scrutiny as the kids ran off, prompting the sheriff to activate his walkie-talkie. “This is Sheriff Blubbs,” he said, his tone quite serious. “We’ve got a code sepia!”

“What?!” the dispatcher on the other end exclaimed, alarmed. “And what are you doing about it?!”

“We’re following them right now,” Blubbs confirmed.

“Find them and stop them. There’s no room for error.”

“I understand. Blubbs out,” the sheriff put the walkie talkie away before turning to his partner. “Deputy Durland, maintaining this cover-up is the mission we’ve been training for our entire careers. Are you ready?”

Instead of providing an actual answer, Durland simply held up his bell once more and gave it a cheerful ring. “Woo!” he exclaimed blithely.

Of course, Blubbs laughed at this, charmed by his partner’s antics as always. “If being delightful was a crime, you’d be breaking the law!”

“Let’s go get ‘em!” Durland proclaimed, stilling ringing his bell as they both headed off, their mission to stop the kids from completing their quest clear.

The kids had decided to start their hunt for further clues at the library with the hopes that they could find some information that would help them decode the document there. Dipper and Connie had already accumulated a fairly large stack of books and slides on cryptology while Steven and Mabel cleared a table for them to work. None of them anticipated that solving this mystery would be easy; after all, even the supposedly wise author of the journal couldn’t crack the document’s cryptic code. But even so, the kids had found answers to unsolvable questions before. Impossible odds were the ones they were most used to facing.

“Alright, you guys,” Dipper began, his tone resolute. “If we can prove Nathaniel Northwest wasn’t one of the founders of Gravity Falls, then it will finally put Pacifica in her place.”

“And solving a real mystery will prove that we’re not silly!” Mabel quipped, exchanging a grin with Steven. “We’re serious. Seeeeeriousssssss…” She kept up a stoic expression on her face as she used her tounge to lap up the butterscotches that were sitting on the table nearby.

“Serious Steven!” the young Gem cheered loudly, only to be quickly shushed by the nearby librarian. “Oh, sorry!” he called, only for the librarian to chastise him once more. “Sorry…” he whispered this time, blushing sheepishly.

“Ok, it’s time to beat these books,” Connie said with verve, already cracking a heavy tome open.

“Hey, what did they ever do to you?” Steven asked, concerned.

“It’s an expression, Steven,” Connie laughed. “We’re just going to use them to help us find a way to crack that code, right Dipper?”

“Right,” Dipper nodded before turning towards the projector slides he had gathered on various kinds of codes. “So, let’s see here…” he said, holding the document up alongside the projector for comparison as he went through them. “It’s not Egyptian… It’s not numerology… It’s not—wait, of
course! The triangle is the alchemist symbol for flame!” he exclaimed, pointing to the large triangle that took up most of the page. “Lighting this parchment on fire will reveal a secret message!”

“Whoa, really?!” Steven asked loudly, only to be shushed by the librarian once more.

“It’s so obvious!” Mabel exclaimed, still chewing on butterscotch.

“Alright,” Dipper said, grabbing the candle sitting on the table. “Let’s light this sucker up and— Mabel!”

Mabel froze upon hearing her brother’s surprised exclamation, taking a brief glance up at the paper hat she had quickly crafted out of the document. “Look! I made a hat!” she proclaimed proudly, only to realize her error immediately afterwards. “Ugh, I did something silly again!”

“To be fair, it is a really cool looking hat,” Steven encouraged, knowing that he would have likely done the same thing.

“Wait a minute,” Connie interjected, taking a second look at the document. “The way the symbols are all rearranged… it sort of looks like… a map!”

“Whoa, you’re right!” Dipper exclaimed in awe. “Mabel, you folded it into a map! And I was gonna burn it…”

The kids’ shared excitement was suddenly broken as they happened to overhear a startling conversation at the front desk. “We’re on the lookout for four kids who might be reading,” Sheriff Blubbs informed the librarian.

“We’re huntin’ them down for secret reasons!” Durland exclaimed, ringing his bell loudly.

In light of this information, the kids knew they had not a moment to spare as they quickly took to hiding behind a nearby shelf, just out of sight of the officers. They hadn’t guessed that their investigation might get them in trouble with the law, but that apparently seemed to be the case since Blubbs and Durland were now on their tails.

“O-okay, guys, maybe we should take this elsewhere,” Dipper said somewhat anxiously as he peered out from behind the shelf.

“Way ahead of you, Dipper!” Steven gave a thumbs up as he lay on top of a wheeled stepping stool. He let out an amused laugh as he gave himself a push, riding the stool down the aisle as the others quickly followed after him.

“Steven, wait!” Connie called as quietly as possible. “We might get caught!”

“Yeah, and I want a turn!” Mabel protested.

“Wee!” the young Gem chuckled as he went down the row of books, glancing over at them curiously. “Wow! There are even cool books on the bottom shelves!” Steven had just about ridden the stool to the end of the aisle when he happened to spot a stray book lying under one of the shelves. “Huh? What are you doing down there little buddy?” The young Gem picked both himself and the book up just as the others caught up to him. The book itself was covered with dust, and from its blank, worn red cover it was clear to see that it was quite old. “Guys, check this book out!” Steven exclaimed with an enthusiastic grin.

“Steven, it’s blank,” Connie duly noted, knowing they didn’t really have time for this. After all, the
cops were certainly still on the hunt for them, which meant they had to leave the library as soon as possible.

Steven let out an amazed gasp as he cracked the book open, immediately spotting a detailed sketch of the Gem temple on one of its pages. “But look!” he flipped through several more of its pages so everyone else could see. “It’s full of drawings of Gem locations! Just like the journal!”

“Wait, what?!” Dipper took the book, immediately intrigued. Indeed, it had sketches and descriptions of not just the temple, but other mystical places as well, many of which he had seen in the journal before. Still, there were clear differences between this book and the journal, including the style of the illustrations and language used in the descriptions, proving that they were both written by different authors. “What is this thing?”

“Uh, we might not have enough time to sit down and read it in here!” Mabel pointed out, nodding towards the cops, who were searching the next aisle over for them.

Immediately, the kids all began to head for the exit, taking the mysterious book with them as they wanted to look into it further. Fortunately, they got out of the library without being noticed, and thanks to their newfound map, their next destination was clear: the Gravity Falls Museum of History. Still, as they headed for the museum, they decided to take a closer look at the book that Steven had found, in the hopes that it might provide them with some new information, even if it wasn’t related to their investigation.

“Whoa… Apparently this book was the journal of Buddy Budwick!” Connie exclaimed as she read through the first few pages of the book.

“Buddy who-now?” Mabel asked, confused.

“Oh wait! I think I’ve heard of that guy,” Steven said. “Mayor Dewey mentions him every other year during his Pioneer Day speech. I think he was a friend of William Dewey or something.”

“Then that means he could have known something about the cover-up!” Dipper exclaimed. “Connie, keep reading.”

“Ok, let’s see here…” Connie adjusted the frames of her glasses as she began to read the first entry. “August, 1845. At last our long and perilous journey upon the Oregon Trail has reached its end. Our wagon train has found a place to stake our claims and start anew, a small, rather odd valley dubbed Gravity Falls. However, I would be absolutely remiss if I didn’t recount the miraculous circumstances that brought our leaders, William Dewey and Nathaniel Northwest, to this bold new land…

“We had been journeying upon the trail for many weeks; our food supplies and morale were starting to run quite low, but Mr. Dewey and Mr. Northwest refused to share their healthy rations with the rest of us. (Since this is my own personal journal, it would likely be safe for me to note that neither of them were very competent leaders.) However, as we were going over a precarious overpass, we were attacked by a monster unlike anything we had ever seen before!

“Mr. Northwest and Mr. Dewey prepared to flee for their lives, leaving the rest of us to fend the fell monster off alone. But alas! When it seemed as though all of our hope had died and the hour of doom seemed at hand, we were rescued! Our savior was a giant, four-armed woman, an illustrious goddess of a creature! With ease, she defeated the monster and carried us and our wagons into the safety of the valley, before somehow splitting apart into four smaller, yet still quite impressive women.
“The women introduced themselves as the Crystal Gems, and their leader, Rose Quartz, welcomed us to the fledgling town of Gravity Falls. However, she gave us a gentle warning that this land was one of untold dangers and that it might not be safe for us to stay. Mr. Northwest and Mr. Dewey harshly scoffed at her concerns and decided to settle down here anyway, as did most of the rest of us. Still, I cannot help but wonder if the Crystal Gems were right about this odd little town after all…”

“Wow, my mom and the Gems helped all of those people get here!” Steven exclaimed once Connie was done reading. “That’s so cool!”

“That’s not the only thing that’s cool about this,” Dipper said as he flipped through Buddy’s book for himself. “If what this Buddy guy wrote is true, then that means that Gravity Falls was already here before Nathaniel Northwest and William Dewey got here! Which means—”

“It means that the Gems can turn into a giant, giant woman!” Mabel zealously interrupted. “And I wanna see her and all four of her arms!”

“No, it means that Northwest and Dewey couldn’t have been the town founders!” Dipper corrected. “This book proves it!”

“And to think I found it just rolling around on a stool!” Steven laughed, before quickly remembering his resolve. “I-I mean, I found it by being serious!”

“It’s proof… but I don’t think it’s the kind of proof anyone’s going to accept…” Connie mused with a frown. “We’re gonna need something bigger… Something that Pacifica and her family won’t just be able to shrug off.”

“Well, we still have the museum,” Steven said as the four of them arrived to the stately building. “Maybe we’ll find our bigger thing in there!”

“You guys do realize what this means, right?” Dipper asked, his tone and expression both deadly serious as they all stood before the museum. “We’re going to have to break in…”

“And here are your free Pioneer Day passes,” the museum greeter smiled as she handed the kids their buttons. “And your balloons: two blues and two pinks.”

“We’re in,” Dipper said, still just as serious, even though “breaking” into the museum had been as easily as just walking through the front door.

“I’ve never been to the town museum before,” Steven said, smiling with interest as the group began to explore. “Look at all the cool old stuff!”

“I… sort of doubt that any of its really authentic though…” Connie frowned as she inspected a piece of Indian pottery that was clearly made out of plastic.

“So what are we gonna do next?” Mabel asked inquisitively. “Steal Thomas Jefferson’s ribcage?”

“Ew, no,” Dipper rolled his eyes. “According to the map, the next clue should be right… here!”

The others gathered around the exhibition piece he had pointed out, a strange work of abstract art hanging on the wall in a triangular frame.
“Hm… it looks like… a triangle,” Steven mused, stepping closer to the artwork. “Maybe we have to feel our next clue out in this weird painting!”

“Steven, wait!” Connie quickly pulled the young Gem away from the painting. “Don’t touch it! You might set off an alarm or something!”

“Wait… what’s the point of having all this art in one place if people aren’t allowed to touch any of it?” Steven asked, bewildered by the concept.

“…Let’s get back on track here,” Dipper said after everyone briefly gave the young Gem a curious look. “We need to figure this one out quick. I have a feeling those cops weren’t at the library to check out books…”

“I don’t think the one with the bell can read…” Mabel noted with a frown.

“So what exactly are we supposed to be looking for anyway?” Connie asked, squinting at the painting. The others followed suit, all of them examining the piece from different angles in the hope that something concrete would soon become clear.

Of course, this quickly started to get boring, especially for Mabel. She let out a tired sigh as she sat down on a nearby bench, though it didn’t take her long to reposition herself so that she was laying upside down on it. “Hey painting, be less stupid,” she scowled, though she let out a shocked gasp a moment later. “It worked!”

“Huh?” Dipper raised a confused eyebrow but nonetheless, he hurried to join Mabel in lying upside down on the bench. Steven and Connie followed suit, and while the four of them had to squeeze a bit, soon it became clear to all of them exactly what Mabel had seen in the painting. With their newfound prospective, the kids were able to see the clear outline of what looked like an angel standing with her finger pointed out. “Oh… It’s not abstract; it’s upside down!” Dipper exclaimed in realization.

“Yeah but… what does it mean?” Connie asked, still not understanding how this image related to their investigation.

“Wait! I think I’ve seen a statue that looks like this in the cemetery before!” Steven exclaimed, bolting upright.

“Then let’s go!” Dipper said, jumping to his feet as well. “Hurry!”

Mabel and Connie were quick to get up off the bench as well and with their next destination clear, all four kids made a beeline for the museum exit. Coincidentally enough, Blubbs and Durland had just arrived at the museum, as they were getting their own passes and balloons from the greeter at the front door.

“I’m sorry, but we’re all out of pink balloons,” the greeter frowned to Durland apologetically.

“Why’d we even come?” the deputy’s shoulders sagged in disappointment.

“Officer Blubbs,” the sheriff’s walkie-talkie suddenly beeped, prompting both cops to run into the privacy of the museum.

“Blubbs here,” Blubbs responded, his tone serious.

“Have the targets been apprehended yet?”
“Negative. But we’re close. I promise, those kids’ll never get past us!”

No sooner had he said this, of course, than the kids happened to run right by the cops, easily escaping from the museum before the officers could even collect themselves. “Hey! Get back here!” Blubbs called out, rushing after them along with Durland. However, the kids made a clean getaway as the cops only ended up getting stuck in the door of the museum in their hasty pursuit, much to the sheriff’s frustration. “Dang it!”

Stan grunted in frustration as he attempted to break himself out of the stocks using only a hairpin. Since his hands were stuck in the stocks, he had to resort to using his mouth to hold the pin as he tried to nudge it towards the lock, only to be just a few inches shy of it. His annoyance towards his current plight only grew, however, as he ended up inevitably dropping the pin.

“Oh, come on!” the conman exclaimed, scowling down at the pin that was now far out of his reach.

Fortunately though, someone was there to pick up the pin; yet unfortunately, that someone just so happened to be Pacifica. “Well, if it isn’t Mabel’s uncle, Mr. Pines,” the heiress said matter-of-factly as she held the pin just out of Stan’s reach. “Looking for this?”


“Please,” Pacifica scoffed. “I already have tons of that. No, I want you to say that the Northwest family is the best family in Gravity Falls.”

“Oh sure,” the conman rolled his eyes. “You want that in writing?”

Pacifica smirked as she produced a pen and a pad of paper, knowing that she was about to win another subtle victory over Mabel, even if she wasn’t there to witness it. She watched with smug satisfaction as Stan wrote out the message with the pen in his mouth, before spitting it out and nodding to the heiress.

“There ya go,” he said with a mischievous grin. His smirk only widened as he watched Pacifica’s smile change into an appalled glare upon reading the words “YOU STINK!” “Ha! I did that with my mouth!”

Despite this triumph, Pacifica still had the upper hand as she retaliated by catching the attention of a group of nearby townsfolk with a whistle. With a mere nod, she prompted the crowd to start throwing their ammunition of tomatoes at the conman, much to his distress.

“Aw, come on!” he shouted as he was pelted by tomato after tomato. “Where’s Amethyst with that ‘rescue’ of hers?!”

As was the case with every Pioneer Day, the Gems found that most of their time at the festival was spent meandering about the town and making sure that no one was blindly walking into danger. All three of them found it to be incredibly boring and tedious, but it was their responsibility, one that they had dutifully performed ever since the holiday was integrated years ago, no matter how much disdain they harbored for it.
“Well, no one’s broken any bones or set anything on fire yet,” Pearl noted as they walked down main street. “So I guess that’s a plus when compared to the last several years…”

“Knowing how Pioneer Day usually goes, I doubt the streak will be broken,” Garnet said stoically.

Oddly enough, Amethyst said nothing as she simply lingered a bit behind her teammates, casting a glance over at Stan in the stocks several yards away. She had a plan in mind for breaking him out, but she needed a good excuse to split off from Garnet and Pearl first, since she knew well that they would try to stop her. And as the kids happened to pass by, it looked as though she was about to get just the distraction she needed.

“Heeeeyyyyy, look who it is,” the purple Gem smirked discreetly, stopping the kids in their tracks as the two groups met. “How are you guys digging Pioneer Day? Hopefully you all aren’t bored out of your minds like we are.”

“Sorry, you guys, but we can’t stop to talk,” Steven said. “We’re in the middle of something super serious.”

“Oh really?” Pearl asked with a curious smile. “Like what?”

“We’re gonna find out who really founded Gravity Falls!” Mabel exclaimed. “It’s a HUGE mystery and we’re not going to stop until we crack this nut wide open!”

“Sounds like a pretty big nut,” Garnet said with a small smirk.

“Wait a second! Maybe you guys can help us out,” Dipper said, knowing that if anyone could provide them with in-depth clues, it was the Gems. “You three were around when Gravity Falls was founded, weren’t you?”

“Well… not exactly…” Pearl frowned. “We came about a year late, but we were ‘around’ back then, so to speak.”

“So you guys would know whether or not Nathaniel Northwest and William Dewey were actually the town founders, wouldn’t you?” Connie pressed inquisitively.

“Are you kidding us?” Amethyst burst out laughing upon hearing this. “Those losers? Come on. They couldn’t have found their way to a tree around here. And there are trees everywhere here.”

“Plus, they didn’t arrive here until almost two years after we got here,” Pearl pointed out. “Yet the townsfolk have been insistent on hailing them as the town founders for over one hundred years now for some inane reason.” As the white Gem was saying this, Amethyst decided to stealthily take her leave, slipping away from the others when no one was watching. Yet all the same, Pearl continued. “We’ve tried countless times to try and set the record straight, but the people of Gravity Falls are set in their historically inaccurate ways. What a shame.”

“Then that means the book was right!” Dipper exclaimed. “So if Northwest and Dewey didn’t found Gravity Falls, then who did?”

“That’s easy,” Garnet replied, crossing her arms. “It was-”

Before the Gem leader could finish her statement, a sudden crash rattled the street, catching everyone’s attention. Garnet and Pearl spun around to find a sight that honestly wasn’t too surprising, but it was still alarming nonetheless. Amethyst had indeed attempted to break Stan out of the stocks, though beyond all logic her methods involved a bicycle, a blowtorch, and several fireworks, all of which she had managed to gather in record time. However she had ended up using
them resulted in a localized explosion, and while there were thankfully no injures, many people were still sent running from the surrounding area, which was now alit with several small fires. Amidst this disaster was Amethyst, who was covered in soot and looked quite surprised that her plan failed as she stood beside Stan, who was still in the stocks and was as perturbed as ever.

“Well, you gotta give me credit for trying at least,” the purple Gem shrugged, patting the flames off the conman’s fez.

“I’d give you even more credit if you hadn’t ended up causing small-scale property damage,” Stan deadpanned sullenly.

“Amethyst!” Pearl scolded from across the square, her hands curled into tight angry fists. “What did you do?!”

“Just a little jailbreak, P,” Amethyst said nonchalantly. “No biggie.”

“Well, there’s our disaster for this year,” Garnet said, already setting off across the street. “Might as well go clean it up.”

“Unfortunately…” Pearl grumbled in annoyance, calling back to the kids as she sulked after Garnet. “Have fun with your mystery hunt, kids! And stay safe!”

“But wait!” Dipper shouted after the Gems as they headed off, still hoping to get some answers from them. “You still haven’t told us who the real town founder is!”

While Pearl didn’t happen to hear this, Garnet did as she paused for a moment and provided a very brief, very vague response. “You four will figure it out,” she confirmed. “In fact, the answer’s closer than you think.”

“That… doesn’t really help at all…” Connie frowned as the Gems went out of earshot.

“I guess finding out the truth is still up to us,” Steven shrugged with a smile.

“To the cemetery!” Mabel proclaimed boldly, already running on ahead. The others were quick to join her, all of them united in their ultimate goal, which, according to the Gem leader, they were getting steadily closer to with every step they took.

“Are you guys serious?!” Amethyst asked, completely distraught as Garnet and Pearl finished locking her into the stockade right next to Stan’s. “What did I even do?”

“You nearly blew up the entire street!” Pearl exclaimed with a harsh scoff. “And you were trying to break Stan out, even though he had been arrested by legal officials!”

“So?” the purple Gem scowled, not understanding what the big deal was.

“So, you broke the law,” Garnet explained firmly. “And even a Crystal Gem, you are not above the law, Amethyst.”

“Pfft, yeah I am,” Amethyst muttered under her breath.

“What was that?” Pearl asked, her hands on her hips.

“Nothing,” the purple Gem quickly assured, though her manner was still quite rebellious. “You
guys do know that this dumb thing can’t hold me, right? I can just break out any time I want. Like this.” With a sly smirk, Amethyst shape-shifted her arms and head to the point that they were small enough to slip out of the stocks, though Garnet was quick to chastise her on this.

“No, Amethyst,” the Gem leader shook her head. “You did the crime; you have to do the time.”

“Come oooooonn…” Amethyst groaned as she begrudgingly positioned herself back into the stockade. “You guys are being so lame!”

“We’re not the ones who told you to set fireworks off into a crowd,” Pearl retorted crossly. “Now if you two want to act like deviants, then you deserve to be treated like deviants. Let this be a lesson to you both.”

“Gee thanks, ‘mom’,” Stan remarked sarcastically. “Got anymore any more after-school special messages for us? Like how we should look both ways before crossing the street? Or how stealing is wrong?”

Pearl let out a heavy sigh of annoyance upon hearing this, already starting to storm off petulantly. “Ugh, you two are hopeless…” she growled, not even bothering to glare back at them.

“Remember, Amethyst,” Garnet advised, her tone unwavering and authoritative. “No breaking out.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” the purple Gem rolled her eyes. “I’ll sit here in time out like a good little Gem. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“I better not have to,” Garnet warned, adjusting her shades as she left.

A beat of silence passed between the two “fugitives” after the two elder Gems departed, though it was soon broken by Stan as he glanced over at Amethyst. “So you’re already thinking up your next escape plan, right?”

The purple Gem smirked slyly, shapeshifting one of her hands out of the stockade. “Oh, you know it.”

Since the cops were still very likely on their train, Steven had come up with the idea to call for Lion so they could get to the cemetery much faster. The pink beast had dutifully come at the call, and while actually getting him into motion was something of a challenge, he eventually complied and carried all four of the kids to the town graveyard, where they easily located the statue that the painting had depicted.

“Hm…” Dipper mused as he stood before the statue along with Connie. “The statue must be pointing towards the next clue…”

“Yeah, but what?” Connie frowned as they both turned in the direction the statue pointed. “I don’t see anything over there at all…”

“Maybe she’s pointing at us!” Steven exclaimed as he rode Lion in front of the two of them. “Oh but wait, I guess that wouldn’t work since neither of us are clues, right Lion?”

As the pink beast let out a bored yawn, Mabel caught everyone’s attention with an amused laugh. “Oh, gross! She’s picking my nose!” she chuckled, having positioned herself in such a way that it
did indeed look like the statue’s pointing finger was stuck up her nose. However, the pressure she was inadvertently putting on the finger was enough to cause it to bend upward, almost as if it was some sort of switch. As a result, the grave underneath the statue suddenly slid open, revealing a set of stairs that led into a darkened tunnel, much to the amazement of all of the kids.

“I can’t believe it! It’s a hidden passageway!” Connie exclaimed in amazement. “Great job, Mabel!”

“Ha! Who’s silly now, Pacifica?” Mabel smirked triumphantly, though she did have a little trouble breaking free from the statue’s hold on her nose. “Ow!” she cringe, though she did finally manage to jump down and join the others as they all began to head inside the passageway.

“Um, Steven? Does Lion really have to come with us?” Dipper asked as he noticed that the pink beast was following close behind them.

“Of course he does!” Steven quipped with a smile. “Who else is going to be our adorable animal sidekick? And besides, he wants to come. Don’t you, Lion?”

Lion simply gave Steven a playful nudge at this, eliciting a laugh from the young Gem. As they headed into the darkness of the tunnel, Mabel began munching on her remaining pieces of butterscotch as something of a victory for her discovery. “Now we’re getting into real conspiracy mode!” she exclaimed daringly. “I’m feeling serious. Aren’t you, Steven?”

“I sure am!” Steven nodded in vigorous agreement before launching into another impromptu song. “Oooh, we’re going on a mystery hunt! For some secret mystery stuff! Something, something, mystery something!”

“Nice song,” Connie chuckled good-naturedly as she walked alongside the young Gem.

“Guys, is it just me, or is this tunnel a little… long?” Dipper asked, realizing they had been walking for quite a while. “I just feel like we should have found something by now, you know?”

“Yeah, like a treasure chest!” Steven exclaimed.

“Or a gorilla!” Mabel added, just as enthused.

“Or a clue,” Connie got them back on track. “It is sort of weird though. All of our other clues couldn’t be leading us to a dead end, could they?”

Before anyone could really answer, Lion suddenly let out a loud roar, startling all of them and stopping them in their tracks. The pink beast quickly lowered himself to the ground, giving the young Gem in particular an insistent look that wasn’t too hard for him to read. “Um… you want to give us a ride?” Steven asked his companion tentatively. Lion simply growled again, making his answer quite apparent. The kids exchanged a brief, confused glance at the pink beast’s strange behavior, but nonetheless, they complied and four of them mounted him. And as soon as they were all on his back, Lion immediately took off.

Needless to say, the kids were quite startled as Lion bolted forward, charging through the tunnel at a frightening speed. They all clung onto each other and the pink beast as tightly as they could, none of them really understanding how Lion knew where he was going since the tunnel was so dark. Still, thanks to the limited light of their flashlight, they were all able to make out the dead end that Lion was steadily barreling towards.

“Lion, wait!” Steven shouted, alarmed. “Don’t run into the waaaaaaaal!”
By now, all four of the kids were screaming in fear, bracing themselves for what would certainly be a painful impact with the wall. However, mere moments before he collided with it, Lion let out a powerful roar, his eyes glowing white as a bright sonic blast shot through the tunnel towards the wall. The moment it struck the dead end, its rock surface imploded, creating a wide opening that Lion easily continued through, arriving in a new, much larger area. As the pink beast skidded to a stop on top of the shallow water covering the ground, all four of the kids fell off of him, splashing into the water in stunned exhaustion.

“Oh my gosh,” Mabel said as she sat up, wringing the water out of her hair. “That was so much fun! Can we do it again?”

“Let’s not and say we didn’t,” Dipper groaned as he repositioned his hat. “Where are we anyway?”

“I have no idea…” Steven rose to stand, taking in their new surroundings in awe. “But wherever this is, its amazing!” The young Gem’s statement echoed around the high walls of the cavernous area there were now in. Shimmering stalagmites rose out of the watery ground, and in the center of the cave was a round, stone platform, which was clearly not a natural facet considering the stairs that led up to it. Lion was the first to ascend the steps and the others tentatively followed, curious to see what exactly this mysterious location was.

“You don’t think this could be some sort of magical Gem place, do you?” Connie asked Steven curiously. However, before the young Gem could respond, the platform suddenly started to glow the moment he set foot on it. A hand-shaped pedestal started rising up from the center of the platform, the symbol of a rose with thorns spiraling around it resting on its palm.

“Yes. Magic Gem place,” Steven confirmed, knowing that this place definitely had that sort of mysterious, mythical vibe to it. As curious as ever, the kids headed over to the pedestal, looking over it but being careful not to touch it quite yet. “Uh, Lion?” the young Gem frowned at his pink companion. “Normally I’m all about this stuff, but I don’t think there are really any clues here…”

Lion simply let out a soft roar at this, regarding Steven with something of a cryptic gaze. “What does that even mean, Lion?!” the young Gem exclaimed, exasperated over how mysterious the pink beast often was. “What does that even mean?”

“Wait,” Dipper cut in, stepping a bit closer to the pedestal as he pulled out the journal. “I’ve seen that symbol before…” He paused briefly, flipping through a few pages before finally finding a sketch of the exact same insignia that was on the hand. “Here it is: ‘The emblem of Rose Quartz.’”

“My mom?” Steven asked, glancing towards the pedestal again.

“No way…” Mabel whispered in awe. “Steven, if this place was your mom’s, then Lion must have brought you here for some super special destiny-type stuff! Give it a high five and see what happens!”

“Oh,” Steven shrugged, doing just that. The moment he placed his hand on the pedestal, both it and the edges of the platform became enveloped in a white light, further proving that there was some sort of underlying connection.

“Hey, I think it likes you!” Connie exclaimed with a joking grin.

Likewise, Steven was duly amazed, that is until he tried to remove his hand from the pedestal, only to find that it wouldn’t move. “Ah! My hand’s stuck!” he gasped, alarmed as he attempted to pull it off again. “It won’t—come off!”
The others were just as disconcerted as they rushed to the young Gem’s aid, grabbing his arm and attempting to pull it off the pedestal together. However, as they tugged in unison, a white case rose up from the platform nearby, containing a wide variety of unique, elegant swords all hovering in an organized line.

“Hey, swords!” Connie grinned, intrigued.

“No!” Steven shouted fearfully, eyeing the sharp blades nervously. Instantly, the collection of swords sunk back into the platform, as though they were never there at all.

“Ok, what is going on here?” Dipper asked, trying to make sense of this confusing situation. “Steven, how’d you do that?”

“I-I don’t know…”

“Do it again! Do it again!” Mabel urged, shaking the young Gem by the shoulder excitedly. Just by this movement alone, another set of weaponry rose up from the pedestal, this time a collection of axes of many different sizes and shapes. “Cool!”

“Whoa, that gives me an idea,” Dipper said as he glanced over at Steven. Without warning, he gave the young Gem a sharp jab on the shoulder and Connie, quickly understanding the plan, followed suit by pulling on Steven’s ear.

“Ow! You guys, what-” Steven tried to ask, but was cut off by Mabel poking him in the side with a playful grin. The young Gem could do little but laugh as his friends poked and prodded at him in the hopes that it would bring about another reaction from the pedestal. “H-hey! Stop it! I’m ticklish!” he cried amidst his heavy laughter. “Cut it out, you guys! I’m gonna pee!”

Regardless of Steven’s protests, this plan somehow worked as a large collection of armor emerged from the platform all around them, each suit hovering freely above the ground. By now, the young Gem was more than ready to consent to being tickled just to see what else this strange collection had in store. “Quick! Someone press my nose!”

Connie did so, prompting the armor to disappear and be replaced with a trio of familiar-looking pink canons. “Are those light canons?” Steven asked, bewildered.

“We totally could have used those to get rid of that Red Eye a few weeks ago…” Dipper noted caustically.

“Next!” Mabel exclaimed, tugging at the corners of Steven’s mouth. As the light canons sunk into the pedestal, a statue of a woman bearing three large flails hanging from each of her arms rose up in their place. “Ooo! Spikey chain balls!”

As Dipper poked the center of Steven’s back, the flails were replaced with perhaps the oddest sight they had seen yet. “A giant… penny?”

“Does that mean it’s worth more than a regular penny?” Connie mused thoughtfully.

“Well, that would make ‘cents’,” Steven joked, eliciting a brief laugh from the others.

“Ok, so this is great and everything,” Dipper spoke up, knowing that they had taken a serious detour from their mission. “But I don’t think any of this is getting us any closer to finding out who the real founder of Gravity Falls was.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right, Dipper…” Steven frowned. “We should probably get going. After all,
how else are we going to prove that we’re serious if we don’t solve this mystery once and for all?”

The moment the young Gem said this, the pedestal abruptly stopped glowing, freeing his hand and allowing him to stumble back away from it. The pedestal itself abruptly began to sink into the platform once more as something completely new began to emerge around the perimeter of it. However, instead of any weapons or armor, it was many different things: several full bookshelves, authentic antiques and historical portraits, and stashes of files and documents at almost every turn. Knowing that they answers they were looking for could very well lie within this hidden library, the kids immediately began exploring it in search of another clue.

“Wow! It’s treasure trove of historic-y, secret-y things!” Mabel exclaimed, looking through a document labeled “top secret”. Not only did the page reveal that Abraham Lincoln had an extra hand hidden under his iconic top hat, but it also revealed the real gender of Ben Franklin. “Oh man! Benjamin Franklin secretly was a woman!”

“Huh, I never knew John Adams had a pet rhino…” Connie mused, looking over a portrait displaying the second president and his beloved pet.

“Whoa, this one has the Gems in it!” Steven grinned, holding up a painting of the Gems clad in old-fashioned clothes on board a boat with several humans. The most interesting aspect of the picture by far was Garnet, standing at the bow of the boat as she punched a shark. “Ha ha, cool!”

As Dipper checked over a stash of confidential documents, he didn’t really find anything of note like the others were. That is, until he happened upon a file labeled: “Dewey/Northwest Cover-Up”. “Ah, jackpot!” he exclaimed, motioning for the others to come join him. “This is just what we’re looking for. Now we’ll find out who the real town founder was.” Not wanting to deal with any further suspense, he began to read from the enclosed document. “Let it be here recorded that, after being deposed from his position of co-wagon train leader, William Dewey, supposed first mayor of Gravity Falls, was actually just a common manure salesman. Likewise, his partner, Nathaniel Northwest, fabled founder of Gravity Falls, was, in fact, a fraud, as well as a waste-shoveling village idiot.”

“Really?!” Connie laughed, elated by this information. “That’s hilarious.”

“Bad news for Pacifica, huh?” Dipper grinned triumphantly. “Wait till the papers hear about this!”

“Yes! We uncovered a real historical conspiracy!” Mabel cheered. “No one can ever call us silly again!”

“Now the whole world will know me as Serious Steven!” Steven exclaimed boldly, placing his hands on his hips in a firm stance.

Despite their celebration, Dipper turned back to the document, knowing that there was still quite a bit to it. “Hold it, guys,” he said, regaining the other’s attention. “Get a load of this: “The true founder of Gravity Falls was Sir Lord Quentin Trembly III, Esquire.”

“Who’s Quentin Trembly?” Mabel asked, confused.

“That’s none of your business!” The kids all gasped as they turned around to see Blubbs and Durland standing in the entryway Lion had created earlier. Both officers looked somewhat exhausted from having to traverse the long tunnel, but even so, they both glared at the kids as they joined them on the platform.

“Woo! We gotcha!” Durland cheered, ringing his bell and grinning as the bright sound echoed
through the cave.

“Uh, maybe you should have closed up that hole your roar made, Lion…” Steven frowned at the pink beast, who didn’t even hear him as he peacefully napped on the other side of the platform.

“Sorry, kids, but Quentin Trembly’s a matter of national security,” Blubbs asserted firmly.

“What do you mean ‘national security’?” Dipper inquired, confused.

“And who was Quentin Trembly?” Connie asked, just as bewildered.

“See for yourselves,” Blubbs said, removing his hat to reveal a film reel. Fortunately, a projector was among the extensive collection, and so the sheriff put the tape in, casting the projection of a greyscale countdown on the cave wall.

“Aw, it’s black and white?” Mabel complained, though Dipper was quick to shush her as the film began.

After the countdown ended, a government official, clad in a stately suit, appeared on the reel, his expression and manner quite serious as he began to speak. “If you’re watching this, then you are one of the eight people in these United States with clearance to view this information. In fact, I myself will be shot as soon as this filming is complete.” The official paused briefly, glancing off-screen before letting out an allayed sigh. “Oh what? No? Whoo! Well that’s a relief!” After another beat, he looked back to the camera and continued. “Of all of America’s secrets, the most embarrassing was that of Quentin Trembly, the eighth and a half president of the United States.”

“President?” all the kids questioned, completely puzzled.

“Eight and a half?” Mabel added, even more confused by this detail. Nonetheless, the reel continued as the official narrated alongside a slideshow.

“After winning the 1837 election in a landslide,” the official began as the reel showed Trembly claiming victory in the election as his opponents fell victim to a literal landslide. “Quentin Trembly quickly gained a reputation as America’s silliest president. He waged war on pancakes, appointed six babies to the Supreme Court, and issued the de-pants-ipation proclamation. His State of the Union address was even worse:

“The only thing we have to fear is gigantic, man-eating spiders!” a vocal reenactment of the former president proclaimed boldly, despite how ridiculous his statement was.

“He was kicked out of office and escaped to an uncharted valley that he named Gravity Falls, after plummeting into it at high speed. Trembly’s shameful term was erased from history and officially replaced by William Henry Harrison as president, local manure salesman William Dewey as Gravity Falls’ first mayor, and local nobody Nathaniel Northwest as its founder. The whereabouts of president Trembly’s body are unknown.”

“Until now,” Blubbs said as the tape came to an end. The sheriff nodded to the other side of the platform, where the body of the eighth and a half president himself was encased in a large, orange, opaque block made of some sort of unknown, solid material.

“Whoa, is this like, amber or something?” Dipper asked as everyone stood before the petrified president.

“The fool thought he could live forever by encasing himself in a block of solid peanut brittle. Smooth move, Mr. President!” Blubbs goaded. “Trembly’s body has been missing for over a
hundred years now, and finding it was our special mission. And now, thanks to you kids, it’s complete.”

“Who knew all we had to do was follow a little girl’s trail of candy wrappers to a lion-sized hole?” Durland smirked triumphantly.

Mabel and Steven both face palmed upon hearing this, knowing that their shared, incidental silliness had been their downfall in the end. Had it not been for their folly, then they would have easily been able to make a clean getaway with their newfound information. But instead, they had been caught and cornered, something that was quite embarrassing for all of them after having come so far.

“Now that you know the truth, well, we can’t let you go around talkin’ about it,” Blubbs said assertively.

“You don’t mean-” Connie began to ask, though Mabel was quick to finish the question.

“Are you going to kill us?!” Mabel asked, horrified.

“Oh no!” Durland gasped, just as alarmed by such an implication.

“No, no!” Blubbs clarified, gently calming his partner down before turning to the kids once more. “We’re just gonna escort you and all this stuff back to Washington. You ain’t coming back by the way.”

Needless to say, the kids were frightened by the idea that they would never be able to return home again simply because of their discovery. Which was why Steven was the first to try and stop it. “L-Lion!” the young Gem called to the pink beast, who was still stoically sleeping. “Could you maybe wake up and help us out?! Please?!”

Lion only responded with a tired roar as he rolled over on his other side, making it clear that he wasn’t going to be of any help in this decisive situation. “Gee, Lion, nice to know we can count on you,” Dipper deadpanned, just as annoyed by how rare the pink beast’s aid was as ever.

“Alright, kids, enough stalling,” Blubbs said unsympathetically as him and Durland began rounding them up. “We have a train to catch.”

The cops hadn’t been kidding about shipping all of the evidence they had found relating to Quentin Trembly off to Washington. Not only had they packed up all of the documents and files pertaining to the former president away, but they had also locked his frozen body, along with all four of the kids and Lion, inside a large crate, despite their protests. Despite their attempts to escape and call for help, the realization finally struck that they were all trapped in the cargo hold of the train that was en route towards the nation’s capital on the other side of the country, without anyone, save for Blubbs and Durland, even knowing of their plight.

“Ugh, I can’t believe I left that trail of candy wrappers!” Mabel groaned in frustration as she sunk down against the side of the crate. “This is all my fault…”

“Eh, I think it’s kind of my fault too…” Steven frowned guiltily. “I thought bringing Lion along would help, but all he wants to do is sleep…” The young Gem glowered at his animal companion, who was still snoozing away, even inside the crate.

“Oh, come on, you guys, don’t be so down,” Dipper said with a small, reassuring grin. “We never would have learned the truth about who really founded Gravity Falls without you two!”
“That’s right!” Connie agreed wholeheartedly. “Mabel, you were the one who solved the clue that led us to the graveyard and Steven, if you hadn’t brought Lion, then we never would have found that cave at all!”

“Nice try, you guys, but it’s not helping,” Mabel sighed glumly. “Pacifica had us pegged all along. We’re just two silly failures, like that embarrassing president what’s-his-name.”

As Steven and Mabel both let out another round of defeated sighs, they both broke a piece off of the peanut brittle block Trembly was encased in, figuring it would be good for a snack. However, before they could even begin eating, the integrity of the rest of the peanut brittle began to waver, until, all at once, it completely shattered, freeing the former president from his century-long prison.

“It is I, Quentin Trembly!” the former president declared, abruptly ripping off his pants without flinching.

“Y-you’re alive?!” Dipper asked, completely bewildered that Trembly had actually managed to survive all these years. “But how?”

“Peanut brittle really does have life-sustaining properties!” Mabel gasped. “You’re not silly, you’re brilliant!”

“And so are you, my dear girl, and you too, my young friend,” Trembly remarked to both Steven and Mabel. “For following my clues and freeing me from my delicious tomb!”

“You also have Lion to thank, Mr. President,” Steven grinned, nodding to the pink beast, who had finally awakened from his nap. “He’s the one who led us to the cave where you were hidden.”

“Ah, yes! Thank you, my good man!” Trembly exclaimed, holding out a hand for Lion to shake. The pink beast didn’t meet him halfway of course, but instead settled down to return to his nap, though the former president was hardly offended by this. “He’s so polite! How refreshing!”

“Uh…. Is it just me or is this guy a little…?” Connie trailed off in a whisper to Steven.

“Awesome!” the young Gem finished with an amused laugh.

“By Jefferson! We seem to be trapped in some sort of crate-shaped box…” Trembly mused, noticing their circumstances.

“It’s a crate, Mr. President,” Mabel clarified with a grin.

“Good thing I have the President’s Key, which can open any lock in America!” the former president proclaimed, pulling said key out. Since the crate had no door or lock, however, he simply resorted to slamming the key into the side of the crate repeatedly in the hopes that it would somehow open it.

“I… don’t think that’s going to work…” Dipper pointed out with a skeptical frown.

“Wood! My age-old enemy…” Trembly grumbled, putting the key away. “In order to get out of here, we’ll need the silliest plan ever conceived.”

“Well, there’s definitely someone in here who can help you with that,” Connie said with a knowing smirk.

“Really? Who?” Steven asked, unaware that she was referring to him and Mabel.
“Hm…” Mabel mused, glancing around the crate. “How about… that hole!” She exclaimed, pointing out a rather tiny opening near the bottom of the crate.

“We shall *leap* through it!” Trembly declared zealously.

“Yeah!” Steven readily agreed. Without any hesitation, the trio jumped for the hole all together, though the most any of them could really get out through it was a finger.

“Um, I’m not sure that’s working…” Dipper said, exchanging a concerned glance with Connie as they watched the group struggle.

“Trust the silliness!” Mabel retorted firmly.

“We… can do it!” Steven exclaimed, pushing hard against the hole.

“Fiddlesticks! Keep going!” Trembly urged, leading the rather ridiculous charge.

As the trio was still trying to force their way through the hole, a woodpecker just so happened to fly into the cargo car through its open window, landing on the crate and immediately taking notice of Mabel’s finger as it wiggled out of the hole. Intrigued, the bird began pecking at the crate at a steady pace, catching the attention of those trapped inside.

“Is that my third wife?” Trembly paused upon hearing the familiar pecking clamor. “Sandy?”

The woodpecker only had to beat on the box for a few minutes before its integrity wore out, causing the crate to fall apart completely and releasing its former prisoners.

“Yes! We’re free!” Steven cheered triumphantly.

“Drat! We didn’t fit through the hole!” Trembly scowled. “Let’s rebuild the box and try again!”

“We gotta get out of here!” Dipper urged, already running for the door of the car as everyone else followed suit.

“Also good!” Trembly concurred.

Fortunately, the door to the cargo train was unlocked. However, as the door swung open, Durland just so happened to be passing by as he got a bucket of ice. The moment he spotted the kids, Lion, and Trembly, however, he abruptly dropped it in shock and called for his partner. “Blubbs!”

Knowing they couldn’t let themselves get caught again, the group quickly slammed the door in the deputy’s face and ran in the opposite direction. Since the cargo car was the caboose, they had no choice but to flee to the top of the train via the emergency escape that led up to the roof. Trembly reached it first and attempted to make use of the President’s Key once more by ramming it against the escape hatch, despite its lack of any sort of lock.

“Give me that!” Exasperated, Dipper took the key from the former president and opened the hatch correctly, allowing everyone to climb up to the roof. However, they didn’t get very far as Blubbs and Durland were quick to pursue them.

“T-there… is no… escape!” Blubbs exclaimed, trying to catch his breath after such a hurried chase. “Oh… I gotta take a knee…”

“Are you okay?” Durland asked with concern as he placed an arm around his exhausted partner’s shoulder. “Can I get you anything?”
“Edwin, darlin’, you are a diamond in the rough,” Blubbs grinned warmly at the deputy.

“Sheriff Blubbs, do you really want to lock us all up in a government facility somewhere?” Dipper asked anxiously.

“I’ve got no choice!” Blubbs said adamantly. “Our orders come from the very top.”

“B-but we won’t tell anyone!” Connie protested. “We promise!”

“Oh, we know you won’t,” the sheriff said, placing his hands on his hips. “Because where you kids are going, there won’t be anyone to tell.”

“Oh man, what do we do know?!” Steven asked, slightly panicked.

“The only thing we can do,” Trembly said, his tone dead serious. “We must leap off this locomotive and hope that the wild ocelots will be there on the ground to catch us!”

Everyone paused and gave the former president a look of confusion upon hearing this, but his purposed plan was soon forgotten as Lion let out a sudden loud roar. It was enough to startle the cops quite a bit, but even so, the pink beast bowed low before Steven, his eyes glowing white once more as something began to emerge from his forehead. As the bright light faded a bit, it soon became clear that it was seemingly the hilt of some sort of sword, pink and marked with a thorny design. Awestruck and not knowing what else to do, Steven grasped the hit of the sword, though he did have some difficulty pulling it out. Even despite their own absolute bewilderment, Connie, Dipper, and Mabel were quick to help him out as they all held the sword together and pulled it out to reveal a large, sharp, light-pink blade.

“You have a sword in your head?!” Steven asked Lion, whose eyes had returned to normal as soon as they drew the sword. “Why don’t you tell me you can do these things you do?!”

“Ah, yes! Why didn’t I think of this?” Trembly grinned excitedly upon seeing the sword the kids were holding. “After all, everyone knows that lions are the best place to store one’s weapons!”

As stunned as the kids were by the powerful blade in their shared possession, the cops were even more frightened by it, especially as the sword turned towards them. “Um, stay back!” Dipper exclaimed, hoping that this turn of events would get the officers off their case. “We have a sword!”

“Oh no! Blubbs, what do we do?!” Durland cried, cowering behind his partner. “They have a sword!”

“I-I don’t know!” Blubbs shook his head, just as terrified. “We weren’t briefed on what to do about kids with lethal weapons!”

“Oh no! Blubbs, what do we do?!” Durland cried, cowering behind his partner. “They have a sword!”

“Uh, what are we going to do with this thing?!” Connie asked in a nervous whisper.

“I… have no idea,” Steven frowned, looking to the sword. “I don’t really have any sort of plan, do you, Mabel?”

“I’m totally stumped,” Mabel shrugged. “But I gotta say this sword is the prettiest one I’ve ever seen! I don’t know if that helps, but I just thought I’d throw that out there.”

“I really doesn’t help,” Dipper glowered, though her pointless comment did happen to give him an idea. “Wait! Maybe we don’t even need the sword. Quentin, did you ever sign an official resignation?” he asked the former president.
“No, sir. I ate a salamander and jumped out the window,” Trembly said proudly.

“Then technically you’re still legally President of the United States, right?” Dipper asked before turning to Blubbs and Durland with a confident grin. “You’ve gotta answer to this guy now!”

“Huh?” the two cops paused, glancing at each other in confusion. Still, Trembly hardly needed any prompting to issue his latest presidential proclamation.

“As president of these several United States, I hereby order you to pretend that none of this ever happened!” the former president ordered. “And go on a delightful vacation.” No sooner had he finished saying this than the train happened to pass under a metal rail, and while everyone else ducked under it, Trembly struck his head cleanly on it, though that barely phased him. “Ow! Mmm yes!”

“Vacation?” Blubbs repeated before turning to Durland with a growing grin. “What place have you always wanted to visit?”

“Silly Water Fun Slides in Grand Lakes, Michigan!” both cops proclaimed in happy unison, not even needing any further convincing to abandon their mission and set off on their dream vacation. Under the president’s orders, of course.

After disembarking the Washington-bound train, Blubbs and Durland were more than eager to board the one headed for Michigan as Trembly and the kids waved them off from the station. The cops had affirmed that they were all in the clear and free to go, which meant they had nothing to worry about as the officers departed for their impromptu vacation.

“Well, my young friends, you’ve all done a great service to your country,” Trembly smiled at the kids after the train had left. “And so I would like to thank each one of you, starting with you, Mabel. I hereby make you an official U.S congressman!” The former president pulled an elegant top hat out of his overcoat and handed it to the excited girl, who didn’t hesitate to put it on immediately.

“I’m legalizing everything!” Mabel declared zealously.

“And you, Steven, well I must say that we would have been remiss if not for you and your majestic pink feline! And so in light of that, I present you with this rare Medal of Honor!” Trembly handed off the large, stately, golden medal to the young Gem, who took it with a huge grin.

“Whoa! This is so cool!” Steven exclaimed, amazed.

“It certainly is, especially since that medal is made of chocolate,” the former president pointed out.

“No way!” the young Gem gasped, taking a bite out of the medal and finding that this was indeed true. “Awesome! Wait, Lion, you can’t have any! Chocolate is bad for you!” Steven gasped, pulling the medal away from Lion as he tried to eat it out of his master’s hands.

“Constance,” Trembly addressed Connie somewhat incorrectly. “I’d like to reward you with this.”

Connie frowned as the former president handed her a piece of paper, which made her gasp in awe as she looked over it. “Wow! Is this a copy of the Declaration of Independence?”

“Even better! It’s the original copy of the Declaration of Indepantsless!” Trembly proclaimed. “I
penned it myself back in ’39. It frees all citizens of America from the burden that is having to wear pants!”

“Oh… Um… thanks?” Connie smiled halfheartedly, not entirely sure what to make of such a bizarre gift.

“And Roderick,” Trembly finally turned to Dipper.

“Um, actually its-” Dipper began to correct him, but the former president interrupted him by kneeling down to his level and placing a hand on his shoulder.

“You, my dear boy, are on your way to unlocking the mysteries of this great land. So I present you with my President’s Key!”

“Wow,” Dipper remarked as he took the key, wondering if it really could open any lock as Trembly had claimed. “Thanks!”

“Don’t mention it,” Trembly smirked as he rose to stand. “Now, let us celebrate our victory over a feast of delicious butterscotch!”

No one argued with the former president as they all began to make their way back to town, all of them in high spirits after their miraculous, and rather improbable escape.

“And then he chased me around and spanked me with a paddle for like, three hours,” Trembly finished up his anecdote as the group made it back to Main Street. “Bottom line, George Washington was a jerk.”

“Agreed!” Mabel quipped heartily.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the square, Amethyst had easily broken out of the stocks and had now dedicated herself to trying to figure out a discreet way of breaking Stan out without Garnet or Pearl noticing. Out of frustration, she had taken to merely sitting on top of the stockade and beating the lock with a rock repeatedly, hoping that it would wear it down eventually.

“Come on!” the purple Gem growled in annoyance, hitting the lock once more. “This stupid thing won’t budge!”

“Is this seriously the best plan you could come up with?” Stan asked caustically.

“Hey, I’m just trying not to get caught by the ‘cops’,” Amethyst replied, referring to Garnet and Pearl. “Just chill out. I’ll get you out of here eventually.” The purple Gem prepared to bring her rock down once more, only to pause upon glancing up and seeing the former president pass through the square along with the kids. “Hey, is that ol’ Trembly?” she asked, leaping off the stockade and running off to meet him.

“Amethyst?” Stan asked, completely confused. “Wait! Get back here and let me out!”

By this point, Garnet and Pearl were making another round through the square themselves and they also stopped dead in their tracks as they passed by Trembly. “Ah! Well if it isn’t my dear friends, the Crystal Gems!” the former president exclaimed with a wide grin. “Fancy meeting you all here!”
Before even Garnet or Pearl could voice their confusion over seeing the thought-to-be-dead
president again, Amethyst arrived on the scene, apparently not even bothered by it at all. “Yo, Q.T!
What’s up?” she greeted with a smirk. “Long time no see, huh?”

“Amethyst, what are you doing here?” Pearl asked, putting her bewilderment aside for just a
moment. “You’re supposed to be locked up in the stocks with Stan!”

“Hey, I told you guys that thing couldn’t hold me.”

“And as for you,” the white Gem turned to Trembly. “How are you even still alive? Human
lifespans aren’t that long. Are they?!”

“We solved this huge mystery and found him!” Steven informed the Gems. “Yeah, it was pretty
serious. You guys are impressed, aren’t you?”

“We are,” Garnet said with a smile. “I knew you four could figure out the truth about who really
founded the town. Good job.”

“But that still doesn’t answer my question,” Pearl frowned. “I hate to be this blunt, but by all
reason, Quentin, you… shouldn’t be around anymore… So how are you here now?”

“It was quite simple, my dear Pearl!” the former president quipped. “I froze myself in solid peanut
brittle for all this time, just as I proposed that I would!”

“Whoa, so the peanut brittle thing actually worked?” Amethyst asked, amazed.

“Rose always believed it would,” Garnet remarked, crossing her arms.

As Trembly and the Gems continued catching up, the kids decided that now was the perfect time to
confront Pacifica about the truth regarding the conspiracy. Dipper and Connie had agreed to let
Mabel and Steven handle this, since they had been the ones the heiress had insulted in the first
place. Both of them were in high spirits as they approached Pacifica, who was boredly watching a
maypole dance with little actual regard for it.

“Hey, Pacifica!” Mabel greeted the heiress blithely. “We just uncovered a conspiracy about the
eighth-and-a-half president of the United States! Who’s still now?”

“What?” Pacifica scoffed, not at all taking them seriously. “Who is that idiot?” She nodded to
Trembly, who was currently trying to fight a bald eagle as the Gems watched on in apt confusion.

“You bald fiend! Put up your dukes!” the former president shouted, chasing after the bird as it flew
off.

“Hah,” Amethyst chuckled, amused. “Same old Q.T.”

“That’s the eighth-and-a-half president of America!” Steven exclaimed to Pacifica with a wide
smile. “We found him in a cave that my pet lion led us to!”

“Now you might be wondering, how is he still alive?” Mabel continued. “Well, it turns out you can
hibernate in peanut brittle, and-”

Pacifica interrupted this explanation as she burst out into mocking laughter, obviously not believing
their story. “Wow. You guys really are two dumb, sad little kids,” the heiress goaded coldly. “Nice
top hat and half-eaten medal by the way.”
Since Pacifica’s parents were standing nearby, they happened to hear this jab and both of them got a snide laugh out of it. “Good one, daughter,” Preston remarked with an uppity chuckle.

“Oh, and Mabel, I can see that your car is stuck in the mud,” Pacifica continued, nodding towards Stan’s car, which was still in the same place it had been since his arrest hours ago. “Enjoy walking home!” With another teasing laugh, the heiress got into her family limo as it passed by, assured that she had gotten the upper hand once and for all.

“Aren’t you guys gonna tell her about her ate-gray ampa-gray?” Dipper muttered to Steven and Mabel, knowing well that they hadn’t brought up the most important part of all of this.

“You know what, Dipper? We have nothing to prove,” Mabel said to her brother with a confident smile. “And I’ve learned that being silly is awesome!”

“Yeah!” Steven whole-heartedly agreed. “Who needs Serious Steven when I can just be the Steven I was always meant to be: Silly Steven!”

Despite the pride acceptance that Steven and Mabel were taking in their shared silliness, neither Dipper nor Connie were as satisfied to let the secrets they had uncovered go unrevealed. After all, the whole reason why they had gone on this adventure in the first place was to make Pacifica eat her words; certainly, not doing so would render everything they had gone through pointless and then some. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Connie asked Dipper with resolve.

“You know I am,” Dipper replied firmly, grinning as he pulled Dewey/Northwest cover-up file out of his vest. “Hey, Pacifica!”

The Northwest’s limo came to a stop as both Dipper and Connie ran up to it, and Pacifica was quick to give the two of them an annoyed glare. Still, she had little time to so much as say anything as Dipper handed the confidential document to her, knowing that it would serve as undeniable proof. “Nathaniel Northwest didn’t found Gravity Falls and your entire family is a sham,” Dipper told her, not at all trying to be polite or civil about it.

“Deal with it!” Connie added with a vengeful smile, which only grew as she watched Pacifica’s expression become suddenly distraught.

“What?!” Pacifica gasped in shock as the limo began to drive away. “Mooooom!”

“Well, I think that about did the job,” Connie remarked, satisfied as her and Dipper returned to Steven and Mabel. “She’ll probably be whining about that for weeks!”

“Man, revenge is underrated!” Dipper exclaimed with a smirk. “That felt awesome!”

A moment later, Trembly rejoined the kids, having already bid the Gems farewell after an odd, yet pleasant meeting. “Children, I am needed elsewhere,” the former president informed them. “But just know that I’ll always be right here… on the negative twelve dollar bill.” Trembly pulled out said dollar and handed it to Dipper, who looked over it in bewildered amusement.

“Whoa, this is… worthless,” he said with a grin.

“It’s less than worthless, my boy. Trembly away!” Without any further ado, the former president preformed a magnificent leap and landed backwards on a nearby horse. The horse reared up on its hind legs for a moment before it ran off, galloping away with Trembly until they were both out of sight.

“Bye, Mr. President!” Steven called out after him.
“Where do you think he’s going?” Mabel asked.

“I’m gonna say… off a cliff,” Dipper guessed.

“And then Soos came by and talked to me for like an hour!” Stan recounted to the kids and the Gems as they came by to visit him in the stocks. “And Amethyst wasn’t any help, what with her crazy ‘escape plans’.”

“Hey, I tried!” Amethyst protested. “And I would have gotten away with it too if it hadn’t been for you guys,” she scowled at Garnet and Pearl.

“Well, clearly we learned that capital punishment doesn’t do anything for you, Amethyst,” Pearl crossed her arms. “But we wouldn’t have to implement such measures if you would just behave!”

“Where’s the fun in that?” the purple Gem retorted caustically.

“Aw, poor Grunkle Stan! You’ve been through so much!” Mabel exclaimed sympathetically.

“So um, can we let him out now?” Dipper asked Garnet and Pearl, knowing that they probably carried the most legal authority now since Blubbs and Durland were away.

“I don’t see why not,” Garnet shrugged apathetically, despite Pearl’s brief protest.

Remembering Trembly’s words about the President’s Key, Dipper decided to test it out on the lock to the stockade, and sure enough, it somehow fit perfectly, unlocking it and setting the conman free. “What do you know? It actually worked!” he exclaimed with a grin before putting the key away, knowing that such a powerful tool would need the proper safekeeping.

“So what’s with the top hat?” Stan asked Mabel as he stood and rubbed his sore wrists.

“I am a congressman!” Mabel proclaimed brightly.

“Pardon me?”

“You’re officially pardoned.”

“It’s so great how nicely everything turned out in the end,” Steven said to Connie with a contented smile. “You know, I think I feel a song coming on!”

“Yeah, Ste-man!” Amethyst cheered as the young Gem pulled his ukulele out and tuned it.

“Please, don’t,” Stan deadpanned, in no mood for such antics after the day he had. Nonetheless, however, Steven plucked out a cheerful impromptu song without any regrets or hesitation.

“Ohhhhhhh, that’s the end of another day! It was mighty serious, I have to say,” the young Gem sang excitedly. “Connie, Dipper, Mabel, and Steven too, we all looked really cool--when we found the eighth-and-a-half president of Americaaaaaa!”

Steven ended his brief song with a flourish on his ukulele, before he joined in on the amused laughter the others responded to his tune with. “Great song, Steven,” Connie smirked sincerely.

“Geez,” Stan rolled his eyes, looking between Steven and Mabel. “You two runts are never gonna make sense, are you?”
“No, we’re not, Grunkle Stan,” Mabel said earnestly as Steven nodded in agreement. “No we’re not. Mabel away!”

Without any warning, Mabel jumped backwards, just as Trembly had when he departed and Steven didn’t hesitate to join her. Though the Gems were especially concerned upon hearing the loud crash as they landed, they were both quick to reassure everyone that they had survived. “We’re fine!”
Chapter 22: Space Race

Chapter Summary

In which Pearl misses space, the kids try to help her, and they all nearly die in the process (what else is new?)

Chapter Notes

Well, here's my rendition of Space Race. I don't have too much else to say about it, but enjoy!

The Galaxy Warp was truly a magical, ethereal place, unlike any Steven, Dipper, or Mabel had ever been to before. The Gems had consented to taking the kids along on their latest magical mission, most likely as an unspoken way of reconciling with them after what was now referred to as the “Lapis incident”. And so they had invited the trio to accompany them to the small, distant isle positioned afar out in the middle of the ocean for what was more of a routine inspection than a dangerous, hair-raising adventure. Still, the kids couldn’t be any more excited for it, especially as they arrived at the Galaxy Warp itself.

The ancient Gem structure rose high out of the inky depths of the ocean, the smooth stones composing it shining in the gentle moonlight. The reflective marble ground was dotted with a sizable collection of warp pads, though only one of them lit up with the usual radiant glow as the Gems and the kids arrived.

“Whoa…” Steven, Dipper, and Mabel all muttered in muted unison the moment the light from the warp pad faded, allowing them to fully see the Galaxy Warp. The Gems had already briefed them about what their mission, telling them that it would likely be non-combatant and rather short, but they were still amazed by the mystical setting all the same.

“Look at all these warp pads!” Mabel exclaimed in absolute delight as she leaped off the pad they had all arrived from. “Are we gonna use them to go on a super-exciting treasure hunt?”

“Nah,” Amethyst said casually. “We’re just here to see if these things are broken or not.”

“That’s why I brought these!” Steven grinned as he held out a stack of colorful Crying Breakfast Friends stickers. “They’ll help us keep track of the ones we’ve checked and they’re scented!”

“Why do we need to check out all of these warp pads anyway?” Dipper asked as he gave a nearby pad an experimental knock.
“It’s just something we like to do every few centuries,” Pearl explained. “Think of it as a… security inspection. We’re just going to make sure that all these warp pads are inactive.”

“So… they aren’t supposed to work?” Dipper questioned, confused.

“No,” Garnet answered tersely. Dipper wanted to raise another question to the Gems about this rather odd mission, but their examination of the various warp pads had already begun before he could.

“This one’s inactive!” Amethyst announced after jumping onto one of the pads and attempting in vain to use it to warp somewhere. Upon hearing this, Steven rushed over to the damaged pad and slapped one of his stickers on it to confirm that it was indeed busted.

“Oh man, I hope I have enough of these left,” the young Gem fretted, counting over his small stack again. “I already used most of them decorating Lion’s mane. He just ended up eating most of them…”

“Well, then it’s a good thing I always carry some of these on me!” Mabel smirked as she pulled out her own small collection of *Crying Breakfast Friends* stickers, much to Steven’s relief.

“Mabel, how are you always so prepared for things like this?” the young Gem asked.

“Eh, it’s a gift,” Mabel shrugged nonchalantly. Yet even so, the Gems’ investigation carried on.

“Inactive,” Garnet called as she checked another pad, prompting Mabel to put another sticker on it.

“Inactive,” Pearl frowned as she stood on yet another pad, masking the disappointment in her tone.

“Do we have to check all of them?” Amethyst asked, crossing her arms. “They’re all still inactive, like always. Nobody would even be able to fix them anyway.”

“We need to make sure,” Garnet said firmly.

“Why?” Dipper asked, still immensely curious about this mysterious place in general. “Where do all these warp pads go to anyway?”

“Well…” Pearl began with a small smile. Already anticipating another interesting piece of Gem information, the kids all congregated around her as she took a seat on the nearest pad. “You see, kids, all of the warp pads here were used to travel off-planet. They were our connection to the Gem Homeworld and to Gem-controlled planets all over the universe!”

The trio let out a unified gasp upon hearing this, all of them obviously amazed at such an incredible revelation. The news that the Gems were aliens was still rather new to all of them, but the idea that they might be able to use one of these very warp pads to see the mysterious Gem Homeworld for themselves? That sounded almost too good to be true.

“So what you’re saying is that going to other planets is just as easy as getting on one of these things?” Dipper asked, intrigued. “That sounds awesome, but also kind of… impossible. No offense.”

“Oh my gosh! Maybe we could use one of them to go see what Homeworld is like!” Steven exclaimed, stars in his eyes. “I’m sure you guys would love to go visit it for a while, right? Since its where all of you are from?” Of course, the one thing none of them were noticing were the wide-eyed, apprehensive glances the Gems were exchanging with one another as the kids’ excitement steadily grew.
“What are we waiting for?!” Mabel asked, more than on board with this idea. “Let’s go right now!"

“Uh, we could do that,” Amethyst cut in, masking her former dread with her usual easygoing manner. “If they weren’t all busted.”

“It’s true…” Pearl sighed, sharing the kids’ sudden, shared disappointment. “The galaxy warps have all been inactive for thousands of years.”

“Can’t we fix them?” Steven asked, hopeful.

“No,” Garnet was quick to respond, adjusting her shades as the moonlight reflected off of them mysteriously.

“Boo!” Mabel stuck her tongue out indignantly. “Why not?”

“Cause it’s just like I said earlier,” Amethyst remarked. “Nobody knows how to fix up these dumb old things, right G?”

Garnet simply nodded, already leading the way back to the only functional warp pad that would take them back to the temple. The purple Gem hurried to follow her, but Pearl still lingered, wistfully gazing up at the starry night sky as she let out another soft sigh.

“Are you ok, Pearl?” Dipper asked with concern as him, Steven, and Mabel stopped short on their way back to the main pad.

“Oh, I’m fine,” the white Gem reassured with a small, fake chuckle as she rose to stand. “I’ll always have my memories of other worlds. But now I’m here… on Earth… forever…”

“With us!” Steven quipped in an attempt to cheer her up.

Pearl paused upon hearing this, trying her best to lighten her saddened expression up a bit for the kids’ sake as she offered them a weak smile. “Right,” she said, glancing away. “With you. Still, it really is incredible out there…” She shook her head slightly as she turned her gaze to the distant sky again, prompting the kids to do the same as they all took in the countless stars that all seemed so close, yet so far away all at once. “I wish the three of you could see it…”

“Stay tuned for another episode of Crying Breakfast Friends!” the TV blared as an episode of said show came to an end. Steven, Mabel, and Dipper all sat atop the young Gem’s bed watching the depressing cartoon, though only the former two were really engaged in it.

“Ok, you guys,” Dipper began with a caustic frown. “We’ve been watching this show for several hours now, and I still don’t really understand what either of you see in it…”

“Dipper, Dipper, Dipper…” Mabel shook her head. “Can’t you appreciate fine art when you see it? Crying Breakfast Friends is the best modern cartoons have to offer!”

“If this is the best there is, then cartoons are kind of in trouble,” Dipper frowned as he looked to the sobbing breakfast foods onscreen.

“Say what you want about it, Dipper, but you gotta admit that it is pretty relatable,” Steven remarked. “Like in that last episode for instance. Seeing how much Sad Apple wanted to go home reminded me of Pearl was missing space at the Galaxy Warp yesterday. She seemed really sad
about it…”

“Who can blame her?” Mabel asked, relining back on the bed. “I’m all bummed out about it too. Going to space would be so awesome!”

“It would be, but you heard what the Gems said,” Dipper said dismissively. “We can’t go anywhere as long as all those warp pads are broken. I tried looking in the journal earlier to see if it had any way to fix them in it, but there was nothing about it, even in there.”

Steven let out a disappointed sigh upon hearing this. “I wish there was something we could do to help Pearl see space again, at least,” he said sympathetically. “If only there was some other way we could get to space… Wait! That’s it! Dipper, Mabel, let’s build a spaceship!”

“What?!” Dipper asked, taken aback. “Steven, we can’t just build a spaceship.”

“Why not?” Steven asked innocently.

“Yeah, why not?” Mabel added. “It’ll be fun!”

“And completely impossible,” Dipper crossed his arms. “I don’t know if you guys know this, but it takes a lot to build a spaceship. We’d need several years at least, plus a ton of resources that we probably wouldn’t be able to get because we don’t have any money to buy them, and the list goes on.”

“Oh, come on, Dipper!” Mabel exclaimed, rolling her eyes. “We could totally do it! After all, nothing is impossible if you work hard and put your mind to it! I read that on a cat poster once.”

“I really don’t think that saying applies to everything, Mabel,” Dipper deadpanned. “Especially something as huge as building a spaceship.”

“Yeah, but people have built spaceships before, and we’re people!” Steven pointed out.

“You can’t argue with that one, bro-bro,” Mabel said, playfully elbowing Dipper.

“And Pearl would love it so much to see space again!” Steven continued. “We have to at least give it a try for her. Think of how amazed she’d be if we built an entire spaceship, just for her!”

Dipper let out a sigh upon hearing this, his skepticism melting away all at once. He could hardly fault Steven and Mabel for wanting to help Pearl with their overzealous idea, even if it was highly improbable. “Fine, I’m in,” he said with a relenting grin. “But if you guys are really serious about this, then we’re gonna need some help. We’d have a hard time trying to build this thing by ourselves.”

“I’m way ahead of you on that one, Dipper,” Steven said with an enthused smile as he leapt to his feet. “In fact, I just so happen to know not one, but two people who would love to help us!”
exasperation. “A spaceship, huh? Alright, which one of you two came up with this harebrained idea?” he asked a moment later, looking between Steven and Mabel.

“Grunkle Stan, how do you know I didn’t come up with the idea?” Dipper asked, somewhat offended that he wasn’t included.

“Because you’re not that creative or crazy,” Stan said bluntly, ignoring his nephew’s disgruntled scowl. “Now what makes you kids think I know anything about spaceships? I’m not exactly a rocket scientist, ya know.”

“But you build design all sorts of cool attractions for the Mystery Shack, Mr. Pines,” Steven said with a smile. “I’m sure you could come up with a really neat idea for a spaceship if you wanted to!”

“Yeah, well I don’t.” Stan said tersely. “And even if I did, I have better things to do with my time then work on some crazy pipe dream. Instead of bothering me with this spaceship thing, why don’t you three get some brainiac to help you? Like Pearl for instance. She’s into nerdy stuff like that.”

“Well we would, but we’re actually planning on doing this for Pearl,” Mabel explained. “She’ll be so excited when she sees the giant, beautiful, spaceship we’re gonna build for her! And once it’s done, we’ll all get in it, and we’ll fly into space, and we’ll visit a bunch of other planets, and we’ll have so much fun, and we’ll-”

“Oh, Ok, Mabel, that’s enough!” Dipper interrupted, knowing that his sister was getting far too excited. “Long story short, Grunkle Stan, we’re doing this so we can help Pearl see space again.”

“Oh, well that changes everything,” Stan said with clearly fake sympathy. “You should have mentioned this was for Pearl. That definitely makes me want to help.”

“Really?” Steven asked with a hopeful smile.

“Of course not, kid!” the conman exclaimed with a scowl. “The last thing I’d ever want to do is help Pearl out with anything, especially something as crazy as this.”

“I know you and Pearl don’t get along very well, Mr. Pines,” Steven frowned. “But I’m sure she’d really appreciate it if you helped out! And besides, it won’t be that hard, we promise!”

“Kid, do you have any idea what goes into building a spaceship?” Stan asked caustically. “First off, you need a bunch of money, which is something I’m not at all interested investing unless I’m gonna have it at least doubled, if not tripled.”

“Well, what about space tourism?” Dipper asked out of the blue.

“Space what?”

“You know, space tourism? When really rich people pay a lot of money to go on short trips into space?”

“How much money are we talking here?” Stan asked, fully interested now.

“I don’t know,” Dipper shrugged. “Thousands, maybe millions.”

Upon hearing this, the conman leapt up from his chair, a huge grin on his face as the enticing prospect of earning untold amounts of cash. “Well, kids, I hate to say it, but you’ve sold me on this spaceship thing,” he said boldly. “I’ll help you build it, but only if you let me use it for this ‘space
tourism’ thing. If this scheme takes off, then I could retire early and buy my own island!”

“You got it, Grunkle Stan!” Mabel exclaimed as both her and Steven shook the conman’s hand to solidify the deal.

“But only after we take Pearl up to space with it first,” the young Gem clarified.

“Yeah, yeah, Pearl-schmearl,” Stan waved his hand with little concern. “What are we still standing around here yapping for? Let’s get this money-making, hunk of junk built!”

Fortunately, Greg was much easier to recruit for the kids’ spaceship proposal, mostly because he believed the project was just for fun rather than anything serious. Since Stan was providing “funding” for the spaceship, then the former rock star decided to lend his aid by providing space and supplies for them to work with. And so, everyone piled into Greg’s van and rode a few miles out of town to a large barn nestled in the middle of a wide open field. It was rather old and apparently abandoned, but the large amount of space would certainly suffice for their needs. But that wasn’t all. The barn itself was stuffed to the ceiling with all sorts of scrap materials and various other miscellaneous items. From tires, to bowling balls, to paint cans, to plane parts. Especially plane parts, however, including wings, propellers, motors and more. It was an impressive collection, one that excited the kids even more as Greg opened up the barn for them all to see it.

“My aunt and uncle had a great love of aviation and each other,” the former rock star explained, nodding to the portrait of his relatives hanging from the barn’s far wall. “They cherished the years they spent together and they held onto every belonging they ever owned—kinda like me and my storage shed… I’m starting to think our family has a problem…”

“Ya think?” Stan asked, raising an eyebrow as he kicked a nearby rudder. “If I were you, Greg, I would have sold all of this junk for scrap metal years ago.”

“Aw, I couldn’t possibly,” Greg said, scratching the back of his neck. “All of this stuff is precious family heirlooms.”

“Dad, all this stuff is so great!” Steven exclaimed excitedly. “I hereby declare this barn to be Universe, Universe, Pines, Pines, and Pines Space Travel HQ!”

“So… UUPPP?” Dipper asked, amused.

“Yeah!”

“Oh, I’m so excited!” Mabel quipped cheerfully. “I’ll start sewing us all company sweaters right away! We’ll need them since I hear it’s really cold up in space!”

“Well, we might as well start hauling all of these parts out of here,” Stan said to Greg as Mabel ran off to get her yarn and knitting needles. “But if I find something actually valuable in there, I’m not making any promises that I won’t swipe any of this stuff and resell it at the shack.”

“M-Mr. Pines! Wait!” Greg called with sudden concern as he ran into the barn after Stan. “My aunt and uncle would kill me if I got rid of any of this stuff!”
“And we’ll work on the spaceship’s design!” Steven proclaimed. “Right, Dipper?”

“Whatever you say, Steven.” Dipper said with a laugh, still thinking this entire plan was a bit far-fetched, even despite his consenting to work on it.

“Ok,” the young Gem said with apt resolve. “Let’s get started!”

And thus the motley crew began their ambitious endeavor. Using a chalkboard that they had salvaged from the barn, the boys got to work on carving out a design for their spacecraft. Dipper took an analytical approach, using his side of the chalkboard for actual formulas and graphs, that is until Steven started imposing onto his space with his own rather simplistic, cartoony sketch of a rocket ship soaring through the stars. After sewing her own space-themed sweater, Mabel decided to take a break and join them, drawing over her brother’s statistical plans with intricate doodles of planets and aliens, much to his exasperation. After dragging several random parts and materials out of the barn, Stan and Greg got to work on sorting through them and breaking them apart into more manageable parts. For once, the conman’s skill of propagating faux attractions came in handy, as he knew exactly how to help the kids fashion the materials together into something that looked like a believable, if not somewhat rickety “spaceship”. And as soon as it was finished, the kids didn’t hesitate to invite a certain white Gem out to the barn to see their newest creation.

“Okay… now!” Steven took his hands off of Pearl’s eyes, allowing her to see the sign positioned on the doorway of the barn. The white Gem’s expression was awash with confusion as she looked between it and the kids.

“‘UUPPP Space Travel?’” Pearl frowned. “What is this?”

“Only the most amazing thing you’ll ever see,” Mabel grinned widely.

“I… somehow doubt that, but alright,” the white Gem smirked, amused. “I’ll go along with whatever this is, I suppose.”

“Good, because you kind of have to for this,” Dipper said, knowing that their meager creation was likely nothing Pearl would be too impressed with.

“And what exactly is… ‘this’?”

“We built a spaceship!” Steven exclaimed brightly.

“A spaceship?” Pearl asked, intrigued.

“A spaceship!” Mabel reiterated, directing the white Gem’s gaze to the craft. Her interest quickly diminished upon seeing the simple vehicle, if it could even be called that. Really, it was just a long wooden box on wheels, with a traffic cone nailed to the front, crude wings taped to the sides, and three seats positioned in very close proximity to each other.

“A… spaceship…” Pearl said with disappointment, knowing that this underwhelming sight was a far cry from any kind of spaceship.

Yet even so, Steven and Mabel were eager to test the vessel out, even if Dipper was a bit more apprehensive about it considering the spaceship’s very rough design and construction. Still, everyone took to the nearby hilltop, including Pearl, who certainly had quite a few doubts about the kids’ “spaceship”, though she didn’t really let any of them show, lest she hurt their confidence.

“Alright, listen up, you three,” Stan began briefing the kids as they prepared for their maiden voyage. “Your job is to make sure this rust bucket is safe enough for customers down at the shack
to ride as long as they sign a liability waiver. I don’t want any parents suing me over ‘faulty craftsmanship’ when their clumsy kids fall out of it.”

“But, at the same time,” Greg interjected with much more logical advice. “Remember that if you kids run into any trouble out there, you can always bail. There’s never any shame in bailing.”

“There is when my next potential attraction is at stake,” Stan countered. “So don’t let that thing crash, got it?”

“Contradicting advice—understood!” Steven saluted with a wide grin. “It’s time to blast off!”

“Um, actually, is there any way I can bail out in advance?” Dipper asked, glancing back at the makeshift spaceship with an anxious frown.

“Nope!” Mabel exclaimed firmly yet blithely.

“Are you all sure this is such a good idea?” Pearl asked tentatively, looking between the kids and their ship.

“Yeah, we are!” Steven quipped as boarded the ship along with the twins. “This is gonna be so great! Just think, Pearl: soon you’ll be able to see space again, just like you said you wanted to!”

“…Right…”

“Are you kids ready?” Greg asked, striking a match and holding up to the sparkler tapped to the back of the ship.

“You bet we are!” Mabel proclaimed boldly. “Light the engines!”

“Roger that!” the former rock star laughed as he did just that.

“Next stop: outer space!” Steven exclaimed, raring to go as he shuffled around in the front seat.

“But more likely, the ground,” Dipper muttered uneasily.

“Oh, come on, Dipper,” Mabel rolled her eyes, unconcerned. “Don’t be so worried! There’s no way this ship could fail! The only place this thing is going is up!”

Before Dipper could even protest this faulty logic, their test flight abruptly began as Stan gave the vessel a shove with his foot. “Whelp, there you go!” the conman exclaimed, disregarding the kids’ mingled cries of excitement and fear. Gravity immediately began to work on the spaceship, propelling it down the steep hill and towards the ramp that had been set up towards the bottom that would hopefully launch the ship upwards towards the stars. However, it didn’t take long for this idea, and the ship itself, to start literally falling apart. Steven and Mabel immediately joined Dipper in ongoing fear as they noticed one of the ship’s wings tear off as the tape’s strength wore out, followed by one of its wooden sides collapsed and fell to the wayside. Pearl, Greg, and Stan all watched the craft begin to quickly break apart from the top of the hill, all of them showing varying levels of concern for the kids’ safety.

“Uh, guys? Now might be a good time to bail!” Dipper called, clinging onto the remaining side of the ship as it rapidly sped towards the ramp.

“No shame!” Steven shouted, agreeing to this plan as he leapt from the crumbling ship first with the twins following only seconds after. The kids made a mostly safe landing as they rolled into the grass, but their ship wasn’t so lucky. The moment it struck a rock right in front of the ramp, the
remainder of the rickety vessel broke apart violently, its various pieces sent flying in every
direction.

“Whoa…” Mabel gasped, sitting up alongside the boys as they looked towards the wreckage. “That
was… awesome!”

Dipper let out an exasperated sigh as Steven simply laughed, largely out of relief that they had
escaped unscathed. Meanwhile, at the top of the hill, the white Gem simply shook her head as she
looked to Stan and Greg.

“Darn it! I told those kids not to crash it!” Stan scowled in disappointment.

“I… think your calculations may have been off,” Pearl noted caustically, ignoring the conman’s
frustration.

Greg let out a sheepish laugh at this. “Well, they can’t be off if you don’t do any.”

Pearl frowned as she looked over the chalkboard back at the barn, mulling over the very simple
sketches Steven and Mabel had scribbled all over it as the others awaited her evaluation. “Hm…
these designs are… interesting…” she mused, making sure to tread lightly with her choice of
words. “I can certainly see where the initial concept derailed. Though these formulas up here do
seem to be onto something… Dipper, are these yours?”

“O-oh, yeah, they are,” Dipper admitted somewhat bashfully. “They aren’t anything really
important though. Just some stuff on angular velocity and impulse momentum.”

“Impressive…” Pearl grinned proudly, though her smile faded as she turned to Greg and Stan. “I
imagine you two didn’t bother to incorporate any of that into… whatever it is you helped the kids
build, did you?”

“Hey, don’t look at me,” Stan said, glaring at the white Gem. “I was only in this for the money.
And I’d like to see you do any better.”

“Well…”

“Pearl, you know how to build spaceships?!” Steven asked, amazed.

“I know a little…” the white Gem said, wiping the chalkboard clean before beginning to draw a
more complex, yet clean concept design. “First of all, you need smooth, curving surfaces,
otherwise, you’re never going to get enough speed to break through Earth’s gravitational pull.
Probably swept-back wings for supersonic flight, airtight cockpit with ejector seat, and we’ll need
some serious engines, or maybe rockets would be better.”

“I vote rockets!” Mabel exclaimed excitedly.

“Wait… like real rockets?” Dipper asked, suddenly quite invested in this project. After all, Pearl’s
intuition and knowledge on aerodynamics and space travel were certainly a great deal more than
anything they had to work off of with their first attempt.

“Well, of course,” Pearl smiled. “What other kind of rockets are there?”

“Rockets! Rockets!” Steven cheered happily, not noticing the bewildered glance Greg and Stan
exchanged behind him.

“Whoa, whoa! Hold on a sec,” the former rock star interjected before the kids could get too carried
away. “We’re not actually talking about building something like this, right?!”

“What? This?” the white Gem glanced at her design, letting out a forced laugh. “Of course not. That would be ridiculous!”

“Aw…” the kids all sighed in dejected unison, their sudden hope of building a real, genuine spaceship abruptly dashed. But only for a moment.

“I mean, yes, theoretically, it’s not a stretch…” Pearl continued thoughtfully. “You’ve got plenty of spare parts here, albeit for incredibly primitive propulsion based space travel.”

“Then let’s do it!” Mabel encouraged as Steven and Dipper noted their ready agreement.

“Oh, but the idea is ludicrous,” Pearl said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “It would never work! Although… several humans, a monkey, and a dog did make it into space…”

“I heard on the radio that some doofus once had a pizza delivered to him out there,” Stan pointed out offhandedly.

“I don’t even wanna think about the delivery charge on that one,” Greg commented. Yet even so, Pearl went on, growing steadily more and more excited by the moment.

“I don’t know why I’ve never thought of it before!” she exclaimed with a bright grin. “This could actually work!”

“Uh…” Greg began to speak up, standing as the voice of reason amidst the kids’ elation and Stan’s relative apathy.

“I hear what you’re saying, and I agree,” Pearl interrupted, pacing around the area as the idea continued to solidify itself in her mind. “It would be incredibly dangerous; a fool’s errand! This couch is disgusting,” she cringed as she pulled a bit of stuffing out of the old sofa everyone was sitting on. “But aren’t the true fools the ones who don’t seize an opportunity, despite the inherent risks? And just think, kids: you’ll all be able to go where few humans have ever gone before, to see the wonders of the cosmos with your own eyes!”

Inspired by Pearl’s bold speech, the kids all shared huge grins, all of them leaping at the change that the white Gem was offering to them. After all, when would they ever have the opportunity to venture into space, the final frontier, in an actual spaceship, ever again? Before, it had sounded like a fantasy, a case of wishful thinking; but now, the idea seemed like it was very much within their reach. And with this possibility finally being so close, they had no choice but to take it.

“Pearl, that sounds so awesome,” Dipper began, yet even still, he had his doubts. “But do you really think we can do it?”

“Yes, I do,” the white Gem nodded with a determined grin. “After all, nothing is impossible if you work hard and put your mind to it!”

“That’s what I said!” Mabel cut in brightly. “Did you read that off a cat poster too, Pearl?”

Pearl gave her a look of befuddled confusion at this, but Steven was quick to interject. “I’m so excited, Pearl! This is gonna be even more fun than building the first ship was!”

“I’m so glad you kids agree!” Pearl clasped her hands together in delight, looking to the sunny skies with a wistful smile. “And who knows? Maybe for just a second, from a distance, I could see what’s been going on without me… All right! Let’s do it!”
As the kids all congregated around the elated white Gem, none of them happened to notice the looks of confusion and apprehension that both Stan and Greg seemed to share. But even so, they were far too excited to at the moment, especially as the young Gem cheered them into action.

“UUPPP Space Travel, go!”

With a legitimate, concrete design in mind and Pearl’s intellect to guide them, the group set to work immediately on their second build of their spaceship. The white Gem had no problems taking the reins of the project, but despite her firm command, she readily let the others help in any extent they wanted to. After a detailed inspection of the barn, she pointed out which tools and parts would be best to use and helped the others haul them and organize them on the lawn.

“Oh, these will work perfectly,” Pearl smiled as she sorted through a box of old tools, picking out a drill from among them. “Greg, do you know if any of those plane parts in there are composed of any titanium or aluminum alloys?”

“Oh… maybe?” Greg shrugged, looking to the discarded wing that him and Stan were carrying. “They look like they could be made of something like that, I guess…”

“Well, no matter,” the white Gem said as she continued working. “We can always strengthen the hull with carbon fiber towards the end. How are things going with that washing machine, kids?”

“They’re… going!” Dipper called as he strained to pry one of the internal parts off an old washing machine. Pearl had given the kids the task of taking the machine apart, with the reasoning that quite a few of its parts could be very useful for the ship’s interior. Steven had already pulled off all of its dials and Mabel was in the middle of beating the back of it with a hammer, though she paused as she noticed her brother’s plight.

“Oh, let me get that for you, bro-bro!” she exclaimed, reaching into the machine and easily breaking the part off. “Neat! Hey Pearl, I got the twisty thing you wanted!”

“How did you do that?” Dipper asked, bewildered. “I’ve been trying to get that thing off for almost an hour!”

“I just pulled it right off,” Mabel shrugged blithely. “What were you doing?”

“…Twisting it.”

“Well, there’s your problem, Dippin-Dots!” Mabel laughed as she threw the part up and caught it again. “You were spending all that time wearing your brain out overthinking something that was super easy!” Before Dipper could offer a defensive response to this, the part happened to slip out of Mabel’s lax grip, though fortunately, Pearl saw this coming and managed to catch it just before it could hit the ground.

“Careful, Mabel,” the white Gem advised, handing the part off to Steven. “We’ll need this agitator perfectly intact. It’ll make a good basis for a small-scale test propeller.”

“Can we help you build it, Pearl?” Steven asked eagerly.

“Well, of course!” the white Gem beamed, leading the way back to the barn. “I’ll need all three of you to help with every stage of construction. After all, this was your idea in the first place; I’m just here to help get it off the ground. Now, who wants to get started on our first scale model?”
Of course, the kids all readily agreed to this as they ran after her, all of them already contributing their own ideas to the model, both realistic and outlandish. Stan and Greg stood by watching as they headed inside, the former rock star frowning apprehensively and the conman shaking his head incredulously.

“She’s not serious about this whole spaceship thing, is she?” Stan asked caustically.

“It’s hard to say…” Greg said. “I mean, she did give me this book on advanced avionics and told me to ‘study up’…”

“Yeah, well she can talk big and get the kids excited all she wants,” the conman crossed his arms. “Just as long as I get a decent kiddie ride to put in front of the shack, then we won’t have any problems.”

“Eh, yeah, you’re right,” the former rock star consented. “We might as let Pearl and the kids have their fun. Still,” he frowned as he flipped through the heavy book the white Gem had given him. “I really hope she doesn’t expect me to memorize any of this stuff…”

“Ok, so we have to remember to factor in both wind speed and velocity, as well as the slope of the take-off area…” Pearl noted as she paced in front of the chalkboard as Dipper jotted everything she said down. They were already well into day two of their project, and since Steven and Greg had driven back to town to grab everyone some lunch, Pearl and the Pines remained back at the barn to continue working. As Stan and Mabel continued assembling supplies, Dipper and Pearl had taken to working through several complex, yet essential calculations that they needed to even get their spaceship off the ground at all. “Gravity will also be a very important thing to consider… Dipper, do you know anything about kinematics?”

“Um… a little,” he shrugged, knowing that whatever meager knowledge he had on the topic would certainly pale in comparison to that of the white Gem’s. “Isn’t kinematics basically all about geometry and motion?”

“It is,” Pearl nodded with a smile. “It really is impressive how much you know about all of these advanced concepts. Most twelve year olds would likely have no idea how to solve parametric equations or how centripetal forces work, but you navigate those ideas with ease!”

“Oh, it’s no big deal,” Dipper said with a small, slightly embarrassed laugh. “Physics have always sort have been sort of fascinating to me, so I guess I kinda just learned a bunch about it without even realizing it. I could have never guessed that I’d be able to apply any of it to building an actual spaceship, though.”

“Well, I certainly appreciate your zeal for it,” Pearl grinned warmly. “It’s good to know that someone else is just as concerned with the scientific side of this project instead of just the idea itself. Just think, Dipper: the equations we’re working on at this very moment will serve as the very heart and soul of our vessel! Without them, we might as well go back to that little boxcar from earlier.”

“Uh, no thanks,” Dipper said as his smile faded. “That thing was a disaster.”

“Agreed,” Pearl nodded. “Which is why we should hunker down and keep working on these formulas. Now, let’s see if we can configure our ship’s kinematic viscosity first…”

As the pair continued working through their calculations, they both failed to notice the other duo peer down at them from atop the barn’s roof. Stan and Mabel both wore mischievous expressions
as they readied their latest prank, namely, a large bucket of water balloons stuffed with chilly ice water.

“Alright, Mabel, are we all ready with those balloons?” Stan asked with a daring smirk.

“You bet!” Mabel exclaimed, grabbing one of the cold balloons. “These babies are freezing cold! See for yourself!”

“Mabel, wait-” the conman tried to stop her, but he was seconds too short as she lobbed one of the balloons at him. Of course, it splattered on his suit, soaking and aggravating him quite a bit.

“Thanks for that,” he said sarcastically. “Now let’s save the rest of those for those two nerds down there, ok?”

Mabel gave her uncle a solid thumbs up before helping him push the bucket towards the edge of the roof. “Ok, on three,” Stan said. “One, two-”

“Three!” Mabel finished, prompting both of them to tilt the bucket and allow its contents to spill down to their targets below. Needless to say, neither Dipper nor Pearl were prepared for this sudden frigid downpour, which was why they both let out startled cries as it abruptly hit them. Stan and Mabel simply high-fived their success, laughing hard as their pair on the ground scowled up at them angrily.

“Stan!” Pearl shouted heatedly, dripping with the freezing water. “What is the meaning of this?!”

“We figured you two could use a chance to ‘chill out’ from all that boring math,” the conman called down to them. “So there ya go!”

“You’re welcome!” Mabel exclaimed cheerfully.

“Look what you guys did!” Dipper gasped in abject horror as he looked to the now blank chalkboard. “All of our equations are gone! We’ll have to start all over again!”

“Eh, but you two enjoy boring sciency stuff like that,” Mabel said with a wave of her hand. “So you’ll get to have all that fun all over again. Isn’t that great?”

“No, it most certainly is not great!” Pearl scowled. “You two just set us back hours!”

Before Stan or Mabel could say anything in their defense, however, Steven and Greg happened to arrive back, and the young Gem didn’t hesitate to hop out of the van upon seeing what was going on. “Whoa, Pearl, Dipper, why are you guys all wet?” he asked, running up to them.

“Somebody decided to play a prank on us…” Dipper said crossly as he glared up at Stan and Mabel.

“And it’s definitely not appreciated,” Pearl added pointedly, wringing out her sash.

“Hey, Steven!” Mabel called down from the roof. “I saved a water balloon for you!”

“All right!” the young Gem quipped happily. “Lay it on me!”

“Steven, wait!” both Dipper and Pearl exclaimed in unison, but it was too late as the rather large water balloon splashed down on Steven, soaking all three of them in the process.

“Nice one!” Stan laughed, high fiving Mabel again.

“I don’t know what you guys are so mad about,” Steven grinned to Dipper and Pearl, who were
As soon as the scale model had been constructed, Pearl wasted no time in getting everyone started on a “mach 2” build of the spaceship. After gathering the proper materials, their first task was to weld the framework of the glider, which was something Stan and the kids took responsibility for as Pearl and Greg got to work on the cockpit. And since he saw no inherit danger in letting a child use a blow torch, the conman simply stood by and watched as Mabel finished melding two metal pipes together with it.

“Aaaaannnnd…. You’re done,” Stan advised, looking over his niece’s work. Mabel let out an excited squeal as she threw her welding mask up to see that the bars had been melted together seamlessly.

“Grunkle Stan, how’d I do?” she asked eagerly.

“You did great, pumpkin,” the conman said with a sincere smile. “And you get bonus points for not burning your hand off with that thing.”

“Yes!” Mabel cheered, waving the still-lit blow torch around in celebration. As she did so, however, the tip of the flame only barely missed setting her brother’s hat on fire, much to his alarm.

“Mabel! Be careful with that thing!” Dipper chastised, quickly taking his hat off to protect it.

“Whoops… Sorry!”

“Hey, Mr. Pines, can I give that blow torch a try?” Steven asked as Stan took it out of Mabel’s hands. “I want to melt things together too!”

“Sure thing, kid, but only if you do me a favor first,” Stan said, handing the torch to the young Gem. “See that sandwich over there?” he nodded to the cheese sandwich sitting on the nearby workbench. “Bring that puppy over here and toast it up for me, will ya?”

“You got it!” Steven gave him a thumbs up as he retrieved the sandwich and began lightly grilling it as the conman held onto it.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Stan said with a hungry grin. “Fry it up nice and crispy, kid. And make sure to get both sides!”

“Grunkle Stan, are you sure you should be using a blow torch to make a grilled cheese sandwich?” Dipper asked skeptically.

“I dunno,” Stan deadpanned. “Are you sure you should be using your mouth to complain about it?”

Dipper didn’t even bother to reply to this, but instead simply crossed his arms and let out a disgruntled sigh. Steven was still in the middle of toasting Stan’s sandwich when Pearl happened to walk into the barn, a hammer and box of nails in hand.

“Well, we just about have the chassis built,” the white Gem reported. “How’s the glider go-” She abruptly cut herself off, dropping her tools upon noticing what was going on. “What are you doing?!”
“Um… making sandwiches?” Steven grinned awkwardly.

“With a blow torch?” Pearl asked, looking to the conman caustically. “Really, Stan?”

“Hey, I’m just trying to get a decent lunch here,” Stan said defensively, taking a bite out of his grilled sandwich as he grabbed the blow torch. “Not that you’d know anything about that, what with your boycott on eating and all.”

The white Gem sent the conman a particularly sour glare at this, but even so, she figured that the kids didn’t need to be around for the rather harsh words she had for him. “Steven, Dipper, Mabel, why don’t you three go help Greg tighten the bolts on the cockpit?”

“Aw, but we wanna watch you guys fight!” Mabel protested.

“What? We’re not going to fight,” Pearl shook her head.

“Yeah, Pearl’s just gonna nag at me and I’m just gonna tune her out, as usual,” Stan remarked, smirking a bit as he watched the white Gem’s eye twitch in annoyance at this.

“Kids, just… please, go outside, alright?”

The trio begrudgingly did so, sulking out of the barn as Pearl pointed to the exit. The white Gem made sure they were well out of ear shot before finally addressing the conman, who was simply giving her a bored, expectant look all the while.

“Well?” he asked, raising an eyebrow as he finished off his sandwich. “Go ahead and let all that hot air out of your head. It’s been a while since we’ve had a good yelling match.”

“I’m not going to yell,” the white Gem said as patently as possible. “I am simply going to speak in a very firm, very unhappy voice.”

“Pfft, might as well be yelling, if you ask me.”

“Stan, if you’re not going to be taking any of what we’re doing seriously, then why are you even here?” Pearl asked crossly. “The kids are all dedicated to the cause and even Greg is being sincere about helping. So what’s your excuse?”

“My excuse is that all this is kind of, oh, I dunno, completely *insane*?” Stan scowled, throwing his hand out towards the glider’s framework. “Really, I figured you would be the first one to realize that and not just jump on board to the idea as gung-ho as you did.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about this whole spaceship thing!” Stan exclaimed in exasperation. “You really don’t think you’re gonna be able to build a real one, right?”

“We’re well on our way to that point,” Pearl countered confidently. “But we’ll never get there if you keep using our tools like they’re simple cooking ware. Just give the torch to me and I’ll finish this framework the *right* way.”

“And what makes you think I can’t finish this thing the ‘right’ way?” Stan asked, holding the torch out of the white Gem’s reach.

“Do I really even need to answer that? Really?”

“You know what? Why don’t you just run back outside and hammer nails into wood with Greg and
“Well why don’t you just head back to the Mystery Shack and continuing fooling the innocent masses with all your tawdry sideshow attractions?” Pearl challenged harshly, reaching for the torch.

“Oh, you mean like this stupid fake spaceship you’re having all of us build?” Stan asked, attempting to push her away, despite her solid resistance.

“It’s not a fake spaceship! It’s going to be a real one, one that will take us to the stars, and to-”

“And to the museum in the shack, ‘cause that’s the only place it’ll ever be able to fly to!”

Pearl growled angrily as she finally got a hold on the blow torch, though Stan refused to relinquish his own grip on it. “By the time we’re done, you’ll be eating those words just like you did that disgusting sandwich!” the white Gem hissed as she pulled on the torch.

“Hey! I’ll have you know that sandwich was pretty tasty!” Stan argued, pulling back on the torch. “I mean, the kid burnt it a little on one side, but it was still decent!”

The two of them continued fiercely bickering over the blow torch, to the point that the group outside the barn could clearly hear them yelling at each other. The kids frowned worriedly as them and Greg momentarily paused in securing the chassis, all of them wondering what the huge fuss was about.

“Yikes… sounds like they’re really getting into it,” the former rock star frowned apprehensively.

“Shouldn’t we go in there and stop them?” Dipper asked. “They are fighting over something that spits fire out, after all.”

“Eh, I’ve learned over the years that it’s best not to get in between Mr. Pines and Pearl when they have an argument,” Greg said with a nervous chuckle. “Trust me; things usually get… pretty ugly when those two duke it out.”

“But they shouldn’t be fighting!” Steven exclaimed worriedly. “We’re all here to build this spaceship together!”

“Maybe we should get them a big tee-shirt and force them to wear it together!” Mabel suggested. “That’ll force them to get along!”

“I… think it might be a better idea to just let this run its course,” Greg advised with a reassuring grin. “They’ll calm down eventually. Either that or they’ll end up burning the barn to the ground, but hopefully that first one will happen instead.”

And so, Greg and the kids simply continued to listen in on Pearl and Stan’s fight from outside the barn, even as their angry yelling seemed to grow louder and louder by the second. “Stan, give me that blow torch already!” the white Gem shouted, her patience wearing incredibly thin.

“Why should I?” the conman retorted fiercely. “I don’t need you to do it for me! I can finish this rig on my own!”

“Like that’s ever going to happen!” Pearl scoffed. “Just let go of it!”

“No, you let go!”
“No, you!”

“No-”

Before Stan could even finish, the blow torch suddenly flew out of their shared grip as the result of both of them pulling too hard on it. With its tip still aglow, the tool soared over both of their heads and towards the half-finished framework, landing squarely on one of the pipes and miraculously balancing on top of it without tumbling to the floor. It did roll a bit, however, towards a loose crossing of pipes, and since the flame was pointed towards them, it immediately began fusing the two of them together in its intense heat.

“No look what you did!” Pearl scolded after the moment of tension had broken. “That thing could have set the entire barn on fire!”

“Well, clearly it didn’t,” Stan pointed out bitterly. “Plus, this was also your fault, so don’t stand there trying to pin all the blame on me.”

“Ugh… Stan, sometimes, I swear you act more like a child than any of the kids do,” the white Gem pointed her nose up as she began to head for the blow torch. “Which is why it’s a relief for me to relieve you of this.”

“Wait! Don’t move that!” Stan exclaimed after a beat, having noticed something about where the torch had landed.

“And why not? It’s not like I have to worry about it burning my hand like you would.”

“It’d be a good bit of karma if it could,” the conman remarked as he rushed for the blow torch himself. “But look at where that thing landed; that’s the perfect place to fix those two bars together. It’ll make the framework much more stable.”

“Please,” Pearl rolled her eyes. “That couldn’t be any further from my calculations. Why, its-” the white Gem stopped herself short as she took a look for herself, her jaw dropping as she did so and saw that the positioning of the bars was actually quite ideal for the glider. “You… you’re right… H-how did you know that?”

“Because maybe I might just know a thing or two about this sort of stuff myself,” Stan informed her pointedly. “Not that you’d think so, Miss ‘Supersonic Flight and Ejector Seats’.”

The white Gem was admittedly dumbstruck as a large part of her perception of the conman suddenly shattered. She could have never guessed that he would have any knowledge on advanced avionics or scientific design at all, but alas, he did, and she honestly had no idea what to make of it. Still, she couldn’t help but feel the slightest bit ashamed for her behavior, especially now that she knew she should have been viewing Stan as an asset in this project rather than a nuisance. “W-wow, Stan… I’m… I’m impressed,” Pearl admitted a bit sheepishly. “And… I guess I owe you an apology… I think I might have blown things a bit… out of proportion.”

“Ya think?” Stan retorted.

“I mean, maybe you’re right,” Pearl continued. “Using a blow torch to heat up a sandwich really isn’t that bad, I suppose.”

The conman’s cold expression lightened a bit upon hearing this as he realized that the white Gem was trying her best to actually be genuine, which was something she so rarely was with him. To be fair, he was hardly ever genuine with her either, but still. It was something different and better than really most of the conversations they ever had before. Which was why Stan couldn’t help but smirk
a bit, just enough to show that he was sincere, but not too sincere. “Ya know… I could fry you up your own sandwich using that torch, i-if you wanted one, that is.”

“I would take you up on that offer, Stan, but I don’t eat, remember?” Pearl let out a small chuckle. “Still, I appreciate the thought.”

“Yeah… well don’t think this means we’re suddenly buddy-buddy with each other now,” Stan crossed his arms, trying to come as gruff. “I still think you’re an annoying, naggy prude.”

“And I still think you’re a cheap, swindling scoundrel,” the white Gem laughed again, knowing it was all in good sport. “Who apparently has a surprising knowledge of aerodynamics, against all odds.”

“What can I say?” Stan shrugged with a grin as they both began finishing up the glider together. “I’m more talented then I let on.”

As the hours turned into days, the construction on the mach 2 steadily marched on. Using only what was contained in the barn, the group managed to build a surprisingly powerful engine from scratch, one that, Pearl claimed would possibly be capable of powering their ship. Of course, the test model itself exploded during its first run, but that hardly fazed the intrepid white Gem. She continued working regardless, testing different calculations and constructing more models and pieces of their eventual ship. The others all helped her in whatever way they could, with Stan and Greg aiding in most of the heavy lifting as far as actual construction went while the kids often salvaged parts or lent a hand in perfecting the designs. With Stan and Pearl now working in relative harmony, there seemed to be no more hitches in the road as everyone worked together and did their part. And after days of dedicated labor and toil, the small group finally had something to show for it.

The mach 2 was, in Pearl’s own words, the idea prototype. The vessel consisted of a wide hang glider, attached to the three seated chassis the white Gem had designed so all three of the kids could test it out for her. Supposedly, its engine was quite powerful, which was something the trio got to experience for themselves as they took it out on its maiden voyage through the dusky skies above the barn.

Pearl, Greg, and Stan all watched from down below as the kids piloted the small vessel. The trio in the air hardly noticed as they flew overhead as they were encapsulated in both crippling fear and overwhelming excitement. They steered the prototype together, curving it through the air that it cut through smoothly and gracefully. Still, the former rock star couldn’t help but be nervous as the craft glided into the sunset clouds and momentarily out of sight.

“Ground control to mach 2,” Greg called to the kids via walkie-talkie. “Come in, mach 2. How are you kids doing up there?”

Since the march 2 didn’t have much in the way of an actual wind shield, none of the kids were really able to reply intelligibly as the high winds blew in their faces. Still, Steven let out an incomprehensible cheer to let his father know he was alright, as Mabel simple squealed in exhilaration and Dipper shouted in apt terror.

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” Stan remarked upon hearing these three very different responses. “Told ya you should have put a wind shield on that thing,” he said to Pearl.
“I’ll be sure to make that a footnote on the next model,” Pearl smirked as she scribbled on her clipboard.

“Uh, don’t you guys think we’re taking this a little too far?” Greg asked apprehensively.

“Oh, we’re not even close to being done,” the white Gem shook her head.

“We’re not?”

“How much longer is this whole horse and pony show gonna take?” Stan asked impatiently. “I’ve already had to close the shack for almost a week now because of all this!”

“I can assure you both that it will all be worth it in the end,” Pearl said calmly before speaking to the kids through her headset. “Ok, you three. Go ahead and bring her down slowly.”

And thus, the trio began their descent, though they did come in a bit too fast. Still, they managed to avoid any injury as the prototype screeched to a rough landing on the ground, shaking its passengers up a bit.

“Mabel, she said bring it down slowly,” Dipper said, knowing that landing had been his sister’s responsibility.

“Sorry! I just got excited and I couldn’t help it!” Mabel quipped. “That was so amazing!”

“It so was!” Steven exclaimed. “We were-

The young Gem was interrupted as the engine suddenly exploded behind them, bursting into flames and causing the glider wings to collapse. Fortunately, the ejector seats worked just in time, propelling the kids away from the danger, albeit a bit roughly as they fell to the ground.

“Woo!” Steven cheered. “Let’s do the whole thing again! Especially that last part!”

“Was it supposed to… fall apart like that?” Greg asked Pearl tentatively.

“And catch on fire?” Stan asked with sudden concern.

“Don’t worry,” Pearl reassured. “This was just to test my engine concept. I’ll work out the kinks in the next one.”

“Hang on, next one?!” Greg asked, alarmed.

“You do know we only have so much useless junk in that barn to make a spaceship out of, right?” Stan asked caustically. “We’ll run out of supplies eventually.”

“Not if we conserve them,” Pearl pointed out. “By the way, do either of you know if there’s a shop in town that carries F-1 single-nozzle, liquid-fueled rockets?”

“You really are serious!” the former rock star gasped. “All this time I thought we were just doing this for fun, but you really plan on building this thing, don’t you?”

“Of course!” the white Gem exclaimed, as though it was obvious. “Oh, and we’ll also need a space suit for each of the kids so they don’t freeze or explode.”

“W-what?” Dipper asked, suddenly concerned upon hearing this. “You never mentioned anything about freezing or exploding before.”
“Can my space suit be pink?” Mabel asked, still completely on board with the idea, despite her brother’s hesitance. “And covered in glitter?”

“I want my name on the back of mine!” Steven quipped enthusiastically.

“Um, Pearl?” Dipper muttered apprehensively. “Just for reference sake, what are the odds of someone, I dunno… actually dying in space?”

“About… 1 in 100, I’d say,” Pearl mused. “But still, it’s definitely worth it!”

“Whoa there, Armstrong,” Stan cut in, just as bothered by this idea as Greg was. “You’re not taking the twins into space. Especially not with odds like that.”

“And Steven’s not going either,” Greg said firmly, placing a hand on his son’s shoulder.

“Aw, what?” Mabel asked in sudden dismay. “But Grunkle Stan, we wanna go! Right, Dipper?”

“I’d wanna go more if there wasn’t a 1 in 100 chance that we’ll die out there, Mabel,” Dipper retorted plainly, though he quickly retracted his statement after his sister elbowed him hard. “Ow! I mean—y-yeah, we totally want to go. And preferably, not die in the process.”

“I don’t care what you two want!” Stan exclaimed. “Your parents would kill me if either of you ended up freezing or exploding out in the middle of space!”

“Well, that’s not going to happen,” Pearl said solidly. “I’m taking all three of the kids into space and nothing is going to happen to any of us and that’s that!”

“No its not!” Greg protested. “We’re not allowing it! This is crazy, Pearl, and you know it!”

“Crazy is just another word for brilliant,” the white Gem said dismissively.

“But Dad, why can’t we go?” Steven asked with saddened sincerity. “Isn’t this why we founded Universe, Universe, Pines, Pines, and Pines in the first place?”

“Steven, you’re grounded,” Greg asserted, much to the young Gem’s dismay.

“What?!”

“No, I mean you’re grounded. You don’t get to leave Earth.”

“Oh. What?!” Steven exclaimed, even more distraught at this news.

“You two can’t possibly be serious!” Pearl scoffed in disbelief. “What about all of our hard work?! You can’t just throw all that away!”

“Oh, I think I can,” Stan remarked, crossing his arms. “Do I need to remind you that I’m the one funding this little project?”

“But Grunkle Stan, all of our supplies are here at the barn,” Dipper pointed out. “Did you even actually pay for anything?”

“Quiet, kid!”

“Well, I don’t need your supposed ‘funding’ anyway,” Pearl said crossly. “We’ll still be able to build a suitable spaceship on our own, right kids?”
“No you aren’t,” Greg contented, still completely against the idea. “As C.E.O. and supreme space commander, I hereby cancel this mission.”

“Aw man!” Steven exclaimed, disappointed. “Stupid company bylaws.”

“They ruin everything!” Mabel added in despair.

“Hey! Who made you C.E.O.?!?” Pearl asked, appalled.

“They did,” Greg said, nodding his head to the kids, who were only able to smile sheepishly at this.

“Fine!” Pearl shouted, completely livid. “If none of you will help, then I’ll just do it myself! Not like it’ll be much different.”

“Pearl, wait!” Steven called after the white Gem as she stormed off. The kids exchanged a disheartened glance as she left, knowing that their promising project was no more. The basic reason why they had wanted to build a spaceship in the first place was to make Pearl happy, but in the end, it had only ended up isolating her even more. But even so, they all knew they couldn’t very well go against Greg and Stan on this, especially considering how adamant they were against it. The dream they shared with the white Gem of seeing the stars would have to remain just that: a dream.

“Pfft, like she’ll be able to build an entire spaceship all by herself;” Stan sneered as he walked away as well. “Well, I’m gonna head back to the shack and have Soos rig me up a real fake spaceship for the tourists, like I should have done all along.”

“Sorry, kids,” Greg said with a sympathetic frown as he noticed how dejected they were. “But sometimes, you just gotta know when to bail.”

Night fell upon the barn softly, bringing with it a radiant, starry sky. As disappointed as they were about being “grounded”, the kids still managed to fall asleep relatively easily as they had something of an impromptu campout near Greg’s van. Since Stan had already driven back to the shack hours ago, Greg had agreed to watch all three of the kids overnight so they could clean up the barn from the remnants of their failed project tomorrow. Pearl was nowhere to be found since her falling out with the conman and the former rock star earlier, and while this worried the kids, they eventually relented in looking for her and resigned themselves to sleep. What none of them knew, however, was that the white Gem had no intentions of giving up, even now. If anything, she was prompted to work even harder and faster, to the point that she ended up with something to show for it long before the night was through.

With an excited grin, Pearl snuck past Greg as he snoozed in the van, tip-toing towards the sleeping kids as quietly as possible. She took care to remain stealthy as she gave each of them a gentle poke to waken them up, still smiling as they all groggily sat up and looked to her.

“What’s going on?” Dipper asked in tired confusion.

“Ugh, is it morning already?” Mabel groaned, brushing her hair out of her face. “Where are the pancakes?”

“Shh!” the white Gem quieted, glancing towards the van to make sure Greg was still asleep. “Do
you three want to see something really cool?”

Though none of them knew what Pearl had in store for them, they all got up and followed her, her bubbling excitement not lost on any of them. They all managed to slip past Greg easily, considering the fact that he was lost in dreamland, and soon enough made it to the barn, which was where the white Gem stopped them. “Alright,” she said with a daring smile as she pushed the barn doors open. “Presenting the brand-new, ballistic flight capable… UUPPP Mach 3!”

Upon seeing what Pearl was referring to, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel let out an awed, unified gasp. Standing before them was unquestionably a spaceship, and very impressive one at that. It was massive, to the point that it was almost as tall as the barn itself, with a strong, sturdy metallic body and wide, graceful wings. In a way, it almost looked like an airplane, only more futuristic and suited for space travel, which was what Pearl had built it for.

“So?” the white Gem asked, happily taking in the kids’ stunned reactions. “What do you think?”

“Spaceship!” Steven and Mabel cheered in unison, both of them not hesitating to run towards.

“Wait, you two!” Pearl chuckled. “Keep your voices down!”

“Pearl, how did you build this so quickly?” Dipper asked incredulously. “I thought you said we weren’t close to being done yet.”

“Oh, well it was actually quite simple,” the white Gem shrugged. “I just reworked a few of our equations, welded the hull together, reconfigured some old plane wings, rebuilt mach 2’s engine on a larger scale and, viola! The final model!”

“I love it!” Mabel gushed, hugging the side of the ship. “It’s so big and shiny!”

“And it even has the logo from the van!” Steven laughed, noticing the “universe” label from his father’s vehicle.

“If Greg asks, we’ll just say we borrowed it,” Pearl smiled. “And I wasn’t able to find anything that said Pines on it, so I just wrote it on the side in permanent marker.” She nodded pointed to word “pines” out to the twins, scrawled in elegant cursive under the label. “You’re welcome.”

“Whoa, look at all the buttons!” Mabel exclaimed as she climbed into the high cockpit. “I wanna press them all!”

“Uh, that might not be the best idea, Mabel,” Dipper warned, taking a glance outside to make sure that Greg wouldn’t catch them. After all, what Pearl had done was certainly enough to get all of them in some pretty hefty trouble with both the former rock star and the conman.

“You know, if you kids wanted… we could always take her out for an engine test…” Pearl offered with a mischievous grin. With a quick flash of her gem, she transformed her usual outfit into a sleek, form-fitting spacesuit. “It’ll be quick…”

“Yes!” Steven immediately agreed as he clumsily fell into the cockpit alongside Mabel, who was bouncing up and down in her seat excitedly.

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” she cheered. “What are we waiting for?! Let’s go right now!”

“Well, if you say so!” Pearl laughed, climbing into the cockpit herself.

“We’re… not actually going to space in this thing, are we?” Dipper asked as he hesitantly joined
them, still remembering the frightening odds of survival the white Gem had mentioned earlier.

“What? Of course we’re not! That would be ridiculous!” the white Gem scoffed, though none of the kids noticed her cross her fingers behind her back. “Now, let’s just start up the engines and… we’ll be off!”

Despite Pearl’s earlier attempts to keep the spaceship hidden, nothing could really stop the massive clamor the ship made as soon as its powerful engines turned on. The violent rumbling it caused was enough to easily wake Greg from his heavy slumber, and the moment he did, he was quick to see that something was wrong upon noticing that his van’s wheels and logo were missing.

“What the-?! Pearl!” the former rock star shouted, knowing the white Gem was responsible for this.

Of course, she hardly heard him, since she was in the process of making sure all three of the kids were strapped into their seats tightly. “Alright,” she grinned, pushing forward on the thruster. “Ready? Here we go!”

With a loud rev of the ship’s engines, the spaceship shot forward out of the barn with a powerful boom, bulleted across the yard and easily lifting off into the air. The force of the blast was enough to knock Greg to the ground as he ran after it, not even needing to ask if any of the kids were on board it or not. Still, he wasn’t about to let this forbidden mission continue as he hurriedly picked himself up off the ground and ran to grab his phone.

Still keeping the ascending ship in his sights, Greg scrambled to dial up the Mystery Shack, impatiently waiting as the phone rang before Stan finally picked up.

“Hello?” the conman answered tiredly, having clearly just woken up.

“Mr. Pines, you need to get over here now!” Greg practically shouted, watching fearfully as the ship disappeared into the clouds. “We have a big problem!”

“Greg? What the heck is going on?” Stan asked sullenly. “It’s 3 in the morning for crying out loud!”

“It’s Pearl. She built the ship on her own and she’s taken the kids with her! We gotta do something!” the former rock star pleaded desperately.

Stan was silent for a long time upon hearing this before letting out an exasperated groan. “See, this is exactly why I didn’t want to get involved in this mess,” he huffed angrily. “I’ll be there in a few.”

Greg didn’t even have time to thank the conman before he abruptly hung up. Still, the former rock star was far from allayed. Without wasting another beat, he grabbed his binoculars and walkie-talkie, hoping that there was some small chance he could convince Pearl to abort this dangerous mission and return the kids safely to the ground.

Meanwhile, high up in the air, Pearl steered the spaceship with confidence, smiling proudly all the while as the kids looked out the window in apt amazement. Gravity Falls grew ever smaller and more distant the higher the ship flew, to the point that it soon became but a mere collection of lights amidst a seemingly endless sea of trees.

“Wow! Look! You can see the temple!” Steven pointed out, looking down at the town far below.

“And there’s the Mystery Shack!” Mabel added, just as excited.
“Mm-hm,” Pearl nodded, though she knew that these mere overhead sights would pale in comparison to the interstellar wonders that awaited them.

“S-so, you do have a plan in case something goes wrong, right?” Dipper asked the white Gem apprehensively, gripping onto the edges of his seat for dear life.

“There’s no reason to be concerned, Dipper,” Pearl reassured. “Nothing’s going to go wrong. I built this ship strong enough to withstand anything.”

“Yeah! How else would she have finished it so fast?” Mabel smirked over at her brother, who wanted to question this logic, though the ship’s intercom lit up before he could.

“Hey, can you hear me?!” Greg’s asked through the com, frightened and concerned. “Where do you guys think you’re going?!?”

“Hey, Dad!” Steven greeted blithely. “Guess where we are!”

“I know where you are!” the former rock star exclaimed, still watching the ship through his binoculars. “It’s where you’re going that concerns me!”

“Oh, don’t worry, Mr. Universe!” Mabel chimed in. “We’re just going on a fun little test flight! We’ll be back down in a few!”

“Uh, no. I think you’ll be back down NOW!” Stan’s voice came in through the intercom this time. The conman had only just jumped out of his car, but he didn’t even need any briefing from Greg to know that this had to be put to a stop as soon as possible.

“Uh oh… We’re in trouble,” Dipper frowned, knowing that Stan certainly wouldn’t let them off the hook for this one.

“Mr. Pines, how did you get here so fast?” Greg asked the conman, knowing the shack was quite a ways away from the barn.

“I have my ways,” Stan replied quickly before addressing the passengers on the ship once more. “Now listen up, Pearl! You better bring those kids down here right now, or so help me, I’ll-”

“Stan, please, calm down!” Pearl interrupted evenly. “This is perfectly fine. The kids aren’t in any danger whatsoever. We’re just going to pop over to the nearest star system for a quick visit. I’ll give them back in 50 years.”

“50 years?!” the kids all exclaimed in shocked unison, looking to the white Gem in disbelief.

“What?!” Greg shouted, exchanging a horrified glance with Stan. “We’ll both be dead in 50 years! Pearl, you have to land the ship! Or we’ll-”

The former rock star was cut off as Pearl abruptly turned the ship’s intercom off, immediately ending all communication between them. “Hello?” Greg shouted at the walkie-talkie as he only got fuzz on his end. “Hello?!”

“That’s it!” Stan stormed off, absolutely livid. “If she won’t bring that ship down, then we will!”

“H-how?!”

“I don’t know! We’ll build something to disable its engines or something! Do I look like I know how to bring a spaceship down, Greg?!” Stan retorted harshly, even if he was still just as desperate
to get the kids back. “But we’re gonna figure something out, because I’m not about to let that crazy broad take my niece and nephew into space for the next 50 years! Now come on!”

Back up in the air, the kids themselves were doing their fair share of panicking, even if Pearl was just as calm and content as ever. “Pearl, the sounded really mad!” Mabel exclaimed worriedly. “I don’t think we’re supposed to go!”

“You think?!” Dipper scoffed bitter. “I told you guys this was a bad idea, but you didn’t listen, like always!”

“Pearl, I thought you said we weren’t going into space!” Steven reminded the white Gem anxiously, though she was hardly listening to any of their complaints.

“Oh, this is so exciting!” she quipped happily as she tinkered with the ship’s controls. “You kids are going to love it up there!” Gracefully, Pearl ran her fingers along the piano keyboard she had rigged to control the engine, hitting a loud, dissonant key that revealed the primary thrusters on the wings. “Hold on tight!” she exclaimed, pushing the ship into a sharp, 90 degree upward. As the vessel rocketed upward, everything on the ground became even more miniscule, not that any of the kids noticed as they clung on tightly to Pearl to brace themselves against the intense rattling of the ship.

Still, Steven was the first to give a tentative glance out the window, only to see a piece of metal fly past the ship in a sudden blur. “W-what was that?!” he asked in alarm, though he soon got his answer as the ship’s warning alarm began to blare loudly.

“Uh, Pearl?” Mabel asked, just as concerned as she looked out the other side of the cockpit to see more small pieces of the ship’s exterior begin to break off. “Is that supposed to be happening?!”

“We can make it,” Pearl said with resolve, paying little attention to these warning signs as she pushed the ship even harder. “We’re almost there.”

As the ship approached the atmosphere, more and more bits and pieces began to peel away from it, including important parts of its hull. Its integrity was starting to wear drastically thin, to the point that its internal engines soon became visible and smoke poured heavily from its back end.

“Pearl, we have to stop!” Dipper shouted over the ship’s aggressive rumbling. “The ship can’t take much more of this!”

The white Gem knew this, but even so, she stayed the course, keeping her gaze set on the stars they were rapidly approaching and nothing else. Her eyes were wet with what looked like oncoming tears, but even so, her expression was determined, even in light of the grave danger they were all in.

“Pearl!” Steven called to her, trying to get her attention, but in vain.

“I’m gonna show it to you…” she said more to herself than any of the kids, even as the alarm continued to blare and the ship was pushed to its greatest limits.

“What do we do?! What do we do?!” Mabel panicked, noticing that the ground was many miles below them.

“We gotta get off this thing!” Dipper exclaimed, looking around for an escape hatch, even though there wasn’t one.

“Yeah, but what do we do after that?!” Mabel retorted.
“We… uh… we should…” Dipper stammered, having no clear idea in mind in light of the massive, deadly disaster they were facing. Steven, on the other hand, took the first option he saw as the twins continued to argue about their plight, pulling a lever that read ‘hatch release’. As soon as he did so, the roof of the cockpit flew clean off, subjecting them all to the high winds and frigid air of the upper limits of the troposphere.

“Steven! What are you doing?!” Pearl gasped in shock at this, broken out of her obsessive trance.

“We need to go, Pearl!” Steven shouted, pressing himself against the other side of the cockpit. “We’re not gonna make it!”

“But we’re almost there!” the white Gem argued desperately.

“Yeah, but we’ll die once we get out there!” Dipper pointed out, unable to believe that Pearl still wanted to keep going.

“But… but I-” Pearl tried, her expression falling as she looked to the depths of space once again. They were so close, so very close to the place she had been dreaming of returning to for countless centuries. They had worked so hard, come so far. They could do it, they could make it, she knew they could. If they could just press on a little further…

“Pearl!” Steven exclaimed, grabbing the sides of the white Gem’s face and forcing her gaze towards him. She was admittedly taken aback upon noticing how terrified he looked, how terrified all three of the kids looked, really. Yet even so, the young Gem made his desperate plea. “I know you miss space and I know you worked hard, but sometimes… you just gotta know when to bail.”

Pearl took in a deep breath upon hearing this, glancing towards the sky one more time. The stars glittered brilliantly, reminding her of all of the times she had soared through them herself, ages ago, upon Gem ships to missions on far off worlds long before she had ever set foot on Earth. She was reminded of the beauty of the cosmos, the breathtaking, endless expanse that was space, one that seemed to confound yet fascinate her all at the same time. Being there, among the stars, the planets, the galaxies, the universe, was a feeling that she couldn’t possibly begin to describe, one that she hadn’t felt in so long yet craved to know again. And she had come to want Steven, Dipper, and Mabel to feel it with her, to let them see the majesty and mystery of it all and experience every exciting new discovery with three fresh young minds, basking in the awe in their expressions at each one.

And yet… as she looked back to the kids themselves and saw the unbridled fear in their eyes as they looked to her, Pearl realized that she couldn’t. She couldn’t put their lives in danger like this, she couldn’t bear the thought of any of them getting hurt, or worse yet, dying on her watch. She cared about all three of them far too much. Which was why, as much as she wanted them to take this journey with her, she knew that Steven was right. There was a time to bail and a time to stay the course and this… this was the time to bail.

A single tear fell from the white Gem’s eye as she nodded solemnly. And, before she could even think to change her mind, she quickly reached down and pulled the lever on the side of the couch that served as the cockpit’s seat. Knowing that it would only take but a second for the lever to work, Pearl wrapped all three of the kids into a very tight, secure embrace as the couch ejected itself from the crumbling ship and began flying backwards towards the earth.

Fortunately, they had bailed just in time. For mere seconds after they were ejected from the ship, it exploded in a fiery blast, one that even Stan and Greg were able to see far from the ground below.

“No!” they both shouted in horrified despair, their shared first thought being that certainly there
were no survivors. Still, Greg used his binoculars to scan the skies in desperation, hoping and praying that there was some small chance they were all alright.

“Please, please, please, please, please,” the former rock star pleaded, looking all over before finally spotting the couch as it floated down slowly thanks to the parachute attached to it. “Oh, thank goodness! They’re ok!”

“Let me see!” Stan demanded, taking the binoculars and letting out a sigh of relief upon spotting the couch. “Geez, these kids are gonna give me a heart attack one of these days!” he exclaimed, crumbling to the ground alongside Greg.

“Tell me about it,” the former rock star muttered tiredly, lying down and letting out a groan to ally his frayed nerves.

It took some time for the group to land on the ground once again, considering the explosion had happened so high up. And once they did, Pearl was a bit hesitant to relinquish the kids out of her firm embrace, though she soon did to let Steve hug Greg and the twins hug Stan.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re ok, Steven!” the former rock star said as he fretted over his son. “Maybe now you’ll listen to me about going on crazy space missions. You know, I feel like that’s something very few other fathers even have to say.”

“Heh, yeah, I’m sorry, Dad,” Steven said sheepishly. “I feel like you were right. Maybe we would have been better off just building a fake spaceship for fun instead of a real one.”

“Eh, well you kids had your hearts in the right places,” Greg shrugged with a grin. “Right, Mr. Pines?”

“Sure, whatever,” Stan deadpanned, quickly relinquishing his hug with the twins. “But if you kids ever pull anything like that again, then I’ll make sure you two stay grounded by fixing you both up with a pair of cement shoes, got it?”

“Um… got it?” Dipper frowned as he exchanged a confused glance with Mabel at this odd threat.

“Aw, Grunkle Stan, you care about us!” Mabel gushed with a smile, hugging the conman once more.

“Yeah right,” Stan rolled his eyes, trying to come across as unconcerned. “I just didn’t want to deal with trouble that would come my way if either of you two yahoos exploded.”

“You care about us!” Mabel reiterated once more with a teasing smirk. “You care about us!”

“Stop saying that!” the conman scowled, though he still allowed her to playfully swing on his arm.

As all of this was going on, Pearl stood at the edge of the group, glancing down guiltily as she rubbed her arm. She knew giving an apology wouldn’t be easy after what she did, but she knew it was necessary all the same, especially for the kids’ sake. “Um… kids?” she began tentatively. “I’m so sorry. I almost got us all killed…”

“I think we’re getting used to almost getting killed on a regular basis,” Dipper remarked with a shrug. “Not that that’s a good thing, but still, it’s not as crazy as it used to be.”

“And Greg, Stan? I’m sorry to the two of you as well…” Pearl continued. “I… might have gotten a bit… carried away with things… Just a little.”
“A little?” Stan raised an eyebrow.

“Pearl, you nearly took the kids into orbit,” Greg pointed out.

“Y-yes, well…” the white Gem trailed off, blushing awkwardly. “I’m still ashamed for how I blew up at you earlier. I hope you can both forgive me.”

“Sure thing, Pearl,” Greg said with a warm smile.

“Yeah, fine,” Stan consented stoically. “But you owe me another sandwich for making me come all the way out here this late.”

“That seems fair enough,” Pearl chuckled.

“Pearl, we’re sorry we couldn’t help you get into space…” Steven said with a frown. “But we’ll get you there someday, we promise.”

“Yeah! And it’ll be in an even bigger, and fancier spaceship!” Mabel chimed cheerfully.

“You know, I think I’d rather be here on Earth,” Pearl said with a contented smile.

“With us?” Steven asked as the white Gem wrapped her arms around all three of them.

Pearl’s smile widened at this, knowing that after everything that had just happened, maybe she didn’t need to stray into the stars once again. Those days were long over anyway. No, what she really needed and wanted, she realized, she had all along on the humble planet Earth. “Yeah,” she said, not bothering to look to the skies this time as she embraced the kids. “With you.”
Chapter 23: The Deep End

Chapter Summary

In which everyone goes to the pool, Mabel falls for a Spanish merman, Steven and Connie play matchmaker, Dipper gets a lifeguarding job, Stan and Amethyst want to beat the shit out of Gideon, and Garnet stays in the same damn chair for an entire chapter

Chapter Notes

Ok so wow I wrote this chapter over the course of three consecutive days, so that might explain why its a bit of a disaster but oh well. I hope you guys still enjoy my take on The Deep End anyway! Enjoy!

9-14 20-8-5 19-21-13-13-5 18 8-5 1-20, 23 5’12-12 20-21-18-14 20-8-5 20-9-4-5

A blistering heat wave had fallen over Gravity Falls, making the already balmy summer weather even more unbearable for everyone. With temperatures already climbing up into the hundreds, most residents of the town tried to stay inside to beat the heat, though that tactic didn’t always work, especially in a place like the Mystery Shack, which didn’t have the luxury of air conditioning. Needless to say that everyone was suffering for this stingy decision on Stan’s part, including the twins, Soos, and even the conman himself as they all lazed about the den, all of them trying their hardest not to move at all lest they incur even more sweat.

“All in favor of doing nothing all day, say ‘ugh’,” Dipper said, receiving a loud, agreeing chorus of tired groans in response.

“This weather is so stupid,” Mabel whined from her spot sprawled against the couch. “It’s too hot to even wear sweaters! What’s the deal with that?”

“Mabel, the only time it’s not too hot to wear a sweater is in the winter,” Dipper deadpanned, in no mood to deal with his sister’s zaniness in light of the oppressive heat.

“Says you.”

Stan did nothing to stop his nibblings’ bickering as he lay on the floor, trying to get the nearby fan to blow on him as much as possible. He wasn’t really successful, however, as Waddles wandered up to him, blocking much of the cool air he could have been getting. “I’m gonna throw this pig out of the house!” the conman growled in annoyance, only for Waddles to innocently oink and lick him instead. “You called my bluff, pig.”

Soon enough, the sticky stillness of the scene was abruptly interrupted as the front door of the shack burst open and Steven cheerfully bounded along with Connie. Both of them were clad in bathing suits and tooted towels and pool toys and floats, though Garnet was clearly carrying the bulk
of what they had as she entered with Amethyst a moment later. “Hey, guys!” the young Gem greeted the Pines brightly. “Is everybody ready to go?”

“Go where, dude?” Soos asked curiously.

“To the Gravity Falls Pool!” Steven informed. “It’s opening day!”

“Good thing it is too,” Connie remarked. “It’s so hot out there!”

“Gravity Falls Pool?” Dipper sat up, his interested peaked.

“Today?” Mabel asked with a growing smile.

“Yes! I could have sworn that I invited you guys to come with us today…” Steven frowned thoughtfully.

“I think you were a bit distracted inviting us instead,” Garnet smirked, crossing her arms.

“Oh, right,” the young Gem chuckled.

“Well, what are all you sweaty sacks waiting for?” Amethyst asked eagerly. “Let’s get going! I wanna practice my cannonball!” Surprisingly, the purple Gem pulled out an actual cannonball and juggled it from hand to hand with ease. “Those suckers won’t know what hit ‘em!”

“No, Amethyst,” Garnet asserted as she pushed the cannonball down.

“Aw, man! It would have been so funny, G! Just think of how everyone would go crazy if a cannonball fell into the pool!”

“Aw, man! It would have been so funny, G! Just think of how everyone would go crazy if a cannonball fell into the pool!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Stan exclaimed, suddenly alarmed as the Gem leader knelt down beside him. “What do you think you’re doing with those?!”

Garnet didn’t answer as she shoved her hands through the floorboards, lifting upward until she had easily pried Stan off of the floor, though not without taking some of the floor with him. Still, the conman hardly noticed the pieces of woods still stuck to his back as he rose to stand. “Wow, uh… thanks,” he remarked to the Gem leader, who merely replied with a simple thumbs up. “Alright! Off to the pool!”

With planks of wood still stuck on his back, Stan led the way out the door, though Amethyst cracked a sly smirk, getting an idea as she saw him leave. “I think I have a use for this thing after all…” she said, tossing her cannonball up and down. “Hey, Stan, wait up!”

Before Stan could even protest, Amethyst hurled her cannonball at him, hoping to use it to smash the wood off of his back. Fortunately, she missed, though she was more than prepared to try again as she retrieved the projectile and took aim at the conman once more, much to his chagrin.

“Amethyst! Cut that out!” Stan shouted as the purple gem perused them.

“Not gonna happen!” Amethyst retorted mischievously. “If I can’t use this thing at the pool, then I
Of course, the purple Gem eventually did hit her mark, and the kids, Soos, and Garnet all cringed as they heard the clatter of shattering wood along with Stan’s comically pained cry. “He’ll be fine,” the Gem leader concluded calmly as ever, leading the way out the door.

Considering the ongoing heat wave, Gravity Falls’ public pool was quite crowded on its opening day. Many of the townsfolk turned out for a day at pool to escape the heat. Blubs and Durland sunned themselves while fondly conversing with each other, while Jenny and Kiki had a splash fight in the water while their father Kofi lay on a raft between them, growing steadily more annoyed with their horseplay by the second. Onion was up to his usual mischief as he mostly kept under the water and stripping swimmers of their pocket change without being noticed while Toby Determined flung his shirt off near the changing house, much to the recoil of everyone nearby. Fortunately, the pool itself was generally large enough to accommodate its many patrons with some room to spare, which was why the Pines, Soos, the Gems, and Connie were hardly deterred from it as they arrived.

“Ah, the pool! A sparkling oasis of summer enchantment!” Mabel exclaimed with a cheerful smile.

“Yeah, nothing like sitting in a moist tub with strangers,” Stan deadpanned. “It’s like the bus, but wet.”

“Oh come on, Mr. Pines,” Steven quipped. “The pool is great! Can’t you just smell the excitement in the air?”

“I think that’s just the scent of chlorine and sun block,” Connie commented with a smirk.

Meanwhile, Dipper frowned as he glanced over at the odd design on the towel Soos was carrying, to the point that he eventually decided to question it. “Why would a sun need to wear sunglasses?”

“It’s best not to think about it,” Soos remarked blithely.

This terse response only managed to confuse Dipper even more, but he simply shrugged it off and posed a different question to the Gems instead. “So… where’s Pearl at?”

“Eh, she’s not coming,” Amethyst replied. “She’s not a huge fan of ‘chlorinated water’ or something like that. So she said she’s gonna spend the day cleaning the temple. Booooorriiiing.”

“Oh man, that reminds me,” Steven spoke up, glancing over at the Gems. “You guys aren’t dressed for a fun day at the pool! We need to get you some bathing suits and fast!”

“This calls for an emergency shopping trip!” Mabel exclaimed excitedly. “Don’t worry, guys; I’ll help you find the best summer poolside fashions this town has to offer. Now the only question is, should we go with tankinis or one pieces…”

“I think we have this covered, Mabel,” Garnet interrupted, holding her hands up as the gems on her palms glowed. In a flash, her usual outfit changed into one that was much more appropriate for the pool: a star-cut tank top with a short, side-swept black skirt tied at her hip. Likewise, the gem on Amethyst’s chest shined as she transformed her own clothing into a strappy top and shorts, along with a small fanny pack around her waist and her hair tied into a high pony tail. Needless to say the others were quite impressed with this ability upon seeing it, but the two Gems hardly acted like it was anything new.
“So, are we finally ready to start throwing things into this tiny lake?” Amethyst asked, flipping her hair casually.

“Amethyst, that’s… not what you’re supposed to do at a pool,” Dipper pointed out.

“What? That’s what I use the pools in my room for,” the purple Gem frowned. “Then what do you do at this pool?”

“Um… swim?” Connie answered, confused.

“Seriously? You mean all you guys do is just float around in that puddle and do nothing?” Amethyst scoffed. “Throwing junk in it would be a lot more fun, right Garnet? …Garnet?” The purple Gem got no response as she realized that the Gem leader had walked off to claim a nearby pool chair, one that lay in full view of the sun. Garnet did give the group a small nod for them to carry on as she reclined out on the chair, the afternoon sun bouncing off her shades as she took the rare opportunity to simply relax.

“Well, Garnet seems happy,” Steven concluded with a contented grin. “But I hope she doesn’t get too hot sitting in the sun like that.”

“Whoa, whoa! Stop the presses!” Mabel suddenly exclaimed, halting the others before they could move on. “Who is that?” With an excited smile, she pointed out a rather handsome young man, likely about her age, relaxing against a raft in the pool. He smiled casually as his long, luxurious dark brown hair glistened with pool water as it blew in the warm breeze. Needless to say that upon merely seeing this intriguing boy, Mabel was instantly lovestruck, as she often was with any attractive young man that just so happened to catch her eye. But the brief snippet of information Soos proceeded to fill her in on regarding this boy only interested her even more.

“Oh yeah. Word is, dude never leaves the pool. People say he’s a mysterious loner.”

“How does he never leave the pool?” Connie asked, confused. “Doesn’t it close at night?”

“And wouldn’t he get all pruny staying in there so long?” Steven also questioned. “I mean, that usually happens to me after just a few hours in the pool.”

“Who cares about all that?” Mabel asked with a wave of her hand, her sights still set on the young man. “Is it getting hot out here or is it just that guy?”

“It’s the hottest day of the year, Mabel,” Dipper rolled his eyes. “Besides can’t you go one week without having a new crush on some random guy?”

“Uh-uh,” Mabel shook her head, far too smitten to turn away from this mysterious stranger now. “Look at his little mustache hairs! He must be so mature!”

“You are clearly enamored,” Soos said, placing a hand on the girl’s shoulder. “Go to him.”

“Yeah! Go Mabel!” Steven cheered encouragingly. “You got this!”

“I got this!” Mabel repeated just as zealously as she darted off towards the other side of the pool. However, in her excitement, she ended up tripping over several pool chairs and running into a barrel of pool toys, though she was quick to pick herself up off the ground and continue on her mission undeterred.

Amethyst let out an amused laugh upon seeing this while Dipper and Connie both watched Mabel run off with relative concern while Steven and Soos were aptly inspired by her enthusiasm. “It’s so
beautiful!” the handyman beamed as the young Gem nodded in sincere agreement.

“Eh, Mabel’s all talk,” Dipper scoffed, crossing his arms. “You guys wanna know a secret? She’s never even kissed a guy before. She always messes it up somehow.”

“Oi, women,” Stan remarked caustically. No more than a second later, however, the conman was suddenly struck with a water balloon from out of nowhere, startling him and drenching him quite a bit.

“Hey, Mr. Pines!” Wendy greeted from the nearby lifeguard stand, revealing that she had been the one to toss the balloon.

“Hi, Wendy!” Steven called with a bright grin as he waved at the cashier.

“What are you doing up there?” Stan asked his employee with a scowl. “Where’s the real lifeguard?”

“I am the lifeguard,” Wendy said. “I make the rules, sucka! Boosh!” Without any warning, she hurled another water balloon Stan’s way, though this one happened to hit Amethyst instead.

“Yeah!” the purple Gem cheered, always ready for action. “Keep ‘em coming!”

“You got it,” Wendy chuckled, sending more water balloons their way, much to Stan’s chagrin.

“Ahh! She’s attacking me with water!” he cried as he ran off. Of course, Amethyst happened to catch several of the water balloon Wendy was tossing, only for the sake of continuing the assault.

“C’mon, Stan, don’t be such a baby!” the purple Gem cajoled, chasing after him with her small haul of water balloons. “I have something for you!”

The others shared a laugh at the conman’s misery, though when it was over, Dipper turned to Wendy once more. “So you work here now?”

“Yeah. I found out lifeguards get free snack privileges,” Wendy smirked. “Plus, I get the best seat in the house.”

“Yeah, you do!” Dipper readily agreed, letting out a forced, drawn-out laugh. He did manage to catch himself in the middle of it, though not until it had gone on for an awkward amount of time. “I’ve been laughing for too long,” he whispered to himself, cringing.

“Dude, are you and Wendy having a secret staring contest?” Soos interjected innocently. “‘Cause I think you’re winning.”

“Oh, yeah, you totally are, Dipper!” Steven quipped. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone stare at someone else for so long.”

“Steven! Soos!” Dipper quickly scolded, embarrassed. Fortunately, handyman took his leave at this juncture and Connie helped Dipper out by distracting the young Gem.

“Hey, Steven, why don’t we hit the pool?” she said, pulling him away. “The water looks like it feels great.”

“Oh, man, it sure does!” Steven exclaimed, wiping the sweat from his brow. “Last one in is... well, dry, I guess!” Without any further ado, the young Gem raced for the pool, laughing all the while. Dipper mouthed his silent thanks to Connie as she hurried off after him, and she responded
with a simple wink and thumbs up while she left.

“So, hey,” Dipper addressed Wendy once again, trying his best not to come across as awkward after all that. “You wanna go help Amethyst chuck more water balloons at Grunkle Stan?”

“I’d love to, but I gotta spend the day doing tryouts,” Wendy said, reclining in her chair with a bored frown. “We’re looking for a new assistant lifeguard.”

Of course, upon hearing this news, Dipper didn’t even have to think twice about how he could use this as an opportunity to spend some quality time with his crush. Still, he realized that a title like assistant lifeguard carried a certain amount of responsibility to it, which was why he stood up straight and threw his voice to make it sound deeper in order to come across as mature enough to undertake this role. “Hey, what if I was the assistant lifeguard?”

“Dude, that would be so much fun!” Wendy immediately agreed with a wide smile. “You’re totally in. You just have to check in with my boss first, Mr. Poolcheck.”

“Your boss?” Dipper asked, looking over in the direction she was pointing. Even upon a first glance, Mr. Poolcheck was a very intense-looking man, muscular and masculine as he performed pushups on the other side of the pool while supporting himself with only his index fingers. Of course, Dipper was immediately intimidated upon seeing this, but he was resolved to get this job nonetheless. After all, it would certainly be worth it if he got to hang out with Wendy.

“Ok, ready?” Connie asked Steven with a daring smile as she positioned herself inside her inner tube.

“Yeah! Let’s go!” Steven exclaimed, jumping as high as he could while shoving his own inner tube down into the water. Connie followed suit with her tube as the two of them repeated this motion over and over, stirring up the water and creating a miniature wave pool around them. When they inevitably wore themselves out doing this, they stopped and clung onto their floats while riding the short-lived waves out, laughing all the while.

“Whoo!” Steven cheered, repositioning himself to lie on his belly on his inner tube. “That was almost as much fun as swimming in the ocean with real waves!”

“Minus the threat of sharks and jellyfish,” Connie chuckled. “You wanna give it another go?”

“Of course!” the young Gem nodded, though he was quickly interrupted by the sound of his own stomach rumbling. “Oh, but first let’s get some snacks first. Making waves is making me hungry.”

Connie agreed to this with a laugh as the two of them got out of the pool and headed for the snack shack, still dripping wet. Thankfully, there wasn’t much of a line at the moment, which meant Steven and Connie were able to walk right up and order their snacks.

“One bag of chips please!” Steven requested, placing a dollar on the counter. He let out a surprised gasp, however, upon seeing who exactly was working at the snack shack.

“Oh, hey, Steven,” Sadie greeted casually as she took his dollar.

“Steven…” Lars grumbled in his sleep as he sat next to her, reclined in his chair and ignoring the disgruntled glare she sent his way.
“Whoa! Sadie, I didn’t know you and Lars worked here at the pool too!” the young Gem exclaimed, amazed.

“We don’t usually,” Sadie explained. “But the snack shack here is owned by the Big Donut, and since the two guys who usually work here both called in sick today, me and Lars were sent over here instead.”

“That’s so cool!” Steven said, stars in his eyes.

“Eh, it’s about the same as working at the Big Donut, only without any air conditioning,” Sadie said, wiping the sweat from her brow.

“Oh, Sadie, you remember my friend Connie, right?” Steven nodded to the girl beside him, who offered a small, polite wave of greeting.

“Oh yeah. You two were trapped in that bubble together that one time, right? Good to see you both finally got out.”

“Heh, yeah,” Connie grinned a bit bashfully. “It kinda took a lot to get us out, but at least we did manage to escape it.”

“Well, it’s nice to see you again, Connie,” Sadie smiled. “Now let me get you guys those chips…” Carefully, she attempted to step over Lars, who was still snoozing away and blocking her path to the chips on the other side of the stall. Unfortunately though, she fell over him, which ended up abruptly knocking both of them to the ground and waking Lars up.

“Wha-? Huh?” Lars blinked sullenly as he sat up. “Sadie! I like, just got to sleep! Now I’ll have to start all over!”

“Then don’t sleep at the counter!” Sadie retorted, standing as she glared down at him. “I’m trying to work!”

“Why don’t you not work at the counter when I’m trying to sleep?!” Lars barked back as he also stood.

“Because we’re not here for you to sleep! We’re on the clock, remember?”

“Pfft, I wish I could forget.”

“Oh, come on, Lars!”

The two cashiers continued to bicker with each other as Steven and Connie stood by and exchanged a concerned glance. “So… I guess they still don’t really get along with each other that well, do they?” Connie asked Steven with a frown.

“They can get along, but they usually don’t fight this badly,” the young Gem said worriedly. “Something is having a bad effect on their relationship… and their customer service.” Nonetheless though, the heated argument between them continued.

“You could get fired!” Sadie exclaimed brusquely.

“Who cares?” Lars crossed his arms and scowled. “I didn’t even wanna come down here and work at this dumb shack. It’s like a billion degrees out here and we’re ten feet away from a pool we’re not even allowed to go swimming in. It’s dumb.”
“Wait! That’s exactly what you guys need!” Steven interjected, cutting through the quarrel. “A nice dip in the pool to cool you off and help you relax! That would make you both feel better for sure.”

“Oh, Steven? We can’t exactly leave the snack shack right now,” Sadie frowned gently. “We’re in the middle of our shift.”

“Maybe you are, but I’m not gonna waste my time baking alive in this stupid food box,” Lars remarked as he began to leave the shack. “I’m gonna go work on my tan.”

“Lars, wait! You can’t just—” Sadie cut herself off with an infuriated growl, slamming her fist down on the counter as Lars left her alone. “I hate it when he does this!”

“Oh no! This is worse than I thought!” Steven whispered to Connie upon seeing this scene play out. “Sadie and Lars need our help, Connie! Otherwise they’ll never get along and be friends and have a good time serving delicious snacks to everyone here at the pool!”

“Ok, Steven, I’m with you,” Connie said with an amused smirk, ready to go along with whatever zany plan the young Gem could come up with. “Did you have any ideas in mind?”

“As a matter of fact…” Steven trailed off as he looked to the glistening waters of the pool itself. “I do…”

Mabel made sure to remain discreet and unseen as she swam low under the water towards the latest object of her affections. The handsome boy who had caught her eye earlier was still propped against his raft, casually sipping a glass of lemonade as he soaked in the afternoon sun. Even as she pushed her way up to the surface of the water, Mabel held her breath out of both excitement and nervousness over meeting him, knowing that just as much could go wrong as it could go right. But still, she burst up out of the water quite close to the boy, startling him and accidently splashing him as she took in a gasp of much needed air.

“Wow! Oh my gosh!” she began with her usual prep and verve. “How crazy it is bumping into you even though we don’t know each other!”

The boy gave her a look of apt confusion as he looked her up and down briefly. “How long have you been underwater?” he asked, his voice carrying a deep, alluring Spanish accent.

“That doesn’t matter!” Mabel quipped before coughing up the bandaid she accidently swallowed underwater. “So, hey! My name’s Mabel!”

“Hola,” the boy greeted with a charming smile.

“Whoa! Are you Australian?” she asked, intrigued by his interesting accent.

The boy laughed warmly at this, fortunately not at all put off by Mabel’s enthusiasm. “I am charmed by your sense of humor. And your bold lack of water wings!”

“You know, a few weeks ago I met a Gem who had real water wings!” Mabel exclaimed. “As in, they were wings, made out of water. Still, I bet she’d be a pretty good swimmer!”

Once again, the boy’s expression was awash in bewilderment, but he let out a small chuckle a moment later. “Oh I get it!” he laughed. “She would be a good swimmer because she has real water
wings! Very funny!"

“Ha! Yeah!” Mabel nodded, grinning so wide that her mouth practically hurt. Still, she could hardly help it, considering how surprisingly well this initial meeting was going. “You’re pretty funny too! And your hair is so beautiful…”

“No, no,” the boy glanced away, holding onto his long locks. “It has silly tangles.”

“Mind if I…?” Mabel trailed off, pulling out a comb. The boy grinned and turned to allow her to gently brush through his hair, rather impressed by the kind gesture.

“Why, Mabel, you are so… forward,” the boy laughed once more. Mabel grew even more excited upon hearing this, knowing that there was already an attraction starting to bloom between the two of them. If she could just water it a little more, then certainly that bloom would blossom into the long-awaited summer romance she had been dreaming of.

“So… hey, you wanna go dry off?” she asked tentatively, giving him a hopeful smile. “Maybe hit the snack bar or-”

“I-I am afraid I cannot!” the boy interrupted, suddenly nervous as he pulled his raft closer to him. “For I have a terrible secret. I… I must go.”

Without any further explanation, the boy hurriedly swam away, leaving Mabel alone, confused, and quite distressed over how things suddenly turned so sour so quickly. “I’m upset,” she muttered to herself with a pout as her eyes followed the boy to the other side of the pool. “Yet intrigued…”

“And that’s why I think I’d make a good lifeguard assistant,” Dipper finished his appeal to Mr. Poolcheck, trying his best to be professional and devout about it. Still, it had been a rather one-sided discussion, since Poolcheck was preoccupied with meticulously making sure each floaty in the supply closet had just the right amount of air in them. Still, he did turn around once Dipper was done speaking and stepped up to him, his expression deadly serious as he looked over the boy with a great deal of scrutiny. Poolcheck even went as far as to sniff him, much to Dipper’s confusion and discomfort.

“Hmm… SPF 100…” Poolcheck noted with a nod of approval. “Good. I like you, kid. But this isn’t an easy job. It’s anarchy out there.”

They both turned to glance at the pool, which was a relatively calm and quiet scene as the swimmers relaxed and played without any signs of trouble. “I… think I can handle it,” Dipper said with relative certainty.

“Can you handle this?!” Poolcheck barked as he suddenly pulled his left hand off of his wrist, alarming Dipper quite a bit. “I lost my hand to a pool filter! The pool may seem friendly, but she can turn on you in an instant. Which is why you must respect the rules! Do you think you have what it takes, boy? DO YOU?!”

Dipper hesitated in answering this question for a moment, considering that he was quite taken aback by Poolcheck’s harsh manner. However, he got the motivation he needed as he glanced over at Wendy, who gave him a supportive thumbs up from her spot on the lifeguard chair. “Sure, I guess,” he finally shrugged, which was fortunately good enough for Poolcheck.

The pool owner nodded once more, his face still set in its usual scowl as he pulled out a whistle and
placed it around Dipper’s neck as a sign of his newly-appointed role. “Welcome to the deep end, son,” Poolcheck said, his tone as grave as ever.

“Well, thanks, I-” Dipper suddenly found himself being cut off as Poolcheck pulled him into a tight, strangling hug. “O-oh,” he choked, trying his best to wriggle free, even if it was impossible considering Poolcheck’s firm grip. “Ok, this is happening…”

Since Stan had no real interest in sharing the pool with the multitude of loud, obnoxious, and often downright disgusting swimmers populating it, he decided to take to sunning himself instead, just as Garnet had earlier. And fortunately, the conman just so happened to know of the perfect spot to do so. “There she is, Soos,” Stan said to the handyman as they approached the ideal pool chair. “Equidistant from the snack bar and the bathroom. Just the right amount of sun and shade. And pointed away from Old Man McGucket suns himself. The perfect pool chair.”

“The legends you told me in the car were true,” Soos agreed as they stood before the chair.

“I just can’t believe it wasn’t already taken,” Stan grinned, laying his towel over the back over it. “And now to sit on it, claiming it as my own.” The conman prepared to do so, slowly lowering himself into the chair. However, before he could fully sit down, he was abruptly stopped as a small foot halted his back out of nowhere. “Whaaaat?!”

“Why, hello, Stanford,” Gideon greeted with a smug grin as Stan spun around to see him reclining in the coveted chair.

“Gideon!” the conman growled hotly. “Get outta my chair, kid!”

“Oh my, this was your chair? I had no idea!” Gideon exclaimed with faux innocence. “Yes I did, Stan. I knew.”

“Move it, you little troll!” Stan shouted, aptly infuriated.

“Now, now, Stanford. First come first serve,” Gideon quipped, bursting into a round of devious giggles as he rolled around in the chair.

“I’ll first serve you!” Stan threatened, hoisting Gideon out of the chair with the intent of throwing him across the pool. However, just before he could, a warning whistle suddenly blew, halting him in his tracks as Wendy hurried over to lay down the pool law.

“Come on, Wendy!” Stan protested as he was led off to pool jail. “You can’t do this to an old man!”

“Sorry, Stan, but it’s not up to me,” Wendy shrugged as she locked the conman in the small enclosure. “Well, actually it is!”

Before the conman could protest any further, the exchange was interrupted as Dipper hurried up to Wendy, eager to share his good news with her. “Hey, Wendy! I got the job!”

“Sweet!” Wendy grinned. “Wanna go abuse our power?”

“Yeah, but what if Mr. Poolcheck catches us?” Dipper asked. “He seems… emotionally unstable.”

The two of them stole a glance over at the pool owner, who was in the middle of an impressive
round of sit-ups on the chain-link fence. Still, Wendy was hardly concerned. “Nah, don’t worry, man,” she reassured. “You just gotta be super sneaky about your rule breaking. Race you to the no running sign!”

On this call, both of them ran off, completely disregarding one of the pool’s most enforced rules. However, Dipper did make sure to slow his pace significantly upon glancing over at Poolcheck, who was in the middle of testing the pool water, oddly enough, by drinking it. Keeping out of the obsessive pool owner’s range surely wouldn’t be easy, but Dipper figured that he would be fine as long as he followed Wendy’s lead and remained inconspicuous about it. After all, how hard could maintaining order at the pool while completely shirking it off possibly be?

Stan scowled impatiently as he sat in in pool jail, sandwiched between two kids who had also been busted for rule-breaking. He knew well that the more time he wasted in this embarrassing cage, the longer Gideon would hog his much sought-after chair, and the thought practically made him seethe with anger. Fortunately though, he just happened to have an unexpected friend in his corner, or more precisely, in pool jail along with him.

“Well, hey! Look who got busted too!” Amethyst remarked, having noticed the conman from her spot on the other side of the jail. “What are you in for this time? Breaking someone’s arm over a quarter?”


“Suuuuree,” one of the nearby boys remarked caustically. “We all are, mister. Pool jail ain’t so bad though, as long as you don’t end up in solitary.”

“Pfft, pool jail is lame,” Amethyst rolled her eyes, taking a seat beside Stan. “I throw one tire into the pool, and suddenly I wind up in this snoozefest. But you got booked just in time, Stan, since I was just getting ready to break out of here.”

“Great, just what I need; another one of your ‘escape’ plans,” Stan said with a wave of his hand. “Just as long as I can get my chair back from that little gremlin Gideon.”

“Okay, so what got you in here, huh?” Amethyst asked, intrigued. “Sounds like you could use a little help. If you catch my drift.”

“Please. I don’t need your help getting that punk out of my chair, Amethyst.”

“Are you sure about that, Stan? Do you really wanna end up in pool jail for another two hours while Gideon imprints his butt on your chair?”

Stan grumbled intelligibly to himself upon hearing this, the thought of the child psychic beating him in this matter enraging him largely more than anything else. Which was why his independent
resolve quickly crumbled, especially since he knew that Amethyst usually was good help when it
came to things like this, though he would never admit it. “Ok, you can help,” he begrudgingly
agreed. “But only because that chair is the best one I can possibly get at this dump. And because I
wanna put that punk in his place.”

“Sweet!” Amethyst cheered with a daring smirk. “Then let’s do it! Honestly, I’d rather throw
random things into the pool for kicks. But apparently, I can’t do that, since it’s “against the rules”.
But I figure this is bound to be half as fun as that, at least.”

After spending the last hour or so devising a plan, Steven and Connie were more than ready to put
it into action. Their goal, above all else, was to smooth over relations between Sadie and Lars and
help them have an enjoyable time together at the pool, despite the fact that they were there to work.
Since Lars had already taken off to relax beside the pool, the kids decided to wait until it was
officially time for Sadie to go on break to enact their plan, knowing that both cashiers would need
to be away from the snack shack for it to work. Still, that didn’t mean they couldn’t set everything
up for it in advance.

“So what if this plan doesn’t work?” Connie asked Steven as they headed to the other side of the
pool.

“This plan will definitely work!” Steven concluded confidently. “I mean, when has forcing two
people to share a raft ever not worked?”

Connie frowned, not entirely sure how to answer this question, but she shrugged it off nonetheless,
knowing that the young Gem did have a knack for things like this. And so they headed over to the
supplies closet, where Wendy and Dipper were in the middle of filling up more water balloons to
unleash on unsuspecting passersby.

“Hi, you guys!” Steven greeted the pair of lifeguards. “Can the two of you maybe help us out with
something? It’ll be super easy.”

“Sure, Steven. What’s up?” Wendy asked with a grin.

“Ok, so if Sadie or Lars come by later on asking for any rafts or floats, then all we need is for guys
to tell them that you’re out or that they’re all deflated,” Steven began.

“Except for the doubles raft,” Connie clarified. “That’s the only one they can have.”

“Um… ok,” Dipper exchanged a confused frown with Wendy. “But why?”

“Because we’re trying to get them to get along,” Steven said. “And I figured the best way to do
that is for them to get closer. Literally!”

“Whatever you say, dude,” Wendy agreed with a chuckle.

“Oh! Here they come!” Connie exclaimed, glancing over her shoulder to see both Sadie and Lars
coincidentally heading for the supplies closet. “Quick, Steven! We gotta hide!”

“Oh! Right!” Steven hurried off along with Connie, both of them hiding just around the corner of the
supplies closet so they could spectate. They didn’t hear much of the initial conversation between
Sadie and Lars and Wendy and Dipper, but what they did hear was Lars’ loud groan of
disappointment upon being told the fake news about the rafts.
“What do you mean you’re all out of rafts?!” he whined. “There’s a whole stack of them sitting right there!”

“W-well, yeah, but those are… they’re…” Dipper trailed off, unable to come up with a good excuse. Fortunately though, Wendy had it covered.

“They’re off limits. Our boss told us not to let anyone use them. Sorry, guys.”

“Eh, it’s ok,” Sadie said much more patiently. “I’ll just go for a short swim instead.”

“Ugh, and I guess I’ll just go back to tanning,” Lars scowled. “Even though I wanted to do that in the pool where it’s not as hot.”

“Well, we still do have one raft left,” Dipper pointed out as Wendy retrieved the large doubles raft from the closet, just as Steven and Connie had requested.

“Sharing it wouldn’t be a problem for you two, would it?” Wendy asked with a coy grin. The pair exchanged a tentative, rather begrudging glance, one that briefly made both Steven and Connie fear that their plan was about to crumble apart entirely. Still, they both let out a shared sigh of relief as Lars and Sadie took the raft, both of them glaring at each other all the while, as they headed for the pool. After quickly thanking Dipper and Wendy, Steven and Connie hurried to get in place for the next phase of their plan as Sadie and Lars boarded their shared raft.

“You know, Lars, this… isn’t so bad,” Sadie remarked as they lay side by side on the raft while it floated to the middle of the pool. “At least they still had this raft we could use.”

“Eh, I think those two were playing us,” Lars scowled. “All those other rafts looked perfectly fine to me.”

Sadie let out an exasperated sigh at this, knowing it was just like Lars to be so pessimistic about everything. “W-well, the water is nice,” she tried again. “And hey, we get an hour off work to enjoy it. Even though you technically already took your break… ” she muttered her last statement.

“What was that?” Lars asked suspiciously.

“Uh, nothing,” Sadie quickly assured. A long, somewhat awkward bout of silence passed between the two of them as they floated together in the water, neither of them looking at each other at all. Meanwhile, Steven and Connie got to work on continuing their plan as the young Gem began to strum a slow, somewhat romantic melody on his ukulele as the pair floated by. To make things even more peaceful, Connie supplied both Sadie and Lars with their own glass of lemonade, complete with straws and tiny umbrellas.

“Here you go!” she exclaimed with a warm smile, disregarding the pair’s confused looks. “Enjoy!”

“What are those two dorks up to…?” Lars asked as he started to sit up on the raft, though Sadie was quick to stop him.

“W-wait! Lars, you gotta admit that this is… sorta nice,” she said with a small smile. “I mean, the music, the drinks, the raft… It’s really relaxing.”

“I guess so…” Lars said as he lay back down. Sadie’s smile grew a bit as she watched his sour expression gradually lighten up into a calm, almost contented one. And, slowly but surely, he started to move his hand over a bit, until it was ever so gently rubbing up against hers.
“It’s working!” Connie whispered to Steven, who grinned excitedly as he continued to play his ukulele as mood music. All the while, Sadie and Lars simply floated together and listened to it, taking small sips from their lemonades as they soaked in the warm afternoon sun. This peaceful silence, however, was soon broken by Lars this time, who caught Sadie’s attention by turning his head in her direction and looking at her intently.

“Uh… Sadie?” he began, his cheeks lighting up in slight embarrassment.

“Y-yeah?”

“Um… well… I sort of… I guess I… You kinda…” he blundered through several false starts, growing steadily more flustered by the second.

“Lars?” Sadie asked, slightly concerned as she thoughtlessly wrapped her hand around his.

“Look, I just wanna tell you that you-” Lars was suddenly cut off by the abrupt, shrill sound of a whistle blowing. Not only did it completely break up the moment, but it was enough to startle both of them enough to send them bolting upright. However, the raft wasn’t ready for such a sudden movement, which was why it ended up flipping over with both of them on it, tossing the pair into the water below them before they could stop it.

Likewise, Steven and Connie were also quite surprised by the whistle, the former even moreso as he found his ukulele being suddenly ripped out of his hands. “Huh?!”

“No ukuleles at my pool!” Mr. Poolcheck shouted at the young Gem as he held his ukulele high out of his reach.


“Do you SEE this thing, kid?” Poolcheck growled, glaring at the instrument. “It’s a choking hazard waiting to happen! Any innocent fool could drown trying to swallow this whole!”

“…What?” Steven asked, completely confused.

“People don’t… eat ukuleles…” Connie tried to reason, even though she was quite bewildered herself. “At least… most people don’t.”

“Still, this item is against pool rules!” Poolcheck exclaimed, taking it away. “Consider it confiscated until further notice, young man!”

“Aw, my ukulele!” Steven protested.

“Uh, Steven? I think we have other problems on our hands…” Connie pointed out, nodding to Lars and Sadie as they broke through the surface of the water.

“Ugh, what happened?” Sadie asked, shaking her hair dry.

“I’ll tell you what happened,” Lars began crossly. “You flipped us over!”

“What?! No I didn’t!” Sadie exclaimed defensively. “It was an accident.”

“Oh sure it was,” Lars rolled his eyes. “Just like it was an accident that they were all out of single rafts. I’m not stupid, Sadie. I know you set this all up!”

“Are you serious?! Come on, Lars, I wouldn’t do that! I-”
“Just save it,” Lars stopped her as he began to climb out of the pool. “If you wanted this dumb plan to work, then you should have tried a little harder than that. Now I’m going back to work, where things are at least dry.”

Without another word, Lars turned on his heel and headed off, with Sadie desperately pursing him not too far behind. “Lars, wait! I didn’t—You don’t… Lars!”

“Oh no…” Steven frowned, disheartened upon seeing how quickly everything had fallen apart. “And things were going so well too!”

“Well, at least we gave it a good try,” Connie reassured.

“But now things are even worse off than they were before!” Steven sighed. “I guess this means we’ll have to try even harder the next time!”

“Next time?” Connie asked with apt concern as the young Gem headed off. “Steven, wait, you’re not—Oh boy, I guess you are…”

“And he has some sort of big, dark secret that he’s all mysterious about!” Mabel finished up her story. “I mean, it does make him even more attractive, but I don’t want it to stand between the two of us! So I figured I’d come and ask you for help, since you seem to know all about this sort of stuff. So what do you think?”

“Hmm…” Garnet mused from her constant spot on her chair, still not moving so much as an inch as Mabel paced around in front of her. “Well, first I would suggest learning his name.”

“Oh, right…” Mabel grinned, embarrassed. “I guess I got so distracted by the secret thing that I sort of forgot about that… Anything else?”

“Mabel, if you really want to develop a genuine relationship with this boy, then respect him and his secret,” the Gem leader advised rationally. “If in time you gain his trust and he decides to tell it to you, that’s fine. But you shouldn’t try to force it out of him. Just be calm and sincere and things will turn out fine.”

“You’re right…” Mabel sighed. “I mean, he is really cute and really nice. I don’t wanna mess things up with him like I usually do with other guys…”

“And you won’t,” Garnet smiled encouragingly. “Trust me.”

“Thanks, Garnet,” Mabel said gratefully as she prepared to head back to the pool to meet with her mysterious crush once more.

“One more thing, Mabel,” Garnet called before the girl could get too far. “Don’t be afraid to let him go if that’s what you have to do.”

Mabel frowned in confusion upon hearing this advice, wondering how it possibly applied to her current situation. But still, she sent the Gem leader a thumbs up all the same and continued on her way into the pool. Once again, she remained stealthy as she approached the boy from behind, though she quickly ducked underwater as he glanced in her direction. He shrugged it off but was still quite surprised when she popped up out of the water right in front of him a moment later.

“Hey there!” she greeted blithely. “I brought you a sandwich! It’s sort of wet, but it should still be
good.” With a warm smile, she put the sandwich down on the boy’s raft, her heart swelling as she noticed his amused grin.

“Well, gracias, Mabel,” the boy chuckled, taking the sandwich.

“Gesundheit!” Mabel quipped before getting serious. She still wanted to heed the advice Garnet had just given her, but even so, her curiosity threatened to overflow inside of her if she didn’t get to the bottom of this mystery. “See, I like sharing things. Sandwiches… secrets…” She dropped her voice to a whisper as she leaned a bit closer to him. “Share your secret, beautiful stranger.”

The boy frowned at this, unsure of what to really say at this juncture. Still, against all odds, he did seem to finally be convinced by her determination alone. “Well… this wet sandwich does look delicious… Very well. But you must never tell another living soul my terrible secret.”

Mabel nodded her promise, already completely invested in whatever it was he was about to tell her. The boy took in a deep breath before finally revealing his long-awaited secret. “You must stay away from me because I am…” he trailed off, pushing his raft away from him to reveal something absolutely unbelievable. Against all odds, he didn’t have legs, but instead he had a tail. A fish’s tail to be exact. “… A merman…”

Mabel gaped at him for a minute or two, unsure of what to make of this revelation until she finally let out a huge sigh of relief. “Oh thank goodness. I thought you were gonna say you had a girlfriend! So, a merman… Ha! I should have known from your strange foreign fish language!”

“It is Spanish,” the boy clarified with a frown.

“You voice is so deep and masculine… How old are you?” Mabel asked.

“I am 12 years old,” the merman said. “Merman’s voices change when we are like, 3.”

“So… what’s your name?” Mabel pressed, remembering Garnet’s advice to get his name.

“There are some who call me…” he paused to strum a chord on his guitar. “Mermando! This is because Mermando is my name.”

“Ooo, dramatic! I like it! But I don’t understand, Mermando,” Mabel frowned. “What’s a guy like you doing in a public pool?”

“It is a tragic, tragic story…” Mermando said before plunging right into it. “I was swimming with my friends, the mighty dolphins, in the Gulf of Mexico, when I was ensnared in the most deadly of traps: a fish net! Captured as I was, I was taken far from my ocean home all the way to Gravity Falls. Using all of my strength, I tried to escape back home, but it was not to be. I would have died of dehydration, were it not for the kindness of the forest animals. But, even with their help, there was little I could do as I tumbled through the woods and eventually landed here in this very pool. And now that you know what I am, you must be seriously weirded out.”

“What?” Mabel laughed, knowing that such a strange fact mattered little to her. Even despite his strange species, he was still ridiculously handsome after all. “I don’t care if you’re a merman! You’re like, the coolest guy I’ve ever met! And you can play at least one chord on the guitar.”

“Oh, Mabel, I have never met another human like you!” Mermando laughed warmly, clearly charmed by her praise. “Would you care to join me in a game of the Marco Polo?”

“Oh, yes, Mermando! Yes!” Mabel exclaimed, completely delighted as she wrapped the merman into a tight, affectionate hug. Despite her sweet intentions however, Mermando let out a tight cough
of protest as she clung onto him.

“You are covering my gills,” he informed her, his voice hoarse and dry. “I cannot breathe.”

“Whoops!” Mabel quickly let go of him, smiling awkwardly as she watched Mermando go underwater for a second to get some water. “Weird…”

Stan and Amethyst watched from a safe distance as Gideon cheerfully patted sunscreen on himself while still sitting in the conman’s favored chair. The pair had easily broken out of pool jail making use of the purple Gem’s shapeshifting abilities alone and now they stood ready to remove the child psychic from the chair in any way possible. With certain limitations, of course.


“Geez, Stan, chill out,” Amethyst crossed her arms. “Gideon’s small-time. Get it? Cause he’s small! Ha! I’m hilarious.”

The conman simply rolled his eyes at this joke. “Can we please be serious about this? This is really important!”

“It’s just a chair, dude.”

“I mean it’s really important to me!” Stan stressed. “And if it were up to me, I’d go over there and pluck that little punk out of that chair right now. But we can’t touch him, or the pool patrol will throw us in pool jail again.”

“Pfft, you mean Dipper and Wendy?” Amethyst scoffed. “I’m not afraid of them. Still, just flipping Gideon outta the chair would be too easy… We gotta make this more interesting…”

“Agreed,” Stan nodded, glancing around as he tried to think of a plan. “Now, what can we…” he trailed off as he noticed the sunlight hit his wristwatch in just such a way that it bounced off brightly. “That’s it! Amethyst, you got any huge mirrors in that mess of a room of yours up at the temple?”

“Oh yeah, a whole bunch of ‘em,” the purple Gem smirked. “Why? What do you have planned?”

“You’ll see… Just go get me one of them and hurry back with it.”

“You got it,” Amethyst saluted as she ran off, leaping over the fence and bolting back towards the temple. Fortunately it only took her a few minutes to return with a large, full-length mirror, one that the duo positioned just right so that the sunlight would hit it and bounce it off in Gideon’s direction.

“Yes, yes! Burn the child!” Stan exclaimed with an excited, vengeful grin as the large beam of light was deflected towards the child physic. However, Gideon was prepared for their strategy as he held up his sun tanning goggles, which just so happened to reflect the light back at Stan and Amethyst in full force. Both of them were easily blinded by this, enough that they happened to stumble backwards right into the pool. Stan and Amethyst both broke the surface of the water at the same time, neither of them too happy about how their plan had backfired.

“I hate that kid!” Stan growled, completely enraged.
“Well, look on the bright side,” Amethyst shrugged. “At least the mirror didn’t break.”

No more than a second after the purple Gem had said this, of course, the mirror abruptly shattered courtesy of a rock thrown by Gideon. “Hey!” Amethyst shouted angrily. “You little creep! That was one of my favorite mirrors!”

“Well, look on the bright side,” Amethyst shrugged. “At least the mirror didn’t break.”

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“Deal with it,” Gideon said smugly as he put his goggles on, clearly reveling in the defeat of his adversaries. Still, Stan and Amethyst were both resilient. Together, they had faced annoyances far greater than Gideon Gleeful, and they certainly weren’t about to let him get the better of them in the end. This was about more than just the chair now; this was about revenge.

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Soos grinned cheerfully as he put an inflatable duck floaty on, excited to use it in the deeper end of the pool. However, the last thing the handyman could have ever expected was for the bird-themed tube to suddenly start speaking to him out of seemingly nowhere.

“Soos,” the floaty addressed him in a high-pitched, squeaky voice.

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“Inflatable duck guy, is that you?” Soos asked, awestruck as he looked down at the tube around his waist.

“Yes, Soos. I can talk!”

“Yes, Soos. I can talk!”

“Oh my gosh! I knew you guys were secretly alive!” the handyman exclaimed with a huge grin. “I knew it!”

Of course, what Soos didn’t see was Dipper and Wendy standing right around the corner, using their megaphone and fake voices to play a rather hilarious prank on the handyman. The two of them shared a quiet laugh before continuing their joke.

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“The inflatable duck revolution is at hand!” Soos proclaimed with resolve, eliciting another round of laughs from Dipper and Wendy as they watched from around the corner. However, their amusement was short lived as Poolcheck’s tell-tale whistle echoed across the area.

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“Pool’s closing!” Poolcheck announced as he drove around the parameter of the pool in his golf cart. “Clear out everyone!”

Knowing they could get in trouble if they were caught slacking off, Dipper and Wendy were quick to split up in the hopes that Poolcheck wouldn’t see them. Dipper, however, was not so lucky as Poolcheck just so happened to drive right by him. “Assistant lifeguard!” the pool owner barked through his megaphone. Dipper fearfully froze in his tracks, almost certain that he had slipped up somehow and Poolcheck was going to chew him out or worse yet, fire him. Fortunately though, his fears were unfounded. “Have a good night, son,” Poolcheck said, removing his prosthetic hand for a moment and patting it until a set of keys dropped out of it. “Lock up the supplies for me.” Dipper breathed a huge sigh of relief as he took the keys and did as Poolcheck said, glad that he would keep his position and his chance to hang out with Wendy for another day.

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As the pool was starting to close up, Mabel and Mermando were in the midst of playfully brushing each other’s hair. They had spent a large majority of the afternoon together, swimming, playing pool games, and simply chatting and getting to know each other better. And the more Mabel talked
to Mermando, the more and more enamored with him she seemed to become. He was suave and alluring, yet sweet and occasionally awkward all at the same time, traits that she had always looked for in a boy but had never quite found such a perfect mix of until now. True, there was the merman aspect that she often forgot about as they hung out, but still, she didn’t see that as much of a hindrance at all. If anything, it only made him even more interesting. A budding attraction certainly existed between them, one that made Mabel feel as though she had finally, finally found the sweeping summer romance she had been looking for at long last.

Still, as much fun as the pair was having, it couldn’t go on forever, as they both realized upon hearing the blaring whistle blow. “The pool, she closes,” Mermando frowned, though his expression became hopeful again as he looked to Mabel. “Can I see you tonight?”


Mermando gave her a bewildered look for a moment or two before pointing out the obvious once more. “Merman. I am a merman.”

“Oh, right,” Mabel chuckled as she got out of the pool and prepared to take her leave, though not for too long, of course. “Then I’ll be back tonight. See ya then!”

True to her word, Mabel returned to the pool that night, having borrowed the mystery kart without telling Stan to get there. Of course, the gate was locked, which meant that she had to scale the fence, using a nearby pool skimmer as a bit of a boost. She hardly noticed that she bent the pole of the skimmer however as she hurdled herself over the fence, landing clumsily on the pavement and quickly picking herself up. By the time she leapt into the pool to join Mermando, she was practically overflowing with excitement over seeing her new crush once more.

“Hi!” she greeted blithely as she swam over to Mermando. “I brought you another sandwich! A dry one this time! Well… half a sandwich anyway. Amethyst sort of ate the other half when I wasn’t looking. But here you go!”

“Um thank you?” Mermando smiled, moderately confused as he took the sandwich.

“I also brought this! A scrapbook of human stuff!” Mabel exclaimed as she held up her summer scrapbook and placed it on the edge of the pool while she flipped through it. “Here’s me standing with my legs. And here I am kicking Dipper in his legs. He couldn’t move his legs after that! Can you imagine? Not having legs?”

“…Let’s skip this part,” Mermando said, somewhat disgruntled.

“And here’s my whole family kickboxing!” Mabel continued, pointing at another picture.

Mermando let out a heavy sigh at this as he turned away from Mabel, glancing down at the water morosely. Mabel bit her lip a bit guiltily, feeling as though she had done something wrong, but even so she followed him nonetheless. “What’s wrong?”

At this prompting, Mermando took his guitar out once more and tried strumming a chord, only for the sound to come out flat. Exasperated, he tipped the instrument over and dumped the water out of the body before strumming it as he spoke. “I, too, used to have a family once, back in the ocean.” Dejectedly, he opened up his seashell locket and briefly looked over the portrait of his family inside. “How I miss them…”
Mabel frowned sympathetically upon hearing this lament, knowing that it couldn’t possibly be easy for Mermando being so far away from his family for so long. “Mermando, why don’t you just leave the pool then?” she asked. “You know, so you could go back to them?”

“I’ve tried only once,” Mermando said with his usual dramatic storytelling flair. “But escaping this pool required a plan that was bold and daring. I foolishly thought it would be as easy as simply jumping out of the pool but then I quickly remembered two things: 1. I do not have legs and 2. I need water to breathe. So I fell back in. And then the wolves came… But no, I am glad that I’m here. Because I met you, Mabel.”

Mabel blushed upon hearing this, a wide, excited and lovestruck smile crossing her face as she stared longingly at Mermando. The setting was certainly something out of any of her favorite romantic movies; the evening crickets were chirping in harmony, the air was warm but not too warm, and the stars reflected radiantly on the pool water below, especially as one darted across the sky. If there was any moment for her to have her first kiss with any boy, this was it. And so she pushed away her nerves and replaced them with confidence as she puckered her lips and went right in for it. Only for it to go… not exactly as she had hoped.

“What are you doing with your mouth?” Mermando asked, confused as he noticed her pursued lips.

“Me? Nothing!” she quickly recanted, glancing away from him nervously. “I-I was just… just eating some sour candy! So my lips were doing that. Because the candy was so sour.”

“Can I have some candy?” Mermando asked with a hopeful smile.

Mabel hesitated in answering for an awkwardly long amount of time before offering a very terse response. “No.”

The following day was just as hot and humid as the previous one, meaning that once again, the pool was packed. Blubbs and Durland sat on a bench near the lifeguard station, cheerfully applying sunscreen on each other. That is, until a life saver happened to fall right on Blubbs from above, trapping him in it.

“W-what the-?!” the sheriff exclaimed in alarm, which only grew as a second life saver fell on his partner.

“I’m scared!” Durland cried as he tried to wriggle free.

“Me too!” Blubbs shouted, also trying to escape.

As the cops continued to panic over their sudden plight, Dipper and Wendy watched from their spot above and shared a laugh over their latest prank. The amount of time they had spent actually watching the pool and its patrons could easily be outweighed by all of their different practical jokes, snack runs, and general lounging about. As irresponsible as they were being however, neither of them could deny that they were having the time of their lives abusing their shared power.

“Dude, this is so awesome,” Wendy chuckled as she reclined back in her chair. “With this job, you and me are gonna be having fun all summer!”

“A-all summer?” Dipper asked with a hopeful smile, knowing that the very thought sounded absolutely incredible. However, the moment was short lived as the loud, sudden blow of a whistle broke through it, followed by an enraged shout from Poolcheck.
“Pines! Here! NOW!” the pool owner yelled as he stood by the two trapped cops, his face so red with anger that it was easily on the level with a tomato.

The pair of lifeguards exchanged a nervous glance, but nonetheless, Dipper hesitantly climbed down the lifeguard stand to face Poolcheck and hear out whatever scolding he was no doubt about to receive. “You gave your word that you would respect the safety rules of this pool!” Poolcheck began, yelling passionately as he paced back and forth in frustration.

“Mr. Poolcheck, are you… crying?” Dipper asked, concerned.

“That’s not important right now!” Poolcheck snapped, drying his damp eyes. “You’re on thin ice, boy! You wanna keep this job?! Well, some maniac broke into the supplies closet last night and destroyed our one and only pool skimmer! So tonight, I want you on night patrol. If one more thing gets taken or broken, you’re fired!”

“I-I won’t let you down, sir!” Dipper quickly saluted, knowing exactly what was on the line. Namely, countless more hours of time to spend with Wendy.

“You better not, boy,” Poolcheck warned, his tone dead serious as he walked straight into the pool. “You better not!”

After spending several hours fruitlessly strategizing for their next plan, Steven and Connie decided that they needed some help if they were ever going to bring peace between Sadie and Lars. And so, upon the young Gem’s suggestion, they went to the one person, or Gem rather, who had a knack for doling out sagely advice on matters such as this.

“So we tried getting the two of them to share a raft, but that backfired because ukuleles aren’t allowed at the pool,” Steven explained to Garnet, who was still resting on the same pool chair. “And I really, really miss it!”

“The bottom line is,” Connie interjected to finish things up. “Our plan to get Sadie and Lars to get along… didn’t exactly work out. So we hoped you could help us come up with something else that can get them together.”

Garnet said nothing for a long time, nor did she even seem to move or respond to what they were saying at all, something that confused both Steven and Connie quite a bit. “Uh… Garnet?” the young Gem gave his mentor a tentative poke on the arm. “Are you ok? Or awake?”

“I’m fine,” Garnet responded, lifting her hand up. “Just thinking.”

“So… any ideas?” Connie asked.

“No,” the Gem leader replied. “But there is something both of you should know. While your hearts are in the right place, you shouldn’t try to force Sadie and Lars into anything they don’t want.”

“So what should we do?” Steven wondered.

“Let nature take its course,” Garnet explained. “If they’re supposed to be together, then they’ll end up together.”

“I’m… not really sure about that…” Connie frowned as she glanced over at the snack shack, where Lars and Sadie were in the middle of a heated argument once again.
“Wait, I think I get what you’re saying, Garnet,” Steven mused. “All we have to do is get Sadie and Lars together in the right place at the right time, and everything else will take care of itself!”

“Steven, that’s not what I—”

“Thanks for the help, Garnet!” the young Gem interrupted, excited by this lead as he grabbed Connie by the hand and ran off. “Come on, Connie! I’ve got a new idea that I’m sure will work this time!”

The Gem leader simply shook her head as the kids ran off, but even so, she didn’t bother to get up from her comfy spot to stop them. “They’ll figure it out on their own,” she concluded as calmly as ever.

“Mermando, get ready!” Mabel exclaimed as she prepared to toss her beach ball to the merman from across the pool. “Cause I’m gonna bring the heat!” With gusto, she threw the ball, though since Mermando wasn’t entirely enthusiastic about their game, he simply let it hit him and bounce back into the water as he let out a fretful sigh. “Mermando, are you ok?” Mabel asked worriedly as she swam over to him.

“O-oh, si, si, I am fine,” Mermando reassured with a weak smile as he sunk a bit lower into the water.

“Oh, it’s your family, isn’t it?” Mabel realized with a frown. “Are you thinking about them?”

Mermando simply gave a nod and a dolphin echo as a response before dejectedly laying against his raft once more. Mabel bit her lip apprehensively as she watched this, already internally wrestling with the daring thought that just entered her mind. She wanted to help Mermando in any way that she could, but at the same time, she knew that if she did, then certainly she would never see him again. Still, she also knew that trying to keep him all to herself was incredibly selfish and cruel. Suddenly, Garnet’s enigmatic piece of advice from before made perfect sense to her: “Don’t be afraid to let him go if that’s what you have to do.” Clearly, letting him go was what she had to do, even if saying goodbye to him was the last thing she ever wanted.

“Mermando, enough is enough!” she finally concluded. “I care about you too much to see you upset like this! We’re gonna bust you out of here and get you back to your family!”

“But Mabel, escape is impossible!” Mermando stressed, even if he did appreciate her resolve.

“Impossible shimpossible!” Mabel scoffed boldly. “We’re breaking you out of here and getting you back to the ocean tonight!” With determination, she slammed her fist down into the water, which resulted in a sudden splash that soaked them both. “Oops! Sorry about that. Water, ya know?”

As he had promised, Dipper took up night patrol at the pool that evening, though not before receiving another severe warning from Poolcheck that once again carried the threat of being fired. But even so, Dipper was going to ensure that wouldn’t happen. In reality, he didn’t really expect to see too much action tonight at all. After all, who would even want to break into the pool so late at night anyway?

“Alright, Dipper, here’s the pan,” he said to himself as he paced around the pool grounds. “Catch
the trespasser, protect the supplies, keep job at pool, and eventually marry Wendy.”

“Sounds like a good plan.”

“What the-?!” Alarm, Dipper spun around, shining his flashlight on Garnet, who was still reclining in her chair as she had been for the past two days.

“Hello, Dipper,” she greeted laxly, still not making much of an effort to move from her constant spot.

“Garnet? What are you still doing here?” Dipper asked, bewildered. “The pool’s closed for the night.”

“I know,” the Gem leader acknowledged. “I just don’t want to lose my spot.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but you have to leave,” Dipper said with a frown. “Nobody’s supposed to be here right now.”

“You’re here,” Garnet pointed out.

“Yeah, because I work here. Look, Garnet, can you just-” Dipper was abruptly interrupted upon hearing a loud crash sound on the other side of the pool, one that clearly needed to be his main priority now, especially if it was the so-called trespassers. “Ok, fine, you can stay,” he quickly turned back to the Gem leader. “Just… don’t touch any of the pool supplies, ok?”

“Wasn’t planning on it,” Garnet retorted, adjusting her shades casually. Satisfied that she was sincere about this, Dipper wasted no time in hurrying over to the source of the crash, though what he hadn’t been expecting was to find were two more familiar faces.

“Grunkle Stan? Amethyst?” he asked incredulously upon finding the two of them cutting through the fence.

“I—uh, I’m sleep walking!” Stan quickly explained, hiding his wire cutters. “And now I’m sleep talking. Nice hat by the way.”

“And I—I’m… Yeah, I don’t have an excuse,” Amethyst shrugged.

“Oh my gosh, it’s you two!” Dipper gasped in realization. “You’re the ones destroying the pool supplies!”

“What? No!” Stan exclaimed with a wave of his hand. “Our crime’s a lot better than that. We’re gonna get that seat and be ready in the morning when Gideon comes.”

“And then we’re gonna hit him with this cannonball!” Amethyst grinned, holding said cannonball up.

“Yeah, something like that,” Stan agreed with a shrug. “And maybe we’ll destroy some pool supplies. Night’s still young.”

Of course, Dipper wasn’t about to let this happen, which was why he gave them a loud, warning blow of his whistle. “Geez, kid, you’re gonna make us go deaf with that thing!” Amethyst complained, covering her ears.

“Seriously! Don’t get your shorts in a bundle! We’re goin’,” Stan assured, turning around to head back the way he had come. Amethyst was just about to question his motives before he suddenly
turned around and darted back in through the fence the minute Dipper turned his back. With a rowdy laugh, the purple Gem quickly followed as they both made a beeline for the chair. Of course, Dipper clearly heard them, so needless to say he started perusing them without a second thought, lest the cause him to lose his job.

No more than a few seconds later, however, another group emerged from the woods surrounding the pool. “Alright, you guys,” Steven said as him and Connie led Sadie and Lars through the fence. “It’s right this way.”

“Steven, I’m pretty sure we’re not supposed to be here this late,” Sadie frowned apprehensively.

“Oh come on. If we weren’t supposed to be here, then there wouldn’t be this huge whole in the fence!” Steven quipped brightly.

“How did that get here anyway?” Connie asked, confused.

“I can’t believe I let you dorks talk me into coming all the way out here this late,” Lars scowled. “This better not be like what happened yesterday!”

“Come on, Lars, just give it a chance,” Sadie encouraged. “I mean, when else are we gonna get the whole pool to ourselves? Plus, night swimming is pretty relaxing.”

“Ugh, fine,” Lars sighed in relent. “But if it blows, I’m out of here.”

Steven and Connie exchanged a hopeful smile as the pair headed for the pool, both of them eager to see their new plan actually work out, since there would hopefully be nothing to impede it this time. However, as they prepared to follow Sadie and Lars to the other side of the pool, they were quickly distracted as a familiar golf cart drove up to the nearby hole in the fence.

“Mabel?!” Connie called upon noticing who was driving the kart. “What are you doing here?”

“S-Steven! Connie!” Mabel gasped, surprised that she had been caught. “W-well, I was just… uh… W-what are you guys doing here?” she flipped the question around as quickly as she could.

“We’re trying to get Lars and Sadie together with a romantic nighttime rendezvous,” Steven explained with a smile. “And so far, it looks like it might be working.” And indeed it did, seeing as how the pair were both sitting together at the edge of the pool, dangling their feet in and having what seemed to be a legitimate conversation.

“Oh, that’s super cool!” Mabel exclaimed, still trying to play her own presence there off. “Well, I’m just gonna head over to the other side of the pool with no questions asked, ok, bye guys!”

“Mabel, wait,” Connie stopped her, still confused. “You never said what you were doing here.”

Mabel let out a sigh of defeat, knowing that she had indeed been cornered. Still, she was glad that Steven and Connie had caught her instead of Dipper, especially since she knew about his night patrol mission. “Can you guys keep a secret?” she asked anxiously. Both Steven and Connie nodded, giving her enough assurance to head over to the edge of the pool. “Mermando? Are you in there? Oh, well, of course you’re in there, but can you come on up? It’s me!”

“Mabel?” Mermando came up from underneath the water to meet her, though he quickly retreated upon seeing Steven and Connie. “Aye carumba!” he exclaimed, startled.

“No, no! It’s ok! They’re my friends!” Mabel hurriedly interjected. “Steven, Connie, I’d like you guys to meet Mermando, my boyf—I mean, my friend! Heh, yeah, just a friend.”
“Nice to meet you, Mermando!” Steven quipped cheerfully.

“Whoa! So you’re a real merman?” Connie asked in awe as she noticed Mermando’s tail.

“…Si,” he admitted hesitantly. “Though my kind is not supposed to be seen.”

“Oh, sorry!” Mabel exclaimed, embarrassed. “I didn’t know that. But don’t worry, Steven and Connie won’t tell anyone, right guys?”

“Right,” Connie nodded.

“Oh man, this is so cool!” Steven grinned, snapping a photo of Mermando with his phone. “Just wait until I tell the Gems about—” he cut himself off upon catching disapproving glances from both Mabel and Connie. “Uh… I mean… right! Delete!” he grinned sheepishly, removing the picture from his phone.

“So are you ready to see your family, Mermando?” Mabel asked the merman with a daring smile.

“Yes, but how can I, a merman, possibly escape?” he asked, frowning.

“Well, my original plan was to tape a bunch of fish sticks together to make you a prosthetic pair of people legs,” Mabel explained, holding up the picture she had drawn of this plan.

“Intriguing,” Mermando noted.

“I like it!” Steven agreed enthusiastically, even if Connie could only look at the drawing with a look of apt confusion.

“But then I realized I could just transport you in this cooler,” Mabel said, nodding to the cooler on the back of the kart. “You guys wanna help me?” she asked Steven and Connie.

“Anything for you, Mabel!” Steven exclaimed with a smile.

“Yeah, sure,” Connie agreed. “After all, it looks like our plan is working pretty well, so I guess we’re up for something like this. As… weird as it is.”

“You all have my sincerest thanks,” Mermando said with a grateful smile. Upon Mabel’s prompting, the merman leapt out of the pool as much as he could, flapping about like a fish out of water for a minute or two before landing in the water-filled cooler.

“Yay! Prison break!” Steven cheered excitedly.

“More like pool break,” Connie laughed. However, the revelry was all too short-lived.

“Hey! Who’s there?!” Dipper shouted, having overheard all of the commotion as he started heading over.

“Quick! Hide me!” Mermando exclaimed in a sudden panic, curling his tail up so Steven and Connie could easily close the cooler with him inside.

“Just act natural you guys,” Mabel cautioned the two of them with a whisper right before Dipper arrived. Steven and Connie both responded with a thumbs up, though that didn’t stop the former from supplying his usual cheerful greeting.

“Hi, Dipper!” Steven exclaimed blithely.
“Well, that is natural for Steven…” Connie muttered as Mabel face palmed.

“Steven? Connie? Mabel?” Dipper asked, completely confused as he shined his flashlight on the trio. “Is there anyone not breaking into the pool tonight? What, is Soos here too?”

No sooner had he said this of course, then did Soos happen to fall over the fence after having scaled it. “I’m ok!” he exclaimed, alerting everyone else to his presence.

“Go home, Soos,” Dipper said, exasperated.

“You got it!” Soos complied, climbing back over the fence.

“So why are you guys here?” Dipper asked the trio with a suspicious frown.

“We’re here in the name of love!” Steven proclaimed boldly.

“Steven!” Connie quickly scolded.

“Oh! I mean we’re here… um… for…” the young Gem trailed off, looking to Mabel to finish for him.

“Uh, no reason!” she said with a forced grin. However, their cover was slightly blown at that moment as Mermando just so happened to clear his throat from inside the cooler.

“Did that cooler just clear its throat?” Dipper asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Um, yeah!” Steven grinned. “It’s a little sick, so we were just trying to take it to the doctor so it can feel better!”

“Ok, sure,” Dipper rolled his eyes, not at all buying that. “So what’s really in the cooler?”

“N-nothing!” Mabel said defensively. “There certainly isn’t a merman in there, if that’s what you’re implying. Who said anything about a merman?”

“You guys really aren’t good at being discreet, are you?” Connie asked Steven and Mabel.

“Being what?” Steven blinked in confusion.

“Guys, I don’t have time for this,” Dipper stressed, growing steadily more annoyed. “If you don’t give me those supplies, then I’ll lose the coolest job ever!”

“We understand…” Mabel said with faux sadness, even though she certainly had a plan in mind. “Hey, look! Wendy in a bikini!”

“Really?!” Dipper instantly fell for the distraction, which allowed Mabel, Steven, and Connie to hop onto the mystery kart. “At night?”

“Sorry, Dipper!” Mabel called as she began to drive off with the cooler in tow.

“Mabel!” Dipper shouted in frustration upon realizing he had been tricked. Without wasting a second, he hurried to the pool’s golf cart and gave chase, determined to get the stolen supplies back long before they could even be missed. As resolved as he was, he hardly noticed as he sped past Sadie and Lars, who were still sitting at the edge of the deep end. Still, the kart suddenly zooming by was enough to startle them both out of their relaxed, almost pleasant conversation, to the point that Lars actually ended up falling into the water, though not before knocking his head on the side of the pool first.
“Lars!” Sadie gasped in alarm, jumping to her feet as she noticed him semi-consciously sink further down. Not knowing what else to do, she jumped into the pool herself, acting on instinct as she swam after him and grabbed him by the arm just in time. Though it took some struggling, she managed to drag him back up to the surface, though it was clear he was still waterlogged and quite out of it. “Oh come on!” she exclaimed in panicked exasperation as she pulled him over to the edge and hauled him out of the pool, letting him lay on his back.

“Lars? Lars, can you hear me?” Sadie shouted, though he was still unresponsive. With an impatient groan, she gave him a clean slap on the face in the hopes of rousing him, though it did relatively little to wake him up. Sadie’s cheeks burned bright red as she realized what she had to do to save his life, and while it flustered her, she went through with it nonetheless. After opening Lars’ mouth up, she took in a deep breath and bent over him, her mouth meeting his as she performed CPR on him. She couldn’t help but relish it the slightest bit, even if she knew it wasn’t a kiss, but all the same, it only went on for not nearly long enough.

As he regained consciousness, Lars’ eyes opened wide as he felt Sadie’s lips on his, which alone was enough to shock and startle both of them apart. Sadie was quick to pull away, still blushing in embarrassment as she let Lars sit up and catch his breath.

Of course, what neither of them noticed was Amethyst, who had been spectating in on the entire scene from her newly claimed spot on the back of Stan’s chair. The purple Gem had been watching all this with genuine interest, so much so that she had honestly neglected to lend any aid to the situation, even as Stan came back from his hiding spot in the bathroom.

“Well, the coast is clear,” he concluded, having made sure his nephew was gone. With a contented smile, he finally claimed his spot on his coveted chair, this time with no competition whatsoever. “Ah… Now all we have to do is wait here fifteen hours until the pool opens… This was a good plan.”

“Plus, we get a front row seat to some prime drama,” Amethyst remarked, nodding to Sadie and Lars. “Check it out.”

The two of them gave their full attention to the pair of cashiers, who were still trying to gather their bearings after what had just happened. “Lars, are you ok?” Sadie asked with relative concern.

“I can’t believe it…” Lars muttered amidst his coughing. “You just… kissed me right the heck out of nowhere! What’s up with that, Sadie?!”

“What?!?” Sadie exclaimed, completely taken aback. “Lars, that wasn’t a kiss! I was saving your life!”

“Please! I know you have the hots for me!” Lars accused coldly.

“Are you serious!?” Sadie scoffed harshly. “Why are you like this?! Why can’t you just be grateful for once? I do all sorts of stuff for you all the time and you never notice! I cover for you at work, I take over your shifts, I even came all the way out here tonight so we could have a good time together for once and you just… don’t care!”

“S-Sadie…” Lars tried to interrupt, his eyes wide as he realized that he clearly messed up.

“I just don’t know what else to do…” Sadie sighed, turning away from him. “But that’s fine. I guess it’s my fault for not realizing that things never change with you, Lars, do they?”

Lars was admittedly speechless upon hearing this, shocked and uncertain of what he even could say
at a moment like this. Not that Sadie was too keen on hearing him out anyway. “Goodnight, Lars,” Sadie said dejectedly as she began to leave. A part of her hoped that Lars would try and stop her, but when he didn’t, she simply kept on going. “See you at work tomorrow…”

While the lake was on the other side of town from the pool, Mabel figured it would be as good a place as any to dump Mermando off so he could make it back to the ocean. Still, they had to hurry if they ever wanted to get there at all, since Dipper was still hot on their tail as they sped through town.

“He’s gaining on us!” Steven called to the girls sitting up front from his spot on top of the cooler in the back.

“Can’t this thing go any faster?” Connie asked Mabel, clinging onto the frame of the cart for dear life.

“No! Grunkle Stan didn’t spring for a high speed golf cart!” Mabel exclaimed fretfully.

“Hand over the pool supplies in the name of pool law!” Dipper shouted to the group through his megaphone.

“Pool law is dumb!” Mabel yelled back rebelliously. “And so is your hat!”

Dipper let out a disgruntled groan upon hearing this, but fortunately, he had a method of retaliation, as well as a possibly way of stopping the trio. He made use of several of the extra water balloons him and Wendy had filled up earlier by haphazardly throwing them at Mabel, Steven, and Connie, all while still relentlessly pursing them towards the lake.

“Incoming!” Steven warned the girls as the first round of water balloons flew towards them. Mabel tried her best to swivel out of the way of most of them, but what did manage to be a direct hit only really hit Steven, given his position.

“Sorry, Steven!” Dipper shouted his apology, knowing that even despite his resolve, he was still chasing his sister and two of his friends.

“It’s ok!” the young Gem assured, despite the fact that he was dripping wet.

The chase went on for quite some time, with neither side willing to stop for even a second. As they all neared the lake, they sped right past a cop car on the side of the road, where Blubbs and Durland were supposed to be on patrol, but were dozing off instead.

“Huh?” the sheriff blinked awake upon hearing the kids’ zoom past them. “I think someone just sped by.”

“Must have been a dream,” Durland remarked drowsily.

“With you, every day is a dream,” Blubbs remarked to his partner with a warm smile.

Meanwhile, the heated pursuit grew even more intense as the lake itself at last came into view. Desperate as ever to get the stolen supplies back, Dipper fired another water balloon at the mystery kart, though instead of hitting Steven, it happened to strike the cooler’s plug instead. Instantly, the plug came loose and the water inside the cooler began to drain, much to the alarm of the merman inside of it.
“I cannot breathe!” Mermando shouted fearfully, trying his best to keep the water inside the cooler.
“You must hurry!”

“Don’t worry, Mermando!” Mabel called back to him. “We’re almost there!”

“And until then, I got you covered,” Steven reassured, putting his hands over the open plug, even though water still gushed out of the cooler despite his efforts. “Aw, man, I thought this work!”

“Steven, just close the plug!” Connie exclaimed, pointing out the obvious.

“Oh, right!” Steven chuckled, doing just that. Still, enough water had drained out of the cooler that Mermando didn’t really have much left, meaning that time was still of the essence. Fortunately, they had just made it to the lake, but unfortunately, the kart was going way too fast as they approached it. Mabel slammed her foot on the breaks, which flung Steven right off the back, though he rolled off to the side as Dipper stopped his kart just a few feet short of hitting him. At the same time, Mabel and Connie held onto the kart tightly as it performed an aggressive roll, until they both inevitably fell off of it along with the cooler.

“Are you guys ok?!” Steven asked as him and Dipper ran over with apt concern.

“I think so…” Connie frowned, gingerly picking herself up off the ground. “I gotta say, going on a wild cart chase was the last thing I ever expected to be doing tonight.”

“I know, right?” the young Gem chuckled in agreement.

“Alright, you guys, the jig is up!” Dipper asserted sternly. “Hand over the cooler!”

“Never!” Mabel protested, standing between her brother and the cooler.

“Why not?” Dipper asked. “What do you even need it for?!”

Mabel sucked in a deep breath, knowing that she couldn’t really keep this charade up any longer. Steven and Connie looked to her with concern, but even so, her shoulders drooped as she let out her breath before jumping into her lengthy explanation. “I needed the cooler to save my new friend because he needs to go home and he’s really nice and we combed each other’s hair and he needs the cooler because he breathes water because he’s a merman!”

At this, Mabel kicked the cooler Mermando was in open, allowing the parched merman to roll out. “Hola,” he greeted Dipper tersely.

“Whoa!” Dipper exclaimed in absolute shock upon seeing this. “Way to bury the lead, Mabel. And you guys knew about this?” he asked Steven and Connie.

“Well, yeah…” Connie admitted a bit sheepishly. “Sorry for leaving you out of the loop, Dipper.”

“Well, now you know!” Mabel interjected. “Dipper, meet Mermando.”

“Nice to meet you. Also, I think I am dying,” Mermando said before letting out a desperate gasp. “Water! Auga! Yo neccesito!”

“Oh no!” Steven exclaimed worriedly. “What do we do?!”

“Dipper, you’re the lifeguard!” Mabel urged her brother. “Give him CPR or something!”

“Mabel, mermen don’t breathe air!” Dipper retorted.
“Then give him reverse CPR! Doi!”

Dipper wasn’t exactly keen on the idea of giving anyone CPR, but at the same time, the last thing he wanted was to watch a merman die of suffocation. And so, he begrudgingly complied, running back over to the golf cart and grabbing a spare bottle of water and hurrying back with it. After a moment of steeling himself for this impending task, he took a long swig of water from the bottle before bending over and passing said water onto Mermando via mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. “I hate this!” Dipper exclaimed in between providing Mermando with several mouthfuls of water. “I hate this!”

“Heh, blackmail,” Mabel chuckled as she took a picture of her brother in the middle of this embarrassing act.

“I don’t understand,” Connie said with a disturbed frown. “Why doesn’t Dipper just pour the water right into Mermando’s mouth straight from the bottle?”

“Shh, Connie!” Mabel quickly quieted her before Dipper could hear. “Because this is way funnier!”

“Go Dipper!” Steven cheered encouragingly. “You can do it!”

And indeed he did. For after what seemed like ages, Mermando finally let out a ragged, yet properly wet cough as he sat up as much as he could. “Thank you for saving me,” he smiled to Dipper, who was rather scarred by the experience. “But… why didn’t you just roll me into the lake?”

Dipper face palmed upon hearing this suggestion, especially upon seeing that the lake itself was only a few feet away. Not wanting to risk Mermando dehydrating again, the kids all worked together to help him into the lake, where the merman was more than happy to splash around for a moment and regain the rest of his lost water. He attempted to let out a happy dolphin echo, only for his voice to falter.

“I am weak from coughing,” he said with a fretful frown. “How will I get my family to hear my call from the mighty depths of the ocean?”

“You could always try using a payphone,” Steven suggested with an amicable smile. “They do have those in the ocean, right?”

“I… kind of doubt they do, Steven,” Connie remarked with a laugh.

“Oh, I got it!” Mabel said with a snap of her fingers. “BRB.” Without another word, she hurried back to the pool golf cart and retrieved the megaphone, holding it up proudly as she hurried back to the shore. “Problem solved!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Dipper exclaimed, snatching the megaphone from her. “Mabel, those are pool supplies. I’ll get fired!”

“Dipper, don’t you know what it’s like to fall for someone?” Mabel asked with a pleading frown. “Even though you know in your heart that it’ll probably never work out, but you’d do anything for that person?”

Dipper let out a long sigh upon hearing this, knowing all too well what that was like. After all, it nearly summed up his own crush on Wendy perfectly. Which was why he could do little else but hand the megaphone over to Mabel, knowing well what it was going to cost him. “Give Mermando the megaphone…”
“Thanks, Dip,” Mabel smiled gratefully, running over to the merman to do just that.

“Oh, this is so great!” Steven gushed cheerfully. “It’s like one big happy ending!”

“Sure…” Dipper muttered to himself somewhat dejectedly. “A happy ending…”

Mabel grinned affectionately to Mermando as she gave the megaphone over to him, but even so, she couldn’t help but feel bittersweet, knowing that these were certainly their parting moments. Still, she couldn’t exactly be completely sad, for certainly she would be able to cherish the memories she had made with Mermando forever. “Mabel, I have never met anyone like you,” Mermando said as Mabel knelt down to his level.

“Same here,” Mabel agreed. “Except a zombie, a gnome, and a couple of cute vampires.”

“I don’t remember any vampires,” Dipper spoke up, confused.

“I don’t tell you everything,” Mabel remarked before turning back to Mermando. “Well, Mermando, I guess this is it…”

“Not quite…” Mermando said with a daring smirk. “This is!” Without any warning, the merman suddenly leapt up out of the lake and gave Mabel a sudden, but completely welcome kiss in the light of the rising morning sun. Her eyes were huge for the first second of it, but she quickly learned to savor the kiss as her foot kicked up in absolute bliss. It took no thought at all for her to realize that this was everything she could have wanted out of her first kiss and then some.

“Whoa! Ok, that’s gross,” Dipper cringed, looking away.

“Yeah, that’s kinda weird…” Connie agreed, also quite off put.

“Aw, come on you guys!” Steven exclaimed with an elated smile, tears in his eyes. “It’s so beautiful!”

And all too quickly it was over. Mermando splashed back into the lake, leaving Mabel with flushed cheeks and a hopelessly lovestruck smile that wouldn’t fade easily. “Oh my gosh! That was my first kiss!” she announced triumphantly.

“How was it?” Steven asked with an invested grin.

“It was amazing!” Mabel gushed, wrapping her arms around herself. “Hey, I guess it was also kind of your first kiss too, huh?” she asked Dipper, elbowing him teasingly.

“Please don’t involve me in this,” Dipper said with a scowl.

“Goodbye, Mermando,” Mabel said, turning to the merman one last time.

“Goodbye, Mabel,” Mermando said was a sincere smile. And then, without any further ado, the merman dove off into the lake, clearly glad to be swimming in open waters once more. After watching him leave for a moment, Mabel returned to the others as they all began to head back to down the docks to the golf carts.

“You did the right thing, Dipper,” Mabel said as she placed an arm around her brother’s shoulder.

“Yeah, yeah,” Dipper shrugged with a small smile.

“Come on, Dipper, you’re like a total hero!” Steven agreed enthusiastically.
“You know, if being a hero means giving reverse CPR to a merman,” Connie added with a smirk.

“I’m… not sure if it does…”

“Oh wait! One last thing!” Mabel exclaimed as she quickly ran back to the edge of the dock. After positioning herself just right, she raised her hand into the air just before Mermando leapt high over the dock, meeting her hand in a high five before splashing into the water once more. “Yes! I’ve always wanted to do that!”

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“A wrecked fence? Dents in the pool mobile? And a missing megaphone?!” Poolcheck practically shouted as he went over the list of damages from last night. “Who is responsible for this?!”

“It’s my fault, sir,” Dipper hesitantly admitted, knowing that there really was no one else to blame. “I’m sorry. I got in too deep.”

“Hand over the whistle, boy,” Poolcheck growled, the veins on his neck popping out in his abject fury. Dipper did so, watching with nervous concern as Poolcheck put the whistle in his mouth and easily crushed it to pieces with his teeth. Not wanting to be on the receiving end of his wrath, Dipper slowly backed away, hoping that the unstable pool owner wouldn’t notice. “If one more thing goes wrong today…” Poolcheck trailed off, shaking with rage. However, something else did go wrong as, only a few feet behind him, Soos innocently tossed all of the inflatable ducks right over the fence.

“You’re free now! Free!” the handyman proclaimed. “Inflatable ducks unite!”

“You!” Poolcheck shouted, absolutely infuriated.

“Huh?” Soos turned towards the pool owner, who was already storming towards him. Terrified, the handyman fled, escaping through the hole in the fence as Poolcheck hurried after him in a heated pursuit.

Meanwhile, Dipper sulked to the other side of the pool in rather low spirits, knowing that his chances of one-on-one time with Wendy had all been completely dashed. Still, he didn’t have too much time to feel sorry for himself before he was suddenly struck with a water balloon from seemingly out of nowhere.

“Hey, doofus,” Wendy greeted as she joined him, revealing that she had been the one to throw it. “You’ll never guess what happened. I just got fired.”

“What? Really?” Dipper asked, amazed by the coincidence.

“Yeah,” Wendy shrugged. “I guess Poolcheck found out I was taking too many snacks.”

“How many?”

Wendy smirked as she lifted her hat to reveal several bags of chips underneath it, much to Dipper’s amusement. “Hey, wanna go break rules somewhere else?” she asked, still grinning.

“Of course!” Dipper laughed, always ready to do practically anything with Wendy.
Steven let out a sad sigh as he sat on the edge of the pool, letting his feet dangle in the cool water. Connie frowned as she sat down beside him, handing him a can of soda. “Steven, what’s wrong?” she asked, concerned. “I thought you’d be happy. I mean, we just helped save a merman! That’s something not a lot of people can say, I’m sure.”

“Yeah, but we weren’t able to help Sadie and Lars,” the young Gem sighed. “When I went to get some chips from the snack shack earlier, they wouldn’t even talk to each other at all! I don’t know what happened. I guess our mission was a total failure, huh?”

“Well… I wouldn’t say it was a total failure,” Connie said, glancing to the other side of the pool. “Look!”

Steven glanced over to where she was pointing, seeing that Sadie was on her break reclining on one of the pool chairs. Lars slowly walked over to her, taking in a deep, anxious breath before addressing her.

“H-hey…” he said, not meeting her gaze as she lowered her sunglasses to look at him. “So um… well, I… Mind if I join you?”

“You can do whatever you want,” Sadie said, unconcerned as she scooted over to make some room for him. The two of them lay together on the chair in silence for what felt like an awkwardly long amount of time before Lars spoke up once more.

“So, uh…. About last night…” he began sheepishly. “I guess I should say… I’m sorry…”

“Oh really?” Sadie asked, not really believing him.

“Well, it was really… great how you, uh… s-saved me and everything…”

“You don’t read into it,” Sadie remarked though after a moment she broke into a small smile nonetheless. “But you’re welcome.”

“Not that I needed your help in the first place!” Lars quickly stammered, though it was clear he was largely joking. “I mean, I’ve known how to swim from the time I was like, three. I would have been just fine.”

“Sure you would have, Lars,” Sadie laughed, clearly amused. “Suuuure you would have.”

As they watched this genuinely sweet exchange, Steven and Connie exchanged an elated smile, knowing that against all odds, their plan had worked, oddly enough, without their intervention. “Wow!” the young Gem exclaimed. “It was just like Garnet said! All we had to do was let nature take its course and things turned out great! Man, I should really start listening to her more often.”

“You think?” Connie asked with a chuckle, knowing well that Steven always had the best intentions at heart, even if he sometimes went a bit overboard in carrying them out.

As Mabel sat by the edge of the pool, she realized just how lonely it was without Mermando there. The bond she had formed with the merman was certainly a special one, but with him gone, she couldn’t help but feel a bit empty. True, she had done the right thing in helping him escape, but she still couldn’t deny that she missed him and lamented the fact that she would likely never see him again. And that thought alone was enough to drag her usually cheery spirits down quite a bit.
“Hello, Mabel,” Garnet suddenly greeted as she took a seat beside her, startling her somewhat.

“Garnet? You finally got up from your chair!” Mabel exclaimed, surprised to see her.

“Eh, it was getting pretty boring just sitting there,” Garnet shrugged. “So I see your mystery boy is gone.”

“Yeah…” Mabel sighed, kicking her feet in the water a bit. “Turns out he was actually a merman, so I helped him get back to the ocean last night. But… I still miss him. I mean I really liked him. I really really liked him. I liked him so much that he gave me all sorts of warm, fuzzy feelings on the inside, you know?”

“I do know,” Garnet said with a small chuckle. “But you did the right thing, Mabel. Letting go of someone is never easy, but if you truly care about them, then they stay with you, no matter how far apart you are.”

Mabel smiled softly upon hearing these comforting words, knowing that there was certainly some truth to them. Even despite the countless miles that separated her and Mermando now, her affections for him and the memories of the brief time they had spent together would always stay with her. And all things considered, that would be enough. “Thanks, Garnet,” she said with sincere gratitude. “How’d you get so smart about all this relationship stuff anyway?”

“I have my secrets…” Garnet replied with a vague, mysterious grin.

Mabel didn’t really get too much of a chance to question this as a bottle suddenly popped up out of the nearby pool vent. Confused, she retrieved it as it floated towards her, and upon seeing that there was a message inside, she pulled it out and read it to herself.

“Dear Mabel, I am home with my family and I am very happy. Our first kiss will always hold a special place in my heart. Technically hearts. As a merman, I have like, 17 hearts. Horrifying, but true! Love, Mermando. PS: More bottles on the way!”

Mabel barely had any time to let this initial message soak in before several more bottles came in through the vent, absolutely delighting her as she realized that Mermando intended on keeping in touch. “That’s what I mean,” Garnet said to Mabel with a knowing smile. “The people you care about stay with you, sometimes in the most unexpected ways.”

Stan and Amethyst sat smugly upon their claimed chair, just as they had been doing ever since late last night. As the conman stretched out on the main part of the seat, the purple Gem perched herself on top of it, finding it to be a rather comfortable spot, against all odds. And of course, what made their plan even more satisfying was the look on Gideon’s face as he headed over to the chair to see that it had already been doubly claimed.

“W-what?!” the child psychic exclaimed in alarm as Stan and Amethyst exchanged a congratulatory wink. “My chair!”

“Not anymore!” the purple Gem exclaimed proudly. “Take that, you little punk!”

“Very well, I suppose you two won, fair and square,” Gideon sighed in defeat. “Put ‘er there.”

Stan attempted to reach his hand out to meet the child psychic’s handshake, only to realize he couldn’t move it, or any other part of his body at all. “Hey! What the-”
“We’re stuck!” Amethyst gasped, realizing that she couldn’t remove herself from the back of the chair either. “What the heck did you do, Gideon?!”

“Well, I might have just so happened to predict your little plan and coated the entire chair in glue last night!” Gideon exclaimed with a wicked laugh of triumph. “Enjoy your chair… forever.”

The child physic continued to snicker deviously as he walked away, leaving the pair trapped to the chair they had worked so hard to get in the first place. “How were we supposed to see something like this coming?!” Amethyst groaned in frustration, wishing she could face palm, even though her hands were stuck to the chair.

“I’ll wring that kid’s neck if we ever get outta here!” Stan threatened bitterly. “Where’s Garnet when you need her?!”

“Garnet!” Amethyst shouted as loudly as she could. “Yo, G, where you at?! C’mon, we need your help!”

The two of them continued to call for the Gem leader for quite some time, though Garnet herself knew full well about their plight, considering that she was telling Pearl all about it via the pool’s phone.

“And he glued them to the chair and everything?!” Pearl laughed on the other end of the line. “I have to hand it to Gideon, that is absolutely hilarious! I wish I was there to enjoy it!”

“Don’t worry,” Garnet chuckled as she watched Stan and Amethyst continue to try and pry themselves free from the chair, to little avail. “I’ll make sure to have Steven take plenty of pictures. It’s something you won’t want to miss.”
Chapter 24: Future Vision

Chapter Summary

In which Mabel, Candy, Grenda, Amethyst, and Pearl save some boyz, Wendy and Robbie break up, Garnet is vague and mysterious (as always), and Dipper and Steven are overly paranoid.

Even though they were supposed to be tending to the gift shop, Dipper and Wendy weren’t exactly fulfilling their responsibilities as they spent the slow afternoon entertaining themselves. Their newly-invented game was a simple one that really only consisted of them providing comical voice overs for the shack’s video security feed, but even so, the witty banter they came up with was more than enough to provide them both with plenty of laughs.

“Do you have this tee-shirt in my size?” Dipper dubbed over one of the gift shop patrons, throwing his voice to do so.

“I have something even better!” Wendy filled in Stan’s response as the conman happened to bend over. “Behold! My butt!”

Needless to say, the pair broke into a round of shared laughter over this, one that provided a brief break from their ongoing narration. “I could play this game forever,” Dipper whispered to his crush, giving her an adoring smile.

“What did you say?” Wendy asked, having not clearly heard him.

“C-coughing! I was coughing! Those weren’t words!” Dipper quickly covered for himself, knowing the last thing he ever wanted was for Wendy catch onto his affections for her.

“This game looks like a lot of fun! Mind if I play too?” Steven asked completely out of nowhere, alerting the pair to his presence near the counter.

“Steven! How long have you been standing there?” Dipper asked, somewhat startled.

“I dunno, a few minutes, I guess,” the young Gem shrugged with a smile. “I’m just taking a break from clearing all of my old toys out of the temple.”

“Whoa, dude, that’s pretty mature of you,” Wendy remarked with a smirk.

“Well, I knew this day had to come sooner or later,” Steven replied. “It’s a little tough letting all of them go, but I’m a Crystal Gem. I’m a big boy now. And I’ve gotta stop saying things like ‘I’m a big boy now’.”

“Yeah, you might wanna hold off on that one,” Dipper said with a small laugh.
The conversation didn’t get much of a chance to progress any further before Mabel ran in, a huge grin on her face as she broke into an excited jig. “Hey, guys!” she greeted cheerfully. “I bet you’re all wondering why I’m doing this dance!”

“Is it… time for an unplanned dance party?” Steven guessed with an eager smile. “Because you know I’m in if that’s the case!”

Dipper, on the other hand, reached a much more frightening conclusion. “Oh no! She got into the Smile Dip again!”

“Both of you are wrong times a thousand!” Mabel proclaimed, finishing her dance. “It’s because today is the greatest day of my life!” Without any further prompting, she pulled a calendar out of her sweater and tossed it at her brother, showing little concern as it hit him right in the face. “Sev’ral Timez is playing at the Gravity Falls Civic Center and Buffet tonight! It’s gonna be… AHHH!” she trailed off into an elated scream, unable to contain her excitement.

“Sev’ral Timez?” Steven asked with a frown. “Aren’t they that super popular boy band?”

“Yeah, the one that came a decade too late?” Dipper added, rolling his eyes. “Mabel, you know all those boy bands are fake, right?”

“Dipper’s right,” Wendy said, even if Mabel really wasn’t paying them any mind in her exhilaration. “They’re just a manufactured product of the bloated corporate music industry.”

“What does all that mean?” Steven inquired, confused.

“It means there’s probably some machine that mass produces them,” Dipper replied, laughing.

“Oh, or maybe the boys are grown from pods,” Wendy chuckled along with Dipper. While Steven still wasn’t exactly sure what they meant, Mabel simply crossed her arms and pouted at their mocking.

“You guys can’t ruin this for me,” she said firmly. “Mabel’s got backup!” As if on cue, Candy and Grenda burst into the shop, both of them decked out in Sev’ral Timez merchandize and both of them just as excited as Mabel was.

“Hey, guys!” Grenda exclaimed in her usual boisterous way.

“Woot-woot!” Candy cheered, holding up her foam finger.

“Who’s ready for the greatest night of our lives?” Mabel asked before breaking out into a snippet of a Sev’ral Timez song. “How many times am I gonna love ya?”

“Sev’ral Timez!” all three of them responded together. Not wanting to wait another second, the girls hurried out to head for the concert, squealing with delight all the while.

“Ugh, girls,” Dipper scoffed once his sister and her friends were out of earshot.

“I know, right?” Wendy remarked just as caustically. Yet even despite their cynicism, the young Gem was still as innocently cheerful as ever.

“Bye, you guys!” Steven called out after the girls with a friendly grin. “Have fun! Oh, and if you do find any boy band making machine, take pictures! That sounds awesome!”
Of course, even as they went outside, Mabel, Candy, and Grenda could hardly stop chattering excitedly about the upcoming concert. The very thought of getting to meet their shared favorite boy band was enough to distract them all to the point that they didn’t even notice the Gems coming down from the temple until they ran right into them, literally.

Garnet was as solid as ever as Mabel accidentally walked into her, cutting off her zealous conversation with Candy and Grenda. “Watch out,” the Gem leader advised a bit late.

“Oops! Sorry, Garnet!” Mabel exclaimed, somewhat embarrassed. “We’re just super excited about going to the Sev’ral Timez concert tonight!”

“Several what?” Pearl asked, confused.

“Sev’ral Timez!” Grenda exclaimed loudly. “They were ranked #1 most kissable boy band by Pre-Teen Dream magazine!”

“And the three of us are going meet all of them!” Mabel practically squealed with excitement as she pulled out a poster of the band for the Gems to see. “Aren’t they just dreamy? There’s Creggy G., Greggy C., Leggy P., Chubby Z., and Deep Chris!”

“He is the phat one!” Candy quipped.

“And these boys will fall in love with us,” Mabel finished with a hopeful grin.

“Why wouldn’t they?” Grenda asked as she shoved a handful of peanut butter into her mouth.

“Whoa, check these guys out,” Amethyst remarked with a chuckle as she took the poster to get a better look. “I’ve never seen humans with hair so shiny before!”

“And they all look remarkably similar to one another…” Pearl noted with intrigue. “Are they related to each other?”

“Nope! They’re just all 100% hunks!” Grenda proclaimed.

“Why don’t you guys come to the concert with us?” Mabel asked the Gems. “It’s gonna be wild and crazy fun!”

“You know I’m always down for wild and crazy fun,” Amethyst smirked. “Plus, it’s been a while since I’ve thrown down in the pit, if ya know what I mean…” The others all gave the purple Gem a look of bewilderment upon hearing this, prompting a scoff from her. “Point is, I’m game. What about you, P? Think you can handle a night of loud music and people pushing each other?”

Pearl rolled her eyes at Amethyst’s teasing, but even so she cracked a small smile. “Don’t worry about me, Amethyst. I’ve done my fair share of…pushing,” she remarked, giving the purple Gem a playful shove.

“Ow, my arm! I think it’s broken!” the purple Gem laughed amidst her pretend pain.

“So are you guys coming then?” Mabel asked with a smile, knowing that the Gems joining them would make tonight’s show all the more exciting.

“I suppose there’s no harm in indulging in a night of human culture and music,” Pearl said with an amicable shrug. “What do you say, Garnet?” The white Gem paused, however, as she noticed that their leader had strangely disappeared, even though she had just been there moments ago. “Garnet?”
Despite the interruption from Mabel earlier, Dipper and Wendy resumed their voice over game, and this time Steven joined them, forgetting about his chore of getting rid of his old toys that he was supposed to be taking a break from. Instead, the trio let time casually roll by coming up with words to put into customers’ mouths and getting a good laugh out of their results.

“Oh look, here comes Robbie!” Steven pointed out the teen’s arrival on the security feed.

“Oh, I got this one, you guys,” Dipper cut in with a somewhat mischievous smirk before throwing his voice to mimic Robbie. “‘Hey, is this the fingerless glove store? I like things that are dumb, I’m Robbie.’”

“C’mon, man,” Wendy chuckled as both boys joined in. The three of them were laughing so hard that they didn’t really notice Robbie approach the counter until he let out a disgruntled sneer.

“Ha ha ha, laugh it up, dorks,” the teen remarked with a scowl aimed for Dipper and Steven. “So, Wendy, Nate and his girlfriend are going to Lookout Point this weekend. Maybe we should go too?”

“Are you kidding me?!” Wendy asked with a rather upset scoff. “First you stand me up last night, then instead of apologizing, you want me to go with you to Lookout Point? You can’t honestly expect me to let you off that easy, Robbie.”

“Hey, are you guys having relationship problems?” Steven interjected somewhat obliviously. “Because if you are, maybe I can help! Why, just the other day, Connie and me helped Sadie and Lars-”

“Steven!” Dipper quickly interrupted, panicked yet excited at the same time. However, he did his best to laugh both of those things off as Wendy and Robbie both gave him a look of apt confusion. “Uh, we’ll just… be over here,” he said, pulling Steven towards the den.

“Aww, but I wanna help-” the young Gem attempted to protest.

“Believe me, no we don’t,” Dipper whispered to Steven somewhat harshly as they hid behind the door to the den. Fortunately, it was still a good enough vantage point for them to eavesdrop in on the continuing conversation between Robbie and Wendy.

“Look, Robbie…” Wendy began with a dissatisfied sigh. “I’m just… not sure this relationship is working. Maybe… maybe we should see other people.”

It took Dipper all the self-control he had to keep himself from outright cheering upon hearing this. Steven watched in confusion as Dipper silently celebrated this news, not really sure what was so great about Wendy and Robbie’s romantic troubles. “What are you so excited about?” the young Gem asked in a discreet whisper.

“Steven, don’t you get it?” Dipper retorted with an elated grin. “Wendy and Robbie are breaking up!”

“And that’s… a good thing?”

“Good? It’s great!” Dipper exclaimed as though it was obvious. “This means Wendy will be available again and I won’t have to compete with Robbie anymore! I’ve been waiting weeks for this moment!”
“Huh,” Steven frowned, still not exactly following. “Well, as long as somebody is happy about it, I guess…”

“W-whoa, hey!” Robbie exclaimed nervously upon hearing Wendy’s desire to break up. “Before you do anything crazy, I, uh… I want you to hear this.” Still clearly apprehensive, the moody teen reached into his pocket and pulled out a rather suspicious looking CD, one that glistened rather oddly despite its dark surface. Though Steven didn’t notice anything particularly out of the ordinary about the disk, Dipper knew there was something suspicious about it, even if he couldn’t exactly put his finger on what that something was.

“I wrote this song just for you,” Robbie said, nodding to the CD. He gave Wendy an apologetic smile as he put the disk in the CD player and began singing along to it. “When I think about you, I feel feelings so deep. I’m tossing and turning, and you know I’m losing sleep.”

“Yeesh,” Dipper cringed over how incredibly sappy the lyrics of the song were.

“Aw, I think it’s kinda sweet,” Steven said with a grin.

“Yeah, sweet enough to rot someone’s teeth out,” Dipper deadpanned, rolling his eyes.

“And I know I’m goin’ crazy when I look into your eyes,” Robbie continued singing, even as Wendy crossed her arms and begrudgingly listened. “Just listen to this song, and you’ll be hypnotai-ai-ai-zed.”

Despite the song’s mushy tone, however, as Robbie sang its final words, Wendy suddenly seemed to be completely captivated by it, her eyes wide as she stared at her boyfriend in relative awe. Her daze soon wore off, however, as she rubbed her eyes and gave Robbie a small, somewhat remorseful smile. “You know, maybe I was being too hasty. I’ll give you another chance.”

“Yes!” Robbie cheered happily over his success, especially as Wendy gave him a kiss on the cheek. Dipper, on the other hand, was far from pleased by this turn of events.

“H-how’d he do that?!” he asked in a shocked whisper.

“Maybe Wendy just really liked the song,” Steven suggested with a shrug.

“Yeah, and maybe Robbie doesn’t smother his hair in gallons of hair gel every day,” Dipper remarked sarcastically.

“Let me go grab my coat,” Wendy said to Robbie as she headed off to the den as Dipper and Steven emerged from it.

“Alright, Robbie, we saw that weird CD,” Dipper said with a scowl as soon as he was sure Wendy was out of earshot. “What the heck are you up to?”

“It’s called romance, kid,” the teen sneered. “Something you’d never understand.”

“So… is that CD made out of romance then?” Steven asked with a confused frown.

“What? No,” Robbie scoffed. “But it might as well be, considering how well it worked.”

Before Dipper could shoot another harsh retort at his rival, Wendy returned, still giving Robbie an affectionate smile. “You ready?” she asked her boyfriend, linking arms with him. “I can’t believe you wrote that song for me.”
“I know. I’m just so insanely talented,” Robbie said as he led Wendy out, though not before sending a smug smirk Dipper’s way.

“Aww, well it looks like everything’s ok again,” Steven remarked once the couple left. “Still, I’m sorry things didn’t turn out exactly the way you wanted them to, Dipper.” The young Gem apologetic frown turned to one of apt bewilderment as he turned to Dipper, only to see him inspecting the CD Robbie had left behind by sniffing it, oddly enough. “Uh… what are you doing?”

“Steven, call me crazy, but I think Robbie might have used his song to hypnotize Wendy!” Dipper exclaimed. After all, his theory only made sense considering how the song was able to completely change the cashier’s mind almost out of nowhere.

“Whoa….” Steven gasped, amazed. “But… I thought you needed a watch to hypnotize people…”

“I’m sure music could do it somehow too!” Dipper protested. “How else would Robbie get Wendy to forgive him just like that?”

“Like I said, maybe she just liked the song,” Steven reiterated. “I mean, yeah it was a little corny, I guess, but Robbie wrote it just for her, which is really nice and touching! Music just… brings people together. Just take my mom and dad for example; they first met at one of my dad’s concerts and they fell in love!”

“Y-yeah, but this… this is totally different!” Dipper still tried to rationalize. “This… this is… Ugh, I don’t know!” With a frustrated groan, he sunk down to sit against the counter, glaring at the floor. “I just don’t get it. How is Robbie always just one step ahead of me when it comes to Wendy? What am I missing here?”

“Oh, don’t worry, Dipper. You’ll figure it out eventually,” Steven reassured as he headed for a nearby shelf to check out a new snow globe. “And look on the bright side. In the meantime, at least you and Wendy can still hang out as friends!”

“…Thanks?” Dipper frowned, unsure of how that was supposed to help.

Steven was just about to offer more encouraging words, but before he could, the shelf he was reaching for suddenly snapped off from its hinges, sending all of its contents tumbling down towards the young Gem. Both boys gasped in fear at this, but fortunately, before the objects on the shelf could fall on top of Steven, someone came to his rescue right on time, albeit completely out of nowhere.

“Garnet!” Steven exclaimed upon seeing the Gem leader shield him from disaster.

“Good afternoon to you, Steven, Dipper,” Garnet greeted with a small smile, even though she was covered in debris from the broken objects from the shelf.

“Oh my gosh! Garnet, are you ok?” Dipper asked with concern as he rose to stand.

“I’m fine,” the Gem leader confirmed, crossing her arms. “I’ve taken a lot worse hits than that.”

“Hey, hey, hey!” Stan exclaimed as he entered the shop, looking less than pleased. “Who’s in here breaking all my merchandise?!” He paused, however, as he noticed the Gem leader. “Oh, I should have figured.”

“Garnet didn’t break anything, Mr. Pines,” Steven explained. “She saved me! Boy, Garnet, I sure am lucky you showed up when you did.”
“Luck’s got nothing to do with it,” Garnet said, adjusting her shades.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Dipper asked, confused.

“Don’t worry about it,” the Gem leader said dismissively as she prepared to leave. Yet even so, both Dipper and Steven were quite intrigued, considering her mysterious manner.

“Hey! Aren’t you gonna pay for all this stuff?!” Stan called after her hotly, even though his question was ignored by the others.

“Oh, come on!” Steven begged as he ran alongside Garnet. “How do you always know where to be?”

“Seriously, it’s almost kind of creepy how you always know what’s going to happen before it happens,” Dipper remarked in agreement. “What’s up with that?”

Garnet paused before the door to the shack, her hands on her hips as she looked between the two boys. “I don’t think you two can handle that information,” she concluded somewhat playfully.

“What? No way! We can totally handle it!” Dipper protested devoutly.

“Yeah! I’m a big b—large man now,” Steven said, catching himself with a smirk. And in the end, after seeing both of their pleading smiles, the Gem leader’s resolve finally crumbled.

“Well… I guess you could say I have a sort of… future vision,” Garnet said as her shades happened to catch and reflect a burst of light.

“Future what?” Dipper repeated, puzzled.

“Future vision? You mean like some sort of hokey crystal ball-reading fortune teller?” Stan asked caustically, clearly not believing her.

“Not quite,” Garnet shook her head. “I’m able to see possible outcomes to most situations. Which comes in handy, since you kids seem to attract a lot of danger,” she said to the boys.

“Well, danger is my middle name,” Steven grinned, trying to act tough.

“That’s a lie,” Garnet said as she knelt down to his level. “Your middle name… is cutie pie.” With an affectionate grin, the Gem leader gave Steven a playful tap on the nose, eliciting a small laugh from him.

“So let me get this straight,” Dipper cut in, trying to make sense of this revelation. “You can see into the future?”

“No one can see into the future,” Garnet replied, standing. “I can see objects and trajectories. Time is like a river that splits into creeks or pools into lakes or careens down waterfalls. I have the map, and I steer the ship.”

“…What?” Dipper asked flatly, not understanding most of what she had just said.

“I see…” Steven mused, even if he didn’t really get it either.

“Pfft, this whole ‘future vision’ thing sounds like some kind of magical nonsense to me,” Stan scoffed coldly. “If you can really see what’s gonna happen in the future, then what am I about to do right now?”
“I just said I can’t see into the future,” Garnet replied dryly. “But as for what you might do in the future… You’ll probably send Soos in here to clean up this mess and then go back to stocking meat up for the apocalypse.”

“Ha! Shows what you know, stretch!” Stan grinned triumphantly. “I wasn’t planning on doing any of that! It just goes to show that fortune telling or future vision or whatever it was you called it is nothing more than a bunch of nonsense.” Without sparing another word, the conman turned on his heel and headed back into the house, though not without inadvertently proving the Gem leader’s prophecy true. “Soos! There’s a huge mess in the gift shop!” he called to the handyman, though the trio still in the shop could clearly hear him. “Get in there and clean it up for me, will ya!? I’m busy stocking up on all of that brown meat I have to get ready for the apocalypse!”

“Wow! That’s amazing!” Steven exclaimed, looking up to the Gem leader with stars in his eyes. “What you said totally came true, Garnet!”

“It doesn’t always work out exactly like I say it will,” Garnet said, continuing on outside as the boys followed her. “But most of the time, I’m pretty close to the mark, at least.”

“Ok… I think I get it now…” Dipper said, even if there were still plenty of questions he had about the Gem leader’s incredible ability. “So, your… future vision lets you see possibilities of what could happen in the future… Am I right?”

“You got it,” Garnet nodded.

“Oh! Oh!” Steven exclaimed, raising his hand. “So what do you see me possible doing next, Garnet?”

“Mmm… I see three outcomes for your immediate future, Steven,” Garnet said thoughtfully. “Either you’re going to give me a hug, you’re going to give Dipper a high five—”

“And the third one?” the young Gem asked eagerly.

“Both.”

“Both it is!” Steven exclaimed cheerfully, promptly high fiving Dipper before wrapping his arms around Garnet’s legs in a tight hug. “This is so cool, Garnet! How come you never told us about future vision before?”

“Well… let’s just say… you’ll figure that out soon enough,” Garnet said as her smile finally disappeared.

Though Dipper was more than prepared to question this vague answer, he paused the moment he happened to see Wendy and Robbie hanging out in the back of the teen’s van on the other side of the shack’s lawn. While his former bitterness and suspicion about Robbie’s song had disappeared in lieu of learning about Garnet’s future vision, it came back in full force now. And yet, at the same time, an idea happened to strike him, especially as he realized just how much of an advantage the Gem leader’s future vision could potentially be in breaking Wendy and Robbie up after all.

“Say, um, Garnet…” Dipper began, hoping that his appeal would work. “Since you can, you know, see what might happen in the future and everything, I was wondering if you’d be willing to—”

“You want me to help you break Wendy and Robbie up.” Garnet finished succinctly.

“Y-yeah…” Dipper admitted somewhat sheepishly. “But only because I’m desperate! So… please?”
“No.”

“What? But why not?” Dipper asked, dismayed. “All I need is a little intel. It won’t be hard!”

“That’s not the point, Dipper,” Garnet shook her head. “The point is, it would be wrong for me to help you break a couple apart. Future vision or not, I don’t support getting in the way of love of any kind.”

“Oh, that is true,” Steven noted to Dipper. “Garnet is a big fan of romance.”

“More than you know,” Garnet remarked to herself with a sly smile.

“Yeah but… but what if Wendy and Robbie aren’t really meant to be together?!?” Dipper protested, even if he knew he was grasping at straws with that. Still, he figured it was worth a try. After all, he did have supposed proof sitting right in his pocket.

“What do you mean?” Steven asked, mirroring Garnet’s confusion well.

“I mean I don’t think Wendy and Robbie are a healthy couple,” Dipper affirmed.

“And you don’t just think that because you think you should be with Wendy instead,” Garnet guessed, crossing her arms knowingly.

“Uh… right!” Dipper exclaimed, even if that was really true. “Just today, Wendy almost broke up with Robbie, but then he won her over again using this!” He held out the CD for Garnet to see.

“That’s a disk,” the Gem leader noted duly.

“No, no, he sang this really cheesy song to her and it somehow convinced her or brainwashed her or did something to her that made her fall in love with him all over again!” Dipper let out an exasperated sigh as he handed the disk off to Garnet. “That doesn’t sound like true love, does it?”

“Hm…” Garnet mused as she looked over the CD. She didn’t answer right away as she looked from the disk to the couple, still casually flirting with each other in the back of the van. Through her future vision, she was able to see what neither of the boys could, and whatever she saw was apparently enough to convince her somehow. “No, it doesn’t.”

“So… you’ll help me out then?” Dipper asked with a hopeful smile.

“Yes,” the Gem leader nodded, though there was no smile behind it. “But only because there’s more to this than there appears,” she said, referring to the disk.

“Like what?” Steven asked curiously.

Garnet finally smirked at this, even if she still disapproved of their mission overall. Yet all the same, she knelt down to the boys’ level and placed an arm around each of their shoulders. “We’ll just have to find that out for ourselves.”

The Gravity Falls Civics Center and Buffet was ridiculously packed, all for the extensively advertised and ridiculously hyped Sev’ral Timez concert about to take place there. Mabel, Candy, Grenda, Amethyst, and Pearl all arrived to the venue right on time to see the performance. While the girls were just as excited to be there as everyone else, the two Gems were a bit more speculative instead as they took all of the nearby sights and sounds in.
“Oh my! This place is terribly loud!” Pearl shouted out of the roar of the line to the ticket booth. “Is this what all human concerts are like?”

“It’s what they all should be like!” Amethyst exclaimed with a laugh. “Looks like this party is already poppin’!”

“It sure is!” Mabel grinned widely before turning to her friends. “Ok, girls, have you all practiced your obsessed boy band screams?”

At this prompting, Candy and Grenda both erupted into a round of excited squeals, one that Mabel and Amethyst soon joined in on. “Amethyst, why are you screaming!?” Pearl yelled with annoyed glare.

“Because that’s what you’re supposed to do at a concert!” the purple Gem practically screamed back with a huge grin. “Try it, P! It’s fun!”

Though Pearl’s heart clearly wasn’t in it, she gave a weak effort at screaming along with the others. “Ahhhh?” she tried, shrugging as she was still uncertain of the purpose of such noise.

“We’ll work on that,” Mabel noted as they made it to the front of the line. “Five tickets please!” she said to the ticket seller.

“Too late, girls!” the clerk exclaimed with an unsympathetic grin. “The show’s sold out.”

Mabel, Candy, and Grenda only had time to let out a shared gasp of horror as the box office abruptly closed, their hopes of seeing Sev’ral Timez live completely dashed. Likewise, Amethyst let out a loud, aggravated groan while Pearl let out something of a discreet sigh of disappointment herself.

“This night is ruined!” Grenda mourned as they all plopped down near the entrance.

“I welcome you, death,” Candy said morosely as she collapsed face down on the ground.

“That’s a… bit of an extreme…” Pearl mused with a concerned frown.

“Ugh, this is so dumb!” Amethyst crossed her arms and pouted. “Why do we even need stupid old tickets to go listen to music anyway?! Why can’t we just sneak in and do whatever? It’s not like it would be hard.”

“Wait, that’s it!” Mabel exclaimed, inspired by this suggestion. “I said we were gonna meet Sev’ral Timez tonight and I meant it! And I’m not going to let a ‘keep out’ sign keep us out!”

Candy and Grenda cheered in support with sudden, daring plan, as did Amethyst. “Whoo! Break in!” she exclaimed wildly. “Now we’re talking!”

“Now, hold it right there,” Pearl cut in quickly. “You all aren’t seriously entertaining the thought of breaking and entering, are you?” Of course, the others all shamelessly nodded at this, eliciting a tired sigh from the white Gem. “Honestly, I would expect such behavior from Amethyst, but you girls are much too young and innocent to be engaging in something so… so morally bankrupt!”

“But Pearl, we’ve been waiting weeks for this concert!” Mabel protested earnestly.

“I’ve been so excited about it, I haven’t slept since last Tuesday!” Grenda exclaimed desperately.

“We can’t just leave without seeing them, at least,” Mabel continued, practically pleading with the
“Yeah, c’mon, P,” Amethyst goaded. “Why can’t you just cut loose for one night and be a rebel? You know, for kicks?”

Pearl shot the purple Gem a sharp glare at this, not appreciating her upper hand. But even so, she pulled herself up to her full height as a hint of mischief entered her tone. “I’ll have you know I have plenty of experience being a rebel,” she remarked firmly. “Now come along, girls. We have a concert to break into.”

And that’s exactly what they did. With Pearl’s new resolve to aid in this rather illegal activity, she formulated a plan that Amethyst and the girls were more than eager to carry out. It took a little time and doing, what with the purple Gem having to knock out the guard to the back door in a clever enough way. But still, Mabel, Candy, and Grenda managed to pick the backstage lock while Pearl kept watch and soon enough they were all in.

“K, you guys,” Amethyst cautioned in a whisper as they walked down the hall of the concert hall. “The one thing to remember during any break-in is that you gotta keep it on the down low. Trust me, getting caught is a total bummer.”

Nonetheless, the purple Gem’s advice was promptly ignored by the excited trio of girls, who were more than elated to be so close to meeting their idols. “Hello!? Sev’ral Timez!?” Grenda called in her loud, booming voice.

“We want to give you several kisses!” Candy added just as indiscreetly.

“Look!” Mabel exclaimed with a gasp, stopping the others before the door that clearly led to the band’s dressing room. “This is it, you guys. We’re finally going to meet the five cutest boys in the world! Dipper’s gonna eat his words that boy bands are ‘fake’.”

Without wasting another second, she quietly opened the door, sharing the hope with her friends that they wouldn’t get caught. However, none of them, not even the two Gems, were prepared for the sight that awaited them on the other side.

Instead of the lavish space they were expecting, Sev’ral Timez’s dressing room was more akin to a testing facility straight out of a sci-fi movie. A row of large cloning tubes lined the wall, each of them containing members of the boy band in various stages of their biological development, from that of a fetus onward all the way to a full-grown teen. However, what was even more alarming was the fact that all five of the boys themselves were locked in a large cage in the center of the room, with only a giant hamster wheel and food trough to entertain them. In light of these startling sights, there was only really one conclusion the group could make about Sev’ral Timez, as impossible as it seemed: they were all clones.

“O. M. G,” Mabel, Candy, and Grenda all whispered in shocked unison.

“And whoa, this place is like a human factory!” Amethyst remarked, amazed. “Kinda reminds me of a Kindergarten, eh, Pearl?”

“Amethyst, please!” Pearl exclaimed dismissively. “Now is not the time for-”

“Shh! Someone is coming!” Candy warned upon hearing approaching footsteps. Before they could be seen, the group hurried to hide behind a nearby clothing rack just as a stout, scowling man barged into the room.
“Terrible show!” the man shouted at the boy band furiously. The members of Sev’ral Timez all shrank away from him in their cage, clearly frightened by his harsh manner. “What is wrong with you boys?! You barely even sold out the arena. And Deep Chris, you call that a pout? Every one of you should be ashamed of yourselves! Except you, Leggy P. You were really on point tonight. Here you go, gorgeous.” The man tossed said member of the band an oversized hamster treat, which he happily munched on, much to the envy of the others. “As for the rest of you, remember that you can always be replaced by your brothers…” He grinned darkly as he pointed his cane towards the cloning tubes. “Dance for me, child! Dance!” he shouted at one of the younger clones, still in stasis as he obliged and preformed a few dance moves. The man let out a maniacal laugh as he began to leave, only for it to be broken up by a harsh cough. “Augh, my throat is killin’ me! Can someone get me a lemon water?!?”

As the man slammed the door behind him, the girls and Gems hidden behind the clothes rack all happened to tumble forward from their hiding spot in full view of the boy band themselves. “Uh… whoops,” Amethyst grinned awkwardly, knowing that it was mostly her fault since she had been leaning hard against the wrack.

“Who goes there?!” one of the boys, Deep Chris to be exact, called from their cage. “Prepare to be danged at!” The singer did just that as he began aggressively dancing towards Mabel, Candy, and Grenda, who were all frozen with love-struck awe upon being face to face with the band.

“Step off, Deep Chris!” Creggy G. exclaimed as he stood between Deep Chris and the girls. “These are ladies. Don’t disrespect them, bro. Don’t disrespect.”

“My bad,” Deep Chris apologized coolly. “Yo, Chubby Z., let’s calm these boos by posing for them poster style.” The other members of the band joined in striking a smooth pose, eliciting a delighted, unified squeal from the girls.

“Do you understand a word any of them are saying?” Pearl whispered to Amethyst, not getting the band’s rather confusing lingo.

“Nope,” the purple Gem shook her head. “But that posing thing they’re doing looks fun.” Of course, she decided to give it a try for herself, striking a sly pose herself.

“Ahhh! Trying not to let my brain explode!” Mabel exclaimed, fanning herself out of excitement as she looked to the boys. “I’ve always wanted to meet you guys! But what was the deal with that scary chub-chub man?”

“Mr. Bratsman’s our producer, yo,” Deep Chris explained.

“He genetically engineered us to be the perfect boy band, G,” Creggy G. added.

“Whoa, so… this really is like a Kindergarten…” Amethyst muttered to herself, her amused smile fading.

“But he keeps us in cages!” Chubby Z. exclaimed petulantly. “That junk is straight brutal, girl!”

“That is straight brutal, Chubby Z.,” Mabel frowned sympathetically.

“Now, hold on just a minute,” Pearl interjected firmly. “You five mean to say that man is imprisoning you all against your will and forcing you all to perform for his own selfish gain?! Like… like you’re his property?!”

“Yo, did you get a word she just said, dog?” Leggy P. asked Greggy C.
“Naw, man,” Greggy C. shrugged obliviously.

“This is just unacceptable!” the white Gem exclaimed with sudden fury. “Even if this ‘Bratsman’ fellow made you all, he has no right to enslave you like this! We’re breaking all of you out right now!”


“Dang, P! You’re goin’ full on rebel mode tonight!” Amethyst remarked with an amazed grin.

“Well, Amethyst, you know better than anyone else that I have every reason to,” Pearl said solidly, crossing her arms.

“Girl, that sounds wild!” Greggy Z. exclaimed, just as enticed by the promise of freedom as the other boys were. “Our one dream has always been to escape into the real world. For real. Yo, I heard ‘bout these things called ‘trees’. I dunno what they are, but I wanna kiss one!”

“But we can’t disobey Mr. Bratsman!” Greggy C. protested. “He says he loves us.”

“If he loved you, he’d set you free!” Mabel countered.

“And he never would have forced you to do his bidding in the first place,” Pearl added pointedly.

The members of Sev’ral Timez all nodded in apt agreement with this, not needing any further convincing to make a run for it as Mabel picked the lock on their cage. “C’mon! We’ll get you guys out of here before anyone ever realizes you’re gone!”

“We’re masters of STEALTH!” Grenda shouted, albeit not very stealthily.

“ Heck yeah! A break in and a break out all in one night? This is getting intense!” Amethyst cheered rowdily.

“Yo, you’d really do this for us, beef?” Chubby Z. asked Mabel.

“You can count on me!” Mabel confirmed with a grin that faded into confusion after a moment. “I’m sorry, did you just call me ‘beef’?”

Dipper, Steven, and Garnet all sat around Robbie’s CD, trying to reach some sort of conclusion about it based on looks alone first. This plan had been actually been the Gem leader’s suggestion, seeing as how she had noticed something off about the disk simply by looking at it, even if she had yet to even hear the song itself. And needless to say, they weren’t really making any progress just by staring at it alone.

“So… is something supposed to be happening?” Dipper asked after a long bout of silence.

“Maybe the CD will get up and start talking!” Steven exclaimed earnestly. “Then it might be able to tell us whether its really hypnotic or not!”

“No,” Garnet shook her head. “We’re simply analyzing it for now.”

“For what exactly?” Dipper frowned, confused.

“Proof.”
“So have you found any proof yet, Garnet?” Steven asked curiously.

“Not yet, but we will,” the Gem leader affirmed, adjusting her shades. “Trust me.”

Dipper let out an exasperated sigh as he leaned back in his chair. He had thought that Garnet’s assistance in this matter would be a bit more helpful, especially with her supposed abilities in foresight, but so far she had done little in the way of actually working towards breaking Wendy and Robbie up. Still, their mission was just getting started. Perhaps the mysterious Gem leader had a brilliant plan in mind that neither Dipper nor Steven could see yet.

All the same, their thorough inspection of the CD was soon interrupted as Stan walked in the den, having finished up his task of stocking meat. He stopped in his tracks, however, as he noticed the trio staring at the CD with intensive scrutiny. “What’s going on in here?” the conman asked, raising an eyebrow. “What, are you three trying to ‘gaze into the future’ through that disk or something?”

“We’re analyzing it!” Steven quipped enthusiastically.

“There’s… a little more to it than that,” Dipper said somewhat vaguely. “But you wouldn’t understand.”

“Aw, c’mon, kid,” Stan rolled his eyes as he took a seat. “Try me.”

“Well… this might sound weird…” Dipper began. “But I think Robbie might be brainwashing Wendy with music.”

“So we’re looking at his CD to try and find proof,” Steven added. “Right Garnet?”

“Right,” the Gem leader nodded succinctly.

The conman’s skeptical expression all but faded upon hearing this claim. “I’ve seen this before,” he said with absolute sincerity.

“Really?” Dipper asked, surprised.

Stan nodded gravely before going into his related anecdote. “Her name was Carla McCorkle. Carla ‘Hotpants’ McCorkle. Me and Carla baby would cut a rug together at The Juke Joint, our favorite 50’s themed 1970’s diner. For a while, everything was all sunshine and roses between us. Then one day, this new aged tree-hugger starts playing his transcendental hippie music. Carla’s hotpants turned into bellbottoms before I even knew what happened. And then they shot off into space in an explosion of rainbows.”

“Whoa, really?!” Steven asked, amazed.

“Eh, my memories get a little hallucinationy at the end, but you get the gist.”

“That sounds about right,” Garnet remarked with a smirk.

“Wait, so you actually believe my theory?” Dipper asked Stan.

“You’re darn right I do!” the conman exclaimed firmly. “And we’re gonna get to the bottom of it!”

“That’s what we were already doing,” the Gem leader pointed out.

“What, by staring at that record or whatever it is?” Stan scoffed. “You’re not gonna get anywhere just by looking at it.”
“So what should we do?” Steven asked, before letting out an excited gasp. “Wait, wait! Garnet! What is Mr. Pines going to say we should do?”

“Kid, what-” Stan tried to ask before the Gem leader interrupted.

“The most probable outcome is that he’ll say we should check the CD for any subliminal messages. It’s a pretty good idea, actually.”

“Huh?” the conman blinked, surprised. “How did you know—? You know what, I don’t care. It’s probably just some weird Gem thing anyway.”

“Is that actually what you were gonna suggest, Grunkle Stan?” Dipper asked, knowing that it was a surprisingly clever plan coming from the conman.

“Yeah, something like that,” Stan confirmed, crossing his arms. “But y’see, kids, music has subliminal mind control hidden in it all the time. If you listen closely, even the music I play in the gift shop has subtle hidden messages.”

“Oh, like the really loud one about buying more keychains?” Steven asked.

“That’s just one of many,” the conman smirked, taking the CD as he headed to the record player. “If you wanna hear mind controlling messages, you gotta slow the record down. Let’s try it out with this LP.”

“This isn’t going to work,” Garnet pointed out as Stan put the disk on the record player.

“Why? Because your ‘future vision’ told you so?” the conman deadpanned as he put the needle on the CD. Of course, since it wasn’t a record, the only sound produced was an earsplitting scratch as sparks flew from the disk, scuffing it.

“No, because common sense told me so,” Garnet remarked caustically.

“What kind of subliminal message is that?” Steven asked with a frown.

“Probably not the one we’re looking for,” Dipper replied somewhat dryly.

“We’re doing something wrong here, but I can’t put my finger on it…” Stan mused as the CD continued to scratch along on the record player.

It was around this time that Mabel, Candy, Grenda, Amethyst, and Pearl arrived at the shack, trying to be discreet as possible as they slipped in through the side door. The purple Gem hauled a large sports bag over her shoulders while the others helped her support it, but even so they could do little to prevent Dipper and Steven from walking out of the den right as they walked in.

“Hi, you guys!” the young Gem greeted brightly. “Amethyst, Pearl, I didn’t know you went to the concert too! Did you have fun?”

“Yeah, we did!” Amethyst exclaimed with a rogue grin. “We shook the whole joint up! We even-”

“Yes, Steven,” Pearl interrupted before the purple Gem could give too much away. “We had… fun.”

“So, what’s in the bag?” Dipper asked his sister with a confused frown.

“Uh… money!” Mabel panicked, giving a quick lie. “Money we stole!”
“We are criminals! We will cut you!” Candy warned, just as anxiously.

“Let’s go away from here now!” Mabel concluded with a very forced grin, no one arguing with her as they began pushing the bag upstairs.

“Well, that was weird,” Steven said, aptly bewildered.

“For Mabel? No, it really wasn’t,” Dipper replied somewhat apathetically.

As the boys headed back into the den, Garnet passed by them and caught sight of the girls and her teammates still carrying their large bag up the stairs. “That’s quite a bit of money you all have in that bag,” she remarked knowingly, causing them all to stop right in their tracks.

“G-Garnet!” Pearl exclaimed nervously, letting go of the bag. “We… we were just-

“I know what you did,” the Gem leader said, though she didn’t really explain how, despite how confused the girls were. “And don’t worry; I’m not going to say anything to anyone about it. After all, your hearts are in the right place. But I would like to give you a word of advice, Mabel.”

“Oh, um, ok,” Mabel frowned. “What is it?”

“Just remember what I told you the other day,” Garnet advised. “Don’t be afraid of letting them go.”

Mabel was even more puzzled upon hearing this, especially since this was a lesson she had already learned by helping Mermando escape back to the ocean just a few days ago. And besides, her and her friends were doing the very same now for the members of Sev’ral Timez by providing them with shelter and safety away from their cruel producer. Certainly, Mabel figured, she knew better than to try to cling onto the boys. Didn’t she?

“Ha! Don’t worry, Garnet,” she said with a smile and wave of her hand. “None of us are gonna get all crazy and obsessive over these guys, right ladies?”

Candy and Grenda shook their heads to affirm Mabel’s question. But even so, the Gem leader was not entirely appeased. “Maybe you won’t,” she shrugged vaguely. “That’s entirely up to the three of you, of course.”

The girls exchanged another confused glance at this, but even so, they continued carrying the bag holding the boys in it up to the attic. However, before they were entirely out of earshot, Garnet called to teammates one last time. “Keep an eye on them,” she cautioned casually.

“You got it, G!” Amethyst gave the Gem leader a thumbs up as her and Pearl followed the girls to the attic. Once they were all up there, they determined that the coast was clear enough to finally let the boys out of the bag, literally. The members of Sev’ral Timez slipped out of the duffle bag one by one, landing on top of each other in a pile on the floor before they all hopped to their feet in unison. Intrigued by their new surroundings, the boys fanned out to explore the room in their own unique way.

“Your tour bus is really strange, Mabel, girl,” Leggy P. noted, glancing around. “Where the feeding tubes at?”

“Yo, what up, girl?” Deep Chris said to Waddles as he gave the pig a pat on the head.

“Heh, these guys are kinda dumb,” Amethyst chuckled, amused.
“Well, they have lived their lives in a cage,” Pearl remarked, crossing her arms. “Chances are they don’t have too much… oh, what do humans call it? … Oh yes, ‘life experience’. That sounds about right.”

“So when do we get to go outside?” Creggy G. asked the girls.

“I wanna cavort like a woodland creature!” Chubby Z. quipped boldly.

“Don’t worry, boys,” Mabel assured with a smile. “You’ll be able to go outside as soon as—” She was abruptly cut off by the sound of screeching tires right outside the window.

“It’s your producer!” Grenda warned the boys as she looked out the window to see Bratsman’s car pull up in front of the shack. The band members gasped in fear and all jumped to hide under Mabel’s bed at the same time, even if none of them really fit.

“Oh for crying out loud,” Pearl rolled her eyes, her hands curling into fists. “We’ll handle him. Come along, Amethyst.”

“Yes! Finally some action!” Amethyst cheered as she followed the white Gem downstairs. “Pearl, you’re being such a bada—”

“Amethyst!” Pearl sharply cut the purple Gem off just in time as they went outside to confront Bratsman.

“I can’t believe those boys escaped from their cage…” Bratsman growled to himself angrily, though his already harsh expression became even more so when he spotted the two Gems coming out to meet him. “You two! I found this trail of frosted tips leading to this very location! Have either of you seen any perfect boys around here?”

“Nah, man,” Amethyst shrugged nonchalantly. “We haven’t seen anyone like that. But you know what we have seen?”

“What?” Bratsman asked with a scowl.

“The goat that’s chewing off your silence plate.”

“Huh?!” the producer spun around to see Gompers happily munching away at his limo’s silence plate. “Hey! Shoo! Shoo!” he chased the goat away as much as he could, even if Gompers ended up taking the license plate with him. “Ugh, I don’t have time for shenanigans like this! Both of you broads get outta my way so I can find my boy band!”

“Of course, but… you might want to leave soon…” Pearl remarked inconspicuously. “He may not look like much, but that goat is actually a known killer.”

“W-what?” Bratsman glanced over at Gompers, alarmed.

“Yeah. In fact, I even lost my hand to him!” Amethyst quipped with a dark grin, shapeshifting her arm behind her back so it looked like her hand had been bitten off. “See?” The purple Gem’s smirk widened as she held her arm out for the producer to see, eliciting a frightened scream from him. As both Gems had hoped for, Bratsman scrambled back into his limo in a frustrated panic.

“Oh, forget it!” he shouted, infuriated. “Those boys must be around here somewhere! I’ll find them even if I have to turn this town upside down!” Without sparing another word, Bratsman drove off, glaring hotly at the pair of Gems as he rode past them.
“Nice one, Amethyst,” Pearl grinned at her teammate proudly.

“Hey, you were the one who came up with that ‘mad goat’ thing, you rebel,” Amethyst elbowed the white Gem. “Say, would you fuss at me if I scratched that guy’s fancy car up a little?”

“Not at all,” the white Gem happily agreed. Amethyst’s smirk widened as she summoned her whip and launched it at Bratsman’s limo, giving it a pretty sizable scratch on the side as he drove away.

“Nailed it!” Amethyst cheered, exchanging a congratulatory high five with Pearl. Still, despite the Gems’ success, the boy band was hardly allayed as they watched with the girls from upstairs.

“Guys, it’s not safe out there as long as Bratsman’s still looking for you!” Mabel exclaimed to the boys with concern.

“What do we do?!” Chubby Z. asked, frightened.

“Aw dang!” Deep Chris exclaimed fearfully.

“I’m scared, Mabel!” Greggy C. quivered anxiously.

“It’s ok, guys,” Mabel comforted the boys as they crowded around her for support. “He’ll have to give up eventually. And in the meantime, you all can stay here with us! Amethyst and Pearl will keep protecting you while we show you a taste of what real, non-cage living is like!” The band members all let out excited gasps of relief upon hearing this invitation. However, no one was more excited about this new situation than Mabel herself. “Girls, do you realize what’s happening here?!” she asked Candy and Grenda with a huge grin. “We have our own pet boy band that we can do whatever we want with!”

“But remember what Garnet said: eventually we will have to let them go,” Candy pointed out. “We have to promise not to get too attached to them, right Mabel? Mabel?”

Of course, Mabel was hardly listening as she sat at the front of the line of boys, all of whom were cheerfully braiding one another’s hair. “All aboard the braid train!” she cheered brightly. “Braid! Braid!”

Candy and Grenda exchanged a somewhat concerned glance upon seeing this, both of them hoping that Mabel was going to take the Gem leader’s advice to heart as much as they intended to. After all, they were doing this for the boys, not for themselves. Still, Mabel didn’t really notice their worry as she gladly let the boys continue braiding her hair, not understanding why her friends weren’t joining in. “What?”

“So what if we up the pitch a whole lot? Will that do anything?” Dipper asked Garnet, hoping that this suggestion would finally be the right one. He had spent nearly the past hour proposing ideas about what to do with the CD to the Gem leader, who used her future vision in order to provide an estimate of how well any of them might work. And so far, none of them had been ranked as very likely.

“Chances are that’ll probably just make the song sound even more grating,” Garnet replied stoically.

“Ok… maybe we should translate the song into another language and then translate it back,” Dipper proposed, knowing he was running out of ideas. “Maybe that’ll give us something.”
“The probability of it being anything understandable are rather low…” the Gem leader pointed out.

“Oh, come on!” Dipper groaned in exasperation, plopping down onto the couch beside Steven. “What else could we possibly do?”

“You’ve listed off just about everything we *can* do, kid,” Stan deadpanned as he got himself a can of soda from the fridge. “The only thing you haven’t thought of is to break the disk in half to see if any secret note or hidden code pops out.”

“Now that *definitely* wouldn’t work,” Garnet remarked dryly.

“Ugh! This was so stupid!” Dipper exclaimed, frustrated. “Of course there’s no hidden mind control messages in that song! Steven, you were right: Wendy just likes the song. She just likes Robbie.”

“Hm…” Steven mused, picking up the CD and staring at it closely. So far, he hadn’t really been able to come up with any real ideas about what to do with it amidst all of Dipper’s suggestions, but as he looked over the disk again, he finally thought of something. “Oh! I know! What if we play the song backwards!?”

“Backwards?” Dipper and Stan repeated in confused unison. Garnet on the other hand, finally cracked a smirk at this suggestion.

“You might be onto something with that, Steven,” the Gem leader affirmed, pressing the rewind button on the CD player. However, this time, instead of receiving an intelligible bunch of nonsense, a very clear, very concrete message came through.

“You are under my control. Your mind is mine,” the cryptic, startling message droned, shocking everyone quite a bit.

“Holy mackerel!” Stan exclaimed, spitting out his soda.

“Bingo,” the Gem leader said with a confident smile.

“Wow!” Steven gasped, awestruck. “It looks like you were right after all, Dipper!”

“I know!” Dipper exclaimed with a small, relieved laugh. “It really is mind control! Oh my gosh! I have to tell Wendy!”

“Finally, a good reason to punch a teenager in the face!” Stan grinned vengefully.

“You might want to be careful about how you do let Wendy know, Dipper,” Garnet cautioned pointedly.

“Why?” Dipper asked, suddenly concerned. “Do you see any potential futures where things will go wrong? Because if you do, now would be a really good time to tell me about them.”

“Well…” Garnet began thoughtfully. “The first outcome I see is one in which you tell Wendy the truth about the song, she breaks up with Robbie, and she rewards you for it with a kiss on the cheek.”

Dipper had to practically suppress his absolutely delighted gasp upon hearing this possibility. The very thought of Wendy not only breaking up with Robbie but also giving him a kiss, even on the cheek, was enough to convince him to go through with telling the cashier the truth the moment he saw her. Which, fortunately enough, would be very soon as he overheard her and Robbie talking
from the other room.

“Here they come!” Dipper exclaimed with an openly excited smile. “Oh, this is gonna be so great!”

“Dipper, wait,” Garnet cut in as quickly as she could. “You should know that future wasn’t the only one I saw. There are several others where-”

Before the Gem leader could finish her warning, the couple just so happened to walk in, meaning that fate would just have to take its course, whatever course that was supposed to be. “Hey, guys,” Wendy greeted with a casual smile as she headed for the gift shop. “Forgot my keys.”

Of course, Wendy stepped out of the room just before Dipper could get her attention, and of course, Robbie stuck around while she went to retrieve her keys. “What are you up to, junior?” the teen asked Dipper, noticing all of the equipment they had used to analyze the CD. “Trying to come up with an equation to make girls like you? Ha!”

Dipper begrudgingly let this insult fly for the moment, especially considering the intel he now had. Still, he was a bit hesitant to reveal it given Garnet’s partial warning, especially as Wendy returned and hooked arms with Robbie. “Ready to go to Lookout Point?” she asked her boyfriend with a fond smile.

“Am I!” Robbie grinned as they both began to head out. “Later, dorks. Catch you on the rewind!”

“Wendy, wait!” Dipper called after the cashier before he could really think better of it. He shot a quick glance at Garnet, who only shook her head warningly. But even so, he couldn’t really redact it now, especially as Wendy stopped and turned towards him.

“What’s up, dude?” she asked curiously.

“Uh… well…” Dipper began anxiously, anticipating that this could go wrong, even without Garnet telling him exactly how. And yet, as he remembered the first and only result she had been able to share with him, he was prompted to go through with it in the end. After all, receiving a kiss from Wendy would be more than worth it. “There’s something you need to hear.” Since he had a recording of the backwards message, he decided to present that to her first, but of course, the tape player decided not to function properly at just the wrong moment. “Um, there’s a secret message hidden in here somewhere!” he laughed nervously amidst the song playing properly. “I swear!”

“Yeah, it’s true!” Steven vouched earnestly. “We all heard it. I don’t exactly remember what it said, but it sounded like this,” the young Gem threw his voice to make it sound deep like the CD did.

“Suuuurreee…” Robbie rolled his eyes as he continued to lead Wendy out. “C’mon, babe. Let’s go. Lee and his girlfriend are waiting for us.”

“Wait!” Dipper pleaded, tapping the side of the tape recorder until it finally started playing the song backwards. “Here it is!” As the hidden message began to play out, he turned the volume up all the way so Wendy could hear it plainly.

“You are under my control. Your mind is mine,” the message played, eliciting a stunned gasp from the cashier as she heard it.

“Whoa,” Wendy remarked, her eyes wide as turned to her boyfriend expectantly. “Robbie, what is that doing in our song?”

“B-baby, I promise, I didn’t know anything about those messages!” Robbie exclaimed defensively.
“In fact, I didn’t even write that song. I ripped it off from some other band! So we’re all good, right?”

“No, we’re not all good!” Wendy retorted harshly, placing her hands on her hips. “I don’t care about the messages. You said you wrote that song for me, and I actually thought it was sweet, you big liar!”

“I know, I know,” Robbie frowned, trying to calm her down. “I lie about a lot of stuff. Like using your makeup and fighting a bear, although—”

“No. You know what? It’s over, Robbie. We’re though!” Wendy proclaimed firmly, set in her decision.

“What?! Wendy!”

“Just… just go, Robbie, ok?” Wendy sighed, turning away from her now ex-boyfriend bitterly.

“But Wendy, I—” Robbie started, before realizing he had nothing to really say in his defense. “Oh man…”

“Look, if it makes you feel any better, the apocalypse is coming soon,” Stan remarked to the depressed teen. “Bury your gold! You’ve been buying gold, right?”

“Aw, Wendy, we’re so sorry about what happened with you and Robbie,” Steven said to the upset cashier with sincere sympathy.

“But, you know, since your night is free now, maybe you’d like to go bowling or something with all of us instead?” Dipper suggested with a hopeful smile, more than ready to receive the kiss on the cheek he was supposedly going to get out of all of this. However, it never ended up happening.

“Are you serious right now?!?” Wendy asked, tears running down her cheeks as she turned to Dipper in disbelief. “I just found out my boyfriend was lying to me for who knows how long! The last thing I wanna do is hang out! Ugh, what is wrong with guys? You only think about yourselves! All of you should just leave me alone!”

Before anyone could try to stop her, Wendy hurried out, still in tears even as Robbie ran after her. “Wendy, baby, wait! I’m sorry! I messed up! Wait!”

“Well… that could have gone a lot better…” Steven frowned as he looked to Dipper, who could only watch as the cashier left in absolute dismay. He knew that the possibility of Wendy kissing him had only been one out of many, according to Garnet, but he could have never expected for the end result to turn out so badly.

At this juncture, the Gem leader stepped forward, having been a silent spectator throughout most of the situation. But now, she stood alongside Dipper, her arms crossed and her expression set in a disappointed frown as he glanced up at her sheepishly.

“Uh… so I guess I should have waited and listened to those other outcomes, huh?” he asked, somewhat ashamed.

“Mmm hmm,” Garnet nodded knowingly. “Especially since what actually happened was also one of the possibilities I saw.”

“Then maybe you should have told him that, don’t ya think?” Stan asked the Gem leader caustically.
“I tried,” Garnet remarked simply as she prepared to take her leave. However, as she did so, Dipper and Steven exchanged a terse glance, both of them happening to reach largely the same conclusion about the Gem leader’s future vision at once. Before, they had both seen it as something exploratory and circumstantial, something that could be used more for simple situations rather than anything too serious. But after the very hard-hitting demonstration they had just gone through, both boys came to realize that perhaps there would be very real dangers, and not just social ones, if they didn’t heed the special foresight that Garnet had to offer. Certainly, with the wisdom gained from her glimpses into the future, they could be prepared for any situation that might come their way, big or small. After all, if something as simple as what had just happened could end up going horribly wrong, then anything at all could go horribly wrong, even on a life or death scale. And given the circumstances, that was something that neither Dipper nor Steven was willing to risk any longer.

“Garnet, wait!” the boys called out in anxious unison, scrambling to hurry after her.

Stan simply shrugged as they left him behind, largely unconcerned with what had just happened in general. “Geez. So much drama with those two. What do you think, pig?” he asked Waddles, who was passing by. Of course, the pig simply let out a small oink before moving on. “Huh. Good talk.”

Since Bratsman had made it quite clear that he had no intentions of halting his search for the members of Sev’ral Timez, the girls and the Gems set their resolve to protect them and keep them out of his reach. And since they had so much time on their hands, they all decided that it would best be put to use in teaching the boys how to function as actual human beings instead of caged animals.

Seeing as how the band members had very little experience in most things, Mabel, Candy, and Grenda worked on teaching them relatively simple things like eating or drinking properly. While Pearl didn’t often eat, Amethyst would join in on these lessons, though the girls did have to add addendums to all of her instructions about eating keys or drinking windshield washer fluid. Though the white Gem, with her limited practice in human living, wasn’t really able to show the band too much, but she still kept a dutiful watch out for Bratsman, as well as anyone who might get in the way. In her vigil, she had successfully kept Stan off their trail on a number of occasions, particularly whenever the girls needed more space than what the attic could provide.

Of course, even in the midst of educating the band, Mabel, Candy, and Grenda were more than happy to let the boys preform their hit songs for them whenever they took a break. Fortunately, the band members were ready to oblige with almost anything, largely out of gratitude for the hospitality the girls and Gems were showing them. Still, the more they hung out with the boys, the more something was starting to become even more apparent. While all three of the girls were having their fair share of time with the boys, it was obvious that Mabel was the one growing most attached to all five of them. She was always the first to volunteer to spoon-feed them, tuck them into bed, and offer constructive criticism on their choreography. Whenever either Candy or Grenda tried to have one-on-one time with any of them, Mabel would always interject and take over, much to the growing concern of her friends. But even so, the boys were safe and were being well cared for, and so far, things hadn’t gotten out of hand. Yet.

“Whoo, well that was exhausting!” Mabel exclaimed with a tired sigh as she joined Candy, Grenda, and Amethyst in front of the TV downstairs.

“How’d it go?” Grenda asked.
“Oh, I finally got them to sleep,” Mabel smiled. “Poor Greggy C. He tried eating a tape dispenser!”

“Can’t blame him for that,” Amethyst chuckled. “Those things make pretty tasty snacks.”

By this point, Pearl walked into the room wearing a rather self-satisfied smirk, one that did not go unnoticed by the purple Gem. “Yo, P, what’s got you so happy?”

“Well… let’s just say I did something that will ensure that horrible producer man will never bother the boys again,” Pearl replied, holding her hands behind her back.

“What does that mean?” Candy asked, confused as all of the others were.

“See for yourselves,” the white Gem nodded towards the TV, which just so happened to be playing the evening newscast.

“The music industry was shaken today at the news that boy band king, Ergman Bratsman, has been arrested,” Shandra Jimenez reported. “After receiving an anonymous tip, Gravity Falls’ police pulled him over for not having a rear license plate. He is now in county jail, awaiting trial.”

“Yes!” Candy and Grenda cheered triumphantly upon hearing this news.

“Whoa! Pearl, you snitched Bratsman out, didn’t you?!” Amethyst asked with an impressed grin. “That is so awesome!”

“What can I say?” the white Gem asked with a proud shrug. “I’ve never been a fan of slave drivers.”

“We have to tell the boys they are free now!” Candy exclaimed excitedly.

“Uh… yeah…” Mabel said with a nervous, rather uncertain laugh.

“Let’s go!” Grenda proclaimed, already leading the way upstairs. However, as they all went to deliver this good news to the band, they were stopped just shy of making it to the attic by none other than Mabel.

“Not so fast!” she exclaimed adamantly, blocking their way to the door. “They’re not going anywhere.”


“Yeah, what’s the dealio, Mabel?” Grenda asked. “Their evil producer is gone. We have to tell the boys!”

“Wait, girls—and Gems,” Mabel began with something of a fake smile. “Let’s not be so hasty. I mean, think about it. If we don’t tell the boys, then they can stay here with me—I mean, with us. The fun we’re having with them never has to end!”

“Mabel, you know very well we can’t keep them here,” Pearl said disapprovingly. “The reason why we saved them in the first place was to let them go in the end.”

“But I love them!” Mabel protested.

“If you loved them, you’d set them free,” Candy rationalized, though it hardly worked as Mabel grew all the more desperate to cling onto the boys.

“Never! Every boy I’ve loved this summer has left me! And I’m not gonna let it happen again!”
"Yikes. Uh, no offense, Mabel, but you’re acting kinda crazy," Amethyst pointed out.

Yet even so, Mabel stood her ground, refusing to let anyone, be it her best friends or even the Gems take her beloved boy band away from her. “Forget it! There’s no way any of you guys are getting in there!”

“If that’s how you wanna be, then we’re really sorry about this, Mabel,” Grenda said, exchanging a terse nod with Candy.

“Candy attack!” the girl shouted, tackling Mabel without warning as Grenda, Amethyst, and Pearl took their chance to rush in to confront the band.

“Yo dudes, its time for you guys to hit the road!” the purple Gem exclaimed quickly as the boys all turned to them, surprised to see Mabel and Candy still scuffling on the floor.

“Ergman Bratsman is in jail!” Grenda informed them. “You’re free!”

“Whoa! Is that true, Mabel dog?” Creggy C. asked, looking to the girl expectantly.

“Uh, no!” Mabel hurriedly exclaimed. “Your producer’s still out there! You’re probably gonna have to stay here forever.”

“What?!” Grenda exclaimed, aghast. “You can’t listen to her!”

“Believe us, boys.” Pearl stepped in as calmly as possible. “After all, I was the one who got your producer arrested in the first place. We just want you to be free, as all Gems—I mean humans should be.”

“Aw, but Mabel’s our girl, girl,” Deep Chris said with a conflicted frown. “She puts pizza in our food trough!”

“She changes my newspaper, yo,” Chubby Z. added. “She’s aight.”

“She is not ‘aight’, Chubby Z.!” Grenda protested crossly.

By this point, Mabel had managed to pull herself out of Candy’s firm grip before hurrying over to the boys, who unfortunately, believed her more than they did the others. “Sev’ral Timez!” she exclaimed authoritatively.

“Yes, Mabel dog?” the members of the band replied loyally.

“Remove these four from the premises, please,” she commanded coldly. Sev’ral Timez proceeded to do just that as they began shuffling towards the group, glaring harshly and snapping their fingers all the while.

“Oh no! They’re aggressively dancing at us!” Grenda exclaimed fearfully.

“We’re not seriously gonna let these guys chase us off, are we?” Amethyst asked Pearl with a caustic frown.

“Well, we can’t very well attack them…” the white Gem sighed in exasperation. “So it looks as though we really don’t have any other choice.”

“Geez, this is just pathetic,” the purple Gem scoffed, rolling her eyes.

“Mabel’s gone mad with power!” Grenda warned the band as they all began backing out of the
“Save yourselves, Se’r’al Timez! You were better off with your producer! Call me, Deep Chris!”

Of course, the group could do little as the boy band finally forced them out of the room, slamming the door behind them and locking it up tight. “Well, this was a huge waste of time,” Amethyst remarked dryly.

“What do we do?!?” Candy asked mournfully. “The boys are in trouble!”

“Oh, this isn’t over,” Pearl said firmly, a new plan already forming in her mind. “I said we were going to set those boys free, and I meant it! Even if the one we have to free them from is Mabel, of all people.”

Seeing as how Pearl and Amethyst were preoccupied and the Gems had no outstanding mission they had to tend to, Garnet had consented on spending the remainder of the afternoon with Steven and Dipper, mostly because they had both begged her to. The Gem leader had easily taken notice of their shared and sudden anxiety, but she didn’t say anything about it and instead answered all of the future-related inquiries they had for her. Even if she did have a pretty strong inkling about how all of this would turn out in the end.

Still, Garnet accompanied the boys into town, giving them her insight around practically every single turn. “If the two of you head down Main Street,” the Gem leader began in response to Dipper’s question. “Then one of you might trip on a crack in the sidewalk and scrape your knees. Or you both could be robbed by a passing mugger. Or you could cross the street without looking both ways and get hit by a truck.”

“W-well I guess we aren’t taking Main Street then…” Dipper muttered, his eyes wide with fear upon hearing all this.

“What if I just order some fry bits?” Steven asked worriedly as they arrived at Gravity Fries. “Are there any possible futures where we might get hurt by this?”

“Hmm…” Garnet mused, looking around. “Tons.”

“Like?” Dipper asked apprehensively.

“Well, for starters, Steven, you could be just going about your business, eating your fry bits, and suddenly you choke to death! Or you could both get so distracted that you fall down a manhole. You could get food poisoning, or be bullied by wasps. And that’s just a few instances off the top of my head.”

Both boys’ jaws dropped in abject horror as they listened to all of these deadly outcomes, both of them shocked that such terrible harm could so easily befall them. Fortunately though, Garnet saw it all and she could provide them with every warning they might need to be prepared and safe for the future. “W-what if we stand perfectly still?” Steven asked fretfully.

“You’ll probably get a really bad sunburn,” Garnet replied with a shrug as she began to walk off. Of course, the boys hurried after her, not wanting to be a single moment without her insight.

“Garnet, wait! What’ll happen if we go by the lake?” Dipper asked, thoroughly stressed out. “Will we get eaten by some sort of freshwater shark or something?”
“Or what if we go to the Big Donut?” Steven inquired, nervously biting his lip. “Are there any futures where the sign might fall on us?”

“O-or a future were we head back to the Mystery Shack and it catches on fire in a freak accident?”

“Or a future where we’re just walking along and all of the sudden Cookie Cat comes down from space and turns out to be evil and zaps us with his spaceship and we-”

“Steven! Dipper!” Garnet suddenly cut them both off as they made it to the crossroads between the shack and the temple. “Both of you need to calm down. Nothing bad is going to happen to either of you.”

“But you keep telling us about all of the bad things that might happen!” Dipper protested. “How do you expect us not to freak out about that?!?”

“Just because I see all of those terrible possibilities that doesn’t mean they’ll be the ones to actually happen in the end,” Garnet rationalized calmly.

“But… but we…” Steven began, though the Gem leader cut him off as she put a hand on both of their shoulders and knelt down to their level.

“Listen,” she said evenly. “I have to go on a solo mission and I need both of you to stay here.”

“You’re leaving?!” the young Gem asked as fearful tears started to fill his eyes. “You can’t go! We need you!” he wailed, clinging onto the Gem leader’s arm.

“Yeah!” Dipper agreed, equally distressed. “At least tell us what’ll happen if we-”

“Shh,” Garnet quieted both of the boys, still keeping a secure hand on both of their shoulders. “I can’t be with either of you all of the time. Just trust me when I say that you both are in control.” She gave them both a comforting, reassuring smile, one that eventually spread to both boys as they let out shared soft sighs of relief. Still, the Gem leader did have one final warning for them as she rose to stand and leave. “One more thing,” she said, her manner dead serious once more. “It’s going to storm later. Don not go outside when it does. No matter what!”

Without sparing another word, the Gem leader leapt off towards the temple, leaving both Steven and Dipper alone and both confused and frightened by this admonition. Unfortunately though, Garnet had failed to elaborate on this warning, meaning that all they could do now was worry over it and speculate, which was exactly what they did as they headed to the shack.

“Why did she tell us not to go outside during the storm?” Steven asked anxiously. “What will happen if we do?”

“Anything could happen!” Dipper exclaimed as they went inside. “We could get struck by lightning, or… or get carried away by a flash flood-”

“Or we could get soaked by the rain and get really sick and die!” Steven proposed fearfully. “Or tons of other terrible things we probably haven’t even thought of! What are we gonna do, Dipper?! What are we gonna do?”

“You think I know?!” Dipper retorted harshly. “Garnet’s the one with all the answers about the future and she’s gone! Until she gets back, who knows what might happen?!”

“What are you two freaking out about?” Stan asked as he entered the den and noticed the boys pacing around. “What, are you still crying about how Wendy yelled at you, kid?” he asked Dipper
“No, but thanks for reopening that wound,” Dipper said with a bitter frown.

“Garnet let go on a mission,” Steven informed the conman. “Which means she can’t tell us what’s gonna happen in the future, which means we don’t know what’s gonna happen, which means anything could happen, which means—”

“Geez, kid, slow down!” Stan interrupted, annoyed. “You keep talking that fast, then you’ll get a speeding ticket. Ha!”

“Grunkle Stan, this is serious!” Dipper stressed. “Our lives could be in danger!”

“Oh what, just because shades isn’t here to give you a weather forecast?” Stan asked caustically. “I don’t know why you two are worrying so much about stuff that might happen anyway. Who cares about the future? You can’t control it anyway.”

“That’s exactly what we’re afraid of…” Steven pouted diffidently.

“Listen, kids,” Stan began, his tone a mix of sarcasm and sincerity. “Both of you should get your heads out of the future and start living in the now, just like I do. Plus, the way I see it the long term doesn’t really matter anyway, what with the apocalypse coming up and everything.”

Both Dipper and Steven wanted to point out the glaring flaws in the conman’s odd logic, but before either of them could, a sudden, loud roar of thunder from outside startled them both. “Ahh!” Steven gasped, his eyes wide with terror. “The storm! Garnet was right!”

“W-we can’t go outside!” Dipper exclaimed frantically. “Steven, come on!” Not wanting to risk anything, the boys ran to the parlor to hide from whatever the future held in store for them.

“Huh,” Stan remarked somewhat obliviously as the boys hurried off. “Glad to see they’re taking my advice to heart.”

Mabel let out a contented sigh as she reclined on her bed, satisfied that she was right and Grenda, Candy, Amethyst, and Pearl had been wrong. As far as she was concerned, the band didn’t have to go anywhere. They were happy there with her, and she was more than happy to take care of them for as long as she had to, which, she hoped, would be forever.

“Mabel, you’ve gotta hear this,” Creggy G. spoke up as him and the other members of the band walked up to her. “It’s a song we wrote to say thank you.”

“Oh boy!” Mabel sat up, delighted. “Songs are like hugs that mouths give to ears!”

“Hit it!” Greggy C. called, prompting the band to start dancing along to their newly written song.

“Here comes you—Mabel, girl, we dreamed of being free,” the boys sang together, harmonizing to the smooth pop melody. “But now we know, that that can never be! You know what friends are all about. You kicked those lying shorties out!”

Mabel frowned as she watched the boys tear apart her picture of Candy and Grenda, a remorseful pit forming in her stomach. “Uh, starting to feel a bit guilty here…” she muttered to herself, though nonetheless, the boys continued their song, which now turned into a rap.
“Break it down! Who’s the girl who’s so aight? Tucks us into bed at night! Holds the fan up while we sing!”

“Keeps me entertained with string!” Leggy P. rapped proudly.

“My shirt was wrinkled,” Chubby Z. began, holding up said shirt. “Till she pressed it!”

“Chews our food,” Deep Chris added. “So we can digest it!”

“He was evil, mean, and reckless,” Greggy C. sang, referring to Bratsman. “You gave me this candy necklace!”

“Sup, girl,” Creggy G. sang to Mabel with a smooth grin. “Other folks we could never trust. But we know that you’d never lie to us.”

“Mabel, girl,” the entire band sang in unison once more, none of them noticing how upset Mabel was, largely with herself. After all, Garnet had tried to warn her not to get too attached to the point that she wanted to keep the boys to herself forever. But in the end, she had done the exact opposite of that, not only lying to the band she genuinely cared about, but hurting her friends in the process. And as the boys finished off their thoughtful song, she knew that she had to do whatever she could to set things right. “We know you love us sooooo…”

Mabel let out a long sigh, her resolve set in stone as she looked to the boys morosely. “And that’s why I’ve got to let you go…”

“Ok, g-go fish,” Steven said to Dipper as the two of them played go fish in the parlor. It was a rather feeble attempt to distract themselves from the storm raging outside, but it was an attempt nonetheless. After all, neither of them knew how long Garnet would be gone for, and they didn’t want to take any chances until she got back.

Dipper let out an uneasy sigh as he took a card from the pile, even if he was far from invested in their game. Even though the parlor had few windows, the roaring thunder and pouring rain outside could still easily be heard, serving as a constant reminder of Garnet’s warning to both of them. And the more Dipper thought about it, the more he realized that their approach in trying not to care about it was the wrong one entirely. “Steven, what are we doing?” he asked as he put his cards down.

“Um, we’re trying not to think about all the different ways we would get hurt if we go outside,” Steven replied with a worried frown.

“Yeah, but why?” Dipper asked, standing. “I mean, whatever Garnet saw is probably bound to end up happening somehow, right? So why are we sitting in here hiding from it like a bunch of babies?”

“Y-you’re right,” Steven admitted hesitantly. “We can’t keep living in fear like this! We have to face this thing, whatever it is! Come on, Dipper, let’s go!”

“W-wait, right now?!” Dipper asked with sudden fear, but nonetheless there was little he could do to stop Steven from dragging him out the door. The boys scrambled outside to find a downpour; rain was falling in thick sheets and the sky was black as pitch. Thunder rumbled low and ominously in the distance as lightning crackled from afar, casting an all too brief illumination on everything. The rain was already soaking Dipper and Steven as they ran out onto the shack’s lawn,
their breathing heavy out of both exhaustion and immense stress.

“Ok, we’re out here!” Dipper shouted over the heavy rain, bracing himself for the worst. “So what now?”

“Yeah! What are you gonna do to us, future?!” Steven exclaimed, his hands curled into tight, shaking fists at his sides.

Of course, no sooner had the boys run out into the rain than did Garnet happen to return from her solo mission, and her future vision had already provided her with a pretty good idea of where they might be. “Steven! Dipper!” the Gem leader shouted firmly as she arrived on the scene. “Get inside!”

“No!” Dipper protested just as resiliently. “Whatever’s gonna happen to us… just let it happen.”

“Neither of you understand!” Garnet tried to reason, concern written all over her face.

“No, you don’t understand!” Steven shouted desperately. “Everything we do shoves us violently towards the end! The more we know, the more we don’t know!”

“It’s just like what happened with Wendy and Robbie!” Dipper exclaimed fretfully and remorsefully. “Things only went wrong for me because I only listened to one outcome. I thought things would be alright, but now they’re worse off than ever before!”

“No, that’s not-” Garnet attempted to interrupt, only to be cut off by Steven.

“Augh! We can’t live like this!” the young Gem mourned loudly. “Why did you even tell us about your future vision, Garnet? What’s going to happen outside?!”

The Gem leader took in a deep breath at this, her usual solid exterior suddenly crumbling all at once. “This,” she replied simply.

“But why?” Steven asked, still confused.

“I took a risk at the expense of both of you,” Garnet sighed. “I was hoping that you would understand this, that you’d learn from it…” In a moment of clear vulnerability, the Gem leader removed her visor, reveling her trio of eyes as she walked over to the boys. “Steven, Dipper,” she began pensively. “It’s true that there are so many things that can hurt you. But it’s not your job to worry about any of them.”

“That’s… kind of like what Grunkle Stan said…” Dipper remarked with a frown.

“Then he was right,” Garnet said, putting her visor back on with a small smile. “There are millions of possibilities for the future, but it’s up to you to decide which become reality. Please understand; you both choose your own futures.”

Steven and Dipper looked to each other once again upon hearing this, both of them temporarily speechless. Still, neither of them could deny that the Gem leader’s infallible wisdom was once again on the mark. In spending time over-worrying about what might happen, they had only caused
themselves a great deal of needless stress and fear. They had seen the future as something far out of their control, when in reality, they did have some handle on it, and that handle was enough. Perhaps they could never know exactly what might come around every twist and turn, but maybe they didn’t need to. After all, they would be much safer and happier taking life as it came, whatever it might throw at them.

“I… we do understand…” Steven said slowly, pausing as thunder crashed nearby. “I can’t believe it took us this long to do it though…”

“Oh man, what are we even doing out here?” Dipper asked with an embarrassed laugh. “I guess we can’t really see a future for ourselves out here, huh?”

“Probably not,” Garnet smirked. “But I can see a future where the three of us go inside where it’s safe and dry and where I’ll see if Stan will let me make some hot chocolate for you both.”

“Sounds good to me!” the young Gem quipped cheerfully, embracing both Dipper and Garnet tightly. “And don’t worry, Garnet. We’ll watch out for ourselves from now on.”

The Gem leader didn’t offer any response as she was distracted with the stormy skies above. As the boys still hugged her, she slowly lifted her free hand up just in time to catch a lightning bolt right before it could strike either of them.

“What was that?” Steven asked obliviously, having heard the crash of thunder.

Garnet shrugged, deciding that it was far better for the mental health of both boys to leave them out of this loop. “Oh, nothing important.”

The next morning, Pearl, Amethyst, Candy, and Grenda arrived at the shack, all four of them prepared to do whatever they had to in order to free Sev’ral Timez. Of course, the only thing any of them refused to stoop to was harming Mabel, but still, they planned on working past her in order to get the boys out and into the wild where they belonged.

“Alright,” Pearl said with resolve as they all stood before the door to the shack. “You all know the plan. Is everybody ready?”

“Yeah! Let’s save those boys!” Grenda shouted resiliently.

“I’m prepared to defend myself,” Candy declared, poking at the pillow armor she had clad herself in.

“And I even brought the tacos!” Amethyst exclaimed, holding up a box of said tacos.

“Amethyst, I told you to leave those at the temple!” Pearl scolded. “What good would they even do us in this situation?”

“Uh, they’re for luring the boys out, duh,” Amethyst rolled her eyes. “And a few of them are for me to eat later on. Just cause.”

Before the group could carry out their daring rescue plan, however, the door to the shack suddenly opened, revealing a very solemn and very remorseful Mabel. “Hi, guys,” she greeted, lacking her usual verve as she glanced down guiltily. “I’m sorry I went bonkers. A catchy song made me realize that you were all right. Can you ever forgive me?”
Of course!” Grenda immediately exclaimed, pulling Mabel into a tight hug.

“Friendship repaired!” Candy joined in happily.

“Water under the bridge, dude,” Amethyst quipped as she pulled Pearl into the embrace as well.

“Oh! Well, yes, we definitely forgive you, Mabel,” the white Gem said with a smile. “I’m glad you were finally able to see reason in all of this. Even if it was a bit… belated.”

“Heh, yeah,” Mabel chuckled sheepishly. “Hopefully next time I’ll learn my lesson way earlier, huh?”

“Well, hopefully there won’t be a next time,” Pearl remarked, smirking knowingly.

At this point, the door opened once more as the members of Sev’ral Timez stepped out, all of them looking to Mabel in relative confusion. “What’s goin’ on, Mabel, girl?” Leggy P. asked.

“You said you had something you wanted to show us or some deal?” Chubby Z. inquired curiously.

“Yup. This!” Mabel threw her arm out to the rising sun and the surrounding woods, allowing the boys to take in the full view of the natural world they had never gotten to see. Needless to say, they were all aptly stunned as they let out a round of amazed gasps.

“Yo, dog, who is this big, round, bright fool?” Chubby Z. asked, shielding his eyes from the radiant sunrise.

“That fool is makin’ my eyes hurt straight painful!” Chubby Z. exclaimed, glaring at it. “I’m gonna stare that fool down!” Of course, his attempt at a staring contest with the sun was short lived as it only ended up making his eyes water until he finally looked away.

“Yo, yo, hold up,” Deep Chris interrupted. “What’s this big green mess?”

“That’s nature, Deep Chris,” Mabel informed him with a smile. “Bratsman won’t bother you anymore. You can do anything you wanna do, go anywhere you wanna go. You’re free!”

“Fa-ree?” Creggy G. questioned, confused by the very concept.

“It means that you five are no longer restrained by the brutal chains of oppressive tyranny!” Pearl proclaimed dramatically. “You are the masters of your own destinies! The captains of the ships of your own lives! The-”

“Ok, P, I think they get it,” Amethyst cut her off, crossing her arms.

“Long story short,” Mabel reiterated. “You’re free. That means you can skedaddle!” Tears were welling up in her eyes as she picked up a nearby stick and began prodding the boys with it in an attempt to drive them away. “Now go! Go! Get out of here before I change my mind!”

The band members all looked to each other, still not fully grasping the idea of freedom, but nonetheless, they began heading towards the forest, singing one final refrain as they did so. “Goodbye, girl…” they harmonized as with a wave to the group as they disappeared into the foliage to tackle their new, free lives. The girls and the Gems waved them off with fond smiles, their mission finally accomplished.
“Well, that’s that,” Amethyst remarked as she began snacking on her tacos.

“Should we be concerned about their chances out there?” Pearl pondered.

“Eh, they won’t last a week,” Candy said with a smile and a shrug.

True to her word, Garnet made piping hot cocoa for Steven and Dipper once they returned to the shack, where they recounted the story of what had just happened to Stan. “So let me get this straight,” the conman began caustically. “You two nearly got yourselves killed in a thunderstorm just because you thought something bad might happen to you?”

“Yeah…” Dipper admitted with a sheepish frown. “Now that you mention it, it kind of doesn’t make a whole lot of sense.”

“Your reaction was understandable though,” Garnet reassured. “And at least none of the bad outcomes I foresaw during that storm actually came true.”

The boys exchanged a wary glance upon hearing this, but in the end they both decided that they didn’t really want to know what any of those outcomes might have been.

“Y’know, if I was a more responsible uncle, I’d think twice about letting the twins hang around you Gems, considering how much danger you guys are constantly putting them in,” Stan remarked dryly, remembering the Gem leader’s role in all of this danger. “Good thing I don’t really care.”

“Well, at least everything turned out ok in the end,” Steven said with a content smile.

“Yeah, everything except for what happened with Wendy,” Dipper sighed, forlorn. “I shouldn’t have meddled in her personal life. She probably hates me now.”

“Aw, chin up, kid,” Stan encouraged with a genuine grin. “That’s just how women work. You ruin their date, drive their hippie boyfriend’s van into a ravine and somehow you’re the ‘bad guy’.”

“Whoa, who did all that, Mr. Pines?” Steven asked, intrigued.

“Eh, just a guy I used to know,” Stan shrugged with a sly grin.

“So um, Garnet?” Dipper turned to the Gem leader. “I probably shouldn’t even ask this but, uh… can you see any futures where Wendy forgives me?”

Garnet cracked a small smirk at this as she placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Plenty,” she replied, eliciting a relieved smile from Dipper.

“Wait a second…” Stan paused upon hearing a loud rustling coming from outside. “Is someone rooting through our trash?!?”

“Oh, that’s probably just Amethyst,” Steven said. But even so, Stan was hardly satisfied, since he knew it had been years since the purple Gem had gone through his trash.

The conman grabbed his broom and hurried outside, where he found the culprit, who just so happened to be one of the lingering members of Sev’ral Timez. Chubby Z. dug through the trashcan outside, rummaging for food until Stan swatted his broom at him in the hopes of driving him away. “Hey! Hey! Get outta here!” the conman shouted, successfully chasing the boy band member off. “Darn beautiful men, always eating out of my trash… Wait, what?”
Chapter 25: Miss Mystery

Chapter Summary

In which Mabel is the boss, Stan goes on TV, Dipper and Connie catch a monster, the Gems aren't helpful, and disaster ensues

Chapter Notes

Well, here's our first chapter of the new year! I hope you all enjoy my take on Boss Mabel! :D

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“Ok, Mabel!” Steven called as he prepared to throw the frisbee. “Here it comes!”

“I’m ready!” Mabel shouted back, already running as Lion raced alongside her. The kids had devised a more interesting way of playing frisbee, one that involved having to contend with the pink beast in catching it. But even so, Mabel managed to barely best Lion this time as she jumped to catch the disk before he could. “Woo! That’s another one for Mabel! Sorry, Lion,” she smirked, giving the pink beast an affectionate scratch on the ear. “But you’re gonna have to do better than that!”

“Uh, are you guys really sure playing frisbee with a literal lion is such a good-” Before Dipper could even finish his question, Mabel haphazardly tossed the disk his way, hitting him squarely in the head and knocking him to the ground. Of course, Lion still chased after it and pounced on the already downed boy to retrieve it before trotting over to Connie with it. “Thanks for that, Lion,” Dipper deadpanned, annoyed as he picked himself up off the ground.

“Thanks, Lion,” Connie laughed, taking the frisbee. “Steven, are you ready?”

“Yeah!” the young Gem grinned as he bounced on the balls of his feet, ready to run. “Throw it, Connie!”

She did so, letting the disk soar towards Steven as Lion hurried after it once more. The only problem was that Connie happened to throw the frisbee a bit too high, to the point that it sailed right over Steven’s head and towards the Mystery Shack just as Stan happened to be walking out of it. Unfortunately, right as he stepped outside, the conman not only happened to be hit by the speeding disk, but also the pink beast that pummeled him to the ground for it.

“W-what the-?!” Stan exclaimed, alarmed as he looked up to Lion still standing over him. “Get off of me, you oversized clump of cotton candy!” The pink beast let out a sullen growl as he did what the conman had said, though Stan made sure to offer just as harsh of a growl of his own in
“S-sorry, Mr. Pines!” Connie called out apologetically.

“We were just playing the new game we made up: Frisbee Toss, Lion Edition!” Mabel quipped as the pink beast passed off the disk to her. “Do you wanna join us, Grunkle Stan?”

“Are you kiddin’ me, kid?” Stan asked caustically. “I don’t have time for fun and games or getting attacked by magical lions. I have a business to run and cold hard cash to make. Something that you’d never understand.”

Mabel pouted upon hearing this, quite unamused with her uncle’s condescending manner. But even so, she didn’t really have time to argue with him as Soos came around from the other side of the shack. “Mr. Pines! We got tourists at 9 o’clock!” the handyman exclaimed. “A whole busload of ‘em!”

And indeed, a large tour bus was pulling up to the shack as a small army of camera-toting tourists filed out, all of them buzzing with excitement and anticipation over the attraction they had arrived. “Hot tamales, it’s a jackpot!” Stan exclaimed with a wide grin as he peeked around the side of the shack to see the impressionable group for himself. “Soos! Make me some new attractions!”

“You got it, boss!” the handyman gave a thumbs-up as he hurried inside the shack. “Now where did I put that taxidermized chicken…?”

“As for all you kids,” Stan turned to the others. “Quit loitering around out here and get back to work!”

“But Mr. Pines, me and Connie don’t work here,” Steven pointed out with a frown.

“Didn’t you hear what I just said, kid?!” the conman exclaimed rigidly, not even caring about what the young Gem had said. “I said get back to work!”

Neither Steven nor Connie found that they were really in any position to argue with Stan, as surly and unyielding as he was. Which was why they both humbly followed the twins as they hurried into the gift shop with the conman coming not too far behind them.

“Wendy! Mark up those prices!” Stan shouted to the cashier, who was engrossed in reading a magazine instead of really doing her job. “The higher the better!” Wendy sighed but begrudgingly did so, adding a zero to the end of a two dollar price tag, upping it to twenty. “Higher!” Stan demanded. “Bleed ‘em dry!” The cashier complied, adding yet another zero to the sign and bumping the price up to a staggering $200.

“Yeesh, Grunkle Stan,” Dipper remarked upon seeing all this. “It’s like when you see tourists, all you see is wallets with legs.”

“That’s not true,” Stan protested pointedly. Yet all the same, as the conman turned to the window to observe his incoming customers, he really did envision most of them as walking, over-sized wallets, all of them ready to spend themselves dry at the Mystery Shack. In fact, as a carsick tourist stumbled out of his car, Stan even imagined he was throwing up pennies as opposed to actual vomit. However, in reality, that was far from what had really just happened. “Clean up on the front lawn!” he shouted to his nephew, seeing as how he certainly wasn’t going to do it himself. Dipper simply sighed relentingly but went to carry out the unsavory task all the same, glaring disparagingly at his uncle all the while.
Considering the sudden flux of tourists, the Mystery Shack was having quite the booming business day, meaning that all of its employees were quite busy. Though they didn’t work there, Stan had deemed Steven and Connie as “temporary interns”, of course implying that neither of them were going to get paid for helping out. And so, the two of them were somehow roped into selling tour tickets outside, which fortunately wasn’t too difficult or tiring of a task.

“There you go,” Connie said as she handed a ticket off to another customer. “Enjoy the tour!”

“This is the best job ever, Connie,” Steven said with a bright grin. “I mean, we get to sit out here, talk to all these nice people, and be the first faces they see when they come to the Mystery Shack! What could be better than that?”

“I feel like I could think of a few things…” Connie remarked with a small laugh.

Before the conversation could continue, another family stepped up to the ticket table, including a mother carrying a small infant. “Oh, what a cute baby!” the young Gem gasped with a delighted smile upon seeing the child. “You get to go in for free, little guy.”

“Oh, well that’s very polite of you. Thank you, young man!” the mother smiled graciously. However, before her and her family could go inside, they were abruptly stopped at the door.

“Hold it!” Stan gruffly exclaimed as he stepped outside. “No one, and I mean no one gets in for free. No exceptions.”

“Not even babies?” Steven asked with a frown.

“Especially not babies,” the conman asserted before turning to the woman. “It’s the full price of admission for you and your little ankle biter, lady.”

The mother simply shrugged in acceptance with this and handed Stan the money before going on inside with the rest of the group. “As for you two,” he said to Steven and Connie. “Don’t let me catch you trying to hand out any kind of ‘discounts’ or ‘price cuts’ to any of these rubes. I’m not not-paying you two to run a charity case.”

The conman didn’t give either of them a chance to respond as he simply went back inside, slamming the door shut behind him. “Well,” Connie said to Steven with a halfhearted shrug. “We can’t say we didn’t try.”

“Ladies and gentle-tourists!” Stan began in his faux charming tone as he led a large tour group through the museum. “Looking around my Mystery Shack, you will see many wondrous roadside attractions! Be amazed at the only known photo of a horse riding another horse!” The conman pointed to said picture hanging from the nearby wall, smirking as the tourists muttered amongst themselves, interested.

“And now,” Stan continued the tour. “Be astonished at the horrible, pre-teen wolf boy!” With a dramatic flair, the conman pulled the nearby curtain aside to reveal Dipper wearing the “wolf” costume Stan had forced him into, complete with fake fur, fangs, and ears. “Oh! Look at him!” the conman continued, ignoring how clearly disgruntled his nephew was over his embarrassing position. “All that hair! His body’s changing, ah!”
“Grunkle Stan,” Dipper spoke up, spitting his fake wolf teeth out. “This is demeaning.”

“What? I don’t know ‘de meaning’ of that word!” Stan joked, eliciting a laugh from all of the tourists and a frustrated sigh from Dipper. “By the way,” he said to the tourists. “If you throw money at him, he dances.”

Of course, the impressionable tourists were more than happy to do so, forcing Dipper to jump around the stage in something of a “dance” in order to avoid the cash being thrown at him. Even so, Stan was more than happy to reap all of the extra money he was making, regardless of how he got it.

Much like the tour, the gift shop was also bustling with customers, all of them eager to spend their money on various knick-knacks and doo-dads. Mabel cheerfully presided over the checkout counter, taking a page from her grunkle about advertising products freely and loudly.

“Behold! Mystery Shack bumper stickers!” she proclaimed, catching the attention of every customer nearby. “You can stick ‘em on your bumper or over your husband’s mouth! Am I right, ladies? She knows what I’m talking about!” she grinned to the woman approaching the counter.

“Oh, you are bad!” the woman laughed, amused. “How much?”

“Hey, it’s on the house,” Mabel smiled as she gave the woman a bumper sticker. “That’s the Mabel difference! Thanks for visiting!”

“What?!” Stan’s sudden outburst startled Mabel as he suddenly stepped out from behind a cardboard cutout of himself. “What the heck do you think you’re doing!?”


“Listen, kid,” Stan began, pinching the bridge of his nose in exasperation. “You don’t make money by giving stuff away. You make it by upping prices and tricking idiots into giving it to you for practically nothing. Which is why you’re off register duty.”

“But-” Mabel tried to protest before she was abruptly cut off.

“No buts except yours out the door,” the conman said coldly. “Now shut your yap and get to work!”

“Grunkle Stan, whatever happened to ‘please’ and ‘thank you’, hm?” Mabel asked. “Oh wait! There they are!” At this, she pulled out her rather extensive sticker collection and retrieved two stickers saying both of those courtesy words, slapping them onto Stan’s face. “Wop wop!”

“Ugh,” Stan groaned, taking the stickers off. “Please’ never made me any money, kid. In fact, just saying the word gives me a burning sensation.”

It was around this point that Steven and Connie entered the gift shop, both of them looking rather famished and exhausted after their long stint of selling tickets. Yet even so, the conman hardly had any sympathy on them. “Hey, hey! What do you two think you’re doing?!!”

“We just came in to get some water,” Steven explained, his voice sounding rather dry. “It’s so hot out there, Mr. Pines.”

“Customers finally stopped coming, so we decided to take a short break,” Connie added. “If that’s ok with you, sir.”
“Well, it most certainly isn’t ok with me!” Stan exclaimed crossly. “If you guys aren’t out there selling tickets, then people will think they can just waltz in here all willy-nilly without paying. Somebody has to take their money from them and that somebody is you.”

“Can we at least have a bathroom break first?” Steven asked anxiously. “I’ve been holding it in for almost two hours!”

“Didn’t you just hear a word I said?” the conman retorted caustically. “No breaks! For any of you! From now on, everyone around here better pull their weight, or I’m cutting your pay even more!”

“Mr. Pines, you’re not paying me or Steven to work here…” Connie pointed out with a frown.

“Then that should give you all the more incentive to work harder, shouldn’t it?” Stan asked, unconcerned.

No one was really sure how to argue with this faulty logic, so none of the kids really even tried. Not long after this, however, Dipper entered the gift shop, more than ready to voice his own grievance to his miserly uncle. “Grunkle Stan, why do I have to wear this wolf costume?” he asked in exasperation, scratching at the fur attached to his legs. “I think I’m getting hookworm.”

“Ha! Yep,” Stan laughed. “Gluing dog hair to your body will do that.”

Dipper sighed at this comment, only growing even more annoyed with Stan’s cheap, unethical business practices. “Grunkle Stan, you’ve got all these dumb, fake exhibits here at the shack but meanwhile I’ve seen actual amazing things in the forest every day! What if you hunted down a real attraction instead of just lying to people for a living?”

“And you should be nicer to your employees too!” Mabel added just as vigorously.

“And give them bathroom/water breaks!” Steven exclaimed boldly. “And maybe a nice snack break every now and then too.”

“Yeah!” Dipper and Connie agreed in unison, high fiving Steven and Mabel. Yet even so, Stan was hardly sold on any of their ultraistic ideas.

“Look, if you guys got a problem with how I run the shack, take it up with the complaints department,” the conman remarked, smirking as he held up a trash can. “Zing!”

“That’s a weird looking complaints department…” Steven noted with a frown.

“Oh, I am going to write them such a letter!” Mabel exclaimed, already starting to do so as she shielded what she was writing away from the trash can.

“Make sure to use lots of exclamation points!” Steven encouraged, looking at over her shoulder at the letter. “They’re great for adding that extra ‘oomf’!”

Of course, Dipper and Connie could only really sigh at the pair’s misplaced enthusiasm, knowing that Stan wouldn’t really listen to any of their complaints or suggestions anyway. And unfortunately, it looked like that was something that wasn’t going to change anytime soon.

As the flow of customers began to slow down later that afternoon, Stan contracted all of his employees (including Steven and Connie) to carry out what he referred to as a ‘shack beautification
In reality though, the sum of said project was coating the shack’s sign with a heavy layer of glitter, regardless of how gaudy it made it look. Of course, the conman had no intentions of helping the others with this task as he merely supervised them from the lawn below.

“And don’t stop until you’ve covered that sign with glitter!” Stan ordered firmly. “Glittery signs attract tourists! Also large birds.” The conman’s statement was proven true as an eagle flew in from out of nowhere, divebombing towards the sign and attacking Soos in the process. Instead of helping his employee however, Stan simply laughed at his panic and misery. “Ha! That’s funny.”

As everyone begrudgingly continued working, the Gems happened to arrive, all three of them curious to see what the commotion was all about. “Yo, Stan!” Amethyst greeted casually as they came to stand alongside the conman. “What up? Are you trying to give people eye strain when they look at the shack’s sign?”

“Because if that’s the case, then you’re doing a pretty good job,” Garnet remarked dryly.

“Hey! I’ll have you know all that glitter is gonna bring in loads of paying customers!” Stan protested defensively. “And it’ll probably get people to finally stop looking at your dusty old temple and get their attention on a real tourist attraction for once!”

“Please, Stan,” Pearl rolled her eyes. “The Mystery Shack couldn’t be more fake. Anyone with eyes can see that everything in there is just a shallow, tawdry ruse.”

“I don’t know what half of that meant, but thank you,” Stan said snidely, satisfied with the aggravated glare the white Gem sent is way.

“Oh, hi, you guys!” Steven shouted down to the Gems from atop the roof. “Check me out! I’m painting!”

“Steven, be careful up there!” Pearl called fretfully before turning to the conman in a huff. “Honestly, Stan, it’s bad enough you force the twins to work so hard. How did you manage to rope Steven and Connie into doing your dirty work too?”

“What? They both volunteered to help out for the day,” Stan lied, feigning innocence.

“No, we didn’t!” Connie called from the roof.

“Pfft, well better than us, huh?” Amethyst asked with a shrug. “This junk looks boring anyway. Though at least Steven looks like he’s kinda having fun.” The purple Gem nodded up to the young Gem, who was blithely painting a smiley face in glitter on the shack’s sign.

“So are you three just gonna stand around here all day?” Stan asked the Gems, crossing his arms. “Because if you do, there’s a fee you have to pay for that.”

“We’re going,” Garnet said, already preparing to leave.

“Fine, I suppose we are,” Pearl said with a frustrated sigh. “But you better be careful not to work Steven too hard, Stan. Or else you’ll have to answer to us.”

“Oh gee, I’m quivering in fear,” Stan remarked sarcastically as the Gems walked off. Pearl shot one final warning glare back at him, but said nothing as they left, leaving the conman to freely bark orders at his employees once more. “Alright, kids, pick up the pace! By the time I come back out here, that sign better be shining like a brand new penny! Or better yet, a quarter because they’re worth way more money!”
And with that, the conman went inside the shack, allowing the group to finally take a much needed breather now that they were no longer under his scrutiny. “Ok, is it just me, or is having Grunkle Stan as a boss seriously the worst?” Dipper asked, putting his paint roller aside.

“I know, right?” Wendy remarked, crossing her arms. “Why do we even put up with it?”

“Aw, working for Mr. Pines isn’t so bad, you guys,” Steven said, trying to see the bright side of things. “At least he finally let me have my bathroom break.”

“Only because you got down on your knees and begged for it, Steven,” Dipper pointed out dryly.

“You know, I gave Stan a suggestion to improve the shack once,” Soos said. “I had this idea where I could be like, the Mystery Shack mascot: Questiony the Question Mark. I ask people questions, do the question dance, cool stuff like that.”

“That sounds amazing!” Mabel exclaimed with a huge grin as the others all nodded their shared enthusiasm towards the handyman’s idea.

“Yeah, Soos! I’m sure everyone would love that!” Steven added brightly.

“Yeah, well… Stan said I couldn’t handle it.”

“He said what!?” Mabel exclaimed, shocked. Stan had already shown a general lack of concern for his employees and his customers over the course of today alone. But as far as Mabel was concerned, this was the final straw. And this time, she wasn’t willing to stand by and let her uncle get away with it any longer.

“And remember, folks!” Stan called after the latest tour group as they departed. “We put the ‘fun’ in ‘no refunds’!” As soon as the tourists were out of earshot, the conman retreating inside the gift shop, counting his large stack of profits and laughing all the while. “Suckers!”

“You!” Mabel shouted accusingly, revealing herself from her hiding spot behind the door and startling Stan quite a bit. “Grunkle Stan, you’ve gone too far this time! Did you seriously tell Soos not to follow his hopes and dreams because he ‘couldn’t handle it’?”

“Look, kid,” Stan began, heading into his office with Mabel following close behind. “Let me break it down for you. Around here, I’m known as Mr. Mystery for two reasons: 1. Because I give everyone who comes to this shack a taste of the unknown, for the right price of course. And 2. Because I’m the boss. And being a boss is about commanding respect. If you give people everything they ask for, they’ll walk right over you.”

“No way!” Mabel argued. “I bet you’d make way more money being nice than being a big grumpy grump to everyone all the time!”

“Ha! You think you know more about business than I do? You think you could wear this hat?” Stan asked caustically, pointing to his fez.

“You!” Mabel exclaimed readily. “Cause I give people respect! And glittery stickers!” For emphasis, she pulled a star sticker out of her sweater and stamped it on her cheek, her expression remaining hard and resolved all the while.

“Please,” the conman rolled his eyes. “I’d make more money on vacation than you would running...
“Then why don’t you go on vacation?”

“Hm… interesting…” Stan mused, taking this challenge to heart. “Alright, I’m a wagering man. So here’s how it’s gonna work. 3 days. 72 hours. You run the shack, and I’ll go on vacation. If you make more money than me, I guess it means you’re right about the way I run my business. But if you lose, you, uh…” The conman paused, glancing around until he found a blank white tee shirt nearby. Acting quickly, he took a marker and scribbled the word ‘loser’ on it in bold black letters. “You have to wear this ‘loser’ tee shirt all summer!”

“Fine,” Mabel shrugged, confident that she would win this bet. After all, how could her natural kindness and charm not make more money than Stan’s swindling and stoicism? “But if I win, I get to be boss for the rest of the summer! Plus, you gotta sing an apology song with lyrics written by me, Mabel!”

“Whoa ho!” Stan exclaimed, rather impressed by how quickly his niece had thought up such specific terms. “You got yourself a deal, missy!”

“No, you got yourself a deal!”

“Deal!” Stan exclaimed once more, slamming his hand down on his desk.

“Deal!” Mabel did the same just as firmly.

“Deal!” Stan shouted once more.

“Deal!” Mabel smirked, putting a heart shaped sticker on Stan’s nose in order to officially seal the deal.

True to his word, Stan began packing up his car later that afternoon, more than ready to not only take a three day long vacation but win the bet in the process. The kids all watched from the porch as he prepared to embark on his trip, as did the Gems, who had come down to check on Steven once more.

“So let me get this straight…” Pearl said to Mabel. “You made a bet with him that you’ll be able to make more money than he can, essentially beating him at his own game?”

“Yep!” Mabel exclaimed enthusiastically.

“I gotta say, that’s pretty gusty of you, Mabel,” Amethyst remarked. “Especially since Stan’s kinda the king of making money.”

“That I am,” Stan proclaimed proudly. “And maybe after three days of not making a single dime will finally show you that, kid.”

“Oh yeah?” Mabel asked challengingly. “Well, I’m gonna make plenty of dimes, Grunkle Stan! You know why? Because people actually want to work for me, right guys?” she asked the others.

“Um, sure, I guess,” Dipper shrugged.

“I don’t see why not,” Connie smiled amicably.
“You bet, Mabel!” Steven eagerly agreed.

“So, wait…” Pearl interjected. “What happens if you win the bet, Mabel?”

“If I win, I get to be in charge of the shack and Grunkle Stan has to perform an embarrassing song and dance number that I’m gonna come up with!” Mabel quipped excitedly. “I already have this super sparkly orange jumpsuit picked out for him to wear while he does it and everything!”

The Gems all exchanged a glance upon hearing this before they broke out into a round of unified laughter. “If that’s what you have in mind, count us in too,” Garnet grinned, her hands on her hips.

“Yes,” Pearl laughed, nodding in full agreement. “That certainly sounds like it’s just the sort of humbling experience Stan needs.”

“Humbling, huh?” Stan raised an eyebrow. “Well then how about we make this more interesting, seeing as how you three feel the need to stick your noses in all this?”

“Oh, I love it when things get more interesting!” Amethyst exclaimed with a daring smile. “‘Whatcha have in mind?”

“I was just thinking we up the ante a bit,” the conman shrugged nonchalantly. “If you all win, then I’ll do Mabel’s dumb little song-and-dance. But if I win, then not only does she have to wear the loser shirt, but you three also have to work here at the shack for me for a month. How does that sound for ya?”

“Wait, you call having to hang out down here all day instead of having to go on missions a punishment?” the purple Gem asked.

“It certainly would be a punishment, if we were going to lose the bet, which we’re not,” Pearl affirmed confidently. “Right, Garnet?”

“Eh, it’s about a fifty-fifty chance either way,” the Gem leader shrugged, her future vision showing her no advantage on either side.

“Those odds are good enough for me!” Mabel exclaimed brightly.

“Me too!” Amethyst agreed. “We’re totally in, right, P?”

“Yes, we are,” the white Gem nodded. “And I have to say, I’m already anticipating your little ‘performance’, Stan. I’m sure it’ll be a big hit!”

The conman simply rolled his eyes as Pearl laughed mockingly. “Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. In the end, I’ll be the one laughing when I put you three to work fixing my roof.”

“We’ll see about that,” Garnet said vaguely.

“You bet we will,” Stan retorted with a smug grin as he got into his car. “Welp, see you all in 72 hours. May the better businessman win! Which is, of course, me!” With another triumphant laugh, the conman sped off, though not before tossing his fez at Mabel as a sign of his responsibilities passing onto her. Still, the girl grinned confidently as she put it atop her head, a large jar to hold all of the money she planned on making tucked under her arm.

“Oh, Mabel?” Dipper spoke up, relatively concerned. “You do know you just made a bet with a professional conman, right?”
“Oh come on,” Mabel said with a wave of her hand. “Being a better boss than Stan will be a cinch. Profit, here we come!” Of course, as she held her profits jar up, it just so happened to slip right out of her hands and shatter on the ground.

“You broke the-”

“We’ll get a new one,” Mabel quickly cut her brother off before turning to the Gems. “So you guys are really gonna help me?”

“Of course we are, Mabel,” Pearl said with a warm smile.

“Yeah, anything to embarrass Stan!” Amethyst quipped, smirking.

“That alone is worth all the hard work,” Garnet remarked.

“Working here is gonna be so much fun with you in charge, Mabel!” Steven exclaimed excitedly. “Will we finally get snack breaks? Oh! Can Lion finally come inside the shack and play with the customers?!”

“Oh, so much more than that, Steven,” Mabel said, grinning as she headed inside. “Let’s just say I have plans for this old place… Big plans…”

“Um… should we be concerned about that?” Connie muttered to Dipper, somewhat unnerved.

“Yes,” Dipper shrugged. “I’m sure she can’t be any worse than Stan was, right?”

Mabel’s first activity as acting manager of the shack was to call for an employee meeting in order to lay down the ground rules to everyone. She had already positioned herself in Stan’s office, more than ready to receive Dipper, Steven, Connie, Soos, Wendy, and the Gems as they walked in.

“You wanted to see us, Mr. Pines?” Soos asked as they approached the desk.

With a huge smile, Mabel turned her chair around and scooted it up to the desk, revealing the business wear she had clad herself in for this special occasion. “Stan is no longer with us.”

“He’s dead!?” Soos gasped, absolutely distraught. “No! It should have been me!”

“Whoa, Soos! Stan’s not dead!” Mabel rose from her seat, concerned as the handyman crumpled to his knees. “He’s on vacation. We made a bet.”

“Oh…” Soos got up, slightly embarrassed for his outburst but relieved all the same. “Thank you for that clarification.”

“So this means, Mabel’s in charge now!” Mabel announced boldly. “Meet your new Miss Mystery!”

“Are those… shoulder pads?” Dipper asked, noting his sister’s very professional attire.

“If they are, they look really snazzy!” Steven quipped with a thumbs up.

“Thanks!” Mabel exclaimed, shaking her shoulder pads up and down. “It’s just one of the up-to-date managerial tricks I learned from this book I found propping up the kitchen table.” She held up said book for them all to see, a volume entitled Succeeding in Management, 1983.
“Seems like a good read,” Garnet said, taking the book from her and flipping through it.

“Human business practices haven’t changed too drastically over the course of a mere thirty years, right?” Pearl asked in a somewhat anxious whisper, a small part of her fearing that they wouldn’t actually win this bet.

“Why does your mug say ‘#2 boss’?” Connie asked with a frown, noting Mabel’s rather odd coffee mug.

“Because the real #1 is… you!” Mabel held up a hand mirror at the others, eliciting pleased laughter from them all. Her smile grew even wider as she realized her plan was already working; she was boosting morale, which would certainly lead her employees to be more productive, just as the book had instructed her. But even so, this was just the first step. She had several more to go if she ever hoped to beat Stan. “Walk with me,” she nodded to the group, leading the way to a nearby chalkboard. “With me as your boss, you’re all gonna notice a few changes around here. My job is to help you be your best ‘SELVES’: Satisfied, Everyday, Loving life, Very much, Everyday, Satisfied.”

“Why were everyday and satisfied in there twice?” Amethyst asked, confused.

“Because I want you all to be twice as satisfied on every everyday!” Mabel explained cheerfully. “Waddles, hold my calls!” she said to the pig, whom she had dressed up as her secretary and built a small office for. Seeing as how things were going quite well so far, Mabel led the group into the gift shop to continue their meeting.

“Alright people, rap with me,” Mabel said, pulling up a chair. “Wendy, how can I make your work space more Wendy-friendly?”

“Hm, well…” Wendy mused. “Stan never lets me hang out with friends at work.”

“Stan ain’t here, sister! Door’s open!” Mabel exclaimed with an affirming grin.

“Sweet!”

“And Soos, I believe this is yours,” Mabel pulled out an oversized foam question mark from behind the counter, handing it off to the handyman.

“Questiony the Question Mark?!” Soos asked, absolutely delighted. “I wish this was an exclamation point to show how excited I am!”

“And Steven, you said you wanted snack breaks? Well how’s this instead?” Mabel pulled the cloth off the nearby table to reveal a huge assortment of various snacks and treats of all kinds. “A whole snack buffet for you to eat from any time you’d like!”

“Wow!” the young Gem exclaimed, stars in his eyes. “Mabel, that’s amazing! It all looks so good! And are those donuts from the Big Donut I see?”

“They are!” Mabel nodded. “Only the best for my valued employees!”

“Steven’s not an employee here…” Pearl frowned, befuddled.

“You know what? You’re right, Pearl! None of you are employees here!” Mabel announced, eliciting confused looks from everyone else. “Here, you’re all family!”

The group all laughed warmly in response to this, all of them very receptive to the kind treatment
Mabel was showing them. “As for you, Dipper…” she grinned, holding up her brother’s wolf costume and noticing the clear look of dread on his face upon seeing it. However, much to Dipper’s surprise, instead of ordering him to put it on, Mabel ran the faux fur through the nearby paper shredder, destroying it completely. “Die, wolf costume, die! Now, Dipper, I want you to head into woods and don’t come back until you found an amazing attraction! And Connie, since you’re into all that magicky nerd stuff too, I want you to go with him!”

Needless to say, Dipper and Connie exchanged elated grins upon hearing this assignment, both of them more than ready to undertake such an exciting task. “Finally!” Dipper exclaimed with a daring grin as he pulled out the journal. “It’s time to show Stan how a real mystery hunter does it!”

“A actual monster hunt…” Connie smiled, her eyes wide with excitement. “Just like out of a fantasy novel! This will be great!”

“Let’s go!” Dipper urged, grabbing the flail that happened to be hanging from the nearby wall and leading the way to the window. “We’re out—whoa!” Unfortunately, he had failed to account for the heavy weight of the flail, which inevitably caused him to fall out the window.

“Dipper, are you ok?!” Connie asked, concerned as she prepared to jump out the window herself.

“I’ll be fine!” Dipper answered someone weakly from outside as he tried to push the heavy flail off of him. With a shrug, Connie leapt out after him, the pair ready to embark on their impromptu monster hunt and make it back before the day was through.

“Um… maybe one of us should go with them…” Pearl frowned with worry as Dipper and Connie departed on their potentially dangerous mission.

“Oh don’t worry,” Mabel reassured blithely. “I’m sure they’ll do great! In the meantime, we’re going to prove that nice boss finishes first. In the next 72 hours, we’re gonna fill this jar with six hundred billion dollars!” To keep track of this goal, she drew a line on the jar towards the top in the hopes that she could reach it.

“Wait, do you know how money works?” Wendy asked, somewhat concerned.

“Nope!” Mabel admitted with a smile. “That’s why I’m putting Pearl in charge of finances!”

“Oh, well thank you, Mabel,” Pearl graciously accepted the jar as Mabel handed it off to her. “You won’t regret this decision. You can rest assured I’ve had plenty of experience handling money in the past.”

“Yeah!” Steven vouched for the white Gem. “Pearl’s great with cash. One time she threw a whole wad of money at a bird to get it to leave her alone!”

“And it worked,” Pearl added with a proud smirk.

Soos and Wendy exchanged something of an apprehensive glance upon hearing this, but even so, neither of them questioned their new boss’s decision. After all, working under Mabel was already proving to be much more rewarding than working under Stan ever was.

“Ok, Amethyst,” Mabel turned to the purple Gem. “Since Soos and Wendy will be busy in here and Dipper and Connie are gone, I’ll need you to give out tours in the museum. You come down here all the time, so you probably know a lot about all the different exhibits, right?”

“Know ‘em?” Amethyst grinned. “Come on. I pretty much helped Stan come up with more than half of those things! Showing them to a bunch of humans with cameras will be a piece of cake.”
“Great!” Mabel exclaimed brightly. “Thanks so much, Amethyst!”

“You got it!” the purple Gem nodded. “And you know what? I’ll even spice that lame old tour up a little for ya. By the time I’m done, people will be paying just to get back in line!”

“Awesome! Do whatever you want! Now Garnet,” Mabel addressed the Gem leader next. “I have a really special job for you.”

“I’ll do it,” Garnet replied, adjusting her shades.

“But... I didn’t even tell you what it was yet…”

“Future vision,” the Gem leader reminded her with a smile.

“Oh yeah! That’s… actually kinda what I was gonna ask you for,” Mabel said, remembering hearing about Garnet’s unique ability. “I want you to fill in as the shack’s newest premiere attraction: the Future Visionary!”

“I like it,” Garnet nodded.

“Just tell the guests what you see in their futures,” Mabel explained. “According to Grunkle Stan, people eat that stuff up when it’s fake, so I’m sure they’ll love it even more when it’s real! Oh, and you’ll need these.” Reaching behind the counter once more, she pulled out an ornate cape and matching turban, handing them to the Gem leader for her to wear.

“Are you really going to wear those, Garnet?” Pearl asked with an amused grin.

“Sure,” Garnet shrugged, also smiling.

“What about me, Mabel?” Steven asked eagerly “What do you want me to do?”

“Steven, you get one of the funnest, most important jobs of all!” Mabel exclaimed. “You get to go into town and try and bring as many customers back to the shack with you as you can.”

“You mean I get to go make new friends and tell them about how great the Mystery Shack is?” Steven smiled, completely overwhelmed with excitement. “This day just keeps getting better and better! I’m on it, Mabel! And I’m gonna take a few of these with me for the road…” He snuck a few donuts from the snack table before heading outside. “Lion! Come on! We have customers to find!”

“Good luck!” Mabel called out after him before turning back to the others. “Well, you guys, I think it’s safe to say we have a pretty tight ship running here. I’d like to see Grunkle Stan try and beat this!”

Despite Mabel’s confidence in her success, there was one thing that she could have never counted on. And that thing was the fact that Stan already knew very well what he was doing when he had struck the bet with her. He had already devised a sure fire plan to make more money than her from step one, and that plan just so happened to involve him landing a spot on his favorite game show: Cash Wheel.

However, what the conman hadn’t accounted for was such a lengthy audition line to stand between him at that spot. “Ugh! This line is taking forever!” Stan grumbled to himself, knowing he only had
three days. “Time to use my old man powers… Ah! I’m having a heart attack!” the conman shouted, putting on a fairly convincing show as he clutched his chest and collapsing to the ground. “And the only known cure is to be a contestant on… Cash Wheel! Augh! Someone give me a part! I’m old!”

Of course, the scene Stan was putting on caught the attention of everyone around him as a large, worried crowd gathered all around him. Fortunately, the show’s producer happened to be rather close by and also took notice of the rather fake drama unfolding.

“Should we escort him off the lot?” the producer’s assistant asked.

“That man is a self-centered attention hog with no regard for human decency,” the producer said with a scowl that soon turned to a grin. “Get him on TV!”

With their monster hunting mission in mind, Dipper and Connie set out on the mystery kart, equipped with really only the journal, the flail, and their own wits to aid them in their task. Still, neither of them were too perturbed or anxious. After all, they were starting to get used to dealing with the more life-threatening facets of Gravity Falls on nearly a daily basis.

“So what kind of monster are we looking for anyway?” Connie asked, peering around the darkened forest with her binoculars.

“I don’t know,” Dipper shrugged. “Any monster we can find, I guess. The journal’s full of all sorts of tips and tricks for capturing mythical creatures, so I figure that if we stick to its advice, we’re bound to turn up with something.”

“Oh good,” Connie said with relative relief. “So, what? Are we gonna build some kind of elaborate trap and hide out in the trees until we catch something?”

“Actually, I was thinking something a little more simple…” Dipper said as they arrived in a large clearing and got out of the kart. “Like… a tiger trap.”

“A tiger trap?” Connie asked incredulously. “Isn’t that basically just a hole in the ground?”

“Yeah,” Dipper admitted, grabbing a shovel from the back of the cart and handing another one to Connie. “But the journal advises that the best way to catch any kind of monster is to keep your trap as simple as possible. That way the monster won’t see it coming, which means it’ll just walk right into it!”

“Huh. I guess that makes sense,” Connie shrugged as they began to dig. It took around two hours, but in time, they eventually managed to dig a hole several feet deep and several feet wide, one that would hopefully suffice for their purposes.

“Well, this ought to help us nab at least a gnome or a troll,” Dipper concluded as him and Connie climbed out of the whole. “Maybe a werewolf, if we’re lucky.”

“Still, we should probably cover it up with leaves or something,” Connie mused, looking over the trap. “A hole this big would be kind of obvious…”

“Oh, good idea!” Dipper nodded in agreement. “Have you done this before, Connie?”

“No, have you?”
“Not really…”

“Well then this will be a learning experience for both of us,” Connie laughed. Knowing they had little time to waste, the pair worked quickly in covering up their trap with foliage. Once they were satisfied with their work, they retreated to hide just out of sight behind a large, nearby tree. After waiting a minute or two, they finally peered out from behind the tree, only to see that the trap had remained untouched.

“Maybe we should have set some bait out or something…” Dipper mused, leafing through the journal once more. “We could probably catch a moth man if we had a really bright light…”

“Dipper, what if this doesn’t end up working?” Connie asked, voicing her newfound concern.

“Oh don’t worry,” Dipper reassured. “It’s going to work.”

“Ok, but-”

“Connie, you don’t understand,” Dipper said, his tone suddenly quite tense. “This has to work. Mabel can’t lose the bet! I can’t go back to back to wearing that wolf boy costume! I just can’t!”

Connie said nothing for a moment, looking to Dipper with apt concern after this outburst. However, before she could ask if he was alright, a loud crash from nearby startled them both quite a bit.

“The trap!” they both gasped in unison, looking out from behind the trees to see that their trap had indeed worked. The upper half of a horrific monstrosity was squeezed into the hole, growling in an angry, blind panic as it tried to wriggle its way out. The monster was quite unlike anything either of the kids had ever seen before, with long, deadly fangs, a hideous, ghoulish face, and a huge, hulking body that only barely fit into the trap.

“I can’t believe it…” Connie muttered, awstuck as she adjusted the frames of her glasses. “We did it! We actually caught a monster!”

“This isn’t just an ordinary monster…” Dipper flipped through the journal, just as amazed. “This is a… a Gremloblin!”

“A… what?”

“A Gremloblin!” he repeated excitedly, showing her the journal page detailing the beast. “Apparently its’ one of the rarest monsters in Gravity Falls! The author wrote about how he nearly died fighting one!”

“O-ok…” Connie frowned, taking a nervous glance over at the outraged Gremloblin. “So how are we supposed to get it back to the shack?”

“Oh, right…” Dipper’s elation over their capture wore off as he glanced around for something they could use to get the monster out of the pit. “That’s it!” he exclaimed, running back to the golf cart and retrieving the large sack they had brought along. “I’ve seen Stan use this trick on Soos before,” he said to Connie, handing her the other edge of the sack. “We just need to be really careful. Gremloblins are pretty violent when they’re angry.”

“Yeah I could have guessed that…” Connie took in a deep, uneven breath as they both approached the still struggling Gremloblin. The monster continued to roar and thrash about, but ultimately it could do nothing as the kids threw the sack over its head. And miraculously enough, as soon as its eyes were covered, the Gremloblin stopped its squirming and instantly fell asleep.
“Yes!” the kids cheered over their success, exchanging a high five.

“Now all we have to do is tie this thing to the back of the cart and haul it back to the shack,” Dipper said with apt satisfaction as they prepared to do so. “With this Gremloblin, there’s no way Mabel can lose that bet!”

Considering the fact that she had quite a few hands to help her, Mabel found that running the shack was surprisingly easier than she had thought it would be. Since her employees were already quite satisfied with the benefits she had given them, she had relatively nothing to worry about on that front, leaving her time to focus on pleasing incoming customers. Without Stan hovering over her shoulder, Mabel found that she was free to be as kind to the tourists as she wanted, which warranted quite a few tips in addition to the regular price of admission.

“Thank you!” Mabel exclaimed warmly, collecting tips from customers at the tail end of the tour. “See you soon! Invite your friends! Tell ’em Mabel sent you!”

As the tourists left, Mabel grinned at the money in her profits jar. She still had a good ways to go before reaching the top, but at the very least she had a decent enough start and plenty of time left. She had no way of knowing how well Stan was doing on his end of things, but she was confident that he likely wasn’t coming anywhere close to the level of success she was at.

“Mabel!” Dipper called as him and Connie returned, working together to drag a heavy sack behind them. “We captured something! This is gonna blow those tourists away!”

“And if it doesn’t, then it’ll at least probably surprise them as much as it surprised us,” Connie remarked with a grin.

Before Mabel could express her gratitude, the monster inside the bag let out a fierce roar and grabbed the closest thing to it, which just so happened to be Dipper’s arm.

“Whoa!” Mabel gasped, alarmed.

“Oh no, not again!” Dipper exclaimed, struggling against the monster’s firm grip. “Connie—”

“On it!” Connie took a nearby stick and began beating the monster with it repeatedly until it finally let go. “Whew! You know, maybe we should put this thing in a cage before it breaks out of that sack… We don’t really have a bunch of holes on hand to trap it in again.”

“Good point,” Dipper said, breathing a sigh of relief as he rubbed his arm. “Come on, big guy,” he said to the still growling monster as him and Connie continued dragging it inside.

“Marvelous work, valued employees!” Mabel called after them with a delighted smile. “Oh, who is that?” she gasped, turning towards the outhouse with a knowing grin. “Is it Questiony the Question Mark?”

Soos frowned as he peeked out from behind the outhouse. “Um… I’m starting to have second thoughts about this, Mabel. I keep forgetting my lines, and this costume is more, uh… revealing than I expected…” Hesitantly, the handyman stepped out from his hiding spot, revealing that his question mark costume really only covered a small portion of his otherwise only underwear clad body.

“Soos, don’t give up!” Mabel encouraged exuberantly. “Anything is possible when you…” she
paused, flipping through her management book briefly to find the right words to say. “Imaginize it!”

“…I don’t know what that means…”

“Shh…” Mabel quieted him, putting a finger to his lips. “Shhhhhhhhh… Believe in yourself…” She whispered, briefly placing her hands against his face before walking away backwards. “Believe!”

“B-but I…” Soos tried to protest, though Mabel wasn’t listening as she went inside. “S-so cold…” he muttered, shivering as his costume exposed him to the elements.

“How’s my favorite Wendy?” Mabel asked blithely as she entered the shack, only to find a disastrous sight. Wendy had indeed followed along with what Mabel had said and invited several of her friends to hang out with her on the clock, however, they were doing far more than just that. Wendy, along with Lee, Nate, Thompson, Tambry, Sour Cream, Jenny, and Buck were all engaged in playing a round of hacky sack with a shrunken head, effectively wrecking the shack and terrorizing its customers in the process. The game eventually got out of control as the head flew haywire, striking a nearby young boy squarely in the face, much to his mother’s alarm.

“Oh my gosh!” Mabel gasped, hurrying over to the upset mother and child. “I’m so sorry. Please, have a refund!” She reached into the profits jar, pulling out a wad of cash, only for the mother to take that and then some before angrily leaving. Resolved to be firm but fair, Mabel approached Wendy, who was casually relaxing against the counter. “Wendy, you have a lot of cleaning up to do. Please?” she asked as nicely as possible.

“Whoa, all this rule stuff is starting to make you sound like Stan,” Wendy pointed out with a critical frown.

“What?! No!” Mabel exclaimed. “I’m nothing like Stan! In fact… t-take the rest of the day off?”

“…With full pay?”

Mabel swallowed nervously, knowing that agreeing to such a proposition would cost her in the end. But even so, she definitely didn’t want to be compared to her uncle and how he ran things at the shack. “O-of course,” she tentatively nodded, adjusting her suit jacket. “Have… have a great time!”

Wendy grinned widely upon hearing this, giving Mabel a thumbs up as she headed out and took all of her friends with her. Mabel let out an allayed sigh, hoping that she had done the right thing in the end. “Mabel Pines, you are the best boss ever,” she asserted, giving herself a pat on the back, failing to notice Soos try his routine out one last time behind her.

“I’m Questiony the Question Mark!” the handyman shouted at a random tourist, who screamed in terror and sprayed him with a healthy round of pepper spray. “Aw dude, it stings so bad!”

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’m Rich Richerson and welcome to CASH WHEEL!” the gameshow host announced as the fanfare played and the audience applauded. “Now let’s meet those contestants!”

“I’m Doug from Fairfield, California,” the first contestant introduced himself as his name appeared onscreen.

“I’m Donna from-”
“I’m Stan!” the conman interrupted boisterously, pushing the second contestant out of the way. “Stan Pines! Ha ha!” Stan hurried back to his place as his own name appeared onscreen. “Did we —did we already do me? Hi, I’m Stan!”

Rich laughed rather uncomfortably at this unscripted interruption, but even so, the show went on. “Okay, it’s going to be a long night, folks.” Of course, the audience laughed heartily at this before the host continued. “It’s time to solve—” Rich found himself being interrupted this time as Stan let out a loud, somewhat obnoxious delayed laugh. “…It’s, uh… time to solve that puzzle! Carla!”

“Yes, Rich?” the co-host asked at the puzzle board.

“Are there any s’es?!” Stan cut in boldly.

“Actually, it’s not your turn yet,” Rich pointed out. Still, two s’es appeared on the puzzle board, prompting Stan to shout out of turn once more.

“I’m ready to solve!”

“No, that game hasn’t started—”

“Is it… ‘shut your yaps?’”

Somehow, the conman’s guess was right on the money as the answer appeared on the board exactly as how he had said it. “Well played…” Rich noted with a smile.

Already knowing how the game worked, Stan gave the wheel a spin, chanting excitedly all the while. “Cash shower! Cash shower! Cash shower!”

“Cash shower!” Rich announced as the wheel landed on the coveted spot.

“Yes! Don’t mind if I do,” Stan grinned as he began to undress, perceiving it to be a literal cash shower.

“Mr. Pines?” Rich asked in sudden concern. “No! You don’t need to take your clothes off!” Quickly, the host hurried to block the camera’s view of the conman before he could fully undress. “Go to commercial! Go to commercial!”

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Dipper caught the attention of two tourists meandering about the museum as him and Connie stood near the Gremloblin’s covered cage. “My name’s Honest Dipper and this is my partner, Reliable Connie.”

“And we have something to show you that is certain to be unlike anything you’ve ever seen before!” Connie added with an enthusiastic smile.

“Unlike my cheating uncle, we’ve come across something that isn’t a hoax,” Dipper said with apt confidence. “It nearly killed us getting him into that cage.”

“And he’s not exaggerating either,” Connie said. “We have scratch and bite marks to show for it!”

“Behold!” Dipper exclaimed, removing the cover from the cage. “Part gremlin, part goblin: the Gremloblin!”

The Gremloblin, now fully awake, let out a fierce roar as he thrashed about his cage, beating the
sides of it in a vain attempt to escape. As he struggled, he ended up spitting up the bony remains of a human arm, which landed right in front of the pair of tourists.

“Well that’s fun,” the man remarked with a grin.

“It’s fake, honey,” the woman rolled her eyes. “You can see the strings.”

“What?!” Dipper exclaimed, appalled. “Those aren’t strings, that’s body hair!”

Still, the couple was hardly paying attention as they headed over to another longstanding fake attraction. “Oh, look at this, dear! The Six-packolope! How charming,” the woman chuckled.

“Wordplay!” the man laughed in amused agreement, snapping a photo of it.

“Seriously?” Connie scoffed in disbelief. “We nearly died trying to capture this thing and they still want the phony stuff?”

“Come on, everything else here is fake!” Dipper protested, dragging the tourists back over to the Gremlobin’s cage. “This is a real paranormal beast. And fun fact about this little guy: if you look into his eyes, you can see your worst nightmare.”

Of course, the couple did so out of sheer curiosity alone, though neither Dipper nor Connie initially noticed their eyes and expressions grow completely blank as the Gremlobin stared back at them. “If that doesn’t prove that this thing is a real monster, I don’t know what will,” Connie remarked, assured.

“Amazing, right?” Dipper asked with a grin, even though neither of them received any sort of response from the tourists. “We work for tips.”

“Um… Are they… ok?” Connie asked, her smile fading after a moment of innocuous silence.

As if turned out, the couple was anything but ok as the Gremlobin’s nightmare viewing ability actually ended up paralyzing both tourists with fear. Despite the kids’ best efforts to revive them, they eventually had to give up and call the ambulance to escort the eternally scarred couple away.

“T-thanks for visiting!” Dipper called after them with a nervous laugh.

“Well… that could have gone a lot better…” Connie said with sigh.

“Tell me about it...”

As Mabel was quickly finding out, having to run the shack effectively on her own was far from smooth sailing, especially since she pretty much had to preside over the gift shop entirely on her own with Wendy gone. Multitasking was anything but easy as she found herself stretched out incredibly thin. From ringing customers out, to maintaining order with reckless patrons, to doling out refunds to unhappy guests, all of it became increasingly harder to stay on top of the more tired she got. Still, she couldn’t give up. After all, the last thing she wanted to do was prove Stan right. She could handle this. She figured that all she had to do was keep up her usual sunny disposition, and everything would turn out fine in the end.

At least, she hoped.

Finally the heavy round of customers gradually dissipated, giving Mabel a much needed moment to
breath. She let out an exhausted sigh as she collapsed against the counter, barely even regarding Dipper and Connie as they came in and joined her.

“Well, we just made two people go insane,” Dipper said glumly. “How about you?”

“I’m so tired…” Mabel groaned. “I gave Wendy the day off so I had to do her job.”

“What about the Gems?” Connie asked. “Maybe you could get one of them to help you out.”

“Yeah, I guess I could…” Mabel mused. However, before she could even decide on which one to look for, a delivery man entered the gift shop, toting a very large crate with him.

“Delivery for a Miss… Pearl?” the delivery man asked, reading his clipboard.

“Oh, that’s for me!” the white Gem grinned cheerfully as she entered from the den. “You can just leave this and the other boxes right in here, thank you.”

“Oh, Pearl? What did you order?” Dipper asked curiously.

“I think the better question would be, what didn’t I order!” Pearl exclaimed with an excited grin, that only grew as she summoned her spear and used it to slit the first box open. “I went on that electronic communication hub where humans preform commerce and other various tasks… oh, what is it called again? The outerweb?”

“You mean the internet?” Connie corrected.

“Oh, yes, that’s it!” the white Gem nodded. “Anyway, while I was there I came across so many wonderful things that we can use to spruce this dirty old place up. Antique chairs, plus floor rugs, elegant lighting fixtures… I think one of these boxes even has a fountain in it…”

“Whoa, Pearl, that sounds awesome!” Mabel exclaimed, delighted. “All that cool stuff is bound to bring all kinds of new customers to the shack!”

“Wait… Pearl, where did you get all the money for this stuff?” Connie asked with a concerned frown.

“Oh, well I got it from the profits jar, of course!” Pearl remarked, still smiling. However, the kids were far from happy to hear this disastrous news as they all looked to her with dismayed disbelief.

“Is… is there a problem?”

“Pearl, we need that money so we can beat Grunkle Stan in the bet!” Mabel reminded. “Ok, ok… This is fine… Just… how much money did you take?”

“Um… all of it…” the white Gem admitted, realizing her mistake. “Oh… Oops… Sorry.”

“Well, we could probably still return all this stuff and get a refund, right?” Connie suggested.

“Oh, yes! Good idea, Connie!” Pearl smiled in relief. “I’ll track that delivery man down right now and ask him to give me a refund! And if he refuses, I’ll make him give us our money back.”

“Pearl, that’s not how—” Dipper tried to advise, but the white Gem had already run out on her new mission. “Well, at least things… probably can’t get any worse, right?”

Of course, no sooner than a second after he had asked this, a large crowd of screaming tourists emerged from the museum, half of them either crying or seething with rage. The group sped past the confused kids, all of them trying to get out as quickly as possible.
“Aw, come on!” Amethyst shouted after them as she came out of the museum herself. “You all need to grow some spines, you chickens!” At this, the purple Gem shapeshifted into a chicken, bawking and laughing mockingly all the while.

“Amethyst, what happened?” Mabel asked, shocked at all of the customers they had suddenly lost.

“I’ll tell ya what happened,” Amethyst remarked, shapeshifting back into herself. “Those guys were all a bunch of scaredy cats. All I did was shapeshift into a few of the things on the tour, and suddenly they get all screamy on me. Babies.”

“What did you shapeshift into that scared them so much?” Connie asked worriedly.

“Oh just this gross old thing,” the purple Gem shrugged, seamlessly changing her shape into one of the museum’s unknown, most bizarre exhibits, a grotesque creature with several faces, arms, and legs. The kids all gasped in horror as they took a step away from Amethyst, who simply snickered mischeviously before transforming back into her regular shape. “What do you know? You guys are bunch of chickens too!”

“Amethyst, you can’t just scare our customers away like that!” Mabel chastised. “We need to be nice to them! We need to—” she paused, looking through Succeeding in Management once more. “Delight retain them!”

“Hey, you told me to do whatever I wanted. And besides, I’m not the only one to blame here,” Amethyst said defensively. “Right, G?”

“Eh,” Garnet shrugged as she entered from the museum herself, still clad in her cape and turban.

“Oh no,” Mabel frowned, knowing that the last thing she needed was more bad news. “Garnet, please, please tell me that everything is going great with the Future Visionary.”

“Mm… not exactly…” Garnet admitted.

“She kinda kept telling people the worst futures she could see for them,” Amethyst informed casually. “It was pretty funny if you ask me.”

“That’s what they asked for, so that’s what I gave them,” the Gem leader said apathetically.

“Oh, G, tell them about that one guy who asked you about proposing to his girlfriend and how you told him he was gonna screw it up and get stung by a whole hive of bees!” Amethyst chuckled. “The way he ran off crying was hilarious!”

“Garnet, people don’t wanna hear about all the bad stuff that might happen,” Mabel said as calmly as she could in this situation. “They wanna know about the good futures!”

“But the future isn’t always good,” Garnet argued. “I was just being honest with them.”

“Well, that’s good!” Mabel encouraged with a small smile. “But maybe you could try being a little more… tactful with them too? Other than that, you’re doing a super job!”

“So what are we going to do now?” Dipper asked Mabel with a concerned frown as Garnet and Amethyst returned to the museum. “All of our customers are gone!”

“Did someone say ‘customers’?!” Steven exclaimed as he burst into the gift shop with Lion.

“Oh, Steven!” Mabel sighed with overwhelming relief as she ran over to him. “Thank goodness
you’re back! Did you find any new customers in town?”

“I sure did!” the young Gem proudly proclaimed, stepping aside. “Ok, you guys! Come on in!”

As it turned out, all of the “customers” Steven had managed to rustle up happened to be large,
bulky, intimidating thugs, all of them clad in biker gear and tattoos and none of them looking very
friendly. “Remember a few weeks ago when we were looking for the wax heads and we stopped at
that biker joint downtown?” Steven said to the others as they watched the bikers rush in. “Well, I
decided to round up all of the friends I made when we were there and bring them to see the
Mystery Shack! Look how excited they all are!”

“We wanna see some weird stuff!” one of the bikers roared, punching the nearby wall and creating
a sizable hole.

“Heh, bobble bobble,” another thug laughed, playing with a bobble head until it inevitably broke.

“Hey, are you gonna finish that?” one biker asked his buddy for his can of soda.

“No! You can’t have it!” Without much prompting at all, the two thugs broke into a rather violent
fist fight, breaking several shelves and displays in their wake.

“Aw… they’re having so much fun already!” Steven quipped with an oblivious smile. Mabel, on
the other hand, was not so charmed by their unintentionally destructive behavior.

“Ah! Ok, hey, you guys!” she shouted at the thugs to get their attention. “Hi! Um…. How about
you all go check out the museum, huh? There’s plenty of really cool, weird things to see in there!”

Of course, the thugs were more than taken in by this suggestion as they all rushed towards the
museum, shouting amongst themselves and briefly getting stuck in the door before going on inside.
“That can only end well…” Connie remarked a bit sarcastically as the four of them all stood alone
in the semi-wrecked gift shop.

“I know, right?” Steven asked blithely.

“Ok…” Mabel took in a deep breath to try and steady her frazzled nerves. “So things aren’t going
exactly as I hoped they would… But that’s not the end of the world, right? At least I’m not running
around here yelling at everyone.”

“I dunno, Mabel…” Dipper mused with a frown. “That might actually be the reason why
everything’s going so badly… Maybe what you need to do is start being a little tougher around
here.”

“No way!” Mabel protested earnestly. “That’s what Stan would do! I just need to think positive, be
friendly, and everything will work out fine.”

No more than a second later, however, a loud roar suddenly sounded, though that paled in
comparison to the monster that suddenly crashed through the nearby wall, scaring all four of the
kids. The Gremloblin stormed into the gift shop, snarling savagely with its deadly claws poised to
attack the first thing it saw. Fortunately, the kids just barely managed to avoid its detection as they
snuck past it and hid just out of its sight in the den.

“Whoa!” Steven gasped as he peered behind the broken wall. “What is that thing? It looks so
cool!”

“It’s the monster me and Dipper caught in the forest,” Connie explained in a hushed whisper, not
too keen on being caught by the violent creature.

“You caught that huge thing by yourselves?” the young Gem asked, amazed. “You guys are so awesome!

“But I don’t understand,” Dipper shook his head, confused. “How did it break out of its locked cage?”

“Well…” Mabel began somewhat guiltily. “I might have maybe… put a key in his cage for his five minute break…”

“You gave him a break?!” Dipper asked in disbelief.

“He’s an employee too!” Mabel protested defensively. “Sort of.”

“Aw man! He’s eating all the donuts from the snack table!” Steven exclaimed, watching the monster raid all of the snacks. “We have to stop him!”

“But how?” Connie asked, aptly afraid. “That thing is bigger than all of us combined!”

“Well it’s not too big for us.” The kids gasped as they turned to see Garnet and Amethyst standing behind them, their weapons already summoned as they stood ready to fight the monster.

“Whoa, is that a Gremloblin?” Amethyst asked, looking to the monster. “Dude, it’s been years since we’ve fought one of those!”

“Just remember,” Garnet advised her teammate. “Don’t look into its eyes.”

“You got it, G!” Amethyst smirked, lashing her whip out as she swung into the gift shop with gusto.

“Stay here,” the Gem leader ordered the kids firmly. “And keep out of sight until we’re done.”

None of the kids argued this time, given how dangerous of a monster the Gremloblin was, as the pair of Gems engaged the beast in combat. Garnet delivered the first blow, landing a swift punch to the monster’s jaw, though it hardly fazed him. Amethyst attempted to incapacitate it by tying up its legs and knocking it over, but the Gremloblin lashed out and severed her whip with his claws before she could.

“Geez, this guy is a fighter,” Amethyst remarked, summoning a new whip. “Hey, where’s Pearl at? She’s missing out on all the action!”

“What do you mean you can’t give me a refund?!” the white Gem asked hotly as she kept the delivery man pinned to a tree.

“M-ma’am, I already told you!” the frightened man gulped nervously, glancing over at his turned over truck nearby. “I’m just the delivery guy! I don’t sell the merchandise, I just deliver it!”

“So then who do I talk to about getting our money back?” Pearl asked, raising a suspicious eyebrow.

“Uh, the companies that you bought all of that stuff from?”
"Hm," the white Gem finally released the delivery man. "Very well then. I’ll go talk to these ‘companies’… But if you’re lying to me, then I’ll be back. I can promise you that."

The delivery man simply nodded, still shaken from the experience as Pearl stormed off, muttering bitterly to herself all the while. "I don’t care how far I have to go or who I have to confront…” she said with determination. "I’m not about to let Mabel lose that bet and end up working for Stan for a month! I will get that refund, no matter what!"

All the kids could really do as the fight between the Gems and the Gremloblin began to drag on was spectate from the den and cheer the Gems on from the side. As strong and skilled as Garnet and Amethyst were, the Gremloblin was a formidable beast, one that they were finding was becoming quite difficult to best between just the two of them. The pair of Gems were getting more than their fair share of beatings, which certainly didn’t help things as the gift shop itself was also taking quite a bit of damage in the battle.

"Ugh, this is taking forever!" Amethyst groaned in exasperation after having hit the monster for what seemed like the hundredth time. "That’s it! I’m goin’ in for the kill!"

"Amethyst, wait!" Garnet tried to warn, already knowing what might happen. But even so, the purple Gem launched herself right at the Gremloblin, who met her attack solely by locking eyes with her. Amethyst froze in midair at this, her eyes going blank as a short gasp escaped her. A moment later, she crashed to the ground, seemingly unconscious even as Garnet hurried over to her.

"Amethyst, I told you not to-""

"No!" the purple Gem suddenly shouted, slapping Garnet’s hand away from her. "Get away! Leave me alone!"

"Amethyst, it’s me," Garnet tried to calmly rationalize, knowing well what the Gremloblin had done to her. "You’re safe."

"Get away from me!" Amethyst hissed once more, trying in vain to shove the Gem leader away. "I don’t wanna go with you or be like them! Just GO!"

Garnet sighed, knowing that only time would be able to heal the purple Gem. And as long as they were locked in combat with the Gremloblin, time wouldn’t be a luxury they would have. "Kids, listen!" she called, standing as she picked the still struggling Amethyst up. "Amethyst is hurt and I need to take her back to the temple so she can recover!"

"But what about the monster?!" Mabel exclaimed, dismayed.

"You can handle it," the Gem leader reassured. "I promise. We’ll be back later!"

"But Garnet, wait!" Mabel tried to race after the Gem leader as she ran out, only to be pulled back behind the wall by Connie.

"You probably don’t wanna go there, Mabel," Connie said with a frown, nodding to the distracted Gremloblin.

"Well, I guess we have to round him up on our own now," Dipper concluded with a sigh. "Where’s Soos?"

"He was stressed out so I told him to take a soothing nature walk," Mabel admitted sheepishly.
“Seriously?!” Dipper exclaimed, unable to comprehend any of his sister’s poor business choices.

“Come on, you guys,” Steven tried to encourage. “Let’s look on the bright side of all this! We… Um… uh…. Actually, I really can’t think of any bright sides this time.”

Distraught and exasperated, all four of the kids let out a shared sigh as they leaned against the wall, taking solace only in the fact that the Gremloblin didn’t know they were there. Of course, to add insult to injury, the nearby TV just so happened to confirm something that made the situation even more dire as Cash Wheel was on.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Stan Pines is poised to become our grand champion!” Rich announced to the viewing audience. “Anything to say to your fans out there?” he asked Stan.

“See you tomorrow night, Mabel,” Stan smirked smugly, looking to the camera and holding up the loser shirt.

“Oh come on!” Mabel groaned, knowing that she would lose the bet for sure at this rate. Of course, in the gift shop, the Gremloblin continued his mindless rampage, throwing merchandise around and knocking over shelves. However, what broke the camel’s back for Mabel was the fact that the monster had managed to find her prized sticker collection and was pilfering through it, putting random stickers on his face. “What do we do?!” she gasped, alarmed. “He’s awarding himself stickers he didn’t even earn!”

“Wait! Dipper, we used the journal to help us capture the Gremloblin,” Connie said, thinking quickly. “So maybe we can use it to get rid of it too!”

“Good idea,” Dipper nodded in agreement, taking the journal out. “Ok, uh…. Got it! When fighting a Gremloblin use water…"

On this suggestion alone, Mabel rushed out with Steven as her backup to confront the Gremloblin with a cup of water. However, instead of recoiling in pain, the monster only let out an agitated roar.

“…Only as a last resort as water will make it much, much scarier?!” Dipper finished reading as he turned the next page. “What?! Who writes sentences like that?!”

And indeed, the water did end up making the Gremloblin much more horrifying as her grew long spines on his back and seemed to double twice in size. Terrified, Steven and Mabel rushed back for cover, watching in fear as the monster destroyed the nearby clock with his fiery breath.

“So… what’s the new plan?” Steven asked apprehensively. “Just wait him out?”

“I guess that’s the only thing we really can do now,” Dipper shrugged. “I mean, he’s gotta leave eventually, right?”

“I’m the singin’ salmon spendin’ all day jammin’,” the talking fish head sang for the hundredth time as the Gremloblin pressed the button once more. “I’m the singin’ salmon spendin’ all day jammin’.”

Meanwhile, the kids all let out another unified groan as they sat against the wall, just as they had been for the past several hours. While the Gremloblin had found a rather aggravating way to entertain itself, none of them still wanted to take a chance in trying to subdue it, since they had all seen what had happened to Amethyst earlier. So all they could really do was sit by and wait for the
monster to finally depart, which he apparently had no intentions of doing considering his fascination with the singing salmon.

“I don’t know about you guys, but I’m getting really tired of listening to that song,” Connie said with an irritated frown.

“I don’t get it, why doesn’t he just leave?” Mabel groaned in exasperation. However, as she looked around the wall once again, she happened to see something that made her practically freeze in shock. The Gremloblin had at last grown tired of the singing salmon and had instead focused its attention on the profits jar sitting on the counter. While there wasn’t much left in there thanks to Pearl, there was a little money from the thugs earlier. And unfortunately, the monster had decided that money was going to be its next snack. “Our profits!” Mabel gasped, thoughtlessly hurrying out from their hiding place to rescue them.

“Mabel, wait!” Dipper called, though Mabel hardly heeded him as she ran up to the monster.

“Stop!” she demanded, only for the much bigger Gremloblin to grab her in one swipe of his massive hand.

“Oh no!” Steven cried fearfully. “Mabel!”

“Don’t look into his evil eye!” Dipper warned. “You’ll see your worst nightmare!”

“I wish we had an evil eye to show him!” Mabel remarked crossly, glaring at the Gremloblin. Unfortunately though, the monster locked gazes with her, starting to give her a glimpse of her nightmares despite her struggling to look away.

“We gotta do something!” Steven exclaimed.

“Yeah, but what?” Connie asked, aptly panicked.

“Wait!” Dipper cut in. “I have an idea, but I need you guys to distract him.”

“Really?” Connie asked in dismay.

“We’re on it!” Steven gave a thumbs up, already running out into the fray. “Hey, Mr. Monster Guy! Look at me! I’m super distracting!”

“Oh boy…” Connie sighed, tentatively heading out into the open and running around to the Gremloblin’s other side. “Wait! Look at me instead! I’m more distracting!”

“No, me!” Connie argued with a small, amused smile, glad that the Gremloblin never looked at either of them long enough to ensure nightmares. Fortunately, Dipper soon came in with his plan as he ran up to the monster himself with a mirror in hand.

“Hey, monster!” he shouted brazenly. “Take a look at this!” As the Gremloblin set its sights on Dipper, he held up the mirror, allowing the monster to take in his own nightmare inducing gaze. The monster let out a horrified scream as it dropped Mabel, petrified by its deepest fears as it somehow sprouted a large pair of wings and flew off, breaking another large hole in the wall.

“Yay!” Steven cheered triumphantly. “We did it! We got him to go away!”
“And hey, at least he didn’t do too much damage,” Dipper pointed out, just as relieved. Of course, as the Gremloblin was flying off, it just so happened to ram into the totem pole outside, breaking its top off and causing to fall onto a car in the parking lot below.

“…Yikes…” Connie remarked with a frown, not even wanting to know how much money that would cost them.

“You guys, it’s the third day!” Mabel exclaimed frantically. “We’ve only got 7 hours left to earn back our profits, or I gotta wear that loser shirt all summer!”

“And we’ll have to work in this filthy dump for a month!” Pearl practically wailed as her, Garnet, and Amethyst returned.

“Hey, you guys are back!” Steven grinned cheerfully. “Amethyst, are you feeling better?” The purple Gem said nothing as she cast a bitter glare towards the floor, so instead Garnet answered for her. “She’s fine.”

“Hey guys!” Wendy greeted casually as her and Soos walked in. “Am I nuts or does this place look different?”

“Oh boy, am I glad to see all of you guys!” Mabel sighed in relief, overjoyed to have all of her employees back. “We’ve got a lot of work to do, but if we hurry, we can still beat Stan!”

“Uh, yeah…” Wendy frowned unenthusiastically. “I’ve got a little headache, so maybe I should like, not work today.”

“I dunno if I’m really feeling up to it either, you know?” Amethyst finally spoke up. “Especially after what happened yesterday.”

“And I never got that refund!” Pearl exclaimed, crossing her arms. “How was I supposed to know that you’re supposed to pay for purchases on the internet with a ‘credit card’? Whatever that is…”

“And I actually just met this pack of wolves, and I think they’re gonna like, raise me as one of their own,” Soos said with a shrug. “So I should really be at the den right now.”

“B-but…” Mabel tried to protest, but even so, the others were already on their way out.

“But hey,” Wendy said with a smile. “See ya on Monday.”

“Uh, BTDubs,” Soos said, pointing to the stray donuts on the floor. “Is anyone gonna eat these?”

Upon hearing all this, something inside of Mabel seemed to finally snap along with the pencil gripped tightly in her hand. She had tried her best to be agreeable and nice, and in the end it had gotten her nowhere. So now, the only thing she could do was be the exact opposite of nice. It was time for her to get mean. “Enough!” she shouted, stopping everyone in their tracks. “I have had it! I fought a monster to save this business, and this is how you all repay me?! I’m gonna get an ulcer from your lollygagging!”

“Whoa…” Amethyst muttered, stunned at this outburst.

“Lollygagging?” Wendy repeated, confused.

“Ulcer?” Soos asked with a frown. “You’re acting… different.”

“You shut your yaps!” Mabel demanded harshly. “I’ve been doing everyone’s jobs while you
bums have been bleeding me dry!”

“But we-” Wendy tried to get a word in edgewise, but Mabel simply wasn’t having it.

“No buts except yours on the floor cleaning! Now quit loafing and get to work!”

“Y-yes, Mabel!” the cashier exclaimed, honestly somewhat terrified after all this.

“That’s yes, boss!” For emphasis, Mabel threw her fist down on the counter, which happened to cause Stan’s fez to fly up and land squarely on her head. As she adjusted it and glanced at her reflection in the nearby mirror, she let out a horrified gasp, realizing that she had done the one thing she had promised herself not to. She had followed in her grunkle’s sullen footsteps. “Dipper… what have I become?”

“What you had to, Mabel,” Dipper said, placing a hand on her shoulder. “What you had to.”

“Yeah, just… please don’t ever do that again, Mabel,” Steven frowned. “That… that was really scary…”

“If it’s the only way I can win this bet, then I’ll do what I gotta,” Mabel said with cold resolve. “We’ve got seven hours to turn this around. Let’s go, people!”

Back on Cash Wheel, Stan was reveling in how well he was doing. He had already surpassed every single other contestant by a mile, essentially beating the game thanks to his own luck and wit. He had already racked up a huge sum of money, enough that he was sure it would easily trump whatever Mabel had made and then some. Which was why he wasn’t really surprised when the wheel landed on Cash Flood yet again after his spin.

“Ha ha! I’m giving none of this to charity!” the conman exclaimed gleefully, more than happy to let the pile of money fall on him.

“And now you can go home a thousandaire!” Rich exclaimed with a smile. “Or you could risk everything to double your money with the bonus word!”

“Rich, I’m a simple man,” Stan said, feigning his conclusion. “So I’m gonna take my winnings, pack my bags, and… bet them all on the bonus word!”

Since assigning everyone to jobs they would have enjoyed most ended up in disaster, Mabel took an entirely new approach in reorganizing everyone to fix up the shack and regain their profits. She had already put Wendy back on register in the gift shop and had Connie managing their funds rather than Pearl. As for the Gems themselves, Mabel had reached the realization that interacting with the tourists wasn’t really their strong suit. So instead, she employed them in a task that they were much more equipped to handle.

“Time is money, you three!” Mabel shouted to the Gems through her megaphone, supervising them as they repaired the shack’s busted wall. “You got complaints? File them with the complaints department!” With a firm scowl, she held up a trash bin, letting out a tired groan as she did so. “Ugh, my back.”
“Yeesh, she’s going a kinda far with all this, don’t ya think?” Amethyst muttered to Pearl and Garnet as they hammered beams back in place.

“It’s still better than the prospect of having to work for Stan for an entire month,” the white Gem remarked, cringing. “Also, Garnet, why are you still wearing those?” she frowned at the Gem leader, who was still clad in her cape and turban.

“They make me feel… important,” Garnet replied with a shrug.

“Cut the chatter over there!” Mabel called sullenly. “We’re burning good daylight!”

“You heard her,” Garnet said to her teammates, shoving the wall into its correct position.

“Dipper!” Mabel shouted to her nearby brother as a tour bus pulled up to the shack. “We’ve got tourists at 9 o’clock!”

“But what do I show them?” Dipper asked with a frown. “Real magic just freaks people out.”

“Figure something out, knucklehead!” Mabel retorted, much like Stan would have. But even so, Dipper did as she said and came up with a new idea, one that would hopefully be much more of a success than the Gremloblin was.

“Ladies and gentle-tourists!” Dipper addressed the large crowd of customers, which also consisted of many of the bikers Steven had brought in earlier. Much like Mabel, he had decided to take a page from Stan by looking the part with a flashy suit and eyepatch, as well as throwing on the false charm that the conman was famous for. “This shack is full of wonders never before seen by human eyes! Be amazed at Bubble Boy, who’s spent his entire life living in his giant pink bubble!”

“Woo!” Steven cheered as the tourists headed over to his display. The young Gem had summoned his bubble and used it to blithely roll around on the small circular track the Gems had set up. Of course, the concept of Steven living inside of his bubble was a lie, but if Stan could profit off of telling lies on a regular basis, than why couldn’t they? “Look at me! I’ve never seen the outside world before! Ha ha!”

Of course, the tourists were all duly impressed by this “oddity” as they laughed and snapped pictures of the bubbled young Gem. Yet even so, there was still another new premiere attraction for them to see. “Behold! The horrible giant question baby!” Dipper directed the group’s attention over to Soos, who was glad in his question mark costume and little else.

“Am I a man? Am I a baby?” Soos asked the crowed, as rehearsed. “These are legitimate questions.”

The tourists were equally as awestruck by the handyman, prompting Dipper to come up with another way to “bleed ‘em dry”, as Stan would say. “Have your picture taken with either of them for a buck,” he said, though he quickly corrected himself, knowing they needed to make money much quicker than that. “Uh, ten bucks. No, a hundred bucks!”

As gullible as tourists often were, almost every single last one of them fell for it, especially the excitable thugs. In the end, all of the guests left aptly satisfied as the shack’s employees (and temporary employees) saw them off. “We put the fun in no refunds!” Dipper called after them before turning to Mabel. “So how’d we do?”
“We filled the whole jar!” Mabel proclaimed with a huge grin, holding the jar up for them all to see. The others all cheered at this great news, knowing they had all brought back victory from the jaws of certain defeat.

Or so it seemed.

“Ok, so minus the money used to replace all the furniture…” Connie tabbed up the deductions that they would have to make to their profits as everyone waited for the results on baited breath. “As well as the money we lost on all of Pearl’s ‘purchases’…”

“Again, I’m really sorry about that…” the white Gem apologized sheepishly.

“And supplies to fix the shack and that leaves us with…” Connie trailed off, using a calculator to determine the final amount, even though Mabel could already see it for herself as it sat in the bottom of the profits jar.

“One dollar…”

“Oh, come on!” Amethyst huffed in annoyance. “After all that hard work we only ended up with one dumb old dollar!?”

“What are we going to do?!” Pearl asked in alarm. “Certainly Stan made more money than that, which means we’ll have to work here in this… this hovel of filth and lies! I can’t do that, Garnet, I just can’t!”

“Calm down, Pearl,” the Gem leader reassured evenly.

“How can I!? It’s just too horrible to even think about!”

“W-well, maybe we still have a little time left,” Steven suggested hopefully. “I mean, Mr. Pines isn’t back yet—”

“I’m back!” Stan proclaimed, bursting into the gift shop with a wide grin. “Time’s up, kids!”

“Oh no!” Mabel gasped fearfully, knowing that she almost certainly lost.

“Well, that’s it,” Pearl threw her hands up, leaning against Garnet for emotional support. “We’re doomed!”

“Nice to see you learned how to dress while I was gone,” Stan remarked to Dipper, noting his suit.

“So how much did you beat us by?” Mabel asked the conman glumly, ready to accept her defeat.

“I won $300,000!” Stan exclaimed boldly, eliciting a shocked gasp from the others. “And then…”

“For a chance to double your cash or lose it all,” Rich began, introducing the final puzzle. “What is a six-letter word you use to ask for something politely? For example, ‘may I blank have that’?”

“Do I look like an idiot, folks?” Stan asked the audience with a knowing grin. “The answer is ‘gimmee’. Two e’s.”
Of course, the buzzer blared at this incredibly incorrect answer, much to the conman’s surprise. “Oh! You know, because you’ve come this far, we’re gonna give you one more chance,” Rich said sympathetically. “Let’s try again. It’s a ‘P’ word. Some might even say it’s the ‘magic word’…”

“Pabracadabra!” Stan panicked, shouting out the first thing that came to mind. “Final answer!”

The buzzer rang once more, finalizing that the conman had lost it all. “I’m sorry, Stan,” Rich apologized. “But the word is—”

“Please?” Mabel finished with a charming smile, relief filling her as she realized that Stan had come home empty handed.

“Apparently that word can make you money,” Stan rolled his eyes.

“Oh my gosh, that is hilarious!” Amethyst laughed hard, to the point that she was practically rolling on the floor. “I wish I had been there to see it!”

“Pfft, it wasn’t that funny,” the conman remarked crossly.

“So wait,” Dipper interjected. “If you lost everything, then that means… Mabel, you won!”

The others all cheered excitedly at this revelation, all except for Stan who let out a disgruntled sigh. “Oh thank goodness!” Pearl exclaimed, fully allayed. “We don’t have to work in this penny pilfering attraction!”

“Aw man, I still thought it would have been fun,” Amethyst crossed her arms petulantly.

“And who could have guessed that we’d win with only a dollar?” Connie laughed, holding said dollar up.

“Hooray for dollars!” Steven cheered jubilantly as everyone else joined in.

“Wait, what did we win again?” Soos asked after the bout of levity had passed.

“Well, according to our bet, I guess Mabel’s the new boss?” Stan shrugged grouchily.

Of course, everyone was quick to protest this idea, especially Mabel herself, considering how disastrous everything had turned out to be under her control. Stan frowned in confusion at all this, but allowed his niece to explain herself nonetheless.

“Grunkle Stan, I had no idea how hard it was being the boss,” Mabel said earnestly. “This place was cuckoo bananas until I started barking orders at people like you. So… I guess I’m sorry for doubting you…” With a small smile, she handed the conman’s fez back to him, which he gladly took and put back on.

“Yeah, well, I gotta admit,” Stan smirked as he bent down and wrapped his arms around his nibblings. “It’s kinda nice to be back, you know?” The tender moment passed all too quickly as the conman stood, pushing the twins away. “Okay, okay, enough is enough, get off of me! And Soos, Wendy, get back to work! And you three,” he said to the Gems. “Get outta my shack! Ahem, please,” he added, cringing as he said the word. “Ugh! Still hurts just sayin’ that.”

“Now, hold on just a minute, Stan,” Pearl said with a smug smile. “I do recall there being a certain… condition you had to meet if you lost the bet…”
“Oh yeah,” Dipper added, also grinning. “Mabel, didn’t your agreement say something about Stan having to do some kind of apology dance?”

“N-no, it didn’t!” Stan protested.

“Actually, yeah…” Mabel nodded in agreement. “I think I have it in my notes here.”

“No! That never happened!”

“I can’t wait to see your dance, Mr. Pines!” Steven exclaimed cheerfully. “I bet it’ll be great!”

“Oh, yeah, this is gonna be priceless!” Amethyst quipped with a teasing smirk.

“I’ll get the camera!” Wendy laughed, already leaving to get it.

“Alright,” Stan sighed in defeat. “Let me just-” The conman never finished his statement as he instead took off running to avoid having to carry out this embarrassing performance. But even so, Mabel wasn’t about to let him get off the hook so easily.

“Grunkle Stan!”

Fortunately, the Gems helped Mabel out by tracking Stan down and dragging him back to the shack against his will. Even though he complained about it the entire time, the conman begrudgingly put on the gaudy, flashy orange jumpsuit Mabel had picked out for him. And after enough prodding, Stan found himself standing before the camera as Mabel prepared to film him while everyone else watched on in amusement.

“Uh, look,” the conman began, cringing as he looked down at his outfit. “I’m not gonna-”

“Do it!” Mabel shouted fiercely, breaking apart Stan’s resistance as he unenthusiastically began to sing the song she had written for him.

“I’m Stan and I was wrong, I’m singing the Stan Wrong Song,” the conman sang dryly, bouncing up and down in a very minimal dance. “I shouldn’t have taken that chance, now here’s my remorseful dance.”

“Do the kicks!” Mabel ordered from her directors chair. “Jazzier!” she shouted as Stan put forth as minimal effort as possible in his performance.

“Now this is what I call a reward,” Pearl chuckled as her and the Gems watched from behind the scenes.

“Agrred,” Garnet nodded with a smirk.

“Woo! Go Stan!” Amethyst cheered mockingly. “Shake it!”

The conman grumbled in protest to himself as he continued dancing, only for his fez to fall off his head, only to be swiped up by Gompers. “Hey! Gimme that!” Stan shouted, fighting the goat for his hat. “Ow! My back!”

“What do you think?” Mabel asked Waddles, who sat next to her in the assistant director’s chair next to her. The pig simply oinked in response, but it was enough for Mabel. “Good point. Take thirty!”
Chapter 26: On the Run

Chapter Summary

In which Steven and Dipper are No Home Boys and Amethyst has some angsts

Chapter Notes

Alas, here we are with a chapter I’ve been looking forward to for such a long time now! And I’m honestly really proud of how it turned out, especially its sort of the beginning of the ongoing angst this story will be filled with later on, so I feel like this was something for me to cut my teeth on in terms of writing some of the darker stuff. But anyway, enough of that. Enjoy my rendition of On the Run!

Save for the occasional monster invasion, the temple was generally an overall peaceful place to simply go and relax, which was exactly what the kids were spending their afternoon doing there. While Lion and Waddles napped together on loft above, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel all sat on the couch below, each of them engaged in their own respective activities. Mabel was busy at work knitting another sweater and though Dipper and Steven were both reading, their respective books of choice couldn’t be any more different. While Dipper poured over the journal once again, Steven was engrossed in reading a novel from his favorite book series: The No Home Boys.

“Whoa,” the young Gem gasped under his breath after coming up to a suspenseful cliffhanger in the novel. “How are they gonna get outta this one?” Fortunately, he got his answer as soon as he turned the page and read on. “Oh, that’s how.”

“Aaaaand… its done!” Mabel proclaimed after putting the last finishing touch on her latest sweater. “Here you go, Steven!” she held the sweater up for the young Gem to see. “What do you think?”

“What do I think?” Steven repeated with a huge grin, shutting his book. “I think it’s amazing, Mabel! Is it really for me?”

“Sure is!” Mabel quipped happily, handing off to him. “It even has your star on it and everything. Try it on!”

The young Gem didn’t hesitate to do so, pulling the sweater over his shirt and smiling down at it in elation. “Wow!” he laughed brightly. “It’s a perfect fit!”

“My sweaters always are,” Mabel nodded in satisfaction. “What do you think, bro-bro?”
As supposedly preoccupied with the journal as he was, Dipper hardly heard his sister’s question, nor did he really even notice Mabel or Steven looking to him inquisitively. “Uh… Dipper?” Steven tried again a moment later.

“Hm?” Dipper sparsely replied, not bothering to look up from the journal.

“I ask you what you thought of the sweater I made for Steven,” Mabel huffed impatiently, rolling her eyes at her brother’s obliviousness.

“Oh. It’s cool,” Dipper answered flatly, still seemingly distracted. Though Mabel simply let out another annoyed sigh at this, Steven couldn’t help but notice there was something else in Dipper’s otherwise bored tone. Remorse, apprehension, maybe sadness? Whatever it was, the young Gem’s curious, empathetic nature refused to simply let it lie.

“Dipper, is everything ok?” the young Gem asked, concerned.

“What?” Dipper blinked, finally looking up from the journal. The question caught him off guard somewhat, but he was quick to catch himself the best he could. “O-oh, uh, yeah. Everything’s fine,” he reassured with a weak, rather fake smile. “Why do you ask?”

“Cause you’re sitting there being all pouty,” Mabel teased. “What are you so mopey about anyway? Did that ol’ journal give you a paper cut or something?”

“No, that’s not what—” Dipper quickly cut himself off, glancing away from the pair as he blocked them out of sight with the journal. “No,” he muttered, feigning emotionlessness and conveying anything but. “It’s… It’s nothing.”

Steven and Mabel both frowned, neither of them really convinced. “Are you sure?” the young Gem asked earnestly. “Because it sounds like something’s bothering you.”

“Yeah, bro-bro, spill it!” Mabel urged less tactfully, playfully pushing against her brother. “You can’t hide it from us! We can sniff emotional distress a mile away and you’re reeking of it!”

“Mabel, please,” Dipper scoffed, pushing his sister away. “I don’t have any ‘emotional distress’ or anything like that. I’m fine, okay? So let’s just drop it.”

Once again, Mabel and Steven exchanged a doubtful glance. “Are you buying that shtick?” Mabel asked the young Gem, her hands on her hips.

“Not for a second,” Steven shook his head. “Dipper, why don’t you just tell us what’s wrong? You’ll feel better if you do, I promise!”

“I doubt that…” Dipper muttered diffidently, though the others still clearly heard him.

“Aha! So you admit it!” Mabel accused, jumping to stand on the couch. “Something is getting you down! And you better tell us what it is so we can help you. Or else!”

“Or else what?” Dipper asked, not taking her threat seriously.

“Or else….” Steven tried to come up with something, but thankfully Mabel jumped in with a perfect idea.

“Or else this!” Without any warning, Mabel suddenly launched herself at her brother, subjecting him to a full-on tickle assault. Dipper was powerless to stop her as he involuntarily laughed all while trying his hardest to push her away. Steven was of no help whatsoever as he stood by and
chuckled in amusement, cheering Mabel on all the while. Of course, in the end Mabel won out as Dipper finally caved after only about a minute of intensive tickling.

“Ok, ok!” he gasped between exhausted laughs, finally shoving Mabel off of him. “You guys win. I’ll tell you about it. But fair warning: you both are probably gonna think this is sort of dumb.”

“Aw, come on, Dipper, don’t be like that!” Mabel said with something of an apologetic smile.

“Yeah! If it’s important to you, then its important to us!” Steven added warmly.

Dipper sighed, hardly reassured, but even so, he dove right into it, as much as he didn’t really want to. “Ok so… uh, I’ve just been thinking a lot about what happened the other day. You know, when I indirectly broke Wendy and Robbie up?”

“Oh yeah, Steven told me about that,” Mabel nodded. “I heard it was pretty rough. But I thought you’d be happy about it, Dipper. After all, it means that Wendy is single and ready to mingle again!”

“Yeah, well the last person she’d probably ever wanna ‘mingle’ with is me,” Dipper remarked glumly. “She was really upset over what happened, and I kind of can’t help but feel like that’s my fault for telling her what Robbie was up to in the first place.”

“But Dipper, you did the right thing letting Wendy know the truth,” Steven said with a consoling smile. “Garnet even said so herself.”

“Well Garnet also said that Wendy would eventually forgive me but that hasn’t happened yet,” Dipper retorted, crossing his arms and looking down. “It’s been almost a week and we’ve barely spoken to each other since then. And at this rate, she probably never will again.”

“Well there’s your problem!” Mabel exclaimed, rolling her eyes. “You’ve been wasting all this time waiting for Wendy to come to you, when you should be the one to go to Wendy!”

“Mabel’s right,” Steven agreed. “Maybe Wendy hasn’t talked to you about it yet because she doesn’t know you’re still upset about it. But I’m sure she’d forgive you if you just asked her to!”

“Are you guys serious?” Dipper scoffed. “This is a really delicate situation! I can’t just walk up to Wendy and tell her I’m sorry! If anything that would just remind her of what happened and make her feel worse!”

“So… are you just going to keep avoiding her then?” Steven asked with a frown.

“…Maybe…”

“Oh, Dipper,” Mabel shook her head. “You can’t just run away from all your problems! You should do what Grunkle Stan says: man up and punch them in the face!”

“Somehow I feel like that would only make things even worse…” Dipper remarked dryly. Still, neither Steven nor Mabel had a chance to much more encouragement as the warp pad lit up, signaling the Gems’ incoming arrival.

“Ugh, who cares?” Amethyst groaned as their ongoing conversation continued as they warped in. “It’s not like it’s even that big of a deal.”

“I’d say it’s a very big deal!” Pearl protested crossly. “We should have been more careful. Who knows what dangers just letting Lapis return to Homeworld could bring? If she tells them about
us… they might try to return to Earth…” The white Gem sucked in a sharp breath, her eyes wide with sudden panic. “We can’t let them come back!”

“Pearl, calm down,” Garnet reassured. “We checked the Homeworld warp and it’s still inactive. We’re still cut off. The Earth is safe.”

“Safe from what?”

All three of the Gems froze upon hearing Steven pose this innocent question, turning towards the kids in the den with genuine shock. “S-Steven! Dipper! Mabel!” Pearl exclaimed with a nervous laugh, stepping off the warp pad. “We… we didn’t know you three were here!”

“Hey, check this out you guys,” Amethyst smirked, holding out a large rock she had brought back with her before crushing it with her bare hands. “Kabooosh!”

“Amethyst, please!” the white Gem chastised, shielding herself from the resounding shrapnel. “Be serious for once!”

“Pfft, never,” the purple Gem crossed her arms and glared in the opposite direction.

“So what were you guys saying about Homeworld just a minute ago?” Dipper asked, his melancholy replaced with his usual curiosity.

“Yeah, what would be so bad about letting them come visit Earth?” Mabel added blithely. “Meeting all those new Gems would be a lot of fun!”

“Trust us, no it wouldn’t,” Garnet replied simply.

“But based on what Lapis said about Homeworld, it doesn’t sound so bad,” Steven mused with a frown. “Then again, she really didn’t say anything about it…”

“Kids… What happened with Homeworld… Well, it’s… it’s complicated,” Pearl began, glancing away guiltily. Still, she was prompted to explain it anyway as the Gem leader put a steady hand on her shoulder.

“Remember, we promised we would start being honest with them,” Garnet reminded gently.

“Right…” Pearl nodded, taking in a deep breath before kneeling down to the kids’ level. “You see, kids, a very long time ago, Gems came to the Earth and tried to do something… very bad. It was something that would have damaged the Earth, irrecoverably so. Some Gems, like Rose Quartz, Garnet, and myself, felt that this was unfair to the life that already existed here, and so we swore to never let the Earth be used for their… purposes. Even if it meant—” The white Gem was suddenly interrupted as Amethyst shattered another rock, her expression bitter and angry as she did so. Pearl let out an aggravated sigh, but continued nonetheless. “Even if it meant we could never go home.”

“Long story short, we chose Earth,” Garnet concluded firmly.

“Wait, so what was Homeworld trying to do anyway?” Dipper asked, immensely interested by this newfound information. After all, not even the journal detailed any of what Pearl had just explained, save for the Crystal Gems’ dedication to protecting the Earth.

Garnet and Pearl exchanged a worried glance at this, neither of them really sure how to go about describing the truth. “We’ll… save that for another time,” the Gem leader said, her stoicism breaking a bit.
“Aw, come on!” Mabel let out a groan along with her brother. “You guys don’t have to end Gem story time here! We’re always down for hearing more cool dark secrets about you guys!”

“Well… some of our ‘secrets’ are a little darker than others…” Pearl frowned apprehensively.

“Whoa, wait a sec!” Steven interjected, stars suddenly in his eyes. “If you guys can’t go back to your home… then that means… we’re just like the No-Home Boys!”

Everyone turned to look at the young Gem upon hearing this, all of them aptly confused. “The what?” Pearl asked with a frown.

“The No-Home Boys!” Steven exclaimed, holding up the book he had been reading earlier. “It’s a book series about these boys who have no home. So they travel around the country, living in boxcars, riding river rafts and solving mysteries! They had a successful run, until the disastrous graphic novel adaptation. But my favorite story is this one: On the Run. In it, the No-Home Boys are chased across the countryside by a mysterious pursuer, which turns out to be the very fear resting within themselves.”

“Whoa! That’s like, you guys’ life story!” Mabel exclaimed to the Gems with a wide smile.

“Oh please,” Pearl scoffed, rolling her eyes. “We are not like the No-Home Boys. Steven, we are literally standing in your home right now.”

“Yeah… that’s a bit of a stretch,” Garnet agreed caustically as her and the white Gem headed for the temple gate. “On the Run does make for a pretty gripping title though.”

“I know,” Steven shrugged with a grin. “That’s why it’s the first book in the series. To draw people in with its drama and excitement.”

“I bet,” Garnet chuckled softly, disregarding Pearl’s aggravated sigh as they both went inside.

“Bye, you guys!” Mabel cheerfully called out after the two elder Gems as the door slid shut behind them, even though Amethyst remained outside.

“Ok, then…” Dipper frowned, somewhat perturbed at how sparse Garnet and Pearl had been. Hopefully though, the purple Gem would be a bit more loose with the truth than her teammates often were. “So Amethyst… what did Homeworld Gems want to do with the Earth anyway?”

“Who cares?” Amethyst answered bitterly, crossing her arms and looking away.

“We do!” Steven said with a curious grin. “Will you please tell us about it, Amethyst? Please? Please? Please?”

“Ugh…” the purple Gem let out a loud groan. “Why do you guys wanna know about all that dumb old stuff anyway? It all happened way long ago so none of it matters anymore. Which means we don’t need to talk about it, ok?”

“Oooo, looks like you’re not the only one who’s emotionally distressed around here, Dipper!” Mabel goaded her brother, flashing a sly smirk to Amethyst as well.

“Pfft, whatever,” Amethyst scoffed, not confirming it but not denying it either.

“Well if you are feeling down, Amethyst, then you can always hang out here with the three of us!” Steven reassured. “Right guys?”
“Actually, you’re gonna have to make that the two of you,” Mabel said, pointing to Steven and Dipper. “I’m have to go down to the mall to meet Candy and Grenda for a SHOPPING SPREE!” she practically squealed as she ran for the door. “Maybe while I’m out I’ll pick up something to cheer you two sad sacks up,” she grinned at Dipper and Amethyst, who both rolled their eyes in response. “But in the meantime, don’t go talking about any cool, super secretive Gem stuff without me, ok? Bye!!”

“Don’t have to tell me twice…” Amethyst muttered sullenly so that no one else could hear her.

“Bye!” the boys both called out after Mabel as she left, leaving the trio alone. It was clear that both Dipper and Amethyst were still a little down for their own respective reasons, and gradually this melancholy passed onto Steven as well as he flopped down on the couch with a heavy sigh.

“You know,” the young Gem began, flipping through his book once more. “I wish I was a No-Home Boy. No past, no future. Just the open road!”

“Yeah…” Dipper agreed with a sigh of his own. “That whole no past, no future thing actually sounds pretty nice right about now… Too bad it’s impossible.”


The purple Gem rolled her eyes as she took a seat in between the boys. “Listen,” she began, her lasting scowl finally turning into a smirk. “You guys wanna see the open road? Then let’s do it.”

“What?!” both Steven and Dipper exclaimed in startled unison.

“Yeah,” Amethyst grinned daringly. “Let’s run.”

“What?!” the young Gem asked with an excited smile.

“Sure, why not? Sounds like fun.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Dipper quickly interjected, clearly not as on board with this sudden idea. “Amethyst, we can’t just… just run away!”

“Uh, yeah we can,” Amethyst argued dryly. “All we gotta do is get out the door and go.”

“Where are we gonna run away to?” Steven asked, eager and ready for this escapade.

“Doesn’t matter where, dude,” the purple Gem shrugged. “We can go wherever we want, do whatever we want, and best of all, no one will be around to tell us that we can’t. Unless you plan on being lame and doing that, Dipper.”

“I only said we can’t because running away is actually crazy!” Dipper protested defensively. “Amethyst, I know you don’t have to eat or anything, but me and Steven do, and it’s not like food is something that’s really easy to come by when you’re on the run with no money or no way of getting money.”

“Oh! I know how to handle that!” Steven quipped. “We’ll just do what the No-Home Boys do! We’ll pack bindles of food and supplies to start us out for a few weeks and when we run out, we’ll use our quick wit and determination to savage more and survive on our own! Like real men!”

“Yeah!” Amethyst cheered in brazen encouragement. Yet even so, Dipper wasn’t sold on the
relatively risky plan.

“Steven, somehow I doubt being literally homeless isn’t as fun as those books of yours make it sound,” he remarked caustically. “And besides, somebody will notice we’re gone eventually. What about Mabel, Grunkle Stan, Pearl, Garnet—?”

“Ok I’m gonna stop you right there,” the purple Gem interrupted. “One: I don’t care about what Pearl or Garnet might say about this. And two: Stan won’t care because he’s done stuff way crazier than this before. And I should know; I was there for a lot of it.”

“Please come with us, Dipper!” Steven pleaded sincerely. “If you don’t, then we can’t be like the No-Home Boys because Amethyst’s a Gem and I’ll be the only boy!”

“Seriously, dude, loosen up for a change,” Amethyst added. “Take a chance, have some fun. You really wanna sit around all day with your nose in that dumb old journal when you could be living life wild and free?”

“Hey, that wasn’t all I was going to do today,” Dipper retorted firmly. “I was… I was gonna… I’m going to head back down to the Mystery Shack after you guys set out “on the road’, or whatever.”

“Oh, good!” Steven exclaimed, allayed. “Maybe while you’re down there, you and Wendy can finally talk about what happened the other day! That’ll make you feel better for sure!”

Dipper froze up upon hearing this suggestion, his immediate thought being that this was a terrible idea. The thought of going up to Wendy and engaging in what would certainly be a very awkward conversation in light of the circumstances was downright nerve-wracking to him. In fact it was as he came to this conclusion that he realized that the alternative that Steven and Amethyst were proposing to him was more than just an impromptu, harrowing, risky adventure. It could very well be an all-out escape, one that he’d be remiss over if he didn’t take it. “…On second thought… I think I might actually join you guys after all…”


“Hooray!” Steven cheered excitedly. “Oh man, this is gonna be so much fun! We’ll pack up our bindles, hitch a ride on a train, build a fire to keep us warm at night and tell stories around it, and see the world! What could be better?!”

“Y-yeah…” Dipper agreed with something of an uneasy laugh. After all, what they were about to do could no doubt be quite dangerous considering the unpredictability of the open road. But even so, he had already agreed to it; there was no backing out now. “What… what could be better?”

“Nothing could,” the purple Gem answered solidly, wrapping an arm around both boys’ shoulders. “You guys know why? Because this crew’s going ON THE RUN!”

The trio didn’t waste any time in starting their preparations for their ‘journey’. Amethyst urged that she wanted to be gone before Garnet or Pearl returned, and neither Steven nor Dipper could really blame her for it. After all, if the elder Gems knew what they were up to, certainly they would try to hold them all back and scold them for even entertaining such a thought. But all the same, they had made up their minds. They were leaving to parts unknown, and they weren’t coming back until they wanted to. As Amethyst had put it, they were the “masters of their own destinies” now.

It was a pretty enticing thought. The execution, however, seemed as though it might be a bit less
Seeing as how they were limited in both time and space, the group took to shoving whatever they could find lying in the fridge into the spare pillowcases Steven had found in his closet. From there, they tied them to sticks, creating bindles that weren’t too heavy and sufficed to carry the basics. And, after throwing out all their fears and reservations, the trio set off, ready to go wherever the wind took them.

Amethyst had made sure to advise Steven not to leave a note for Garnet and Pearl stating what they were doing and fortunately the young Gem obliged. Along those same lines, Dipper insisted they push right past the shack as they headed into town, mostly so Stan, Soos, or especially Wendy would catch on. But as much as they all wanted to remain inconspicuous about their plan, there was one person that both Steven and Dipper couldn’t help but feel guilty about leaving out of the loop.

“You know, I kinda wish we had gotten the chance to say goodbye to Mabel before we left…” Dipper said with a frown as they made it into town.

“But we did say goodbye to her when she left earlier remember?” Steven pointed out.

“No, Steven, I meant like an actual goodbye.”

“Oh yeah…” the young Gem said somewhat morosely. “I guess we should have, since we might be gone for a really long time… Oh, I know! We could always send her a postcard! They do sell postcards on the open road, right Amethyst?”

“Heck if I know,” the purple Gem shrugged. “What I do know is that once we get out of this drag of a town, everything’s gonna finally be great.”

“Amethyst, I don’t know if this is… ok to ask, but… what made you suddenly wanna run away anyway?” Dipper asked somewhat tentatively.

“Nothin’ did,” Amethyst said, letting out what seemed like a forced laugh. “I just… wanted to, you know? Thought it would be fun if I took you two dorks with me. So far it ain’t that bad.”

“Aww, come on, Amethyst,” Steven prodded with an understanding smile. “There’s gotta be more to it than that. I mean, I know you and Pearl fight a lot so maybe that could have had something to do with it?”

“What? No way,” the purple Gem scoffed defensively. “This has nothing to do with Pearl. Sometimes I just… wanna get away, alright? Not everything has to have a reason. That’s the first lesson you guys are gonna learn once we finally get out there on our own.”

The boys exchanged a glance upon hearing this, Amethyst’s rather cold tone not lost on either of them. They couldn’t really pinpoint why the purple Gem had been acting so touchy and moody all afternoon, even before they left, but it was clear to see nonetheless. But given how closed off and rigid Amethyst often was about her emotions, chances were they weren’t going to get an explanation for it any time soon.

And so the trio continued on down the sidewalk in silence for a while, at least until then sudden blare of a car horn startled them all. “Hey, what’s up, you guys?!” Jenny called as she pulled her car up alongside the group. Crowded in both the front and back were several of the other teens, including Buck, Sour Cream, Nate, Lee, Tambry, and Thompson. Fortunately, Dipper noticed that neither Wendy nor Robbie were among them, but even so, he avoided eye contact with the teens.
nonetheless, thinking that certainly they knew about the couple’s rough breakup.

“Hi, guys!” Steven exclaimed with a friendly smile. Likewise, even if she wasn’t as familiar with the teens, Amethyst offered them a casual grin and nod of greeting.

“What’s with the sacks?” Lee asked, noting their bindles. “You guys practicing being hobos or something?”

“Uh, yeah, actually,” Amethyst remarked with a smirk.

“We’re on the run!” Steven exclaimed brightly.

“O-on the run?” Thompson asked with concern. “From who?”

“Oh from no one,” the young Gem reassured. “We’re just doing it for fun. Right guys?”

“Yeah,” the purple Gem shrugged.

“Right…” Dipper agreed halfheartedly, still looking away from the teens. “Fun…”

“You guys are really living wild and free with plans like that,” Buck said with a nod of approval. “I like it.”

“So do you three ‘hobos’ need a ride to wherever it is you’re going?” Jenny asked with an amused smirk. “We still got a little room back there, right guys?”

“Meh,” Tambry responded flatly, engrossed in her phone as she sat squeezed tightly between Thompson and Nate.

“We can make room,” Sour Cream assured a moment later.

“We’d love a ride!” Steven grinned, delighted as he ran over to the car and jumped up front in between Buck and Sour Cream. “Thanks so much, Jenny!”

“Don’t mention it,” Jenny laughed before looking to Amethyst and Dipper. “You guys coming too?”

“You bet,” the purple Gem agreed, hopping into the back. “Anything’s better than having to just walking like a bunch of squares. Right, Dipper?” she asked pointedly, noticing his apparent hesitance to join them.

Dipper shot Amethyst an unamused glare at this, but even so he relented and got in the car, knowing that he couldn’t very well refuse, given the circumstances. “Y-yeah… Um, thanks, you guys.”

“So where were you guys going before you passed by us?” Steven inquired curiously as the car pulled into motion once more.

“We were just heading to the Mystery Shack to pick Wendy up from work,” Nate said. “She said she wanted to hang out, blow off some steam, you know?”

“Can’t blame her, dude,” Lee remarked with a frown. “She’s been feeling pretty low ever since her and Robbie broke up last week.”

Dipper sucked in a sharp breath upon hearing this, his former guilt and remorse returning in full force. He had suspected, based on their limited reactions over the past week, that Wendy had been
lastingly upset after what happened, but now that suspicion was all but confirmed. Still, it was all
the more of a justification for his choice to join Steven and Amethyst in running away. After all,
the last thing he wanted to do was make Wendy feel even worse just by going up to her and talking
to her about it all.

“Yeah… Me and Dipper were actually there when they broke up,” Steven said sympathetically, not
noticing the look of absolute panic Dipper sent him at this. “Wendy seemed really, really upset…”

“But,” Dipper quickly interjected before any of the teens could say anything. “J-just so you guys
know, neither of us had anything to do with it! So, uh… yeah!”

“Wait, really?” Amethyst spoke up, confused. “Because just the other day, Garnet was telling me
about how you told Wendy that-” The purple Gem was abruptly cut off by Dipper shushing her,
but fortunately, none of the teens seemed to question it.

“Yeah, we don’t really know a whole lot about what happened between those two…” Sour Cream
mused. “All we know is that it was some pretty heavy drama.”

“Wendy won’t really tell us anything about it and none of us have heard from Robbie since then,”
Jenny shrugged. “Guess that’s just par for the course when it comes to dating friends.”

“It’s like asking for trouble,” Buck said stoutly.

“It still sucks that we can’t all hang out like we used to because of this,” Thompson pouted sourly.

“ Eh, they’ll get over it,” Tambry muttered, still not looking up from her phone.

“Aw, I’m so sorry, you guys,” Steven said with sincerity. “I know how hard it can be when your
friends fight… But I think Tambry’s right! Wendy and Robbie will feel better eventually and then
you can all hang out and have fun together, just like before!”

“We hope you’re right, Steven,” Buck said, his tone as stoic as ever, even if there was the slightest
hint of wistfulness in it.

“Well, here we are,” Jenny said, bringing the car to a stop. “The outskirts of town. You guys
getting out here?”

“Yes!” Amethyst quipped, boldly leaping out of the car and grinning at the nearby sign reading
“Now leaving Gravity Falls.”

“Thanks again for the ride, you guys,” Steven smiled as him and Dipper got out of the car with
their bindles. “I hope everything turns out alright!”

“Thanks, dude,” Lee grinned. “Hope you whole ‘hobo’ thing works out good too!”

“Oh it will,” Amethyst muttered somewhat mysteriously. “It has to this time.”

As the teens began to call out their goodbyes, Steven blithely waved after them, but Dipper didn’t
initially join it, especially as the finality of what they were doing finally hit him. They were
leaving, heading off into the great unknown, without the faintest idea of when they might return, if
they were even going to return at all. And as much as that thought alone frightened him, the
thought of not ever getting at least a chance of reconciling with Wendy, even if it was indirectly,
frightened him even more. “Wait!” he suddenly called out after the teens before they could pull
away. It was a move driven by impulse and panic and little else, but even so, he resolved himself to
go through with it, no matter how it might look. “Uh… when you guys see Wendy again… could
you maybe tell her that… I’m sorry?”

“Sorry for what?” Tambry asked, raising a confused eyebrow.

“For um… well, she’ll know what it’s about,” Dipper said, admittedly too ashamed to admit his part in the couple’s breakup to the teens.

The teens all briefly looked to each other, confused, but even so Sour Cream offered him a thumbs up. “Yeah, alright.”

“Bye!” Steven called after the teens drove away, leaving the trio alone once more as they stood by the otherwise empty road.

“So… what now?” Dipper asked, looking to the vast expanse of trees ahead of them.

“Now,” Amethyst began with a smirk. “We just keep on running.”

“Until when?” Steven asked.

“Till whenever!” the purple Gem exclaimed. “C’mon!” Without much warning, Amethyst scooped both Steven and Dipper up and perched them on her shoulders with no trouble at all. It startled both boys somewhat, but even so, they let her carry them into the forest that continued to head out of town. After a while, the purple Gem eventually grew tired of this however, so she put the boys down and forced them to walk, though they didn’t really complain about it. After all, venturing into the mysterious forests that eventually gave way to wield fields was an adventure, one that Steven at least was taking on with his usual optimism and verve. As they made it out of the woods, the young Gem even happened to come across a stray racoon, which he was more than happy to befriend and bring along as they continued on their way. Of course, the creature was only friendly for so long before it turned on Steven and viciously attacked him for his bindle before doing the same to Dipper, all while Amethyst merely stood by and laughed instead of doing anything to really help.

Racoon attacks aside, as exhilarated about their excursion as Steven was, Dipper didn’t really share his enthusiasm, at least not at first. For their first several hours of wandering, he was still largely preoccupied with remorseful, wistful thoughts of Wendy, just as he had been before they left. But the further out they got from Gravity Falls, the less he began to think about it all, especially as Steven and Amethyst provided ample distractions with their jokes and jabs. The purple Gem had been surprisingly accurate in saying that there was something liberating in getting away from it all. With the endless skies above them and the open road ahead of them, it really felt as though they had no limits at all. They could go anywhere, do anything, or be anything they wanted.

And to put it simply, it felt great.

As the sun began to sink low into the sky, the trio happened across a fast-moving train speeding through the valley. Agreeing that this would expedite their travels, Amethyst tossed both boys onto an open train car with gusto before hopping on herself. After spending a while settling into their newfound ride, Steven decided to cheerfully entertain his two traveling companions in the best way he knew how: with song.

“It’s time to get moving, time for us to have some fun,” the young Gem sang brightly, his tune upbeat and bouncy even though it was acapella. While Dipper was somewhat confused by this impromptu musical number, Amethyst smirked as she tapped her hand against the floor of the car to create a fitting beat. “There’s no time to hang around, our adventure’s just begun! We’ll be thinkin’ ‘bout our friends, as we chase the setting sun—”
“But we’re leaving them behind, we’re on the run,” Amethyst joined Steven as he finished the verse before she jumped into whistling a reprise of it.

“Come on, Dipper!” Steven encouraged with a bright laugh. “Sing along with me!”

“Uh… yeah, sorry, Steven, but… that’s not gonna happen,” Dipper said with a small, rather awkward grin.

“What? Why not?”

“Because singing’s… not really my thing, ok?”

“Aww, don’t be silly,” the young Gem said with a wave of his hand. “Just try it! I’m sure you’ll do great!” And with that, Steven leapt into his song once again: “We’re on the run…” he held a long note, waiting eagerly for Dipper to join in. Of course, this never happened as Dipper upheld his stance against singing.

Still, that didn’t keep Amethyst from accompanying Steven with her own new verse instead. “I don’t care about what all the others say.”

“We’re on the run…” Steven sang once more, smiling as the purple Gem joined him.

“Well I guess there are some things that will just never go away,” Amethyst continued, glancing down somewhat morosely. Yet even so, she made sure to recover from her melancholy before either of the boys could really take notice.

“We’re on the run…”

“I wish that I could say that there’s no better place than home-”

“But home’s a place that I have never known!” both Steven and Amethyst sang together, startling Dipper as they both pressed against him while doing so. “That’s why we’re on the run…”

“Well that was… fun?” Dipper said, unsure of what to make of such a sudden performance.

“Yeah it was!” Steven quipped happily. “Just think of all the other great new songs we can come up with and sing out here on the road! And look at that sunset!” The young Gem waved his hand at the open train car door, which was showcasing the crisp glow of the sun as it disappeared over the distant hills. “This is the life!”

“You can say that again,” Amethyst chuckled, propping herself up on a pile on one of the many piles of hay filling the car.

“You know, I wasn’t really sold on this whole running away thing at first,” Dipper admitted with a small smile. “But now that we’re actually out here, it’s kind of nice and relaxing.”

“That’s what I was trying to tell you, dude,” the purple Gem remarked. “Out here, there’s nothing to worry about. We go with the flow, ride the rails, and do nothing but chill. It’s way better than having to follow a bunch of dumb rules and be whatever someone else wants you to be.”

“And the best part is, we still have a bunch of delicious snacks from home to enjoy!” Steven proclaimed, taking a sandwich out of his bindle as Dipper did the same. However, before either of the boys could chow down, a familiar furry face just so happened to leap into the train car and join them.
“Ah!” Steven gasped as the raccoon from earlier pounced on him, stealing his food. “The raccoon is back!”

“Hold on, Steven! I got this!” Dipper exclaimed, preparing to beat the critter away with the stick of his bindle. Unfortunately, the raccoon retaliated by grabbing the stick just in time and used it to roughly pull Dipper to the ground before it made off with both his and Steven’s stashes of food.

“Aw, man!” Steven exclaimed in dismay as the raccoon jumped off the train with their food in tow. “Um, Amethyst? Could we maybe have some of your food?”

Of course, as the young Gem posed this question, Amethyst just so happened to be in the middle of dumping the contents of her bindle straight into her mouth all at once. “Huh?” she asked, her mouth full as she finished her food off. “Oh, uh… sorry, guys.”

“See? I knew this would happen,” Dipper remarked pointedly, taking a seat against a bale of hay indignantly.

“I guess our bindles couldn’t fit enough for us and a racoon…” Steven sighed, cringing at the sound of his own rumbling stomach.

“Why didn’t you just bring your backpack?” Amethyst asked caustically.

The young Gem glanced away, somewhat embarrassed that he hadn’t thought of that. “…It wouldn’t fit in my bindle?” he said quickly before climbing up onto a nearby stack of hay. “Maybe I can just sleep the hunger off. Just like the No-Home Boys.”

“Good idea,” Dipper agreed, taking a different approach by just lying down on the floor of the car. However, he was only there for a moment before the train happened to bump rather roughly, resulting in him ultimately hitting his head against the hard metal floor. “Ow!” he exclaimed, sitting up and gingerly placing a hand against the now sore spot. “Ugh, why did I think that would be a good idea?!”

“You know,” Steven spoke up, having problems of his own as he tried his best to get comfortable on his hey bed. “I feel like I’ve been misled about hey. It always looks so soft in those illustrations, but it’s actually really scratchy.” Of course, the train happened to bang violently yet again, causing sending one of the stacked hay bales tumbling right down on the young Gem and irritating him more. “Amethyst, I wanna go home now.”

“Same here,” Dipper sighed, rising to stand. “I hate to say it, but I think going home and finally facing Wendy would be easier than having to live like… well, this. N-not that I’d actually do that if we do go home, but still.”

“Pfft,” Amethyst scoffed, turning away from the boys as she sulked over to the edge of the train car and took a seat. “You guys need to get over yourselves. Have you ever tried maybe not being such wimps?”

“…Doesn’t running away technically make us all wimps?” Dipper asked somewhat hesitantly.

“Well either way, I think I’m done being a No-Home Boy,” Steven said as they both headed over to sit down next to the purple Gem.

“Not me,” Amethyst said apathetically, staring out at the passing scenery.

“Amethyst, you don’t honestly expect us to be able to last out here forever, do you?” Dipper asked with sudden concern.
“I dunno, maybe,” the purple Gem shrugged. “You might if you learn to toughen up a bit.”

“But… I’m sure Garnet and Pearl and Mr. Pines and Mabel are worried sick about us,” Steven pointed out with a frown. “They’re probably wondering when we’re coming home right-”

“That’s not my home,” Amethyst cut the young Gem off sharply.

“How?” Steven asked, confused.

“Oh yeah, that’s right,” Dipper interjected. “You’re from Homeworld.”

“That’s not my home either!” the purple Gem exclaimed harshly, apparently even more offended by such an idea.

Dipper and Steven were both silent for a moment as they exchanged a puzzled look over how angry and indirect Amethyst was being. After all, if she considered neither Homeworld nor the temple to be her home, then where else was there? “Then… where are you from?” Dipper asked, voicing the question they were both wondering.

A sudden, almost dark smirk crossed the purple Gem’s features upon being posed this question. “I’ll show you.”

The trio continued riding the rails for quite some time, and all the while, Amethyst refused to answer any of the boys’ questions about where they were heading. All the while, she only kept up a sly, mysterious grin until she prompted Steven and Dipper to disembark from the train at last, only after they had traveled several hours. Yet even after jumping off the train, they still had to walk several miles before even coming close to their supposed destination. And as they did, both boys couldn’t help but be the slightest bit disconcerted upon a first glance.

Amethyst was eagerly leading the way into what seemed to be a high canyon, with dark walls that towered high into the dark fog shrouding the area. As they got closer to it, Dipper and Steven both couldn’t help but notice that all vegetation and natural life seemed to abruptly end, giving way to dry, desolate earth. The entire place already had quite an eerie air to it as almost every sound they made seemed to echo back at them. But even still, Amethyst bounded towards it with an elated smile, as though there was nothing unnerving about the area at all.

“Here we are!” the purple Gem chuckled as they stood before the entrance to the canyon. “Welcome to the Kindergarten! What do you guys think?”

“Um… It’s great!” Steven exclaimed with something of a forced smile, not entirely sure of what to think.

“Uh, Amethyst?” Dipper spoke up, aptly confused. “This… isn’t a kindergarten.”

“What? Yeah, it is,” Amethyst rolled her eyes. “I mean, there’s no flashy sign or anything, but this is the real deal, for sure. Believe me, I would know.”

“No, I mean-” Dipper cut himself off with something of an exasperated sigh before trying again. “Look, a kindergarten is like… well basically, it’s a school for really little kids. And this place… Well, this place couldn’t be any further than that.”

“Oh what, you don’t believe me?” the purple Gem challenged. “Then I guess I’ll just have to show
you. C’mon!” Amethyst laughed mischievously once more as she grabbed both boys by the wrist and dragged them into the canyon itself. Of course, the area became even more unsettling as they got a good look at it. Not only was the depths of the canyon expectedly dark and devoid of much color, but what was quite odd was the fact that its walls were dotted with thousands upon thousands of deep, almost human-shaped holes. Even stranger were the tall, drill-like machines that occasionally clung to the walls via spider-esque legs. The boys couldn’t help but feel rather small compared to all of this as Amethyst led them through the vast gorge. Whatever this place was, it was far from undiscovered. Something, or someone had been here before.

But who?

“Ok, Amethyst, what is this place, really?” Dipper asked, finally too perplexed by it all to remain silent.

“It’s kinda where I’m from,” the purple Gem replied, shrugging.

“But… I thought Gems were from space?” Steven frowned, confused.

“Pearl and Garnet are,” Amethyst explained. “But I was made here on Earth. Like you two!”

“Wait, you’re from Earth?” Dipper asked, taken aback. “But how-”

“Don’t act so surprised, dude,” the purple Gem interrupted, smirking. “You know, the way you’re freaking out reminds me of how your uncle did the same thing when I brought him here a bunch of years ago.”

“Stan’s been here before!!” Dipper exclaimed, even more shocked by this information. “Then why has he never mentioned it to me or Mabel?”

“Maybe he just forgot?” Steven suggested.

“Nah, it’s because this place skeeved him out a little,” Amethyst laughed teasingly. “Don’t know why though. The Kindergarten’s where the party’s at. Oh, and check it out!” the purple Gem exclaimed with a delighted gasp. Without explaining, she ran ahead, hurrying up to a nearby boulder as the boys followed after her. “Oh man! I missed this guy!” she laughed, embracing the large stone. “Aw… It’s my climbing rock!”

“Uh, hello!” Steven greeted the climbing rock with an uncertain smile.

“Steven, that’s a rock,” Dipper deadpanned.

“ Heck yeah it is!” Amethyst exclaimed brightly. “And over there-” she pointed to another nearby rock. “That’s the sitting rock! And that one was the rock that I kicked into two rocks!” With a warm laugh, the purple Gem scurried up the climbing rock, happily sitting atop of it as she grinned down at the boys. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“So, how long did you live here?” Steven asked curiously.

“For a while, I guess,” Amethyst shrugged. “At least until I met your mom and the others.” Still clearly enjoying being back in such a familiar place, the purple Gem flopped off the climbing rock and ran further into the Kindergarten. While Steven was more than eager to follow her, Dipper was much more hesitant about it, especially as the purple Gem rushed towards one of the massive drill machines.

“Whoa,” he gasped, unnerved by the sheer size of it as it towered over them all. “What is that
“Eh, it’s just some old Gem junk from a long time ago,” the purple Gem remarked dismissively. “It’s probably busted by now.”

Despite Amethyst’s assurance, neither Dipper nor Steven were really that allayed. Even if they didn’t know what these machines were for, they did know that they were not only abundant here, but quite sinister-looking with its several sharp, menacing points all aimed straight for the ground. Still, the boys only had enough time to exchange a nervous glance before Amethyst called over to them once again.

“Hey, Steven, Dipper! Look!” the purple Gem’s smile was huge as she stood beside one of the many holes in the cliff side. “Here’s the hole I came out of!”

“What?!” both boys exclaimed in equal surprise and confusion, hurrying over to the hole themselves.

“It’s my hole,” she reiterated, chuckling at their bewilderment. “Look! It’s me siiiiizeed…” Amethyst flashed a wry grin as she inserted herself into the hole, which was indeed, her exact size and shape. Needless to say, both Steven and Dipper were startled as she slid back into the hole seamlessly, before sitting down and letting out a contented sigh. “Ah, its still got that good hole smell.”

“Let me get this straight,” Steven interrupted, trying to make sense of all this as him and Dipper peered into the hole. “You came out of this hole?”

“This is where I was made, dude,” Amethyst nodded. “One day just… pop! Right outta this hole.”

“Hold on,” Dipper shook his head, his thoughts running at a mile a minute over all these sudden revelations. “So that’s how Gems are made? You guys just… come out of the ground?! Well, actually, I guess that makes sense, seeing as how gem gems are made, but still—this is crazy!”

“Yep! That’s exactly what Stan said too,” the purple Gem laughed, amused.

“So… if this is your hole…” Steven began anxiously, backing away to get a better look at the hundreds of other holes on that wall alone. “What about all the other holes?”

The young Gem’s question was left unanswered as the nearby warp pad suddenly light up, startling the boys as they spun around to face the pair that had just arrived.

“Oh, look! There they are, Pearl!” Mabel shouted with apt relief, smiling widely as she waved down to Dipper and Steven.

“Finally,” the white Gem sighed in relief, though she wasn’t as quick to join Mabel in climbing off the warp pad and heading down to meet them. Instead, she remained stationary for just a moment, taking an uneasy glance around the Kindergarten before leaping down herself.

“Great,” Amethyst remarked crossly as she climbed out of her hole. “Here comes the fun police…”

“Me and Pearl have been looking like, everywhere for you guys! I’m so glad we finally found you!” Mabel exclaimed as she locked both boys into a tight hug before suddenly smacking them both against the back of the head.

“Ow!” Dipper shot his sister a glare. “Mabel, what-”
“That’s for running away without telling me, you dummies!” she pouted angrily. “I was worried sick about both of you! The least you could have done was tell me about this. Then I could have come along and joined in on the fun too. I would have even packed us some cookies for the road!”

“Well, they probably wouldn’t have lasted that long anyway thanks to the racoon…” Steven frowned.

“Trust us, Mabel, life on the road isn’t as fun as it sounds,” Dipper remarked somewhat dryly. “We just-”

“I don’t wanna hear a peep outta you, Mr. ‘Runs-Away-So-He-Doesn’t-Have-To-Face-His-Problems’;,” Mabel asserted firmly. “I know you only did this so you wouldn’t have to talk to Wendy, even though that’s what you need to do!”

“Oh, come on!” Dipper exclaimed, exasperated. “Mabel, that’s not even what this is about!”

“Really?” Steven asked, confused. “Because I thought you said that you weren’t going to talk to Wendy, even if we-”

“Steven!” Dipper harshly cut him off. Fortunately though, before their conversation could really continue, Pearl intervened, already more than prepared to give Amethyst a proper scolding.

“Oh, I’m so relieved to see you boys are alight,” the white Gem sighed, somewhat relieved. “Garnet said you’d all be here, but I didn’t want to believe it. Amethyst, what were you thinking bringing Steven and Dipper to a… Kindergarten?”

“Kindergarten?” Mabel interrupted with an intrigued smile. “Wait, if this is a kindergarten, then where are all the toys and milk cartons and adorable little kids?”

“It’s not that kind of kindergarten, Mabel,” Dipper quickly noted to her in a whisper.

“Well, Amethyst?” Pearl asked, looking to the purple Gem caustically. “Care to explain?”

“I dunno,” Amethyst scowled, kicking a nearby pebble. “We were in the neighborhood. And hey, don’t act like I’m the only bad example. You brought Mabel here, after all.”

“O-oh, well that’s only because she wanted to come looking for the boys with me and she wouldn’t take no for an answer!” Pearl protested, flustered. “Right, Mabel?”

“That’s right!” Mabel quipped. “And I’m glad I came because now I get to hear about all of this cool mysterious Gem stuff going on here too!”

“Pearl?” Steven interjected apprehensively. “Was Amethyst really… made here?”

The white Gem sucked in a sharp breath upon hearing this question before turning back to Amethyst, even more aghast this time. “How much did you tell them?”

“What? You mean about the bad thing?” Amethyst asked, her voice a whisper at first, though it steadily started to raise in volume the angrier she got. “How this bad place is where bad Gems came to grow more bad Gems? Is that what you’re talking about?!”

“No way. They grew other Gems here?!” Dipper exclaimed, completely stunned by this information.

“Cool! Where are they?!” Mabel grinned excitedly, glancing around for any other Gems.
“Thankfully, *not* here,” Pearl said harshly. “Amethyst, *none* of them are ready to hear about this!”

“A-about what?” Steven asked worriedly.

“Oh, but don’t worry, you guys,” Amethyst faked a smile as she pressed past the white Gem and stepped closer to the kids. “Everything’s just fine now.”

“*Amethyst,*” Pearl interjected rigidly, but even so, the purple Gem ignored her.

“It all worked out. We won!” she continued, pressing closer to them as she failed to notice their shared growing confusion and fear.

“*Stop,*” the white Gem pressed again, yet Amethyst kept on going, too unhinged to stop now.

“And we shut this place down so the Earth would be safe from parasites like *me!*”

“Amethyst! That’s enough!” Pearl shouted, putting herself between the kids and the purple Gem.

“Pearl?” Steven spoke up, his expression awash with concern. Likewise, the twins stood alongside him just as confounded and troubled. None of them really understood what the unfolding contention between the two Gems was truly about, but what they all immediately figured was that it was more than any of them could have bargained for.

“Oh, kids, I’m so sorry,” Pearl sighed, kneeling down to their level. “None of you should have ever had to see this horrible place.”

Amethyst’s burning scowl deepened upon hearing this, her gem starting to shine as she let out a low growl. “Then why don’t you just *leave?!*” the purple Gem exploded, her whip lashing out of her gem and coiling around Pearl tightly. The kids gasped in shared shock as Amethyst tossed the white Gem towards the nearest drill machine, sending her crashing into it first and then into the ground roughly. “Admit it! I’m just an *embarrassment* to you!” Amethyst shouted, swinging her whip at Pearl once more. This time the white Gem managed to dodge it, though it did cut a swath into the leg of the machine as Pearl easily flipped away.

Of course, all three of the kids were quite alarmed upon seeing the purple Gem’s sudden, violent outburst. Which was why they all hurried to intervene before things could get too out of hand.

“Amethyst, wait!” Steven exclaimed desperately, reaching for his guardian. “You can’t do this!”

“Y-yeah!” Mabel agreed earnestly. “You guys are friends! You shouldn’t fight!”

Amethyst said nothing in response as she instead scooped all three of the kids up at once, shapeshifting another hand to help her do so, before tossing them aside as though they were nothing. The trio were fine as they landed a few feet away, all of them cushioning the fall for each other, but still shaking them up nonetheless. “Uh, guys?” Dipper said with a frown. “Maybe we shouldn’t get involved in this…”

“No way!” Steven exclaimed with determination. “We gotta stop this before they hurt each other!”

“Amethyst!” Pearl shouted as she rose to stand, summoning her spear as she did so. “I don’t want to fight you!”

“I wouldn’t wanna fight me neither!” the purple Gem hissed before jumping and curling into a ball and rolling towards Pearl at a frightening speed. The white Gem rolled out of the way just in time as she sent a barrage of energy blasts at Amethyst from the tip of her spear. The purple Gem outmaneuvered them, rolling along the side of the canyon until she leapt high into the air, hurling
her whip down at Pearl brutally. Fortunately the white Gem saw this coming and slammed her foot down on the whip, slicing it cleanly in half.

As this skirmish continued, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel rushed into it once again, all three of them hoping they could somehow convince the fighting Gems to calm down. “You guys, stop it!” the young Gem begged. Before either of the twins could make an appeal, however, Amethyst counteracted them, mostly out of frustration.

“Stay out of it!” she shouted, tossing a long whip at the three of them. It hit its mark, twisting around the trio, tying them together, and sending them roughly plummeting to the ground.

“Aw, I thought for sure that would work!” Mabel exclaimed as they all tried to wriggle free.

“Maybe we should try coming up with an actual plan this time, you guys?” Dipper suggested pointedly. Still, they didn’t really have a lot of time for that as the duel between the two Gems waged on.

Pearl launched herself at Amethyst, smoothly bending out of the path of a lash of her whip before leaping over her and landing a heavy kick to her face. The purple Gem cried in pain as she landed, glaring up at Pearl, who stood ready for her next attack, her spear spinning deftly in her hand.

“Amethyst, stop this!” she urged firmly. “You can’t beat me!”

“I… don’t… CARE!” Amethyst practically screamed in raw fury, letting that scream continue as she pulled two more whips out of her gem. Both of them managed to latch onto Pearl’s spear as soon as she lashed them out at her. “I’m not gonna let you stand there and remind me of everything I hate about myself!”

With another battle cry, the purple Gem shook her whips, sending two violet bursts of energy running down them and towards Pearl. The resounding explosion shook the Kindergarten, startling the kids and sending Pearl flying backwards into the drill machine. The white Gem landed hard on the ground below and struggled to pick herself up even as Amethyst approached her.

“I never asked for it to be this way,” the purple Gem lamented, heavy tears streaming down her face. She let out a choked sob as she continued, her voice rough and ragged with far too many emotions to count, even if most of them could be summed up by pain. “I never asked to come out here! I never asked to be one of them! I never asked to be made!”

Pearl was stunned into silence upon hearing this, her expression awash with deep worry and sympathy for her teammate. She had spent so many years around the purple Gem, but even so, she could have never guessed that her feelings of remorse and regret for something that wasn’t even really her fault ran so very deep. “Amethyst…” she muttered softly, wanting to say so much but not even knowing where to start. Fortunately though, the kids intervened just in time.

“Amethyst, please, no more!” Steven pleaded as him, Dipper, and Mabel rushed to stand between the quarreling Gems. Tears were forming in the distraught young Gem’s eyes, and that alone was enough to make Amethyst stay her hand before lashing her whip out at Pearl once again. “I know you’re upset, but I can’t stand to watch you two hurt each other.”

“Seriously, can’t you two just… talk this out or something?” Dipper asked anxiously. “It’s bound to be easier than just beating each other senseless.”

The purple Gem opened her mouth to shoot back a reply, but before she could get anything out, a sudden loud creak from above startled them all. With a gasp, everyone looked up to see the drill machine they were gathered under begin to quickly topple over on them as its sliced leg suddenly
snapped in two. Acting quickly, Steven summoned a large bubble around himself, Pearl, and the twins to shield them from the impending fallout. Unfortunately, there was still someone who was just outside of the bubble’s protection.

“Amethyst!” Steven gasped, horrified as the purple Gem stood just a few feet outside his bubble. However, Amethyst simply looked to the kids for a moment, frightened and ashamed, before she abruptly turned on her heel and took off in the opposite direction.

“Amethyst!” the young Gem cried again, the twins joining him this time as they all shared the same sheer panic for the purple Gem’s safety. “Amethyst! Amethyst!” All of these please fell on deaf ears however, as Amethyst simply kept on running. Right until the machine came crashing down on them all.

Thankfully, the bubble did its job and kept them safe from the falling machine. Still, Pearl and the kids were hardly relieved as the dust began to settle and they saw that Amethyst was nowhere in sight. “Amethyst!” Steven sobbed, dropping the bubble and running forward as Dipper and Mabel hurried after him.

“Amethyst, where are you!?” Mabel called, immensely concerned.

“Wait, do you guys hear that?” Dipper asked, catching onto the very faint noise of what sounded like sobbing nearby.

“The hole!” Steven gasped, rushing over to Amethyst’s hole, which was blocked off by a heap of rubble. Pearl slowly rose to stand as she watched the kids quickly work together to remove the blockade, all the while keeping her distance out of both dread and guilt.

“Amethyst!” the kids exclaimed in surprised unison upon seeing the purple Gem huddled deep inside her hole. Her back was turned to them and her shoulders were shaking as she kept her arms wrapped tightly around herself, but fortunately she was unscathed. At least physically.

“Go away,” Amethyst ordered bitterly. “I’m bad and you guys shouldn’t be around me.”

“What?” Steven asked, confused. “That’s ridiculous!”

“Yeah!” Mabel nodded in sincere agreement. “Amethyst, you’re like, one of the coolest Gems we know! Then again, we only know four Gems, but still, you’re great!”

“And hey, even though things are kind of… rough right now, we still had a fun time hanging out with you today, even if we almost died several times. Right, Steven?” Dipper asked, sending the purple Gem an encouraging grin.

“We did!” the young Gem nodded insistently. “Look, Amethyst, we don’t really know what any of this means, but-”

“Yeah, you don’t,” Amethyst interrupted crossly, still not turning to face any of them. “Cause if you did, then you wouldn’t be talking to me.”

“Oh boy,” Dipper sighed diffidently as they backed away from the hole a bit. “We’re really not getting anywhere with her, are we?”

“Hold on. I have an idea,” Steven said, turning to the nearby white Gem. “Pearl, you gotta get in here. You have to help us.”

“But-” Pearl tried to protest, but the kids weren’t having it this time.
“You have to talk to her,” Steven insisted, his tone dead serious.

“Maybe if you do, then she’ll feel better and come out!” Mabel added with a reassuring smile.

The white Gem let out a long sigh at this, steeling herself for the challenging task ahead of her. “Y-you’re right…” Pearl agreed, glancing away. “As… difficult as all of this is, I suppose avoiding it really isn’t helping anything…”

“Hey, doesn’t that sound familiar, bro-bro?” Mabel asked, elbowing her brother.

“Mabel, now’s really not the time for this!” Dipper exclaimed in a harsh whisper, but even so he couldn’t deny she was right. Even though what Pearl and Amethyst were going through was vastly different from what transpired between him and Wendy, not confronting the problem was only making things worse. After all, regret and remorse could never truly be alleviated by either fleeing or fighting; time and talking were the only things that could ever really reconcile them.

Pearl took in a deep breath as she slid into the hole and took a seat next to Amethyst. Neither of them said anything for a long moment, especially as the purple Gem kept her back turned and her posture small and closed off. After what seemed like ages of tension however, the white Gem finally spoke. “Amethyst…” she began, reaching her hand out towards the purple Gem before hesitantly pulling it back. “Amethyst, I had no idea you’ve been upset about this.”

“What?!” Amethyst spat harshly, finally turning around as tears continued to roll down her cheeks. “You had no idea?! This is like, my entire existence!” she shouted, motioning to the hole around them. “You wanna pretend like none of this ever happened! You think I’m just a big mistake!”

The white Gem gasped upon hearing this, moved with sadness for the grief her teammate was going through. “No, no!” she protested. “Amethyst, you’re not the mistake. You’re just the byproduct of a… big mistake…” Pearl trailed off, blushing in embarrassment over her awkward misstep of words. Amethyst shot her a cold glare at this while the kids all shook their heads, knowing that this wasn’t going as well as they had hoped for. “No, that’s not-” Pearl tried again, recollecting herself. “I… I just never thought of this as you. None of this is your fault. You didn’t build this place.”

Amethyst paused upon hearing this, knowing that nobody, not even Rose, had ever told her something like this before. It was true that she knew she had no control over the place she had emerged or how, she had always carried some level of guilt towards it all. After all, the very reason why the Crystal Gems existed at all was to end Homeworld’s Earth-harming mission, a mission that had the Kindergarten at its very heart and soul. But since she had come from the Earth Kindergarten, the purple Gem had always believed that she had been a least a part of the problem, a problem that could have very well destroyed the planet she now stood to protect if it had been left unchecked. Yet now, Pearl was telling her that what had happened here, what could have been, was not her burden to bear. And perhaps, Amethyst realized, it really never was in the first place.

“I-I’m sorry, Amethyst,” Pearl said with absolute sincerity. “I hope you can forgive me. You’re the one good thing that came out of this mess. I always thought you were proud of that.” With a gentle smile, the white Gem extended her hand out towards her teammate. Amethyst didn’t take it right away, but when she finally did, she wiped her tears away and allowed Pearl to help her out of her hole. The purple Gem refused to so much as even look back at it as she left it, knowing that she didn’t need to cling onto the past or her origins any longer. She was a Crystal Gem now. As far as she was concerned, she always would be.

And that was enough for her.
The kids all let out collective sighs of relief as Amethyst and Pearl emerged from the hole together, apparently having reconciled. The purple Gem still tried to come across as cold and stoic after everything, but as she looked to Pearl, she found that she could no longer keep her overwhelming emotions contained any longer. With a heavy sob, Amethyst enveloped Pearl in a tight, desperate embrace, one that startled the white Gem, though she still smiled softly as she tearfully returned it all the same.

“Aw, they’re friends again!” Mabel gushed with a happy smile.

“Yeah…” Steven nodded with a contented grin. “And you know? I have a feeling things will be even better between them from now on.”

“Even better…” Dipper repeated to himself, his eyes widening in realization. After everything that had happened between the two Gems and how potentially disastrous their falling out had been, he now knew for certain that he couldn’t very well go on avoiding Wendy any longer. He had to stop running and face this problem, no matter how difficult or awkward it might be and no matter what might happen. And maybe at the end of it all, things would somehow turn out to be even better.

“Are you kids ready to head home?” Pearl asked with a grin as her and Amethyst’s hug disbanding.

“Yes!” Steven exclaimed brightly, running to the warp pad. “Let’s go home so Steven can sleep in a bed!”

“Yeah, I think I’ve had enough of life on the road for one day…” Dipper remarked with a tired smirk.

“Seriously though, if you guys ever decide to do this again, please let me know!” Mabel quipped somewhat jokingly as they all climbed onto the warp pad.

“Somehow I doubt we’ll be doing this again…” Pearl noted, giving Amethyst a sly grin, which she softly returned.

With no need to linger any longer in the Kindergarten, the group warped away, leaving the decrepit place dull, dark, and empty once more. Yet even still, somewhere off in the distance, ominous clanging could be heard echoing through the canyon, almost as if it was the very echo of the Gems who had built it centuries ago.

By the next day, everything had returned to normal. Or at least, as normal as things got, all things considered. Garnet was quite satisfied to hear that her teammates had reconciled their differences and she professed her belief that they were well on their way to a much better relationship in the future, much to Steven’s delight. Even though Dipper told her not to, Mabel of course divulged the full details of her brother’s escapade to their uncle, though fortunately Stan was hardly mad, seeing as how he had been on the run from various individuals, as well as the law itself, countless times in the past. Still, not everything was completely resolved quite yet. But that was something Dipper intended on fixing as he sat waiting outside the shack, perking up a bit as he saw a certain cashier come in for her shift.

“Wendy!” he called, getting up and running over to her.

“Dipper!” Wendy exclaimed with a surprised, yet relieved grin. “There you are, dude! I was looking all over for you yesterday!”
“W-wait, really?” Dipper asked, confused.

“Well, duh! My friends told me that they gave you, Steven, and Amethyst a ride out of town yesterday because you all were ‘on the run’ or something?”

“Oh, right…” Dipper frowned, a bit embarrassed.

“Gotta say, that’s pretty gutsy of you, man,” Wendy remarked with a wry grin which quickly faded. “But at the same time… it could have been pretty dangerous out there. So I’m glad to see you’re back safe and sound. Hobo living… probably isn’t for you.”

“Yeah, it really wasn’t…” Dipper said with a halfhearted smile. So far, this conversation was going well enough, but at the same time, he had yet to bring up what he knew he had to get off his chest. Which was why he took in a deep breath, pushed his insecurities away, and simply went through with it. Just as Pearl had with Amethyst. “So uh, Wendy? Can I talk to you about… something?”

“Anything, dude,” Wendy nodded with a smile.

“Well I… I, um, just wanted to tell you that… I’m sorry for what happened last week,” he began somewhat hesitantly. “You know, for how I kinda ended up breaking you and Robbie up?”

“Oh what? You’re still worried about that?” Wendy asked with a suddenly concerned frown. “Don’t be, dude. I’m really not even that torn up about it even more and you shouldn’t be either.”

“What?”

“I said its ok,” the cashier reassured, kneeling down to his level. “I mean, yeah it totally sucks that that happened, but like, you did the right thing. I’m glad you told me the truth about what Robbie was doing; it really showed me that you care about me, which, if you ask me, is pretty awesome.”

“B-but you were really upset,” Dipper interjected. “And I thought you-”

“Well of course I was upset at first,” Wendy interrupted. “But I’ve had time to get over it. I’m sorry if how I blew up over it made you feel bad or like you did something wrong. Because like I said, you didn’t.”

“So… so we’re cool then?” Dipper asked hopefully, relief already starting to fill him that everything would, in fact, be even better than before.

“Yeah, man,” Wendy smirked, exchanging a fist bump with him. “We’re totally cool.”

As this touching exchange unfolded, Steven and Mabel eavesdropped from around the corner of the shack, mostly out of curiosity and concern for Dipper. Still, they were both as relieved as he was to see that everything had turned out alright in the end after all.

“Well, it looks like Dipper had nothing to worry about after all,” Mabel concluded with a content grin. “I can’t wait to rub it in his face that I was right all along later.”

“Yeah, its pretty great,” Steven agreed, smiling. “Pearl and Amethyst made up, Dipper and Wendy made up, and I learned an important lesson: that sleeping on hay is really overrated.”

The pair shared an amused laugh at this, one that concluded as Mabel departed to go take pictures of Lion and Waddles as they chased each other around the yard. Steven prepared to join her, but even so, he did stop short upon stealing a glance up at the temple as it peered over the trees in the distance. The young Gem’s smile faded as he looked to his home, the six-armed statue he had
always known suddenly seeming strangely alien somehow. The revelation that the Gems were not of the Earth was one thing, and largely Steven had already come to terms with that by now. But the fact that Gems came to Earth and endangered it by creating more of their own… he wasn’t entirely sure what to make of that yet and he honestly wasn’t sure when he would be.

Still, Steven took solace in the fact that he had nothing to worry about. The Gems had made it clear that they refused to let any of their kind return to Earth and use it for their destructive purposes. There was no chance of Homeworld Gems coming back and continuing their treacherous work. As Garnet had said, the planet was safe. Their home was safe. And so it would remain as long as they were around to protect it.

Right?
Chapter 27: Land Before Swine

Chapter Summary

In which Steven trains Centipeedle and Stan punches a pterodactyl

Chapter Notes

Well, here we are with my mix of Monster Buddies and Land Before Swine. It's... interesting. Enjoy!


The road that cut through the woods towards Gravity Falls was a relatively less traveled one, especially at night. Yet even so, the police station insisted on keeping up an evening roadside patrol there, even if traffic was quite sparse. Still, Sherriff Blubbs and Deputy Durland hardly minded having to sit in their squad car, tucked behind a billboard, waiting to clock in speeding motorists. Mostly because they found a sure-fire way to entertain themselves in their idle time.

“Focus, deputy,” Blubbs cautioned his partner, his tone dead serious. “Remember your training. Easy… easy…”

Sweat had formed on Durland’s brow as he kept his gaze intently focused on the children’s maze game he had been working on navigating for the past hour. Despite its admittedly easy difficulty, it had been a tumultuous challenge for the deputy, but the sheriff wholeheartedly supported him through it all. “You’re almost there!” Blubbs encouraged. However, this encouragement did little as Durland reached the end of the puzzle, somehow bypassing the treasure chest at the end of the maze and instead drawing a line straight into the shark’s mouth.

“Dang it! I almost got the treasure!” the deputy exclaimed in disappointment.

“The time we spend together is treasure enough,” Blubbs reassured with a warm smile, placing a hand on his partner’s shoulder. The tender moment was short lived however, as the squad car suddenly rocked slightly. “Hey, did you feel that?”

The car thrashed again, much more violently this time, as huge claws began to tear into the roof of the car. Frightened, the officers both ducked for cover, but fortunately they weren’t in too much danger as whatever mysterious force had gripped the roof soon peeled it off entirely before making off with it and flying off into the night. Neither Blubbs nor Durland were able to see what exactly had stolen the roof of their car, yet somehow neither of them were too shaken by the startling experience.

“Reckon we should report that?” Durland asked, sitting up in the now roofless car.

“We could,” Blubbs mused before coming up with a new idea. “Or we could go for a ride in our
new convertible!”

Durland cheered in excited support to this and Blubbs joined in as they pulled onto the road and sped down it, completely oblivious to the large, ominous shape flying past the full moon.

By the next morning, word was going around Gravity Falls that several citizens had happened to spot an unknown creature lurking in the shadows of the town, supposedly the very creature that had torn the roof of the police car off. While it was all merely based on rumor, those rumors were enough to appear on the front page of the morning paper, and that wasn’t all. It was also enough to garnish the attention of the Gems, especially given their sworn responsibility to protect the people of Gravity Falls from any threat, be it Gem-related or supernatural.

Hence why the group was currently cutting a path through the deep woods of Gravity Falls, on the hunt for this unknown creature with the intent of subduing it before it could harm anyone. However, as was often the case, the Gems didn’t make it very far before they were faced with another threat, this time in the form of a Gem monster they had happened to cross paths with by chance. Garnet had deemed this sharp-tailed creature their first priority, and without any hesitation, the Gems launched themselves into battle against it as Steven cheered them on from the sides.

“Alright everyone!” Garnet shouted to her teammates, her gauntlets clenched as they cornered the monster. The creature had already used its saw-like tail to swipe through many of the nearby trees, creating something of a small clearing. But now, it had nowhere else to run as the Gems converged on it.

“One more attack should do it!” Pearl proclaimed, slicing her spear at the panicked creature. The monster squealed in pain as its arm was cut cleanly off, eliciting a gasp of sympathy from Steven.

“Yikes! Your arm!” the young Gem exclaimed, cringing as he held his own arm.

Still, the Gems continued their assault as Garnet sped for the monster, her gauntlets landing a heavy blow that dug quite deep. Soon enough, the creature stopped resisting and let out a piercing scream, before its form poofed and disappeared into nothing more than its small orange gemstone. Pearl rushed for the gem and quickly bubbled it before sending it back to the temple, letting out a relieved sigh as she did so.

“Well, that was a bit of a detour,” the white Gem remarked.

“Yeah, an annoying one,” Amethyst rolled her eyes, flipping her hair back.

“But at least now there’s nothing standing between us and finding that creature!” Pearl continued zealously. “Hopefully the rumors were right and we’re not just tracking what turns out to be nothing down on a wild goose chase.”

“We’ll find it,” Garnet assured. “In fact, we-” The Gem leader was cut off as something suddenly soared through the trees right over their heads at an alarming speed. No one had any time to see it, but the force of the wind it had created was enough to cause the last few trees the Gem monster had weakened to begin to topple over.

“Whoa!” Steven exclaimed, his eyes wide as a tree began to fall over near him. Fortunately, Amethyst shoved him out of the way just in time as the tree only narrowly missed falling on her instead.
“Geez! This job’s kinda dangerous!” the purple Gem shouted as another tree fell over beside her, essentially trapping her.

“Amethyst!” the young Gem gasped. “Uh, don’t worry! I’ll get you out!” To the best of his abilities, Steven tried to push the trees apart from each other, only for them to not budge so much as an inch. At the same time, Garnet and Pearl glance up at the unsteady woods around them, knowing that it wouldn’t be much longer before the entire clearing caved in.

“We’ve got to get Steven out of here!” Pearl exclaimed fearfully.

Garnet nodded, hurrying over to the young Gem as she forcefully picked him up. “Hey-” Steven tried to protested, but the Gem leader was quick to cut him off.

“I’m sending you back to the temple,” Garnet said, not willing to listen to a single word of dissent on this.

“But Garnet, how are you gonna-” Steven was once again interrupted as Garnet did something quite unexpected. A large, maroon bubble suddenly formed around the young Gem, shielding him entirely as he floated above the Gem leader’s hands. “You can bubble me?!” Steven asked, amazed from inside the bubble.

“Garnet, no!” Pearl exclaimed in sudden panic, rushing towards the Gem leader only to be seconds too late. Without wasting another second, Garnet abruptly waved her hands, sending the bubble, and Steven off back to the temple. “Garnet!” the white Gem shouted, aghast at the risky move their leader had just done.

Yet even so, Garnet herself was hardly phased as she simply offered her teammate a useful bit of advice in the midst of the avalanche of trees falling upon them. “Watch your head.”

Mabel smiled as she held Waddles up to look outside the gift shop window with her. Her grin widened as she watched Stan drive the golf cart away from the shack with a large load of tourists on the newly developed, aptly named “Woods of Mystery tour”. All the same, it meant that the conman would be gone for quite a while, giving Mabel and Waddles ample free time.

“Finally, Waddles, the whole house to ourselves!” Mabel exclaimed to her beloved pig, who sat before her loyally. “What do you think we should do? Dance party?” Of course, Waddles simply oinked in response, but that was more than enough for Mabel. “I’m not hearing a no!”

Prompted by excitement, Mabel rushed to flip the shack’s open sign to closed before tuning the radio into her favorite dance mix station and turning it all the way up. From there, the girl and her pig engaged in what was easily a legendary dance party, even if its only attendees were just the two of them. Still, Mabel was having a wonderful time dancing as wildly and freely as she pleased as Waddles either sat by and watched or occasionally got in on the dancing action (with Mabel’s assistance of course). However, dancing wasn’t all they were filling their alone time with; the pair also indulged in trying on some of the gift shop’s sunglasses, snapping photos together, and eating random things off the floor, regardless of if they were really even edible or not. The fun went on for quite some time, until Mabel’s vast threshold of energy finally started to run low. As much as she wanted to keep the party going, she eventually ended up collapsing to the floor out of exhaustion, though she did open her eyes and smile as Waddles gave her outstretched fingers a gentle lick.
“Uh oh! Cuddle time!” she giggled, wrapping her arms around the pig and pulling him close. “Waddles, can I tell you a secret? You’re my favorite pig in the whole world!”

Waddles once again oinked in response to this, eliciting another affectionate laugh from Mabel before she let out a tired yawn. It wasn’t long before both her and Waddles fell into a content snooze together on the floor. Unfortunately, it wasn’t long after that that Stan returned from the tour, oblivious to the pair as he walked in, counting a sizable pile of cash. Since the conman didn’t see them, he of course ended up tripping over them, sending him crashing to the floor and startling Mabel and Waddles awake.

“Mabel?” Stan asked in confusion as he picked himself up off the ground. “What are ya doing lying on the floor?”

“Being cute and great,” Mabel said with a charming grin, pushing her face against Waddles’. “Yeesh,” Stan rolled his eyes, putting his glasses back on. “And I thought your brother was weird.”

“Nah, he’s more like-” Mabel cut herself off as she grabbed one of pine tree hats from the nearby shelf and put it on before throwing her voice to sound like Dipper. “‘Ahh! Let’s go solve a mystery! I kiss a pillow with Wendy’s face on it!’”

The conman let out an amused chuckle at imitation. “Heh, that’s pretty good. Kissin’ a pillow.” The bout of levity was shortly lived however, as Stan’s attention was soon diverted by Waddles, who had taken to chewing on the leg of his pants.

“Go go!” Mabel cheered her pig on. “Chew that pant leg!”

Stan on the other hand, was far less accepting of this. “Hey!” he shouted, picking Waddles up. However, the pig was still chewing on the conman’s pants, and so he happened to tear off a piece of fabric as he was lifted away from them. “Alright, that’s it!” Stan growled, opening the nearby window. “Outside! Now!”

“No! Grunkle Stan!” Mabel protested, swiping her pig away from the conman. “It’s not safe for Waddles outside! There’s predators! And barbequers!”

“That’s just the natural order of things,” Stan argued with an apathetic shrug. “It’s not my fault your pig’s potentially delicious.”

“W-well you can’t make him go outside,” Mabel asserted firmly. “The Gems don’t force Steven to put Lion outside, so you shouldn’t force me to do the same to Waddles.”

“Oh sure, and if the Gems let Steven go into space then you’d wanna go too, huh?” Stan asked caustically. “Oh wait, that actually happened. Well, whatever. That pig is still outta here!”

“No! He should be inside like a person!” Mabel exclaimed adamantly.

“People don’t roll around in their own filth. Except for Soos.”

“And maybe we’re the lesser for it!” Mabel said, sending her uncle a cross glare. “Maybe we’re the ones who should be put outside, huh? Huh? Think about it! Hmph!” Turning her nose up in anger, Mabel stormed out of the gift shop with Waddles in tow, leaving a very confused Stan behind.
Steven had never experienced being bubbled before, which was why he couldn’t help but scream in fear and excitement as he was sent through an otherwise black, empty expanse towards a radiantly glowing light. When the young Gem realized he was no longer moving, he opened his eyes and gasped as he realized he was in a rather familiar place.

“Whoa! I’m back inside the temple!” Steven exclaimed, looking down from his bubble. He was quick to see that he was in the room where him, Connie, Dipper, and Mabel had confronted the Gems about the journal a few weeks ago, where all of the bubbled gems were safety and stillly contained.

The young Gem tentatively glanced around at all of bubbles his was hovering amidst, only to spot their most recent catch floating not too far away from him. “Heh, look at you now,” he remarked to the captured gem with a sly smirk. “Stuck in a bubble. Then again… I guess I am too… Hm… Let me see if I can…” Steven trailed off as he pushed his hands against the surface of the bubble, slowly forcing an opening wide enough to pop the bubble entirely. With it no longer around to hold the young Gem up, gravity did its job as Steven began to plummet downwards, but not before landing on another bubble right below him.

Still, this new bubble didn’t provide much support for long as it too, popped from the force of Steven landing on it, sending both him and the round gem inside of it tumbling to the ground. The young Gem let out a small cry of pain as he hit the ground, though he breathed a sigh of relief as he realized he was safe and sound. Or so he thought.

Steven only had seconds to recover before the now-free gem lying a few feet away from him began to glow brightly. The young Gem gasped as he sat up and watched a vaguely humanoid figure begin to form around the gem, though that form quickly turned monstrous as a shining green silhouette rose high above him.

“Oh man, what’s happening!?” Steven exclaimed in alarm, his eyes wide as the monster let out a loud screech, its many arms, pincher mouth, and lengthy body creating a familiar form. “Ah! The Centipeedle!” Steven shouted, remembering the Gem monster from the beginning of the summer. As the Centipeedle set its one-eyed gaze upon him, the young Gem quickly scrambled to his feet and hurried over to the far side of the room fearfully, knowing that the Gems weren’t around to provide him with any aid this time.

However, the Centipeedle’s reaction to this was surprisingly non-violent, as its large, imposing form steadily scaled down into a much smaller, quadruped one. As the light faded from the monster, it opened its maw, acid spilling down from it as it looked around and let out a frightened chirp. Slowly, Steven turned back towards the creature, surprised by its now diminutive size but even more surprised by how it was trembling and looking around, obviously distraught. And immediately, his sympathy for it was stirred.

“Aw… it looks so… scared…” Steven noted with a concerned from, stepping away from the wall. “Uh, hi….” He greeted the nervous monster with a small smile, getting down low as he crawled towards it so he could be on its level. The Centipeedle screamed and backed away, still shaking fearfully, but even so, Steven continued to slowly and carefully approach it. “Hey, its ok. Look, please don’t be scared of me.” The Centipeedle let out a soft, almost content coo in

Slowly, the Centipeedle’s trembling began to still as its screeches became less frequent. Steven smiled upon seeing this, knowing that he was starting to get somewhere with the poor creature. “Yeah, that’s it. Doesn’t relaxing feel nice?” The Centipeedle let out a soft, almost content coo in
response, its white mane settling down as Steven continued speaking to it. “You wanna… come over here and relax with me? We can totally just hang out and relax, right here on the floor.” Hesitantly, the monster began to step towards the young Gem, whose smile widened as he continued to welcome it towards him, despite the acid still dripping from its mouth. “Yeah, there you go! Don’t be shy. We can be friends! My name’s-”

“STEVEN!” Pearl shouted as her, Garnet, and Amethyst stood in the threshold of the temple. All three of them were quite shocked to see the young Gem fraternizing with the monster, who let out a terrified shriek, its former calm completely shattered. “Get away from that thing!”

“Whoa, dude!” Amethyst exclaimed, just as alarmed. Garnet, however, took action as she leapt into the room, her gauntlets already summoned.

“Wait! It’s not-” Steven tried to protest as Garnet landed almost right on top of the Centipeedle. Fortunately, it leapt away just in time, but the Gem leader wasn’t about to let it go that easily.

“Oh, this was a terrible idea!” Pearl exclaimed, landing beside Steven as she looked him over for any injuries. “And he’s even managed to pop a bubble and let out that awful… thing! If it hurt you, so help me, I’ll-”

“No! It didn’t do anything!” Steven exclaimed, startling the white Gem quite a bit. Upon seeing Garnet corner the Centipeedle, the young Gem hurried over and put himself between the monster and the Gem leader’s gauntlets. “Garnet, don’t hurt it! I accidentally let it out of its bubble, but it didn’t even try to hurt me! It’s not like the other monsters. It’s just scared and confused. Please, Garnet. I’m begging you!”

Steven looked to the Gem leader with absolute desperation, his arms held out wide to protect the defenseless Centipeedle behind him. Garnet paused for what seemed like ages, her expression unreadable as she met her young charge’s gaze. And then, slowly, she lowered her gauntlets in defeat. “I can’t say no to that face…” she admitted sheepishly.

“Excuse me?!” Pearl asked, aghast. “Garnet, you can’t be serious!”

“I am,” Garnet nodded affirmatively. “I think you should try and tame it, Steven.”

“Garnet, thank you so much!” Steven exclaimed joyously, hugging the Gem leader’s legs tightly.

“Ohhh! Shut down by the G-Squad!” Amethyst laughed as Pearl scowled and placed her hands on her hips.

“Well,” Pearl huffed, aptly annoyed. “We should at least take some precautions.”

“This isn’t what I meant by ‘precautions’…” Pearl frowned, crossing her arms as she looked over the setup Steven had conceived for restraining the Centipeedle. While the Gems had wanted to use solid metal chains to keep the monster confined to a rock or a tree, the young Gem had insisted on something a little more humane. While the Centipeedle was no fan of the leash she now had to wear, Steven was at the very least content that she had some way of moving about at all. Still, Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl, and Lion lingered close as the young Gem stood before the monster, whose leash was attached to a tree at the end, just in case anything were to go wrong.

“Alright, Steven,” Garnet said evenly. “Let’s see if you can get it to calm down.”
Steven frowned as he glanced towards the Centipeedle, who was desperately trying to pull herself off of the leash, spitting small bouts of acid and screeching all the while. “Um… it still seems a little scared…”

As the young Gem said this, the Centipeedle pulled against the leash once more, lobbing acid randomly. Some of the toxic liquid landed on the ground quite close to Steven, startling the Gems and Lion just enough to prompt them into an offensive pose. The Centipeedle cried fearfully as it shrunk back, shaking once more. “Uh, maybe you guys could put your weapons away and watch from the house?” Steven suggested tentatively.

“Absolutely not!” Pearl proclaimed firmly. However, her authority was quickly ruled out as Garnet’s gauntlets dissipated.

“Steven can handle it,” the Gem leader agreed, turning to head back to the temple.

“Garnet?! the white Gem gasped in shock.

“Pearl,” Garnet replied calmly, walking away.

“Ohhhhhhh! You just got Garneted!” Amethyst exclaimed with a rowdy laugh, not even noticing the glare Pearl shot her way.

“Ugh, fine,” Pearl sighed in annoyance. “I suppose I’ll just keep tracking that monster down then…”

“Good luck, Ste-man!” Amethyst called as her and Garnet began to head back to the temple as Pearl went off on her own mission. “You’re gonna need it!”

As the Gems headed back to the temple, Lion stayed behind, ready to protect his young owner in case anything went awry. Still, with the Gems gone, the Centipeedle calmed down just the slightest bit, but even so, Steven made sure to turn back towards her with a gentle, calming smile. “Ok, friend, it’s just us now,” he reassured, taking a careful step towards her. “It’s just like before. Just relax and let your hair down…” The monster grew increasingly more relaxed as the young Gem approached her, until she finally managed to let him get close enough to touch her. Stars were in Steven’s eyes as he slowly reached his hand out and gently placed it against the Centipeedle’s head, eliciting a soothed purr from the creature.

“Yesss….” Steven whispered, knowing he had reached a new point with the monster. “We’re friends now, right? Just stay still if we are.” In response to the young Gem’s question, the Centipeedle remained still, looking up to him expectantly. “Yay! This is so cool!” Steven suddenly let out an excited gasp, causing the Centipeedle to tilt her head in apt confusion. “Oh my gosh! I gotta go show Dipper and Mabel! They’ll be so impressed by how much you’ve changed!”

Steven paused for a moment as he looked up towards the temple, making sure that none of the Gems were keeping too close of an eye on him. And then, being as stealthy as possible, the young Gem untied the Centipeedle’s leash from the tree, wrapping it around his own wrist tightly before she could try to run off. “Alright, Centi!” Steven exclaimed boldly, pointing down the hill. “To the Mystery Shack we—whoa!”

Without any warning, the Centipeedle suddenly bolted, dragging the young Gem along with her. Lion let out a fierce roar as he ran after the pair, but even so, Steven simply laughed, amused by what he assumed was the monster’s enthusiasm as she raced down the hill towards the shack with him in tow.
With rumors of an unknown monster still floating about the town, the Gems were hardly the only ones trying to see if they held any weight to them. Dipper had also decided to set out on his own quest to discover the truth and he had brought Soos along with him, knowing that he would need the help in what could be a potentially dangerous search.

“Today’s the day, Soos,” Dipper said with a bold grin as he checked over his camera. “Thanks for coming along on this mission.”

“Dude, it’s an honor,” Soos nodded, wiping the sweat from his brow. “Today I’m sweating from heat and excitement! Whooh!”

“There’s something hiding in these woods,” Dipper said, pulling out the newspaper that recounted the vague details of the monster attack from last night. “Something big enough to rip the roof off of a car. And if we get a photo of this thing, we’ll be heroes!”

“Yeah, we’ll get all the babes,” Soos smiled confidently. “You’ll be fending off smooches with a stick!”

Dipper let out a small laugh as Soos gave him a playful nudge, which he was happy to return. “Shut up, man,”

“With a stick, dude!” the handyman reiterated, laughing himself.

“Well, we’ll have time for all that later,” Dipper remarked as the levity passed, returning to the matter at hand. “For now, what we need to focus on is getting proof that this monster even exists in the first place.”

“Is there any chance of that monster looking anything like Pearl, dude?” Soos asked out of the blue.

“What?” Dipper frowned in confusion, though he quickly understood what the handyman was talking about as the white Gem in question arrived on the scene.

“Dipper? Soos?” Pearl asked as she emerged from the nearby woods and noticed the pair. “What are you two doing all the way out here?”

“We’re on a monster hunt, dude!” Soos quipped brightly.

“We’re looking for that mysterious monster everyone’s been talking about,” Dipper elaborated, showing the white Gem the newspaper. “You know, the one that tore the roof off that cop car?”

“Oh well isn’t that a coincidence?” Pearl said with a grin. “I’m looking for the very same creature myself. Garnet and Amethyst would have joined me if not for our… other monster problem…”

“What other monster problem?” Dipper asked, confused.

“It’s a… long story,” Pearl groaned, still quite exasperated over the matter.

“Yo, you should totally join us on our monster hunt, Pearl,” Soos invited casually.

“Yeah!” Dipper agreed. “I already came up with a plan to get a picture of it and everything. Plus, if the monster turns out to be dangerous, which it likely will be, then you’ll be around to save us from it.”
“Well, my intent is to subdue the monster, especially if it does end up being a legitimate threat…” Pearl mused. “But I suppose the best way to start would be with some proper reconnaissance.”

“Isn’t reconnaissance where all those famous artists came from?” Soos whispered to Dipper, someone confused by the white Gem’s extensive vocabulary.

“Very well then,” Pearl agreed with a broad smile. “I’ll help you both in this endeavor. I’m sure between the three of us, we’ll find our monster in no time!”

“Great!” Dipper exclaimed excitedly. “Then Soos, give me a boost.”

“You got it, dude,” Soos said with a thumbs up, hoisting Dipper up so he could scale the nearby tree. The handyman followed by clumsily climbing up while Pearl performed a graceful leap up into the tree.

“So what’s the plan?” Pearl asked Dipper, taking a seat on the branch beside him.

“Ok, so Soos and I have already set up three cameras throughout the clearing,” Dipper explained. “If everything goes according to plan, the creature will grab that steak,” he nodded to the steak they had positioned atop a high tree stump with several ropes attached to it. “And cross through the strings, setting off cameras A, B, and C.”

“Hm, impressive…” Pearl noted with a smile. “And very inventive. Though I must say… I’m not sure what good a picture’s going to do aside from just proving that the monster exists…”

“That’s… kinda the point,” Dipper shrugged as Soos finally made it to their branch and joined them.

“Woo…” the handyman breathed in exhaustion, placing his hand against the side of the sap-covered tree before realizing it was stuck there. “Uh… is sap supposed to be this sticky?”

“So… what do we do now?” Pearl asked, still not entirely understanding why they needed to get a picture of the monster at all.

“Now all we gotta do is wait for the monster to come by,” Dipper said, poising his own camera to get a good picture of it.

“And nothing can go wrong!” Soos proclaimed confidently. “High five!” As the handyman held his hand up, Dipper gladly met it in a high five, only for their hands to get stuck together thanks to the sap.

“This was poorly planned…” Dipper frowned, trying to pull his hand away from Soos’. However, while the trio was distracted by this, they all failed to notice the large shape that glided over the clearing, stirring up a heavy breeze that nearly knocked them all out of the tree. The cameras all snapped in quick succession, their flashes blindsiding the trio even moreso.

“What was that?!?” Pearl exclaimed, fixing her hair as they all turned towards where the steak was. Or rather, where it *used* to be.

“That,” Dipper said with an excited grin, knowing his plan had succeeded. “Was our monster.”

Mabel was just putting on the finishing touches on the matching sweaters she was knitting for
herself and Waddles when Steven burst into the shack’s den. Or rather, when Lion burst in first, followed by Steven and his new companion.

“Steven!” Mabel exclaimed brightly, perking up upon seeing the young Gem. “I’m glad you’re here! I was just finishing—” She abruptly cut herself off as she noticed Steven struggling to pull the Centipeedle into the room along with him. “Uh… who’s your friend?”

“Hi, Mabel!” Steven greeted first before explaining his situation. “You remember that Centipeedle monster from a few weeks ago, right?”

“Well, yeah!” Mabel quipped, leaning forward in interest. “That was sorta like, our first huge adventure together! How could I forget it? So what, is that one of its babies?”

“Oh, no actually,” the young Gem shrugged, finally getting the Centipeedle to settle down and stand beside him. “She’s the main one. I accidently let her out of her bubble earlier. It’s… kinda a long story.”

“So why’s it—oops, sorry, I mean she so cute and tiny now?” Mabel asked with a smile, getting up to head over to approach the creature. However, since the Centipeedle was unfamiliar with her, she let out a frightened screech and cowered behind Steven once more. “Oh no!” Mabel gasped with concern, drawing back a bit. “Did I scare her?”

“Eh, a little,” Steven admitted. “She can be a little jumpy sometimes.” With a calming smile, the young Gem turned and knelt down before the skittish monster. “Hey now, it’s ok. Mabel’s a friend, just like me. She won’t hurt you, I promise. You can trust her.”

“Yeah!” Mabel added, toning down her usual verve a bit as not to startle the Centipeedle again. “You don’t have to be shy around me. I’m all about adorable little things like you!”

Upon getting another reassuring smile from Steven, the Centipeedle calmed down steadily, hesitantly letting Mabel give her a gentle pat on the head. “Oh, she is so cute!” Mabel gushed cheerfully. “You know, for an acid-spitting, potentially deadly monster. So is she like, your new pet now?” she asked Steven.

“I don’t know if I’d call her a pet…’” Steven mused. “After all, Pearl said that all of the Gem monsters used to be Gems too. So I’d say she’s more like a… buddy! That’s why I’m trying to tame her; so the Gems will let me keep her around instead of bubbling her again.”

“Oh! Oh! Can I help?” Mabel asked eagerly. “I’m great at teaching animals how to do stuff! I’ve already taught Waddles how to say cupcake, right Waddles?”

The pig oinked twice in response to this, the sound vaguely sounding like the word ‘cupcake’. “Whoa, that’s amazing, Mabel!” Steven exclaimed, thoroughly impressed. “You can totally help! Between the two of us, we’ll be able to reform Centi enough that there’s no way the Gems won’t be able to accept her as part of the team!”

“Yeah!” Mabel cheered excitedly, already heading for the door. “Let’s get—”

“Hey you!” the TV suddenly shouted, catching Mabel’s attention and stopping both her and Steven in their tracks.

“Me?” Mabel questioned curiously.

“Yeah you!” the TV announcer exclaimed. “Sick of constantly dropping your baby?”
“Yes!” the man on screen agreed, almost dropping the baby he was holding.

“Hi, I’m Bobby Renzobbi!” the excitable announcer declared as he appeared on screen. “And what you need is the Huggy Wuvvy Tummy Bundle!”

“The what?” Steven asked, confused.

“I can hold ten babies at once!” the man exclaimed, carrying no less than ten babies within the carrier strapped to his chest.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Bobby continued. “Does it work for pigs? Ah ha ha, yeah of course it works for pigs, stupid! Feel your pig’s heartbeat next to yours! IT WORKS FOR PIUUUUUIGGGGS!”

Startled by the noise on TV, Centipeedle tucked away behind Steven once more, shivering nervously. Mabel on the other hand, let out an amazed gasp as the commercial came to a close, her awe turning into a huge grin as she glanced over at Waddles, knowing that such a product would be perfect for him.

“Grunkle Stan!” she shouted to the conman who was just entering the room. “I’m off to get a Huggy Wuvvy Tummy Bundle for Waddles!”

“Yeesh,” Stan remarked caustically. “Isn’t knitting matching sweaters for that pig enough?”

“Nope,” Mabel answered, completely straight faced as she stood alongside Waddles, their pair of sweaters perfectly matched.

“And hey!” the conman exclaimed hotly upon noticing the Centipeedle still hiding behind Steven. “What the heck is that thing and what’s it doing in my living room?!”

“This is Centipeedle, Mr. Pines,” Steven introduced with a smile. “You might remember her from a few weeks ago when she… heh, kinda tried attacking the Mystery Shack?”

“Oh my gosh, Steven, you’re so right!” Mabel readily agreed. “Grunkle Stan, can you look after this little gentlemen while we’re gone?” she asked, nodding towards Waddles, who was in the midst of eating a fly.

“Not now, kid,” Stan remarked with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I got some tourists coming through.”

“Aww, don’t worry, Mr. Pines,” Steven encouraged. “Lion will be more than happy to help you keep an eye on Waddles! After all, they love each other! See?” No sooner had the young Gem said this than Lion settled down beside Waddles, who was quick to curl up next to him happily.

“Oh, they’re so precious,” Mabel gushed, absolutely delighted at the adorable sight.

“Yeah, sure, kid,” the conman deadpanned stubbornly. “Because I definitely wanna waste my afternoon babysitting two pink pests.”
“Now, Grunkle Stan, I know you’re not crazy about Waddles,” Mabel admonished.

“He’s a fat, naked jerk.”

“But I know you do care about me,” Mabel continued. “Promise me you won’t let him outside.”


“Thanks, Grunkle Stan!” Mabel called out as she ran outside, Steven following with the Centipeedle not too far behind. Of course, Lion attempted to go after them too, wanting to ensure the young Gem’s safety, but he was stopped before he could make it out the door.

“No, Lion,” Steven said firmly, holding his hand up as the Centipeedle continued trying to drag him out the door. “You stay here with Waddles and Mr. Pines, ok? We’ll be back soon!”

The pink beast let out a huff of disappointment but begrudgingly sat down, watching angrily as his owner left along with the potentially dangerous monster in his care. Still, Lion did find the time to turn around to glare at Stan, letting out a testy, bitter growl.

“Yeah, same to you, bucko,” Stan remarked dryly before scowling down at Waddles. “I’m watching you, pig.”

As the conman pointed a stern finger at Waddles, the pig simply responded by lifting up its foot and placing it against it. While anyone else would have seen this as charming, Stan let out a groan of disgust and pulled his finger away before heading back into the museum, not even bothering to take so much as a glance back at the pig that was his charge to look after.

With their intent to uncover the truth behind the unknown monster as clear as ever, Dipper and Pearl had wasted no time in working to convert the shack’s attic into a temporary darkroom so they could develop the pictures they had captured earlier. While Soos worked on making some nachos to celebrate the occasion, Pearl and Dipper busied themselves with developing the photos. It wasn’t a process that the white Gem particularly understood that well, but she did appreciate the science behind it as Dipper walked her through it. And though it took some time and care, but with the more photos they developed, the clearer the overall picture of what they were dealing with became.

“C’mon… c’mon…” Dipper muttered impatiently as he hung the next picture up on the line to dry, its image appearing as he did so. “Oh my gosh! That’s a wing!” he exclaimed upon seeing the large, somewhat blurry wing in the photo.

“Incredible…” Pearl mused, getting a better look at the photo. “What kind of monster is this…?”

“We’re about to find out,” Dipper said, hurrying over to the next picture being developed. “So if camera B got the wing, then the one that should have gotten the rest is… camera C!”

Pearl curiously watched over Dipper’s shoulder as he held up the final picture, a large, ominous shape slowly but surely becoming visible. “That’s it!” the white Gem gasped, her eyes widened in amazement as the monster appeared.

However, before either of them could really see what exactly the creature was, the attic door suddenly burst open, flooding the room with a great deal of unwanted light. “Who wants victory nachos?” Soos asked with a huge grin, carrying a large bowl. Of course thanks to all the excess
light from the hall, all of the pictures that Dipper and Pearl had been developing all immediately
faded, to the point that nothing could be made out of them at all.

“No!” the pair exclaimed in distraught unison, desperately trying to shield their pictures from the
light, lest they lose their leads. But even so, their panic went right over the handyman’s head.

“Dudes, don’t worry,” Soos reassured calmly. “I only ate like a third of them… Ok, half of ‘em….
Just kidding, I ate them all, dude.”

“And here, ladies and gentlemen, is our final exhibit,” Stan smirked, finishing up his latest tour as
the tourists followed him and clung onto his every word. “The most hideous creatures known to
man!”

The conman pulled the cloth off of said exhibit, revealing a mirror that reflected the tourists’
reflections right back at them. The group was confused for a second before they all burst into
unanimous laughter, understanding the joke. “Right? Right?” Stan chuckled in agreement. “We
have fun here. But seriously, folks,” he said, heading over to the next covered exhibit. “This is
something. I present to you, a unicorn, made out of corn! The Corn-i-corn! I-I don’t know. I’m
tired.” Without much of a dramatic flourish, the conman unveiled said corn-i-corn, only for the
crowd to gasp upon seeing a horse-shaped mesh of empty wires, completely bereft of any corn

As a ripple of dissent ran through the crowd, the conman glanced around in a panic before spotting
Waddles sitting on the far side of the museum, Lion stoically accompanying him. But what caught
Stan’s attention more than anything else were the incriminating bits of corn stuck to the pig’s pink
face.

“What a rip off!” one of the tourists shouted in heated disappointment. “Kids, we’re leaving.” As
the tourists all headed off in a huff, the pair of children in the group threw down their unpurchased
merchandise and stormed off as well, leaving the conman with no profits to show for it.

“No!” Stan shouted in protest as he helplessly watched his customers leave. “You!” he shouted at
Waddles, turning around to face the pig who had eaten his exhibit. Of course, Lion was quick to
stand between the two of them, growling at the conman all the while, but even so, Stan wasn’t
about to let the intimidating pink beast stop him. “Outta the way, powder puff! This is between me
and the pig!”

Fortunately, Lion didn’t outright attack Stan as he picked Waddles up and began carrying him to
the door. But the pink beast still did try to stop the conman by biting on his pant leg to try and stop
him from hauling his friend away. “Beat it, ya fluffy freak!” Stan scowled, shaking Lion off of his
leg as he continued on his way out the door. “Actually, you know what? If you care so much about
the little freeloader, you can go right on outside with him too!” Still showing no fear for the pink
beast, Stan grabbed him by the ear and pulled him outside along with Waddles.

“Just ten minutes without the pig in the house. Is that so much to ask?” Stan ranted to himself,
tying Waddles to a peg in the lawn as Lion stood by, growling lividly all the while. “There. And if
Mabel asks, this never happened.” As something of a bribe, the conman placed a five dollar bill in
the pig’s mouth before turning to head back inside. “Oh but, Grunkle Stan!” Stan continued,
mocking his niece. “‘It’s not safe out there! There’s predators!’ Oh brother…”

The conman’s back was turned away from the pair of animals for only but a few seconds, but it
was just enough for things to take a disastrous turn for the worst. For while Stan wasn’t watching, a massive creature, the very same creature the town was abuzz about, happened to swoop down in a heavy gust of wind, one that was enough to blow even Lion away. And, with one swipe of its massive claws, it snatched Waddles up and flew towards the skies once again, the squealing, panicking pig in its grasp all the while. Stan gasped as he spun around to see what could be nothing else but a dinosaur, a pterodactyl to be exact, soar away with Waddles in tow. And while the conman was far too stunned by this unbelievable sight to do anything about it, Lion was quick to leap into action.

The pink beast jumped to his feet and raced after the dinosaur that had captured his friend, letting out a super-sonic roar in the hopes of bringing it down. But the crafty creature managed to turn a full 180 in the air, dodging the attack with ease as it glided swiftly over the shack with its latest catch.

“I can’t believe this!” Pearl groaned, still trying to recover all of the lost pictures in vain. “How in the world are we supposed to track that creature down if we don’t even know what it looks like?!”

“I can’t believe you, man!” Dipper scolded Soos, who had only just realized the error he had made.

“Sorry, dude,” the handyman frowned apologetically. “I was just so excited! Nachos cause excitement!”

“But certainly, they could have waited until we were done perhaps?” Pearl asked caustically, adding a muttered statement afterwards. “And to be honest, I had no intentions of eating any of those… things anyway.”

“Soos, no offense, but you gotta be more careful sometimes,” Dipper said with a sigh of exasperation. “I mean, what are the odds we’ll get another picture of-”

He was abruptly cut off as the entire shack seemed to shake in its entirety, thanks to the large shape that flew just past the attic window. None of them even had to ask themselves twice about what it was as they all hurried downstairs and outside without delay, only to see a sight that made them all stop and stare. The pterodactyl had turned a full circle and was heading off into the woods once more, Lion furiously chasing it and sending more sonic roars its way each time, to no avail. As the dinosaur cleared over the trees, the pink beast at last begrudgingly gave up his pursuit, letting out an angry huff as it made off with Waddles. A single red string from the sweater Mabel had knitted for the pig trailed off after the creature and into the woods, the sole indication of where it might be heading.

“Whoa!” Amethyst exclaimed in awe as her and Garnet landed on the scene, having seen the dinosaur even from the temple. “What the heck was that crazy thing?! It was huge!”

“That was a dinosaur!” Soos exclaimed, aptly amazed. “Awesome!”

“How is it possible that a dinosaur survived 65 million years?” Dipper asked, also awestruck.

“It’s not possible,” Pearl shook her head in confusion. “Those creatures were long gone even before Gems first came to Earth! There’s no way one could have lived this long!”

“I wouldn’t say there’s no way,” Garnet interjected calmly. “After all, we’ve been in this town long enough to know that this is where the impossible happens on a daily basis.”
“Did you see it, Mr. Pines?” Soos asked his boss, who had been standing outside before any of them arrived. Stan offered no response however as he simply stood still, his gaze fixated on the direction that the pterodactyl had flown. “…Mr. Pines?”

“Yo, Stan,” Amethyst tried to get through to him, waving a hand in front of his face. “You in there?”

“It… it took him…” Stan finally muttered, blinking out of his daze.

“T ook what?” Dipper asked.

“The pig!” the conman exclaimed in a sudden panic. “It took Waddles!”

“What did you say about Waddles?” Mabel asked as her, Steven, and Centipeedle returned. Everyone turned to the trio nervously, none of them entirely sure what to say as they exchanged uneasy glances. “Whoa, awkward silence,” Mabel chuckled, still having no idea about what happened to her beloved pig. “Bwah!”

“Whoa, hold on a minute,” Pearl cut in, noticing the monster standing alongside the young Gem. “Steven, why isn’t that thing tied to its tree?”

“Oh, uh, I was just… trying to train her,” Steven shrugged with a good-natured smile. “And she’s getting a lot better, by the way! We took her into town and she only ended up destroying three cars with her acid spit! She’s come so far.”

The white Gem let out a tired groan as Amethyst chuckled in amusement. “Steven,” Pearl began. “You can’t just-”

“Like I said,” Garnet cut her off with a hand on her shoulder. “Let him do his thing. He’s making progress with it. I can tell.” The Gem leader nodded to the Centipeedle, who seemed much less frightened and agitated over every little thing as it stood beside Steven, chirping calmly, despite all of the people around it.

“So… what’s going on?” Mabel asked. “Why are you all standing around here awkwardly? And… where’s Waddles?”

Everyone expectantly looked to Stan as this question was posed. “Um… uh…” the conman frowned with dread as he stepped in front of the peg he had tied Waddles to earlier, hiding it from view. Lion sulked towards Stan, snarling harshly all the while until Steven stopped him.

“Lion, cut that out! Its rude!” the young Gem scolded, allowing the conman to say his piece.

“So, uh… the good news is you’re getting a puppy!” he exclaimed to Mabel with a forced grin.

“What happened?” Mabel asked, growing steadily more concerned by the second.

“Well, see, uh… when the-” Stan tried to begin before Soos cut him off.

“Your pig got eaten by a pterodactyl, bro!”

“What?! Waddles!” Mabel cried, tears already forming in her eyes as she looked around the yard desperately. “Oh, how did this happen?! Grunkle Stan, you didn’t put him outside did you?”

Before Stan could even answer, Lion growled yet again in something of an attempt to out him for what he did. “Hush!” he snapped at the pink beast, pushing him away. “What? No!” he scoffed,
turning back to his distraught niece. “I didn’t put him anywhere! I’m not acting suspicious! You’re acting suspicious! What’s a pig?!”

“Yeesh, Stan,” Amethyst remarked with an amused smirk. “Don’t have a flip out on us.”

“So what really happened then?” Dipper asked curiously.

Stan didn’t answer this right away as he instead took a brief moment to come up with a spur of the moment lie, one that would hopefully be convincing enough for Mabel if no one else. “Uh, look, it went down like this, see? So there I was in the living room, tenderly nursing the pig with only the richest of creams.”

Lion snorted indignantly at this complete lie, but since no one could understand his meaning, Stan was free to go on. “And then, all of the sudden, that thing, the—uh, what’s it called again?”

“Pterodactyl?” Pearl informed, rolling her eyes.

“Yeah, that!” Stan nodded. “Anyway, it burst into the shack without any warning and ripped the pig right outta my arms! So I said, ‘no dice, cowboy!’ and whipped out my impressive gunshow.”

“Oh brother,” Garnet remarked drying, not buying this tall tale at all.

“Then I started punching it in the face!” Stan exclaimed, holding his fists up. “But he played dirty and poked me right in the eyes! That really happened! I couldn’t hold on any longer, which was how I lost him. And the pain of it all still cuts me like a knife… That’s, uh… that’s a good analogy for something upsetting, right?”

“Oh, Grunkle Stan!” Mabel gasped, her eyes wet with tears as she drew her uncle into a tight hug. “You tried to save him!”

“Uh, yeah!” Stan agreed, glancing away somewhat guiltily. “I’m a great man, alright.”

“Oh it was huge…” the conman remarked, knowing that was the only part of his story that wasn’t an actual like. “Very huge.”

“Whoa, Mr. Pines, that was so brave of you!” Steven exclaimed, amazed. “That dinosaur must have been huge.”

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“What, you think I couldn’t fight off something like that if I really wanted to?” Stan asked challengingly. “Because I definitely could! And, uh, I did! Yeah!”

“Really?” Dipper questioned, also quite skeptical. “You punched a pterodactyl in the face? I thought you didn’t even believe in the supernatural.”


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“Oh Waddles…” Mabel mourned, holding the carrier she had just gotten for him, one that might very well never see any use considering the fact that the pig was now long gone.

“Aw, don’t worry, Mabel,” Steven reassured with a smile. “We’ll get Waddles back.”

“That’s right,” Dipper boldly agreed. “No pterodactyl messes with my sister. We’re gonna go out
there, catch that thing, and save your pig. For Mabel, guys!”

“For Mabel!” Soos, Steven, and the Gems cheered in full support of this plan.

“You guys really mean it?” Mabel asked with a small smile, using the sleeve of her sweater to wipe her tears away.

“Of course, we do,” Garnet said with an affirmative grin.

“Yeah, I mean, we were gonna go hunt that thing down anyway, but now I guess we got another reason to go after it,” Amethyst shrugged, eliciting a frustrated glare from Pearl for her tactlessness. “What?”

“But how do we even find the little guy?” Stan asked caustically.

Lion suddenly caught everyone’s attention with a sudden roar, diverting their attention to the red string from Waddles’ sweater that led into the woods. “Great thinking, Lion!” Steven exclaimed. “We’ll just follow that string! That’s bound to lead us to Waddles and that dinosaur, right?”

The others all nodded in agreement to this plan, save for Stan, who was far less on board with this entire venture. “Or, you know, we could just call it a day, maybe hit the pool hall or—” the conman cut himself off as he realized everyone was staring questioningly at him. Knowing that he couldn’t very well incriminate himself in front of Mabel, he decided that he had no choice but to play along. For now. “Uh, yeah! Let’s go… save Woggles!”

“Waddles,” Mabel corrected.

“Him too.”

“Oh this is so exciting!” Steven quipped, smiling to Centipeedle. “This will be our first chance to take Centi on a mission! She’ll be able to do so much to help us and—”

“Oh, no,” Pearl cut in firmly. “Out of the question! We are not taking thing with us!”

“Aw, but c’mon, Pearl!” Steven protested. “She won’t get in the way, I promise! And she’ll be really good, right, Centi?”

The Centipeedle let out a small affirmative chirp before accidentally coughing up a bit of acid on accident. “Uh, Steven? I’m kinda with Pearl on this one,” Dipper remarked skeptically. “That thing seems like it could be a bit of a flight risk.”

“Oh, you guys worry too much,” Amethyst smirked nonchalantly. “Bring the little guy along, Steven! It’ll be funny.”

“I can see the Centipeedle potentially helping us, actually,” Garnet said, adjusting her shades. “In a few futures, at least.”

“Well, that’s that then!” Steven declared, grinning at the monster, who perked up under his cheerful smile. “We’re bringing her along! Get ready, Centi, because we’re going dinosaur hunting!”

“Alright!” Soos exclaimed brightly as he finished spray-painting the words “pterodactyl mobile” onto the side of his truck. “That p-terodactyl won’t know what hit him!”
Dipper let out a small laugh upon hearing the handyman mispronounce the dinosaur’s name before lightly correcting him. “It’s pterodactyl, man.”

“Actually, no one knows how to pronounce it because nobody was alive back in dinosaur days, so, uh… yeah!” Soos grinned with apt confidence.

“That’s an… interesting train of logic…” Pearl noted with a befuddled frown.

The handyman simply shrugged as he went to strap a gage to the undercarriage of his truck, only for him to forget that he hadn’t properly parked it as it jerked forward a bit. Soos gasped as he sat up quickly, mere seconds before it could hit him. “Whoa! Almost ran over my head there! Heh, wow.”

“Oh boy…” Pearl muttered to herself, facepalming, especially as she turned to see Steven still trying his best to control Centipede. “This mission is truly going to be… something else.”

“Mabel, we’ve gotta talk,” Dipper said, pulling his sister aside so they were just out of Soos’ earshot. “This is a really high-stakes mission and I’m a little worried about Soos coming along on this one. I love the guy, but sometimes… he messes up.”

“What?” Mabel scoffed, believing this to be just another case of her brother’s usual paranoia. “Since when?”

“Well, there was that time when he knocked the crystal ball in the museum over,” Dipper recalled pointedly.

“Well, yeah, but-”

“And the time he tried installing that window only for it to fall out of the frame.”

“Ok, maybe, but he still-”

“And the time he accidentally killed that fairy with a flyswatter-”

“Ok, you might actually have a point,” Mabel at last agreed. “Just let him down easy, ok?”

Dipper nodded as he went to do so, steeling himself for what wouldn’t be an easy conversation. However, before he could even get a word out, Soos turned to him, his eyes alight with excitement. “This is so great! You and me, bro. Best friends. Fighting and potentially high-fiving dinosaurs.”

“Uh, Soos, look,” Dipper began, taking in a deep breath. “I, uh, gotta tell you something.”

“Okay, but before you do, check out these matching shirts I made for us!” Soos exclaimed, holding up two very large shirts, both of which had a rather simplistic design of the two of them on them. “Who’s this guy right here?” he pointed to the image of Dipper on one of the shirts. “You! Totally you, dude. And these rays indicate friendship! So what was it you were going to tell me again?”

Dipper frowned upon looking over the shirts, feeling somewhat guilty about even entertaining the thought of excluding Soos from this mission. Even if bringing the absent-minded handyman along could prove to be dangerous, it was a risk Dipper knew they had to take. After all, how could he turn Soos down after he had gone to such good-natured lengths? “Uh… p-terodactyl, here we come!” he exclaimed with an awkward rather forced laugh.

“Yes!” Soos cheered, hopping into the truck. “Bros before dinos!”
With no further preparations in the way, the collective group all got in Soos’ truck, the Pines taking up the cabin with the handyman while Steven, Centipede, and the Gems sat in the bed and Lion following not too far behind. As they followed the red sweater string through the forest, the young Gem continued his attempts at training Centipede, while the Gems kept a close eye on the monster all the while.

“Ok, Centi, let’s try something new,” Steven smiled at the monster, who was cowering away from the Gems on the far side of the truck bed. “How about you come over here with us?” Centipede resisted this suggestion, letting out a small screech of protest at the Gems.

“Steven, I don’t think this is going to work,” Pearl remarked flatly.

“Oh, don’t worry, Pearl,” Steven reassured. “She just needs a little… encouragement! And I think I have just the thing.” With a sly smirk, the young Gem pulled out the bag of Chaaps he had brought along with him for the ride. “Oh, what’s this? Chiiips!” Centipede perked up a little as the young Gem rustled the bag. “You like chiiips? You want a chiiip? Yeah? Yeah?”

Steven grinned as he took a chip out of the bag. “Aw, look at this tasty chip!” he exclaimed before eating it. “Yum! Yum! Mm, tasty tasty! Try one!” Curious, Centipede slowly skittered forward towards the chip, sniffing it experimentally. “That’s it! Smells good, huh?” After another moment of investigation, the monster finally took the chip out of the young Gem’s hand and munched it down, cooing happily as it began vying for more.

“Whoa, I can’t believe that actually worked,” Amethyst remarked with an impressed smile.

“I don’t know how you eat with an eyeball in your mouth, but I’m glad you like it,” Steven grinned at Centipede, giving her another chip, which she was more than happy to devour.

“Wow!” Mabel exclaimed, looking out the back window and watching the whole ordeal. “That’s amazing! She totally loves those things, Steven! Give her more!”

“Uh, maybe that’s not the best idea?” Dipper called from his spot up front. “For all we know, it could go crazy for the chips and start attacking you for them.”

“Aw, I’m sure Centi wouldn’t do that,” Steven said, patting the monster on the head as he fed her a few more chips. “Right?” The monster chirped in response as the young Gem tossed a barrage of chips her way, laughing all the while. “Yeah! There we go!”

“Steven, please!” Pearl protested, brushing the myriad of crumbs off of her lap. “You’re making a mess!”

“Shh,” Garnet calmed the white Gem down. “Let him do his thing.”

The young Gem happily continued giving Centipede as many chips as he could, though it wasn’t long before the snack caught the attention of a nearby crow flying overhead. Hungry, the bird divebombed Steven, biting his finger in an attempt to get one of the chips and causing him to drop the bag entirely. “Ah! Shoo! Those aren’t for you!” the young Gem protested, trying to drive the crow off as it landed and began eating the fallen chips. As Centipede saw all this, her usual skittish behavior quickly turned to anger as she let out a low, feral growl. The Gems went on alert at this, all three of them sitting up as they prepared to summon their weapons against the creature if the need be.

“What are you doing?!” Steven asked the perturbed monster, alarmed as it got low and prepared to attack the bird. With a loud hiss, Centipede shot a wad of acid at the crow, burning a hole in
the bed of the truck and frightening the bird enough to fly off without a second thought.

“Steven!” the Gems exclaimed in frightened unison, but their young ward was quick to calm them before they could do anything drastic.

“Wait! It’s ok!” Steven urged, throwing himself between them and Centipeedle. “She saved me! And… I think I found out how to train her…” Suddenly, the young Gem mimicked the crow and let out a sudden squawk, prompting Centipeedle to lob another wad of acid, one that landed alongside the road as they drove by. Steven made another bird noise, and as a response, the monster spit acid at Garnet, though the Gem leader easily dodged it.

Amethyst let out an amused laugh at this display, even if Pearl was absolutely appalled by it. “That was awesome!” she exclaimed, preparing to eat the sandwich she had brought along with her.

As the young Gem repeated the process for a third time, though, Centipeedle shot her acid at the very sandwich Amethyst was about to eat, knocking it from her hand and melting it away into nothingness. “No! Mi torta!” the purple Gem wailed in mourning.

“Steven, this is unacceptable!” Pearl scolded in a huff.

“Aw, come on, Pearl,” Steven frowned. “Maybe this is how she’ll be able to help us find the dinosaur! Right, Garnet?”

“Eh, is possible,” Garnet shrugged stoically, not about to stop the young Gem’s plans at all.

“We’re here!” Mabel announced as the truck pulled to a stop. The trail of string had led to an old, decrepit abandoned church, far out in the middle of the woods. The building looked as though it was just about ready to fall apart, and while it didn’t look anywhere near large enough to be sheltering a pterodactyl, the group ventured on inside to see what they could find.

What they did end up finding, however was far from the dinosaur or pig they were seeking.

The group entered the dilapidated church to find none other than Old Man McGucket dancing his usual zany jig near the broken-down pulpit and singing along to a non-existent tune. He was so caught up in his levity that he barely even noticed everyone as they came in.

“Oh, hey, its that crazy old guy,” Amethyst pointed out. “What’s his name again? McTruckit?”

“McGucket,” Mabel corrected, finally catching the hillbilly’s attention.

“Well, howdy, friends!” McGucket greeted with a wide grin as he stopped dancing.

“Hi!” Steven exclaimed just as brightly.

“What are you doing out here?” Dipper asked incredulously, knowing that it was quite strange to find even the eccentric hillbilly in such a place.

“You’ll never believe me!” McGucket exclaimed, slapping his knee. “Now I was doin’ my hourly hootnanny-” He cut himself off as he broke into his folksy jog once again, song and all.

“Ugh, this guy,” Stan deadpanned, already exasperated.

“When this enormous wing-ly critter stole my musical spoons and flew lickety-split into the abandoned mines down yonder!” McGucket finished, pointing to the large hole in the center of the church.
“That’s where we’re headed then,” Garnet proclaimed, undaunted as they all stood before what looked to be a darkened abyss.

“Yikes,” Stan remarked hesitantly, gazing down the hole. “Looks kinda hairy down there.”

“C’mon, Grunkle Stan, you can handle it!” Mabel encouraged. “You punched a pterodactyl in the face, remember?”

“O-oh, yeah,” the conman said quickly, remembering his cover-up. “Heh, I did do that, didn’t I?” he asked with a forced chuckle.

“My, what suspicious laughter!” McGucket exclaimed, oblivious as ever. However, while no one else caught onto Stan’s act, Lion certainly did as he sent another sharp glare his way, one that didn’t go unnoticed by the conman.

“What’s your problem, pinky?” Stan asked the pink beast rather harshly. “You got a thorn in your paw or somethin’?”

“Ok, everyone!” Mabel exclaimed, determined to rescue her beloved pig. “We’re going in!”

“Need someone to tag along and tell weird personal stories?” McGucket asked blithely.

While the kids weren’t exactly how to respond to this, the Gems all were quick to shake their heads and Stan offered his very blunt response. “No thanks.”

Still, the hillbilly didn’t really get the hint as he ended up trailing along all the same as the group slowly scaled down the hole using a long rope. “So there I am, fighting a racoon for the same piece of meat,” McGucket detailed, recounting one of his odd anecdotes as they climbed down into the darkness. “When our mouths get close, and we kiss accidentally!”

“You just can’t take a hint, can you?” Stan asked with an aggravated sigh.

“Nope!”

“Come on, Centi!” Steven called to the monster, who was still standing anxiously on the edge of the hole. “Jump on down, I’ll catch you!”

“Steven, how in the world are you even going to catch that thing while we’re climbing?” Pearl asked incredulously. “You’ll just end up falling off the rope!”

“No I won’t. I totally got this, Pearl,” Steven reassured confidently, turning back up to Centipeedle. “It’s ok! You can just jump! You don’t have to be scared, I-” As the young Gem was in the midst of convincing her, one of the monster’s feet happened to slip over the edge of the hole, sending her plummeting downward with a frightened shriek. Steven gasped as he reached out his arms to catch her, but as he did so, the rope sustaining all of them abruptly snapped from the sudden additional weight.

Of course, everyone panicked as they were sent into a freefall, though Lion happened to leap into the hole himself at this juncture, catching Steven and Centipeedle and ensuring they at the very least had a safe landing. Everyone else was just as fine however, as they landed, albeit a bit roughly, on the large, soft mushroom nestled at the bottom of the pit. After a moment of regathering their bearings, they all managed to get their first look at their new, admittedly amazing surroundings.

The abandoned mines hidden deep under Gravity Falls were vast, and quite impressive given their
age. Steam geysers dotted the dank, craggy landscape, as well as the rusty remains of mine carts and tracks. But what was by far more fascinating was the rather unique vegetation that had taken up shop in the caverns, despite the relative lack of natural sunlight.

“Whoa,” Dipper mused in fascination as he shined his lantern on one of the nearby shrubs. “These plants look all Jurassic-y…”

“Huh, this little guy smells like battery acid!” Soos exclaimed, pointing to another plant, one that happened to spit a stream of acid into his face at random. “Augh!” he exclaimed in disgust before shrugging it off. “Welp, looks like I just lost my sense of smell. Ha ha!”

“Yo, this place is actually pretty sweet,” Amethyst remarked, glancing around with a grin as they continued on ahead. “Kinda reminds me of my room.”

“If only your room was as this empty,” Pearl commented sarcastically.

“Hold it,” Garnet suddenly stopped everyone in their tracks as they came up on where the red string was leading next: a corridor blocked off by a barricade of rocks.

“The pterodactyl must have caused a cave-in when it flew through here earlier,” Dipper guessed, looking over the obstacle.

“I’d call that a plumb coinkydink!” McGucket exclaimed with his usual verve.

“Well, it looks like we’re stuck!” Stan concluded, turning around. “Guess we might as well give up and head on home, huh?”

“Wait!” Steven interjected. “I have an idea.” With a knowing smile, the young Gem turned to Centipeedle before letting out the same crow noise from before. As if on cue, the monster fired a shot of acid right into the rock pile, which easily melted the stones until there was a hole that was large enough for them all to crawl through. “All right, Centipeedle!” Steven cheered, giving the monster more chips as a reward while Mabel, Dipper, Soos, and Amethyst applauded, impressed.

“Nice work,” Garnet praised, giving the young Gem a pat on the back.

“Oh come on!” the conman muttered in aggravation, begrudgingly following the others as they all climbed through the opening. As they arrived in the next room, the group were might with an even more unbelievable sight than before, one that made them all pause in apt amazement.

All throughout the cavern were mountainous piles of tree sap dripping from the ceiling. However, the sap itself was hardened, as if frozen, which was quite fortunate considering the gigantic beasts trapped by it. Around almost every turn were dinosaurs, of every size and classification, frozen in place by the sap as though it was ice. The sticky substance was still transparent enough for the creatures to be clearly seen, however, which was why everyone, including the Gems, was staring at the vast collection with wide eyes of shock.

“Wow!” Steven exclaimed with an awed grin. “Look at all the cool dinosaurs!”

“There are more of them?!” Pearl asked, alarmed. “But how?”

“They’re trapped inside the tree sap!” Dipper exclaimed in realization. “That’s how they survived for 65 million years!” He paused as he shined his lantern over at a nearby sap heap, one that was bereft of a dinosaur, but did have a very familiar pterodactyl shaped hole in it. “Whoa. The summer heat must be melting them loose!”
“Holy moley!” Stan grinned, already seeing the multiple ways he could profit off of this. “Forget the cornicorn! This is the attraction of a lifetime!”

“Oh no, you don’t, Stan,” Pearl admonished. “We’re not about to let you profiteer off of such a dangerous place. Humans shouldn’t even be down here, what with all these murderous dinosaurs just waiting to break free!”

“All I’m hearing is “blah blah dangerous, blah blah I’m a stuffy stick in the mud’!” the conman mimicked, irritating the white Gem even further. “You can’t stop a tourist trap like this! I could bring people down here and turn this into some sort of theme park! Jurassic… Sap Hole!”

“Heh, I’d come,” Amethyst chuckled, amused.

“Uh… dudes?” Soos interjected anxiously, pointing to a sap pile across the room that contained yet another pterodactyl. The creature had managed to free one of its claws from the sap, and it was clear by how the appendage was slowly wiggling that it was working on the rest of its hand as well.

“U-uh oh…” Steven frowned with apt concern.

“…Maybe we should keep moving,” Dipper said, also quite uneasy upon seeing this.

“Of course, we’ll have to come back someday and properly contain these creatures, right Garnet?” Pearl asked. “The last thing we want is for any more of them to break free and wreak havoc.”

“Eh, we’ll get around to it eventually,” the Gem leader shrugged apathetically as she started to lead the way onward.

“This could be a gold mine!” Stan declared, still wrapped up in his enterprising thoughts. “Velvety-rope type deal there, ticket booth here… ha! I should have put that pig outside ages ago!”

“Wait… what did you just say?”

The conman froze upon hearing his niece pose this question. “Huh?” he asked, turning around to face her and frowning upon seeing her expression steadily become more and more upset.

“You said the dinosaur flew into the house and-” Mabel cut herself off with a gasp, the horrible realization starting to dawn on her. But even still, Stan tried to play it off.

“You put Waddles outside and then you lied to me about it!” Mabel shouted, infuriated as tears ran down her cheeks. “And now thanks to you, my pig could be dead! Waddles could be dead!”

“Aha!” Pearl remarked with something of a self-satisfied grin. “I knew that dinosaur story was just another one of Stan’s countless lies!”

“Now’s not the time, Pearl,” Garnet admonished the white Gem for her tactlessness in the midst of Mabel’s clear mourning.

“Look, the pig’s an animal,” Stan tried to justify. “He belongs outside! Just like that weird bug thing that’s been following Steven around all day.”

“Hey, now! Centi’s not an animal and she doesn’t belong outside,” Steven asserted, turning to the monster with a soft smile. “Right, girl? Here ya go! Have some more chips!” The young Gem
cheerfully tossed a handful of chips Centipede’s way as she nuzzled against his leg and gobbled them up. “Aw, who’s a good Gem monster? You are! You are!”

“See what I mean?” Stan asked caustically.

“No, Grunkle Stan, that’s it!” Mabel exclaimed hotly. “I am never speaking to you again!”

“What? You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, is someone talking right now?” Mabel asked pointedly, turning her back on Stan. “Because I can’t hear them!”

“Kid-” Stan tried to reason, only to no avail.

“La la la la!” Mabel sang loudly, covering her ears. “I can’t hear anyone! No one’s talking to me!”

“Yikes…” Amethyst remarked to her fellow Gems. “This is getting kinda ugly…”

“Guys, guys!” Soos cut in between Stan and Mabel. “Don’t fight! Why can’t you be more like me and Dipper? Look, everything’s gonna be just fine. All we gotta do is follow is find the pig with this here yarn!” The handyman grinned widely, picking up the string on the ground as he began to roll it up into a ball. “Just keep following and following until we reach the-” He cut himself off as he realized that he had indeed reached the end, as they very yarn they had been tracking all this time now rested in a neat ball in the palm of his hand. “Uh oh… W-which cave was it again?”

“Oh you’ve got to be kidding me!” Pearl groaned, completely exasperated.

“Ugh, Soos! You lost the trail!” Dipper exclaimed, just as frustrated.

“Hey, come on,” Soos reassured with a small smile. “We’ll find our way. Trust me.” As he said this, the handyman gave Dipper a hearty pat on the back, startling him enough to make him drop the lantern that had been lighting their way and causing it to break on the hard ground.

“…Sorry, dude,” Soos apologized stoutly.

“That’s it!” Dipper shouted, now about as upset as his sister was. “See, this is why I didn’t want to bring you along, Soos!”

“W-what do you mean?” the handyman asked with concerned confusion.

“I mean this was really important to Mabel, and you keep screwing everything up!” Dipper explained harshly. “You ruined our photograph and now you’ve got us hopelessly lost!”

“But… but we’re the p-terodactyl bros… I made us the tee-shirts!” Soos said, crestfallen as he pulled out the shirts.

“It’s pronounced pterodactyl! And these shirts are useless! They’re gigantic!”

“I have a different body type, dude!”

“Oh, so it’s my fault then?”

“Guys, please!” Steven interjected, hating to see all this anger spread around. “Don’t-”

Before the young Gem could even finish his statement, both Stan and Mabel and Soos and Dipper’s conflicts all quickly blew up into an intense argument on all sides. However, the argument itself
was shortly lived as the Gems decided to intervene.

“That’s enough!” Garnet shouted above the noise, silencing everyone briefly. “We need to work together to find this creature. Arguing will get us nowhere.”

“Why don’t you use your special ‘future’ powers to guide the way?” Stan asked dryly. “That’s about all you three are good for down here.”

“Now, you hold on just a moment!” Pearl exclaimed, offended. “If it wasn’t for us, then you all would be in grave danger down here! Honestly, if anything, the last thing we need is someone like you trying to profit off of all of this, Stan!”

“Ooooh! Roast him, P!” Amethyst goaded, caught up in the heat of the moment as much as everyone else.

With no more restraints holding them back, the argument resumed, but this time the Gems joined in as everyone seemed to bicker at random. The only one who was silently and worriedly observing in all of this was Steven, who wanted nothing more than to keep his friends from fighting like this. However, before he could even try and stop them, a sudden panicked shriek from behind caught his attention. “Centipeedle!!” the young Gem exclaimed, spinning around to see the monster screaming in abject terror. He watched her in confusion for a moment as she began backing away from the group, but even so, he tried his best to console her.

“What’s wrong?” Steven asked the monster, concerned. “You want some more chips?” With a gentle smile, the young Gem held a chip out to Centipeedle, but this time she promptly refused his offer and contained her nervous cries. “Oh!” Steven exclaimed, finally understanding as he glanced to the arguing group behind him. “It’s all the noise, isn’t it? Well don’t worry. I’ll get them to-”

Centipeedle cut the young Gem off with another high-pitched wail, one that was just loud enough to distract the Gems away from the quarrel. “Something’s wrong,” Garnet noted, stepping away from Pearl and Amethyst followed.

“What’s that thing’s deal?” the purple Gem asked. “What, did it get a stomach ache from all those chips or something?”

“It doesn’t like everyone arguing!” Steven exclaimed. “We need to-”

“Hey!” McGucket suddenly exclaimed, garnishing everyone’s attention and silencing the argument at last. “Cheer up, fellas! I fixed your lantern!” The hillbilly held said lantern up only for its light to reveal the pterodactyl itself standing right behind him. Everyone let out a unified scream of terror at this sight, one that McGucket mindlessly mimicked for fun. “Heh,” he chuckled, still oblivious. “What… what are we doin’?”

“Behind you, dude,” Soos whispered with an anxious frown.

“Hm?” McGucket spun around, freezing up upon seeing the dinosaur towering in front of him. “Oh. Nobody make any sudden movements or loud noises.” A beat of silence passed as everyone followed this rule, before the hillbilly himself broke it with a loud, excited shout. “YEEEHAW! We found a pterodactyl!!”

Not needing any further provocation, the pterodactyl let out a fierce shriek, one that terrified nearly the entire group, save for Garnet of course. The Gem leader reacted accordingly, summoning her gauntlets and landing a heavy punch to the dinosaur’s face. While the creature was stunned, everyone took the opportunity and hurried past it, scrambling into the next narrow tunnel that soon
gave way to a large, open room. Steven noticed that Centipeedle was lagging a bit behind however, her complete panic returned as she trembled heavily.

“Centi, come on!” Steven exclaimed, running back for the creature.

“Steven!” the Gems shouted, alarmed as the dinosaur continued to peruse them. Fortunately, the young Gem managed to grab the monster just in time, narrowly avoiding the acid spilling from her mouth as he ran on ahead to join the others, escaping the pterodactyl just in time.

Fortunately enough, the dinosaur managed to get itself stuck in the entry of the large room, its wide wingspan delaying it from perusing the group as they ran in and took refuge behind a nearby cluster of rocks. The pterodactyl didn’t see them as it finally made it into the room, gliding underneath the suspended mine car tracks to the deep chasm below.

“Ok, guys, we need a plan to get out of here,” Dipper said, worriedly glancing out from behind the rocks.

“I got a real simple one,” Amethyst remarked causally. “It’s called we go out there and beat that dumb old dino’s face in.”

“No, you can’t do that!” Steven exclaimed pleadingly. “It scares Centipeedle when you guys use your weapons!”

“Ugh, but how else are we supposed to take care of that thing?” Pearl asked, crossing her arms.

“I got it!” Stan exclaimed with a daring smirk. “Hows about Mabel gets Soos a pig costume—”

“I like it,” the handyman nodded compliantly.

“-and we use Soos as a human sacrifice!”

“I like it!” Soos agreed once again.

“What do you say, Mabel?” Stan asked his niece, hoping to coax her out of her anger towards him. Of course, it didn’t work as Mabel simply crossed her arms and glanced away stubbornly, refusing to even give her uncle a second glance. “Aw, come on. You can’t stop talking to me forever.”

“Yeah, Mabel,” Dipper agreed firmly. “We have to work together here.”

“Oh, what,” Soos scoffed crossly. “You wanna work with Mabel but not your buddy Soos?”

“Here we go again,” Garnet deadpanned to herself, already anticipating the next argument that stated but not a second later. However, this one was very shortly lived as a sudden familiar oink interrupted them all.

“Wait, did you hear that?” Mabel paused, looking to the pterodactyl’s large nest resting on a spire in the center of the room. “Waddles!” she exclaimed joyously upon spotting her beloved pig sitting in the middle of the nest, meeting her gaze intently even from a distance. Without hesitaton, Mabel made a beeline for the nest, barely even regarding the potential danger as she left their hiding spot and ran across the rickety mine tracks to it.

“Kid, are you nuts?!” Stan asked as the others all let out concerned gaps.

“Oh, is someone speaking?” Mabel asked caustically, stopping only for a second to glare back at the conman. “Because I can’t hear anything!”
“Oh no!” McGucket cried. “She’s gone deaf with fear!”

“Mabel, get back here!” Dipper called to his sister with apt concern.

“Yeah!” Steven agreed just as fretfully. “What if the dinosaur comes back?!”

Mabel was hardly listening to any of their pleas however, as she finally reached the nest, wrapping her arms around Waddles tightly as she swept him into a loving embrace. “Oh, Waddles! I promise I’ll never lose you again!”

The pig simply let out a contented oink at this, one that he repeated as Lion jumped into the nest and joined them. Mabel smiled fondly as she watched the two pink animals nuzzle each other, and Steven joined in on her delight as him and the others reached the nest themselves. “Aw, they missed each other!” the young Gem exclaimed warmly.

“I know, right?” Mabel asked with a charmed laugh. “They’re so cute!”

“Uh, guys?” Dipper interjected somewhat nervously upon spotting a pile of bones, human bones to be exact, lying in the nest not too far away.

“Whoa, those guys don’t look like they had a very good time down here…” Amethyst commented with a frown.

“Y-yeah, we should probably get outta here, dudes…” Soos agreed anxiously. Still, Mabel was far too engrossed in reuniting with Waddles to so much as even worry. Until a certain pterodactyl happened to return.

The dinosaur suddenly flew high over the nest, letting out an ear-splitting screech as it did so. Frightened by the sight of the creature who had kidnapped him, Waddles let out a petrified squeal before darting away out of panic. Likewise, Centipeedle screamed in equal fear, letting an uncalculated burst of acid fly, one that narrowly missed hitting Steven.

“Waddles, wait!” Mabel called after her pig, unable to bear the thought of losing him again so soon. Waddles continued to let out terrified squeals as he eventually ended up barreling into Stan, who was completely unprepared for it.

“Get off me, ya dumb pig!” the conman exclaimed, trying to shove the squirming animal away from him. However, as Stan was already teetering on the mine tracks in an attempt to keep his balance, the pterodactyl swooped in once more, ready to reclaim its lunch. The group in the nest let out a collective gasp of shock as the dinosaur rammed into Stan and Waddles, sending them both plummeting off of the tracks and down into the mine shaft far below.

“Oh no!” Mabel cried with newfound concern over her uncle.

“Stan!” Dipper exclaimed, also quite alarmed.

“Mr. Pines!” both Soos and Steven gasped in worried unison.

“Don’t worry, Stan!” Amethyst called down, more than ready to leap down the chasm after him. “I’ll save—whoa!” Before the purple Gem could jump, the pterodactyl flew up once more, the force of its heavy wind it created being enough to knock her off her feet.

All the while, Stan and Waddles were in a freefall towards the bottom of the mine shaft, though fortunately they had a soft enough landing as they bounced off another large mushroom and into the mud puddle beside it.
“Ugh,” the conman groaned in both pain and disgust as he sat up, cringing at the mud now covering his suit. Waddles, on the other hand, was much happier about their current state of affairs as he took to happily rolling around in the mud, oinking brightly all the while. “Yeah, you would enjoy this,” Stan deadpanned to the pig, reaching out to grab his fallen fez. However, before he could, the pterodactyl came around once again, snatching it up in its massive claws as it carried it back up to its nest. The dinosaur dropped the hat into its nest, in full view of the group still gathered there, all of them quite shaken by what had just happened.

“Oh brother…” Pearl sighed in exasperation. “I suppose we have to go save Stan now, don’t we?”

“Oh, yeah we do!” Amethyst exclaimed as though it was obvious.

“And we gotta hurry!” Mabel urged, feeling incredibly guilty for how she had treated Stan earlier now. Especially in light of the very real possibility that she might never see him again. “Before that dinosaur eats them both!”

“McGucket, do you have an invention that can distract the pterodactyl?” Dipper asked the hillbilly, remembering his complex design for the Gobblewonker robot.

“Do I?!” McGucket exclaimed boldly, rummaging inside of his beard only for his search to come up empty. “Nope.”

Of course, the situation only went from bad to worse as the lone large egg resting in the nest behind them happened to hatch at that very moment, revealing a much smaller, but still large by comparison, baby pterodactyl.

“Aww!” Steven and Mabel gushed in unison at the newborn creature as it made a small peeping noise.

“Welcome to the world, little feller-” The hillbilly was cut off as the baby pterodactyl suddenly threw its head down, snatching McGucket in its maw and swallowing him whole. The others all let out gasps and screams of abject terror at this, but even so, the Gems kept their cool.

“Looks like we’re on our own then,” Garnet proclaimed, reforming her gauntlets. “Gems! Let’s go!”

Amethyst and Pearl nodded loyally, summoning their own weapons as they stood off against the baby pterodactyl. However, before they could even start attacking, Centipeedle, who was already quite on edge, let out a shrill cry that stopped them right in their tracks.

“Oh no!” Steven exclaimed, running over to the frightened creature. “Not now!”

“Steven, what’s wrong with that thing?” Dipper asked, aptly alarmed by the monster’s clearly panicked behavior.

“I don’t-” the young Gem was cut off as Centipeedle began spitting acid out at random. “Whoa!” Steven gasped as one burst barely missed him, catching the Gems’ unified attention immediately.

“Steven!” Pearl gasped, rushing over. “Oh, I knew this would happen! That thing is more trouble than its worth!”

Before Steven could really even protest, the white Gem swung her spear at the monster, hitting her with the dull side of the weapon and sending her flying to the far side of the nest. “Ah! Pearl, stop! It was an accident!” the young Gem cried, running over to Centipeedle and accidently grabbing her
hair in the process, eliciting a harsh hiss from the monster. “Oh! Sorry for pulling!”

“Steven!” Garnet shouted, kicking the monster away from the young Gem before it could harm him. Likewise, Lion ran to stand before Steven and Centipeedle in order to protect the young Gem, growling bitterly at the monster all the while.

“No!” Steven cried, tears forming in his eyes over this violent display. Fortunately though, before the Gems could really gang up on Centipeedle, they were all reminded of the other problem at hand as the baby pterodactyl let out a wild shriek, one that was soon followed by a unified frightened scream from the twins and Soos.

“Oh, right. Kinda forgot about that guy for a sec,” Amethyst said, summoning another whip and tossing at the dinosaur. The whip coiled itself around the pterodactyl’s mouth, muzzling it briefly and allowing Dipper, Mabel, and Soos to run for cover behind the dinosaur. “We’ll deal with you later, little guy!”

As the dual threats from both the baby pterodactyl and Centipeedle continued up atop the nest, Stan and Waddles were hiding out under one of the giant mushrooms from the larger pterodactyl. The conman took a tentative glance out from under the fungi, looking up to see that the dinosaur was still very much on the prowl as it flew only a few feet above them.

“The dumb thing must be hungry,” Stan remarked sourly. “I guess it’s you or me, pig.” Without any hesitation, the conman shoved Waddles out from underneath the mushroom, hoping that he would serve as the perfect decoy for his escape. However, instead of panicking, the pig simply remained still and gave Stan an innocent, almost endearing stare. “What are you looking at?” the conman asked caustically, though Waddles only continued looking to him intently. “Aw come on, don’t give me that look! What am I supposed to do? Let it eat me?”

Waddles only blinked in response to this, his innocuous stare still fixated on nothing but Stan. “Oh, I get it,” the conman tried to justify, even if the pig was starting to wear him down. “You’re trying to guilt trip me. Well it ain’t workin’, pal. Who cares if your Mabel’s favorite thing in the world? I can live without the kid talking to me all the time! …Telling me her jokes… Makin’ me laugh…”

The conman frowned as he trailed off, glancing down at the ground with apt guilt. He hated to admit it, but he knew he had done wrong by his niece, and while he would have liked to think that he didn’t care about that, deep down he knew he did. As sappy as he knew it was, Stan knew just how charming and lovable Mabel was, and the prospect that she might never speak to him again out of pure anger was actually a pretty terrible one. Still, the conman wasn’t entirely sold until he looked to Waddles once more, just as the pig tilted his head a little and let out a small, yet quite adorable snort.

Stan cracked a small grin at this, though it was short lived as he glanced up and noticed the pterodactyl swooping down upon them once more. “Aw, dang it!” the conman exclaimed relentingly, knowing that he had no other choice. With no need to mull it over any further, Stan hurried out from his hiding spot, strapping Waddles into the Huggy Wuvvy Tummy Bundle that had happened to fall down into the chasm with them and strapping it and the pig onto his chest. “Well, this is just about the dumbest thing I’ve ever done,” the conman concluded, standing as boldly as he could in the face of such a danger. “Hey, ugly!” he shouted to the pterodactyl. “You want this pig?! Then you’re gonna have to get through me, you flying devil! Come and get me!”

The dinosaur screeched menacingly at the conman as it began to divebomb towards them. However, instead of hiding or running in fear, Stan took the creature head on, quite literally as a matter of fact.
Still, not all was going so well. Back up in the nest, as the baby pterodactyl struggled to free itself
from the whip tied around its mouth, the Gems were still facing off against Centipeedle, much to
Steven’s great distress. All the while, the monster was struggling to return to the young Gem’s
side, only to be blocked off in her attempts each and every time. Eventually though, she had
enough, for as Amethyst lashed her whip at the monster once more, she caught it in her maw
briefly before tossing her head and sending the purple Gem flying into her teammates in an
impressive show of strength. As the Gems were downed, Centipeedle let out a savage hiss as she
approached them, more than ready to fire off a stream of acid at them.

And yet, before she could, Steven at last made it past Lion and hurried towards her, putting himself
between the monster and the Gems. “Stop!” he exclaimed desperately. “You don’t need to fight!
This isn’t you! You’re not a monster anymore. You’re so much more than that! We have so many
memories now! Don’t you remember our trip downtown? The chip times?” Slowly, the young
Gem approached Centipeedle, who was still clearly enraged as acid spilled from her mouth. “And
how you saved me from that vicious crow? And how we became best friends?” Tears were
streaming down Steven’s cheeks as he gently, yet tightly embraced the monster, disregarding her
acidic spit. “You have to remember! This all happened today!”

As the young Gem clung onto her, Centipeedle’s rage soon began to simmer down, to the point
that she eventually, finally relaxed and let her eye fall shut, a soft, soothed chip escaping her.
Steven smiled tearfully as he heard it, relieved to see that she was truly coming along in terms of
her behavior. Perhaps, in time, she would truly become a member of the team after all.

Still, the young Gem had little time to celebrate his success as the baby pterodactyl finally broke
free from its bond, letting out an angry howl as it did so. “Steven! Go hide with the others!” Garnet
commanded, knowing that they no longer had to focus their attention on Centipeedle now.

Steven simply nodded as he did as she said, running over to join Dipper, Mabel, and Soos as
Centipeedle trailed close behind him. “Are you guys, ok?” Mabel asked worriedly.

“Well, we won’t be fine for long if we can’t find a way to get away from that pterodactyl,” Dipper
reminded, nodding to the creature as it tried to peck at the Gems.

“I still can’t believe he ate that prospector guy!” Soos exclaimed. “That was messed up!”

As if on cue, the baby pterodactyl paused from fighting the Gems and Lion as it coughed up
McGucket’s hat. The hillbilly himself tried to climb up out of the creature’s throat at this juncture,
his head peeking out of the dinosaur’s mouth as he grinned goofily. “I’m ok!” he announced, only
for the pterodactyl to swallow him again, much to everyone’s shared horror.

“Ugh, how revolting!” Pearl exclaimed in absolute disgust.

“I dunno, I thought it was kinda funny,” Amethyst chuckled, somewhat amused as she swung her
whip once more. “In a weird sorta way, you know?”

“What do we do?!” Dipper exclaimed, even more panicked over their situation than before.
However, oddly enough, Soos was the first one to come up with a suggestion.

“We have to get in a straight line,” the handyman said firmly.

“What?” the kids asked in confused unison, none of them quite understanding this train of thought.
“The pterodactyl’s eyes are so far apart, that if you stand right in front of it, it can’t see you!” Soos explained.

“Soos, you’ve been wrong about stuff all day,” Dipper said, highly skeptical of this idea. “How can we-”

“Dude, look,” Soos interrupted, his tone sincere. “I know I mess stuff up a lot. I can be sort of clumsy and… It’s not always as loveable as I think. But please, as my friend, just trust me on this one!”

Dipper hesitated in giving a response, still not entirely sure if this plan would even work. After all, Soos wasn’t exactly known for coming up with the most brilliant ideas. But still, there were very few other options they had to work with at the moment. Which was why Dipper decided to place his trust in the handyman once again as he nodded and smiled slightly, even if he had no idea how this might turn out.

Soos grinned in return as he rose to stand, the kids following his lead. “Get behind me, dudes!” he instructed, leading the way out from their hiding spot as they all formed a single file line. Steven made sure to shush Centipeedle, who kept close behind him as they moved along quietly, just outside the pterodactyl’s frame of vision. And while the dinosaur didn’t see them, the Gems did as they all glanced towards them questioningly. Still, Soos didn’t explain his plan to them as he instead put a finger over his mouth, silently telling them to remain quiet about it. Garnet nodded in response to this, even if Pearl and Amethyst were still somewhat confused. As the kids started making their way back across the mine car tracks, the Gems and Lion also retreated from their battle and easily leapt to the other side of the room, as not to accidentally give them away to the dinosaur.

“It’s working!” Mabel exclaimed in an excited whisper as they continued to sidle their way along. And indeed it was working s the baby pterodactyl remained still, unaware of their presence. Each time the dinosaur happened to turn its head, the kids would leap from one side of the tracks to the other, narrowly missing the creature’s gaze each time. However, as they were about halfway across, the group leaped to the other line once again, only for Steven to accidentally lose his balance and fall forward onto the tracks themselves.

“Steven!” the twins gasped in shared concern, especially as the pterodactyl perked up, now seeing the young Gem clearly. The young Gem gasped as he quickly picked himself back up, but it was already too late. The pterodactyl knew they were there, and it wasn’t about to let them go so easily. With a fierce roar, the baby dinosaur lurched forward, pulling itself towards the kids at an alarming rate. However, before it could even clear the edge of its nest, someone else rushed forward to meet it.

“Centipeedle!” Steven cried in alarm as the monster hurried for the pterodactyl, stopping it in its tracks as it stood before it and screeched wildly. The young Gem had no time to go to its rescue as both Dipper and Mabel grabbed him by the arm and pulled him to the other end of the tracks along with Soos before the dinosaur could see. Still, Centipeedle stood firm against the much larger creature, especially as she geared up to spit acid at it without restraint. And yet, before she could even get her first attack out, the unthinkable happened.

With another shriek, the pterodactyl clamped its wide jaws around the Gem monster, clamping down on her with a great amount of force. Centipeedle only lasted for about another second, but it was long enough for her to look directly at Steven one last time before she inevitably vanished in a puff of smoke, just as all downed Gems did.
“No!” Steven exclaimed in horrified shock, especially as the pterodactyl began to swallow Centipeedle’s lingering gemstone. However, the dinosaur ended up choking on the stone, prompting it to spit it out and send it flying across the room before returning to eating whatever was lying around in its nest. The monster’s gem landed safely on the other side of the room, but as it slowly rolled up to Steven, all the young Gem could do was collapse to his knees tearfully as he gently picked the stone up.

“You… you saved us…” Steven muttered morosely, holding Centipeedle’s gem close. The young Gem could scarcely find any other words to say in light of this fact, especially since he had just lost Centipeedle so soon after making her his friend. Yet in the end, she had ended up sacrificing herself to save not just him, but all of them really. And such a noble sacrifice, Steven knew, could not go unnoticed.

Everyone else stood around the young Gem as he mourned the lost monster, none of them quite sure how to console him, even if they all felt truly bad about what had happened. However, there was no time to pay tribute to the fallen monster, as everyone was reminded that there was another pterodactyl, a much larger one, lurking in the caverns, especially as it let out a shrill, almost painful cry. Confused, everyone glanced up to see the adult pterodactyl sour overhead, though the sunlight spilling into the room blocked everything save for its silhouette, at least for a moment. For when its shape cleared, they all got a glimpse of something that completely surprised and stunned them all.

“Is that…?” Dipper trailed off, unsure of if his eyes were just playing tricks on him.

“Stan?!” Mabel finished in apt disbelief. But sure enough, Stan was indeed riding atop the pterodactyl, holding on tightly with one hand and punching the creature squarely in the face with the other as he let out an angry battle cry. And while that was impressive enough, Mabel let out another awestruck, yet completely relieved gasp upon seeing the pig that the conman had in tow with him. “Waddles!”

“I can’t believe it…” Pearl muttered, her jaw dropped in shock. “He’s actually punching an actual dinosaur in the face. Stan of all people is punching a dinosaur in the face. How is that even possible?”

“Woo!” Amethyst cheered rowdily. “Get him, Stan! Punch that dumb old dino right back to the stone age!”

“From heck’s heart, I stab at thee!” Stan shouted fiercely, using both hands to land a very heavy blow on the already struggling dinosaur. The pterodactyl screamed in pain as it rammed into the side of the cliff, which was where Stan quickly jumped off before the creature could fall into the abyss and take him with it. After a moment or two, the conman made it to the top to join everyone else, tired, and a bit worse for wear from the perilous experience, but safe overall.

As the conman was brushing himself off, he hardly even noticed Dipper, Soos, and Amethyst all applauding him for his bravery, as well as Garnet sending an approving thumbs up his way. While Steven was still quite a bit torn up over what happened to Centipeedle, he still smiled softly, even if Pearl, crossed her arms and let out an aggravated huff over how she had been proven wrong. Mabel, on the other hand, was quite pleased with her uncle’s actions as she stood before him with a warm, though somewhat apologetic smile.

“Here’s your pig, kiddo,” Stan grinned, passing Waddles off to her.

“Waddles!” Mabel cried happily, embracing her pig. “You saved him for me!”

“Yeah, well,” Stan shrugged as though it were no big deal. “Sometimes you just gotta—LOOK
OUT!” The conman let out a frightened shout as he noticed the pterodactyl steadily scaling the cliff behind him.

Not wanting to risk it with any more dinosaurs, the collective group turned and retreated, even though the pterodactyl was in hot pursuit. As they crossed the threshold of the narrow passage, Dipper was the last to make it through, though he only barely escaped as the dinosaur snapped at him, tearing a rather sizable hole in his vest. Still, everyone managed to make it back to the main cavern, only to discover something that made their situation even more dire: they had no way of getting back up to the surface.

“We’re trapped!” Stan exclaimed, alarmed.

“What do we do now?” Steven asked, taking a glance back to see the pterodactyl still trying to squeeze through the passageway.

“Quick!” Dipper pointed to one of the nearby geysers, one that could hopefully land them were they needed to go. “The geyser can shoot us back up!”

No one argued with this as they all jumped into the geyser, though unfortunately, it stubbornly refused to pump, even as the pterodactyl finally squirmed free and continued towards them. “Ugh, come on!” Amethyst exclaimed impatiently. “This is taking forever!”

As if to remind them the severity of their circumstances, the pterodactyl let out another roar, its wings spreading wide as it prepared to beset them all. However, as terrified as everyone else was by this, Soos steeled himself and let out a brazen battle cry. “Bros before dinos!” he shouted, pounding on the side of the geyser hard. At last, it finally burst, shooting the entire group up right before the dinosaur could devour them all. In mere seconds, they were all shot back up into the church, all of them landing roughly throughout the decrepit building and all of them soaking wet and quite shaken, but fortunately safe.

As a result of the rumbling earth below it, the crumbling church finally collapsed in on itself, covering up the hole that the pterodactyl had first come out of and hopefully trapping it for good. Fortunately though, the Pines and the Gems were all well out of the building and heading back to Soos’s truck in a mixed array of spirits.

“I can’t believe you did all that for Waddles!” Mabel exclaimed to Stan, aptly amazed upon hearing him recount his rescue.

“Aw, well, I can’t have my favorite niece not talking to me,” Stan remarked with a fond smirk as he leaned against a nearby tree. “And if I gotta leap onto a pterodactyl and punch him in the face, then that’s what I gotta do.”

“That’s kinda sappy,” Mabel chuckled blithely.

“What? That’s how I feel!”

“No, I mean the tree,” Mabel corrected, pointing to the sap that Stan had placed his hand against.

“Oh yeah,” the conman frowned, pulling his now sap-covered hand away from the tree before jokingly putting it on his niece’s face. “Gotcha!” he laughed, before realizing that it was now stuck there. “Uh oh.” In a sudden panic, the pair screamed as they tried to pull away from each other, though unfortunately the sap was pretty potent as far as its stickiness went.

Eventually, however, Stan and Mabel did manage to free themselves from the sap, even if they were still covered in the stuff as they slept against each other and Waddles on the ride home.
Steven and the Gems once again took their seat in the back while Lion ran behind the vehicle, as the sun began to set over the woods as they headed back to the temple and the shack once again.

“Check it out!” Dipper exclaimed as he sat up front with Soos, looking over his torn vest. “That thing totally destroyed my vest!” However, that wasn’t all. For upon a closer inspection, Dipper managed to find something far more impressive: one of the pterodactyl’s teeth had gotten stuck in it as he had pulled away earlier. “Whoa, Soos, look!” he said with a wide grin, holding the large tooth up for the handyman to see.

“A real dinosaur tooth?” Soos asked, amazed. “That’s awesome!”

“Not as awesome as you saving us back there,” Dipper said somewhat sheepishly, admittedly ashamed of his former behavior. After all, in the end, Soos really had come through for them all, and for that, he was truly grateful. “Pterodactyl bros?”

“Pterodactyl bros!” Soos grinned as they two exchanged a fist bump. “Hey! I pronounced it right that time!”

“So you think we’ll need to worry about the rest of those dinosaurs?” Dipper asked with a slightly concerned frown.

“Eh, I doubt it.”

While Soos and the Pines were all relatively content after their latest misadventure, the same couldn’t exactly be said about Steven. The young Gem let out a sad sigh as he held Centipeedle’s gemstone, looking over its smooth green surface with remorse. His guardians all exchanged worried glances as they observed him, but as usual, Garnet was the first to reach out to him and console him.

“Steven…” the Gem leader began gently, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. “You did a good job trying to tame the Centipeedle. Your mother would be so proud.”

“She would?” Steven asked with a frown, glancing up from Centipeedle’s gem.

“The truth is,” Garnet began, looking down. “Rose Quartz had tried to use her powers to save these monsters too, but she was never able to heal any of them.”

“Never? But if she couldn’t do it…”

“Who knows?” Pearl asked with an encouraging smile. “Maybe when you have better control of your powers, you might be able to help them in ways even your mother couldn’t.”

“Even this one,” Garnet nodded to Centipeedle’s gem.

Steven smiled softly as he looked down to the stone himself, wishing that he could have truly helped Centipeedle this time. But even so, if she was willing to wait for him, then he would be willing to go the extra mile for her. Just as she had done for him. “Then I’ll keep her safe until then,” Steven said with resolve, wrapping his hands around the stone until a small, pink bubble happened to form around it, much to the Gem’s complete shock.

“Whoa!” Amethyst gasped, amazed.

“Steven!” Pearl exclaimed with a proud grin. “You can bubble Gems!”

“Wow…” the young Gem muttered, knowing that this was the first time he had ever accomplished
such a feat. Still, he couldn’t focus on that so much right now. So instead, he focused on Centipeedle. “Wait for me, Centipeedle. I promise I’ll heal you up someday.”

With a warm smile, Steven sent the bubble he had created away to the temple, just as he had seen the Gems do countless times. “Oh, wait!” he exclaimed, forgetting something, something that he knew the monster would certainly appreciate when he did manage to heal her.

Back at the Gem temple, a lone green gem, enveloped in a pink bubble materialized in the burning room, floating amidst the countless others. And then, mere moments after it had arrived, another bubble appeared right beside it, holding only one thing, something that would serve as a welcome back gift to that Gem if she ever did reform: a half-eaten bag of chips.
Chapter 28: Straight to Video

Chapter Summary

In which Lion is a typical cat and Steven's mommy issues begin

Chapter Notes

Oh boy, here we go with an "emotional" chapter. And by that I mean it made me very emotional to write this. Still, I'm so proud of this one. SO very proud of it. So I hope you all enjoy it too! Let's get started with my take of Lion 3: Straight to Video!

Steven put a thoughtful hand to his chin as he looked over the various treats the Mystery Shack’s vending machine had to offer. He had silently pondering over his choice of a snack for quite some time now, long enough for Wendy to offer him a brief encouragement in making his integral decision.

“You got this, Steven,” the cashier smirked as she casually leaned against the counter.

“Thanks, Wendy,” Steven said, his attention still devoted to the machine. “It’s just so hard to choose though! I mean, I could get a bag of chips, which would be tasty, but I always get chips. Shouldn’t I be living life to the fullest and trying new things?”

“Dude, if that’s how you wanna roll, I totally recommend the new spicy pretzels in row seven,” Soos cut in. “They’re easily the most dangerous thing in there, trust me.”

“Hm… good point…” Steven mused thoughtfully.

“If you still can’t make up your mind, why don’t you ask your buddy over there?” Wendy asked, nodding over to Lion as he walked over to the ice cream freezer. Curious, the young Gem went over to the freezer as well to see why his pink companion was pressing his face against it, only to groan in disgust upon realizing what all the fuss was about.

“Ugh, Lion Lickers?” Steven frowned disapprovingly. “Lion, those are gross. No offense.” The pink beast did take some offense to this of course, as he let out a disgruntled huff and walked to the other side of the gift shop.

“You guys better hurry it up,” Wendy advised with her usual relaxed grin. “We have to close up for the night soon.”

“Yeah, you don’t want Mr. Pines chasing you out with the hose again like last time, dude,” Soos
added with a concerned frown.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind, but Lion here’s not a huge fan of water,” Steven chuckled, grinning to his fluffy companion. “Right?” The pink beast let out a sullen growl as he turned away from the young Gem, sticking his nose up in the air as he sat down firmly. “Looks like somebody’s being a little grumpy-grump today,” Steven remarked, his hands on his hips as he raised an eyebrow.

“That’s cats for you,” Wendy commented with a shrug. “They’re pretty temperamental little guys. Though in your case, Steven, I’d say Lion’s more of a temperamental big guy.”

“Ha! I get it!” Soos laughed along with Steven over this quip. “Cause he’s a lion!”

“AHHHH!” a sudden, quite loud scream from the living room broke through the conversation, slightly startling the group in the gift shop. Their worry quickly faded however as Mabel ran in, holding a large box above her head as a huge, excited grin lit up her face. Dipper followed not too far behind her, nowhere near as enthralled as she was, but still generally amused with his sister’s usual antics.

“Yo, dude, what’s up?” Soos asked Mabel curiously as she set the box on the floor. “You’re more excited than you were that time you found that baby squirrel in the attic.”

Mabel was hardly listening as she began to tear the package open, letting out another elated squeal as she did so. “Eee! It’s here! It’s here! It’s here!”

“What’s here?” Steven asked, confused.

“The summer care package our mom sent us,” Dipper explained since Mabel was far too distracted to. “She actually sent it out weeks ago, but apparently it got lost in the mail or something like that-”

“But now its finally here!” Mabel cheered. “Whoa, Dipper! Look at all the cool stuff Mom sent us!” she exclaimed as he began digging through the box’s contents while Dipper and Steven curiously watched on. “Heh, looks like somebody left his jacket back at home! Guess Mom didn’t want you catching a cold,” Mabel teased as she held up a blue jacket.

“It’s summertime, Mabel,” Dipper deadpanned grabbing his jacket from her. “I just thought I wouldn’t need it. Still… I am kinda glad she sent this. It can get sort of cold up here… sometimes.”

“What else did she send you guys?” Steven asked Mabel, quite intrigued, seeing as how he had never really received a package like this before himself.

Mabel gasped with delight as she pulled a few more items out of the box. “My favorite knitting needles! And new yarn for sweaters! Aw, Mom knows me too well!”

“Whoa, is that a new mystery novel?!” Dipper exclaimed, taking a thick book out of the box. “Oh man, I’ve been dying to read this one! I-” He stopped short, however, upon noticing the amused smirk Wendy was sending his way. At the risk of embarrassing himself in front of his crush, he proceeded to try and play it off like it was no big deal, despite his excitement. “Uh, I mean… It’s cool. I’ll read it in my spare time or whatever. Who knows?”

“Dork!” Mabel coughed jokingly, eliciting an annoyed glare from her brother and a small laugh from Steven.

“Oh, who’s this cute little guy?” the young Gem asked as he noticed a photograph of a cat inside the box.
“Aw, it’s Muffin!” Mabel grinned warmly, holding the picture of her beloved feline up. “I miss him so much! You know, we named him Muffin because those are his favorite things to eat!”

“Even though Mom and Dad have told you time and time again not to let him eat them,” Dipper cut in dryly.

“Aw, he’s so adorable!” Steven smiled as he looked over the picture. “Do you guys think he’d get along with Waddles and Lion if he was here?”

“Considering the fact that the only person Muffin actually tolerates is Mabel, I doubt it,” Dipper said, shaking his head.

“Oh, come on,” Mabel rolled her eyes. “Muffin, Waddles, and Lion would be best friends for sure! Isn’t that right, Lion?” Once again, the pink beast was rather stoic as he only briefly glanced over his shoulder before settling down to a nap. “I’ll take that as a yes!”

“Looks like there’s one more thing in there for you dudes,” Soos pointed out, nodding to the almost empty box.

“Oh yeah,” Dipper said, pulling the round metal tin out. He paused as he looked it over, but soon frowned with concern upon reading the small note taped to the lid. “Oh no…”

“What is it?” Mabel asked, snatching the tin from him and opening it. She let out another overjoyed gasp as she did so, especially upon seeing that the tin was filled with cookies of countless different shapes and decorations. “YES! Mom’s famous cookies!”

“Hold it, Mabel!” Dipper interrupted as Mabel already began happily scarfing the sweets down. “Mom put a note on here telling me not to let you eat all of those cookies at once, so you better not-”

“Huh?” Mabel asked, her mouth full and the tin already close to empty.

“…Never mind.”

“It sure was nice of your mom to send you guys all of this stuff!” Steven smiled warmly.

“Eh, actually, it’s sort of embarrassing,” Dipper shrugged with a frown. “I mean, yeah its thoughtful and everything, but it’s also our mom’s way of saying she doesn’t think we can handle ourselves here without her.”

“Ha! If only she knew about all of the crazy Gem monsters and weird paranormal things we’ve been up against and survived!” Mabel exclaimed with a daring grin. “Speaking of which, that reminds me. I’ve been meaning to write about all of that stuff in that letter I plan on sending her!”

“Oh, come on, you guys,” Wendy remarked, smirking. “It’s not embarrassing; it’s totally sweet. If my mom was still around, I’d kill to get an awesome box of junk like that from her.”

“Wait, Wendy your mom is… gone?” Dipper asked, instantly regretting asking the question for how completely tactless it was.

The cashier nodded, letting out a long sigh as she glanced away. “Yeah. She went out to the store one day when it was raining a few years back and she got in a really back wreck and… well… she just… didn’t come back…” A brief bout of melancholy silence passed in light of this, but Wendy was quick to bridge it with a small smile to lighten the mood. “B-but its ok. I mean, yeah it was kinda rough without her at first, but you learn to get over it and move on, you know?”
“Don’t you still miss her sometimes though?” Mabel asked with a sympathetic frown.

“Yeah, sometimes…” Wendy acknowledged, though she once again bounced by quickly from it. “But like I said, it’s cool. After all, it’s not like I’m the first person to lose their mom.”

“I know what you mean by that…” Steven interjected, glancing to the floor morosely. “I never really got to meet my mom at all since she gave up her physical form to have me and everything…”

Another period of rather pensive silence filled the room as no one was really sure what to say to fully comfort either Wendy or Steven in light of the discussion of their deceased mothers. After all, the twins couldn’t really relate and Soos still had a maternal presence in his life in the form of his grandmother. But as soon enough the emotionally heavy mood was soon lifted, and as usual, Mabel was the one to lift it.

“Hey, uh, you guys want the last two cookies in here?” she asked Steven and Wendy with a smile, holding the cookie tin up. “They’re the best cookies you’ll ever eat, I promise!”

“Heh, I’m willing to put that promise to the test,” Wendy chuckled, gladly taking one of the cookies. “Thanks, dude.”

“Yes, thanks, Mabel!” Steven grinned, his usual pep returning. “Hey, check it out! It’s a cookie shaped like a star!” he laughed, placing the cookie over the star on his shirt. “I guess you could say this cookie is… out of this world?”

The others all laughed over this corny pun, their former levity now returned in full. Lion let out a small yawn as he padded over to the empty box and attempted to lie down inside of it, completely disregarding the conversation as it continued.

“Whoa, Mabel, you weren’t kidding,” Wendy said as she ate her cookie. “This thing is amazing! Your mom can really bake!”

“Glad you like it! I’ll let her know you enjoyed it in my letter,” Mabel beamed brightly.

“Aw, dude, I wish I could have tried one,” Soos said with a frown. “Same here,” Dipper remarked, giving Mabel a caustic glance. She simply shrugged innocently in response though, hardly guilty at all about eating most of the other treats.

“You know,” Steven said, his mouth still full as he munched on his cookie. “I kinda can’t help but wonder what kind of cookies my mom would have made me. Maybe they would have been actual space cookies!”

“Oh my gosh, I bet your mom’s space cookies would have been amazing, Steven!” Mabel agreed heartily.

“Wait, how would space cookies even work?” Dipper asked, confused. “Would they be made out of star dust, or meteor bits or-?”

“Whatever they would have been made of, they probably would have been great…” Steven said with a wistful sigh, looking down at the remainder of his cookie. “I just wish… I knew a little bit more about my mom… Just to know what she was like for myself.”

Before anyone could really respond to this, Steven was briefly startled by Lion headbutting his arm, keeping his forehead placed against the young Gem without any signs of moving it. Charmed by this, Steven gasped, as did Mabel, who was more than happy to discreetly snap a photo of it for
“Her scrapbook.”

“That’s a keeper!” she quipped brightly.

“Blink if this means you love me,” Steven whispered to his pink companion, who did no such thing but rather just stared up at the young Gem blankly. Steven was quick to change this however, as he briefly blew in Lion’s face, causing the pink beast to finally blink in response. “He loves me!”

Of course, everyone got a good laugh out of this, though it was short lived as Stan entered the room, as stoic as usual. “Hey, hey, hey!” he exclaimed, breaking up the fun. “What are you all doing lazing around in here?! It’s quitting time! And the sooner you all amscary, the sooner I can settle down and watch my show.”

“You mean that old soap opera about that duchess?” Dipper asked with a laugh.

“N-no!” Stan exclaimed defensively. “And even if I did watch a show like The Duchess Approves, I would only do it for the deeply relatable characters and the gripping real-world commentary.” A beat of uncomfortable silence passed as everyone looked to the conman in slight confusion before he let out a frustrated sigh. “You know what? I’m just gonna go now. Soos! Wendy! Close up shop!”

“You got it, boss!” Soos exclaimed with a loyal salute.

“Yeah, sure, whatever,” Wendy shrugged, taking her nametag off and grabbing her jacket as she prepared to go.

“And as for you, kid,” Stan scowled at Steven. “Hit the road! And take that frilly furball with you.”

“Aw, ok, Mr. Pines,” Steven begrudgingly agreed, hating to go even though he knew it was getting late. “See you guys, tomorrow!” he exclaimed to the twins, heading for the door as Lion padded behind him, carrying the empty care package box in his maw.

“Bye!” Dipper and Mabel both called out after Steven as he left, though the latter did stop short a bit as he realized something.

“Wait… did Lion just steal our box?” Dipper asked with a frown.

“Aw, he can have it!” Mabel quipped warmly, smiling as she looked over her picture of Muffin. “After all, as a cat, he’s a distant relative to my sweet little Muffin! And as a responsible cat owner, it’s my sworn duty to look out for other cats aside from my own!”

“You… do know Lion’s a lion, right Mabel?”

“Yeah. And your point is…?” Mabel smirked, ignoring her brother as he rolled his eyes in exasperation with her usual odd train of logic.

“And… all done!” Steven exclaimed as he finished taking the cushions off his couch and arranging them into a bed on the floor for Lion. “I made sure to make it extra cushy, just the way you like it!” The young Gem grinned in satisfaction over his work, but Lion hardly noticed it as he glanced up at the loft instead. “Wha—hey!” Steven protested as the pink beast leaped up onto the loft,
jumping onto the young Gem’s bed and nestling himself into the plush covers.

“Hey, get out of there, Lion!” the young Gem chastised as he ran up to the loft. “Lion, this is the Steven bed, not the Lion bed.” Of course, the pink beast refused to so much as budge, prompting Steven to relent and start pushing him off the bed with as much force as he could muster. “Come… on! Whoa!” the young Gem fell abruptly to the floor as Lion suddenly got up, taking the comforter that was still covering him with him. “Hey, that’s mine to!” Steven exclaimed, ripping the blanket away only to discover one of his stuffed animals in Lion’s mouth. “And Sir Bearlington,” he glowered, holding his hand out expectantly. The pink beast handed it over, letting out an aggravated huff as he padded back downstairs in apparent disappointment.

“You know, Lion, I usually love it when you act all cute like this, but it’s kinda late and I’m really tired,” the young Gem sighed in exasperation as he lay down and covered up. “But we can play tomorrow if you want!” Steven let out a tired yawn as he got comfortable, though he didn’t forget to address his pink companion down below one last time. “Anyway, night, Lion!”

Lion let out a simple snore in response, a sign that he was already fast asleep, which was where Steven was quickly headed as well. “Love you…” the young Gem mumbled as his eyes began to grow heavy. “…in the morning…” No sooner had Steven muttered this than he drifted off to sleep as easily as he did every other night.

However, when the young Gem opened his eyes again, he found that he wasn’t in the comfort of the room he had fallen asleep in. Instead, a bright, pastel pink sky met his sigh high above, a fitting coloration to go along with the apparently pink tall grass all around him.

“Whoa…” Steven thought, quite bewildered by his strange new surroundings. “What is this place?” Still confused, the young Gem opened his mouth to take in a breath of air, only to come to the startling realization that air was something this unknown place somehow lacked. “I can’t breathe!” Steven gasped internally, suddenly frantic as he tried to move his arms and legs only to realize they were stuck under something that felt quite heavy.

Just as the young Gem was running out of air and his alarm turned to outright panic, a familiar voice broke through the otherwise breezy silence. “Steven…?” the voice was quite soft at first, but it grew louder and more frightened as the world grew dark in Steven’s vision. “Steven?!”

“Steven!” Pearl cried, aghast at the sight before her. Most of the young Gem’s upper body was pinned under Lion’s fluffy body, his legs kicking in a frenzied attempt to get free. “Steven! Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh!” The white Gem ran to the bed, unsure of what to really do to solve the matter, especially as Steven’s muffled shouts grew louder. “H-hang on! I got you!” Pearl exclaimed, pushing against the pink beast, who stoically refused to so much as even budge. “Ugh, Lion! Let him go!”

Pearl went for a different method upon seeing how irresolute Lion was being, by pulling on Steven’s legs to free him. By now, the pink beast was thoroughly annoyed, which was why he finally relented and stood, releasing Steven and allowing him to take in a large, much needed breath of air at last.

“Oh thank goodness!” Pearl sighed in relief, hugging Steven tightly and cutting off his air once again.

“P-Pearl!” the young Gem exclaimed, his voice tight and breathless. “I can’t-”

“Oh! Sorry!” the white Gem blushed, releasing him and letting him breathe easy once more.
“What… happened?” Steven asked, still panting to regain lost air.

“Steven, are you alright?” Pearl asked with apt concern. “Why was Lion sleeping on top of you?!”

“I don’t know…” Steven frowned, looking to the pink beast sitting nearby. “He’s being a little clingy today. But that’s ‘cause I’m his favorite!” As soon as the young Gem said this, Lion suddenly grabbed him with his paw and shoved his face into his mane. “See?” Steven asked, his voice muffled briefly before he pushed himself away from Lion. “Wait… why are you here, Pearl?”

The white Gem’s former worry quickly turned to sudden nervousness upon hearing this question. “M-me? Nothing!” Steven didn’t really seem to buy this however, as he instead continued to stare at her questioningly. “I was just… uh, well, you know how I always say… um, I just, uh…” Pearl was clearly flustered by this point, as could be told from the sweat beading on her forehead, but she did finally relent and let out the admittedly strange truth. “I like to watch you sleep sometimes. And by sometimes I mean… often.”

Awkward silence filled the room for a moment as Steven wasn’t entirely sure of what to make of this revelation. Still, as troubled as he was by it, he made his stance on the matter clear when he spoke up again. “Okie-dokie, its time for everyone to leave Steven alone. I’m a growing boy and I need my rest.”

Disregarding both Pearl and Lion, Steven marched back to bed and fell onto it with a relaxed sigh. Still, before he could even try to sleep, he noticed Lion still sitting at his bedside, looking down at him intently. “Lion, that means you too,” the young Gem remarked, closing his eyes for a moment before opening them to find both Lion and Pearl still hovering over him. Frustrated, Steven grabbed his pillow and jumped to his feet, swiping at the overprotective pair in an attempt to chase them off. “Rah! Rah!” he shouted, shooing Lion and Pearl (who crawled away on all fours) away at last. “Ugh…” Steven sighed, exasperated as he flopped back onto the bed.

Seeing as how he was already tired, the young Gem hoped that sleep would come easy to him once again. Of course he had only had his eyes closed for a moment or two before he felt a sudden weight on his chest. “Wha-” When Steven opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was Lion, sitting on the best beside him, his large paw resting squarely on top of his chest. “Lion!” the young Gem grumbled, shoving the pink beast’s paw off of him, only for Lion to set it right back down. Steven simply let out a long sigh, looking up to his stubborn pink companion tiredly. “This… this is gonna be a long night, isn’t it?”

“Ready…? Race!”

“Woo!” Mabel cheered, slamming the button on her controller down as the video game kart race began. Dipper was just a split second behind in accelerating, which was more than enough for her to tease him over. “Uh oh, bro-bro, looks like you better wake those reflexes of yours up! Or else you might not win this time around!”

“Mabel, I’ve won the past three races now; my streak isn’t about to end this time,” Dipper grinned triumphantly. “Still, speaking of waking up…” he trailed off with a frown upon noticing the kart that Steven was controlling continually driving straight into the wall.

Confused, the twins paused the game and stole a glance back at the young Gem, who was sitting on his stomach on the bed behind them, snoozing softly, his controller having slipped out of his
grasp. “Uh, Steven?” Dipper asked, somewhat concerned, though Steven was still fast asleep.

“Hey, Steven! Wake up!” Mabel exclaimed much more boisterously, giving the young Gem a playful poke on the cheek. This was enough to startle Steven awake, though he was still quite a bit groggy at first.

“How?” Steven mumbled, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes as he slowly sat up. “Dipper? Mabel? When did you guys get here?”

“Um, we’ve been here for almost an hour now,” Dipper said with a frown.

“Yeah, and you were a lot more awake when we got here,” Mabel chuckled lightly.

“Oh, right,” the young Gem nodded, fighting to keep his eyes open as he let out a long yawn. “Sorry. I’m just a little…” Steven trailed off as he nodded off again, only to be awaken again by another poke from Mabel. “Tired. I didn’t really sleep that well last night.”

“Why not?” Dipper asked curiously.

“Well,” Steven yawned once more. “It’s all because a certain lion of mine couldn’t stop trying to sleep on top of me last night.” The young Gem sent a sour glare back at Lion, who was curled up for a nap on the other half of the bed.

“Aw! He probably just wanted to cuddle!” Mabel quipped with a charmed smile. “I know what that’s like! Waddles always wants to sleep on top of me all the time too! It’s so precious!”

“Yeah, it was really cute. The only problem is that Lion’s a lot bigger than Waddles is…” Steven frowned. “Between him and Pearl watching me while I was trying to sleep, I barely got any rest last night!”

“Wait, why was Pearl watching you while you slept?” Dipper asked, somewhat disturbed by that fact.

“I… have no idea,” Steven admitted with an equally unsettled frown. “But anyway, I’m so tired I could…” Once again, the young Gem trailed off as his head lolled and he fell into a doze yet again. Dipper was more than prepared to wake him up once more, only for Mabel to beat him to it.

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” she exclaimed loudly, grabbing Steven by the shoulder and shaking him wide awake. “Steven! I have an awesome idea! If you wanna get some extra sleep, you should totally stay at the Mystery Shack tonight! That way Lion can’t get in and sleep on your face and we can have the most epic slumber party ever!”

“Whoa, Mabel, that’s actually a really good idea,” Dipper agreed with a small smile. “Though it probably won’t be too much of a ‘party’ if Steven’s that tired.” He nodded to the young Gem, whose head was resting against his lap as he snored softly.

“Wha-?” Steven perked up a bit upon hearing his name, trying as hard as he could to remain awake. “No way. I’ll totally stay awake long enough for us to… what are we gonna do again?”

“We’re gonna have the slumber party of the ages!” Mabel exclaimed excitedly. “And it’ll be great! We’ll have snacks, do crafts, watch movies, have a pillow fight-”

“And most of all, sleep,” Dipper asserted, reminding Mabel of the very reason why they were planning on doing this. “Right, Steven?”
All Steven could really offer was an exhausted thumbs-up as he flopped onto the bed, far too tired to keep his eyes open for even another second.

Just as they had planned earlier, Steven headed back down to the shack along with the twins later that evening for their impromptu slumber party. The young Gem had made sure to make it very clear to Lion that he was not invited before they left the temple, though the pink beast seemed to take it well enough as he simply settled down on Steven’s bed in his absence. But even so, the kids all settled into the attic relatively early, with the intent of having at least a little fun before going to bed.

“Ok, Steven, this is one of the most important choices we’ll ever make,” Mabel said, her tone quite stern. “Should we make our friendship bracelets with beads or charms?”

“Oh, definitely charms!” Steven exclaimed with a wide smile. “That way they’ll be even more special!”

“Agreed!” Mabel nodded, smiling as well as she prepared to get to work on the craft. “By the way, you don’t mind passing those mini-cupcakes over here, do you?”

“Nope, not at all!” the young Gem complied, handing her the tray of tiny cupcakes they had made earlier. “But only after I have another one,” he laughed, taking one for himself and scarfing it down in one bite.

“Uh, don’t you guys think that maybe you shouldn’t be eating so much sugar right before bed?” Dipper asked as he glanced up from reading his mystery novel.

“What? No way!” Mabel scoffed. “Cupcakes are the number one pre-bedtime snack. All the experts agree!”

“And by experts you mean… you, right?” Dipper asked, raising a caustic eyebrow.

“Yes!” Mabel grinned widely.

“Then there’s pretty much no use trying to argue with that logic then,” Dipper concluded, rolling his eyes.

While Steven and Mabel continued to work on their friendship bracelets, Stan happened to come by to offer the twins his usual nighttime greeting. “Night, kids,” he remarked casually, poking his head into the room briefly.

“Night, Grunkle Stan,” Dipper and Mabel called back in unison.

“Night, Mr. Pines!” Steven exclaimed brightly, causing the conman to stop in his tracks as he turned and started to leave.

“Hold it,” Stan said as he opened the door wider to take the scene in the attic in. While Dipper was simply sitting in bed reading as usual, Steven and Mabel had their craft supplies and snacks strewn across the floor, to the point that they were covering a great deal of space, including the young Gem’s sleeping bag and overnight bag. Which, of course, was something that caught the conman immediately off guard. “Alright, since when is there one more of you runts than usual?”

“Steven’s staying here tonight, Grunkle Stan!” Mabel exclaimed cheerfully. “We’re having a
“Oh yeah? Says who?” Stan put his hands on his hips. “Because none of you munchkins ever ran this little ‘slumber party’ plan by me first.”

“Oh, please let me stay for just one night, Mr. Pines!” Steven pleaded with sincerity. “I didn’t get any sleep last night because Lion kept sleeping on me and I’m so tired and I need to keep up a healthy sleep schedule or else I won’t—”

“Yeesh, kid, slow it down a second,” the conman interrupted. “What did you say? Your pink pest keeps trying to use you as a pillow or something like that?”

“Uh huh,” the young Gem nodded. “Which is why I need to get a night away. Please? I promise, you won’t even notice I’m here!”

“In case you haven’t noticed, kid, the Mystery Shack isn’t a hotel,” Stan deadpanned. “Though I guess it could be for one night, if you were willing to pay room and bored.”

“I don’t have any money,” Steven pointed out with a frown.

“Well then, I guess you better head on home and get used to that big cat of yours laying on your face!” Stan exclaimed as he started to usher Steven out. “Who knows, maybe it’ll build character or something sappy like that. Now don’t let the door hit you on the way out, kid!”

“Aw…” Steven and Mabel mourned in unison, both of them equally upset about their dashed slumber party plans. Fortunately though, Dipper interjected with an appeal that would hopefully work.

“Grunkle Stan, you’re seriously not about to force Steven to walk all the way up to the temple this late at night, are you?” he asked, raising a suspicious eyebrow.

“What? It’s not that far of a walk. Besides, a little tussle with a wolf or two never hurt anyone,” Stan shrugged, unconcerned. He did pause, however, upon noticing the rather disapproving looks both of the twins were giving him. His resolve crumbled even more upon looking down at Steven, who was returning his gaze with the most convincing pout he could muster. Which, unfortunately for Stan, no one was able to resist. “Ugh, fine!” he finally relented, pushing Steven back into the room. “You can stay, but just for one night! And just for the record, I’m adding this onto your dad’s tab.”

“My dad owes you money, Mr. Pines?” Steven asked curiously.

“He does now,” Stan scowled as he prepared to leave. “Don’t be up all night you three! And keep the noise down! That goes double for you, Mabel.”

Without any further ado, the conman slammed the door shut, grumbling to himself as he headed downstairs all the while. Steven and Mabel could scarcely contain their shared squeals of delight as they jumped up and down together, overjoyed that their slumber party was saved.

“I said keep it down!” Stan shouted from downstairs, prompting the pair to cut the volume of their celebration a bit.

“Oh, this is so great!” Mabel exclaimed happily. “What should we do next? Play Tangler? Give Waddles a makeover? Make a blanket fort?”

“Go to bed?” Dipper suggested, knowing that once again, Steven and Mabel were missing the
“Oh, but it’s so early, Dipper!” Steven said brightly. “It’d be a waste to go to bed now. There’s still so much to do and so many tasty treats we can eat!”

“Uh yeah, about that? You might wanna lay off the sweets this late, Steven,” Dipper advised. “They can give you some pretty out-there dreams. Just ask Mabel.”

“Oh yeah, I have crazy dreams all the time from eating candy before bed!” Mabel exclaimed with a laugh. “One time, I had this dream where I was on a roller coaster, but I was riding a whale down the track and my hair was made out of rainbows! It was so cool!”

“Whoa, I wanna have a dream that cool!” Steven gasped, amazed. “Hand me those cupcakes again, Mabel! They’re gonna help me have the craziest, most awesome dream ever!”

“Yeah!” Mabel cheered, giving him the snacks. “We’re keeping this party going all night!”

“Oh boy…” Dipper sighed, knowing that this night would be a long one for him if no one else.

“Hey, you know what? I feel wide awake now!” Steven exclaimed excitedly. “I must have been so tired earlier that I just overcame it and now my body thinks its daytime again! I’ve conquered sleep itself!”

“All hail Steven the Sleep Conqueror!” Mabel declared with a laugh. “Nighttime and snooze buttons tremble in his presence!”

“You guys, that’s not-” Dipper tried to interject out of exasperation, but he was promptly ignored.

“I couldn’t possibly go to sleep now!” Steven proclaimed brazenly.

“Same here!” Mabel agreed, just as excited. “Let’s stay up all night! Maybe even longer than that!”

“No,” Dipper attempted to protest, but once again, he was outnumbered.

“Yeah!” Steven cheered. “All night! All night!” Mabel soon joined in on this zany chant, while Dipper merely sighed in defeat and continued reading, trying his best to block them out. “All night! All night!”

As it turned out “all night” only ended up being about an hour before all three of the kids ended up clocking out. Of course, Steven was the first to go as his earlier exhaustion returned and hit him hard, to the point that he practically K.O.ed on the floor. Thankfully, his sleeping bag was right underneath him with it happened to cushion the fall and provide him with something soft to lie on. The twins weren’t very long after him in falling asleep, as Mabel’s energy was quickly spent after her and Steven’s short-lived dance party, though she did manage to tiredly climb into bed first. While Dipper was the last to go to bed, he did so in a much more gradual, natural way, seeing as how he hadn’t exactly joined Steven and Mabel in their brief, yet wild escapades. But even so, soon enough the attic was filled with nothing more than the moonlight pouring in through the window and the sound of soft, peaceful snoozing.
move that he knew would win for sure. He was quickly proven wrong however, as Dogcopter set his chess piece piece down on top Steven’s checker piece.

“I win,” Dogcopter concluded, his voice smooth and coming out without the need for him to move his mouth at all.

“Oh what?” Steven asked, looking over the checkerboard with a laugh. “That was a good move.”

“Thanks.”

“Dogcopter, how do you do it?” the young Gem asked, shaking his head in amazement.

“How do I do what?” Dogcopter asked as calmly as ever.

“I mean, what’s your secret? How’d you get so talented?”

“Don’t focus so much on talent, Steven,” Dogcopter advised wisely. “Making art is all about communication. Look to what inspires you and then reshape it into something you love even more.” He paused for a moment to eat his chess piece whole. “Don’t worry about trying to be broad or appeal to everyone. Just be true to yourself, and people will appreciate your honesty.”

“Whoa…” Steven said, taking this somewhat random knowledge to heart. “Thanks for the advice.”

“Of course. Oh and take a deep breath,” Dogcopter said as he suddenly flew away at an alarming speed.

“What?” Before Steven could even comprehend what was happening, the island-scape was in suddenly crumbled apart, though he still had a brief moment to go off of Dogcopter’s advice and suck in a large breath as everything faded to black.

When the young Gem opened his eyes again, he once again found himself surrounded by the very same pink grass he had been in during his dreams the previous night. “Here again?” Steven thought curiously. Knowing that he wouldn’t have any air here, he continued to hold what breath he did have as he popped up a bit higher in the grass, allowing him to see that the grassy expanse stretched on for what seemed like forever. “I don’t know what this place is but it feels… familiar…” the young Gem continued to internally muse. “Why can’t I breathe? Wait a minute… Lion!”

As Steven began to struggle underneath Lion’s weight outside of his dream, he easily managed to wake Dipper and Mabel up, even though they had somehow both slept through the pink beast barging into the attic in the first place. “Ugh… what’s going on?” Mabel asked drowsily as she sat up in bed, her hair a mess as she resisted the urge to flop back onto her pillow.

“I don’t know…” Dipper mumbled just as tiredly, only for his eyes to go wide upon seeing the odd sight in the middle of the room. “Wait, Lion?!?”

“Ugh!” Steven shouted, finally pushing Lion off of him. “Lion! My face is not your bed!”

“Steven, how in the world did Lion get into the shack?” Dipper asked, rather alarmed as both him and Mabel got out of bed. “I thought you told him to stay back up at the temple!”

“Aw, looks like somebody was all lonely after not being invited to our slumber party,” Mabel said with a charmed smile as she reached out to pet Lion, only to have her advance be rejected with a sullen growl. “Whoa! Well excuse me, Mr. Night Owl.”
“Lion, that’s so not like you!” Steven scolded. “You love it when Mabel pets you! What’s going on with you lately?”

Lion had no chance to respond in any way as the already opened attic door burst open even moreso as Stan charged into the room, baseball bat in hand as he prepared to attack any apparent assailants. “Kids, somebody’s broken into the shack!” he shouted, glancing around the room with a fierce glare. “The front door was wide open! I don’t know how they managed to get past me, but when I catch that lousy, no-account beginner, whoever they are, I’m gonna—” The conman cut himself off upon seeing the pink beast sitting next to Steven, getting his answer. “Oh. Well I guess this is my fault then. I should have figured this would happen if I let you stay here, kid.”

“Oh, I’m really, really, sorry, Mr. Pines!” Steven apologized earnestly. “I don’t know how Lion managed to get in here, but I can promise you he’s going home right now.” The young Gem sent annoyed glare to his companion, who simply returned it with a much softer, almost apologetic glance.

“You’re darn right he is,” Stan remarked with a frustrated scowl. “It’s bad enough I have to babysit you for one night, kid. I’m not running an animal shelter here with that thing too! Now come on, pinky. Beat it.” Of course, Lion simply turned his nose up at the conman’s harsh manner, aggravating him even further. “Oh yeah? That’s how you wanna be? Well two can play at this game.” Putting his bat down, Stan marched over to Lion, reaching out to grab the pink beast by the ear and drag him out himself. However, he only narrowly missed having his hand scratched as Lion suddenly lashed his paw out at him with a fierce warning growl.

“Lion!” Steven gasped, appalled by the pink beast’s suddenly violent behavior.

“O-on second thought,” Stan backed away from Lion a bit, especially as the pink beast continued to growl at him. “He can stay. Heck, I—I’ll even make him breakfast in the morning, yeah! Just as long as he keeps those claws of his far away from me.”

The kids all exchanged a disappointed glance as the conman quickly retreated, not even bothering to exchange another glance with the perturbed pink beast as he left. “Well, we can always count on Stan to be helpful in a pinch,” Dipper remarked sarcastically.

“I just don’t get it….” Steven frowned to Lion, who remained close by his side. “What’s wrong with you, Lion? You’re acting so weird. Weirder than usual, I mean.”

The pink beast simply responded by letting out a loud groan as he rolled onto his back, giving the young Gem a pleading look as he exposed his soft stomach. “Oh my gosh,” Mabel whispered, completely charmed by this. “How can he be so cute?!?”

“Wait… you just wanted a belly rub?” the young Gem asked, confused.

“Oh come on,” Dipper shook his head. “He couldn’t have come all the way down here just so you could give him a belly rub. Could he?”

Lion let out another small roar in reply, giving Steven more than enough of a proper answer. “You never let me touch your belly!” he exclaimed, delighted as he rushed to rub the pink beast’s stomach. Mabel hurried over to join him, but before she could get close enough, Lion suddenly grabbed Steven with his front paws and pulled him close in something of a hug. Startled, the young Gem struggled to free himself from Lion’s surprisingly strong hold. “Ah! It’s a trap!” he cried, briefly lifting himself off of the pink beast’s chest. “An adorable trap!”

“Steven!” both twins gasped worriedly, both of them hurrying to Lion to try and save the young
Gem. However, as they got close, the pink beast sent them a loud growl, as if he was telling them to both back off, which they hesitantly did.

“What do we do? What do we do?!” Mabel asked fretfully. “We can’t let Lion smoother Steven with hugs! No matter how sweet it is!”

“Well we can’t let ourselves get mauled by an actual lion, Mabel!” Dipper protested, not wanting to be on the receiving end of Lion’s wrath yet again.

“Guys!” Steven exclaimed as he struggled to lift his head to catch a breath. “It’s ok! I-I’m… fine!”

“Really? Because it honestly doesn’t look like it, what with Lion trying to suffocate you and everything!” Dipper exclaimed in disbelief.

“N-no! I’m-” Steven cut himself off with annoyed huff, blowing some of Lion’s fur out of his face. “Ok, Lion, you got me. Will you finally let me go now?” Despite his pleas, the pink beast remained resolute, refusing to let the young Gem go for anything. “Come on! Ugh!” As Steven tried to pull himself free from Lion’s grip once more, the pastel beast retaliated by pushing him down once again, this time digging his claws into the young Gem’s back to ensure that he’d say put this time. “Ow!” Steven cried, finally provoked enough to pull himself away from Lion entirely.

“Whoa, Steven, are you ok?!” Mabel asked with concern, running over to check on him.

“Ugh, yeah I’m fine,” Steven sighed, rubbing his back in annoyance. “But Lion’s not!” He sent a very disapproving glare to his pink companion, who merely returned it with a questioning look, as though he had done nothing wrong. “That’s it, Lion! You’re on time out!” Firm in his resolve, Steven marched over to Lion and began pushing him out of the attic as much as he could. “You’re going outside to think about what you’ve done!”

“Uh, Steven? I really don’t think that’s working,” Dipper said with a doubtful frown as Lion remained as still as a statue, despite Steven’s best attempts to move him.

“No, I-I just gotta—whoa!” the young Gem suddenly stumbled backwards as Lion turned around on him, though fortunately, the pink beast didn’t try to shove his face into his mane this time. Steven took a cautious step back from his pink companion, who gave him what seemed to be a genuinely sad look, his ears flopped down and his eyes doleful and pleading. The young Gem could hardly deny how adorable Lion looked like this, especially as he blinked slowly and sweetly, filling both Steven and Mabel with absolute delight.

“He loves me!” Steven whispered with an enchanted gasp.

“And I love him!” Mabel quipped, just as enthralled. “He’s just so precious!”

“You guys can’t be serious, right?” Dipper asked with a scoff as Steven and Mabel rushed over to Lion. “Steven, you do remember how he nearly smothered you just a minute ago, don’t you?”

“Aw, I know. But I just can’t stay mad at that face!” Steven exclaimed warmly, throwing his arms around Lion in a wide hug. “You’re a wonderful human being, Lion! Except you’re not. ‘Cause you’re a lion.”

As Steven pressed his face into Lion’s mane, a soft pink light suddenly started to emit from it, startling both the twins quite a bit when they noticed it.

“Whoa…” Mabel gasped, amazed.
“What the…?” Dipper frowned in absolute bewilderment.

Yet despite their confusion, no one was more confused than Steven himself as he opened his eyes to find himself amidst the tall pink grass yet again, even though he was sure he was awake. Startled and bewildered, Steven pushed himself out of Lion’s mane as he took in a sharp gasp, only to find himself back in the attic once again and the twins staring at him with wide eyes.

“Steven, that was so cool,” Mabel whispered, awestruck.

“What was that?” Dipper asked, completely confounded.

“I don’t-” Steven cut himself off as he looked to Lion once again, noticing that the place where his hand rested on the pink beast’s mane was still glowing brightly. After exchanging a tentative glance with the twins, the young Gem sucked in a deep breath and plunged his head inside Lion’s mane once more, arriving in the wide pink field of his dreams yet again. “I’m inside Lion’s mane?!” Steven thought, alarmed at this revelation. Then again, it did make sense in a way that he had dreamed of this place every time Lion had slept on him over the past few nights. Still, the idea that an entire world seemed to exist within the pink beast’s mane was both incredible and unbelievable.

As Steven pulled himself out of Lion’s mane again, neither Dipper nor Mabel had any time to ask him any questions about it as he took in another deep breath and went in again, over and over again just out of his own curiosity and entertainment. While Steven laughed over how fun it was, Lion let out an unamused growl while both of the twins were clearly in suspense over what exactly the young Gem was seeing.

“Sorry,” Steven chuckled, giving Lion an apologetic grin. “I couldn’t resist.”

“So what’s in there?” Mabel asked, overwhelmed with curiosity. “More of Lion’s super-soft fur?”

“No, actually,” Steven shook his head, turning away from Lion briefly. “I don’t really know how to explain it but, like… there’s a huge field full of pink grass in there! Almost like it’s a whole other world, one that doesn’t really have any air in it, but it’s still so awesome!”

“What?” Dipper asked, puzzled. “Steven, that’s imp—Ok, you know what, maybe it’s not impossible given everything we’ve seen this summer, but still. How could an entire world fit inside Lion’s mane?”

“Who cares?” Mabel asked excitedly, running up to the pink beast. “I wanna see it!” Taking in a deep breath just as Steven had, Mabel shoved her face squarely into Lion’s mane, only for it to remain as solid and fluffy as ever. “Aw, what gives, Lion?” she frowned, pulling away from him a bit. “You’re not gonna let me in to see your pink grass dimension?”

“Maybe only I’m allowed in there…” Steven purposed thoughtfully, placing his hand against Lion’s mane and watching it light up again.

“Well then go in there and check it out!” Mabel urged. “And tell us everything about it! Considering how amazing Lion is, there’s bound to be some great stuff in there!”

“Uh, that might not be such a good idea, Steven,” Dipper cautioned much more rationally. “Who knows how big it really is in there? What if you get lost or run out of air or something?”

“Aw, Lion won’t let that happen,” Steven reassured the pink beast, who continued to stare down at him as stoically as ever. “After all, he did all this just so I could see that place. There’s gotta be something in there I’m meant to see, right?”
“Oh! What if there’s another, smaller version of Lion inside Lion’s mane?!” Mabel theorized zealously. “And another Lion inside that Lion’s mane! You know, like those cute little dolls that go inside each other.”

Dipper rolled his eyes upon hearing this rather outlandish idea, but Steven was intrigued by it nonetheless. “Well, I guess there’s only one way to find out,” the young Gem said with resolve. “I’m going in.” Without any further hesitation, Steven jumped right into the still-glowing opening in Lion’s mane, which closed the moment he disappeared into it entirely.

“Good luck, Steven!” Mabel called out after him. “Oh, and if you really do get lost in there, I call dibs on your Crying Breakfast Friends special edition box set!”

“Mabel!” Dipper scolded succinctly over his sister’s tactlessness.

Still, Steven didn’t really hear either of them as he emerged inside the pink grass yet again, holding onto the breath he had taken as he looked around curiously. “Am I… supposed to do something in here?” the young Gem thought to himself, still uncertain of why Lion was so insistent on showing him this mysterious place. He paused, however, as he caught sight of something rising over the grass afar in the distance, something that looked like the vague silhouette of a tree amidst the pale pink sky.

“What…?” Curious, Steven started making his way towards the tree, easily pushing his way through the tall grass as he got ever closer to the hill it was perched atop. It was quite tall and beautiful, with long branches adorned with pink leaves, in keeping with the color scheme. A variety of different items seemed to congregated around the tree, but unfortunately, Steven wasn’t able to get a good look at any of it before he finally ran out of air, prompting him to dive back into the grass with the hopes of getting more.

The twins both gasped in surprise as the young Gem’s head popped out of Lion’s main, though they did wait a moment for him to catch his breath before bombarding him with questions.

“So, what’s it like in there?” Mabel asked with a huge smile, completely intrigued. “Did you find anything cool or magical or anything that looked like a tiny Lion?”

“Or was it just a huge empty expanse of nothingness?” Dipper asked, still skeptical of the entire concept.

“No, there’s something in there!” Steven exclaimed. “It was a tree!”

“A tree?” both twins asked with confused frowns.

“Yeah, and there was all sorts of stuff lying all around it.”

“What kind of ‘stuff’?” Dipper asked, seeing as how that was a very vague description.

Steven paused for a moment, unsure of how to describe any of what he had only seen in the brief glance he had caught of it. “Hold on a second,” he said before heading back into Lion’s mane with a deep inhale.

As the young Gem poked his head through the grass again, he found himself at the foot of the tree’s hill, conveniently enough. Pushing through the last of the grass, Steven steadily scaled the hill, stopping as he stood before it and looked over the fascinating collection before him.

Standing at the far side of the tree’s base was a torn and tattered pink flag, adorned with an elegant rose design as it waved in the invisible wind of the area. Resting over one of the branches above it
was a bubbled gemstone, much like the ones in the temple, rectangular in shape is it descended down into something of an upside down pyramid. Steven was also quite surprised to see the large pink sword that him, the twins, and Connie had pulled out of Lion’s mane the other week, digging into the ground near the tree. Then again, he figured it would make sense for its usual home to be here, all things considered. On another branch hung what the young Gem recognized to be one of his father’s shirts from his touring days, a large black tee with the “Mr. Universe logo” branded upon it. A large chest was also resting near the tree, a photograph of Rose and Greg resting against it, the very same one the former rock star had in his storage shed. Still curious, Steven glanced just a little ways past the chest to see a long glass tube sitting behind it with a label that read “Crystal Gems” in elegant cursive. Something else was written underneath that, but the young Gem couldn’t exactly make it out given how the tube was partially rolled over.

However, what caught Steven’s eye the most out of all of these various items was, oddly enough, a VHS tape sitting right at his feet. Intrigued, he picked it up and looked over the label on its side, which was simply marked: “For Steven.”

“For me?” Steven wondered, frowning down at the tape. “Who would put this here? And how does this huge place fit inside of Lion’s mane anyw-” The young Gem’s musings were abruptly cut off as he realized he was all too quickly running out of air again. His already palpable panic grew as he realized the hill he was on was solid; the only way out was, of course, through the grass.

Grasping onto the tape tightly, Steven began bounding down the hill, feeling his lungs tighten with each footfall. It really didn’t help matters, however, when his foot caught on a rock, which sent him pummeling to the ground hard and resulted in him rolling down the hill and into the grass uncontrollably.

While Steven was exploring whatever Lion’s mane had to offer, the twins remained standing by, anxiously waiting as seconds started to turn into minutes. “Uh… do you think he’s ok in there?” Dipper asked his sister with ever growing concern.

“I’m sure he is,” Mabel shrugged blithely. “It’s he, Lion?” She grinned to the pink beast, who simply shoved her away from him with a simple push of his paw. Of course, Mabel was hardly offended by this as she instead let out an amused laugh amidst falling to the ground. “Aw, love pats!”

“Mabel, that wasn’t-” Dipper was suddenly interrupted as Steven fell cleanly out of Lion’s mane, letting out a sharp gasp as he fell on his back.

“Steven!” the twins exclaimed, shocked as they hurried over to him.

“Are you ok?” Dipper asked, offering a hand to help Steven up.

“Um… yeah, I think so,” the young Gem replied, still a bit breathless as he stood.

“What’s that?” Mabel asked nodded to the tape in Steven’s hands. “Oh! Is it a movie?”

“I… don’t really know what this is,” Steven frowned down at the tape. “I just sorta found it in there, and it says its for me, and I just… took it.”

“But why would there be a video tape inside of Lion’s-’” Dipper abruptly cut himself off in the middle of his question, letting out a tired sigh before restarting. “You know what? I feel like that’s definitely not the right question to ask about all this.”

“You’re right! The right question to ask is: can we see what’s on it?” Mabel asked Steven with a
eager grin.

Steven shrugged as he glanced over to Lion, who had finally settled down for a nap, his mission apparently accomplished, whatever it was. “I don’t see why not.”

Seeing as how it was already early morning anyway, the kids hurried downstairs to as quietly as they could, as not to frustrate Stan anymore than they already had that night alone. Lion padded along after them, but took to cuddling in the corner of the den with Waddles as the kids all got comfy around the TV in preparation for their viewing.

“Hey, dorks,” Wendy greeted with a tired yawn as she stepped into the room, having just arrived for her early morning shift. “You guys are up early. What, did you have a crazy slumber party and stay up all night?”

“Uh, yeah, actually,” Dipper admitted with a shrug.

“A tape, huh?” Wendy chuckled, taking a seat on the arm of the chair. “Mind if I join you guys then? Anything’s better than having to open up the gift shop this early.”

“Sure, Wendy. Let’s just start it up here and…” Steven smiled as he put the tape into the VHS player. No one really said anything else as the young Gem pushed play and returned to his seat, mostly as everyone looked to the static-filled screen out of curiosity, until a clear image finally appeared.

The first scene of the mysterious tape was a familiar one; namely, it was a wide shot of the woods near the temple, the bright sun shining through the trees as birdsong echoed in the background. Static suddenly filled the screen once again as the image cut to another one, this time of the bright blue skies above, clouds lazily floating through them.

The kids were all admittedly initially unimpressed by this seemingly random collection of nature shots. However, their shared interest was instantly peaked the moment the Gem temple appeared on screen. The camera tilted down to where the house usually would have been, only to reveal that it was gone and the warp pad and temple door could now be clearly seen instead.

Once again, the tape cut back to the woods, only this time, it panned over to a much younger version of Greg, his hair still full and long as he attempted to climb a nearby tree, to little avail. Somewhere off screen, a soft, feminine voice let out a gentle chuckle, amused by the former rock star’s antics. “What are you doing?”

Steven took in a sharp gasp upon hearing this voice, not immediately recognizing it, though his eyes wide as he put the pieces together. Inside Lion’s mane, the tape had been sitting right next to a photo of his parents. And if Greg himself was in the tape, then that meant that the only one who could be filming it was... his mother.

Rose Quartz.

Dipper, Mabel, and Wendy all looked to the young Gem with soft smiles as they apparently all reached the same realization. Still, no one spoke as the tape continued. The next shot was of Greg, lying in the middle of the clearing they were shooting in, fast asleep as a squirrel sat upon his
stomach.

Rose let out another warm laugh at this, her voice melodious and inviting as she whispered to the camera. “Greg made a friend.” The peaceful moment was soon shattered, however, as the squirrel suddenly chattered loudly, startling Greg wide awake.

“Wha-?!” the former rock star exclaimed, startled as he quickly sat up and scared the squirrel off. Rose laughed again, catching Greg’s attention and causing him to blush in slight embarrassment over his unnecessary panic.

The next shot was of Greg himself, standing against the forest as he looked into the camera somewhat awkwardly. “Go on…” Rose urged gently.

“Sorry, I’m getting stage fright here,” Greg admitted, glancing away.

“Tell us about yourself,” the pink Gem encouraged once more.

“Well… let’s see here,” the former rock star began thoughtfully. “My name is… Greg. No, no no!” he suddenly panicked. “This is all wrong!”

Once again, the tape cut, this time to a bird nesting high in a tree. “Ok, go!” Greg exclaimed off-screen, prompting Rose to tilt the camera down to him. The former rock star grinned daringly, his guitar perched and ready to play as he wore a pair of dark sunglasses. “They call me…” Greg trailed off, strumming his guitar broadly. “Mr. Universe! Get ready, baby! You’re gonna have the coolest dad this side of the cosmos!” Greg smirked as he plucked at his guitar once more, singing along to his light riff. “Press the button, Rose!”

“Oh, right!” Rose exclaimed, hitting a button that caused a colorful stream to wash over the screen. “Was that the right one?”

“Uh… maybe?” Greg shrugged.

“Now, what does this one do?” Rose wondered, hitting another button that caused a star to iris out to black before cutting once more.

When the screen cleared again, Greg was sitting in the middle of the clearing, his back turned to the camera as he strummed his guitar peacefully, a contented smile on his face. After a moment of this gentle, calming melody, Rose began to speak. “Isn’t it remarkable, Steven? This world is full of so many possibilities. Each living things has an entirely unique experience. The sights they see, the sounds they hear, the lives they live… are so complicated… a-and so simple…”

Tears were already forming in the young Gem’s eyes as he listened to his mother’s beautiful message to him, hanging onto every love-filled word she spoke. His already touched smile grew even wider as she continued. “And there’s no place on this planet where that’s more clear to see than right here, in Gravity Falls,” Rose went on, panning the camera around to the trees. She gradually turned the camera in a full circle as she spoke, the shot landing on the Mystery Shack down below for a moment or two. “There are things here that I’ve never seen anywhere else, things that still amaze me every time I encounter them. So many strange, yet wonderful creatures and people… I can’t wait for you to join them. This place is so special to me, Steven. And I hope that it will become just as special to you too someday…”

Rose paused as she turned the camera away from the shack and towards herself instead. Her luxurious curls spilled over her shoulders as gently as ever as she looked into the camera, her expression sincere yet hopeful. “Steven,” she said, her voice filled with both affection and
intention. “We can’t both exist. I’m going to become half of you. And I need you to know that every moment you love being yourself, that’s me, loving you and loving being you. Because you’re going to be something extraordinary.” Rose pulled the camera a bit closer to her, a warm, loving smile crossing her features. “You’re going to be a human being.”

“Hey, Rose!” Greg called from off-screen, diverting the pink Gem’s attention for a moment. Still, she looked to the camera one last time, giving one final message to her then-unborn son.

“Take care of them, Steven.”

The shot changed one last time as Rose set the camera down, revealing the Gem on her very-pregnant stomach. Her curls twisted casually as she walked over to Greg, who placed a gentle hand on her stomach as well. The battery meter in the corner of the screen began to blink red as the couple leaned in for a kiss.

And just like that, it was over.

Static crackled on the screen for another moment or two before it cut to black and the tape popped out of the player. Needless to say that no one’s eyes were dry in the aftermath of watching such a touching, inspiring message. Still, Stan had no idea of this as he barged into the room as gruffly as he usually did.

“Alright, kids, enough loungin’ around in here,” the conman remarked stoically. “It’s time to open-” Stan cut himself off as the group around the TV all looked to him, the tears in their eyes still quite clear. Surprised and unsure of what to say in light of this, the conman backed out of the room slowly, allowing the twins to get up and pass by him first. “What the heck did you kids watch?” he asked, confounded.

Neither Dipper nor Mabel offered their uncle any real response, however as they dried their respective tears and exchanged a soft smile. Neither of them were really sure what to say after what they had just watched themselves, but that was fine. After all, not much else was needed after something like that. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking, bro-bro?” Mabel asked after a moment of tentative silence.

“That we should call Mom and thank her for the care package?” Dipper guessed, still smiling.

“Yes,” Mabel nodded happily.

“Oh, definitely,” Dipper readily agreed. “I feel like we’d be crazy not to after… well, you know.” The twins shared another warm grin as they headed for the phone, still leaving the conman quite in the dark about everything.

“Wait, kids? Is someone gonna fill me in on what’s going on?” Stan asked, somewhat disgruntled. “Kids!”

Steven hugged his mother’s tape close to his chest as he pulled it out of the VHS player. His eyes were still wet with happy tears as he looked to his name on the side of it, no doubt written there by Rose herself. The young Gem had always wanted to meet his mother for himself somehow, even if he knew it was impossible. And while this wasn’t exactly the same as speaking to her face to face, it was certainly the next best thing.

“Steven, wait up,” Wendy stopped the young Gem before he could leave the room. She was just
finishing wiping away her own tears as she smiled down at him, her usually casual manner shaken somewhat. “Um… well, uh… You know, if you ever need to talk to someone about the whole… ‘no mom’ thing... you can always talk to me. I know how that feels, after all.”

“Thanks, Wendy,” Steven said with a warm smile. “And... I’m sorry again about your mom. I bet she was really nice, like my mom was.”

“She was…” Wendy said with a wistful sigh. “But like I said, its ok, dude. We actually have a bunch of tapes of her at home just like your mom’s. Ok, well, maybe not just like hers’ but still. We have something to remember her by.”

“Yeah…” Steven grinned, looking down to the tape in his hands contentedly. “Something to remember her by…”

“Anyway, I better get to work before Stan has an aneurism,” the cashier joked, her usual playful ways returning. “See you later, Steven.”

“Bye!” Steven called after Wendy as she headed into the gift shop. Knowing he had to get ready for the day himself, the young Gem started to head for the door, Lion trailing not too far behind him. Steven was startled a bit as Lion bumped his head against his back, catching his attention gently. “Thanks, Lion,” he said with complete sincerity, embracing the pink beast. After all, if not for his efforts, then Steven might have never found this tape at all and might have never gotten to know his mother, even in this very simple way. A happy sigh escaped young Gem as he looked down to the tape one last time, his mother’s loving words of wisdom still echoing inside his mind.

“Take care of them, Steven…”

The young Gem leaned his head against Lion’s chest as he closed his eyes, clinging onto the image of his mother’s kind, smiling face. It was an image that would only ever exist for him in photos and tapes, but perhaps that was really all he needed. For now. “Don’t worry,” Steven promised in a gentle, blissful whisper, one that he knew the half of him that was Rose would certainly hear. “I will.”
Chapter 29: Revenge Trip

Chapter Summary

In which Stan and Amethyst do illegal shit and angsty flashbacks happen

Chapter Notes

Ok, so here's another completely original chapter, one that I loved writing and I really hope you all enjoy reading. Why? well because its about one of my favorite original dynamics in UF: Stan and Amethyst! Still, its super LONG but, hey, more for you guys to read, am I right? But anyway, here we go! Enjoy!

20-8-9-14-7-19 20-8-1-20 13-9-7-8-20 2-5 7-18-5-1-20
2-21-20 23-8-1-20 20-8-5-25'12-12 4-15 3-15-21-12-4 19-1-22-5 20-8-5 5-1-18-20-8

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, we’ve just about reached the end of our tour,” Stan concluded as he addressed the large crowd of tourists crowded right outside the shack. The conman grinned broadly as he heard the collective sighs of disappointment from the enthralled guests, knowing he had them right where he wanted them. “I know, I know. It’s a shame such a good time has to end. But… just because you folks have been such a good audience, I’ll let you all get a glimpse at one last exhibit. What do ya say?”

Of course, the crowd cheered in pleading support of this idea, prompting Stan to comply and continue on to the curtained off area ahead. “Well, if you say so…” he said with a coy smirk. “But I should warn you: this isn’t for the faint of heart. Because right behind this curtain, is a real, 100% genuine living dinosaur!”

The tourists gasped in awed anticipation, their cameras already raised to snap photos of the rumored creature. Which was why Stan wasted no more time keeping any of them in suspense. “Here he is! The one, the only: Compy the Compso—Compa—Compasaort—Dipper!” the conman shouted, hoping his nephew could fill him in with a proper pronunciation. “What’s it called again?!”

“It’s ‘Compsognathus’!” Dipper corrected, briefly poking his head outside of the shack.

“Yeah, what he said,” Stan said to the tourists. “Anyway, behold!” Without any further ado, the conman lifted the curtain to where the supposed dinosaur was contained. Stan prided himself on swiping a small dino egg the other day during the gang’s journey in the abandoned mines. And, as he had hoped, the egg had hatched a baby compsognathus, a dinosaur that likely wouldn’t grow beyond the size of a chicken, but a dinosaur nonetheless. And given its small size and generally non-violent demeanor, Stan saw the miniature creature as a prime attraction, especially since “Compy” just so happened to be quite the little pick pocket himself. The conman had already profited quite a bit off of the baby dinosaur, and he was poised to do so again as he unveiled it to
the anxiously awaiting crowd.

However, Stan’s wide grin turned to a confused frown upon hearing the crowd’s shocked gasps turn into angry boos. Alarmed, the conman quickly spun around to see that the enclosure he usually kept Compy in was completely empty, save for the dinosaur’s small haul of stolen watches and credit cards. But the creature itself had vanished, the only sign of its escape being the back of the gate of its enclosure had been somehow torn off.

“What?!” Stan shouted, aghast. However, things quickly turned from bad to worse as the tourists voiced their enraged dissent.

“I can’t believe this!”

“What a rip off!”

“I want my money back!”

“W-wait, no!” Stan exclaimed, trying his best to calm his outraged patrons. Unfortunately, it was to no avail as they all collectively stormed off, leaving the conman very distraught over his sudden loss of profits. “Kids!”

There was just enough heated rage behind Stan’s bellow to prompt both of the twins to come running out of the shack, both of them startled yet quite curious to see what all the fuss was about. “Grunkle Stan, what’s wrong?” Mabel asked with apt concern.

“Do you need to hear how to pronounce compsognathus again?” Dipper asked, crossing his arms. “Because I literally just told you.

“I wish,” Stan scoffed coldly. “You two runts notice anything missing back there?” he asked, nodding to the empty enclosure.

“Whoa, hey, yeah!” Mabel exclaimed, running up to the side of the enclosure. “Compy’s gone! What happened? Did he go for his lunch break?”

“Or did he just finally pick the lock and make a break for it?” Dipper suggested much more rationally.

“That’s just it! There’s no way he could have busted out!” the conman grumbled hotly. “I had Soos rig this thing to be foolproof! And dinosaur proof! Somebody tore that gate off on purpose. And no one around here is resting until I found out who!”

“Yo, Stan!” Amethyst called as she jumped onto the scene quite out of nowhere.

“Not now, Amethyst,” Stan quickly brushed her off. “We’re kind of in the middle of a crisis here!”

“Oh what, you mean your missing baby dinosaur crisis?” she asked knowingly. “Well then, you might wanna take a look at this. Found it nearby on the way down here.” The purple Gem handed the conman a small slip of paper, one that he proceeded to read aloud to the kids.

“Dear Stanford,” Stan began reading, squinting at the tiny writing. “Hope ‘ya’ll’ don’t mind me fixing your gate for you. I thought your newest attraction could use some extra roaming space. But look on the bright side. With that curious creature gone, all your customers are bound to come on down to my ‘lil’ ol Tent of Telepathy instead! Warmest regards: Lil Gideon.”

“You guys ready to see something funny?” Amethyst whispered to the twins the second Stan
finished reading. “Wait for it… In three… two… one…”

“GIDEON!” Stan shouted, completely infuriated as he crumpled the child psychic’s spiteful note in his fist. While Dipper and Mabel were quite startled by this, Amethyst simply let out an amused chuckle at the conman’s frustration, especially as he threw the note down petulantly. “That four foot, pig-nosed, pompadour-pedaling little creep! Why, I oughta skin him alive for letting Compy out! That dinosaur was the attraction of a lifetime and now he’s gone thanks to that phony!”

“Aw, don’t be so upset, Grunkle Stan,” Mabel encouraged sweetly. “I’m sure Compy’s still around here somewhere! We’ll even help you find him, right Dipper?”

“Oh, yeah. I mean, he can’t be too hard to find,” Dipper shrugged. “You could probably track him by the trail of spare pocket change he’s always dropping.”

“I appreciate the thought, kids, but chances are Compy’s long gone by now,” Stan said with genuine disappointment. “Gideon probably pried that gate open last night when we were all asleep. I knew I should have had Soos stand guard out here all night!”

“Geez, Stan, don’t be such a sadsack about it,” Amethyst rolled her eyes. “Look at it this way. Sure, Gideon’s a clever little punk who ruined your new attraction and has a way flashier setup than yours. But you still have something that he doesn’t.”

“Oh yeah, what’s that?” Stan asked caustically.

“Oh wait… you wanted me to give you an answer to that?” the purple Gem asked with a frown. “Because I thought you would have one.”

“That’s not helping, Amethyst,” the conman said dryly. He paused for a moment, however, upon stealing a glance up at the temple. “Uh, speaking of not helping… have you seen your place lately?”

“Huh?” Amethyst turned around, confused, at first, before gasping at what she saw. She hadn’t noticed it upon emerging from the temple earlier, but now she could clearly see that the entire stony surface of the massive statue, save for the house below it, had been somehow coated in a rather obnoxious shade of pink paint, compete with a layer of shining glitter thrown on top. The purple Gem’s jaw dropped in absolute shock upon seeing such an alarming sight, and while both Stan and Dipper stared at it in apt bewilderment, Mabel let out a delighted gasp over it.

“Oh my gosh! The temple looks so pretty in pink!” she quipped brightly. “When did you guys paint it?”

“We didn’t,” Amethyst shook her head, still absolutely befuddled. “Besides, even if we did ever paint it, we wouldn’t-”

“AMETHYST!” the purple Gem didn’t have time to finish her remark before Pearl’s very loud, very angry shout coming from up the hill.

“Oh boy…” Amethyst cringed, already anticipating the white Gem’s inevitable rant. “I better run on up there before Pearl gets a crack in her gem. See you guys around. And hey, who knows? Maybe your missing dinosaur will turn up somewhere after all.”

“Yeah, maybe he will,” Stan deadpanned as Amethyst leapt off to head up to the temple. “Especially since you two munchkins are gonna go out there looking for him,” he said to the twins.

“Wait. By ourselves?” Dipper asked with a frown.
“You’re not gonna help us, Grunkle Stan?” Mabel questioned with a slight pout.

“Ha! You kids really think I have time to run around the woods searching for that thing?” Stan scoffed. “I gotta stick around here and get that fence fixed now, all because that skunk Gideon has to stick his nose where it doesn’t belong. Now what are you two doing just standing around here gawking for?” he asked the twins harshly, already ushering them off. “You got a compo-whatever to find. And don’t come back until you do!”

Amethyst let out a long sigh as she caught sight of Pearl, Garnet, and Steven standing before the now-pink temple. The elder two Gems looked far from pleased as they looked over the sight, though Steven glanced up at it in apt amazement, still wondering how such a thing could have happened in the first place.

“Oh, there you are, Amethyst!” Pearl huffed impatiently as the purple Gem arrived. “Care to explain this little disaster?”

“Uh, the temple’s pink, dude,” Amethyst shrugged. “Anyone with eyes could see that. Duh.”

“No, that’s not—” the white Gem cut herself off with a frustrated groan. “What I meant was, what in the world possessed you to do something as ridiculous as painting the entire temple?!”

“Wait… you guys think I did this?” the purple Gem asked in disbelief.

“Wouldn’t be the first time you did something like this,” Garnet noted stoically.

“Yeah…” Steven agreed with an apprehensive frown. “There was that time you filled the entire house with golf balls… Or that April Fool’s you washed all my clothes and shrunk them in the dryer on purpose…”

“Or the time you emptied a box of cicadas into my room!” Pearl interjected with an angry scowl.

“Or the time you broke the microwave trying to stuff it full of pinecones,” Garnet added.

“Or-”

“Ok, ok! I get it!” Amethyst interrupted, thoroughly annoyed. “Sometimes I get a little carried away with my pranks and end up making some pretty big messes. I know that. But do you guys really think I would waste so much time painting the temple pink just to get a quick laugh out of it?”

“Yes,” Garnet, Pearl, and Steven all answered in perfect unison.

“Amethyst,” the Gem leader said, her tone calm yet firm. “We understand that sometimes your emotions get the better of you and that acting out is the only way you can vent those emotions. But sometimes, you take things too far. And this is definitely one of those times.”

“But I didn’t do it!” Amethyst argued adamantly. “I’m serious! Steven, you believe me, right?!”

“Uh… well…” the young Gem frowned, not really sure what to think. After all, the evidence stacked against the purple Gem was pretty high, especially considering her countless past offenses.

“Oh come on!” Amethyst groaned, growing more desperate by the second. “You guys can’t be serious! I promise, I didn’t do this!”

“Well if you didn’t do it, then who did?” Pearl asked caustically.
“Uh… I don’t…” the purple Gem bit her lip, glancing around for a moment before gasping as she glanced down at the Mystery Shack and remembered something important. “It was Gideon!”

“Gideon?” Steven asked with a confused frown. “But he hasn’t really that bad since the whole thing with the size crystal and the Watermelon Stevens a few weeks ago. What makes you think he did this?”

“Because he just punked Stan too!” Amethyst exclaimed earnestly. “Gideon let Stan’s new attraction loose, and he even left a note about it behind saying he did it! Heck, if you guys need proof, then I can even have Stan vouch for me!”

“Oh because Stan is definitely a reliable source,” Pearl rolled her eyes.

“So what, are you saying that little punk wouldn’t do something like this?” the purple Gem asked harshly. “I mean, the kid’s made it pretty clear that he hates us. Messing with our temple like this would be just up his dumb little alley.”

“We’re not saying he couldn’t have,” Garnet said. “But there’s just no real proof.”

“So basically… what you’re saying is that I’m getting the blame for this?!”

“For now, yes,” the Gem leader nodded. “At least until we figure out who really did this.”

“Which means,” Pearl added pointedly. “You’re the one responsible for cleaning this little ‘mess’ up, Amethyst.”

“Aw, what?!” Amethyst exclaimed in complete dismay. “You guys can’t be for real right now! You want me to clean the entire temple?!”

“Yes,” Garnet affirmed coldly.

“But that’ll take hours!”

“Well then, that leaves you with plenty of time to contemplate the consequences of your actions while you work,” Pearl remarked. “And maybe next time, you’ll think twice about doing something so… destructive and defiant!”

“I told you, I didn’t-” Amethyst cut herself off with a heavy sigh, knowing that Garnet and Pearl weren’t going to believe her, no matter what she said. “You know what? Who cares? I’ll clean the stupid temple. Even though I shouldn’t have to.”

“Taking responsibility for your actions is an important lesson to learn, Amethyst,” Garnet said as her and Pearl started to head inside. “You’ll thank us for this later.”

“No I won’t,” Amethyst scowled, kicking a rock once the two elder Gems were out of earshot.

“Aw, I’m sorry, Amethyst,” Steven frowned sympathetically. “To be honest, I… kinda don’t think you did this either… Though I guess there really is no way to know for sure.”

“Pfft, come on, Steven, I didn’t do this,” Amethyst reiterated. “That tiny dork Gideon did, I’m sure of it. If only I could make Garnet and Pearl see that. Or better yet, get back at that little runt for it…” The purple Gem scowled petulantly as she crossed her arms and glanced down. However, she was only silent for a moment before an idea struck her, one that would certainly satisfy one of those conditions. “That’s it!”
“What’s it?” Steven asked curiously.

Amethyst sucked in a sharp breath upon hearing this question, seeing as how she had forgotten the young Gem was even there. “Oh uh… nothin’. I… I just thought of a way to… clean the temple up really fast! Yeah.”

“Oh… well, do you want some help?” the young Gem offered selflessly. “Because between the two of us, I’m sure we could get it done a lot faster!”

“Nah, Steven, I got this,” Amethyst waved him off, glancing down to the Mystery Shack with a sly smirk. “Or should I say… we got this…”

Stan let out a long sigh as he finished off another can of Pitt Cola. Though had already sent the twins to bed roughly an hour ago, the conman stayed up and lamented the loss of his premier attraction by his lonesome. After hours of searching, Dipper and Mabel had finally returned with the unfortunate assurance that Compy was indeed gone for good, much to Stan’s deep disappointment. Not only had the conman lost plenty of customers thanks to Gideon’s underhanded scheme, but he had also lost any potential money the miniature dinosaur could have brought in for him in the future. And for someone who loved profits as much as Stan did, it was certainly a heavy blow.

“Ugh…” Stan finally groaned to himself indignantly. “Stupid Gideon…. Always ruining everything…”

“Tell me about it.” The conman perked up, surprised as he looked over to see Amethyst perched in the nearby open windowsill. A cross expression rested on her face as she reclined, her arms crossed and her entire body covered in flecks of pink paint and glitter.

“What are you doing down here so late?” Stan asked her, hardly even surprised by her sudden appearance. After all, this was far from the first time she had broken into the shack under the cover of night. “And what happened to you? You look like one of Mabel’s arts and crafts projects.”

The purple Gem blew her hair out of her eye with a huff as she jumped down at headed over to take a seat at the table across from Stan. “I just spent the past seven hours scrubbing paint off the temple because apparently Garnet and Pearl think I made the place all pink and sparkly,” she scowled, taking the conman’s empty soda can and swallowing it whole. “Of course, I didn’t do it. But you wanna know who I think did?”

“Let me take a wild guess…”

“Gideon,” the both answered with equal disdain for the child psychic.

“Ugh, that pint sized psychic is a real pain in the neck,” Stan remarked bitterly. “Who does he think he is, anyway? Messing with us. Somebody really oughta teach that kid a lesson.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking…” Amethyst said with a growing smirk.

“Oh really?” the conman asked, somewhat intrigued. “And what did you have in mind?”

“Oh, nothing much,” the purple Gem shrugged casually, though it was clear her zeal was starting to get the better of her. “I just figured maybe finally it’s time for another one of our good old fashioned… Revenge Trips?”
Stan’s interest immediately pattered out as soon as he heard this. “No.”

“What? Come on!” Amethyst urged. “It’s been years since we’ve gone out on one! Don’t tell me you haven’t been itching for a wild night of righting wrongs, taking names, and getting even! You and me used to be revenge masters, remember?!”

“Yeah that’s just it, we used to be,” Stan pointed out solidly. “We haven’t pulled a Revenge Trip in over fourteen years now. And even back in the day when we used to do them every week, something would always go wrong. I told you after the last time we got arrested that I’m done with those.”

“Pfft, since when did you get so old and lame?” the purple Gem rolled her eyes. “So what if we got busted a few times? It’s like you always used to say: ‘no pain, no gain’. And we gained a lot back in our revenge days. You can’t deny that.”

“Heh, yeah we did,” Stan remarked with a small, reminiscent smile. It quickly faded however when he noticed the coy grin Amethyst was giving him. “But we can’t go on another Revenge Trip. Not now. Things around here… they aren’t like they used to be.”

“Oh yeah? How?” Amethyst asked, raising a suspicious eyebrow.

“Uh… well… I… I got the twins to worry about now. What if something happened on our Revenge Trip, huh? Who’d take care of ’em?”

“They don’t live here all the time, do they?” the purple Gem reminded caustically. She let out a teasing laugh as she threw her voice to mimic the conman. “Oh, look at me! I’m Stan and I’ve turned into such a huge softie all because I took in two kids for the summer. Chill out, dude,” she remarked in her usual voice. “Dipper and Mabel would be alright. They’d just get sent home or whatever. No biggie.”

Stan let out a harsh scoff at this, glaring rather coldly at Amethyst upon hearing this. As much as he didn’t want to admit it, the thought of the twins being sent home because of his own misdeeds was a rather unsavory one. “Sure, ‘no biggie’,” he repeated sullenly. “By the way, don’t you have your own little munchkin to worry about?”

“What, you mean Steven?” Amethyst asked, glancing away briefly. “He’ll be fine if something happened to me. Heck, he’d probably be better off with just Garnet and Pearl taking care of him anyway.”

The conman’s expression softened as he noticed how suddenly forlorn the purple Gem was. “Hey, uh… you know the kids told me about your little trip to the Kindergarten last week…” he said rather hesitantly. “Is… is that what this is really all about?”

“What? No!” Amethyst retorted harshly. “This has nothing to do with the Kindergarten thing! This isn’t about ‘blowing off steam’ or anything stupid like that! No, you know what this is really about, Stan, just as much as I do. It’s about revenge!”

“Wouldn’t be a Revenge Trip if it was about anything else,” Stan noted with a small grin.

“And it won’t be a Revenge Trip if I try to roll solo,” the purple Gem huffed in annoyance. “Come on, Stan. I know you wanna go do this, even if you’re acting like you don’t. The look on Gideon’s face will be priceless once we get even with him! It’ll totally be worth it.”

“It won’t be if we get caught.”
“Then we just won’t get caught. Don’t tell me that you miss the thrill of going out on the road, the excitement of sneaking in and out of places, the sweet reward of sticking it to the man! You used to be all about that kind of stuff before you got all old and boring.”

“Hey, hey, hey! Who said anything about me being old and boring?” Stan protested.

“You did by saying you don’t wanna go,” Amethyst retorted, knowing she was getting close to convincing him. “Never would have pegged you to be such a scaredy cat, Stan. Especially given your track record. But I guess it was bound to happen eventually. You just can’t keep up with me anymore.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah!”

“Well, I think you’re wrong!” the conman exclaimed, slamming a fist down on the table petulantly. “I could keep up with you just as easily now as I used to way back when!”

“Then prove it!” Amethyst challenged, jumping onto the table herself.

“Fine! Then I will!”

“So you’re in?”

Stan let out a deep, frustrated breath as he glared down at the hand Amethyst was extended to him, catching the clever smirk she was sending his way. He knew that this would likely be a risky endeavor, perhaps one of their most dangerous Revenge Trips yet, given their history with Gideon. But still, he had never been able to turn one of Amethyst’s dares down. And this one was certainly no exception. “I’m in!” he exclaimed, firmly shaking her hand to solidify their plans.

“YEAH!” Amethyst shouted excitedly, jumping up and down on the table happily as the conman simply smirked in subtle satisfaction. “Stan and Amethyst are BACK in business, baby! Revenge Trip, here we come!”

As with all of their infamous Revenge Trips, planning was by far the quickest and easiest part for Stan and Amethyst to get through first. It wasn’t their custom to leave any stone unturned in their escapades, which was why they had conceived a two-fold revenge scheme against Gideon, one that they were certain would even the playing field and then some. Still, before they set out, they had to make sure to gather the proper supplies; after all, there was no room for error in a Revenge Trip, as the pair had learned several times over.

“Ok, so Greg agreed to foot the bail this time in case things do go wrong,” Stan said as he hung the phone up. “Apparently he expects me to ‘pay him back’ this time or somethin’. I dunno.”

“I don’t even know why you bothered to ask him anyway. I already told you, nothing’s gonna go wrong,” Amethyst scoffed as she continued laying their tools of the trade out on the table. Hammers, screwdrivers, and crowbars were only a small part of the extensive collection that also consisted of gloves, gaffers tape, rope, magnifying glasses, flashlights, sponges, and more. Neither of them were exactly sure what they would definitively need until they were actually out in the field, but still, there was no harm in going prepared.

“Still, we’re better safe than sorry,” Stan remarked, crossing his arms as he looked over their
supplies.

“Geez, Stan, since when did you start caring so much about the fuzz?” Amethyst rolled her eyes. “You were the guy who crashed his car into the side of the jail just to break me out, remember?”

“I sure do,” Stan couldn’t help but chuckle fondly over the memory. “And then the next time around, you shapeshifted into a bulldozer and broke me out.”

“Hey, you know I always come through,” Amethyst smirked proudly. “Still… we’ve had some pretty wild Revenge Trips. You can’t imagine how hyped I am to finally be going on another one after all these years!”

“Yeah, well save that hype for the road,” Stan chuckled, amused. “Cause the last thing I wanna do is wake the-”

“Grunkle Stan?”

Stan and Amethyst both froze as they turned to the threshold of the kitchen, where a very tired Dipper and Mabel stood, both of them looking to the pair in apt confusion.

“Uh… yo, you guys,” Amethyst greeted with a forced grin. “What’s up?”

“I feel like we should be asking you guys that question instead,” Dipper said with a yawn. “What are you doing with all that stuff?”

“Are you guys gonna go rob a bank?” Mabel asked curiously. “And if so, can we come! I’ve always wanted to be an accomplice in a high-stakes bank robbery, just like in the movies!”

“Yeesh, kid, we ain’t robbing any banks tonight,” Stan informed dryly. “We’re just going to take care of a little… personal business.”

“At 11 o’clock at night?” Dipper asked, glancing over at the clock.

The conman and the purple Gem exchanged an uneasy glance, neither of them really sure how to respond, seeing as how they had been caught on the spot like this. Still, as usual, Stan was the one who came through with an expectantly snappy response. “Yeah, maybe. What’s it to you, kid? I’m a grown adult and Amethyst is a… grown magical rock person. Which means we’re allowed to be out as late as we want and do whatever we want while we’re out.”

“Oooo, you guys are gonna do something super mischievous, aren’t you?” Mabel asked with an intrigued grin.

“We don’t know,” Amethyst shrugged vaguely. “It depends.”

“Depends on what?” Dipper asked, still quite confused.

“Depends on a whole lot of none of your business,” Stan retorted crossly. “Now why don’t you just run on back to bed and pretend like this was all just a weird dream, k?”

“Yeah, and don’t go telling Pearl or Garnet about any of this,” Amethyst added firmly. “It’ll just be our little secret, got it?”

The twins looked to each other, quite bewildered by how mysterious the pair was being. Still, it was quite clear that both Stan and Amethyst were irresolute in giving away any concrete answers about their plans, which was why Dipper and Mabel decided that all they could really do was give
“Fine,” Dipper said, turning with a relenting sigh. “We’ll go and leave you guys to whatever most-likely illegal thing you plan on doing.”

“Good luck with it!” Mabel exclaimed brightly as she began to follow her brother out. “Oh, wait, Amethyst, can I tell Steven about this?”

“No, because he’ll tell Garnet and Pearl,” Amethyst shook her head rigidly.

“Aw… ok…” Mabel sighed as she left. “Still, he’d think it’s so cool!” Stan and Amethyst waited for a moment or two, making sure to listen for the sounds of the twins going back upstairs and climbing into bed before letting out a shared sigh of relief.

“Yikes, that was a close one,” Stan remarked, crossing his arms. “I thought those twerps were never gonna leave.”

“Well, at least you managed to drive them off,” Amethyst laughed. “Guess you are still as smooth as you used to be. Still, it doesn’t prove that you can still handle a crazy, high-stakes, fast-paced night on the run.”

“Well then I guess there’s only one way to find out,” Stan smirked daringly, spinning his car keys on his finger deftly. “Let’s roll.”

Amethyst could barely contain her excitement as she hopped into the passenger’s seat of Stan’s car. The conman himself was a bit calmer as he got into the car himself, though he still smirked in amusement as the purple Gem jumped up and down in her seat.

“What are we waiting for?” Amethyst asked eagerly as Stan turned the key in the ignition. “Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go! We’re burning moonlight!”

“Geez, hold your horses!” Stan laughed as he pulled the car into motion. “The Revenge Trip hasn’t even started yet.”

“I know, but I can’t help it! I’m just so pumped! Tonight is gonna be legendary!”

“Sure, just as long as we don’t get caught.”

“Come on,” Amethyst rolled her eyes. “I already told you. Nobody’s catchin’ us. We’re way smarter than like, anyone in this lame old town. That’s why they call us the Kings of Revenge!”

“Oh yeah? Who calls us that?” Stan asked, raising an eyebrow.

The purple Gem paused for a moment, glancing down with a thoughtful frown before perking up once more. “I do!”

The pair shared a hearty laugh over this, one that eventually petered into a contented sigh as they drove down the dark, empty, narrow road. The sparse streetlights and the dim moonlight beaming down from above gave the road ahead a mysterious, yet somehow comforting vibe, one that Stan and Amethyst hadn’t really seen since their last Revenge Trip years ago. And experiencing it all again now certainly brought about more than enough nostalgic feelings for them both.

“Heh, I kinda forgot how nice this feels,” Stan remarked, hardly paying any mind to his speed as the car careened down the empty street. “Nothin’ but the open road and revenge schemes… It just
sorta takes ya back to the good ol’ days, you know?”

“Yeah, I do,” Amethyst readily agreed. “Oh man, remember that one time we got revenge on ol’ Dewey for that zoning ordinance he put on the shack?”

“Of course!” the conman chuckled. “People around here still talk about how his dumb van was blaring ‘Mayor Screwy’ for a whole week! What a classic! Still, nothing compares to the time we pushed Toby Determined’s car into the lake for that stupid article he published about you Gems.”

“Hey, it served him right,” the purple Gem crossed her arms and smirked in satisfaction. “Dude should have known better than to try and get all up in our personal biz. But yeah, that was one of the best ones…” Amethyst sighed as she propped her arm against the car door and looked out the window with a contented smile. “Hey, Stan?” she spoke up after a moment of silence. “You still remember the night we met?”

Stan let out a small laugh at this, shaking his head but keeping his eyes on the road nonetheless. “Please. How could I forget that mess?”

22 years ago…

“Good night, ladies and gentlemen! Thanks for visiting the Murder Hut! And remember: we put the ‘fun’ in ‘no refunds’!” Stan exclaimed boisterously as he waved the last group of tourists out of the gift shop. He let out a tired sigh as he closed the door behind them, pinching the bridge of his nose as his grin faded into an exhausted scowl. “Sheesh, I thought they’d never leave.”

Since Stan had given Greg the rare day off today, he held the full responsibility of closing up shop for the day, which certainly wasn’t helped by the long night up that no doubt awaited him. Still, the conman dully attended to his duties of locking the shop up and making sure everything was in order for the next day. The good part about Greg being off for the night was that Stan wouldn’t have to waste time exchanging pleasantries with him in sending him off. After grabbing a quick bite to eat out of the fridge, he could easily head down and get right to work on what was really important.

After putting his fez down on the counter for the night, Stan headed for the kitchen to grab his rushed dinner, only to be caught off guard by an abrupt, quite loud crash from right outside. The conman had been around long enough to know that anything suspicious like this was enough to raise his guard over, especially considering his circumstances. To be fair, Stan had been on edge for quite some time now, though he honestly had every reason to be, considering he owned a surprisingly profitable business so far out in the woods. Not to mention the personal project he had been hard at work on, one that countless people would love to discover or get their hands on…

Acting quickly yet quietly, Stan crept to the side door, briefly glancing out the window first only to find no one immediately there. Still, he was hardly relieved by that fact alone. Making sure his fists were at the ready for a fight, the conman slowly opened the door, tucking just out of sight behind it as he surveyed the lawn. Still nothing. The area was silent, dark, and serene as always. Stan was just about ready to accept that his caution was mere paranoia and he had just been hearing things, until he happened to hear a soft rattle coming from the nearby trashcan.

While Stan’s initial assumption was that it was just a mere racoon or other wild animal, he still didn’t really want to take his chances with it. Which was why he carefully reached for the baseball bat he kept shoved under the couch on the porch before slowly approaching the trashcan, ready to
However, before he could even really get to close to the rattling can, it happened to suddenly topple over, eliciting a startled cry from both the conman and the small purple figure who rolled out of the can and onto the ground. Stan stilled his bat from swinging upon realizing that it was a person, or at least he thought. Her small, stocky body and short, scruffy lavender hair were covered in filth, most likely from the garbage she had just been rooting through. Still, her eyes were bright and a wide grin was on her face as she looked over the stack of crushed soda cans she had gathered.

“Hey, buddy,” she said to Stan, who could only stare down at her, completely dumbfounded. “Mind kicking that can over here? These babies aren’t gonna eat themselves.”

“Uh… sure?” Stan shrugged in confusion, kicking the empty can near his feet over to her.

“Thanks, old guy!” the girl quipped happily, tossing it into her mouth and swallowing it whole. Yet as much as Stan was disturbed by this, he knew there was a much more pressing question that needed to be asked. Two actually.

“Hold it!” the conman exclaimed, still not letting his guard down at the sight of his diminutive intruder. “Who the heck do you think you are and why were you rummaging through my trash? You know I could call the cops on you for this sorta thing. If I wasn’t going to just fine you for it myself instead.”

“Whoa, wait a sec,” the girl exclaimed, jumping to her feet and letting the cans spill all around her. “Your trash? You mean you live here?”

“Uh… yeah,” Stan replied, though there was a hint of hesitance in his tone before adding more confidence to it. “Yes, I do. Why, you got a problem with that, kid?”

“Kid?” she chuckled, quite amused. “I’m way older than you, old guy. But still, this is crazy! Rose always says nobody lives down here, but what do ya know?! And here I was, thinking it was Music Man coming down here and squatting all the time, but no! It was you! …Whoever you are.”

“Wait, wait, wait, did you just mention… Rose?!” Stan asked, suddenly alarmed.

“Uh yeah,” the girl rolled her eyes. “Why, do you know her? Because everybody knows Rose. Especially me, and Garnet, and Pearl! Oh, and Music Man too, I guess.”

“Then that means… you must be one of those Crystal Crones who live up in that statue on the hill!” the conman exclaimed hotly.

“Sure am!” she proclaimed proudly. “Though we’re really called the Crystal Gems. But I get it. You humans aren’t always the best at pronouncing junk. At least that’s what Pearl is always saying.”

“Beat it, kid!” Stan snapped harshly, pointing up to the temple. “Your kind isn’t welcome around here!”

“Aw, what?” the purple Gem asked, dismayed. “But we just became friends!”

“Friends?!?” the conman scoffed. “Please. I wouldn’t be friends with any of you ‘Gems’ if my life depended on it! I don’t want anything to do with any of ya! Now go scamper on back to your giant eight-armed statue before I have you run in for trespassing!”
The purple Gem simply looked to him with a confusion of slight expression, before shrugging in apparent relent. “K, fine. Whatever you say, old guy.”

Stan watched sullenly, his hands on his hips, as the Gem turned and began making her way back up to her temple home. She did stop on the edge of the yard, however, and cast a somewhat unreadable glance back at him, to which he simply responded with another dismissive wave of his hand. The purple Gem shrugged once more as she disappeared into the woods, leaving the conman satisfied enough that she was gone for him to head back into the house.

However, Stan had no sooner shut the door than something suddenly dropped right onto his shoulders, frightening him a great deal, especially as a pair of hands covered his eyes. “What the-?!?” he shouted, stumbling around in an attempt to get whatever was sitting on his shoulders off.

Meanwhile, the purple Gem let out a rosaceous laugh as she gladly remained on her perch, having the time of her life as she watched this strange new human panic over her prank. “Ha! Gotcha! Guess you weren’t ready for a sneak attack, old guy!”

After what felt like several minutes of struggling, Stan finally managed to shove the Gem off of his back, glaring frustrated daggers at her as she landed on the floor with another playful laugh. “Well, that was fun!” she remarked, smirking. “Don’t ya think?”

“No!” Stan shouted, infuriated by this point. “Now get the heck outta my house!”

“Oh come on,” the purple Gem rolled her eyes. “You don’t really want me to go, do ya? Seems like this place is pretty boring and lonely. I could totally liven things up for you! If your beef really is with us Gems, then don’t worry! I’m not like Garnet, or Pearl, or even Rose, I promise! Cause unlike them, wherever I go, I bring the party!”

“I don’t care! I don’t want a party or company or anything else! All I want is for you to leave and never ever come back here! Got it?”

The purple Gem pouted insincerely for a moment before flopping down onto the floor lazily. “Nah… I think I’m just gonna hang around here for a while.” With another laugh, she threw her arms up towards the ceiling, watching the conman’s shocked expression in amusement as she shapeshifted them long enough so that they wrapped around the high support beam. With little difficulty, she shortened them a bit, but not all the way: just enough so that she was hanging from the ceiling almost like a hammock. “Get it? Hang around? Ha!”

“H-how did you…?” Stan began to ask, before quickly shaking his head clear of the amazement. “You know what? It doesn’t matter. What does matter is that you’re outta here, purple. Or else.”

“Oh come on,” the purple Gem chuckled, dropping down from the ceiling. “You humans are so funny when you try to act all tough like that!” Once again, she shapeshifted this time into Stan himself as she mimicked his gruff tone. “’Oh, you better get on outta here, purple. Or else I’ll… I’ll uh… do nothing!’” The purple Gem had worked herself into a fit of laughter by this point, completely ignoring the conman’s awe and subsequent frustration as she reverted to her original form.

“Yeesh, you Gems are even more annoying than I thought…” Stan grumbled indignantly as the purple Gem continued to laugh at his expense.
“So, you got a name, old guy?” she asked curiously, still reclining on the floor.

“Yes, I got a name for ya,” Stan scowled. “It’s amscray before I call the cops.”

“Huh, kind of a weird name, but whatever,” she shrugged. “K, Amscray-Before-I-Call-The-Cops, I’m Amethyst. Nice to meet ya!”

“Pleasure’s all mine,” the conman deadpanned, rolling his eyes.

“So, what do you wanna do now?” Amethyst asked with an eager grin. “Eat some more cans? Cause you got plenty of cans out there and I don’t wanna hog ’em all to myself if you want any. That’d just be rude.”

Stan’s scowl faded into a sly smirk as a sudden idea came to him, one that could hopefully rid him of this annoying intruder at least for a while. “Actually, yeah, let’s do that,” he agreed, feigning interest. “Why don’t you head on out there and grab the rest of them up for us?”

“Sure thing, Amscray-Before-I-Call-The-Cops!” Amethyst readily hopped to her feet and headed for the door. “Oh man, we’re gonna have such a great time! I.” The purple Gem was abruptly cut off as Stan slammed the door behind her the moment she stepped outside. A shocked gasp escaped her as she angrily turned around, pounding the door in a futile attempt to get back in. “Hey! Amscray!”

“Yeah, that’s right!” Stan called with a satisfied smirk as he walked away from the door. “Just amscray back up to your little statue and your ‘perfect’ Rose. And stay the heck outta my hair! Goodbye, good riddance!” The conman heaved an exasperated sigh as he headed back to the gift shop. “And if I never see another Gem again, it’ll be too soon.”

Amethyst raised a confused eyebrow as she glanced out the window to see that Stan was veering off of their intended course and into the suburbs instead. “Uh… Stan? Where are we going?”

“What?” the conman frowned, glancing over at her. “You said so yourself. For our plan to work, we’re gonna need a good backdrop. And there’s only one artist I trust with getting us that backdrop.”

“Wait…” A wide grin spread across the purple Gem’s face as she realized what he was implying. “You don’t mean…”

“That’s right,” Stan nodded with a smirk. “We’re heading to V’s place.”

Amethyst let out a loud, excited cheer at this, one that lasted pretty much until they arrived at their destination. Zealous as always, the purple Gem rushed to the door of the house and eagerly knocked on it while Stan followed not too far behind. “Oh man, V’s gonna be so surprised to see us!” Amethyst exclaimed. “Well… at least me.”

“Hey, me and V always got along just fine,” Stan said defensively.

“Yeah, but were you ever her muse?” the purple Gem snickered playfully.

Before the conman really had a chance to respond, the door abruptly swung open, revealing a middle-aged woman. Her hair was worn in a short, thick bob while she was clad in a green artist’s smock and red slippers. And while there was both exhaustion and confusion written all over her
face, the most startling thin about her was the shotgun she wielded as she faced off against whoever had knocked on her door.

“Who’s there?!?” she shouted fiercely. “It’s almost midnight! You can’t just–” She stopped dead in her tracks, her jaw and her gun dropping as she noticed the familiar pair standing on her doorstep. “Whoa, hold it… Amethyst?! Stan?!?”

“Vidalia!” Amethyst exclaimed happily, rushing to embrace her old friend.

“I can’t believe it!” the woman, Vidalia, exclaimed, hugging Amethyst as she glanced to Stan in disbelief. “It’s been years since I’ve seen you guys.”

“Tell me about it,” Stan remarked with a small, yet fond grin.

“Man, you’ve changed!” Amethyst laughed as she looked Vidalia up and down. “You look terrible!”

“You look the same…” Vidalia mused before breaking into a joking grin. “Terrible! And Stan, well, I don’t even think I need to touch on how you look.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the conman rolled his eyes, even if he did let out a small laugh. “Good to see your personality hasn’t changed even if your looks have, V. You’re still just as bratty as I remember you being.”

“Hey, that’s what I was known for back in the day,” Vidalia shrugged. “Speaking of which, come on in, you two. Just keep it down. The kids are trying to sleep.”

“Whoa, kids?” Amethyst asked, bewildered as they stepped inside the house. “What the heck happened? I thought you only had one! What, did you and ol’ Farty Marty hook up again?”

“Please. I don’t know where that fool is! And I don’t care either,” Vidalia smiled. “It’s just been me and Yellowtail for a while now.”


“How’d you manage to land that catch?” Stan asked with a joking smirk. “Get it?! C-cause Yellowtail’s a–” The conman cut himself off as he noticed neither Amethyst nor Vidalia were laughing. “You know what, never mind.”

“Same old Stan, same awful jokes,” Vidalia shook her head with a coy grin. “But yeah, things just kinda happened. Next thing you know, I’m living with a fisherman and I have another little troublemaker on my hands. And here he is now.” The artist smirked as Onion ran into the room and jumped into her arms. “You’re supposed to be in bed, mister.” As usual, Onion didn’t respond, even as his mother took the pair of scissors he was wielding away from him.

“Heh, we get it,” Amethyst grinned. “Kids, am I right, Stan?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! I didn’t know you, of all people, finally decided to settle down, Stan!” Vidalia exclaimed, impressed. “How’d you end up turning into such a silver fox?”

“Please,” Stan scoffed, crossing his arms. “They’re not my kids. I just took in my great niece and nephew for the summer. And honestly, the little scamps are more trouble than they’re worth. Most of the time.”

“Aw, looks like somebody’s finally gone soft in his old age,” Vidalia goaded as she sat Onion
down, allowing him to run back upstairs.

“That’s what I was saying!” Amethyst exclaimed. “V, can you believe that this old loser nearly chickened out on going on a Revenge Trip with me tonight?!”

“Yeah, well I didn’t!” the conman protested. “I’m here now, ain’t I?"

“Yeah, only ‘cause I dared you to."

“Oh, so that’s what you guys are up to, huh?” Vidalia asked with a knowing smirk. “I kinda figured that this wasn’t just a personal visit. So what are you two in the market for tonight? Disguises? Life-sized doubles?"

“Actually… we we’re just gonna need… a painting,” Amethyst said vaguely.

“A painting? Of what?"

“The Tent of Telepathy,” Stan said firmly. “You know, that chump Lil’ Gideon’s place on the other end of town? We’re gonna need a pretty huge backdrop of it, as big and as real-looking as you can make it.”

“Oh yeah?” Vidalia placed her hands on her hips. “You guys are going after Gideon Gleeful? Sounds like kind of a risky move, especially since you two have been out of the game for so long. You really sure you’re up to this?"

“You know we are, girl!” Amethyst said with a daring grin. “We already got everything all laid out, we just gotta go do it! And we need one of your ‘masterpieces’ to help us, V!”

Vidalia let out a long sigh, shaking her head as she looked between the pair. “You two are never gonna learn, are you?” she asked with a smile. “Still, I gotta say, I’ve always respected that about you guys. You never gave up. So, I guess I’ll do your Tent of Telepathy painting. When do you need it by?”

“By the end of the night,” Stan said simply. “If not sooner.”

“What?!” the artist asked, alarmed. “Stan, it’s gonna be a ten foot canvas! I’ll be up all night painting if I-”

“V, come on,” the conman urged with a charming smile. “You’re the best artist in town. If you can’t pull this off, nobody can. Besides, it wouldn’t be the first time you preformed a miracle for us. So... what do ya say?”

Vidalia gave him a skeptical look for a moment, though it petered out as soon as she caught Amethyst’s pleading expression. “Flattery will get you nowhere, old man,” the artist deadpanned with a coy grin. “But just for you guys, I’ll have it ready for you guys to pick up by sun up. If you don’t end up getting arrested first, that is.”

“Alright, V!” Amethyst cheered.

“Thanks, V,” Stan said with actual sincerity. “I knew we could count on you.”

“Who else would you count on?” Vidalia chuckled as she began leading them out. “I’m the only person who won’t rat you two clowns out. Now get on out there and get your revenge. And have some fun for me, will ya? After all, I am gonna be stuck in here all night painting...”
“Will do!” the purple Gem saluted as her and Stan got back in the car. “See ya, V!”

“Later!” Vidalia waved them off as they drove away. “And good luck!” The artist laughed to herself as she shut the door behind her, heading for her workshop to begin the task ahead of her. “Hard to believe that after all these years, the dynamic duo is finally back again… Who could have guessed?”

Stan grumbled indignantly to himself as he took in a long sip of his fifth cup of coffee, knowing that it was the only thing keeping him awake at the moment. Not only had he been up working all night, he had to contend with the purple Gem still lingering around the shack, banging on doors and windows in a desperate attempt to get in. He had no idea what her reasoning was or why she was being so persistent, but his aggravation with her had grown steadily with each passing hour. And yet, right before he prepared to chase her off with the hose, she had apparently given up altogether and headed home, without so much as a single word. While the conman found it rather strange, he couldn’t deny that he was grateful for losing his unwelcome interloper.

At least until the Murder Hut opened for business the following morning.

“Hey, Mr. Pines!” Greg greeted with a smile as he came in for his shift. Stan merely responded with a sullen groan as he slumped against the counter, clinging onto his coffee mug like a vice. The former rock star frowned as he looked over his boss, unsure of what to make of his apparent exhaustion. “Uh… are you ok?”

“Yeah…” Stan mumbled tiredly. “Just had a long night last night…”

“Oh… Well, uh… then maybe now’s not a good time…”

“Not a good time for what?” the conman asked, sitting up a bit.

“Well… There’s someone who… kinda begged me to come down here with me this morning…” Greg said somewhat sheepishly as he turned to the open door. “Um… You can come on in now!”

Stan bolted upright in his seat upon seeing Amethyst walk in, a remorseful expression on her face as she looked up at him guiltily. “YOU!” the conman shouted furiously. “You little punk! I barely got any sleep around here last night what with you banging on stuff all night long!”

“I know… And I’m sorry, Amscray,” Amethyst pouted sincerely.

“Amscray?” Greg asked, looking to Stan in confusion.

“Ugh, stupid kid,” the conman scowled. “My name’s not Amscray.”

“But you said-”

“I know what I said!” Stan snapped. “Listen, couldn’t you just-” The conman cut himself off with a frustrated sigh before turning to his employee. “Greg, could ya give us a minute here? This won’t take long.”

“Oh, um… sure, Mr. Pines,” Greg nodded, exchanging a somewhat nervous glance as he passed by Amethyst and stepped outside. A long bout of silence lingered between the conman and the purple Gem, before the former finally spoke up, quite exasperated.
“I just don’t get you, kid,” Stan huffed, irritated. “What’s your deal with me anyway? Why couldn’t you just run back up to the statue last night when I first told you to?”

“I dunno…” Amethyst admitted with sincerity. “I guess… I was just so excited to meet you! I don’t know too many humans aside from ol’ Music Man out there, and he’s already super tight with Rose, so… you were like, a totally new face to me! I just thought you were kinda cool.”

Stan cocked an eyebrow at this, unsure of what to think after hearing something like this. After all, it wasn’t like he was called something as positive as ‘cool’ very often. Still, he wasn’t about to be taken in by such simple flattery. “Well… don’t you have Rose and those other two bozos to hang out with? Why do you have to pester me, huh?”

“Rose, Garnet, and Pearl are gone,” Amethyst informed with a frown. “They went on a mission yesterday and… they just… didn’t bother to tell me about it I guess.”

“Oh, well boo-hoo,” Stan deadpanned unsympathetically. “How rough it must be for you, not being able to punch monsters with all of your buddies.”

“It’s not rough,” the purple Gem remarked, pretending she really didn’t care. “After all, this wouldn’t be the first time they left me behind though. They’re always doin’ it. Probably ‘cause they don’t want me around, messing stuff up or whatever.”

The conman’s constant scowl suddenly lightened a bit upon hearing this. As much as he wanted to deny that he had anything in common with any of the Gems, he knew that thinking such a statement didn’t at the very least strike a cord with him would be completely false. “Uh… what do you mean?” he asked hesitantly, already regretting pressing any further, since he really wasn’t fond of the idea of striking much of a conversation with the purple Gem.

“Eh… It’s just… I’m not as smooth or strong as the other Gems…” Amethyst sighed, crossing her arms. “Garnet’s really powerful, Pearl’s super smart, and Rose… Rose can do anything. And me? I’m just the dumb ol’ rock that follows them around.”

“You do?” Amethyst asked, surprised as she noticed the conman’s unexpectedly regretful expression.

“Course, I do. When I was a kid, everyone used to always compare me to-” Stan quickly stopped himself as he remembered who he was speaking to before revising his statement. “E-everybody else. And when it came right down to it… Well, let’s just say I was never at the top of anyone’s list.”

“Hey, same here!” the purple Gem exclaimed with a small, depreciating laugh. “That’s sorta why I like shapeshifting so much. Why do I have to be a nobody…” Amethyst smirked as she transformed into Greg, Garnet, and Rose, all in seamless succession. “When I could be anybody?!”

Stan couldn’t help but let out a small, sincere laugh at this, one that he actually didn’t retract on this time. “You know, as freaky as that whole shapeshifting thing is, it’s pretty impressive. You ever thought about goin’ on the road with that, kid?”

“Meh, it’s no big deal,” Amethyst shrugged as she turned back into herself. “But this place you have going on here? It looks awesome!” With an excited grin, the purple Gem looked around the gift shop, taking in all of odd sights on display. “What is all this cool junk anyway?”
“What, you’ve never heard of the Murder Hut before?” Stan asked, slightly offended.

“Murder Hut?” Amethyst stuck her tongue out. “Ugh, that name’s terrible! Who would wanna come to a place with murder in its name aside from crazy people? You should really think about changing it, dude. An old mysterious shack like this deserves to be called something just as mysterious!”

“Mysterious shack, huh…?” Stan mused thoughtfully. “Then how about… the Mystery Shack? What do ya think about that, kid?”

“Oh, man, yeah!” the purple Gem eagerly agreed. “That’s way better!”

“You think so?”

“Yes I do!”

“Yeah, well I-” Stan cut himself off, his casual grin fading into a scowl once again as he spotted the gemstone on Amethyst’s chest. “Pfft, well, it’s not like I care about what someone like you thinks. I mean, I don’t even know you, much less like ya, kid.”

Amethyst rolled her eyes, her smile unshakable as she looked up to the conman. “You know what I think? I think that’s a lie, old guy. I think you do like me. At least a little.”

“No I don’t!” Stan protested adamantly. “I don’t like any of you Gems! I thought I made that pretty clear last night.”

“Yeah, sure,” the purple Gem laughed, calling his bluff. “Whatever you say, old guy.”

“Will ya stop calling me old guy, kid?” the conman asked impatiently.

“Only if you stop calling me kid,” Amethyst agreed coyly. “But if I can’t call you old guy and I can’t call you Amscray… then what can I call you?”

The conman sighed, part of him wishing he had kicked the purple Gem out of his house the moment she walked in. And the other part of him somehow strangely enjoying the bizarre conversation they were having and wanting it to continue. After all, it had been a long time since he had really opened up to anyone like this. And unfortunately for him, that other, softer part of him won out in the end. “Stan,” he finally answered, smirking just the slightest bit as he watched Amethyst’s eyes light up with delight. “You can call me Stan.”

“Well, we’re here,” Stan announced as he parked the car in the woods just shy of the Tent of Telepathy.

“Yeah! Here comes the revenge!” Amethyst exclaimed, bouncing up and down on her seat. “We’re gonna roast that little punk! I can’t wait to see the look on his face tomorrow when he-”

“Hold it, Amethyst,” the conman cautioned, stopping her before she could jump out of the car. “We can’t just go out there and do this as if it were any old Revenge Trip. If V was right about one thing, it’s that this is a high stakes job.”

“Heh, I get it! Stakes!” the purple Gem laughed. “Cause we’re gonna take the stakes outta the tent! Good one!”
“Heh, yeah sure,” Stan rolled his eyes, grinning in slight amusement. “But I mean it. Gideon may be a chubby little hussy, but he’s a chubby little hussy with a whole lot of clout around here. Which means if we’re not careful, then he could have the entire town turn on us in a heartbeat.”

“Pfft, like I care about what any of those squares think,” Amethyst scoffed. “But fine. If you’re so scared of getting busted, then I’ll cool my jets for you. And cause I don’t wanna get yelled at by Garnet or Pearl if we do end up getting caught.”

“Good,” Stan nodded, grabbing his gloves and hammer from the back seat. “Then let’s hit it.”

Amethyst nodded, holding up her can of spray paint briefly as they both got out of the car. Still, staying out of sight at the edge of the forest, the pair crept towards the tent, making sure to keep an eye out for anyone in the vicinity before they emerged to start their work. As Stan hurried around the tent and pulled each of the pegs holding it down out in quick, quiet succession, Amethyst stood at its rear, taking in the empty “canvas’ before her. She hadn’t really thought ahead too much about her manner of vandalism as much as her method, which was why she was at something of a loss about what to paint on the side of the tent now.

“Well, I got all the pegs,” Stan said as he joined her, holding up a full bag. “All it’ll take is one good gust of wind and this whole place will come toppling down. Plus, these pegs will make some great firewood back at the shack. What’s the holdup back here?”

“I can’t think of anything to write!” Amethyst groaned. “I mean, normally I’m super clever and witty when it comes to coming up with insults, but I’m so hyped on Revenge Trip adrenaline right now. I’m drawing a blank!”

“Geez, do I have to do all the heavy lifting on Revenge Trips even fourteen years later?” Stan asked with an amused grin, taking the spray paint from her. “Gimme that thing. I’ll show you what a good tag looks like.”

The purple Gem watched curiously as the conman graffitied on the side of the tent in deft, confident strokes, before letting out a rosaceous laugh upon seeing what he had written once it was done. “Oh my gosh. That’s hilarious. That stupid kid will never be able to live this one down!”

“Hey, I told you,” Stan shrugged as he tossed the spray paint back to her. “I haven’t lost my touch just yet.”

“Man, I’m sorry for ever doubting you!” Amethyst exclaimed brightly as she followed Stan back towards the car. “Guess you really can still hold your own in a Revenge Trip. So I guess that means you’re not boring. Just old.”

“Yeah, well we’re not done yet,” Stan rolled his eyes casually. “We still gotta-” The conman froze as he accidently bumped into one of the abandoned cars parked near the Tent of Telepathy by mistake. Much to the pair’s misfortune, the car’s security alarm immediately started blaring, which of course, woke up anyone within the immediate vicinity. Stan and Amethyst exchanged a wide-eyed glance as all of the lights in the nearby houses turned on, hoping that it wasn’t already too late for them to make a clean get away.

“Uh, I guess that’s our cue hightail it the heck outta here!” Stan exclaimed, dashing for the car. Of course, Amethyst made it there first, though the conman wasn’t too far behind. Acting as quickly as possible, Stan shoved the key in the ignition, though of course, the car just so happened to stall when he turned it. “Oh come on!”

“What’s wrong?” Amethyst asked, glancing out the front window anxiously. People had already
started emerging from their houses as the car alarm continued to ring out obnoxiously through the night.

“Ugh, the stupid thing won’t—” Stan cut himself off as he threw his fist down on the dash of the car, which of course, somehow got it working finally. “There we go!”

“Well, come on! Let’s get the heck outta here before someone sees us!” the purple Gem urged anxiously.

“Hey, you don’t have to tell me twice!” Stan exclaimed, pulling the car into reverse before speeding back onto the road. Amethyst was thrown back in her seat as the conman floored it, practically burning rubber as he drove away from the scene as fast as his car would let him.

After regathering her bearings, the purple Gem sat forward and let out a loud, wild cheer, pumping her fist in the air with apt excitement. “Whoo! Yeah, baby! Petal to the metal!”

“Heh, ya think that’s fast?” Stan asked with a challenging smirk. “Then you ain’t seen what this baby can really do!” His grin widened as he put the car into the next gear, causing it to rocket forward even faster somehow.

Amethyst was practically screaming with exhilaration by this point, especially as she stuck her head out the open car window and let her long hair blow wildly behind her. “Aw, yeah!” she exclaimed with a warm laugh as she sat back down and Stan steadily slowed down. “This is the best! This is totally just how it used to be back in our old Revenge Trip days, and I love it! Doesn’t it just make you feel alive?”

“ Heck yeah it does!” the conman boldly agreed with a wide grin. “I don’t even know why I was worried before! Like anybody’s ever gonna catch us this time! Even without Revenge Trips, we’ve still broken in and out of plenty of other tight spots over the years. This’ll be a piece of cake!”

“You’re darn right it will be!” Amethyst exclaimed. “I mean, we’re already one third of the way done! The night’s still young and the rest of this Revenge Trip is in the bag! Ain’t nobody gonna stop this party! And why?”

Stan laughed as he caught the eager, expectant look Amethyst was giving him. And of course, he gave her the answer he was certain she wanted to hear. “Because this party’s going all night!”

With the momentum gained from the first stage of their plan, Stan and Amethyst had more than enough to keep them going as they went on with phase two. Fortunately, the car alarm back at the Tent of Telepathy had hardly tipped anyone off to their presence there, as no one bothered to tail them or look into what had even happened, really. And so they were completely in the clear to ride through town unnoticed as they carried out the next part of their revenge scheme.

Part two was by and large the least risky stage, as it consisted of several brief, succinct stops all over town. They all did have a common theme, however: every stop they made was in front of some kind of advertisement for the Tent of Telepathy. Be it billboards, posters, bus ads, or anything else that had Gideon’s face on it, Amethyst and Stan made sure to stop by them and apply a healthy coat of graffiti. Their designs and messages were different on each one, from giving the child psychic an ugly mustache, to devil horns, to simply writing the word “fraud” on several of them. Whatever they could come up with, it was all fair game. Fortunately, they only had to deal with one close call while they were working on a billboard in town, but thanks to Amethyst’s
shapeshifting, they narrowly evaded being spotted by the passing patrol car.

From there, the rest of their work was relatively easy, especially as they took it to the side and back roads out of town. Along the way, the two of them continued to speed down the empty roads just for fun, laughing and yelling all the while. Whenever the decided to take a break from this, they would instead reminisce about Revenge Trips gone by, laughing over their many reckless escapades and close calls, most of which they could easily look back on as fondly as ever. And for a while, both of them were easily able to forget that they had ever stopped going on Revenge Trips in the first place.

For a moment, as fleeting as it might have been, they both felt just as young and as free as they had been during their very first revenge trip, over twenty years ago.

“Yo, Stan!” Amethyst exclaimed as she entered the gift shop. The purple Gem’s visits to the newly dubbed Mystery Shack had become rather frequent, to the point that she stopped by for a few hours at least once a week, if not more. While the conman did complain at first, he had gotten somewhat used to it after the first month or two. After all, when compared to her fellow Gems, Amethyst wasn’t really the worst company to have around, given her playful personality and her genuinely engaging sense of humor. Stan still wasn’t sure if he would ever refer to her as a “friend”, but at the very least, the two of them had reached an amicable place. For the most part.

“Amethyst,” Stan greeted the purple Gem dully, looking over his newspaper with a cross scowl.

“Whoa, what’s with the long face?” Amethyst asked, hopping up onto the counter as she usually did. “What, was someone a penny short on buying a bobble head?”

“Pfft, I wish,” the conman rolled his eyes as he set his paper down. “Have you seen this? Some chump “tourist destination reviewer” or whatever the heck he calls himself came by here the other day, disguised as a regular old tourist. And then, after I kicked the creep out for asking too many stupid questions, he writes this crummy review about the shack in the town paper!”

“Oh yeah? What’s it say?” the purple Gem asked curiously.

“Nothing but a bunch of complains about how this place is ‘run down’ and my business practices are ‘shady’,” Stan tossed the paper away from him harshly. “What a load of garbage. Weasels like that deserve to be dropped off a very high cliff, if you ask me.”

“Dang, this fool sounds like a real jerk,” Amethyst said, crossing her arms. “What’s his deal anyway? This place is totally cool!”

“Exactly!” Stan asserted. “That’s why I’m gonna put that reviewer in his place tonight with a little good old fashioned revenge.”

“Ooo, revenge?” the purple Gem asked, intrigued. “Sounds neat! Whatcha you gonna do?”

“Eh, nothin’ too fancy. I was just gonna go find his house and then let a bunch of rabid squirrels loose inside of it. Maybe get some pictures of it and send an article of my own to the Gossiper on it.”

Amethyst nearly fell off the counter laughing at this insane, yet admittedly outrageous plan. “Dude, that’s hilarious! You gotta let me come with you and watch! Or better yet, help you round up all those squirrels!”
“Oh, no,” the conman firmly shook his head. “No way. I work alone, kid. Especially on petty heists like this.”

“Aw, come on…” Amethyst pleaded. “I won’t get in the way! I promise! Besides, I need to see some action! Everything’s been so boring lately…”

“What, you mean you haven’t been out tossing that whip of yours at creeps with your buddies recently?” Stan asked, his disdain for the other Gems clear enough in his tone. If there was one thing that both Stan and Amethyst (and Greg, seeing as how he had been roped into all of this too) agreed on, it was that they had every intention of keeping their newfound comradery hidden from the other Gems, particularly Rose. The conman had his own reasons for this, ones that he never really disclosed to the purple Gem, who didn’t really care too much about them in the first place. But for Amethyst, the main reason why she didn’t really care to hear any possible complaints her teammates might aim at either her or Stan for it. After all, she had to put up with enough of those as it was.

“Haven’t been any creeps to toss it at,” the purple Gem shrugged. “And when there are, the others usually just take care of it without me. As usual.”

“Hmph, what else is new with those three?” Stan said with a scowl. “Still, kid, you can’t come with me tonight. Mostly ‘cause I just don’t think you can keep up with an old pro like me.”

“Pfft, I know I can!” Amethyst exclaimed, hopping to her feet. “I’m a magical Gem warrior! I can handle anything that any ol’ loser might throw at us!”

“That’s a pretty bold claim…” the conman mused with a growing smirk. “You really think you can back it up?”

“Duh!”

“Fine,” Stan shrugged. “Then I’ll give you a shot. But if you start dragging me down for even a second, kid, then I’ll drop you just like I’m gonna drop those squirrels in that reviewer’s house.”

“Deal!” Amethyst exclaimed, taking the conman’s outstretched hand and firmly shaking it. “Aw, man, this Revenge Trip is gonna be great!”

“Revenge Trip?” the conman repeated, aptly confused. “What the heck is a Revenge Trip?”

“It’s what we’re gonna do tonight!” the purple Gem explained brightly. “Ya know, since we’re going on a trip to get some revenge. So it’s a Revenge Trip!”

“Geez, that’s corny,” Stan rolled his eyes. “You may have been right about renaming this place the Mystery Shack, kid, but you might wanna think twice about that whole ‘Revenge Trip’ thing.”

“Eh,” Amethyst shrugged blithely. “You’ll warm up to it eventually.”

It had taken several hours, but soon enough, Stan and Amethyst had succeeded in vandalizing just about every Tent of Telepathy ad they knew of in Gravity Falls. Still, neither of them were really even that tired yet, even if it couldn’t have been any earlier than 3 AM. If there was something either of them knew, it was that exhaustion was never a factor of a Revenge Trip. And if it ever was, then it could easily be fixed with just a few cups of coffee.
With phase two now behind them, Amethyst kicked back in her seat, letting out a contented sigh as Stan drove up the steep hill towards their penultimate destination: the Gleefuls’ merchandise warehouse. By and large, stage three was going to be the most dangerous and most daring part of their scheme, one that could easily end up with them getting caught if they weren’t careful. After all, what they planned to do next was more than just mere graffiti or stealing tent pegs. Stage 3 entailed actual criminal offenses, including breaking and entering, theft, and destruction of property. Nothing the two of them hadn’t done before, but still, things that could carry pretty hefty penalties if they did actually end up getting caught. But still, there was only one rule that Stan and Amethyst had for all of their Revenge Trips: “Instead of just going big, always go bigger.” And this was certainly going to be one of the biggest things they had ever done on a Revenge Trip.

“So you know the plan, right?” Stan asked as they arrived right outside the warehouse.

“Duh,” Amethyst rolled her eyes. “We get in there, get all the stuff, get out, and dump it in the lake. Simple as that.”

“Sure, ‘simple’,” the conman deadpanned, getting out. “It’ll be real simple if we manage to make it outta here without getting busted. Now can you give us an in?” he asked, handing her a crowbar.

“You got it!” the purple Gem gave him a thumbs up, running up to the warehouse before leaping high at one of its windows. After grabbing onto the ledge and perching there, she used her crowbar to pry one of the windows open before hopping down into the warehouse itself. Stan only had to wait for a moment or two before its front doors swung open, revealing a very satisfied Amethyst standing inside.

“What do ya know?” the purple Gem asked as the conman walked past her into the factory. “Looks like I haven’t lost my touch either.”

“How could you when you break into my house at least once a week?”

“Aw, come on. You know you love it.”

“Love is a strong word. How about we say I tolerate it and leave it at that?”

“Pfft, whatever,” Amethyst scoffed as they both stopped to evaluate the large task ahead of them. The warehouse was filled to the brim with Gideon’s self-advertising paraphernalia, piled up in boxes and crates that stacked up to the ceiling. Still, neither Stan nor Amethyst were too terrible daunted by it. After all, they had the rest of the night ahead of them. “So…” the purple Gem began, rolling her eyes as she glanced down at a Lil’ Gideon plushy near her feet. “Where should we start?”

“With anything breakable,” Stan said, clutching his own crowbar. “And then everything else we’ll haul down to the lake.”

“Sounds like a plan to me!” Amethyst readily agreed, more than ready to get to work. And that’s just what they did. Releasing any and all inhibitions, the pair began storming the warehouse, swinging their crowbars at literally anything that could be shattered, bent, or beaten. At one point, the purple Gem even shapeshifted into a wrecking ball and proceeded to plow through as many crates at once as she could. Stan could only stand by and laugh as she did so, taking sheer delight in the unapologetic destruction of his rival’s property. If nothing else, then one thing was certainly clear: the best kind of revenge was certainly being had in this Revenge Trip.

After they had busted just about everything breakable in the entire warehouse, they steadily starting rounding up anything that was left. It was still a fairly sizable load, consisting of clothing,
figurines, posters, and more, and not all of it could easily fit inside of Stan’s car. Fortunately, Amethyst came up with a rather clever idea about how they could haul the rest of it down to the lake. Shapeshifting her body thin and wide, the purple Gem scooped the rest of the merchandise into her arms and formed herself into something of a large “sack” to hold it all in. With Stan’s assistance, she managed to perch herself on top of the car, holding tightly onto the roof as she held all of the stolen goods under her.

“K-k!” Amethyst exclaimed down to the conman, clearly straining. “I… I think I’m ready!”

“Are you sure?” Stan asked with apt concern. “Cause you look like you’re pushing yourself pretty hard up there.”

“A-aw…” the purple Gem laughed roughly. “Y-you really do care about me, S-Stan!”

“Yeah, yeah,” the conman said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Let’s just get going already. The sooner we finish, the sooner I can finally go home and get in bed. Coffee only does so much, you know.”

“Then c-come on!” Amethyst urged as Stan got in the car. “L-let’s finish this!”

The conman complied as he started driving off, going slow at first to make sure Amethyst had a steady hold on the roof before resorting to the normal speed. They both knew they had to exercise a bit more caution now, seeing as how the purple Gem large, bag-like form on the roof would certainly be a dead give-away that they were up to something suspicious. Still, time was on their side, since nobody was out so very late at night. Which meant that they were able to ride all the way to the lake without passing so much as a single soul. Indeed, it certainly seemed that everything was going off without a hitch.

So far.

Amethyst let out an exhausted sigh, finally lifting her straining form as Stan pulled up on the shore of the beach. All of the stolen merchandise fell off of the roof right along with the Gem, several boxes already dropping into the shallows of the lake already.

“You ok?” Stan asked as he stood over Amethyst, who simply lay flat on her back in the sand as she recovered. “Or are you gonna need a minute?”

The purple Gem responded with a feeble thumbs-up. “I-I’m… good…” she assured breathlessly.

“Good, because we don’t have a lot of time to waste,” the conman said. “We gotta shove all this junk into the lake before sun-up, or else we’ll-”

“Or else what, Stanford?”

Stan and Amethyst gasped in startled unison as a pair of glaring headlights suddenly beamed down on them. And of course, standing in the middle of the spotlights, was none other than the very target of their Revenge Trip: Gideon himself.

“Gideon?!” the pair exclaimed in apt shock, glancing to each other first and then to the child psychic, who stood before them with a very smug smirk.

“Well, good evenin’ both of ya!” Gideon exclaimed with transparently faux friendliness. “Or perhaps I should be saying good mornin’ since its, oh, about 4 in the morning! Now that begs the question… what are ya’ll doin’ out here this early with such a fine array of merchandise from my factory, hm?”
“Oh, this?” Stan asked with a caustic scowl. “We were just moving it all for you. Yeah, we figured that a bunch of useless tacky junk like this belongs more at the bottom of the lake than it does all nice and cozy in that warehouse of yours.”

“Oh, well I’m much obliged, Stanford, much obliged,” Gideon nodded, still playing his amicable card for all it was worth. “Course, you both realize that I can’t just let something like this lie. Especially since all of my signs all around town were also shamelessly vandalized tonight. Ya’ll wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

“Ugh, just shut up, you little twerp,” Amethyst groaned in exasperation as she stood up. “You already caught us red-handed, you don’t have to be an annoying jerk about it.”

“Very well then, I suppose your right,” the child psychic shrugged. “Guess there really is no need in bein’ pleasant if you ain’t gonna be. I’ll just settle for dialing up the police and letting them handle this,” Gideon grinned darkly as he pulled out his phone. “I’m sure the town prison will just love to welcome two new inmates in one night.”

“Ok then, go ahead and call them,” Stan challenged, unconcerned. Amethyst shot him a concerned look at this, but he was quick to reassure her with a subtle wink. “And while you’re at it, go ahead and tell them how you trespassed onto my property earlier and broke my fence. Or about how you vandalized the Gem’s temple and painted the whole thing pink. I’m sure they’d love to hear about that.”

“Ohhhh!” Amethyst exclaimed with a triumphant laugh. “You can’t smooth-talk your way outta all that, Gideon! We know you did all that stuff!”

“Maybe so,” Gideon acknowledged. “But it’s my word against ya’lls. And really, who are they gonna believe? Poor lil’ ol’ me? Or the town crook and a Gem with a known record of causin’ mischief?”

Stan and Amethyst both sucked in anxious breaths upon hearing this, knowing that as much as they hated to admit it, Gideon was right. He had the town practically wrapped around his little finger; it would take a miracle for them to convince anyone that they were in the right here, especially since all of the evidence of their misdeeds stood right beside them. “So are we making a break for it?” Amethyst muttered to Stan.

“Do you even have to ask?” the conman replied in a quick whisper. “Getaway time!” he shouted, throwing one of the smoke bombs he always kept on hand down. While the child psychic was blinded by the blast, Stan and Amethyst hurriedly jumped into the car and sped off down the shoreline, leaving their haul of merchandise behind completely in favor of escaping.

“Wha—hey!” Gideon shouted, enraged as he watched his foes get away. “Get back here, you— augh!” The child psychic ran to the car behind him, hopping into the passenger’s seat behind his father. “After them, Daddy!” he ordered harshly as he began dialing up the police. “Don’t you dare let them get away!”

Meanwhile, the conman was flooring it as he swerved back onto the road, while Amethyst took a nervous glance out the back window. “Uh, he’s following us!”

“Of course he is, the little troll!” Stan growled. “Wouldn’t have expected anything else from him. That’s why we gotta loose him!”

“Yeah! Now you’re talking!” the purple Gem exclaimed, her former pep returning. “Oh, wait! I got an idea!” Amethyst quickly turned around in her seat, reaching for the mound of plushies that they
had shoved in the back and grabbing several of them. Opening her window wide, the purple Gem threw them hard at Bud’s car, watching with a satisfied grin as he had to swerve out of the way to miss one.

“Nice one!” Stan exclaimed, exchanging a high five with her. “Now we just gotta-” The conman froze the moment he started hearing police sirens from behind. Amethyst gasped as she looked out the back to see a patrol car had joined the chase, and now rode alongside Gideon and his father in trailing them.

“Aw, come on!” the purple Gem groaned. “How’d they get here so fast?! I swear, it’s like that kid can get anyone to do anything for him!”

“It doesn’t matter!” the conman exclaimed, speeding on the narrow forest road. “Cause we’re about to shake both of them as soon as I find the dirt path up ahead.”

“That old thing? You’ll never be able to find it as dark as it is out here!” Amethyst protested. “Let me drive, I have a much better idea!”

“What?! You really think I’m gonna let you drive my car?!” Stan scoffed in disbelief. “Now you’ve really lost it!”

“Come on, Stan, just trust me on this!” Amethyst pleaded, reaching for the wheel. “I have a plan! You know me! I always have a plan!”

“Yeah, well if you always have a plan, then why didn’t you plan on this happening, huh?!” Stan retorted crossly, pulling the wheel away from her. The car weaved back and forth wildly on the road as they grappled for it, but even still, both Gideon and the cops kept tight on their tail.

“I could have planned for it!” the purple Gem argued, pushing on the wheel hard.

“Then why didn’t you?!”

“Because… because I… Look out!” Amethyst let out a frightened shout as the car rounded the next turn hard. Fortunately, they managed to lose Gideon and the police in this turn, but unfortunately, neither of them were able to stop the car from veering out of control and off of the road altogether. The pair let out a unified frightened scream as the car plowed into the forest at an alarming speed, the breaks proving useless thanks to their drastic descent down the hill. They only narrowly managed to avoid hitting one of the many trees in their path thanks to Stan keeping his wits about him enough to swerve through them, though nearly every one they passed was a drastically close call. After what felt like ages of bouncing roughly through the woods, the car finally at last came to a gradual stop in the middle of a wide clearing.

As the car finally went still and the engine mercifully cut off, both Stan and Amethyst let loose the terrified breaths they had been holding all throughout their trip down the hill. However, as the conman leaned back in his seat to try and catch his lost breath, the purple Gem instead let out a raucous, excited cheer over their survival.

“Whoo! We lived! And it was awesome!” she exclaimed, stars in her eyes. “Man, I wish I could have seen the looks on our faces as we were rolling down that hill! What a wild ride! Huh, Stan?” Amethyst grinned widely as she glanced over at the conman, who was instead simply glaring down at his lap in utter disbelief. “Uh… Stan?”

“Amethyst, we nearly just died,” Stan said, his tone harsh and cold.

“Well, yeah, almost, I guess,” Amethyst shrugged. “But he, we didn’t! Cause like we said, this
party’s going all night! And nothing’s gonna stop us from-"

“Amethyst!” the conman practically shouted, clearly in no mood for such merriment. “I’m serious!”

“Pfft, since when?” the purple Gem scoffed, crossing her arms as she glared away from him. “Oh yeah, that’s right. Since you got old and boring. Should have known you’d wimp out on me in the end. Just like last time.”

“And I should have known that everything would turn south, just like last time,” Stan scowled just as bitterly. “I don’t even know why I agreed to come along on this disaster. I knew I should have just gone with my gut and stayed home. At least then I wouldn’t be on the lamb again.”

“Yeah, cause anything’s better than going on another Revenge Trip with me, right?” Amethyst asked sourly. “Oh, and let me guess. You’re probably wishing that you never let me start hanging around you all those years ago either, huh? I’m sure that would have saved you a ton of headaches and annoyance! Well sorry that I thought you were cool for some reason back then. Because now, it’s pretty obvious that I was totally wrong!”

“Whatever,” the conman remarked coldly. “You really think I care what you think about me? Or about what anyone thinks of me? Well, I don’t! Never have! And you know why? Because unlike you, I’m totally fine on my own! I don’t need anybody to pick me up when I’m down and tell me I’m gonna be ok, because that’s not how the real world works! I don’t need to go out and act up like this just to make myself feel better! The only reason I ever went along and did any that was because of you!”

“Oh yeah? W-well, who said I ever needed you to make me feel better?!” Amethyst shouted, her temper getting the better of her. “I was just fine before I ever met you! Back then I had Rose, and she’d always tell me that I was special, that I was important, no matter what!”

“Oh wow, real inspiring,” Stan deadpanned. “I’m sure she really meant it too. Just like how she said she was gonna stick around you guys forever, huh? And look at how that ended up turning out.”

Amethyst suddenly threw her fist down hard on the dashboard upon hearing this. “Don’t you ever talk about Rose like that!” she practically screamed, tears welling up in her eyes. “You think it’s not hard enough that she’s gone?! I don’t need to be reminded of it, especially not by you! You couldn’t possibly know how hard it is to just lose someone like that!”

“Oh, really?!” Stan asked, completely appalled. “Because I know what it’s like to lose someone important too. I knew about that way before you ever did! In fact, I—” The conman quickly cut himself off before he said too much, but he still remained quite bitter, even if he calmed down somewhat and went off on an entirely different tangent. “See, this right here is why we stopped doing Revenge Trips…"

“What are you talking about?” Amethyst asked, letting out a frustrated huff. “We stopped because you got lame on me, just like everyone else…”

“No. We stopped because this happened last time too,” Stan said with palpable regret. “It nearly ended up ruining…” The conman sighed, knowing this would be one of the rare occasions he was actually going to admit to this, though he did so all the same. “Our friendship. Remember?”

The purple Gem stilled at this, her scowl fading as she looked to the conman somewhat gently. “Of course, I do,” she said, her tone strangely fragile and morose as she glanced down briefly. “How
could I forget one of the worst nights of my life?"

Stan and Amethyst’s initial “Revenge Trip” had been a rousing success. In almost no time at all, they had filled the tourist reviewer’s home with rabid squirrels and had laughed together over it all the while. And of course, since their first Revenge Trip had gone so well, it didn’t take long for them to find reasonable cause to go on a second one. Then a third one. And a forth one.

Sure enough, Revenge Trips very quickly became a norm for the pair, at least a weekly affair that they always looked forward to. Under the cover of night, they would set off, with a different target in mind each time, always ready to right any perceived wrongs against them in the best of ways. Their methods were creative, their tactics, clever, and their zeal, undaunted. Rare was the occasion where they ever got caught, and if they did, then either Stan would talk their way out or Amethyst would force their way out. They had gained both allies and enemies along the way, but what they gained the most of by far were memories. Through their misadventures and scheming, Stan and Amethyst had gone from begrudging acquaintances to true friends, friends forged by nights of freedom, danger, and most of all, vengeance. For eight straight years, the dynamic duo felt like they were on top of the world, unstoppable in their many quests for revenge and excitement.

Until, of course, it all came to a grinding halt.

It was a simple job, one they had thought about and planned out as much as they could. A supplier up the road had failed to deliver a shipment of merchandise that Stan had already paid for, and they adamantly refused to give him a refund for it. So of course, the only way the conman could see to rectify the situation was contracting Amethyst for another one of their infamous Revenge Trips. The ride up to the factory had been a rather long and uneventful one, but once they arrived, they were more than ready to carry out their well-thought out plans. Making use of Stan’s wide variety of tools and Amethyst’s clever use of shapeshifting, the pair managed to sneak their way into the factory, where they planned on stealing several boxes of goods in order to make up for what the conman hadn’t received.

And yet, through years of successful Revenge Trips, Stan and Amethyst had gotten admittedly cocky in their scheming. Since nobody had ever really caught and held them for too long, they started to hold onto the belief that they were invincible, that no one could nab them because they were far too smart and far too fast to be pinned down by anyone. A belief that, of course, was their downfall in the end.

Usually, the places they raided on their Revenge Trips were abandoned by night, or far enough out of the way that they wouldn’t have to worry about being seen. However, what neither of them had anticipated was that the target of their heist was actually surprisingly upscale. While breaking in had been easy, evading detection was a whole other issue. The moment they dropped down into the factory, a siren alarm started blaring, prompting the security guards on duty to give chase. Seeing that their mission was immediately futile, Stan and Amethyst already started making a break for it. When they were inevitably apprehended at the door, they both tried to fight their way out of the officers’ gasp, with punches, kicks, and even a few whip lashes. But in the end, they were indeed outnumbered and outgunned, and both of them were ultimately arrested on the spot.

Since their Revenge Trip had taken them out of Gravity Falls, the pair found themselves in a precinct far harsher and more strict than what they were used to. What would have been regarded with a mere slap on the wrist in Gravity Falls was considered a serious offense in this new area. Breaking and entering, resisting arrest, and attempted theft were all on the bill for possible
charges they were both facing. Still, there was little they could do to argue their case as they were locked in one of the police station’s small cells, awaiting further sentencing.

“I can’t believe we got caught,” Stan grumbled to himself, reclining against the stone wall behind him. “All these years of Revenge Trips and we’ve never been busted like this before! Guess that’s why got caught in the first place: we got sloppy.”

“Yeah, we did, but you know what’s not gonna be sloppy?” Amethyst asked with a sly smirk. “Bustin’ outta here.”

“What? You can’t be serious,” the conman scoffed. “Amethyst, we aren’t in Gravity Falls anymore. These cops aren’t as dumb or easy to fool as the ones back home. If they were, then I would have already talked us out of this cell and we’d be off the hook.”

“Oh, so what?” Amethyst asked, standing with an impatient scowl. “You’re just gonna sit here and serve five to ten just because we made one dumb mistake?”

“No, but I’m just saying. We need to see how this is gonna turn out before rushing into anything else. Tonight’s already turning out to be enough of a mess as it is, we don’t need to make it any worse.”

The purple Gem shot the conman a cold glare upon hearing this, but even so, she refused to sit down again. “Since when did you start wimping out on me, Stan? You’re always telling me about all of the wild and crazy things you used to do back in the day, so what gives?”

“What gives’ is that this isn’t worth it!” Stan exclaimed adamantly. “It’s all fun and games until something like this happens. And I’ve been in enough scrapes of my own to know that when things go downhill as bad as this, that’s when it’s time to bail out.”

“Wha—Yeah, b-but… that’s what makes it all so fun!” Amethyst protested. “It wouldn’t be worth it if it was easy! The risk is what makes a Revenge Trip a Revenge Trip! Duh!”

“See, that’s always been your problem, Amethyst!” the conman scolded. “You always gotta go bigger than you need to and it always ends up getting both of us in trouble! And… and I’m done.”

“D-done with that?”

“With this! With Revenge Trips, with getting arrested, with-”

“With me?!” Amethyst asked challengingly, her hands curled into tight fists.

“Maybe!” Stan shouted before he could really stop himself. He immediately regretted it though, especially as the purple Gem took in a sharp, very hurt gasp upon hearing this. Her bottom lip quivered as her eyes filled up with incoming tears that she refused to let loose as she simply glared piercingly at the conman, her expression saying everything that her words couldn’t. “A-Amethyst,” Stan quickly tried to redact his statement, his eyes wide as he realized he had definitely crossed the line in his frustration. “I… I don’t… I didn’t mean-”

“Amethyst!” The pair was abruptly startled out of the moment as a familiar pair marched up to their cell. Stan let out a disgruntled sigh upon seeing Garnet and Pearl, though Amethyst’s reaction was by far more worried.

“Oh no…” she muttered, knowing that the situation had just gone from bad to worse. For the past eight years, she had managed to keep her Revenge Trip escapades with Stan a secret from her fellow Gems, knowing that they would never approve of them. After all, she had learned over the
course of the past eight years and whenever Rose and Stan so much as crossed paths, they would always buck heads in some way or another. And of course, Garnet and Pearl would always side with their leader, no matter what. But now, there would indeed be no denying it or trying to sneak off as Amethyst usually did. They had both been caught red handed.

“Oh, it looks like you were right after all, Garnet!” Pearl exclaimed, standing outside the cell with the taller Gem and glaring at the pair inside. “I didn’t want to believe that Amethyst would engage in something so deplorable, especially with a miscreant like you, Stan, but here we all are! Care to explain?”

“Sheesh,” Stan rolled his eyes. “As if getting arrested wasn’t bad enough, now we gotta sit here and listen to you lecture to us, Pearl? Might as well just send me off to death row and get it over with instead.”

Pearl was so livid upon hearing this that she was practically shaking with visible rage. “Did you hear what he just said to me?!” she whispered to Garnet harshly. “What a no-good, callous, irresectable, lying, cheating—”

“Pearl,” Garnet quieted her teammate evenly. “Calm down.”

“Ugh, what are you guys even doing here?” Amethyst asked, dismayed. “And how’d you find out about this anyway? We’ve been doing this for eight years, and you guys are only now busting our chops for it?”

“Eight years?!” the white Gem gasped, shocked. “We just started thinking that your little nighttime ‘solo missions’ were not what they seemed just the other week! How have you two been keeping this insane ruse up for eight whole years?!”

“Uh, maybe it’s because we’re way smarter than you, stretch,” Stan deadpanned. “Even thought about that one?”

“Clearly you weren’t smart enough to not get arrested,” Garnet remarked just as sarcastically.

“So what? Are you guys gonna break us outta here or not?” the purple Gem asked with an exasperated sigh.

“Of course we’re not!” Pearl exclaimed. “As far as I’m concerned, you both deserve to learn the consequences of your horrible actions! Isn’t that right, Rose?” The white Gem paused upon realizing her leader was nowhere to be found. “Rose?”

“Oh, sorry, Pearl!” the pink Gem exclaimed as she stepped into the cell block. Her stomach was starting to become even rounder by the day thanks to her pregnancy, which was still in its relatively early stages. Still, a look of palpable exhaustion was written on her face and her usually mirthful expression was anything but, especially as she took in the sight of the pair in the cell before her. “I was just making sure none of those officers you knocked out earlier were seriously hurt and—Oh…” Rose frowned, giving the conman a critical gaze as she regarded him. “Stan.”

“Rose,” Stan greeted just as dryly, not even bothering to hide his distaste for the pink Gem.

“Rose…” Amethyst muttered much more hesitantly, looking down to the ground guiltily.

“Amethyst…” Rose began, her tone soft yet firm as she looked down to the youngest member of her team. “What’s all this about? What were you doing to end up here and with… him?”

“Rose, these two have been up to no good for nearly eight years now, right under our noses!”
Pearl quickly informed her leader, wrapping her arms around her arm. “Can you believe it?! Eight whole years! And we never noticed until now! I can’t imagine how they managed to-”

“It doesn’t matter now,” the pink Gem cut her off, surprising everyone. “Pearl, let me handle this.”

The white Gem sucked in a sharp breath, but nodded in relent, backing away to let Rose step closer to the cell. While Gems didn’t need sleep, there were clear bags under the pink Gem’s eyes, ones that seemed all the more present as she looked between the pair before her with an uncharacteristically cold expression. “Amethyst?”

“Y-yeah…?” the purple Gem frowned up at her leader, already feeling quite small under her imposing gaze.

“There’s no excuse for this kind of behavior,” Rose said, her admonishing tone still somehow strangely gentle. “You’re a Crystal Gem. You need to start acting like one. When I’m… gone, all that will be left is you, Garnet, and Pearl. And I need to be able to depend on you to protect humanity in my place. But I can’t do that if you’re going to be acting like… this. Do you understand?”

Amethyst nodded meekly, wrapping her arms around herself tightly as she fought back tears. While Rose’s words were hardly mean or hurtful, the purple Gem still hated being admonished by her leader at all. The very idea she had disappointed the pink Gem was enough to fill Amethyst with more shame than she could really handle, which was why she said nothing, but merely hung her head as Rose continued.

“And as for you, Stan,” the pink Gem’s tone turned harsher as she addressed the conman. “I just don’t understand. I thought we made it very clear where we stood with each other years ago. You said so yourself: you wanted nothing to do with any of us, which was perfectly fine. But then, all of the sudden, you start hanging around with Amethyst completely out of nowhere. It makes no sense. What could you possibly have to gain from that?”

“Maybe I didn’t wanna ‘gain’ anything from it, huh?” Stan retorted, scowling. “Maybe we just did it for the heck of it. And it’s not like you really gripe at me about any of this, seeing as how you three constantly leave Amethyst out of everything.”

“Wha—what are you talking about?” Rose asked, caught off guard by this. “We... we don’t... Amethyst... is... is that how you’ve been feeling?”

The purple Gem still didn’t meet her leader’s eyes as she slowly nodded once more. “Yeah... a little...”

“I... I’m so sorry...” Rose said with genuine remorse. “I had no idea... But still. That’s no excuse for this. Stan, you had no right to inspire Amethyst to act so... so...”


“Thank you, Pearl, that’s enough,” the pink Gem said with slight impatience.

“Oh, sure,” Stan remarked with biting sarcasm. “Go ahead, blame me for all of this. You already blame me for everything else, so why not this too?”

“Well maybe I would have to blame you if you had just let things be as we had agreed and left all of us alone!” Rose exclaimed, growing steadily angrier.
“Well maybe I would have left you alone if you had kept your nose out of things like you should have from the beginning!” Stan shouted, standing.

“Maybe I would have stayed out of things if you hadn’t shown up here in the first place and started undoing everything we had worked hard to-”

“Stop it!” Amethyst suddenly shouted, rushing to stand between the two to break the intense argument up. “Just stop it! I don’t even know why you guys are arguing anyway when this is all my fault anyway!”

“What?” Rose asked as both Pearl and Garnet looked to each other confused.

“Amethyst, what-” Stan started to ask, but the purple Gem was interrupt him.

“You heard me,” Amethyst said, irresolute. “This is all my fault. Not Stan’s. I was the one who went down to his house eight years ago and… I dunno, we just sorta became friends. In fact… I was the one who came up the whole Revenge Trip thing in the first place.”

“But-” Stan tried to cut her off, confused, but the purple Gem continued before he could say anything to incriminate himself.

“I’m the reason why we got in trouble and wound up in here,” the purple Gem affirmed. “So… if you’re gonna yell at anyone, yell at me. But… don’t blame Stan for this, please. I know you don’t like him, Rose, but… I do. We’re friends. He’s like… the only person who’s there for me when you guys aren’t. I feel… I feel like I can really be myself around him… Doesn’t that mean anything?”

Rose was silent for quite a long time as she looked down to her younger teammate, conflict written all over her tired expression, especially as she briefly glanced at Stan. And yet, after what seemed like ages of tentative silence, she finally released a long, pensive sigh. “Oh, Amethyst…” she began, glancing away guiltily. “I… We… We’ll talk about this when we get back to the temple… For now, let’s… let’s just get you out of there.”

Stan and Amethyst both looked to each other in confusion over Rose’s seeming acceptance over the purple Gem’s apparent outburst. Still, neither of them complained too much as Garnet stepped forward and summoned her gauntlets, easily bending the cell bars to the point that there was a wide enough opening for both of them to step through. Not too many other words were sparred between Stan and the Gems, save for a terse, dry thank you from the conman, one that Rose simply returned with a small, emotionless nod. And then, without any further signs of civility, they all parted ways the moment they all emerged from the police station.

And yet, as Stan headed back for his car, he happened to glance over his shoulder one last time to see Amethyst looking back at him too as she glumly followed behind her fellow Gems. While the conman wasn’t much for shows of gratitude, he did mouth her a soft ‘thank you’ before she got too far away. Amethyst’s only response was a small, yet bittersweet smile, one that quickly faded as she turned away from him.

And just like that, the final Revenge Trip was over.

“You wanna know what Rose said to me when we got back to the temple that night?” Amethyst asked, her voice still subdued as she hugged her legs tightly to her chest.

“Amethyst, I already-” Stan started, but the purple Gem quickly cut him off.
“Besides all that that. She told me she was disappointed in me. And… while that hurt, a lot, in a way it was sorta… ok. Because I took the brunt of everything for you and… I was really glad I did…”

The conman was silent for a moment upon hearing this, not really sure of what to make of something so touching. Even though that had been years ago, he suddenly felt compelled to finally give her the proper thanks she deserved for defending him that night, for sticking up for him even in front of the other Gems. But instead of any of that, a mere question escaped him instead. “So… are you still glad you did?”

Amethyst paused and seemed to muse over this for a moment or two. However, just as she opened her mouth to give him an answer, a sudden light flooded into the car from the outside. The pair shielded their eyes from it, all while exchanging a frightened glance because certainly Gideon and the cops must have found them by now. But as the light dimmed a bit, they were both equally shocked and dismayed to see who had really found them.

“Amethyst!” Pearl shouted hotly as she stood before the car, her hands on her hips. “Get out of that car this instant! You too, Stan!”

“Aw, geez…” the purple Gem groaned, complying as she opened her door and slipped out.

“Yeesh, history really does repeat itself, doesn’t it?” Stan deadpanned in a futile attempt to lighten the mood. Once they were both out of the car, the pair was able to see that Pearl was not alone. Garnet had accompanied her, of course, but so had Steven, Dipper, and Mabel, all of whom were clad in their pajamas and all of whom looked very tired and confused over having been roused out of bed so late.

“Amethyst? Mr. Pines?” Steven asked with a frown. “What are you guys doing out here in the middle of the woods this late?”

“Getting busted, apparently,” the purple Gem scowled, kicking a nearby rock. “Also what gives?” she asked the twins harshly. “I thought you guys agreed to not spill any of this to Pearl or Garnet. Not cool, dudes.”

“Just for the record, we didn’t tell them anything about what you guys were up to,” Dipper said defensively. “Mostly because we didn’t even know what you guys were up to ourselves.”

“Yeah, they just came by and got us out of bed so we could come down here and find you guys,” Mabel explained, letting out a yawn. “So what were you guys doing anyway? Racing through the forest against squirrels or something? Because that sounds like a lot of fun!”

“I can tell you right now what they were doing out here,” Pearl said, looking to Stan and Amethyst with a caustic glare. “Getting themselves in all sorts of trouble, that’s what.”

“Hey, we only got in trouble because we got caught,” Stan retorted crossly. “Besides, how’d you even find us all the way out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“I can tell you right now what they were doing out here,” Pearl said, looking to Stan and Amethyst with a caustic glare. “Getting themselves in all sorts of trouble, that’s what.”

“Hey, we only got in trouble because we got caught,” Stan retorted crossly. “Besides, how’d you even find us all the way out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“Just like how we found you the last time,” Garnet said stoically. “Future vision.”

“Ugh, of course,” Amethyst sighed in exasperation. “That always comes in to bite us in the butt somehow.”

“Honestly, Amethyst, I can’t believe you would go out and do another one of these heinous… ‘Revenge Trips’ again!” Pearl scolded. “Didn’t you both learn your lesson last time when you got arrested for one of these nights of reckless abandon?”
“Whoa, you guys got arrested together before?” Steven asked curiously.

“Why don’t you guys ever tell us about all this cool stuff you used to do?!” Mabel asked, just as intrigued.

“Because it doesn’t matter, kid,” Stan remarked coldly. “That was years ago. Which means you two can’t hold it against us anymore,” he said to Garnet and Pearl.

“I think we have every right to, seeing as how both of you are still acting just as childish now as you were back then!” Pearl exclaimed. “Why, just think of the terrible example you both are setting for the kids!”

“Uh, to be fair, they really didn’t set an example that any of us would really follow,” Dipper pointed out. “What, with the whole driving a car into the forest thing.”

“Yeah, see?” Stan shrugged. “If the kids aren’t all torn up about it, then why should you be? It’s not even a big deal. You guys don’t have to get all bent out of shape about it.”

“It is a big deal,” Garnet said firmly. “What you two did tonight was irresponsible and reckless. You know that. And both of you should be ashamed for it.”

“I completely agree, Garnet,” Pearl affirmed pointedly. “Amethyst, didn’t you listen to a word that Rose told you that night years ago?! Oh, just think of what she would say if she were here now. She’d be mortified by your irresponsible, heedless, dangerous, selfish-”

“Hold it!” Stan interrupted, having heard quite enough, especially as he noticed Amethyst’s downcast expression. “Now you two can stand here and scream at me all you want for what happened tonight, but I’m not about to let you let Amethyst take the fall for any of it.”

“Uh, Stan?” Amethyst asked, suddenly confused. The conman largely ignored her however, as Pearl spoke up.

“Oh, and why is that?”

“Because… because this was my idea!” Stan proclaimed firmly, not even bothering to look over at Amethyst as she looked up at him in completely shock. “Yeah, that’s right,” the conman continued just as brazenly as everyone looked to him skeptically. “The whole shebang was my idea. Guess I was just getting a little stir crazy and needed some action. So I roped Amethyst into going on a classic Revenge Trip with me. And you can’t really fault her for saying yes, especially since you two are always fussing at her all the time anyway.”

“Whoa… Grunkle Stan, is all that true?” Mabel asked as both her and Dipper looked to him, concerned.

Stan did hesitate for a moment upon seeing the somewhat critical glances both his nibblings were giving him. He wasn’t too fond of the idea of painting himself in such a negative light in front of them, but still, Amethyst had done the very same thing before her fellow Gems for him years ago. It was only fair that he return the favor now. “You’re darn right it is,” he said with resolve. “Isn’t that right, Amethyst?”

The purple Gem looked to the conman in complete disbelief, knowing he had just lied to spare her from the criticism of her teammates. And while she wanted to turn right around and tell the truth to spare him from it all, she didn’t have the heart to undermine the selfless act he had just done for her. Which was why she simply mumbled her response, suppressing a smile of gratitude as she did so. “Yeah… That’s right.”
“Well, we should have figured as much,” Pearl scoffed coldly, glaring at Stan. “Nothing ever changes with you, does it, Stan? You’re still just as irresponsible now as you’ve always been. In fact, I have half a mind to—”

“Pearl,” Garnet suddenly cut the white Gem off, stepping past her as she approached Stan. The conman crossed his arms as he scowled up at her, but the Gem leader’s expression was surprisingly soft, as hidden as it was. “Stan,” she began, her tone firm yet calm. “Thank you for telling us the truth. This doesn’t make what either of you did tonight right, but… it does prove a lot that you’re willing to put yourself out there for Amethyst. Which… to be honest… isn’t something even we can say we do for her that often.”

“Well then, maybe you should start,” Stan said before Amethyst could cut in. “Cause you know, she really ain’t half bad.”

“Heh,” the purple Gem chuckled, clearly touched by this. Still, she made sure to hide it under her usual playfulness as she elbowed the conman in the knee. “Same goes for you, ‘old man’.”

The kids all exchanged warm smiles at this sweet exchange, one that Garnet shared and eventually even Pearl cracked a small smile over, her earlier frustration slowly ebbing away. However, the tender moment was cut far too short as the group overheard the heavy sounds of approaching footsteps and nearby voices.

“I saw a light over this way!” Gideon’s tell-tale accent called out. “C’mon!”

“Aw, man! It’s Gideon!” Amethyst whispered, worriedly. “We forgot all about that little loser!”

“Wait, you two were trying to get revenge on Gideon?” Dipper asked. “Well, I guess that makes sense considering what he did to Compy’s enclosure earlier…”

“Aw, you guys totally should have asked us to come with you then!” Mabel exclaimed with a smirk. “We would have loved to help you get even with Gideon!”

“Ugh, and he’s got the fuzz with him too?” Stan scowled, hearing other voices follow after the child psychic’s. “Whelp, that’s it! We’re pretty much done for this time! Might as well just surrender now, because how in the world would we ever get outta this one?”

“Like this,” Garnet said with resolve. “Stan, Amethyst, take the kids and hide. We’ll handle this.”

“Wha—we will?” Pearl asked as the others ran off to hide in the cover of the woods. She quickly redacted her hesitance, however, upon catching the caustic look the Gem leader gave her. “Oh! I mean, o-of course we will! Right…”

“Aha!” Gideon exclaimed as him and Blubbs and Durland burst into the clearing. “There they—are?”

“Evening, officers,” Garnet said calmly, leaning casually against Stan’s car as she and Pearl attempted to play it cool. “Gideon.”

“Wha—You two?!” the child psychic exclaimed, dumbfounded. “What are ya’ll doing here? Where are Stanford and Amethyst?! I demand you bring them out here so they can pay recompense for their crimes against me immediately!”

“Oh, we would, if they were still here, of course,” Pearl said with faux innocence. “And if they were guilty of any crimes at all. But, as it stands, you were the one who engaged them in a high speed car chase, Gideon and apparently from the looks of it… ran them off the road, endangering
both of their lives and nearly causing a case of vehicular manslaughter…”

“What?! I did no such thing!” Gideon protested hotly. “Officers, they’re lyin’ to ya both right through their teeth! Can’t you see through their wicked little Gem trickery?”

“Hm…” Blubbs mused, glancing between the two Gems. “Well, if our two ‘culprits’ aren’t here, then where are they?”

“They went home,” Garnet replied simply.

“That’s right,” Pearl added with a nod. “The poor things were both so traumatized after the whole experience that they came and asked the two of us to retrieve Stan’s car while they recovered. And of course, how could ever deny a request from two… t-two… upstanding members of the community! Heh, right…”

“You really think we’re buying any of that trash?” Gideon asked with a scoff, turning to the officers once more. “I saw the two of them trying to dump all of my merchandise into the lake! Check the car! I’m sure ya’ll will find more than enough evidence.”

“You heard him,” Blubbs said to the pair of Gems as him and Durland stepped forwards. “Step aside, ladies.”

“O-oh… Of course!” Pearl exclaimed with apt nervousness. Fortunately though, Garnet had a plan as always.

“Wait! Look at that!” the Gem leader exclaimed, pointing in the opposite direction. Of course, the cops, as well as Gideon, were all gullible enough to fall for the ploy, allowing Garnet just enough time to grab all of the remaining merchandise out of the back of Stan’s car. While the others were still distracted, Garnet easily tossed her large haul across the forest right before they all turned around. “Alright, go ahead and check.”

The officers did so, shining their flashlight in the backseat only to find it was completely empty. “Well, golly, nothing’s in there!” Durland exclaimed.

“W-what?!” Gideon gasped, shocked. “But… but they-”

“Looks like you have no evidence for your bold claims, Gideon,” Pearl shrugged unsympathetically. “You might as well just head on home. It’s probably quite past your bedtime, after all.”

“Well it’s definitely past our bedtimes,” Blubbs concluded with a tired nod. “Come along, Durland. I’ll get pick us up some early morning coffee on the way back to the station.”

“Oh boy!” Durland exclaimed brightly, following his partner up the hill. “Can I have extra whipped cream in mine?!”

“No, wait!” Gideon called out after the cops, only to spin around towards the Gems with a hateful glare. “You conniving lil’ Gems may think you’re so clever, but very soon ya’ll are gonna regret ever makin’ an enemy outta me! You think painting your precious temple all up is bad? Well just wait until I smash it to smithereens!”

“Oh, so you were the one who did that?” Pearl asked, crossing her arms. “And here we were thinking it was Amethyst all this time! I guess we owe her an apology!” she exclaimed lough enough that the purple Gem would easily be able to hear it from her hiding spot.
“And believe us, we’re already regretting having you as an enemy,” Garnet deadpanned. “Having to put up with you alone is about as annoying as it gets.”

Gideon let out a frustrated growl upon hearing this, but even so, he spun on his heels and began to retreat, grumbling threats towards the Gems all the while. Once the child psychic had completely left, Garnet and Pearl called out for the others to assure them that the coast was clear and that they could out. And while the kids were the first ones to rush out and profess how amazed and amused they were with how Garnet and Pearl had handled the situation, but by far, Stan and Amethyst were the ones most impressed.

“Oh my gosh, you guys, what you just did was awesome!” Amethyst exclaimed with a rowdy laugh. “That little chump’s gonna be crying about this for weeks!”

“Yeah, I gotta admit you two pulled a pretty decent con back there,” Stan acknowledged with a smirk. “And believe me, I know all about cons.”

“Thank you, Stan,” Pearl said with a satisfied grin. “But for future reference, don’t ever make us lie like that to cover for you again. I nearly gagged trying to convince myself to call you an honest citizen.”

The group let out a collective laugh at this, one that faded as Steven spoke up. “Aw, well I’m really glad we’re all getting along again! But, uh… could we maybe go home now? I don’t know about you guys, but these past few nights haven’t been the best for sleeping…”

“Agreed,” Dipper said, aptly weary.

“Sleep! Sleep! Sleep!” Mabel cheered with as much waning energy as she could muster.

“Tell me about it, kid,” Stan agreed, rolling his eyes.

“Alright, alright, we’ll take you all home,” Pearl chuckled as her and Garnet began to lead the kids away. “Are you two coming?” she asked Stan and Amethyst.

“Eh, we’ll catch up with you all later,” Stan shrugged. “We still have one more thing we gotta go.”

“Oh yeah! That’s right!” Amethyst exclaimed, remembering Vidalia’s painting. “Uh… we’ll be back in a while. Don’t wait up!”

Pearl prepared to protest this, but Garnet was quick to stop her. “We won’t,” she replied as they all headed off into the woods, leaving the purple Gem and the conman alone once more. A stilted silence lingered between the two of them, especially as they both got back into the car. Only after Stan pulled the car into motion did Amethyst finally break the veil of quietness.

“Oh… Stan?” she began hesitantly. “I… I, uh… Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” Stan said simply, slowly maneuvering through the trees before eventually finding the road again.

“Um… you know, nobody’s ever really… stuck up for me like that before,” Amethyst admitted. “It… it was nice, for a change.”

“Yeah, well nobody stuck up for me the way you did all those years ago, either,” Stan shrugged, cracking a small smile. “So I guess that means we’re finally even, huh?”

“Guess so…” the purple Gem sighed contentedly, though her smile quickly faded. “Uh… I know
tonight ended up being a huge mess but… you really did prove that you can still keep up with me so… that’s pretty cool. Guess we’re still sold off of doing any more Revenge Trips though, huh?”

“Are you kidding?! Of course we’re gonna do more!” Stan exclaimed as if it was obvious.

“What? But you said—”

“What, you really think I’m gonna let one bad night stop us now that we got our mojo back? No way! I haven’t felt this young in years. And just for the record, I’d absolutely do tonight over again if I could, mess ups and all.”

“Heh, same here,” Amethyst laughed warmly. “After all, where would mess-ups like us be without plenty of mess-ups of our own?”

“Old and boring,” Stan replied with a smirk. “That’s where. Now, let’s finish this Revenge Trip once and for all. Because how long is this party going?”

Stars were practically in the purple Gem’s eyes as the conman posed this question to her, and she was more than happy to give her usual reply to it. “This party’s going all night long!”

“Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to humbly welcome you to my lil’ ol’ Tent of Telepathy!” Gideon quipped brightly, standing between a group of tourists and said tent the following morning. If there was anything the child psychic was good at, it was putting the embarrassing loss he had suffered last night behind him in order to put on his usual schmaltzy show without a hitch. Or so he thought. “Inside this tent, ya’ll will find a world of wonder and enchantment! So why wait any longer? Let’s head on—”

Gideon was abruptly cut off as he walked smack into the wide, large canvas behind him. The child psychic toppled over right along with the elaborate, realistic painting of the Tent of Telepathy, which had been enough to fool even him. His guests all let out simultaneous gasps of shock as the ruse collapsed, revealing the actual tent behind it. Or rather, what was left of it.

Without the pegs to keep it standing, the tent had easily collapsed to the ground overnight, creating a variable disaster in and of itself. Of course, to make matters even worse for Gideon, it had fallen in such a way that it was clear to see the insult spray painted onto it in bold red letters: “Gideon Peeful”.

“W-what?!” Gideon exclaimed, mortified and alarmed as he jumped to his feet. A mix of laughs and boos came from the crowd, which was quick to disband upon realizing the child psychic had nothing to show them.

As Gideon desperately ran after them in an attempt to get them back, he failed to notice the two figures hidden just out of sight in the bushes nearby. Stan and Amethyst finally let loose the pent up laughter they had been holding back once Gideon was out of earshot, both of them exchanging a high five over their rousing success.

“Man, V really came through for us this time!” Amethyst chuckled, glancing at the painting. “That worked perfectly!”

“Hey, all the best Revenge Trips always do, don’t they?” Stan asked with a satisfied grin.

“ Heck yeah they do! I already have a bunch of new ideas for our next one, whenever that’ll be.
That is, if you’re game for it.”

“You know I am,” Stan nodded, still grinning. “Though, uh, we might wanna wait a while before we pull another one. After something as wild as last night, I’m gonna need a little time to recover, you know?”

“Pfft, whatever you say, old man,” Amethyst joked, elbowing him playfully.

“Now listen, kid,” the conman started, feigning seriousness over this age-old nickname. “I thought I told you to—eh, you know what? What the heck. I’ll let it slide.” He sent a wink to the purple Gem, who was more than happy to return it, just as she always did. “This time.”
Chapter 30, Part 1: Dreamscaperers

Chapter Summary

In which the asshole demon nacho makes his debut and the kids rifle through Stan's memories

Chapter Notes

Well, here we are at the end of another arc with a chapter I know a lot of people have been waiting for! And so, here's my take on Dreamscaperers! Enjoy!!!

It was an unusually gloomy day in Gravity Falls, with the skies hanging dull and overcast and covered in clouds that were more than likely saturated in oncoming rain. A few sparse showers had already fallen that morning, dampening everything just enough that so much as trying to walk outside would result in a rather muddy mess. It was for this reason that Dipper, Mabel, and Steven had taken to the shack’s attic to hang out for the afternoon. Seeing as how the Gems were gone for the day on a mission and the shack was bereft of business, the kids had relatively no obligations, which meant they were free to do whatever they pleased to occupy their time. Including engaging in a rousing, albeit a bit one-sided game of picture charades.
“Ok! It’s done!” Mabel exclaimed, grinning widely as she presented her drawing to the boys. They both looked over it quietly, taking in her rather sloppy and haphazard jumble of images in for a moment before Dipper finally shook his head in defeat.

“Mabel, I have no idea what any of that is,” he admitted with a frown.

“Aw, come on! Just guess something!” Mabel encouraged, tapping her pencil against the page.

“Hm…” Steven mused thoughtfully, looking to the drawings once more. “Is it… a calculator!”

Mabel gasped in excitement, nodding vigorously as she glanced at her own rough sketch of a cow, a cue tip, and a person waving. “Yeah it is! Good job, Steven!”

“Eh, it was kinda obvious,” the young Gem shrugged with a grin.

“Ok, seriously?” Dipper asked with slight disbelief. “How are you guys beating me so badly at this?”

“Oh don’t feel bad, Dipper,” Mabel reassured with a smirk. “Me and Steven just have the same kind of special ‘art sensibilities’, right?”

“Right,” Steven nodded. “I mean, Mabel was able to guess that my drawing was a laptop, so that must mean something!” He held up his own sketch, which was of waves crashing onto the shore and a blouse.

Dipper simply looked between the two of them with slight confusion before reaching an apt conclusion. “I… don’t think either of you guys are really playing this right…”

Before Steven or Mabel could argue their case, their game was suddenly interrupted as Stan called up to them from downstairs. “Kids! Come quick!” Curious to see what the fuss was about, the trio hurried downstairs Stan sitting before the TV wearing only his boxers and an undershirt and a wide grin of amusement. “I need you to laugh at this with me!” he chuckled, nodding to the ad playing on screen, which just so happened to be for the Tent of Telepathy.

“Who’s cute as a button, and always your friend?” Gideon sang in his usual schmaltzy way, putting on a charming smile and a folksy dance. “Lil’ G-I-D to the E-O-N! Wink!” he exclaimed, giving a sly wink to the viewing audience as a voiceover from Bud cheerfully repeated his son’s name: “Lil’ Gideon!”

“Ugh, Gideon,” Dipper groaned in annoyance, rolling his eyes.

“Remember when I wouldn’t date him and he tried to destroy us?” Mabel asked with equal disdain.

“Or the time he forced all my Watermelon Stevens to try and destroy the Gems?” Steven asked with a frown that quickly turned tearful as he recalled the experience. “Oh, Baby Melon, may you rest in peace—er, pieces.”

“He’s always trying to trick me into losing the Mystery Shack,” Stan scowled. “Not to mention how he nearly got me and Amethyst arrested the other night.”

“Uh, actually, I think you and Amethyst nearly got yourselves arrested,” Dipper pointed out.

“Don’t change the subject!” Stan snapped. “That doesn’t change the fact that Gideon’s still a creepy little punk.”
“Seriously though,” Wendy agreed as she stepped into the room with Soos. “One time I caught him stealing my moisturizer.”

“And yet, our mutual hatred for him bonds us together,” the handyman concluded, eliciting agreeing nods from almost everybody. Their collective attention was caught by the television once again, as Gideon’s ad came to an end.

“Come on down to Lil’ Gideon’s Tent of Telepathy!” Bud’s voiceover exclaimed. “Opening soon at this location.” The shot suddenly changed to the Mystery Shack, strangely enough, though it only remained for a second before the Tent of Telepathy fell smack on top of it, crushing the shack completely. Likewise a wrecking ball smashed into the Gem temple in the background, ramming into its face and crumbling it apart instantly.

“Oh my gosh!” Steven gasped in alarmed horror. “The temple! And the Mystery Shack! Oh this is terrible! How did Gideon do that while we were all standing in here?!"

“He didn’t, Steven, it was just an effect,” Dipper deadpanned. “Still… should we be worried about that?”

“Please,” Stan said with an unconcerned wave of his hand. “The only way Gideon’s taking over the shack is by breaking in and stealing my deed.”

The abrupt sound of shattering glass instantly startled the entire group the moment they heard it, even if it came from the other room. “You mean like, right now?” Wendy asked in reference to what Stan had just said.

And certainly and timely enough, Gideon had indeed busted into Stan’s office and was already hard at work trying to decipher the combination to the conman’s tightly locked safe. “38? 41?” the child psychic muttered as he frantically turned the lock. “Oh, heavens to betsy!”

“Gideon!” Stan shouted gruffly, standing in the doorframe of the office with his arms crossed sullenly. The kids, Wendy, and Soos were all piled behind him, eager to watch the confrontation that was about to unfold.

“Well, well, Stanford, my arch-nemesis” Gideon smirked deviously as he stood and faced the conman. “Just like the other night, it seems as though we have entered a dangerous game of cat and mouse. But the question remains: who is the cat and who is the-"

“Soos, broom,” Stan said dryly as the conman handed him a broom.

“Oh no, not the broom!” Gideon cried in alarm, especially as the conman charged at him with it. Of course, this soon turned into a rather comical circular chase, as Stan pursued the child psychic with his broom and got a few good whacks in. Gideon attempt to show his dominance by pausing and letting out a harsh hiss, only for Stan to retaliate with two rough swings of his broom, which was finally enough to force him out of the room. The conman quickly managed to chase Gideon out of the shack altogether, making sure to keep his broom on hand as he stood guard at the door to keep him from sneaking back in.

“And stay out, you chump!” Stan exclaimed harshly.

“You mark my words, Stanford!” Gideon began, his hands curled into tight fists as he glared fiercely at his rival. “One day I’m gonna get that combination! Nobody can stop me! Not you, not those bothersome Crystal Gems, not anyone! And once I get that deed, you’ll never see the Mystery Shack again!”
Stan simply rolled his eyes, not taking the petulant child psychic’s threats seriously. “Good luck, bucko,” he remarked sarcastically before slamming the door, leaving Gideon to seethe out in the lightly-falling rain.

Still, Stan did make sure to go back to his safe and check to make sure Gideon hadn’t tampered with the shack’s deed. And, after checking it seeing that it was safe and sound, the conman secured in back inside the safe once more, making sure it was locked tight and far out of the child psychic’s reach. “Heh,” Stan chuckled to himself as he finished up. “The combo to this safe is in the one place he’ll never find it: my brain.”

With a broad grin of satisfaction, the conman left the room to continue lounging, not even noticing the figure still lurking right outside the window. Gideon’s fury had dissolved into a sinister resolve, for despite how crafty Stan might have thought himself to be, the child psychic had a plan. He always did. “Your brain isn’t as safe as you might think, Stanford Pines!” Gideon exclaimed, his dark smirk growing wider as he pulled the second journal out of his suit. “This is the last straw! It’s time to unlock the journal’s greatest secret…”

Gideon’s smile grew practically manic as he found the page he was looking for. For there, nestled amidst countless codes and cryptograms on the rain splattered parchment, was a wheel, demarcated with ten symbols around it, all of them different: from a tree, to a star, to a sword, to gemstones of several varying cuts and still others. But the wheel itself was not what captivated the child psychic’s interest. Rather, it was the mysterious being inside the wheel, who, according to the journal at least, supposedly possessed power and knowledge all at once.

Only time would tell if that promise carried any weight.

While Gideon’s break in earlier had been something of an eventful distraction, the quiet, dull pace of the day was quick to return, leaving everyone to spend the rest of the gloomy afternoon congregated around the TV downstairs. While Dipper and Wendy reclined boredly on the floor and lazily fired off Nyarf guns at each other, Steven and Mabel sat together on the other side of Stan’s chair and laughed over the funny videos they were watching on the young Gem’s phone. It didn’t take too long for their noisy merriment to start getting on the conman’s nerves as he tried to watch TV over them, to little avail.

“Ugh, that’s it!” Stan exclaimed, glaring at the pair in frustration and immediately silencing their laughter. “Kid, when the heck are you gonna go home?” he asked Steven impatiently. “You’ve been here all day! Normally I don’t care since you runts usually go running around outside, but being cooped up in here and having to put up with both you and Mabel is more than any sane person can take!”

“Aw, but Mr. Pines, the Gems are on a really dangerous mission today,” Steven began to explain. “And Pearl told me to come spend the day down here instead of being all alone at the temple. She said that you owe her and Garnet for what happened with the cops the other night.”

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“Don’t worry, Grunkle Stan,” Mabel reassured brightly. “We’ll be super quiet.” Of course, only a
second after she promised this, her hand slipped, resulting in her accidently hitting the play button on Steven’s phone. The loud song that blared over the speaker was enough to rouse Dipper and Wendy from their relative listlessness as well as prompt Stan to confiscate the phone entirely.

“Hey, my phone!” Steven protested, reaching for it even as Stan held it away from him.

“Obviously you two can’t handle the responsibility of- ” the conman paused as he looked over the phone with a confused frown, unfamiliar with the trending technology. “Whatever this weird noise box is. So until you can, I’ll just hold onto it.” Stan’s bewilderment with the phone soon turned to frustration as he kept slamming his finger against it in a futile attempt to get the blaring music to stop. Eventually though, he gave up and handed the phone back to Steven, but only for a moment. “Just as soon as you turn that racket off, first.”

“Well, Grunkle Stan, if we aren’t allowed to watch TubeTube videos, then can we at least watch a movie that we’ll all enjoy instead of… that?” Mabel asked, nodding to the TV as it played a lackluster old western.

“He put the old in ‘old west’.” The TV advertised. “They call him ‘Grandpa the Kid!’”

“I’m tired during the day,” the elderly cowboy on screen grumbled.

“Hey, I’ll have you know I can relate to this!” Stan argued crossly.

“Mr. Pines, Mabel’s right,” Wendy said dryly. “That old junk is boring.”

“It sure is! Which is why I have the perfect suggestion for what we should watch instead!” Mabel grinned widely, holding up a very colorful VHS tape. “Dream Boy High! ‘Where love is on your permanent record’.”

Of course, the others all booed at such a gaudy, pandering suggestion, save for Steven who looked to the cover of Mabel’s tape with his usual fascination. “I don’t know what you guys are booing about,” the young Gem said with a smile. “This movie looks like it’ll be great! Just look at how cool and colorful these guys are!” He exclaimed, pointing to the two young men on the cover, both decked out in the most flashy neon clothes imaginable.

No one really had a chance to argue against this however, as a sudden crash sounded from the kitchen, with Soos scrambling into the room seconds later with a fearful cry. “Dude, there’s a bat in the kitchen! It tried to touch me with its little bat fingers!”

“Don’t worry, I got this under control,” Stan reassured before casually reclining back into his armchair and shirking the task off. “Dipper, take care of it.”

While Mabel chuckled triumphantly over how she didn’t have to handle this unsavory responsibility, Dipper let out a disgruntled scoff, shooting a disbelieving glance at the conman for it. “What? Why can’t Mabel do it?” he asked petulantly.

“Cause life ain’t fair,” Stan shrugged unsympathetically. “Now go fight a bat so we can watch TV.”

“No way, Grunkle Stan!” Dipper protested firmly as he stood between Stan and the TV. “You’re always making me do dumb chores and I’m tired of it! I’m putting my foot down this time!” To emphasize his point, he slammed his foot down on the carpet, hoping that it would show the conman that he meant business.

“Ooooo!” Mabel, Steven, Soos, and Wendy all gasped, intrigued by turn of events. Stan however, was far less amused.
“I said do it, kid,” he ordered harshly. “Now!”

Despite this severe command, Dipper was still adamant, especially as he crossed his arms and stared Stan down, undaunted. Of course, the conman stared right back, and the others all watched the palpable tension steadily build up between the two of them as the scowls they were trading became progressively more irate. However, Stan won out in the end, as Dipper wasn’t able to hold out under his fierce, almost threatening glare for too very long.

“Ok, I’ll do it!” he finally, very begrudgingly agreed, heaving a defeated sigh as he began to head for the kitchen. Steven and Mabel followed after him, curious to see how this would turn out. “Ugh, stupid chores…” Dipper muttered petulantly as he grabbed a saucepan and spoon lying near the kitchen entry.

“You totally got this, Dipper!” Steven encouraged brightly. “The good thing about bats is that they’re really small, but then again… they can fly… which means they might be kinda hard to catch…”

“Just remember,” Mabel cut in with what she believed was much better advice. “Bats are more afraid of you than you are of them.” Dipper didn’t really take either of their well-intentioned, yet misguided help to heart as he simply took in a deep, resolved breath and charged into the kitchen with pan and spoon in hand. “Or maybe I’m thinking of ducklings…” Mabel mused a moment after her brother left.

This correction came too late of course, for before either Steven or Mabel could even peek in and see how Dipper was faring, they quickly were able to glean that from the abrupt clatter in the kitchen. Aside from the noisy explosion of breaking plates, bat screeches, and Dipper’s own frightened cries, a barrage of kitchenware flew out of the room as the pair outside simply stood by, unsure of what to really do.

“Ducklings are so adorable!” Steven obliviously quipped as though nothing had even happened.

“I know, right?” Mabel readily agreed, playfully mimicking one, much to the young Gem’s amusement. “Quack, quack, quack!”

Of course, as soon as the clamor in the kitchen did calm down a bit, Steven and Mabel did head in to check up on Dipper, who had somehow managed to chase the bat outside though not without getting mildly injured in the process. He assured the pair that it was only a few small cuts and bruises, but it was enough to worry both Steven and Mabel enough to get Soos involved. And so, after rounding up what little first aid supplies Stan had on hand in the shack, the three of them got to work on tending to Dipper’s wounds the best they could, much to his chagrin.

“Ow, ow!” Dipper hissed in pain as Soos dabbed disinfectant over the cut on his arm while blithely humming a song he made up about it.

“You know, Dipper, this would be way faster and easier with my healing spit,” Steven pointed out before giving his hand a generous lick. “This stuff will fix you right up!”

“Uh, n-no thanks, Steven…” Dipper quickly rejected, blocking his hurt arm off with a rather uncomfortable frown. “I’m pretty sure I’ll recover just fine without it.”

“Well, ok,” Steven shrugged, not entirely convinced. “But the offer’s still on the table for if you ever have to chase off another bat or something!”

“Uh… right…” Dipper said, glancing away as Mabel finished bandaging the cut on his forehead.
“I just don’t get it though. Why does Grunkle Stan always pick on me? Think about it! The more painful or difficult the chore is, the more likely it is I’ll have to do it! Why doesn’t he pick on you guys like that?”

“Pfft, what are you even talking about, bro-bro?” Mabel shook her head. “Stan’s not hard on you, silly! He just likes showing tough love sometimes!”

“Yeah, like when he tells me and the Gems that we’re ‘annoying’ and that we’re ‘the worst neighbors ever’,” Steven remarked innocently. “Amethyst says that’s just Mr. Pines’ way of joking around with us! Which means he must love joking around with us because he says that sort of stuff so much!”

Dipper gave the young Gem a rather puzzled look upon hearing this, knowing that was most certainly not what it meant but not bothering to try and argue against his stilted logic. “Sure, Steven,” he said somewhat sarcastically. “That’s what it means.”

“Dipper, Stan’s personality is just one of life’s great mysteries,” Soos spoke up. “Like whether or not it’s possible to lick your own elbow.”

“I bet you can’t!” Mabel challenged daringly.

“I bet I can!” Soos exclaimed boldly, already trying to do so, much to Steven and Mabel’s shared amusement.

“Lick it! Lick it! Lick it!” they chanted excitedly, following Soos out of the room and leaving Dipper behind. He let out a frustrated sigh, especially as he happened to glance over at Stan’s picture hanging on the nearby wall. Regardless of what Steven and Mabel had said, Dipper was still convinced that the conman had a generally low opinion of him, though for what reason, he really didn’t understand. Then again, he supposed it did make some sense. Especially seeing as how even from the very beginning of the summer, Dipper had never really hit it off with Stan in the way Mabel had. But then again, was that really any excuse for the conman to treat him with such blatant disrespect?

“The sink’s clogged!” Stan yelled from the other room. “Dipper! Get in here and fix it!”

Of course, this stoic command only managed to aggravate Dipper even more, as well as give him even more tangible evidence for Stan’s clear contempt for him. Which was why, out of sheer vexation, he grabbed the Nyraf gun lying on the nearby table and fired a suction-cup projectile at the conman’s portrait, watching with muted satisfaction as it struck him right between the eyes.

Somewhere in the middle of the woods, a nearly identical photo of Stan sat, defaced with a red ‘x’ over his eyes and a ring of glowing candles around it. Gideon smirked cunningly as he put his match out, journal 2 resting in his free hand and turned open to the exact page he needed for his treacherous plans.

“You think that combination’s safe in your mind, Stanford?” the child psychic asked rhetorically, running a hand over the summoning spell on the open page. “We’ll see what my new minion has to say about that!” Still using the journal as a guide, Gideon stood before the circle of candles as he began reciting the spell word for word. “Triangulum, entangulum. Vene foris dominus mentum. Vene foris videntis omnium!”

While Gideon believed he would go relatively unnoticed in carrying out his scheme, what he hadn’t
counted on was that Mabel, Steven, and Soos had taken to the front lawn of the shack. The kids took immense enjoyment out of watching the handyman’s continued albeit fruitless attempts to lick his elbow, yet despite that, they still cheered him on all the while.

“Lick that elbow! Lick that elbow!” Mabel and Steven cheered in pumped unison, only for Soos to finally sigh in defeat as he stopped straining to reach.

“Like the infinite horizon, it eludes my grasp,” he admitted with a frown as Steven and Mabel simply chuckled. However, the levity was soon cut short as a very familiar laugh sounded from the forest nearby.

“What was that?” Steven asked, looking to the woods curiously.

“Wait…” Mabel paused as the devious chuckle continued. “Is that who I think it is?”

After exchanging an inquisitive glance, the trio decided to go investigate, only to find the source of the laughter in a clearing not too far away. They stayed at the fringe of the clearing however, tucking behind the bushes just out of sight of the child psychic at the center of it. “Ugh, Gideon?” Mabel asked with apt disgust. “What’s he still doing here?”

“Whoa, dudes, looks like something’s up with him,” Soos noted, referring to how the child psychic was doubled over and trembling as he let out a load groan.

“Maybe we should go see if he’s ok?” Steven suggested with his usual stain of empathy.

Mabel was more than prepared to shoot that idea down, but the group was surprised into silence as Gideon collapsed to his knees and let out an indecipherable, admittedly unnerving chant. “Egassem sdrawkcab. egassem sdrawkcab. Egassem sdrawkcab! Egassem sdrawkcab! Egassem sdrawkcab!”

With each nonsense word, the child psychic’s voice grew louder, his eyes enveloped in a bright blue glow that completely hid his pupils. In a sudden flash, the entire world seemed to drain of all color, resorting to a dull, grayscale pallet. The clouds in the sky overhead seemed to be flying by at an alarming rate while the rest of the world just seemed to freeze, save for Gideon and the trio eavesdropping on him. All three of them continued watching what was unfolding with unshakable fear, even if they had no idea what they were supposed to really be afraid of.

Out of nowhere, another bright flash dotted the sky before the child psychic and out of it, a triangular shape began to emerge. As it scaled to a medium size, it turned dark with what seemed like a starry spacescape, only for an outline of flames to burst around it seconds later. As a large, singular eye appeared in the center of the triangle, it began to, of all things, laugh. It was a strange, nasally laugh that was somehow both annoying and intimidating all at once, and carried the faintest hint of sadism in it for good measure. Frightened and bewildered by the appearance of this strange new entity, Mabel, Steven, and Soos all made sure to tuck down behind the bush just so they could remain out of its singular-eyed sight. Even Gideon backed up a bit, suddenly unsettled by the creature he had managed to summon based on just its laughter alone. But soon enough, the triangular being made his full appearance known as the flames around him died out and more physical details emerged, including thin black arms and legs, a tall, narrow top hat, and a petite bowtie just below his eye. A deceptively simple and unassuming appearance for a creature that was supposed to be “all knowing”.

“Oh, Gravity Falls! It is good to be back!” the being exclaimed in his pitchy, somewhat echoey voice as he glanced around. “Haven’t seen this old place since that night I shook those four space rocks up years ago! But I’ll spare you the boring details on all that. Spoilers, ya know.” With his hands casually placed on his hips—or rather, his edges, he glided down to float directly before Gideon, who could only gape at him, dumbfounded. “Name’s Bill Cipher,” he introduced himself.
And I take it you’re some kind of living ventriloquist dummy. Ha! Just kidding! I know who you are, Gideon!"

“W-what are you?!” the child psychic asked with apt nervousness. “And h-how did you know my name?"

“Oh, I know lots of things!” Bill exclaimed brightly, though his tone quickly turned dark and deep as a plethora of cryptic images flashed on his otherwise bright yellow form, all of which went by too quickly to make anything of. “LOTS OF THINGS… Hey, look what I can do!” he quipped, his body returning to its normal color as he held his hand out towards a deer that was grazing at the edge of the forest nearby. With a mere flick of his wrist, the doe’s teeth were all seamlessly ripped out of its mouth as they flew towards the demon’s open hand without delay. “Deer teeth!” he handed the collection of teeth to Gideon with a twisted laugh. “For you, kid!”

“Augh!” Gideon cried in disgust, dropping the teeth immediately. “You’re insane!”

“Sure I am, what’s your point?” Bill shrugged, returning the deer’s teeth to its mouth with a simple wave of his hand. “I never did understand why you fleshbags get so worked up about that little tidbit. Then again, you’d hardly be the first.”

As unnerved as Gideon was, his fear was turning more into frustration over Bill’s impudent, rather callous attitude, which seemed to far exceed even his own. Still, as flustered as he was, the child psychic regained his composure and take up a firm stance as he voiced his demands. “Listen to me, demon! I have a job for you,” he said, glaring boldly at Bill all the while. “I need you to enter the mind of Stanford Pines and steal the code to his safe!”

Upon hearing exactly what Gideon’s intentions for summoning this bizarre demon were, Mabel, Soos, and Steven all gasped in shocked unison. After all, if the child psychic had gone to such great lengths, then clearly, he was done playing around. This time, he meant business.

Once again, Bill simply laughed mockingly, clearly not taking Gideon too seriously. “Yeah, sure, I-” he abruptly cut himself off however, his eye reverting to a cold glare as he turned away from the child psychic briefly. “Wait… Stan Pines…” he mused, his form flashing with an image of the conman himself, followed by an unknown, glowing red symbol. His eye went wide with realization before he quickly turned back to Gideon, maintaining his usual casual manner. “You know what, kid? You’ve convinced me. I’m sold! I’ll help you with this, and in return you can help me with something I’ve been working on! Nothing too big, just a… a pet project, ya know? We’ll work out the details later.”

“Deal!” Gideon exclaimed without hesitating, knowing that whatever Bill wanted from him in return from this would be more than worth it to get his hands on the Mystery Shack.

As the child psychic held out his hand to solidify the deal, the demon’s own hand erupted in a bright blue flame, though it oddly didn’t burn Gideon as the two shook on their plans, much to the amazement and slight horror of the trio still watching the exchange from afar.

“Well, time to invade Stan’s mind! This should be fun!” Bill exclaimed with undaunted glee. “Remember: Realityisanillusiontheuniverseisahologramtheclusteriscomingbuygold bye!”

After imparting this fast-spoken, bewildering message, Bill suddenly disappeared in blinding blue flash, similar to the one he had first appeared in. As the light cleared and color returned to the black and white world, Gideon let out a sharp gasp as he opened his eyes, clearing them as if he had just awakened from a dream. But what had just happened was far from just a mere dream, as Mabel, Steven, and Soos could all attest to as they also opened their eyes, completely shocked at what they
had just witnessed.

“It worked!” Gideon let out a maniacal laugh as he realized all of his sinister plans were coming together. However, the trio in the bushes all knew they had a serious problem on their hands with this development, which was why they were quick to retreat so they could discuss it out of the child psychic’s earshot.

“Guys, this is really bad,” Mabel said with apt concern. “We can’t let that triangle guy get inside Stan’s mind. Who knows what’ll happen if he does?”

“Dudes, that guy was crazy bonkers creepy!” Soos exclaimed fretfully. “Did you see what he did with those deer teeth? I totally thought I was gonna puke!”

“And the way he just… laughed about it, like it was actually funny,” Steven shuddered with an anxious frown. “It was scary. Even if his little top hat and bow tie were kinda cute. But what can we do to stop him?”

“Oh! Oh! I know!” Mabel exclaimed, her expression alight with a newfound idea. “Who better to call to get rid of crazy evil things like that then the three coolest Gems in Gravity Falls? Well, the only three Gems in Gravity Falls, but still! I’m sure they’d be able to get rid of that triangle guy, no problem!”

“Yeah!” Steven exclaimed with zeal before his smile quickly faded. “Oh, but wait… they’re gone for the day and I don’t know when they’ll be back. And I don’t think we really have a lot of time to wait for them…”

“Dang it!” Mabel exclaimed with a frustrated snap of her fingers. “Well then I guess we’re gonna have to do this ourselves. To the Mystery Shack!”

“To the Mystery Shack!” Soos and Steven repeated boldly after her, before the handyman quickly interjected.

“Uh, actually, can we maybe stop off for snacks first? You can’t fight a crazy triangle demon on an empty stomach, dudes.”

Mabel and Steven looked to each other for a moment upon hearing this request, but in the end, this delay easily won them both over. After all, they certainly had enough time to grab a quick snack before stopping Gideon’s twisted ambitions, right? “To the Big Donut!” the young Gem proclaimed just as vigorously as before.

“To the Big Donut!”

Seeing as how he had been the only one around for the past hour, Dipper had found himself stuck with even more chores to add onto the already lengthy list Stan had rattled off to him. His current task of sweeping up the living room put him rather close proximity to the conman, who was fast asleep on his recliner in front of the TV. Dipper paused, giving Stan a suspicious glance as he mumbled a rather incoherent apology in his sleep.

“What is going on in that guy’s head?” Dipper wondered to himself incredulously as he prepared to leave the room. However, before he could, Mabel, Steven, and Soos burst in in a rather noticeable panic, even despite the snacks they were all toting.
“Dipper! We gotta help Stan!” Mabel cried loudly, though somehow she still didn’t end up waking the snoozing conman.

“Wait, what?” Dipper asked, aptly confused at this sudden plea.

“This evil triangle guy said he’s gonna break into Stan’s mind and steal the combination to his safe!” Soos exclaimed, his mouth full of Burrito Bites. “Also we stopped for snacks on the way here.”

“We watched Gideon summon him or something out in the woods,” Steven explained much more earnestly. “They made like, some kind of deal, I think? It was pretty confusing…”

“Wait,” Dipper interrupted, trying to make sense of everything they were saying. “Triangle guy? Deal? I felt like I’ve seen something like this before in the journal…” he mused, pulling said book out of his vest and tentatively flipping through it before finding the right page. It was by far one of the most ominous ones in the entire journal, transcribed in panicked scribbles as opposed to the author’s usual clean script and marred with what seemed to be several blood splatters. And of course, its content was even more disturbing, as they all quickly gleaned from Dipper reading it aloud. “Beware Bill! The most powerful and dangerous creature I’ve ever encountered. This nightmare in disguise will seduce you with never ending flattery until he gets what he wants. Whatever you do, never let him into your mind. There is no telling what damage Bill might no. Do not summon at all costs.”

This reading was abruptly interrupted as Stan started tossing and turning about in his sleep, a pained expression washing over his face. “Grunkle Stan!” Mabel cried worriedly as the others gasped with equal concern. For before anyone could do anything, the ominous triangular shadow of Bill Cipher himself draped itself upon the wall behind Stan, before sinking down slowly, no doubt into the conman’s mind. In the wake of this, Stan’s movements became even more jerky and erratic as his eyes shot open, though it was clear he was anything but really awake. Rather, his eyes were glowing bright blue as he let out a series of struggling cries.

“Oh no! We’re too late!” Steven exclaimed in dismay. “What do we do?”

Mabel was quick to get the answer to this question as she grabbed the journal from Dipper and read an excerpt from the next page aloud: “It is possible to follow the demon into a person’s mind and prevent his chaos. One must simply recite this incantation.”

“Ugh, this is just great,” Dipper remarked bitterly. “I spend all day cleaning sinks and fighting bats for Stan and now I have to save him from some crazy brain demon?”

“But we gotta help Mr. Pines, Dipper!” Steven urged pleadingly. “If we don’t do something, then who knows what might happen?”

“Gideon might steal the shack!” Mabel exclaimed fretfully. “Or worse!”

The conversation was interrupted once more as Stan let out another scream amidst his restless thrashing, his eyes still blank and glowing. And if that wasn’t enough to prompt the kids into action, then nothing was.

“Fine,” Dipper sighed relentingly, not too fond of putting himself in what would be certain danger for Stan like this. Still, he knew that if he refused, Mabel and Steven would never let him hear the end of it. “Get ready, guys. We’re about to journey into the most horrifying, disturbing place any of us have ever been: our uncle’s mind.”
Despite the determination the kids had for this daring mission, Soos was quick to break through it with an inquisitive, though somewhat unrelated question. “You think I can take these Burrito Bites into Stan’s brain?” he asked, holding the back of snacks up. “Thumbs up? Thumbs down?” The handyman paused for a moment, gaging the kids’ reactions to this proposal, or rather, lack thereof before letting out a small laugh. “You know what, I’m just gonna bring ‘em.”

It took a while to get everything in order, but with the journal to guide them, the kids eventually managed to construct the setup they would need to perform the ritual that would hopefully grant them access into Stan’s mind. The group had constructed a circle of candles surrounding the conman in the living room, one that was admittedly quite similar to the one Gideon had used to summon Bill in the first place. With the lights turned off and the candles burning dimly, the four of them stood around the still-slumbering conman, preparing themselves for the daunting task ahead.

“Ok, guys,” Dipper said with resolve, still holding the journal open to the incantation. “In order to save Stan, we’re gonna have to follow that dream demon into his mind.”

“I wonder what it’ll be like in there…” Steven mused curiously. “Oh! Wouldn’t it be awesome and adorable if there was a tiny version of Mr. Pines in there who will take us on a tour? It’d be just like it is here at the shack!”

“Oh my gosh, that would be the cutest thing ever,” Mabel gushed with a delighted smile. “Especially if tiny Stan sang and danced, just like I’ve always wanted the real Stan to do but he never does because he says its ‘cheesy!’”

“Guys, come on,” Dipper said, rolling his eyes in exasperation. “Stop messing around. The sooner we get in there, the sooner we can get out and be done with this whole thing.”

“I wonder what Stan is thinking right now,” Soos cut in thoughtfully. With a small grin, the handyman pulled the conman’s jaw up and down and comically threw his voice to put words in his boss’ mouth. “‘I love Soos like a son!’”

“Soos! This is serious!” Dipper scolded impatiently.

“‘Sorry!’” Soos exclaimed, still briefly pretending to speak through Stan before exchanging a high five with Mabel out of amusement.

“So if we’re finally done wasting time,” Dipper began pointedly, shooting the others a disapproving glance. “Let’s do this.” As soon as everyone had placed a hand on the conman’s forehead as a point of contact, Dipper began to recite the intended incantation straight from the journal itself. “Videntis Omnium. Magister Mentium. Magnesium Ad Hominem. Magnum Opus. Habeus Corous.” As the spell went on, all of their eyes, and even the gemstone on Steven’s stomach, started to glow the same bright blue as Stan’s, though none of them could really pay too much mind to that as the incantation neared its completion. “Inceptus Nolanus Overratus. Magister Mentium! Magister Mentium! Magister Mantium!”

A very bright, very quick flash illuminated the room, all of the candles abruptly going out in the process. And then, as the light faded as quickly as it had appeared, Dipper, Mabel, Soos, and Steven were all but gone.

And instead, they opened their eyes to find themselves in what seemed like another world entirely. All four of the kids let out muted gasps of awe as they got their first glimpse at the grayscale landscape all around them. Not a speck of tangible color existed and the very atmosphere itself was still and lifeless, though it did flicker briefly every now and then. The most presently noticeable
feature was the large duplicate of the Mystery Shack before them, which seemed to float amidst nothingness. Its façade was even more dilapidated and worn down than the real-life version of the building, with pieces crumbling apart and hovering scattered around it and its very structure hewn and stitched together without any form or order. Curious, the gang got up and slowly began to approach it, taking care in their initial steps lest this ethereal world fall apart around them at any slight provocation.

“Whoa… is this really Stan’s mind?” Mabel asked, glancing around with wide eyes.

“I figured there would be more hot old ladies,” Soos remarked.

“And I guess there’s no tiny Mr. Pines in here after all…” Steven said with a disappointed frown that turned to one of confusion as he happened to look to his left and see one of the several battered facets surrounding the mind shack. It was a simple swing set, obviously rusted and bent as vines clung to it and one of its two seats was hanging broken from it, while the other lone seat slowly swayed to a nonexistent breeze. For reasons the young Gem couldn’t quite place, a wave of sudden regret and sympathy washed over him as he looked at the old abandoned swing set, though he was quickly broken out of it as the others moved on without him. Before anyone could really notice he wasn’t keeping up, Steven hurried to catch up with the rest of them as they came to stand before the mind shack.

“Remember everyone,” Mabel said, her tone plucky and serious. “We’ve gotta look out for the triangle guy.”

“Yeah, look out for the triangle guy!” Bill himself quipped as he made his arrival, rising up from the porch of the mind shack.

“It’s him!” Soos exclaimed as the others gasped in surprise. “It’s the guy!”

“You leave our uncle’s brain alone, you isosceles monster!” Mabel warned, her boldness getting the better of her as she charged towards the dream demon in the hopes of catching him. Of course, Bill was more than prepared for such an attack, which was why he allowed Mabel to leap right into him, hardly even caring as she disappeared into his triangular form. The dream demon pulled a stopwatch out of nowhere, and after using it to wait a few seconds, he sent the girl tumbling out of him in the same way she had came. “Gotcha!” Mabel exclaimed triumphantly, only to find that she hadn’t caught anything. “Wait, what?”

“Ah, Stan’s family. We meet at last,” Bill remarked casually. “Question Mark, Shooting Star, Pine Tree, I had a hunch I might bump into you!” With an amused look, the dream demon pointed at the group, a laser blasting from his finger in a sudden burst. The blast ended up striking Dipper straight in the chest, startling him a great deal as he let out a horrified scream. However, as the initial panic wore off, he realized that the attack hadn’t really hurt him, though what was quite alarming was the large, gaping round hole that had been cleanly shot through his chest.

“Boop!” Mabel exclaimed with a joking smirk as she stuck her hand through the new hole in her brother’s body just for fun.

“Mabel!” Dipper scolded, pushing her hand away.

“And look who else is joined this party!” Bill exclaimed, disappearing and immediately rematerializing right behind Steven. “Hey there, Rosebud! How are you and those Crystal Chumps doing?”

“You mean… the Gems?” Steven asked uneasily, suddenly perplexed by how the dream demon
seemed to know about them. Then again, he had said so himself: he knew lots of things.

“Well, duh!” Bill rolled his eye. “I’d ask how ol’ Quartzy is, but that would be pretty redundant, if you catch my drift.”

“Wait, Quarzty? As in… Rose Quartz?” the young Gem asked, confused by all the nicknames. The dream demon simply “nodded” as he continued to spin his black cane casually. “You… you knew my mom?”

“Sure did! Me and your dear old mom go waaaaay back. She sure was something else, let me tell you!” Bill exclaimed with a small laugh. “Speaking of quartzes, mind if I take a quick peek at that rock on your gut, kid?”

“Oh, my gem?” Steven frowned, tentatively lifting up his shirt to reveal it.

“That’s the one!” the dream demon quipped cheerfully, snapping his fingers. The second he did so, however, the gemstone on Steven’s stomach suddenly disappeared completely, only to reappear over Bill’s open palm a second later.

“Hey! My gem!” the young Gem cried fretfully, looking down to the now empty spot on his stomach, where only an indentation where his gem had once been remained. Likewise, Dipper, Mabel, and Soos all gasped with apt concern, all of them quickly growing tired of the crafty demon’s demented games.

“Relax, Rosebud,” Bill reassured, making sure to keep the pink stone out of anyone’s reach. “I’m just borrowing it for a while. After all, Gems like this are pretty hard to come by anymore. And besides, you won’t even remember it’s gone after a while!” With a mere flick of his wrist, the gemstone disappeared into thin air, and much to Steven’s dismay, did not make a reappearance in its rightful place on his stomach. “But anyway, enough talking about who knows who and crying over rocks,” the dream demon shrugged, gliding back over the mind. “Instead, let’s chat about how you kids are gonna leave and let me go about my business, hm?”

“Not a chance!” Dipper protested firmly. “What do you want with our uncle’s mind anyway?”

“Oh, just the code to the old man’s safe!” Bill remarked, just as informal as ever. “Inside the shack is a maze of a thousand doors representing your uncle’s memories. Behind one of them is a memory of him inputting the code. I just need to find it and Gideon will pay me handsomely!”

“Not if we stop you!” Mabel challenged.

“Ha! Fat chance!” the dream demon scoffed. “I’m the master of the mind. I even know what you’re thinking about right now!”

“That’s impossible!” Mabel proclaimed confidently. “No one can guess what I’m thinking!”

She was quickly proven wrong, however as Bill snapped his fingers once more, resulting in a very colorful blast of light. When it cleared, two tall young men, both clad in the gaudy neon fashions of the 90s, had appeared among the group, much to Mabel’s absolute delight.

“Ahhhhh!” she squealed with sheer joy as she looked up at the two boys excitedly. “Xyler and Craz from Dream Boy High?! You two are even dreamier in person, if that’s even possible!”

“Whoa, where are we, bro?” Xyler asked, bewildered as he looked around.

“We must be in heaven, cause I just saw an angel!” Craz declared pointing at Mabel with a smile.
Of course, Mabel let out another happy scream as she hugged Craz’s leg tightly. “I’m never letting go of your leg!”

“You’re out of your league, kids,” Bill cut in, satisfied that he had demonstrated just a bit of his power. “Turn around before you see something you might regret. Later, suckers!” With another mocking laugh, the dream demon abruptly crashed through the wall of the mind shack, leaving a triangle hole behind as he hurried inside to begin his treacherous work.

“We’re going in!” Dipper exclaimed, knowing that Bill already had a head start on them. “Uh, Mabel? Can we leave those guys out here?” he nodded to the dream boys. “Looking at them… hurts my eyes.”

“No way!” Mabel protested adamantly, still holding onto Craz’s leg. “They can help us!”

“I think they’re pretty cool,” Steven interjected, smiling at the boys.

“Thanks, bro!” Xyler exclaimed, exchanging a high five with the young Gem.

“Whoa, neat! I’m a bro!” Steven grinned brightly. “Still… I kinda wish I still had my gem… I dunno, I’d just feel a lot… better with it…” he frowned, glancing down to the vacant spot on his stomach.

“Don’t worry, Steven. We can get it back when we stop Bill!” Mabel reassured daringly.

“Alright!” Xyler and Craz cheered in supporting unison. “Arm throne!” Both boys bent down and linked their arms together, creating something of a seat that Mabel was more than happy to leap into, chuckling brightly as she allowed the boys to carry her inside the mind shack.

“Dude! Arm throne!” Soos copied them, holding his own arms out to Dipper. Of course, he turned this offer down seeing as he was still somewhat sullen and self conscious about the gaping hole in his chest, but Steven on the other hand was more than willing to comply.

“Yay! Arm throne!” he exclaimed, hopping into the handyman’s arms. They both laughed as they headed into the mind shack after Mabel and the boys, with Dipper following much more petulantly behind them.

Much like the outside, the interior of the mind shack itself was drained of all colors, as well as disjointed and scrambled in almost every way possible. Floating staircases were everywhere, leading to doors in seemingly every single direction imaginable. Several of the doors were clearly marked, from one that was tightly bolted shut labeled “fears” and another one afar in the distance that had a soft white glow to it entitled “hopes” and still several others. As discombobulating and strange as it all was, no one could deny that this expansive labyrinth was perhaps more than any of them had bargained for.

Yet even so, if there was anyone heedless of the daunting challenged ahead, it was the (admittedly dense) dream boys. “Radical!” Craz exclaimed with a wide grin.

“I also think its radical!” Xyler agreed with just as much zeal.

“This place is so huge!” Steven exclaimed, glancing around in awe. “Where do we even start looking?”

“Our best bet would probably-” Dipper began, though he was abruptly cut off as a bat with, oddly enough, Stan’s face flew past, barking “no refunds” repeatedly. Already quite irritated with this mission and the conman as a whole, Dipper let out a frustrated sigh before he continued. “Like I
was saying… our best bet would probably be that door down there that says ‘memories’.” He nodded to the door at the bottom of the nearest set of stairs.

“Oh, good idea, dude!” Soos agreed with a smile. “Though in retrospect, I guess it was sorta obvious.”

Intrepid in their mission, the group headed through the door into a seemingly endless hall of the conman’s memories, all of which were playing out simultaneously in the open doorways lining it. Most of the memories immediately on display were quite recent, ranging from Stan taking on the pterodactyl to rescue Waddles, to Stan giving Soos a task at the shack, to Stan arguing with Pearl over the rocket ship project and still countless more. And somewhere among this plethora of memories, was no doubt the combination for the safe that both all of them and Bill were searching for.

“Whoa, look! All of Stan’s memories!” Soos remarked, amazed.

“Cool! Each one of them is kinda like a little mini-movie!” Steven chuckled, glancing at a door containing the memory of Stan and Amethyst scaring off Summerween trick or treaters. “Or should I say, mini-memory-movies!”

“Great, I’m sure there’s plenty of memories of Stan bossing me around,” Dipper said dryly, crossing his arms. “Can’t wait to see more of that.”

“Come on, Dipper! We gotta find that code before Bill does!” Mabel urged resolutely.

“Mabel is talking!” Craz exclaimed, duly impressed.

“So rad!” Xyler gushed just as enthusiastically.

“Let’s get searching!” Soos declared, prompting the group into action. The hall was indeed as Bill had described it: a maze. But the gang stuck together as they ran through it, keeping an eye out for anything that looked like it could be the memory of the code they were looking for. Since not all of the doors were hanging wide open, they realized they would have to open some of them for themselves, which was a trend Dipper started as he opened up a random door.

The memory inside the door showed a much younger version of Stan, clad in an orange jumpsuit as he sat in a prison cell alongside two very rugged cellmates. “Jorge, Rico,” Stan began with a wide smile, wrapping an arm around each of them. “You’re the best Colombian prison friends a fella could make.”

“Espero que muera,” Rico said to Jorge with clear disdain for the oblivious conman.

“Si,” Jorge agreed simply.

“Nope!” Dipper said, concluding the memory to be useless in their search as he shut the door.

Meanwhile, Soos opened up another nearby door, to find another memory of a young Stan, who was attempting to sell vacuums as a door to door salesman. “Sir, would you like to buy a Stan-Vac vacuum?” he began his pitch with a flashy grin. “Stan-Vac: It sucks more than anything.” Of course, upon hearing this faulty slogan, the customer was quick to slam the door right in the conman’s face. “Gotta work on that…”

“Nope,” Soos shook his head, closing the door.

“Whoa, this one has Amethyst in it!” Steven pointed to the door he had opened. The scene inside of
it depicted Stan and Amethyst one of their infamous Revenge Trips, embroiled in what appeared to be a high-speed car chase with the police.

“I thought you said nobody saw you steal those tires!” the conman exclaimed, alarmed as the cops’ sirens blared behind them.

“Hey, how was I supposed to know that place had a security camera?” the purple retorted casually, clearly unconcerned. “Just do what you always do when the heat shows up. Floor it!”

“I can do better than that,” Stan smirked, shifting his car into gear, pushing it much faster than before. The pair both let out a precocious laugh as they easily outgunned the cops, all while the conman peeked his head out the window and taunted them triumphantly. “Try and catch us now, suckers!”

“Aw, those two always have so much fun together,” Steven said with a warm smile as he closed the door.

“Oh look! It’s Stan on a date!” Mabel cooed curiously, pulling a smaller door open. And indeed, the conman sat across from Lazy Susan on a dinner date, one that clearly wasn’t going well, based on the stilted, awkward conversation they were having.

“So, uh… your eye is weird,” Stan began, his tone uncertain. “Let’s… let’s talk about that.” Lazy Susan merely let out a loud laugh at this, one that the conman joined in much more anxiously as his thoughts narrated over the memory. “Ugh, this is going terrible. I can’t think of anything to say and she… she looks weird up close. Think of a way out!” Of course, Stan’s “way out” was appropriately unorthodox and sudden as he abruptly stood from the table and cried: “Non-specific excuse!” before shoving everything off of the table and running for his car outside.

“Yeesh,” Mabel closed the door, cringing at the awkward display.

As the group forged on ahead to continue their hunt, they happened to pass by a door leading to another hallway simply labeled “Dipper Memories”, which of course, was quick to catch Dipper’s attention. “Look, guys! Memories about me!” he exclaimed, grabbing the doorknob tentatively.

“That doesn’t seem like a good idea, dude,” Soos noted with a frown, nodding to the “keep out” sign on the door.

“Yeah, I doubt we’ll find the combination to the safe in there,” Steven said. “Unless Mr. Pines told it to you, Dipper. But then… I guess we wouldn’t really need to be here if he did, so…”

“Listen, I just wanna know what the old guy really thinks of me,” Dipper said, pulling the door open a little more.

“We already know how Stan feels about us!” Mabel quipped confidently as she began to walk off. “He loves us! We’re great.”

“Yeah, let’s just keep moving,” Soos agreed as him and Steven headed onward with Mabel and her dream boys.

“More moving?” Xyler asked excitedly.

“Yes! I love motion!” Craz quipped brightly.

Dipper started to follow the rest of the group as well for a moment, though as soon as he was sure no one was noticing, he quickly turned and rushed back to the door. True, it didn’t really have
much to do with their overall objective, but still. He needed to know the truth for himself.

“Ok, just a quick peek…” he muttered, slowly opening the door and heading inside. Expectedly, this hallway was much more narrow than the main one, and seemingly a bit darker too, as Dipper noted while exploring it. As he walked down it, he could clearly hear Stan bark orders at him from all of the countless open doors, all of which were instances that Dipper also remembered, none of which very fondly. Deciding that any of them would probably do to prove his point, he chose a random door to open, revealing a memory that, to his own recollection, had only happened about a week or so ago.

“No buts!” Stan exclaimed harshly, his tone stern as he pointed to the pile of wood in the lawn. “Now go and chop that firewood already!” As a way of asserting his authority, the conman knocked his nephew on the head with the newspaper he was holding, much to his chagrin. With an aggravated sigh, Dipper turned and headed off to start chopping the wood while Stan took a supervising role as he sat upon the couch on the porch alongside Soos and Amethyst.

“Dude, Stan, I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Soos began with a concerned frown. “Why are you so hard on Dipper all the time?”

“Yeah, seriously,” Amethyst agreed casually, munching on an empty soda can. “I mean, yeah the kid’s a nerd, but that’s really no reason to pick on him that much. Even if it is kinda funny.”

Outside of the memory, Dipper simply rolled his eyes upon hearing this, more than used to Amethyst’s callous remarks by now. But even so, he listened intently as Stan began to explain. “Listen, you two. I’m gonna let you in on something.”

“What, about how you wet the bed until you were like, thirteen?” Amethyst asked with a joking smirk. “Because you already let that one slide to me, Stan.”

“N-no! And I never said anything about that!” Stan exclaimed, clearly flustered. “Just… ugh, look. You really wanna know what I think?”

From there, the conman’s voice dropped into a low whisper as he talked to Soos and Amethyst, prompting Dipper to lean in a bit closer to the door so he could make out what Stan was saying. And when he was able to hear what Stan was saying, Dipper just as soon wished he hadn’t. “The kid’s a loser. He’s weak! He’s an utter embarrassment! I just wanna get rid of him.”

Dipper didn’t really need to hear anything else after all this, which was why he slowly shut the door before Stan could say any more hurtful things about him. He let out a dejected sigh as he turned away from it, his head hung as he stared down to the ground in disappointment. Dipper hadn’t really been sure of what he expected to find here, but a small part of him had hoped that it wouldn’t have been something like this. Indeed, his suspicions about Stan’s apparent disdain for him had been all but proven by the conman himself. Still, that hardly prevented the revelation from hurting as much as it did. If anything, hearing it come from Stan only made it hurt even worse. Before, Dipper had merely speculated that the conman simply found him as an easy target for his teasing and orders out of apathy alone and little else. But now he knew that there was much more to it than that. There was ire, contempt, and scorn, all things that, in retrospect, Stan had never hesitated to show towards him before. Which was why Dipper realized that instead of futilely trying to gain the conman’s fickle favor, he might as well show those very things towards the conman in full force.

After all, it was only fair.
None of the others had really noticed Dipper’s absence yet as they continued searching through the maze of doors for the code, though with relatively little luck so far.

“Hello? Code to Stan’s safe?” Mabel called. “Where are you?”

“Opening and closing doors is fun!” Xyler proclaimed, randomly opening and shutting the same door over and over again.

“I can do it also!” Craz quipped with a huge smile, doing the exact same thing.

“Oh, maybe it’s in this one…” Steven mused, opening up a nearby door curiously. While he didn’t find the code, what he did find though peaked his interest quite a bit. “Whoa, look you guys! It’s my dad when he used to work for Mr. Pines!”

The others all gathered around the door inquisitively as they observed a scene in the gift shop play out. Greg sat behind the counter, organizing merchandise as Stan casually leaned against it, rattling off a lengthy list of complaints about only one thing: the Gems.

“And you know what else irks me about those four?” the conman asked, crossing his arms. “Every time they have some sort of disaster or monster up at that temple of theirs’, it always manages to wind up down here somehow. I’m still trying to regrow the grass that fire monster they fought last week burnt up.”

“Aw, come on, Mr. Pines,” Greg said with a small smile. “The Gems really aren’t that bad once you get to know them.”

“Yes, Greg,” Stan deadpanned. “Of course, you’re only saying that because you’re head over heels for one of them.”

“Heh, well I am a little guilty of that…” the former rock star grinned bashfully. “But who knows? I’m sure if you just gave the Gems a chance then maybe you guys could actually get along!”

“Ha! Yeah right! The day I make nice with any of those broads is the day pigs fly.”

“Well, given how weird this town can sometimes be, I wouldn’t say that’s totally impossible…” Greg chuckled, finally eliciting an amused smirk from Stan as well.

“Well what do you know?” Steven said, closing the door and exchanging a smile with Mabel. “Looks like my dad was right after all.”

“Yeah! About both things, kinda,” Mabel shrugged with a laugh.

As they moved on, Soos opened up another door, this one containing a memory of Stan pressing several buttons on the gift shop’s vending machine late at night. Neither of the kids were there with the handyman to see the machine swing aside and reveal that there was a secret staircase hidden behind it.

“If only people knew the truth…” Stan said mysteriously, glancing out from behind the vending machine as he prepared to go down. “That hidden behind this vending machine, I secretly have a-”

“Boring!” Soos exclaimed, carelessly slamming the door shut before the conman could finish.

“Alright, guys,” Mabel said, standing before a small door labeled ‘top secret’. “I have a good
She readily swung it open, uncovering a memory not of the safe combination, but rather of Stan in the bathroom, bereft of a shirt as he used his stomach as something of a puppet for his own amusement. “Hey, Mr. Tummy!” he greeted, grinning down at his gut. “‘Hey Mr. Stan,” the conman threw his voice as he made his stomach essentially “talk”. “Are you hungry? ‘Yes!’ Then eat your crackers!”

The group observing this memory all cringed in relative disgust over it, especially as Stan started “feeding” his stomach crackers. “Sweet Sally!” Mabel exclaimed, repulsed as she quickly shut the door.

“Ugh, we’ve been searching forever!” Steven exclaimed, exasperated. “And there are still a ton of doors we haven’t even checked yet! What if Bill finds the memory before we do?”

“Guys, we got this,” Mabel reassured. “If we wanna find Stan’s memory, then we gotta think like Stan. He’s always hiding stuff, right?”

“Yeah!” Soos agreed. “Like how he’s always hiding his arrest warrants under that rug in the gift shop?”

“Soos, that’s it!” Mabel exclaimed brightly. “Look!” She pointed to a rug lying on the ground just a few feet away, one that was nearly identical to the one Stan kept in the gift shop. And sure enough, upon pulling the rug away, the group found one more door hiding underneath it. The gang all exchanged wide smiles of anticipation, all of them hoping that this was at last the elusive memory they had been seeking. And as Mabel opened the door, they were instantly overjoyed to find that it indeed was.

Inside the memory, Stan kissed the precious deed to the Mystery Shack before putting it safely inside the safe. “There ya go,” he said, shutting the door. “And now to input the code. 13, 44, and finally—”

Soos closed the door before Stan could finish but even so, the entire group was immensely relieved and excited to have finally come across it. “Dude! We found it!” the handyman exclaimed cheerfully.

“Yeah!” Steven and Mabel cheered, exchanging a high five.

“But what do we do now?” Xyler and Craz asked in tandem. “Jinx!”

“Um… hm…” Mabel mused, trying to come up with a suitable solution. “Oh! I know! Let’s destroy the memory before Bill can find it!”

“But… if we destroy the memory, then wouldn’t Mr. Pines not be able to remember the code at all?” Steven asked with a frown as Mabel grabbed the ax from a nearby statue of armor.

“Well, yeah, I guess,” Mabel shrugged, struggling to tote the heavy ax over to the door. “But still, anything’s better than Gideon getting ahold of it and stealing the deed!”

“Wait!” Soos suddenly stopped Mabel before she could bring the ax down on the door. “Maybe I should do it! My big fat arms are great at destroying stuff!”

“Oh, okay,” Mabel grinned, seeing no harm in this plan.

However, instead of outright destroying the door using force, the handyman simply reached his
hand out towards it silently, focusing on it intently. Mabel and Steven exchanged a confused glance at this, though their bewilderment soon turned to surprise as a blue glow started to surround the door as Soos managed to lift it from the floor without even touching it.

“Whoa… How are you doing that, Soos?” Steven asked in apt amazement as the door hovered beside the handyman.

However, before Soos could answer, oddly enough, another Soos happened to wander onto the scene at that exact moment. “Hey, guys!” the new handyman greeted a bit obliviously. “I just saw a memory of Stan roller skating and wearing short-shorts! Didn’t… didn’t look that bad!” An awkward pause permeated the group, during which Soos finally happened to notice the presence of his doppelganger. “Hey, something weird is goin’ on here, but I can’t quite put my finger on it…”

The other Soos simply laughed as his cover was blown, though it was far from the handyman’s laugh. Instead, it was the telltale mocking, borderline insane laughter of Bill Cipher himself, which made more sense as the dream demon seamlessly shifted from his perfect disguise into his usual triangular form. “Boy, you kids sure are gullible!” he exclaimed, holding onto the door as the group all gaped at him in apt surprise. “I knew you’d lead me straight to the code! It’s funny how dumb you are!”

“Hey, no fair!” Steven exclaimed, dismayed. “You tricked us!”

“Wow, you sure are slow to the punch, kid,” Bill remarked teasingly. “Of course I tricked you! And it was even easier than I thought it would be! Then again, I never thought it would be that hard since you all are a bunch of half-wit mini-meatskins in the first place.”

“Oh yeah? Well, y-you’re… you’re a… a stink face!” Mabel retorted challengingly.

“Awesome comeback, Mabel!” Xyler congratulated with a thumbs up.

“Don’t treat me like a child, Xyler!” Mabel quickly scolded, frustrated.

“Well, as fun as holding my victory right over your heads is, I have a deal to make good on,” Bill said, lifting the door with the code inside up higher. “Later, suckers!” With another triumphant laugh, the dream demon raced off, flying away before any of the kids could hope to stop him.

“Oh no! The code!” Steven gasped in alarm.

“Come on!” Mabel urged, more than ready to chase after the demon for it. “We gotta save Stan!”

“What’s the point?” The other members of the group were all somewhat surprised to hear this question come from Dipper as he finally rejoined them, his expression quite sullen and his hands shoved into the pockets of his vest. “Why should I save him, huh? I work for Stan night and day, and all he does in return is say he wants to get rid of me.”

“Dipper, you know that’s not true,” Mabel was quick to argue.

“Why would Mr. Pines ever say anything like that?” Steven asked, concerned. “You’re his family, Dipper. He loves you!”

“No he doesn’t!” Dipper retorted harshly. “I saw it with my own eyes, you guys. He’s always picked on me and now I know why: Stan hates me!”

The others all gasped at this claim, none of them really able to believe it. “B-but… that can’t be right,” Steven tried to reason, even if Dipper wasn’t having it. “Maybe you just misheard him or
something.”

“Or maybe it’s the truth and you guys are just in denial!” Dipper protested bitterly. “Look, if you need proof, then why don’t we all just go back to the door so you can hear what Stan-”

“Dipper, there’s no time!” Mabel interrupted, frustrated that he was even insisting upon something so ridiculous. “It doesn’t matter what you saw or what you heard. If we don’t stop Bill, we’ll lose the shack!”

“No!” Dipper refused, irresolute in his position. “You know what? Not this time. For once this is one of Stan’s problems I’m not gonna fix. If you guys wanna go put yourselves in the line of fire for him, that’s fine. But count me out.”

“W-what?!?” Steven asked, quite surprised and dismayed at this turn of events. “But Dipper, we-”

“Fine!” Mabel retorted just as harshly, sending her brother a disapproving glare. “Go ahead and be a selfish old stick in the mud! Come on, you guys. We’ll save Stan ourselves.” Without sparing another word, she promptly headed off to finish this mission, regardless if Dipper came along or not.

“Let’s go, Xyler,” Craz said, eagerly following behind Mabel.

“All right, Craz!”

“Those are our names!”

“Totally righteous!”

“Dipper, you’re a cool dude but… this isn’t cool, dude,” Soos said with a disappointed frown as he also moved on. But even so, Dipper refused to change his stance on the matter, even as Steven lingered behind for a moment.

“Let me guess, Steven,” Dipper began, crossing his arms as he let out an exasperated sigh. “You’re gonna try and convince me that I should help you guys save Stan, right?”

“Uh… well, yeah, actually,” Steven admitted with a shrug. “But only because it’s the right thing to do!”

“Well, forget it,” Dipper shook his head, firm in his resolve. “It doesn’t matter if its right or not. Nothing you can say will make me change my mind about this. Besides, you can’t honestly tell me that Stan saying he wants nothing to do with me is ‘right’ either, can you?”

“Well, no… I can’t…” the young Gem frowned, not really sure of what to say. “And… I guess I can’t really convince you to help us either… But you should at least think twice about this, Dipper. I mean, this is kind of a big deal, in case you haven’t noticed…”

“Oh, believe me, Steven, I’ve thought about it plenty,” Dipper said, glaring away bitterly. “You might as well go join the others. I’ll see you on the outside.”

“But…” Steven started to protest before realizing that this was a losing battle. “Ok… but… you know where to find us if you change your mind.”

“Yeah, like that’s ever gonna happen,” Dipper remarked sardonically as the two of them headed their separate ways.
Steven frowned in disappointment as he started off in the direction that Mabel and Soos had went, rather upset that he hadn’t been able to really change Dipper’s mind as he had hoped. However, his dejection soon turned to surprise as he heard a startlingly familiar voice ring out from one of the memories down a nearby hall.

“I can’t—I won’t let you do this,” the feminine voice said, her tone hardened and firm. Steven’s jaw dropped as he heard it, knowing that he had heard this very same voice for the first time ever in the video tape he had watched just a few days ago. But still… what place would she have here in Stan’s memories?

“So what? You’re gonna try and stop me, pinky? Is that how this is gonna be?!” Stan asked in angry response. Steven’s curiosity raised even more upon hearing this, especially as he realized that whatever this encounter was, it was likely quite confrontational.

“Yes. I am,” the pink Gem’s voice was solid, the determination in it clear. The young Gem took in an anxious breath as he stood in the threshold of the hall, still unable to see the memory for himself, even if he could clearly hear it. “I’ll do whatever I have must to keep you from reopening it. No matter what the cost.”

“Steven!” Mabel’s call abruptly broke the young Gem out of his intrigue. “Are you coming?”

“Uh, be there in a second!” Steven exclaimed in response, briefly turning back towards the source of the memory. He had missed whatever Stan had said, but he could tell the tension was still very high as Rose spoke again.

“Don’t you understand?! This thing is far too dangerous!” she exclaimed, a hint of remorse and desperation in her tone. “It was a mistake to build it in the first place. We should have never-”

“Steven?!” Mabel called once more, starkly reminding the young Gem of the urgency of the situation. He couldn’t afford to waste time investigating unrelated leads like this. Bill already had the code to the safe, and if they didn’t hurry, then it would be in Gideon’s hands before they knew it.

“Coming!” Steven assured, forcing himself to disregard the memory he had overheard. But even still, as he turned and started to continue on after the others, he couldn’t help but still pick up on bits and pieces of the argument until it was finally out of his earshot. “Gone… machine… not fair… Gems… disaster… your fault…” and finally “portal…” were all the young Gem was really able to make out, leaving him with far more questions than any answers. Despite that, Steven knew that he couldn’t really focus on any of those questions right now, not at such a high-stakes moment as this.

Still, that didn’t stop him from wanting to ask them.

Bill sped through the long hall of memories at a remarkable speed as every door he flew past flung open almost instantly. With the memory of the code in tow, the dream demon was assured in his victory and twistedly excited for what he would get in return from Gideon upon the fulfillment of their deal. And that fulfillment was at hand as Bill’s form suddenly rang like a phone, prompting him to answer the call with a tap of his bowtie.

“Y’ello?” the dream demon greeted casually as Gideon appeared on the screen that formed below his tie.

“Bill! Did you find the memory with the combination yet?” the child psychic asked eagerly.
“Relax, short stack. I got it right here,” Bill assured, pulling the door out of nothing.

“Perfect!” Gideon exclaimed with a triumphant laugh. “Now, give it to me and we’ll finish our bargain.”

“Finally! Its—you got a pen there? It’s 13, 44…” Before the dream demon could list off the last number, the door was suddenly struck with a suction cup projectile, cleanly knocking it out of his hand. “Ah! No, wait!” he cried, scrambling after the memory as it went flying towards another open door. The memory inside of it was Stan presenting the bottomless pit from several weeks ago as he stood before it.

“…and none are more bottomless than the bottomless pit! Which as you can see here is bottomless,” the conman concluded, though he did pause and watch in confusion as the code door happened to fly into the memory before quickly falling into the endless abyss. “Whoo!” Stan exclaimed, looking into the pit. “Whatever that was, its gone forever!”

As the door slammed shut, Mabel let out a victorious laugh as she lowered her Nyarf gun, Soos and the dream boys cheering over her perfect aim. “Ha! Boom!” she remarked, sending the shocked dream demon a coy smirk. “Your move, Bill.”

“Mabel did it!” Xyler and Craz exclaimed, completely stoked.

“H-hey, guys!” Steven greeted breathlessly as he caught up to everyone. “What did I miss?”

“We did it, dude!” Soos grinned widely. “The shack is safe!”

“The deal’s off!” Gideon shouted at Bill, completely infuriated over this turn of events.

“W-wait!” Bill exclaimed in a sudden panic. “No! Wait!”

“I should’ve known this wasn’t gonna work! I’m switchin’ to plan b!” the child psychic growled hotly. At this, the screen instantly turned off and the dream demon’s body began to crumble to pieces like broken glass, much to his alarm. However, it didn’t remain broken for long as it quickly reformed, only this time, it was not its usual bright yellow but instead a deep, warning shade of red.

“YOU!” Bill growled, enraged as he glared at the kids, his eye turning black as his pupil went white. “You can’t even imagine what you just cost me! Do you have any idea what I’m like… WHEN I’M MAD?!” The group was quite taken aback as several cryptic symbols passed through the furious demon’s eye, especially as the ground beneath them started to violently shake. Before any of them could even think of retreating, they found themselves all being lifted up on what was a large, round, stone surface that, oddly enough, was the top of a bust of Stan’s head. The newly-erected “arena” steadily rose high into the air, the black and white scenery of the mind shack disappearing into dark, unnerving, star-speckled space. Yet as startled as the kids all were at this, their relative fear only increased as Bill stared scaling up in size, until he towered over all of them easily.

“So I guess he gets really mad when he gets mad,” Soos remarked as they all cowered together, none of them having any idea about to do to protect themselves from the oncoming onslaught.

“EAT NIGHTMARES!” Bill shouted, his voice low and powerful as lightning crashed all around him, much to the group’s ever growing horror.
Seeing as how he had no reason to linger inside of Stan’s mind any longer, Dipper had taken to looking for a way out, though given how impossibly expansive the mind shack was, he wasn’t really having much luck. “Ugh, how do I get out of this place?” he muttered to himself, becoming increasingly frustrated with each dead-end hall he came across. “Exit? Hello?” he called, trying several doors as he came across them, none of them revealing any sort of reprieve. However, as he opened up another random door, he was met with a familiar sight: the same memory from before of Stan forcing him to chop wood. “Aw, this again?” Dipper asked with an annoyed frown, especially as the conman said his piece again.

“He’s a loser. He’s weak. I just wanna get rid of him,” Stan said just as callously as before, reminding Dipper once again of how little the conman supposedly cared about him. And since he didn’t really want or need such a reminder, he began to close the door to the memory again, only to hear an integral piece of information he hadn’t the first time. “Heh, yeah. Those were all things people said about me when I was a boy.”

“Huh?” Dipper’s attention was immediately caught at this as he opened the door again, confused but interested to hear more.

“It was terrible,” Stan went on, still addressing Soos and Amethyst. “I was the biggest wimp on the playground!”

As if in response to this, another door suddenly opened behind Dipper, revealing Stan as a child, clearly being bullied by his peers as they roughly hit him in the face with a ball. Clearly injured and embarrassed, he ran off in tears, much to the amusement of his bullies.

“So one summer, my pop signs me up for boxing lessons,” Stan continued in the first memory as yet another door opened up. In this one, a still young version of Stan was taking said boxing lessons and clearly losing as his father stoically watched on. “It was even worse than the school yard!” the older conman exclaimed as his younger self tried and failed to land a left hook on his opponent. “Y’know, at the time I thought my pop was trying to torture me.”

Another door soon opened, showing Stan as a teenager waiting in line for the movies. “But wouldn’t you know it? The old man was doing me a favor all along!” In the line right in behind Stan, a shady man walked up to a young woman and started trying to snatch her purse.

“Gimme that bag!” the man exclaimed, attempting to pull it away from her.

“Help! My purse! Help!” the girl cried fearfully, prompting the teenage Stan into action with the lessons he had learned in boxing class years ago.

“Left hook!” he shouted fearlessly, spinning around and landing a brutal uppercut to the thief, knocking him out cold. The surrounding crowd all cheered over his easy triumph while the girl graciously embraced him and gave him a kiss on the cheek as a reward, much to his delight.

“Geez, Stan,” Amethyst remarked with a laugh in the first memory. “You sounded like you were a major loser back in the day. Like, even more than you are now, if that’s even possible.”

The conman shot the purple Gem a quick disapproving glare before shaking her usual teasing off. “Yeah, well that’s exactly why I’m so hard on Dipper,” Stan concluded. “I don’t want him being a loser like I was. I’m trying to toughen him up. So when the world fights, he fights back.”

“Do you think its working?” Soos asked curiously.

Stan simply grinned in response to this and pointed to Dipper, who finally managed to chop the
block of wood he had been working on for quite some time now in half. “I-I did it!” he exclaimed with a small, triumphant grin. “Yes!”

“He’s really comin’ along!” Stan remarked in apt satisfaction. “When push comes to shove, I’m actually proud of him. Just don’t ever tell him I said that. His head is big enough as it is.”

“Pfft, you got that right.” Amethyst smirked as her and Soos laughed along with the conman.

Outside of the memory, Dipper couldn’t help but smile warmly upon hearing all of this, his perceptions about Stan and his relationship with him completely shattered in the best of ways. While he had thought the conman’s harsh treatment of him had been out of disdain and abhorrence, it instead came from a place of rare affection and care. It was certainly surprising to learn, but Dipper couldn’t have been any more grateful for the revelation, especially after hearing Stan admit to being proud of him after all. And yet, at the same time, it also made him feel quite guilty for his earlier impudent behavior. A part of him wished he could offer Stan an apology then and there, but since he was in fact inside the conman’s mind, simply placing a hand against the now treasured memory would have to suffice.

However, what Dipper hadn’t counted on were for the walls between the memories and the hall to be so thin. Before he could catch his footing, he stumbled right into the memory itself, and since the door was right beside where Stan, Soos, and Amethyst were sitting, they were all quick to immediately notice his arrival.

“Whoa, kid, what are you doin’ here?” Stan asked, looking between him and the other Dipper inside the memory, who was still in the middle of chopping firewood. “Nice hole in your chest by the way. Let’s fix that up.” By merely pointing his finger at the still-gaping hole in Dipper’s chest, somehow managed to seal it up instantly, much to the boy’s absolute amazement.

“W-what the-?” he asked, checking himself over to see that hole was indeed completely closed, as if Bill had never shot it through him at all. “How did you do that?”

“Word to the wise, kid,” Stan grinned. “We’re in the mind! You can do whatever you can imagine in here!” As a demonstration, the conman held out his hand as a can of Pitt Cola instantaneously materialized in it, one that he cracked open and took a sip out of.

“Huh. Well how about that?” Dipper smiled, knowing just how helpful such advice could be. And it seemed as though the time to use it was very much at hand, especially as several loud booms crashed from the hallway right outside the memory, followed by screams from Soos, Mabel, and Steven. “Oh my gosh, what am I doing!?” Dipper exclaimed, alarmed. “I gotta stop Bill!”

Knowing there was no time to loose, he hurried out of the memory, not bothering to bid Stan farewell seeing as how they would see each other again soon enough. After all, the others would need his help against the dream demon, and armed with his newfound knowledge of the dreamscape, he would certainly have an edge that Bill hopefully wouldn’t be expecting.

“Huh,” Stan noted with an openly proud grin as he watched his nephew run off towards the fray, undaunted by whatever challenges he was about to face. “Fighting back.”

“One nightmare, coming up!” Bill shouted, still hovering high, huge and intimidating over the kids. None of them had the faintest idea of what to do to escape from him or fight back, which was why all they could really do was hope that they could figure out some way out of this incredibly
dangerous situation, as impossible as one seemed.

“Nightmare?” Soos frowned. “Hope it’s not that British dog man I’m always dreaming about…” No sooner had the handyman said this than the very same large British dog man he feared appeared right next to him, much to his absolute horror.

“‘Ello, ‘ello, ‘ello! Who’s crike for a stick in the pudding?” the dog man asked in a very thick cockney accent, poking and prodding at Soos with his cane.

“Ah!” the handyman screamed, trying to shield himself from his nightmare. “It’s everything I’ve ever feared!”

“You!” Bill pointed at Mabel next, firing a round of his nightmare-creating power at her. The effect was immediate as her skin turned an unflattering shade of green and her head became large and malformed.

“My cuteness!” she cried, her voice also deepening and slowing down to match her new rather grotesque appearance. “What did you do to my cuteness?!”

“Mabel!” Steven gasped with apt concern, though he had no time to help either her or Soos as the dream demon moved onto him next.

“Your turn, Rosebud, and boy, do I have a doozy of a nightmare for you!” Bill exclaimed with a hint of sadistic glee in his otherwise angry tone as he snapped his fingers. The young Gem gasped once more as the Gems appeared standing behind him.

“You guys!” Steven grinned in relief as he turned to his guardians. “I’m so glad you’re here! We could really use your… help?” His excited smile faded into confusion as he noticed the hardened, disapproving glances all three of the Gems were giving him. “Guys? What’s-”

“We’re very disappointed in you, Steven,” Garnet interrupted, her already stoic tone even icier than usual.

“W-what?”

“You lost your gem!” Pearl exclaimed with an appalled scoff. “Do you honestly think you can be one of us, a Crystal Gem, without it?”

“W-wha—but wait! I didn’t lose it!” Steven protested, lifting up his shirt to show them. “It was stolen! I-”

“You really think that’s an excuse?” Amethyst asked, crossing her arms. “Face it, Steven. Even if you still had your gem, you still wouldn’t be good enough to be one of us.”

The young Gem’s breath caught at this, tears already welling up in his eyes upon hearing such harsh words from his beloved guardians. “B-but… but I-”

“You’ll never be anywhere near as strong or as brave as your mother was,” Pearl remarked, her tone full of disdain as she glared down at Steven. “She’d be so ashamed of you.”

“Guys…” Steven practically sobbed, crumbling to his knees under the weight of their unrelenting words. Indeed, his greatest fear was coming true right in front of him: the fear that the Gems wanted nothing to do with him. And it was fear that he had no idea how to handle. “P-please… I just… I… ”
“Steven,” Garnet spoke up, standing tall right in front of the doubled over young Gem. Slowly and hesitantly, Steven glanced up at her, tears streaming down his cheeks as he desperately hoped she had at least one kind word for him. But what she did have for him, was anything but kind. “You will never be a true Crystal Gem.”

Steven could no longer hold the rest of his tears back upon hearing this, loud sobs of misery escaping him as he hung his head, ashamed to even make eye contact with any of the Gems as they continued berating him relentlessly. The others were two wrapped up in dealing with their own respective nightmares to help him, which was why Bill was free to laugh at the young Gem’s clear suffering before moving onto the final two members of the group.

“You’re next!” the demon proclaimed, pointing at Xyler and Craz.

“Cool! We’re next!” Craz grinned obliviously as him and Xyler began to dance to an unheard beat. Their partying was short lived, however, as they were both hit by a blast from Bill, knocking them off the platform and causing them both to burn up and dissipate into nothingness.

“My dream boys!” Mabel cried upon seeing this, her voice still low and unpleasant.

“And now to finish you all off!” Bill declared, more than ready to flux his power and wipe them all out easily.

The trio cowered together fearfully at this, knowing of nothing else they could do to save themselves from this certain doom. Steven tearfully looked to the Gems standing behind him, silently pleading for their help, help they refused to give as they merely glared away from him stubbornly. However, while the Gems wouldn’t save them from Bill’s wrath, someone else miraculously came to their rescue instead.

“Hey, Bill!” Dipper shouted fearlessly as he flew in from below, already utilizing the advice Stan had given him earlier. The trio all gasped in shock over his sudden arrival, but no one was more surprised than the demon himself.

“What?!” Bill shouted, startled at the return of the missing member of the group.

“Nice bowtie!” Dipper taunted before enacting what he knew was nothing less than poetic justice. In much of the same way as Bill had done to him, he fired a laser blast from his eyes, shooting a hole cleaning through the dream demon, much to his alarm as he let out an appalled scream. “Just thought I’d return the favor!” Dipper said with a triumphant smirk.

“Dipper!” Steven, Mabel, and Soos all exclaimed with relieved smiles, both of them overjoyed to see that he had changed his mind about helping after all.

“Guys, I just learned you can conjure whatever you can conceive in Grunkle Stan’s mindscape!” Dipper informed them with an excited smile as he glided down to them.

“Huh?” Mabel frowned in confusion as Soos and Steven also looked to him in apt confusion.

“Just think of cool fighting stuff and it’ll happen,” Dipper elaborated more simply. “Like this!” With little effort at all, he fired another laser at the British dog man that had been terrorizing Soos, getting rid of him instantly.

“Heh, he’s dead now,” the handyman grinned with a relived laugh.

“What?!” Bill asked in a heated panic, knowing he was quickly losing his advantage. “Who told you that?! Don’t listen to him!”
“We can do anything?” Mabel grinned, using this new ability to easily return both her appearance and her voice back to normal. “Like have kittens for fists?” At this very suggestion, her fists turned into fluffy pink kitten heads, which she was more than happy to shoot Bill’s way. “P-pow! P-pow!” The dream demon let out another frustrated scream as the kitten fists stuck to him, biting and gnawing violently. Mabel chuckled at this, especially as the kittens still on her fists gave her loving licks on the cheeks. “Well hello, friends!”

“Anything huh?” Soos wondered, lifting his shirt up. “Soos love stomach beam stare!” At this prompt, a rainbow question mark beam fired from the handyman’s stomach, one that was powerful enough to knock Bill right off the platform.

“Oh! I wanna try!” Steven exclaimed, pulling his own shirt up and concentrating for a moment. An excited gasp escaped him as his gem returned to its rightful spot on his stomach, though he had little time to celebrate as he felt a hand fall on his shoulder.

“Steven,” Garnet said, a soft, warm smile on her face. Steven frowned anxiously however as he turned to her and the other Gems, unsure of what they might say to him this time. But instead of voicing any form of disapproval or disdain, the Gem leader merely lowered herself to his level and folded him into a gentle embrace. “Wonderful job.”

“Yes! Well done, Steven!” Pearl exclaimed, clasping her hands together in delight. “We’re so proud of you!”

“Yeah, and sorry about all that junk from before,” Amethyst smirked, rustling his hair affectionately. “You know we’re crazy about you, dude! You’re one of us through and through!”

“R-really?” Steven asked with a hopeful grin.

“Of course,” Garnet affirmed, though her smile soon faded as Bill returned to his spot on the platform. “Don’t worry,” the Gem leader said, summoning her gauntlets as she looked to all of the kids. “We’ll handle him.”

The group exchanged wide, excited smiles as the Gems summoned their weapons and leapt into action, racing for the dream demon. “Whoa! Are you making them do that, Steven?” Mabel asked, impressed.

“Uh, yeah, I think so,” Steven shrugged with a smile as he watched the Gems jump at Bill, their weapons raised. However, as valiant as their attempt was, the dream demon was quick to shoot it down, quite literally.

“Oh, I don’t think so, Crystal Chumps!” Bill exclaimed harshly, thoroughly enraged as he fired off a laser at the trio. The kids gasped in horrified shock as the Gems were vaporized almost instantly from it, not a trace of them remaining. Of course, they hadn’t been the real Crystal Gems, but seeing such a frightening sight was more than enough to catch them all off guard. “And as for all of you! Enough games!” the dream demon growled as he began shooting another powerful laser blast at them all.

“Wait guys!” Steven exclaimed, thinking quickly. “I got this one!” Throwing his arms open wide, the young Gem imagined his shield appearing, large and sturdy, and sure enough, there it was. He had never been able to summon it before so easily in reality, but calling upon it in the dreamscape was more than sufficient, especially as it both blocked the laser blast and reflected it right back at Bill.

“Oh! My eye!” the dream demon cried as the blast hit him squarely in his eye, blinding him.
momentarily. “Darn it! I hate that stupid shield!”

“Nice one, Steven!” Dipper congratulated with a grin.

“Thanks!” Steven chuckled, bringing his shield down. “I’ve always wanted to make it that big!”

Before Bill could recover and try and counterattack, Mabel was quick to come up with the next strike. “Rise, Xyler! Rise, Craz!” she proclaimed, bringing her arms up. As she did, both dream boys rose from behind the platform, fully revived and jamming out a synth drum and keytar happily.

“No!” Bill shouted, horrified. “Synthesized music! It hurts!”

“And now to imagine your worst nightmare!” Dipper proclaimed boldly. “A portal out of Stan’s mind!”

“Out of Stan’s mi-ind!” Mabel sang to the synth music Xyler and Craz were playing.

“Mabel!” Dipper scolded, knowing this was a serious moment. “Everyone, together!”

The entire group immediately started concentrating their collective efforts in imagining the same exact thing. And soon enough, a large, gaping, swirling vortex appeared right below Bill, one that quickly began sucking him down into it. “No, no, no!” the dream demon cried, struggling against its pull before ending it altogether. “ENOUGH!” All at once, the world turned completely white and still, the portal disappeared, and the kids were startled at how fast it all changed. “You know, I’m impressed with you guys,” Bill remarked, his color returning to its usual yellow as he readjusted his hat. “You’re more clever than you look. Especially the fat one.”

“He’s talking about you,” Soos whispered to Mabel, aside.

“So I’m gonna let you kids off the hook. For now,” Bill said, crossing his arms. “You might come in handy later. In fact, I know at least a few of you definitely will... BUT KNOW THIS.” As the dream demon held his arms up, a glowing blue symbol of a six-fingered hand appeared above him, the very same one that was on the journal. “A darkness approaches. A day will come in the future when everything you care about will change. And when it does, I won’t be the only one you’ll have to worry about...” As he said this, the hand symbol shifted into four diamonds organized together, the bottom-most one crumbling apart a bit. “Until then, I’ll be watching you! I’LL BE WATCHING YOU...” Bill’s voice turned low and ominous as two wheels surrounded him, both of them containing a wide array of various symbols, some familiar, some not, each one lighting up faster and faster until, in a burst of blinding light, the dream demon disappeared.

But hardly for the last time.

“He’s gone!” Dipper exclaimed in apt relief after making sure Bill was nowhere in sight. “We did it!”

The group cheered at this victory, one that had been hard earned. Squaring up against an all-powerful dream demon was certainly one of the greatest challenges they had faced yet, but even so, they had overcome it, much to their shared elation. However, it was short lived as all four of the kids suddenly started to fade out.

“Whoa…” Steven mused, looking over his hand as it grew fainter and fainter. “What’s going on? We’re getting all fade-y.”

“Stan must be waking up,” Dipper concluded, rationalizing that they couldn’t very well remain in
the conman’s mind if he was awake.

“Will I ever see you guys again?” Mabel asked with a sad frown as she turned to her dream boys.

“In your dreams,” Craz said with a smooth grin.

“Good one, bro,” Xyler nodded, his tone somewhat solemn over this parting. “Good one.”

The group only had time enough to wave farewell to the dream boys before they faded out from the mindscape completely. When the four of them simultaneously awakened, they found themselves back in the shack’s living room, save and sound and back in reality once more.

“Woo!” Mabel cheered, hugging both Steven and Dipper in celebration. “We did it!”

“W-what?” Stan asked groggily, sitting up in his chair as he fully awakened. “Did what? What are you all doing here? And why was I dreaming of two brightly colored and radical young men?”

“Grunkle Stan, you’re ok!” Dipper exclaimed with apt relief, running over to the conman and embracing him. After all, it was the least he could do after hearing Stan’s surprisingly touching genuine thoughts on him.

“What is this?” Stan asked in confusion, knowing that Dipper usually didn’t indulge in such open affection. “A hug?”

“Nope! It’s a choke hold!” Dipper smirked, playfully pulling Stan into said choke hold loosely. Mabel, Steven, and Soos all laughed in amusement as this went on for a moment or two before Dipper relinquished his hold.

“Heh, not bad, kid,” Stan chuckled, jokingly pulling Dipper’s hat down over his eyes as payback. “Not bad.”

“Aw, this is so nice,” Steven interjected with a warm smile. “Everyone’s happy and getting along! I love it when everything turns out great in the end like this! Just like it always does.”

“I’m just glad Gideon didn’t get into the safe,” Mabel said, also grinning. “I really love this old shack.”

“Group hug!” Soos exclaimed, holding his arms out wide, even though no one else did. “No? I never know the right time!”

All of this levity was soon interrupted however, as a small tremor suddenly shook the entire building, one that everyone could clearly feel nonetheless. “Hey, did you guys hear-” Dipper’s question was left unfinished as a large, abrupt explosion tore through the nearby wall. Everyone was sent flying from it, and while Steven tried his best to shield them all from it with a bubble, it quickly burst as soon as they all landed, scattered across the broken remains of the den.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Pines family,” Gideon smirked as he walked in through the gaping, still-smoking hole in the wall. “Did I wake you?”

“But… but we defeated Bill!” Dipper protested, surprised that the child psychic could still somehow claim success after all that.

“Bill failed me!” Gideon snapped harshly. “So I resorted to plan b: dynamite!”

“Spoiler alert, Stanford: I got the deed!” Gideon grinned in twisted triumph as he held the deed up. “The Mystery Shack belongs to me! So get out of my property!” The child psychic didn’t spare another word on any of them as he turned and headed out, speaking over his walkie-talkie as he did so. “Daddy? Bring it around front.”

“Uh… so I wasn’t the only one who didn’t see any of that coming, right?” Steven asked with a bewildered frown.

“D-don’t worry, guys!” Dipper reassured rather anxiously. “It’s just part of the dream! We’re gonna wake up any second now, right? Right?!”

Of course, this hopeful optimism proved pointless as they all glanced out the front door to see Bud steadily driving a large bulldozer straight for the shack. No one wasted time running outside for their own safety at this, especially as the wrecking ball abruptly smashed right into the shack’s sign, much to everyone’s shared panic.

“Someone pinch me, dude…” Soos said fretfully as the sudden violence on the Mystery Shack unfolded right before their very eyes.

None of it felt real for any of them, however, until the shack’s iconic sign came crashing down right in front of them, solidifying that this was far from a dream.

It was a nightmare.

To be continued…
The dark, rainy curtain that had hovered over Gravity Falls all day had finally subsided, the clouds breaking apart to allow a warm, crisp, golden sunset to leak through and shine upon the sleepy town. How ironic, it seemed, that the literal storm would end right at the outset of the overwhelming metaphorical storm that the Pines family now found themselves facing.

As soon as it had become apparent that Gideon had the Mystery Shack for himself, Steven had kindly offered an immediate place of shelter for the displaced Pines by way of the temple. Though the twins were on board with this plan amidst their relative shock, Stan was much more begrudging to accept it, but given that they had really nowhere else to go, he quickly agreed. After sending Soos home for the night, the group managed to salvage whatever possessions they could from the shack without Gideon noticing before sulking up to the Gem temple in defeat. No sooner had they gotten there, however, than the Gems returned from their all-day mission, and needless to say there were all aptly confused at seeing the distraught group gathered in the living room.

Despite the Gems’ abundance of questions, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel were quick to catch them up to speed, with Stan adding a bitter remark or two every now and then. While they provided as much of the story as they could, the kids intentionally left most of the details about their encounter with Bill, mostly out of uncertainty about how the Gems and the conman would react. But even so, by the time they were done explaining the tumultuous situation, Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl were all easily left with more questions than answers.

“Ok, so let me see if I understand this,” Pearl began, trying to make sense of everything they had just heard. “Gideon stole the deed to the Mystery Shack and managed to kick the three of you out?”

“Yeah, that’s… pretty much what happened,” Dipper said with a dejected sigh.

“The stupid little punk would have never blown that hole through the wall if I had been paying...
more attention,” Stan remarked crossly. “What I wouldn’t give to knock his lights out and take my
deed right back from his grubby little hands!”

“Yeah… sounds great,” Amethyst agreed, cracking her knuckles. “Let’s do it!”

“No,” Garnet cut in firmly, standing near the door and watching as Gideon rode his bulldozer
around his newly claimed property. “The chances of any plan where you just go and try to take the
shack back by force actually working is very low. Believe me.”

“Oh, what, so we’re just supposed to sit around and let Gideon turn it into the Tent of Telepathy
Part 2?” Stan asked caustically.

“For now, it’s all you can do,” Garnet replied, crossing her arms.

“What are we gonna do in the meantime, then?” Mabel asked with a fretful frown. “Without the
Mystery Shack, we have no place to stay! Where are we supposed to sleep? Or eat? Where am I
gonna make Mabel juice?! Or knit sweaters?! Or-”

“Wait a minute, Mabel,” Steven interrupted with a small, growing smile. “I think I have an idea.
While we get this whole thing with the shack sorted out, you guys could always… stay here at the
temple with us?” he grinned to the Gems as he finished his suggestion, making sure to be as
charming as possible for the sake of convincing them.

“Oh my gosh, Steven, that is literally the best idea I’ve ever heard!” Mabel gushed, her worry
instantly replaced with excitement. “If we stayed up here at the temple with you, then it would be
like a never-ending slumber party filled with magic and… more magic! Doesn’t that just sound
awesome, you guys?” she asked her brother and uncle.

“No,” Stan deadpanned plainly.

“Yeah, I don’t know about that…” Dipper frowned, glancing around the rather cramped house. “I
mean, it’s not like this place really has enough space for three more. Then again, I guess it’s either
here or… nothing.”

“That’s the spirit!” Steven quipped brightly. “Oh, this is gonna be so much fun! We can-”

“Now, hold it just a minute, Steven,” Pearl cut in. “I’m not so sure this ‘never-ending slumber
party’ is the best idea either. Not because of the lack of space, but because… well…”

“Let me guess,” the conman filled in, his tone as dry as ever, which really wasn’t that surprising,
given the situation. “It’s ‘cause you don’t want me mooching around here, huh?”

“…Well…”

“Pfft, don’t listen to Pearl,” Amethyst rolled her eyes, trotting over to Stan and smirking up at him.
“Of course you guys can stay! Heck, it might even be kinda fun having some new roomies. Means
I’ll have more people to pull late-night pranks on, right Steven?”

“Oh, yeah, speaking of which,” Steven said with a frown. “Amethyst, can we talk about that frog
you put in my bed last night later on? Cause I think we kinda need to talk about that.”

“Uh, yeah, of course!” Mabel pouted, seeing as how Amethyst was already on board with the idea. “Please, please, please, please! Just look at us!” she exclaimed, pulling Dipper up beside her before issuing him a whispered command. “Be as cute as you can!”

Knowing they had no other options, Dipper complied, forcing the most endearing smile he could
muster as Mabel continued her appeal. “We’re cold, lonely, and lost in the world with nowhere else to go! Can’t you find it in your hearts to take in two poor, adorable kids and their cheap but lovable uncle for a while? Pretty please? After all, we are your favorite twins!”

“Um… yeah. What she said,” Dipper nodded, knowing there was little he could really add to Mabel’s thorough entreaty. “Please?” he asked to further emphasize it though, tilting his head down a bit as he looked up to the Gems dolefully. It was a trick the twins had practiced and perfected over the years, not just with their parents, but with Stan as well, and to their credit, it usually always worked. Which meant that if it didn’t win Garnet and Pearl over, then nothing would.

The two elder Gems remained silent of a moment or two, both of them taking in the twins’ forlorn, pleading pouts. As they glanced over at Steven, they found he was wearing one too, mouthing the word ‘please’ to them repeatedly as he clasped his hands together hopefully. And while Pearl’s bottom lip was already starting to quiver and her eyes were filling up with sympathetic tears, Garnet was ultimately the one to break first.

“That’s not fair,” she noted, a hint of amusement in her tone. “You kids know we can’t resist any of you. Especially when you give us that look.”

“You mean this one?” Steven asked, giving the Gem leader complete puppy dog eyes.

“That’s the one.”

“Oh, how could I even think of turning you two away?!” Pearl cried, wiping her tears away. “You both can stay here for as long as you need to! No questions asked!”

“Yay!” Steven and Mabel cheered in delighted unison, both of them more than ready to start celebrating their triumph. Dipper, on the other hand, did have at least one more question.

“So Grunkle Stan can stay too?” he asked somewhat anxiously, wanting to ensure this deal was a fair one.

“Well…”

“Stan can stay too,” Garnet cut Pearl off. Her solid tone alone made it clear that there would be no arguing with her on the matter, much to the white Gem’s annoyance.

“Oh gee, thanks,” Stan rolled his eyes, his tone still as sarcastic as ever. “Not only do I get my house stolen from me by a blue-suited gremlin, but I also get to sleep on a couch and put up with you two nagging at me about it, all in the same day! How lucky can a guy get?”

“Aw, c’mon, Stan, it won’t be so bad,” Amethyst chuckled mischievously. “With us being roomies, that means we’ll have all sorts of time for new Revenge Trip scheming. You know, whenever you stop crying about losing the shack or whatever.”

“What? I’m not crying about anything!” the conman exclaimed defensively.

“Heh, could’ve fooled me with how crabby you’re being about it,” the purple Gem shrugged.

“Oh, don’t worry, you guys!” Steven reassured warmly. “We’ll think of some way to get the shack back, I’m sure! But in the meantime, all of us are gonna have so much fun living together! We’ll be like one big happy family!”

“Yeah we will be!” Mabel heartily agreed, just as zealous. “One big awesome family! The best one around! We could even redecorate the mailbox so that it has both of our last names on it!”
“You mean like… Unipines?” Steven asked with an eager grin.

“Or Pinesuverse!”

Already gripped by this odd idea, the pair continued brainstorming ideas for a combined last name, Stan was making himself right at home already by combing the fridge for a snack, much to Pearl’s immediate aggravation.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked with a disapproving scowl.

“What? I’m famished here,” the conman shrugged, pulling a sandwich out of the fridge.

“You can’t eat that! It’s not your food!” the white Gem huffed as she marched over to him.

“Hey, it’s not like you’re gonna eat it.”

“Oooo! He got you there, P!” Amethyst laughed, quite amused. Of course, it didn’t take long for the usual strain of argument to break out between Stan and Pearl, even if it was a rather pointless one. And as usual, the purple Gem merely sat on the sidelines, adding her quips and sly remarks just to fan the flames for fun. Their bickering only added to the noisy chaos of the room that Steven and Mabel were creating, even if it was in stark contrast to the loud fun they were having, especially as they laughingly let Lion chase them around the house. Garnet and Dipper stood on the fringe of all this madness, the former shaking her head as she put her hands on her hips and the latter watching it all unfold with growing worry.

“There’s no way this is going to work out, is it?” Dipper asked the Gem leader, hoping her foresight could possibly set his dread to rest.

“It could…” Garnet noted, her tone anything but definitive.

“But will it?”

The Gem leader paused, taking another look at the ongoing chaos before them before reaching her conclusion. “…No.”

Though it took some time and some staunch words on Garnet’s part, everything soon died down enough to allow the Pines to settle in to their new living situation. Indeed the house didn’t offer much in the way of suitable sleeping space; the couch was fortunately a pull-out, but it was still a cramped fit for Stan and the twins. Steven would have offered to make room in his own bed for one of them, but seeing as how the Pines had taken over Lion’s usual sleeping spot, he had taken to cuddling up next to the young Gem instead, leaving him with very little room either. So instead of having to try and pack into the bed and couch, Steven, Stan, and the twins had taken to trying to calm their nerves from the hectic day they had with a little evening television. The Gems had also begrudgingly joined them, cramming onto Steven’s bed up on the loft as an episode of Ducktective droned on in the background. In order to pass the idle time, Mabel had prompted a rather short, but still effective “braid train”, with Garnet in the back, twisting Mabel’s hair skillfully while she worked on Amethyst’s.

“Whoa, Amethyst, your hair is so soft and smooth!” Mabel complimented as she ran a hand through the lavender locks. “I always thought it would be super tanglely and sticky since you drink so much chocolate syrup and hot glue. What’s your secret?”
“Heh, I’ll never tell,” the purple Gem smirked, flipping her bangs.

“It’s because she shakes it all out of her hair,” Garnet informed dryly.

“Like a dog?” Mabel asked.

“Exactly like a dog.”

“And its’ never failed me yet,” Amethyst crossed her arms confidently. “Hey, Stan, you sure you don’t wanna join this braid train? I mean, you don’t really got a lot of hair anymore, but I’m sure I could make something out of it.”

“Amethyst, cut it out!” Stan scolded in annoyance as the purple Gem playfully knocked his fez off his head. “You too, Mabel.” The conman was quick to swat his niece’s hand away as she also tried to reach out and braid his hair. “The news is finally on.”

The collective group turned their attention to the TV as the evening news began, and of course, the first story was the one that was most presently affecting them all. “In a movement that has all of Gravity Falls buzzing, child psychic Gideon Gleeful has taken surprise ownership of the Mystery Shack,” Shandra Jimenez reported as an innocent file photo of Gideon surrounded by puppies appeared on screen. “Previously belonging to area shyster, Stanford Pines.” The next image shown was an incriminating one of Stan, cheerfully clad in a devil costume and surrounded by flames.

“That picture’s taken out of context,” Stan noted crossly.

“Heh, yeah it is,” Amethyst chuckled. “I should know. I was the one who took it!”

“Oh for crying out loud, you two! Really?” Pearl scolded at their irresponsibility, though the kids were quick to shush her as the newscast continued.

“Now that you have the shack, what exactly are you planning on doing with it?” Shandra interviewed Gideon in front of the shack, which now had a tall wire fence erected around it.

“I have a big announcement to make tomorrow,” Gideon began with his infamous charming grin. “And I’d cordially like to invite all the good people of Gravity Falls to join me. Free admission to anyone who wears their Lil’ Gideon pin! It’s my face!” He winked to the camera as he held up a small pin that did indeed have his face on it.

“How tacky,” Garnet remarked with a dry frown.

“I just can’t believe Gideon beat us,” Dipper said with a discouraged sigh. “Normally I’m able to save the day, but this time? I have like, no idea about what to do! This is all my fault.”

“What? No it’s not, Dipper,” Steven said with a sympathetic frown. “I mean, there really wasn’t a lot that any of us could have done to stop Gideon from breaking into the shack. Literally.”

“Steven’s right,” Mabel agreed, jumping to her feet. “Don’t worry, Dipper! I guess this just means that Mabel’s gonna have to be the new hero of the family now! I’ll defeat Gideon with my grappling hook!” With a determined grin, she pulled her treasured grappling hook out and held it aloft.

“Mabel, no offense, but that grappling hook has only ever helped us out once,” Dipper pointed out, referring to the ordeal at Rose’s Fountain a few weeks ago.
“Twice, bro-bro,” Mabel corrected. “It helped us out twice, remember? And it’ll help us out again this time! Just watch this” To prove her point, she took aim with her grappling hook at the temple gate, hoping to snag one of the smaller rocks gathered near it, only for it to catch a much larger one and send it flinging back towards the group. Garnet acted quickly and deflected it before it could hit any of them with a single punch, though the broken pieces did scatter all over the temple, making quite a mess.

“See what I mean?” Dipper asked pointedly. “That thing usually causes more harm than actual help.”

“Aw, that’s just because I wasn’t aiming right,” Mabel scoffed. “Let me just try again and-”

“O-ok!” Pearl cut in with a forced grin. “Why don’t we put that away and everyone heads onto bed now, hm?”

“Aw, already?” Steven asked, dismayed. “But we’re having so much fun!”

“I don’t know if ‘fun’ is the word I would use to describe any of this,” Stan remarked sarcastically.

“Can’t you guys just hang out with us a little longer?” the young Gem inquired his guardians as they started heading downstairs. “I’m sure we would all feel better with some jokes or a story or something. Please?”

“Alright,” Garnet instantly complied, returning to the bed as she took a seat on it. Though they were somewhat confused, Amethyst and Pearl followed her lead. “I have a story for you kids.”

“Really?” Dipper asked, confused. “But Garnet, I thought you said you didn’t tell stories.”

“Well, I happen to have one this time,” the Gem leader replied. “And it’s about Alexandrite.”

Amethyst let out an excited squeal upon hearing this, while Pearl was somewhat less bold about it as she smiled with a soft blush. “A-Alexandrite?” the white Gem asked anxiously. “Garnet, are we really going to tell them about… her?”

“Sure,” Garnet shrugged. “It’ll help them feel better.”

“Who’s Alexandrite?” Mabel asked, already overwhelmed with curiosity.

“She’s only a complete and total boss!” Amethyst exclaimed with a daring grin.

“You all remember Opal and Sugilite, right?” Pearl asked tentatively. “Well… Alexandrite is… sort of like them. Only… bigger.”

“A lot bigger,” Amethyst added.

“Alexandrite is the fusion of myself, Pearl, and Amethyst,” Garnet properly explained. “She is very massive and very powerful.”

“Plus, she has six arms and can summon like, all of our weapons!” Amethyst quipped, her grin still huge as she looked to the kids, who were all aptly awestruck upon hearing about this new fusion.

“Howe-” Pearl cut in pointedly. “As fearsome and formidable as Alexandrite is, she’s a bit… unstable. Her true potential can only be realized when the three of us fuse with a singular goal in mind. Anything else and… well…”

“We fall apart,” Garnet concluded.
“Wait, so all three of you can fuse at the same time?” Dipper asked, amazed, especially since the journal didn’t detail much about fusions in the first place. “But how? I thought only two Gems could fuse at a time.”

“Nah, man,” Amethyst remarked. “There’s no limit to how many of us can mash it up at once!”

“Please,” Stan scoffed, skeptical of this fantastical idea. “This ‘Alexandrite’ broad sounds like she’s just one big fairy tale to me. Then again, considering how you three are like something out of a nutso fairy tale, it probably isn’t too far out there.”

“Well, I think Alexandrite sounds amazing!” Steven exclaimed, stars in his eyes. “Can we meet her? Like, right now?”

“Yeah!” Mabel nodded just as zealously. “And if Alexandrite is really as big and strong as you guys are saying, then I bet she’d be able to go down to the shack, beat the snot out of Gideon, and get the deed back, no problem!”

“Whoa, that’s… actually a pretty good idea,” Dipper said, somewhat surprised. Then again, it was a rather sensible plan; with the Gems and their strength on their side, then perhaps getting the shack back would be as easy as getting them to take it right back from the child psychic. Sure, it wasn’t the most creative idea, but at least it was the first tangible, actually feasible idea any of them had come up with so far.

“O-oh, well, we would love to help, kids, but… we really only fuse during deadly situations,” Pearl said with a gentle frown. “And losing the Mystery Shack to Gideon… really isn’t one.”

“Hey, it is to me!” Stan protested. “Without that dusty old shack, I’m making zero profits! That’s the deadliest situation imaginable!”

“Eh, you’ll live,” Garnet remarked apathetically.

“Don’t be so down, you guys!” Amethyst encouraged as she hopped off the loft, Garnet and Pearl following not long after her. “At least you get to chill here for a while. Besides, what’s Gideon really gonna do with the shack anyway? Paint it pink like he did the temple? Come on.”

“We’ll have more time to discuss a more realistic plan tomorrow,” Pearl said, heading for the temple gate. “In the meantime, good night, kids. And uh… you too, Stan, I suppose.”

The conman merely rolled his eyes as the kids bade the Gems goodnight in return before they went inside the temple. “Whelp, I should’ve guessed those three wouldn’t be any help,” Stan deadpanned stoically.

“Aww, well… I bet the Gems will help you guys out however they can,” Steven reassured warmly. “And I’ll help too! Don’t get me wrong, I love that you guys are staying here, but I already miss going down to the Mystery Shack and seeing all the great stuff there!”

“Yeah… Same here…” Mabel said with a homesick sigh. “I mean, the temple is great and everything, but it’s a lot different than the musty, weird, creakiness of the shack.”

“Not to mention it’s a lot cleaner here,” Dipper noted, though his worried frown betrayed his sarcasm. “But still, I agree with you guys. For as old and rundown as it is, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t miss it too.”

“And that’s why we gotta get it back,” Stan said with firm resolve. Of course, his verve was soon broken however as Lion caught him off guard by wrestling his fez away with him so he could play
with it, much to the conman’s great annoyance. “Ugh, and the sooner we get it back and get out of this nuthouse, the better.”

The next day saw a large crowd congregating outside of the Mystery Shack, a great deal of the townsfolk having heard Gideon’s announcement and eagerly showing up for whatever event he had to offer. The child psychic stood on the stage constructed before the shack, watching them all file in with a triumphant, satisfied smirk. “Hell, Gravity Falls!” he greeted in his usual bright, faux friendly way, especially as the crowd buzzed with excitement before him.

“Gideon is the psychic-est!” Lazy Susan exclaimed with delight. “He guessed the secret ingredient to my coffee omelet!”

“The kid was able to predict how many games there are at Funland Arcade without even counting ‘em!” Mr. Smiley added, also quite impressed. “Even I don’t know how many games I got in there!”

“Somehow he knew about my secret birthmark!” Toby Determined quipped as awkward as ever.

“His hair is very poofy and soft,” Nanefua Pizza noted with a smile. “I wonder what conditioner he uses.”

“Is that why we are here instead of at work, where we should be?” Kofi asked his mother pointedly. “Because if so, this is a waste of valuable pizza making time!”

Kofi’s disgruntled manner was soon traded with a burst of fear however, as Manly Dan let out a loud, powerful shout right beside him. “I love that child psychic so much!” the lumberjack cried, pulling Blubbs and Durland into a tight, choke-hold hug.

“Y-you’re chokin’ me!” Blubbs gasped for air amidst Dan’s firm hold.

“G-grandma, is that you?” Durland asked, his face turning purple from strangulation.

The various townsfolk continued to praise Gideon amongst themselves as they waited for the program to begin. Fortunately, none of them noticed the last group to arrive, one that consisted of the Pines, Steven, and Soos, all of whom had donned disguises just so they could gain entry into the event they would have otherwise been barred from.

“We’re in,” Dipper whispered to the others as soon as he was certain no one was paying them any mind.

“Just gonna say it.” Mabel smirked, fiddling with the faux mustache she had on. “I don’t know what we’re doing here, but I’m loving these fake mustaches!”

“It’s like a tiny little caterpillar on top of my lip!” Steven grinned, petting his own false mustache.

“Dudes, if anyone asks, I’m not Soos,” Soos said, pointing to the sign he had put on his hat labeled ‘not Soos’ for the sake of solidifying his design.

Before either Dipper or Stan could convince the others to be serious about their mission, Gideon spoke up from the platform, addressing the crowd with a broad grin. “Ladies and gentlemen! Today I am delighted to announce my plans for the former Mystery Shack! I give you… Gideonland!” With a flourish, the child psychic unveiled a scale model of what seemed to be a
small amusement park, complete with rides, signs, and even a towering statue of Gideon to top it all off. The disguised group in the back all let out shocked gasps upon seeing the child psychic’s ambitious plans, but even so, the townsfolk all showed their full support of it with a rousing round of applause and cheers.

“That’s right, folks!” Gideon proclaimed proudly. “We’re gonna turn this dirty ol’ shack into three square miles of Gideon-tertainment! And, if all goes well, then we’re even lookin’ to expand up the hill a bit…” The child psychic’s smile turned ominous as he glanced up to the Gem temple, hidden greed and spitefulness in his eyes. “Now, allow me to introduce our new mascot: Lil’ Gideon Jr!” Gideon sent a nod to his father, prompting Bud to pull off a sheet revealing Waddles, who was clad in a complete Lil’ Gideon costume, suit, wig, and all and looking quite miserable in it. “Boom! He’s a pig!”

“Waddles!” Mabel cried in heartbroken horror upon seeing her beloved pig reduced to such embarrassment. “You monster!”

“Alright, that’s it!” Stan shouted hotly, throwing off his disguise. The others did the same and followed the conman as he charged through the crowd, forcing their way to the front. Stan, Dipper, and Mabel boldly leapt onto the stage, while Steven and Soos remained at the head of the crowd to provide additional support if needed.

“Listen up, people!” the conman exclaimed fiercely. “Gideon’s a fraud! This kid broke into the shack and stole my property!”

“Arrest him, officers!” Mabel commanded, still deeply upset over what Gideon had done to Waddles.

“Yeah!” Dipper added, impetuously knocking the nearby podium over for emphasis.

“Such accusations!” Gideon gasped with false innocence. “Mr. Pines, I recall that you gave the property to me. Look, I have the deed right here!” To prove his point, the child psychic pulled said deed out of his suit and presented it to the large crowd as evidence.

“Well, that’s all the proof I need to see,” Blubbs concluded with a shrug.

“We love you, Lil’ Gideon! Sing them funny songs!” Durland exclaimed with a cheerful grin.

“But wait!” Steven interrupted, hopping onto the stage himself. “Gideon’s lying! He really did steal the deed to the Mystery Shack! I was there when it happened; we all were!”

“Y-yeah!” Stan exclaimed with an agreeing nod. “What the kid said!”

Upon hearing such information from the young Gem, a mummer of doubt began to ripple through the crowd concerning the authenticity of Gideon’s story. After all, if there was one thing most of the people of Gravity Falls knew, it was that Steven rarely, if ever, lied. Unfortunately, that perception was a fact that Gideon was also well aware of, and he wasn’t about to let it throw a wrench into his rapidly succeeding plans.

“Oh ho, well certainly you must be mistaken, Steven, my dear friend,” Gideon forced a grin onto his face as he threw an arm around the young Gem’s shoulder. “Then again, it must be hard for you to keep track of what’s what when you’re always runnin’ off on adventures with those Gem compatriots of yours. Spending time with rocks probably knocks the ol’ noggin around a bit, you know what I’m sayin’, folks?” The crowd easily let out a charmed laugh at the child psychic’s joke, even if the young Gem was anything but amused by it.
“B-but I-” Steven attempted to protest, though Gideon was quick to put an end to it. With a mere snap of his fingers, the child psychic prompted the two burly thugs in his employ to round up the Pines and the young Gem and haul them away from the event. Despite their attempts to struggle and escape, the guards grabbed all four of them and began leading them away, but not before Gideon flaunted his victory over Stan once more.

“Now, get off my property, old man!” the child psychic exclaimed, slapping one of his pins onto the conman’s lapel with a smug grin.

“I’ll show you who’s the old man!” Stan challenged, though his boldness was interrupted as his hearing aid let out a high-pitched screech. “Ow! My hearing aid!”

“Thanks for visiting Gideonland!” Gideon cheerfully called out after the group as his thugs dragged them all away. “Don’t come back, I don’t care for ya’ll.”

It didn’t take long for the guards to toss the group outside the chain-link fence surrounding the property, and for good measure, they made sure to stand by it to ensure that they wouldn’t try to sneak in again. The Pines, Soos, and Steven all let out defeated sighs as they leaned against the fence, knowing that their initial attempt had been a complete and utter failure.

“Well, I had imagined that going a lot smoother than it actually did,” Stan said with a bitter scowl.

“Don’t worry, guys,” Dipper tried to encourage the best he could. “We’ll get the shack back somehow.”

“We better,” Wendy said as she rode up to the group on her bike. “If I can’t work at the shack, my dad’s gonna force me to move upstate and work at my cousin’s logging camp.”

“What? You’re leaving town?” Dipper asked, surprised and dismayed at the prospect of his crush being gone. “But we need you here!”

“Yeah,” Soos nodded in agreement. “Especially Dipper because of his huge crush on—” The handyman abruptly cut himself off upon catching Dipper’s harsh glare, though even so, the way he corrected his statement was quite awkward. “…you… eucalyptus trees! Ha! The kid loves eucalyptus trees!” Soos exclaimed with a nervous laugh. “Saved it!”

“Eucalyptus trees?” Steven asked with a curious grin, completely falling for it. “Is that true, Dipper?”

Dipper rolled his eyes at this, but before he could answer, a suddenly rustling in the nearby bushes caught the group’s attention. “Oh man, guys,” Wendy cringed, already knowing full well who it was. “Don’t look now.”

“Take me back, Wendy!” Robbie cried as he stood up from the bushes, holding a boom box over his head as it played a sappy love song. “My arms are too skinny to keep holding up with boom box forever!”

“Ugh, I was never here,” Wendy said coldly, mounting her bike and riding off.

“Have you been getting my texts!” Robbie called as he chased after her desperately. “Do I need to send you more texts!? Wendy!”

Dipper could only watch with growing distress as the cashier left, knowing that this situation had gone from bad to worse. Indeed, it had seemed that Gideon’s hostile takeover of the shack had created a ripple effect, one that didn’t just effect the Pines family alone, but Steven, the Gems,
Soos, Wendy, and likely others none of them had even thought about yet. However far this ripple would reach, it was hard to say for certain just yet. But one thing was clear: it was easily and forcefully uprooting just about everything in its path, and it likely wouldn’t stop until there was nothing remotely familiar left at all.

“And then he had these really beefy guys drag us away, all before anyone could hear what really happened.” Steven finished explaining what had happened earlier to the Gems, who were all listening to the tale quite intently as they gathered in the living room.

“Isn’t it just tragic?” Mabel asked with a morose groan as she lay upside down on the couch. “Plus, he put Waddles in this hideous costume! Oh, you guys should have been there to see it! It was terrible!”

“Sounds like it,” Garnet nodded.

“Sounds like Gideon’s really stuck it to you guys,” Amethyst remarked with a scowl. “So what are you gonna do now? Try again tomorrow?”

“Actually… we were hoping you guys could give us some advice about what we should do next,” Dipper said, his tone tentative and hopeful. “We know you can’t all fuse and just defeat Gideon like that, but you could at least help us brainstorm some ideas, right?”

“Hm…” Pearl started to muse thoughtfully. “Well, in our experience, chain link fences never really prove to be much of an obstacle… But wrenching the deed away from Gideon would likely be the hard part…”

“We could always just beat the little loser up without fusing,” Amethyst suggested with a shrug. “And believe me, that’s something I’ve been wanting to do for a long time now. The kid’s just asking for a good punch in the face, if you ask me.”

“As fast and as easy as that could be,” the white Gem said with a frown. “We’re not really at liberty to do it. Our job is to protect humans, no matter who they might be or how devious and dishonest they might be. Harming any of them, regardless of their actions strays quite a bit away from the Crystal Gem manifesto.”

“We have a manifesto?” Steven asked. “That’s so cool! By the way, what’s a manifesto?”

“Can’t you guys make an exception, just this once?” Mabel asked pleadingly. “Please?”

“We’re sorry, kids, but no,” Garnet said firmly. “The only time we step in and use force to restrain humans is when they harm each other or one of our own. It was a rule Rose Quartz firmly believed in and it’s our duty to follow that rule even today.”

“Aw…” Dipper and Mabel sighed in disappointed unison, both of them flopping onto the couch dejectedly.

“Blah… What are we gonna do?” Mabel asked with a loud groan. “Staying up here with you guys is great, really, but I’m running out of room to store all my sweaters!” She nodded to Steven’s rather cramped closet, filled to the brim with her large collection of sweaters in addition to the young Gem’s own clothing.

“What’s Stan gonna tell Mom and Dad?” Dipper asked with a much more rational concern.
“Chances are they’re probably not gonna like hearing that we got booted out of the shack and we’re all technically kind of homeless now.”

“You guys aren’t homeless! Your home is here with us!” Steven exclaimed with an understanding smile. “Well, for now at least. Right, guys?” he asked the Gems, who merely replied with a round of various uncertain murmurs. While none of them wanted to admit it, they didn’t really have any real long-term solution they could offer the kids. As it was, their hands were tied. And unless something were to change, there wasn’t really anything even they could do to help the twins out of their current plight.

“And besides,” the young Gem added, trying to remain positive as usual. “I’m sure Mr. Pines will think of something to tell your parents in the meantime. He’s good at-”

“Lying?” Pearl interrupted with a disapproving frown.

“Well, I was gonna say coming up with stuff…”

“Yeah,” Amethyst chuckled. “That’s pretty much what lying is in a nutshell.”

The group shared a small, albeit half-hearted laugh at this, one that didn’t really do much to lighten the mood. Of course, Steven hadn’t exactly been wrong in implying that Stan was fabricating something to tell the twins’ parents, seeing as that was exactly what the conman was currently doing at the moment. “Don’t worry, your son and daughter are fine,” Stan reassured as he stood on the porch, speaking to his concerned relatives over the phone. “Where are we staying? Uh….” The conman hesitated, stealing a glance up at the temple before coming up with a clever lie. “I put ’em up in this amazing four-star hotel! Real ritzy place. Plenty of space for them to run around, and uh… there’s even a fancy statue right outside for them to play on!”

Stan forced a smile as he said all this, knowing that even despite the Gems’ agreeing for them to stay there, this new living arrangement could only be a temporary one at best. The Gems had never actually said anything to the conman about them eventually having to leave, but he knew. There was just too many complications that would come along with their stay lasting longer than a few mere days.

“What?” the conman asked, having missed the question the twins’ mother posed. “Uh, sure, we got… plenty to eat,” he lied again, knowing that between him, the twins, and Steven, the fridge inside had already been nearly cleaned out. Of course, Greg always provided his son with money for groceries and whatnot, but Stan knew he couldn’t very well ask his former employee to do the same for him and the twins. His pride simply wouldn’t allow it. “Relax,” Stan assured his relatives once more. “If I thought I couldn’t take care of these kids, I’d send them back right away. Uh huh. You too.”

The conman saved his defeated sigh for the moment after he hung the phone up. Uncertainty seemed to overwhelm him as he leaned against the porch’s railing, rubbing his temples. Only about a mile down the hill, the Mystery Shack rested in its usual spot, so close, yet so far, especially with the fence and sign Gideon had erected all around it. As much as Stan wanted to blame the deceitful child psychic for all this, the conman knew he could only really blame himself. He should have paid more attention, should have taken Gideon’s threats and schemes more seriously instead of shrugging them off like he did everything else. Maybe then, him and the twins would still be safe and secure at the shack instead of upset and uncertain here at the temple.

His conversation with the twins’ parents only made Stan more worried over how this situation might possibly turn out. So far there had been very few signs of the possibility that things would get better in the near future. True, they all did have a roof over their heads at the very least, but the
conman knew he couldn’t really provide much else for his nibblings. All of his savings were hidden in various nooks and crannies back at the shack, and with no access to them, he was starting to run dangerously low on funds. If he was perfectly honest with himself, Stan knew that he wouldn’t be able to care for Dipper and Mabel like this for much longer. Honestly, he was getting to the point where he didn’t know how he’d care for himself in the long run. Still, in the end, Stan realized, that above all else, he had to do what was best for was best for the twins.

Even if what was best for them wasn’t what was best for him.

The fireplace in the shack’s parlor burned brightly, especially as it began to consume the photo of the Pines family that Gideon had just tossed into it. The child psychic chuckled wickedly as he watched the picture of his enemies burn for a moment, before turning his attention back to the second journal resting on the nearby desk. He was quickly distracted from it, however, by the sound of Waddles desperately scuffling to escape by climbing out the window. The poor pig’s attempt was immediately put to an end with a harsh, sharp blow from Gideon’s whistle.

“You! Back to your corner!” the child psychic ordered fiercely, frightening Waddles enough to send him cowering to the corner of the room fearfully. Satisfied that he would stay put, Gideon began leafing through the journal once more, paying no mind to his father as he entered the room with the reclaimed sad clown painting Stan had stolen from him weeks ago.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you, boy,” Bud began, setting the painting down as he looked to his son. “Shouldn’t you be celebratin’ instead of sticking your head in that there book all day?”

Gideon didn’t answer this question right away, but instead shut the journal before turning to Bud with a dark, serious expression. “Father, have I ever told you the true nature of this book?” he asked, glancing down at it. “It was written many years ago by a brilliant unknown author who learned secrets too powerful for one man. He hid his journals where he thought no one would ever find ‘em, because he knew that if the journals were ever brought together, they would unleash a gateway to unimaginable power!” A greedy, ambitious grin crossed the child psychic’s face as he mentioned this, knowing that this gateway, whatever and wherever it was, was his ultimate goal. “Codes and maps have lead me to believe that the other book is buried somewhere on this very property, and I intend to find it!”

“So that’s why you wanted the Mystery Shack,” Bud noted, somewhat overwhelmed by everything his son had just explained but still getting the gist of it.

“Exactly,” Gideon said firmly, grabbing a nearby shovel. “It’s time to begin the search for the other journal! And once I find it, not only will this town finally belong to me, but I’ll also be able to get rid of the only ones who could possibly get in my way: the Crystal Gems!”

The child psychic let out a sinister laugh, one filled with confidence over his upcoming victory as he held the second journal aloft. After all, his success would only be a matter of finding the first one; in fact, a large part of the other half of his plan lay in the form of the large effigy of himself being erected right outside. One that, when completed, would certainly be enough to crush the Gems, or anyone else who got in his way, once and for all.

Seeing as how they had nowhere else to go and no other plans left to try, the kids had resorted to
distracting themselves from the ongoing stressful situation with a board game. Upon Steven’s insistence, the Gems had agreed to join them, largely for the sake of trying to cheer the still quite troubled twins up.

“Ok, Amethyst, it’s your turn,” Steven smiled at the purple Gem, prompting her to pick up a card from the game board.

“Aw, sweet!” the purple Gem smirked, looking over her card. “I got another dare one. Quick! Someone throw out a dare! Whatever it is, I’ll totally do it!”

“I dare you to body slam the table as Purple Puma!” Mabel exclaimed with a zealous grin.

“You’re on!” Amethyst shouted, already shapeshifting into her wrestling persona.

“Now hold on just a minute! You’re not—” Pearl tried to stop the purple Gem, but of course she was too late. With a roughish laugh, Amethyst leapt high into the air before coming down on the coffee table, breaking it instantly and sending all of the game pieces flying across the house.

“Yeah! I win again!” Amethyst cheered, happily laying amidst the mess she had made.

“I’ll say you did,” Garnet said dryly as Pearl seethed with sheer frustration beside her.

“Uh maybe we should play something a little less… destructive?” Dipper suggested with a frown.

However, before the group could move onto a different game, the front door to the house swung open as Connie hurried inside. “Steven! I got your texts. Did all of that stuff really—” she cut herself off upon seeing around the table. “…happen?”

“Uh… yeah, it did,” Steven nodded with a shrug.

“So… you guys really did get kicked out of the Mystery Shack?” Connie asked the twins with a fretful frown.

“Yeah,” Dipper said with a sigh. “That’s the short version of what happened anyway.”

“But it’s not all bad!” Mabel said with a small, hopeful grin. “At least we get to stay here with Steven and the Gems and cuddle with Lion each night and play board games and stuff.”

“Well, it’s not so bad as long as we keep those board games under control,” Pearl remarked, sending Amethyst a pointed glare.

“But what are going to do now?” Connie inquired curiously. “Try to get the shack back?”

“We already tried that,” Steven said, frowning. “It… didn’t really go so great.”

“Aw, come on, you sad sacks,” Amethyst attempted to encourage the forlorn kids. “This mess isn’t over yet. I’m sure if we all knock our heads together or however it goes, we’ll come up with something!”

“Uh, actually… about that…” Stan cleared his throat as he came into the kitchen, a look of clear regret and dread already clear on his face. “Kids, we gotta talk,” he said to the twins, trying hard to avoid eye contact with them out of guilt. “Look, I’ve been thinking and… I can’t take care of you anymore. I don’t have a house or a job or too much of anything else really. The plan is… you’re goin’ home. Your bus leaves tomorrow. Here are your tickets.” With a sad sigh, the conman lay a pair of bus tickets on what was left of the table, much to the shock and dismay of everyone
gathered around it. But of course, none of them were more upset over this news than Dipper and Mabel themselves, which was why they immediately tried to convince Stan against this decision.

“But Grunkle Stan, you can’t give up!” Dipper protested adamantly.

“Seriously, Stan!” Amethyst agreed hotly, angered by the very thought. “I’ve known you for a long time and I’ve never seen you just… throw in the towel like this!”

“That’s true,” Pearl nodded, also quite against this idea. “I hate to admit this, Stan, but if there’s one thing you’re not, it’s a quitter.”

“Please don’t send us home, Grunkle Stan!” Mabel pleaded as morosely as she could, hoping that her charm could somehow change her uncle’s mind. “There’s still so much summer fun left for us to have here in Gravity Falls! It can’t end just like that!”

“Look, I lost, ok?” Stan asked, trying to be gruff and firm on the matter, even if his facade was quickly crumbling into woe and remorse. After all, for as much as the twins tended to get on his nerves, the last thing he wanted was to see them go so soon either. But he knew this was what he had to do; he had no other options left. “The best thing for you both is for you to be with your parents. Sorry, kids. Gideon won. Summer’s over.”

The conman let out a dejected sigh as he glanced away from the twins, though he still caught their heartbreaking looks of disbelief and desperation nonetheless. Unable to bear that along with the thought of sending them off after having grown so attached to them, Stan simply hurried out of the house without another word, leaving a very confused, very somber group behind.

“Oh…. We’re so sorry, kids,” Pearl said with genuine sympathy as she placed a hand on both of the twins’ shoulders. “I don’t understand why Stan thinks he needs to do this. We already made it very clear that you both are allowed to stay here for as long as you need to.”

“It’s because Stan’s being a stupid quitter, that’s why,” Amethyst growled bitterly, kicking the crumbled table as she crossed her arms.

“Y-you guys can’t just go!” Steven cried in distress as Connie nodded her equally worried agreement. “It feels like we just met a few weeks ago!”

“It was just a few weeks ago, Steven,” Dipper pointed out glumly.

“Yeah, but still, you can’t leave so soon!” the young Gem exclaimed earnestly before turning to the Gems. “Isn’t there something, anything we can do to keep this from happening?!”

The Gems didn’t answer immediately as they all exchanged a tentative, saddened glance, their expressions alone revealing that they were at just as much of a loss as the kids were. But as usual, Garnet was the one to be strong for her teammates and voice it aloud, as difficult as it was.

“Dipper, Mabel,” the Gem leader began, a hand on each of their shoulders. “The last thing any of us want to see is for either of you to go… But in the end, this isn’t our choice, or even yours. It’s Stan’s. And if his choice is to send you home then… you’ll have to accept that. All of us will have to accept that,” she finished firmly, looking to her fellow Gems as well as Steven and Connie.

Amethyst and Pearl let out defeated sighs upon hearing this, knowing that there would be no more arguing with their leader on this matter. Unsure of how else to comfort the twins on this tremulous matter, they simply and silently followed Garnet to the temple gate, their heads hung as they sent brief, apologetic glances to the kids. “Again, we’re sorry,” Garnet said as the door slipped open, turning to them one more time. Her frown briefly turned into a small, encouraging smile after her
teammates retreated into the temple though, as she imparted the kids with one last message of hope. “But remember: even if Stan has given up, that doesn’t mean you all have to.”

Without another word, the Gem leader stepped into the temple, leaving the kids to soak in what she had just said as the light from the gate faded. Indeed, the conman had given up, he had found no hope in their current situation, and no way to change any of it at all. But where he had quit, the kids keep on going. They could persist, persevere, perhaps even prosper. All they had to do was try. After all, this wasn’t over yet.

“Ok, Mabel, that’s enough!” Dipper exclaimed with bold, newfound resolve. “Garnet’s right. If Stan won’t get our home back from Gideon, then we’ll have to do it ourselves!”

“Yeah!” Mabel cheered, already ready to do whatever they had to to reclaim the shack.

“Count us in too!” Connie smiled with clear determination. “Between the four of us, there’s bound to be a way to get the shack back!”

“Yeah, we’ll do whatever we can to help!” Steven proclaimed brightly. “Nobody can break the four of us up! Know why? Cause we’re…” the young Gem trailed off with a grin, hoping that the others would follow his lead, even though they didn’t. “Uh, this is the part where we’re all supposed to cheer ‘Mystery Kids’.”

“Oh…” the others mused in realization before they launched into a resolved, unified cheer. “Mystery Kids!”

“With all four of us working together, this’ll be a piece of cake!” Mabel exclaimed confidently. “And besides, Gideon may have the upper hand, but we have something that he doesn’t.”

“The journal!” Dipper proclaimed, holding the book up.

“A grappling hook!” Mabel declared at the same time, lifting the hook up before catching the odd looks the others were giving her. “Oh, right. The… the journal. Journal!”

With their mission in mind, the kids set out the next morning, their intrepid resolve and their need to act fast proving to be more than enough to drive them along. After all, quite a good deal was at stake this time; and if they didn’t succeed, then it could mean the end of their still-developing friendships, an outcome that was unthinkable for all of them. And so, they decided to begin their task with a stakeout right outside the property line of the Mystery Shack, knowing that they wouldn’t be able to easily get in so long as it was fenced off and guarded as it was. Gideon and his hired cronies had clearly already made some progress on “Gideonland”, as could be seen by the abundant construction equipment and the nearly-finished massive metal statue of the child that stood beside the shack. It was an intimidating setup, to be sure, but one that the kids would have to overcome if they ever hoped to get the shack back and save their summer.

“Alright,” Dipper began as they lay low in the bushes surrounding the fence, observing the ongoing construction. “The bus that’ll take us out of Gravity Falls comes at sundown. If we wanna stay in town, we’ve got to get past those guards, make it through the fence, and get Gideon to hand over that deed.”

“Sounds easier said than done…” Connie noted with an anxious frown as she glanced up at the towering fence.
“Don’t worry, guys!” Mabel exclaimed with a broad grin, whipping her grappling hook out. “Just leave that to Mabel! Wa-chaw!” Not paying much attention to her aim, she fired the hook, which happened to strike a tree before ricocheting right back and hitting Dipper squarely in the face, knocking him to the ground.

“Ow!” Dipper exclaimed in both pain and frustration as he picked himself up, rubbing the sore spot in his forehand as he handed the hook back to Mabel. “Now will you admit that grappling hook is useless?!?”

“Nope!”

“So how are we gonna get over that fence?” Steven asked curiously. “Are we gonna build a catapult and fling ourselves over it? Because I’ve always wanted to use a catapult!”

“What? No,” Dipper shook his head. “We’re gonna use this, remember?” He pulled the journal and began leafing through it as the others gathered around to look as well. “Now, what can we use to defeat Gideon? Let’s see… abominable bro-man?”

“Yeah!” Mabel and Steven quipped in agreement.

“Nope,” Dipper quickly turned the idea down, turning the page. “Butternut squash with a human face and emotions?”

“What?” Connie asked, aptly bewildered.

“Yeah!”

“No,” Dipper rolled his eyes, flipping to yet another page, one that caught everyone’s attention.

“Whoa, what’s all that?” Connie asked, looking over the complex, intricate design on the page.

“I honestly have no idea,” Dipper admitted, glancing at the page himself. “I’ve stared at this page for hours. It seems like a blueprint to build some kind of strange futuristic super-weapon-”

“Boring!” Mabel interrupted. “To get rid of those guards, we need some kind of army.”

“Wait a minute!” Dipper gasped as a sudden idea came to him upon hearing this. “An army! Mabel, that’s it! The gnomes!” he exclaimed, holding the gnome page in the journal open for the others to see.

“Uh…” Mabel frowned, tugging at the collar of her sweater nervously. After all, she certainly wasn’t keen on the idea of contracting the gnomes for help, especially after they kidnapped her, tried to force her into marrying them, and then brutally attacked her and Dipper when she refused.

“Hey, that could actually work!” Steven exclaimed with a grin. “There are so many gnomes out in the woods that Gideon wouldn’t know what to do with them all! Plus, they’re really, really stubborn too and surprisingly tough for being so cute and tiny.”

“Oh, we know all about that,” Mabel remarked, still hardly in favor of this idea.

“But didn’t you guys say you had to fight the gnomes off with a leaf blower before?” Connie asked. “What makes you think they’ll wanna help us?”

Dipper smirked as he closed the journal, hoping that all of the lessons Stan had taught him and Mabel in conning and persuasion would pay off now. “I’m sure we’ll think of something…”
Fortunately, the lush, mystical forest that the gnomes called home wasn’t too far of a hike from the shack. Still, the kids made sure to keep their guards up as they ventured into the reclusive cove, unsure of how their encounter with the potentially violent gnomes might turn out.

“I think this is their hiding spot…” Dipper said, recalling the familiar surroundings from when he rescued Mabel from the tiny men weeks ago.

“Yeah, it definitely is,” Steven agreed. “I’ve chased the gnomes back here enough time to know. You wouldn’t believe how many times they’ve broken in the temple to steal food!”

“Sounds like they get around,” Connie remarked with a small chuckle.

“I wonder what gnomes do out here all alone in the forest?” Mabel mused, though she soon got her answer as they made it to the heart of the cove. There, sitting in a bathtub filled to the brim with scurrying squirrels, was Jeff, the de facto leader of the gnomes. He happily relaxed in his odd squirrel bath, until he noticed the group of kids watching on in shocked disgust.

“Ah!” Jeff exclaimed, also quite surprised to see them though he quickly collected himself. “This… this is normal. This is normal for gnomes.” To prove his point, he proceeded to scrub his armpit with one of the many squirrels running around in the tub. The kids could only exchange a repulsed, dumbfounded glance at this, unsure of even what to say about it, which only prompted Jeff to continue. “Well, well, well,” he began with a broad smirk, reclining back in the tub. “Look who came crawling back. Take five, Chris,” he said to one of the countless squirrels, which hopped out of the tub. “The rest of you guys keep doin’ what you’re doin’. So, changed your mind about marrying us, did ya, Mabel?”

“Ew, hardly!” Mabel cringed in revulsion. “We just need your help. And seriously, ew!”

“You want our help?!” Jeff asked hotly. “After you left us at the alter? No dice! Unless…”

“Unless what?” Dipper inquired, almost afraid to ask.

“Unless you hook us up with that other cutie you got there,” Jeff smirked, sending a flirtatious wink Connie’s way.

“What?” Connie asked with a confused frown. However, she didn’t have a chance to really react further as a small crowd of gnomes emerged from the nearby greenery and surrounded her, all of them poking and prodding at her in curious inspection.

“Ooo, her hair is so long and full!” one of the gnomes exclaimed, standing on the shoulders of his companion to run his fingers through it. “And luxurious!”

“Course, the glasses are gonna have to go!” another gnome quipped, snatching her glasses away from her. “Can’t have them flying off and stabbing one of us in the face!”

“Hey!” Connie protested, grabbing them right back as yet another gnome forcibly grabbed her hand.

“Say, what’s your ring size, sweetie?” he asked with a charming grin.

“O-ok, this is getting too weird and uncomfortable for me,” Connie quickly said, making sure to put distance between herself and the very forward gnomes.
“You guys can’t marry Connie!” Steven exclaimed, rushing to stand before her.

“Oh look, it’s that Gem kid again,” Jeff remarked dryly. “Are those three knockouts you live with still playing hard to get?”

“Uh, yeah…” the young Gem frowned. “Pearl’s still kinda mad about the last time you guys tried to sneak into her room and sing that love song to her.”

“Hey, not all our plans can be winners,” Jeff shrugged apathetically before turning to Connie and Mabel. “We’re still short one queen here, no matter how you cut it. So, are one of you two dolls gonna marry us, or what?”

“Oh, no, that’s not happening,” Connie shook her head, her tone firm. “Ever.”

“Aaw, but why not?!”

“Because… Because we can get you a new queen!” Mabel quickly interjected, rolling with her newfound idea. “One that’s even more beautiful than me or Connie!”

“Oh yeah!” Dipper exclaimed, catching onto Mabel’s drift. “Her name is Gideon, and she has lovely white hair.”

“Huh?” Steven asked confused. “But Gideon’s not a-”

“Shh!” Connie abruptly cut him off before he could innocently ruin their plan.

“Whoa, mature woman, huh?” Jeff asked, intrigued. “Hey, Shmebulock! Get my cologne!”

“Shmebulock!” another gnome exclaimed gruffly, carrying in a bottle of cologne that was almost as big as he was.

“Is Shmebulock all you can say?” Jeff asked, somewhat concerned.

“…Shmebulock…” Shmebulock nodded sadly.

Jeff simply shrugged at this before turning back to the kids with a broad grin, one that they returned as they realized their plan was coming together perfectly. “It’s a deal!”

Stan let out a long sigh as he slumped against the counter at Greasy’s Diner. He had decided this was as good a place as any to take refuge away from the temple, so he wouldn’t have to see the twins’ pleading glances or hear the Gems’ judgmental whispers. The conman knew he should have been spending these last few precious, fleeting hours with Dipper and Mabel before he had to see them off on the bus that evening, but he couldn’t really bring himself to do it. The thought of having to bid them such a sudden farewell alone was difficult to deal with enough; the last thing he wanted was to be reminded of it.

“Waiter, give me a glass of the strongest, most expired apple cider you got,” Stan addressed the nearby waiter, hoping that the cider could at least help him feel a little better about all this.

“Sure thing, Mr. Pines.”

Confused, the conman glanced up to see none other than Soos working the counter, clad in an apron and all. “Soos? What are you doing here?”
“Well, since the Mystery Shack shut down, I’ve had to take on a bunch of part time jobs,” Soos explained as he rubbed a glass clean. “Grave digger, bus driver, really awesome cook… Hey, is the kitchen supposed to have that much fire in it?” Alarmed, the handyman rushed into the kitchen, using a fire extinguisher to put out the flames covering the stove.

“You’re a good man-child, Soos,” Stan said with a sigh. “But it’s not lookin’ good. This whole town loves Gideon and hates me. If only they knew how evil he really was!”

“Hey, I’m here for you, dude,” Soos smiled, walking up to the conman and putting a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

“The entire lower half of your body is one fire,” Stan pointed out.

“Shh…” Soos quieted calmly, not noticing the smoke rising from his pants. “We’re having a moment.”

Even though construction on Gideonland was in full swing, the child psychic himself wasn’t fully devoting much of his attention to it at the moment. Instead, he had devoted himself to his first and foremost goal: finding the other journal.

“Where are you, journal?” Gideon muttered petulantly to himself as he started digging another hole next to the countless empty ones he had made on the fringes of the property. “Where are you!?”

“Boy, I hate to interrupt you,” Bud cut in as he approached his son. “But you have some guests.”

“What?” Gideon scowled, glancing over to the fence to see Dipper, Mabel, Steven, and Connie gathered outside it.

“Give us the deed to the shack, Gideon!” Dipper demanded firmly. “Or else!”

The child psychic simply rolled his eyes at this, clearly not taking them seriously. “Oh, I’m just shakin’. Am I supposed to say ‘or else what’?”

“Yes, you are supposed to say that!” Mabel exclaimed before calling to the hidden army in the nearby woods. “Now!”

At this command, the kids cleared out of the way as the crowd suddenly began to rumble before a vast force of gnomes broke out from the forest, riding atop various woodland creatures as they easily broke through the fence. Gideon let out an alarmed gasp at this, especially as still more gnomes appeared on the roof of the shack, all of them organized into a deadly force when combined. Their surprisingly pointy hats were all aimed right at the child psychic, who was cornered and unable to escape as the kids approached him.

“Nice work, you guys!” Steven congratulated the gnomes brightly, rewarding the ones near him with some chips he had brought. “You all did great! It just goes to show yet again that teamwork always works!”

“Where’d you hear that one from?” Connie asked with a small laugh.

“I made it up!”

“It’s over, Gideon,” Dipper said with hardened resolve. “You’re surrounded by an unstoppable
gnome army. Now give us back out deed and get off our property!”

“And let the marriage ceremony begin!” Jeff added enthusiastically as he sat atop his deer mount.

“Very well,” Gideon sighed in defeat, reaching into his suit, presumably for the deed. “I suppose this deed belongs to—” He cut himself off as he pulled a whistle out instead of the deed, blowing it loudly and quickly. At once, the gnomes all collapsed from their organized formations, the high-pitched noise irritating all of them all to the point of submission, much to the kids’ shared shock. “Ha! What do you know? It works on gnomes too!” Gideon chuckled as he blew the whistle once more.

“Stop!” Jeff pleaded desperately, bowing before the child psychic. “We’ll do anything! How can we serve you your majesty, the most beautiful girl we’ve ever seen?!”

“I am not a girl!” Gideon shouted harshly.

“Really? But your skin is so soft,” Jeff noted, rubbing the back of the child psychic’s hand. “Do you moisturize or…”

“Subdue them!” Gideon ordered, ripping his hand away before pointing to Dipper, Mabel, Steven, and Connie. The gnomes of course complied as they charged for the kids, easily outnumbering them and capturing them all. The child psychic laughed triumphantly as he watched his foes futilely struggle, but ultimately fail, to break free from the already firm hold the gnomes had on them. “I have to admit, kids, I am impressed by your creativity! How did you ever manage this little scheme?”

“Oh, we just bribed them,” Connie shrugged amidst trying to escape from the gnomes holding onto her and Steven together.

“Oh?” Gideon asked, turning his attention to her somewhat curiously. “And who might you be? I don’t recall ever seeing you runnin’ around with this lot before.”

Before Connie could really answer, Steven let out a startled gasp as he looked over at her and noticed a small, but still lightly bleeding cut on her cheek, most likely gotten from their scuffle against gnomes. “Oh no! Connie, you’re hurt!” he exclaimed worriedly. “Here, I can fix it! Just let me-” The young Gem cut himself off as he licked his hand and then pulled against the gnomes to try and reach Connie, only to be interrupted by Gideon’s appalled scoff.

“Oh, I understand what’s goin’ on here…” the child psychic mused with a dark, jealous scowl.

“Huh?” Steven frowned, confused.

“Don’t act like you don’t know, Universe!” Gideon shouted, suddenly furious. “It’s clear to see that you’re nothing but a two-timing, womanizing scoundrel!”

“…What?”

“Just look at yourself!” the child psychic went on. “Cheatin’ on poor Mabel right in front of her with this other girl! You oughta be ashamed of yourself. Just goes to show that she should’ve chosen me instead of you.”

“What?!” both Mabel and Connie asked in dumbfounded unison, having no idea what Gideon was on about at all.

“Cheating?” Steven shook his head, bewildered. “What are you talking about? I’m not with—”
“Oh, and don’t think I haven’t forgotten about that little stunt you tried to pull at my openin’ ceremony the other day!” Gideon continued, clearly incensed against the young Gem at this point. “You almost had me worried there for a moment, tryin’ to convince the townsfolk of the ‘truth’, but in the end, you should have known it was destined to fail. Face it, Universe; this town may like you, but they love widdle ol’ me.”

“Ugh, ok that’s enough!” Dipper exclaimed, more than annoyed and frustrated with the accusations Gideon was throwing at Steven. With newfound verve, he began struggling against the gnomes once more, even though their tiny hands had an iron-like grip. “Come on, let go!” he shouted, pulling against the gnomes and not even noticing the journal slip out of his vest until it fell to the ground. “Oh no!”

“No, could it be?!” Gideon gasped, surprised as he spotted the journal and hurried to claim it before Dipper could. “It is!” the child psychic grinned widely in excitement as he frantically flipped through the book. “Of course! It all makes sense!” Gideon smirked triumphantly at Dipper, who was trying harder than ever to break away from the gnomes now that the child psychic had his hands on the journal and was making sure to keep it just out of his reach. “The one place I’d never think to look! You had it the whole time! And to think I actually considered you a threat!”

“No!” Dipper protested fiercely, desperate to get the journal back in any way possible, even if it was a futile effort. “Give it back!”

“Every victory you had was because of your precious book!” Gideon mocked smugly, more than happy to have the coveted volume all to himself.

“Give it back, or I’ll-”

“Or you’ll what, boy?” Gideon interrupted challengingly, getting up close in Dipper’s face since there was little he could do to stop him. “You’ll what? Huh? Huh?! No muscles, no brains. Face it! You’re nothin’ without this!” he exclaimed, pointing to the journal before waving the group off, ordering the gnomes to carry them all away with another blow of his whistle. “Bye, bye forever, ya’ll!”

“No!” Dipper shouted in distress, reaching out for the journal one last time as the gnomes dragged them all away.

Gideon simply saw the group off with a triumphant, wicked smile, one that only grew as he glanced down at the new journal in his hands. “With them gone, there are only three more obstacles left in my way…” he mused deviously, smirking at the nearly finished statue behind him first, then to the Gem temple up on the hill. “But I’ll make easy work of them soon enough. First thing’s first…” With another cold chuckle, the child psychic headed for the shack, knowing that now, no one, absolutely no one would be able to stop him.

The gnomes finally let the kids go at the entrance to the woods, none of them bothering to stick around much longer now that the plan had completely fallen through. “Next time, do your own dirty work,” Jeff remarked to the kids rather crossly before leaving. “Come on, boys!” At this call, three squirrels ran to him and jumped into his pants right before he scampered off as well, leaving the kids alone and quite forlorn.

“Well, that’s it,” Dipper said with a defeated sigh as he took a seat on a nearby tree stump. “Guess the bus should be here soon.”

“What?” Mabel asked as Steven and Connie mirrored her surprise. “Dipper, don’t give up! You always have a plan!”
“Yeah!” Steven readily agreed. “Like the time you figured out how to stop that Gem monster when we were exploring the temple!”

“Or when you chased that Gremloblin we caught off before it could do anymore damage to the shack,” Connie added just as insistently.

“Don’t you guys get it?” Dipper asked somewhat harshly, far too upset to be consoled now. “The journal was what bailed us out both of those times, not me! That’s always what has a plan! Gideon was right. The only courageous or cool things I’ve ever done have been because of that journal. Without it… I can’t help us, or Stan, or anyone…”

Mabel, Steven, and Connie all exchanged a saddened glance upon hearing this, none of them really sure of what to say. In a way, Dipper was indeed right; the journal had saved them from countless situations in the past. Without its guidance and wisdom, they had nothing else to go off but themselves. And seeing as how badly that had just backfired, they weren’t really in the position to go and try it again.

“B-but… there’s gotta be something we can do…” Mabel murmured despondently, looking to her brother for answers he simply didn’t have.

Dipper could only meet his sister’s worried gaze with palpable despair. He didn’t even need to admit that he had all but given up, seeing as it was clear to them all. “What can we do?” he asked morosely, voicing the one question that none of them had an answer to. As much as none of them wanted to admit, there was little else they could do now. They were out of time, out of options, and out of hope. And most importantly and most tragically: out of summer.

All too quickly, sunset had come, and with it, the bus that was to take Dipper and Mabel back home to California. A large, yet sad group had joined Stan at the bus stop to see them off, including Steven, Connie, the Gems, Wendy, Candy, and Grenda. The round of farewells had been all too short and all too sad, with tears shed and apologies made for how short the twins’ time in town had been. Candy and Grenda had to hold onto each other for emotional support as Wendy gave the most reassuring, playful goodbye she could offer, though it was clear to tell it was just a safeguard to keep her from getting too upset. While Amethyst tried her best to seem aloof and bitter, she couldn’t very well look either of the twins in the eye without tearing up as Pearl was simply trying to hold her pressing sobs back as best as she could, with little luck. A stray tear even slipped out from under Garnet’s shades as she promised the twins that they would all meet again someday. It was a promise that Dipper and Mabel certainly wanted to believe, but one that they found a hard time holding onto at a moment like this.

But of course, their parting with Steven and Connie had been among the hardest of them all. The young Gem was an inconsolable weeping mess, unable to bear the thought of his still rather new friends departing so soon and on such a sad note. Connie was also quite upset, quiet tears in her eyes as she lamented the fact that she hadn’t had the chance to hang out with either of them more but voicing the desire to remain in touch with them even after they were gone. Still, they all knew it wouldn’t be the same. Whatever fun times or adventures they might have had were now nothing more than distant dreams that would never be. For as hard as they had tried to stay together, the Mystery Kids had been inevitably torn apart. And no one knew if they’d ever be able to come together again.

Stan’s farewell had been the shortest and definitely the most painful. The conman had embraced both of his nibblings tightly, holding back sobs as he avoided eye contact with either of them. After
all, how could he bear to meet their heartbroken, dejected glances now without being filled without even more regret over having to send them home like this in the first place. Stan knew this was all his fault, and the crushing weight of that guilt alone was enough to prompt him to shove the twins towards the bus with only a final word of goodbye.

It almost felt like the twins were entering another world entirely as they boarded the bus. Its empty leather seats and grimy exterior would be what was to usher them out of this strange new world that they had gotten so used to and had come to love over the past several weeks alone. A world of magic and mystery, of dangerous monsters, mythical creatures, and living gemstones, of friends and family that they desperately didn’t want to leave. Which was why Dipper and Mabel took to the back seat of the bus as it began to pull away, with the hope that, somehow, being so far back would let them stay in Gravity Falls for even just a second longer.

Stan could only turn away morosely as the twins looked to him through the back window. One final apology escaped him as the bus began to drive off, one that he knew they probably wouldn’t hear, but that was fine. It was meant more for himself than them anyway. “Sorry, kids,” he muttered brokenly, a single tear finally slipping down his cheek, even if none of the others saw it. “It’s for the best….”

The farewell party remained together and watching as the bus rattled down the road that led out of town, all of them wanting to get their last glimpses of it for as long as they were able. Steven choked out another sob as he leaned his head against Garnet’s leg, holding tightly onto Connie’s hand for support as she also broke down crying. The Gem leader placed a consoling hand on her young charge’s back while Pearl steadied Connie with a hand on her shoulder. In the end though, none of the Gems were really able to keep it together either; after all, for as strange and out of their usual habits as it was, they had truly grown attached to the twins almost as much as Steven had. And having to watch them go, especially under such circumstances, filled them with a sort of helplessness and despair that none of them really knew how to reconcile. But even so, they had to; for Steven’s sake.

Much like the group still at the bus stop, Dipper and Mabel continued to watch from the back window of the bus as the familiar sights of Gravity Falls passed by them far too quickly for their liking. Mabel shed silent tears as she leaned her head against her brother’s shoulder, needing whatever steadying support he could offer her right now. Dipper was nearly to the point of tears himself, but he forced them back, trying his hardest to be strong in all this for Mabel. Still, he couldn’t really hold back a miserable sigh, especially as the outskirts of town came into view. “I can’t believe this is happening…” he said dejectedly, wishing that this was all just a horrible nightmare but knowing that it was anything but.

If anything, it all became more real and more heartbreaking as the bus continued into the shadowy uncertainty of the hills ahead, rolling past a sign that only read “Now leaving Gravity Falls”.

Gideon snickered in treacherous triumph as he burst into the shack, his new journal in tow. The child psychic was beside himself with excitement over this find, one that would certainly entail him with everything he could ever desire. “I’ve got it! I finally got it!” he proclaimed as he rushed into the living room. “Get out!” he brusquely ordered his parents, who didn’t hesitate to follow his command and run out of the room.

“It’s finally mine!” Gideon exclaimed, running up to the table where journal 2 sat. “At last, I have journal number-” He abruptly cut himself as he set the new journal down, expecting to find a 1 on its over but instead seeing a 3. “Three?! There are three of them?!” Frazzled, the child psychic
quickly reorganized the two journals, distraught that there was still one missing from the collection. “But where is journal number one!? I must have all three for the power to be unlocked! But where could it-” Gideon interrupted himself once more as he gasped in furious realization. “Dipper! He must know where it is! He gave me the third one and kept the first for himself!” Absolutely infuriated by this thought, the child psychic let out an unhinged scream of frustration, ripping out some of his hair in the process. “I can’t let him leave Gravity Falls!”

Wasting no time, Gideon grabbed the second and third journals and rushed outside, standing before the now-completed statue of himself. “You there!” he called up to McGucket, who had done nearly all of the work on it. “Is it ready?!?”

“Heh, only one way to find out!” McGucket laughed, pulling the lever on top of the statue, or rather, robot. The robot’s vacant eyes began to glow brightly as the advanced machinery inside of it roared to life, sure fire signs that it was indeed working.

While Gideon had intended for his robot to be used against the Gems with the intent of destroying them all first, he knew that this would be a more than a suitable test run for it. Knowing he had not a moment to lose, the child psychic rushed into the robot, putting his specially-designed motion sensor suit on as he rode the lift up to the chassis in its head. As it was designed to, the robot mimicked Gideon’s forceful punch exactly as he did it, shoving the Gideonland statue it was holding into the ground. The child psychic grinned darkly as he guided his robot into action, its maiden voyage already underway as it started out towards the path that led out of town.

“I’ve got a good feeling ‘bout that kid!” McGucket quipped obliviously as Gideon left to put the robot he had built to use for untold destruction.

The ride back to the temple had been a silent and sad one. Steven, Connie, the Gems, and Stan really had nothing to say in wake of seeing Dipper and Mabel off, but one thing was immediately clear: they all easily missed the twins already. As soon as they had all gotten back, the Gems had retreated into the temple for a while, all of them needing at least a little time to themselves. Likewise, Steven and Connie had taken to sitting out on the porch together, hoping that the gentle calm of the summer evening could offer them some form of solace in such hopeless times. Stan, on the other hand, had gone inside and planted himself before the TV, unsure of what else to really do with himself now that the twins were gone.

“Well, Stan, this is it,” the conman lamented to himself, his head in his hands. “Rock bottom. No friends, no family, stuck watching infomercials for whatever that is…”

“Are you sick of piles of owls constantly blocking your driveway?” the ad on TV blared obnoxiously. “Well then you gotta get Owl Trowel!”

Stan let out a tired sigh as he turned his attention to the Gideon pin sitting on the bed next to him before he picked it up. “How’d you do it, kid?” he asked the pin, confounded. “Why are you always one step ahead? Maybe he really is a psychic after-” The conman was suddenly cut off as his hearing aid let out another high-pitched, painful whine. “Ah! My hearing aid! What keeps causing that?!?” Stan groaned in frustration as he glared at the pin in his hands, his eyes going wide with the sudden realization he had upon drawing it closer to his ear and listening as his hearing aid screeched yet again. “Wait a minute! That’s it!” he proclaimed with newfound excitement. “I know Gideon’s weakness!”

“Stan,” Pearl said as she climbed onto the loft, her tone authoritative and firm. “If you’re going to
be staying here for a while, there’s a few ground rules we need to-"

The white Gem was very suddenly cut off as Stan ran up to her and embraced her without warning, unable to hold back his elation. Alarmed, Pearl froze up as the conman easily lifted her off of her feet in his tight, very chummy hug, one that lasted far too long for her liking. After what felt like unbearable ages, Stan finally released her with a laugh before running downstairs and out the door, leaving Pearl behind to cringe in what was nothing less than absolute revulsion.

Stan paid neither Steven nor Connie any mind as he rushed past them and down to his car, not even bothering to spare a word about where he might be going, even as the kids watched him go in apt confusion. “I wonder where he’s going in such a hurry,” Connie mused with a frown.

“Maybe he’s going to chase after that bus and bring Dipper and Mabel back…” Steven muttered with a dejected sigh as he slumped against the porch table.

“Aw, Steven,” Connie frowned empathetically, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. “I miss them too… But look on the bright side; at least we got to say goodbye to them before they left.”

“We shouldn’t have had to,” the young Gem remarked, somewhat frustrated. “They should have been able to stay here for the rest of the summer, Connie. It’s not fair!”

“No… I guess you’re right,” Connie glanced down sadly. “It’s really not.”

“We were all gonna have so much fun together!” Steven exclaimed, reclining back in his chair lazily. “There were still so many Gem missions and mystery hunts for us to go on! And now they’ll never happen… It’s over… They’re gone…”

“If only we could have done more to help them,” Connie sighed remorsefully. “Hanging out with you and Dipper and Mabel this summer has made me believe that pretty much anything is possible. That no challenge was too big or too dangerous to get through. But… I guess there are things that even we can’t overcome, no matter how hard we try…”

Steven simply nodded in glum agreement with this, putting his head against the table once more. However, the table itself didn’t remain still for too long as the entire temple seemed to rattle with an apparent earthquake.

“W-what was that?!?” Connie exclaimed, suddenly alarmed as she struggled to remain in her chair as the young Gem fell out of his.

“I don’t-” Steven began, though he was soon cut off as the ground rattled violently once more. As the sensation happened a third time, all three of the Gems abruptly rushed out of the house, just as alarmed as the pair on the porch was.

“Kids, what’s going on?!” Pearl asked frantically.

“Yeah, what’s with all the sha-aking?!” Amethyst tried to ask as another small earthquake knocked her off her feet.

Both Steven and Connie were ready to voice their own confusion, but Garnet’s sudden warning cry was more than enough to provide an answer to it. “Look!” she shouted, pointing down the hill. The group on the porch let out a unified gasp of shock as they watched a massive robot, at least 50 feet tall and built in Gideon’s image, begin to storm away from the shack, its pace getting quicker and more confident with each step it took. It did stop for a moment, however, and cast a glance up towards the temple, before it easily ripped a tree from the ground and threw it their way. Garnet quickly leapt into action and punched the tree cleanly in half before it could harm any of them, but
even so, the Gideon-bot continued on its way, surprisingly not even bothering to launch another attack at them.

“The statue Gideon build down at the shack… i-it’s a… giant robot?!” Steven asked, aghast.

“We can’t let Gideon take that thing into town!” Pearl exclaimed. “Who knows what kind of damage he might cause with something like that!”

“That’s not where he’s heading,” Garnet noted, watching the robot as it disappeared into the woods, though still towered over most of the trees. “It seems like he’s going for the cliffs.”

“But why?” Connie asked, bewildered.

“Hey, maybe he’s gonna do us a favor and toss that huge eyesore right off the cliff,” Amethyst remarked, scowling after the bot.

“No,” Garnet said with a sudden gasp of rare fear as her future vision provided her with the truth. “He’s going after Dipper and Mabel.”

“What?!” Pearl and Amethyst exclaimed in horrified unison, both of them quite concerned for the twins’ safety in light of this.

“Oh no!” Steven cried worriedly as Connie let out a shocked gasp. “Garnet, are you sure?”

“Positive,” the Gem leader said, her hands curling into tight, angry fists.

“W-well we have to stop him!” Connie exclaimed with both worry and resolve. “He could really hurt them with that thing!”

“You two go on ahead,” Garnet said to Steven and Connie. “We’ll catch up with you soon.”

The pair nodded firmly with this plan as Steven called for Lion, hoping the pink beast would be able to keep up with such a massive machine. “Ok, Lion!” the young Gem exclaimed barely as him and Connie mounted the pink beast. “Let’s go save Dipper and Mabel!”

Lion simply roared in response as he ran off with the pair in tow, leaving the Gems behind. “So, what are we gonna do?” Amethyst asked Garnet with a worried frown, knowing they had to act quickly and decisively if they wanted to save the twins in time.

The Gem leader didn’t answer right away as she instead held her hands out, both of the gemstones on her palms starting to glow brightly. Her expression was hardened as she reached out and took both of her teammates hands, that glow transferring to their gems as well as they both realized exactly what Garnet’s intentions were. It was a dire move, true, but seeing as how these were dire circumstances, then they were at liberty to act as direly as they pleased. After all, they figured that if Gideon intended on harming either of the twins, then all gloves were finally off. “We’re going to break our rule.”

The further out of town the bus got, the lower the sun seemed to sink over the distant hills, almost serving as a grim reminder to the twins that their vastly fleeting time left in Gravity Falls was disappearing as quickly as daylight itself was. With each familiar landmark they passed, from the iconic water tower to the very falls the town was named for, the reality that they were really leaving, really heading back to their average, unextraordinary lives in California, seemed to set in
more and more, as painful as it was. Still, Mabel could easily tell that Dipper was more upset about it all than even she was, seeing as how his crestfallen gaze had been fixated on the scenery rolling by out the window for most of the ride thus far. Mabel could certainly understand why he was so down though; after all, Dipper still largely believed that his failure to come up with a functional plan to defeat Gideon had been what had sealed their fate. It wasn’t true of course; it had been a combination of many unfortunate things that had led them to this point, but all the same, Mabel could hardly stand to see her brother so miserable, even if she wasn’t really feeling much better herself.

“Hey, Dipper?” she spoke up, finally breaking their longstanding silence. “Wanna play bus seat treasure hunt?”

“I’m not in the mood,” Dipper muttered glumly, not even bothering to glance over at her.

“Aw, come on!” Mabel encouraged with a soft smile as she pulled the nearest bus seat up and looked over what was stuck to it. “We got Canadian coins… gum that’s shaped like Ronald Reagan’s head… and ooh! Miscellaneous fluid stain?”

“Giant robot!” Dipper shouted, suddenly alarmed.

“Yeah, a giant robot,” Mabel agreed before realizing there was nothing under the seat that looked remotely like a robot. “Wait, what?”

“Look!” Dipper pointed out the back window, namely to the massive Gideon robot chasing after their bus in a heated pursuit.

“Halt!” Gideon shouted fiercely from inside his robot, more than determined to get what he was after. “I command you to halt!”

Aptly horrified by this unexpected and frankly terrifying turn of events, the twins let out a shared frightened scream, especially as the bus started to shake violently with every thunderous step the huge robot took towards them. Frantically, they both scrambled for the front of the bus, knowing that they could really handle something this dangerous by themselves.

“Mr. Bus driver!” Mabel cried, panicked. “There’s a giant Gideon-bot coming for us!”

“Oh hey, dudes!” Soos greeted as he turned to face the kids from the driver’s seat of the bus.

“Soos?!” Dipper and Mabel exclaimed in surprised unison, confused yet relieved to see the handyman.

“Don’t worry, guys,” Soos reassured, gripping the steering wheel. “I’ve been a part-time bus driver for at least 40 minutes now. One of these is probably a clutch…” Looking over the bus’ controls for a moment, the handyman pulled one of them, which fortunately enough happened to be the clutch. “Hang on, dudes!” he exclaimed as the bus lurched forward, picking up speed. The twins were thrown back a bit by this, but they managed to remain standing by clinging onto the bus seats, only to spot the Gideon-bot trying to grab the bus from behind. Fortunately, it missed as Soos swerved the bus to the side, but Gideon wasn’t about to give up that easily. Dipper and Mabel gasped in alarmed shock as the Gideon-bot easily leapt over the bus, landing several feet in front of it and blocking the road ahead.

“Soos, look out!” Mabel warned as the bus sped right for the robot’s open hands. Acting quickly, the handyman spun the wheel, veering off of the road entirely and onto the dirt path that led towards the floating cliffs. The group in the bus let out a collective cry of fear as they smashed
through a ‘road closed’ sign, but they could hardly think of stopping as the child psychic continued to chase after them relentlessly, even as they began speeding up the hill to the cliff.

“I don’t understand. He already won!” Dipper exclaimed to Mabel as they watched the Gideon-bot begin to scale the mountain after them. “What does he want from us?!”

“I got you in my sights!” Gideon yelled from inside his robot, his monitor honing in on the bus as he drew ever closer to it.

The twins’ rapidly growing fear only increased as the robot reached down to try and grab the bus once more. However, upon taking a furtive glance towards the front window, they were able to see that there was something much more immediate they needed to worry about. “Soos, cliff!” Dipper shouted waringly as they came up on the cliff’s edge at an alarming speed. The handyman horridly floored the breaks, but even that wasn’t enough to keep the bus from spinning wildly out of control. In a palpable panic, Dipper and Mabel clung onto each other as they braced themselves for whatever impact might happen, but fortunately, the bus grinded to a halt right before it could plummet off the edge. It’s back wheels, however, did slip off, leaving the bus teetering half on the cliff and unable to move and therefore, unable to escape the Gideon-bot as it ominously finished its approach.

With a mere tug on the roof of the bus, the robot was able to rip it off as if it were nothing. Soos gasped in surprise as he met the automaton’s angry, glowing gaze, but even so, he quickly began leafing through his bus emergency manual to find a solution. “Okay, what’s closest to our present situation?” the handyman asked, flipping through the book. “Raccoon in the engine or angry grandparent won’t leave bus? P-probably the second one.”

Upon seeing that neither Dipper nor Mabel were in the bus, the Gideon-bot whipped around to see that the twins had escaped without him noticing and had fled for the train bridge connecting the two cliffs. They still had no idea what Gideon was after or why he was so intent on chasing them down, but they figured they could worry about all of that later. For now, their only thought was escape, an attempt that was quickly ruined as they reached the other end of the bridge, which was barred off by a dead end. The twins’ shared instinct was to run back for the other end, but Gideon beat them to the punch as his robot landed squarely on the bridge before them, blocking any hope of escape.

“Tell me!” Gideon demanded through his robot as it towered over both twins. “Where is journal #1?!”

Dipper and Mabel exchanged a bewildered glance at this, neither of them having the faintest clue about what the child psychic was on about. “Journal #1?”

“Don’t play games with me, boy!” Gideon yelled furiously, controlling his robot to punch the cliff right above the twins. As bits of stone and shrapnel rained down upon them from the impact, Dipper made sure to block Mabel from the brunt of it, even though they both got their fair share of cuts and bruises from the flurry of rocks.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Dipper exclaimed, still standing between the robot and Mabel in an attempt to protect her. “You took the only journal I ever had! What do you even want with these journals anyway?!”

“That is none of your concern!” Gideon shouted brusquely. “And if you won’t tell me where that first journal is, then I’ll find it myself!” Still as incensed as ever, the child psychic commanded his robot to snatch both twins up in its massive hands before either of them could even think to escape.
While both Dipper and Mabel tried their hardest to remain together, Gideon ultimately separated them easily as he held them both in separate hands, even despite their struggling against the robot’s tight grip. But even still, Dipper was by far more concerned for Mabel’s wellbeing than his own, especially considering Gideon’s dangerous affections for her. “Let go of her!” he shouted fiercely, beating against the robot’s hand in an attempt to break free and aid Mabel, who was trying to pry herself out of the automaton’s other hand.

“Ha!” Gideon laughed smugly as the robot’s hand tightened its grip around Dipper. “You still think you’re some kind of hero?! You ain’t nothing!” With another triumphant laugh, the robot tossed Dipper aside roughly, though Gideon made sure to still cling onto Mabel tightly. Fortunately, Dipper landed on the fringes of the other cliff, though it was anything but a gentle or smooth one. He hit the ground hard, sliding back until his head struck a rock, abruptly stopping him. A strong burst of pain and shock rattled his entire body as he blacked out completely for a moment or two. When he was able to sit up, he did so slowly and sluggishly as he realized he was sporting a bloody nose, aching back, possibly a concussion, and still countless other minor injuries from the landing that he likely wasn’t even fully aware of yet. Still, he was hardly distracted by any of that for too long, especially as he noticing the Gideon-bot start to carry Mabel away.

“Once I find that final journal, I’ll rule this town with you as my queen!” Gideon proclaimed to Mabel victoriously. “And I think I’ll begin my reign with shatterin’ three certain pesky Gems and their annoyin’ little prodigy!”

Mabel let out a fearful gasp upon hearing this, concern filling her for not only herself, but for Steven, the Gems, and her brother as well. “Dipper!” she cried desperately, flutily trying to pull herself out of the robot’s grip. “Help me!”

Upon hearing his sister’s panicked cries, Dipper got to his feet, nearly tripping from unsteadiness as he ran to the edge of the cliff but making it there nonetheless. Of course, it was only as he stood at the edge that he realized he had absolutely no idea what to do. As hurt and as weak as he was, he couldn’t possibly hope to rescue Mabel and defeat Gideon with just his bare hands. And really, he had no other options left in his arsenal. In fact, the only thing Dipper could really think of as he stood at the edge of the cliff, watching Gideon carry Mabel away as she still cried out of help he couldn’t give her were the child psychic’s own spiteful words, words that cut him deeper now more than ever before: “Face it, kid. You’re nothin’ without that journal. How are you gonna fight then? No muscles, no brains. What are you gonna do, huh? What are you gonna do?”

Dipper froze, his breathing hitching as he took a stumbling step back towards the surrounding woods as he realized there was only one crushing answer to this question: nothing. There was nothing he could do to put an end to this, to rescue his sister or his friends, to save the day and come out on top. It would be pointless and dangerous, likely even deadly to so much as try. After all, he was just one kid, a kid who had gotten lucky by discovering a special journal in the woods, and now even that was gone. And without it, what was really special about him after all? He didn’t have Mabel’s drive and creativity, or Steven’s empathy or powers. Gideon was right: all he had was nothing. He couldn’t get the shack or the journal back. He couldn’t stop Gideon from carrying out his sinister plans. He couldn’t even save his own sister. He couldn’t—he just couldn’t.

But just because couldn’t do it, didn’t mean he couldn’t try.

Acting on a burst of sudden courage, impulse, and desperation alone, Dipper quickly turned and started bolting towards the edge of the cliff once more, running for it as fast as his legs could carry him. He barely had a plan, and what little plan he did have could very well end up getting him killed, but he didn’t care. He couldn’t care now. Because Gideon had his sister and had threatened his friends and if there was one thing Dipper wasn’t going to let him get away with, it was that.
And so, not bothering to stop for even an instant lest his rush of adrenaline and reckless bravery fade away, Dipper jumped off the edge of the cliff as high and as hard as he could, propelling himself towards the Gideon-bot with a determined shout. The robot turned, surprised as Gideon heard this, but the child psychic could do little as Dipper crashed into one of the automaton’s eyes headfirst. Though he likely sustained several more injuries in the process, he cared for none of them at the moment, especially as he rammed into Gideon, brutally tackling him to the ground. As a result, the robot stumbled backwards on the bridge, much to Mabel’s alarm, especially as the two boys began fighting inside its control chassis.

“Let go of my sister!” Dipper demanded harshly, holding Gideon down and landing a surprisingly strong punch, one that send the robot’s head reeling.

“Never!” Gideon shouted back, pushing Dipper down and throwing a hard blow of his own. “I finally won this time!”

The brawl continued on as they both exchanged a back and forth of punches, slaps, and kicks. Of course, all the while, the robot kept its tight hold on Mabel, even despite her continued attempts to escape it so she could possibly climb up and aid her brother in this fight. Still, as the duel went on and the robot teetered back and forth on the bridge from it, Steven and Connie finally arrived on the scene riding Lion, who came to a stop at the edge of the other cliff beside the bus and Soos.

“Whoa!” both kids exclaimed in bewildered unison as they watched the Gideon-bot stumble about.

“What’s going on?” Connie asked Soos, aptly concerned.

“Dude, I’m gonna level with you and say I have like, no idea,” the handyman admitted with a shrug.

“Steven! Connie!” Mabel exclaimed with surprise as she spotted them from her spot in the robot’s fist.

“Mabel!” Steven cried fearfully. “Don’t worry! We’ll save you!”

“Wait, where’s Dipper?!” Connie asked, glancing around for him and not seeing him anywhere.

“He’s-” Mabel was cut off as the robot reeled backwards once more in tandem with Dipper throwing another punch Gideon’s way. The child psychic was quick to retaliate with a hard and fast swipe that struck Dipper cleanly in the jaw, leaving quite a heavy bruise. Still, despite the pain, he hardly gave up as Gideon went in for another blow, one that he managed to catch with his open palm just in time. He was more than prepared to send it flying right back in the child psychic’s face, but before he could, a sudden heavy rumbling from outside abruptly interrupted the fight.

“Huh? What’s-” Steven’s confusion was cut off as him and Connie both turned to see a massive figure running their way, one that was easily as tall as the Gideon-bot, if not even larger. She couldn’t be described as anything else but a giant woman, with vibrant magenta skin, dark blue shades, thick mane of mint-green hair, and six long, powerful arms. All six of her hands were curled into tight fists as she arrived on the cliff-side, towering over everyone as all of the kids gaped up at her in absolute dumbfounded shock.

“GIDEON!” the giant woman roared fiercely, her voice deep and powerful as it came out of both her regular mouth, as well as the second, much more monstrous mouth underneath it. The ongoing brawl inside the robot had all but come to a grinding halt at the arrival of this intimidating being, especially as both Dipper and Gideon stared at her, confounded.
“W-who is that?!” Dipper asked, alarmed and slightly frightened by the woman’s imposing presence.

“No…” Gideon muttered, his jaw dropping in shock as he completely forgot about the ongoing fight. After all, he recognized this ferocious being right out of the pages detailing Gem fusions he had poured over countless times in journal 2. “It can’t be…. It’s-”

“Alexandrite!” Steven gasped in realization, still sitting atop Lion as he realized that this was indeed the legendary fusion of all four of his guardians. It only made sense, seeing as how she bore all four of their gemstones, as well as their shared resolve to protect those they commonly cared about.

With another bold shout, Alexandrite jumped down onto the bridge to square off against the Gideon-bot face-to-face. “Let them go!” she shouted firmly, her infuriated glare clear even despite her shades. “NOW!”

The child psychic’s stunned expression soon turned into a dark smirk, especially as he roughly shoved Dipper aside so he could focus on the fusion before him. “Well, well…” Gideon began, an air of knowing arrogance in his tone. “If it isn’t all three of the Crystal Gems, fused into one. Looks like I’ll get to kill two—or rather, several—birds with one stone! Are you ladies itchin’ for a fight? Well I’ll be more than happy to oblige!”

Without another word, the Gideon-bot threw the first punch, one that caught Alexandrite off guard as the blow sent her stumbling backwards. Still, the massive fusion was resilient as she quickly regathered her bearings and charged at the robot, barreling into it and using her second set of arms to push it back into the other cliff in an impressive show of strength. The robot attempted to fight back by swinging its fists out at Alexandrite, but she was quick to catch them both with her uppermost arms, while one of her lower fists landed a brutal uppercut. She made sure that her strike stayed far away from Mabel, but even so, both Gideon and Dipper were sent flying upwards in the chassis by the blow, only to plummet right back down immediately.

“Yeah! Go, Alexandrite!” Steven cheered, still watching this intense fight from the sidelines.

“This is seriously the coolest thing I’ve ever seen,” Connie noted, her eyes wide as the struggle continued.

“Tell me about it, dude,” Soos agreed, just as awestruck.

As soon as Gideon had regathered his bearings from Alexandrite’s last attack, he regained control of his robot enough to wrench its fists out of her grip. Though the fusion tried to rescue Mabel from the automaton’s grip first, she wasn’t quick enough to do so before the robot pulled her away. Frustrated by how he had underestimated Alexandrite’s great strength, the child psychic pushed her away and prepared to go in from another angle. However, in doing so, he had made one fatal mistake: forgetting about his other opponent.

Right as Gideon tried throwing another broad punch, Dipper rushed for him and tackled him to the floor, something that nearly sent the robot tumbling off the bridge entirely, though it somehow managed to remain standing. Alexandrite paused in confusion for a moment as she watched the robot’s head spin, not knowing that inside, Dipper was throwing punch after punch Gideon’s way, simply in an attempt to knock him out at this point. Yet even so, the child psychic had a surprising amount of endurance, especially as he harshly shoved him off with a brutal kick to the chest. Dipper was sent rolling sideways from the blow, and even though he wanted to get back up and keep fighting, his earlier head injury was finally starting to catch up with him, his vision tunneling and his limbs shaking to the point that he could barely keep himself up on all fours without passing...
out.

“Ha! That’s right! Just stay already down, boy!” Gideon remarked with a mocking grin, adding insult to injury as he stood over Dipper triumphantly. Of course, the child psychic had to make matters even worse by giving his opponent an unfair kick to the stomach, finally sending Dipper collapsing to the floor, semi-conscious and in even more pain than before. “Maybe that’ll finally teach ya. Now to back to the main event…”

Gideon smirked as he looked to out of the robot’s eyes to Alexandrite once more, the fusion rushing to come in with another blow. The robot cleanly blocked it though, seeing as Gideon no longer had any distractions to deter him, and instead went for a low blow to the fusion’s gut, one that sent her reeling backwards with a pained grunt. However, as the robot charged at her, Alexandrite took a different approach this time. Making use of her many arms, the fusion summoned Pearl’s spear from the stone on her forehead and Amethyst’s whip from the gem on her chest, before bringing them both together to create Opal’s longbow in a flash of light. The Gideon-bot stopped in its tracks at this, especially as Alexandrite summoned an arrow out of nothing and pulled it back on the bowstring, taking aim right for the robot’s head.

“It’s time to end this…” the fusion growled, her hair blowing in the wind that the energy of the arrow was creating. She was more than ready to send it flying in what would be an attack the robot certainly wouldn’t be able to fend off, but she was stopped mere seconds before she let the arrow loose.

“Wait! Stop!” Mabel shouted to Alexandrite, still held within the robot’s firm grip, her expression aptly panicked. “You can’t do that! Dipper’s in there!”

A sharp gasp escaped Alexandrite as she quickly shifted her aim right as the arrow flew out of her grasp. Fortunately, it soared right past the robot’s head, narrowly missing it as it instead crashed into the woods on the other cliff, burning out instantly. Still, Gideon quickly thought of a way to take advantage of the fusion’s newfound weakness as the projectile rushed by, especially as he looked to Dipper, still lying listlessly on the floor nearby.

“Looks like you might actually be useful after all, boy,” Gideon smirked deviously, grabbing Dipper by the wrist and hoisting him up off the ground. As much as he wanted to fight back against the child psychic, he really wasn’t in any position to do so, seeing as how his head was pounding, he could hardly breathe, and his limbs refused to cooperate with him.

“Listen here, Crystal Gems!” Gideon shouted boldly. “Because here’s how things are gonna go: either you three stand down, unfuse and surrender, admit defeat, and leave town forever, or… I’ll throw Dipper Pines out of this robot and off this bridge into the chasm below! Now, which’ll it be?”

“What?!” Mabel gasped, immediately horrified upon hearing this threat. “No! Dipper!” Fearful tears were already welling up in her eyes as she tried harder than ever to pull herself out of the robot’s hand, desperate to rush to her brother’s rescue before it was too late. After all, the thought of losing him, especially after he had so fearlessly and selflessly tried to rescue her, was far more than she could bear.

Likewise, Steven and Connie shared a shocked gasp at the fact that Gideon would go so far as to much such a violent threat. But as afraid as they were, the young Gem steeled his resolve as a sudden plan came to him, one that could hopefully save Dipper if Gideon really did go through his treacherous ultimatum. Acting quickly, Steven leaned down and whispered into Lion’s ear, wanting to keep their exit as discreet as possible so the child psychic wouldn’t notice. The pink beast nodded in gruff response before spinning around and running off, away from the edge of the
Alexandrite herself froze as Gideon issued this demand, her longbow dissipating into thin air as the three Gems that she was composed of tried to assess the risky situation they now found themselves in and find a solution to it. However, all three of them completely disagreed internally about what to do; Amethyst wanted to just outright attack the robot head on in the hopes that they could retrieve Dipper before Gideon threw him out of it, Pearl wanted to devise a more tactical, safer, less dangerous plan, while Garnet was torn between both methods. And in the end, their indecisiveness gave way to instability.

The fusion let out a startled gasp as her form began to glow and waver, a sign that she was startling to fall apart as the Gems fell out of sync with each other. “No!” she shouted to herself, her voice breaking apart into that of all three Gems instead of one. “Cooperate!”

Gideon’s sly smirk deepened as he watched his plan work perfectly, especially as Alexandrite seemed to grow more and more unstable by the second. Dipper, on the other hand, could only watch with growing dismay as the previously undaunted fusion began to crumble apart all for his sake. He figured that if the Gems did end up surrendering and giving into the child psychic, he wouldn’t just let them leave alive and unharmed. Gideon had far too much disdain and ill intent towards them to let things end that easily. Certainly, he would take advantage of the moment and shatter them, or at least try to, and likely go after Steven and Connie in the process too. And as soon as he realized all this, Dipper knew that he couldn’t let all of that potential harm come to any of them because of him.

Which was why if the Gems couldn’t save him, he would just have to save himself.

Forcing himself to move despite the pain still pounding throughout his body, Dipper abruptly forced himself to stand correctly, wrenching his arm out of Gideon’s grip before grabbing both of the child psychic’s wrists and pulling them behind his back. “Hey!” Gideon cried in angry protest, struggling to break free, though this time, Dipper refused to let up whatsoever. “How dare you—”

“You guys!” Dipper interrupted, shouting to Alexandrite through the child psychic’s attached mic. “Hit him! Now!”

Startled yet somewhat relieved upon hearing this command, the Gems were quick to regain their composure and harmony, even if they knew they would only be able to hold it together for a moment more at best. But still, a moment was all they really needed. With newfound righteous fury, Alexandrite swung her fist out hard and heavy, decking the Gideon-bot squarely in the gut. As the robot stumbled backwards from the blow, Dipper remained on the offensive, pulling both himself and Gideon to the right hard, sending them both plowing to the floor. Offset by this sudden shift of weight, the robot also tilted right, until one of its feet slipped off the bridge entirely. Unable to catch itself, the entire automaton soon followed as it began to tip off the side of the bridge and start the long plummet down below. Alexandrite gasped in alarm as she saw this, and while she quickly reached her hand out in an attempt to catch the robot, or at least either of the twins, they were all too far out of her reach before she could.

As the bot descended into the valley below at a frightening speed, its grip on Mabel finally loosened, though she still clung onto its hand for a moment with a terrified scream. Likewise, Dipper let out his own frightened cry as he fell out of the robot’s chassis through the very eye he had busted in through. The twins’ wide-eyed, petrified gazes met for a moment before they crashed into each other mid-air, instantly embracing each other for dear life. Fortunately though, Mabel had a plan.

Acting quickly, she reached into her sweater and grabbed her grappling hook. Dipper didn’t even
have time to ask before Mabel fired it straight upward, hoping that it would latch onto the bridge up above. Unfortunately, its reach was just a few feet shy of it, much to the twins’ shared dismay and dread as the hook began dropping back towards them. And yet, before their hopes at survival were crushed completely, a flash of light burst out of thin air above them, a portal forming and a familiar pink beast flying out of it.

“Lion, catch it!” Steven commanded, pointing to the falling hook. Lion did just that, grasping the rope right below the hook tightly in his maw. With a heavy tug of his head, the pink beast pulled the rest of the rope, and the twins clinging onto it, upwards, the force of which tossing them both up as Lion fell. With perfect timing and a good bit of luck, Dipper and Mabel somehow ended up landing squarely on Lion’s back behind Steven and Connie, right before the pink beast roared another portal into existence and leapt through it.

As the Gideon-bot crashed into the valley, an explosion erupted from it that was loud and powerful enough to catch the attention of nearly everyone in Gravity Falls. Townsfolk stopped dead in their tracks as the bright blue burst rattled the area, raising curiosity and worry as it broke through the otherwise calm of the evening. At the crash site itself, scattered pieces of the robot lay smoldering amidst burnt and knocked down trees, hardly a piece of the automaton left functional as sparks and small flames burst from it. Amidst these ruins, Lion’s portal emerged, and out of it sped the pink beast, still carrying the kids, all of whom, were at last safe and sound.

“Grappling hook!” Mabel cheered triumphantly, holding the hook that had saved her and Dipper up with a broad smile, one that the others all shared. “Told you it would come in handy!”

“You did great too, Lion,” Steven complimented the pink beast, who collapsed to the ground in exhaustion as soon as they all got off of him. “Take all the time you need to rest.”

“Mabel, that was amazing!” Dipper exclaimed, aptly impressed that Mabel’s grappling hook had actually come to their rescue after all.

“Not as amazing as you defeating that robot!” Mabel laughed warmly, though her smile soon faded a bit as she took in just how beaten up her brother really was. Not only were his clothes quite tattered from the brawl, but he sported far too many various cuts and bruises to count, some much bigger than others. His left arm hung somewhat limply at his side, his jaw was somewhat swollen, and his nose was still lightly bleeding a little. And given that was only what she could see on the outside, Mabel figured she had every reason to worry for her brother’s less than stellar condition. “But uh… are you ok, bro-bro? You look… not great.”

“Well… I’m not gonna lie. Pretty much everything hurts,” Dipper admitted, placing a gentle hand against his still very-much aching head. “In fact, I’m pretty sure I probably have a concussion and might need stitches in a few places. But I’m sure it’s nothing Steven and his, uh, healing spit can’t fix, right?”

An excited gasp escaped Steven upon hearing this suggestion, stars in his eyes as he gave Dipper an elated hug. “Of course, Dipper! I’d be more than happy to heal you up!”

“Oh, ow!” Dipper cried, cringing at the tightness of the young Gem’s embrace and how it aggravated his injuries. “Like I said, everything still hurts, Steven! You haven’t healed me yet!”

“Oh, sorry!” Steven quickly released him, blushing in embarrassment as Mabel and Connie laughed in shared amusement.

“Oh, there they are!” Pearl exclaimed as her, Garnet, and Amethyst rushed onto the scene, their expression awash in worry. Apparently, they had unfused between the twins’ fall from the bridge.
and now, though it did make sense, seeing as how Alexandrite had been steadily falling apart even before then. “Oh, kids!” she cried, throwing her arms around all of them in a relieved embrace. “We’re so glad you’re all alright!”

“Well, mostly alright,” Connie remarked, sending a small, sympathetic smirk Dipper’s way.

“Man, that thing went down hard, huh?” Amethyst asked, looking over the remains of the Gideon-bot. “We totally owned that slimy punk and his dumb robot!”

“We weren’t completely responsible for that…” Garnet said, picking up journal 3 as it lay on the ground nearby hand handing it to Dipper with a small, proud grin. “Excellent work, Dipper. I believe this belongs to you.”

“Thanks.” Dipper accepted the book back with a grateful smile. Simply having its familiar, brittle leather surface in his hands again filled him with unspeakable relief, especially since he had thought he had lost it forever this time.

“You guys were so cool!” Mabel exclaimed to the Gems brightly. “Or I guess I should say, Alexandrite was so cool! She was like ‘bam’! And ‘woosh’! And ‘punch’! And all sorts of other awesome actiony words!”

The Gems shared a laugh over this, one that was unfortunately short lived as others began to congregate towards the crash site. Curious over what had happened, a large crowd of townsfolk approached the wreckage of the robot, all of them murmuring in confusion over the shocking sight amongst themselves.

“Is this the thing that exploded?”

“What’s going on?”

“Look! It’s over here!”

“Hey, those magical women are here! Did they have something to do with this?”

As this large group began to gather, Gideon himself slowly climbed out of what was left of his robot, letting out a sullen groan as he ripped the remains of his motion-sensor suit off. Of course, as soon as the townspeople spotted them, they completely forgot about the Gems and the kids standing nearby and devoted their attention instead to the beloved child psychic.

“Gideon!” Deputy Durland cried with concern as him and Blubbs rushed to retrieve Gideon from the robot’s ruins. “Oh, good heavens! What on earth happened here?!)

“I-it was the Pines twins!” Gideon exclaimed, immediately seeking to place the blame on his enemies. “They tried to attack me and blow up my statue with dynamite! And then those Crystal Gems pushed it off the bridge and nearly killed me! Arrest ‘em! Arrest ‘em all!”

“What?!” the twins gasped in alarm over this bold claim.

“Officers, he’s lying!” Dipper argued, especially as the cops pulled out a pair of handcuffs.

“He certainly is!” Pearl agreed firmly. “You can’t possibly believe such a preposterous claim. We were trying to save the kids, the entire town, for crying out loud!”

“Pearl’s right!” Steven entreated earnestly, addressing the crowd as a whole. “I mean, just think about how many times the Gems have saved Gravity Falls before! L-like the time we brought the
waterfall back when it was stolen! Remember that?"

A mumble of agreement rippled through the crowd upon hearing this, seeing as how none of them could really argue with the young Gem in that the Crystal Gems did serve to protect them and the town. But even so, Gideon wasn’t about to let victory slip through his fingers so easily.

“W-well, even if that *is* true, that doesn’t change the fact that they all destroyed my property!” the child psychic protested hotly. “I demand you arrest them! Every last one of them, at once!”

While the Gems may have had previous service on their side, the towns’ loyalty and devotion to Gideon won out in the end as the cops both shrugged turned back to the group, handcuffs still in hand.

“Aw, what? Come on, you can’t be serious!” Amethyst exclaimed, dismayed. “We didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Sorry, folks, but we trust Gideon,” Blubbs remarked, preparing to make the multiple arrests. “And nothing short of a miracle would ever change our-”

The sound of loudly screeching tires cut the sheriff of as a familiar car veered off the nearby road and onto the scene, ramming into the side of the cop car and sending it rolling sideways. Stan jumped out of it, still clad in his boxers, undershirt, and slippers as he instantly and excitedly caught everyone’s attention. “Wait! Wait! Stop everything! I’ve got somethin’ to say!”

“Ugh, not this guy again,” Blubbs groaned in annoyance along with the rest of the crowd.

“Just wait!” Stan exclaimed, running to stand in front of the ruined robot. “So, you all think Gideon is so perfect and honest, right? ‘Oh, I could never tell a lie! I’m Gideon!’” The conman mocked the child psychic, cute poses and all.

“Heh, nice one, Stan,” Amethyst chuckled at the spot on impression.

“He’s more honest than you!” Blubbs countered, sending Stan a suspicious glance.

“Yeah! And he’s psychic too!” Durland added.

“Oh really? How’s *this* for psychic?!” Stan brutally kicked a panel off of the robot away. “Take a good look!”

A collective gasp escaped from the crowd as they noticed the wide array of screens arranged inside the bot, all of them showing what seemed to be surveillance feeds of the people of Gravity Falls.

“Wait a minute, is that *me*?!” Lazy Susan exclaimed, spotting a screen showing her pouring coffee into an omelet to make her famous coffee omelet.

“Hey, look! That’s me!” Mr. Smiley shouted, aghast as he saw a video depicting him signing a notice to add several new games to Funland Arcade.

“And me!” Toby cried, pointing to the screen where he was showing his disgusting birthmark to a doctor.

The other townsfolk were all quick to spot themselves in the countless other screens, alarmed and horrified that they were being watched and recorded without their consent like this. “That’s right! These pins were hidden cameras!” Stan said firmly, holding a Lil’ Gideon pin up for them all to see. “And my hearing aid was picking up the feedback! Who’s the fraud now?” With a satisfied
grin, the conman crushed the pin in his hand, revealing the tiny camera hidden inside. Aptly infuriated with the child psychic for this intrusion on their personal lives, the townfolk all did the same, tossing their Gideon pins to the ground in shared disgust as they turned to the stunned child psychic for answers.

“Gideon… we gave you our trust…” Durland said, deeply hurt.

“You LIED to us!” Manly Dan shouted, completely enraged.

“P-please!” Gideon pleaded, desperate to win back the favor he was very quickly losing. “I— It’s not what it looks like! I—”

“Oh, its not?” Pearl cut in coyly, crossing her arms. “Because what it does look like is that not only were you blatantly spying on the people of Gravity Falls, but it also looks like you used a giant robot to chase down two defenseless, innocent children, nearly killing them both in the process, and then you proceeded to try and pin the blame on us for it. So, hm… I believe this certainly is exactly what it looks like. Wouldn’t you officers agree?”

Both Blubbs and Durland nodded in saddened agreement, but still, they looked to Tyler Cutebiker for the final word on the matter. “Tyler?”

Tyler sucked in a sob as he provided his famous catch phrase hesitantly and remorsefully. “Get ‘im…” he sighed, wiping away tears. “Get ‘im…”

“Lil’ Gideon, you’re under arrest for conspiracy, fraud, use of a giant, deadly robot, and breaking our hearts,” Blubbs said, his tone firm, yet morose. “Durland, the tiny handcuffs.”

The deputy held up the petite handcuffs before locking them around Gideon’s wrists and leading him away to the squad car. “Wha—no!” the child psychic cried in struggling protest. “Let go of me!”

Stan smirked broadly as he held the door to the cop car open for Gideon, though he did stop the child psychic short to shake him dry first. Various objects fell out of Gideon’s pockets, including a hatchet, a picture of Mabel, journal 2, and most importantly, the deed to the Mystery Shack, which was what the conman was more than happy to reclaim. “I believe this belongs to me,” Stan said with a proud grin, posing with the deed for the attending journalists’ cameras.

“No! No!” Gideon protested hotly, especially as he was shoved into the back of the cop car. “Watch the hair! You can’t do this to me! Y’all are sheep! You need me!” The child psychic continued to throw out his enraged threats, even as the cops began to drive him away to prison. “You’ll hear from my lawyers! I’ll be back! I swear it!”

“So what are the chances we’ll actually hear from again him anytime soon?” Amethyst asked Garnet with a sly smirk.

“Not likely,” Garnet replied, adjusting her shades with a confident grin.

“There you have it,” Shandra Jimenez reported as she stood before the Pines and the Gems, who had all gathered together to celebrate their shared triumph. Stan hoisted Mabel up onto his shoulders while leaning an arm on Dipper playfully, while Garnet perched Steven on her shoulders and Amethyst did the same for Connie. Even Lion fitted himself into the frame somehow, making things a bit crowded, though at such a joyous moment as this, no one really minded. “Local hero Stanford Pines has just exposed Lil’ Gideon as a fraud after the Crystal Gems took down his giant robot of doom. Is there anything any of you would like to say?”
The Pines family wasted no time in settling back into the shack, getting rid of everything Gideon had left behind first and foremost. All remnants of what would have been “Gideonland” were tossed out or destroyed courtesy of the Gems, who were quite thankful the temple house’s only occupant was Steven once more. And while the young Gem did already miss having the Pines as his roommates, him and Connie were more than happy to help them restore the Mystery Shack back to its former “glory”. The Gems even freely lent their aid in restoring the shack’s iconic sign, though even they could do nothing to keep the s in shack from falling off as it always did. Seeing as how Stan was now hailed as a town hero, business at the shack was booming, with people coming from far and wide to get autographs from the conman and eagerly take the museum tour. Soos and Wendy were both glad to return to their usual posts, especially the cashier, seeing as how it meant she could stay in town instead of being shipped off to her cousin’s logging camp. Likewise, the twins were overwhelmingly relieved to know that the remainder of their summer in Gravity Falls was safe and secure. There had been moments of doubt, moments where it had seemed like the future was uncertain and things wouldn’t turn out alright, but in the end, they had come out on top once again.

And now, things were even better than before.

In the rush of eventfulness following their victory, the twins had barely had any time to move themselves back into the attic. Steven and Connie had readily volunteered to help them unpack, eager to spend more time with the friends they had nearly lost, in more ways than one. Almost as soon as they had left the robot’s wreckage, Steven had made good on his promise to heal Dipper’s various injuries, much to the Gems’ pride and Stan’s confusion over how his nephew had sustained so many wounds in the first place. Of course, while the Gems provided the conman with a condensed version of what happened, he didn’t really believe it, finding the part concerning Alexandrite to be pretty far-fetched. Regardless, what had been a tumultuous day had ended happy and successful, and had led to the past few, still-ongoing happy days they had all gotten to experience. And hopefully, they would be just the first of many more.

The kids were in the midst of redecorating the attic, with Steven and Mabel gleefully putting up posters according at random while Dipper and Connie worked on organizing books exactly right. Their various conversations were interrupted however, as Stan knocked on the door, all three of the Gems gathered not too far behind him.

“Uh, you kiddos settling back in okay?” Stan asked the twins with a small, amicable grin.

“Yes!” Mabel quipped brightly. “All of my favorite moldy spots on the ceiling are still there! Even you, Daryl,” she smirked at a particular spot of mold on an upper support beam.

“W-we just came by to tell you kids how proud we are of all of you…” Pearl said with a warm smile. “You all were very brave in a situation that, to be perfectly honest, even had the three of us a little frightened at times…”
“Yeah, you dudes totally kicked butt!” Amethyst remarked, smirking. “Guess they call you four the Mystery Kids for a reason, huh?”

“Yeah, they do!” Steven exclaimed proudly. “Still, it seems… a little crazy how different everything seems now. Not bad different, but really good different, you know?”

“Oh, we know.” Garnet nodded with a solid smile that both Pearl and Amethyst shared and exchanged with Stan, who begrudgingly returned it. Indeed, seeing as how the conman had essentially saved them from certain arrest, the Gems had been sure to give credit where credit was due and thank the conman. And since then, even the kids noticed the marked improvement in how Stan and the Gems related to each other. While the conman and the purple Gem had always gotten along, Stan had started getting along better with Pearl and Garnet, through simple, mutual jokes, genuine compliments, and even signs of gratitude for what each party had done. Of course, things were completely peaceful between them; Stan and Pearl still had their fair share of disagreements that they were more than happy to bitingly argue about, but still. It was a change. And as far as the kids were concerned, a great one at that.

“Um, speaking of mysteries…” Dipper spoke up, his tone somewhat hesitant as Stan took a seat on the bed next to him. “Well… Me and Mabel have been talking and… I think there’s something we should finally tell you.” He paused, taking in a deep breath as he reached into his vest for the journal, hoping that Stan’s initial reaction to it would be much better than the Gems’ had. “This is a journal I found in the woods,” he began, handing the journal to the conman so he could pursue it for himself. “It talks about all of the crazy stuff that lives in Gravity Falls, including the Gems. Gideon nearly destroyed the whole town trying to find it. I don’t know what this means, or who wrote it. But after all we’ve been through, maybe it’s time you knew about it.”

Stan was silent for quite a while as he leafed through the journal, not really showing much of a reaction at all to its contents. When he finally did say something though, it was in the form of a question posed to the Gems. “So you three knew about this thing already, huh?”

“Well, we didn’t at first…” Pearl admitted with a frown. “In fact, when we did discover it, it came as… quite of a shock to us, seeing as there’s quite a bit in there about the three of us.”

“Yeah… we might have overreacted over it and tried to burn it,” Amethyst shrugged. “You know, like you do.”

The conman raised an eyebrow upon hearing this, but even still, his expression betrayed little emotion as he instead closed the book, taking in a deep breath before turning to his nephew. “I’m glad you showed me this, Dipper,” he said, his tone solemn. However, his manner only remained like that for a moment before he broke into a loud, obnoxious burst of laughter. “Now I know where you’ve been getting it all from! Spookums and monsters—this spooky book has been filling your head with crazy conspiracies!”

“Wha—but it’s all real!” Dipper protested, unable to believe that Stan would simply just laugh it all off like this.

“Dipper’s right, Mr. Pines,” Steven vouched. “We’ve seen a lot of the stuff in there this summer! Plus, everything in it about the Gems is true too! Right guys?”

The Gems all nodded in response to this, but even so, the conman continued chuckling over the journal. “Oh, yeah sure it is,” he remarked with a sarcastic smirk. “You kids gotta quit reading this fantasy nonsense for your own good. Although some of these would make great attractions!” He nodded to the page he was on, which featured the butternut squash with human face and emotions. “Can’t come up with this stuff! Mind if I borrow this for a while?”
“Wait, no!” Dipper exclaimed in sudden panic as Stan got up and started to leave, taking the journal with him. “Grunkle Stan!”

“‘Magic’ book,” Stan scoffed with another laugh, leaving the attic. “Ridiculous!”

“Stan, I need it!” Dipper cried, more than ready to chase his uncle down after the book before Mabel stopped him.

“Dipper, you don’t need that book!” she exclaimed with a smile. “Don’t you see? On your own, you defeated a giant robot with nothing but your bare hands! You’re a hero whether you’ve got that journal or not!”

“Mabel’s right,” Garnet added, her hands on her hips as she gave Dipper an affirming grin. “The courage and determination you showed in facing off against Gideon the other day was something that you couldn’t have found in the pages of that journal. That was entirely your own, Dipper. And that is something to be proud of.”

“Yeah!” Steven and Connie exclaimed in supporting unison.

“Definitely,” Pearl nodded with a warm smile.

“Totally, dude!” Amethyst remarked, chuckling.

Dipper couldn’t help but smile himself upon hearing all this encouragement, knowing that he hadn’t really thought of any of it like that. Indeed, he certainly had squared off against Gideon and against more than impossible odds, all without the journal in his hand. And yet, through it all, he had somehow not only managed to survive, as narrowly as he had, but had won the day at the end of it all, relying only on himself and little else. When it came right down to it, Gideon had been completely wrong. Dipper realized that he had so much more than nothing. He had drive, determination, zeal, and bravery, all of things that, when put together, were exactly as Garnet had said: something to be proud of.

“Whoa…” he muttered, somewhat bashful of the warm words everyone was offering him. “Thanks, guys… But, I still want the journal back though.”

“I’m sure you’ll get it back,” Mabel reassured with a wave of her hand. “What would a boring old man like Stan want with that book anyway?”

“Knowing Stan, he’ll probably end up using it as a door stopper,” Pearl remarked with a sardonic smirk.

“Or paperweight,” Garnet said, crossing her arms.

“Or he’ll try using it as a weapon during our next Revenge Trip,” Amethyst laughed. “Yo, speaking of trips… We were gonna go check out this cool old Gem tower later. You guys wanna come with?”

“Do we!” Steven exclaimed with a huge grin.

“Yeah we do!” Mabel proclaimed excitedly.

“Well then, come along,” Pearl laughed, amused by their shared zeal as she led the way out. “That tower’s not going to explore itself!”

The kids were all quick to follow the Gems out, all of them pumped for whatever magical
adventure they were about to embark on. Certainly, this would be another one of many magical, mysterious journeys they had been on and had yet to go on.

After all, they had plenty of summer left for more.

The kids’ mission with the Gems lasted well into the evening, which was something Stan was grateful for; after all, the last thing he needed now after everything that happened was for either of them to find out. He’d tell them about it, of course, one day, but it still wasn’t time yet. For now, he had to get to work.

The conman was inconspicuous as ever as he strode through the gift shop, pausing at the vending machine with a lantern in hand. After making sure no prying eyes were looking, he entered in the code he had committed to memory by now, standing back as they machine swung open to reveal a hidden doorway. Stan steeled his resolve, just as he always did when he descended the stairs into the vast, cavernous basement below, inputting yet another code on the elevator at the foot of the stairs. This had all become routine, perhaps even normal for the conman after nearly 30 years of taking the elevator down to the bottommost floor, where a complex, hidden laboratory awaited.

The lantern the conman was toting cast dim, crisp shadows across the various dials, buttons, and sensors lining either side of the lab as he passed by them. But Stan hardly paid any of the advanced machinery any mind. Instead, he went right for his usual spot at the desk towards the front of the room, where even more practically indecipherable buttons were positioned. Upon sitting down, the conman stoically opened the desk’s panel and pulled out the book that had served as his only guide for 30 years now: journal 1.

“After all these years…” Stan remarked, scarcely unable to believe it himself as he placed the first journal down before taking the other two out. In all honesty, he should have figured that Gideon had somehow gotten his hands on the second one, but to think that the third journal, the one that Rose Quartz herself had vowed to never let him find, had been discovered by his own nephew? It was something Stan was still reeling from. Nonetheless, he placed all three journals down on the table together, side by side, a complete set at long last. “Finally, I have them all…”

Knowing that there was still work to be done, the conman opened each journal to the proper page, each one revealing but a piece of a much larger, very complex blueprint. Upon propping them up together in the right order, they all revealed an algorithm lined with codes and equations, things that Stan had painstakingly worked to teach himself for years for this very purpose. Still using the journals as a guide, the conman punched in every button and switch exactly as they directed, a burst of sudden light flashing from the larger room right behind the glass once he was done.

“It’s working!” Stan exclaimed, amazed as he jumped to his feet. Without wasting a beat, he ran into the larger room, approaching the massive triangular structure in the middle of it with hurried footsteps. With as much force as he could muster, the conman pulled on the lever that stood before it, watching with anticipation and growing excitement as the triangular machine pulsed alive with electricity for the first time in over 30 years. The room was flooded with light as the machine turned on fully, a radiant white light emanating from its center, putting off an impressive amount of energy and force. Still, Stan stood before it proudly, his hands on his hips as he grinned broadly, basking in its bright, powerful, momentous glow. Because after all these years, everything he had ever worked for was finally about to pay off.

“Here we go.”
Chapter 31: Scary-oke

Chapter Summary

In which the government shows up, Stan and the Gems shrug stuff off, Dipper gets in way over his head, and the power of music saves the day

Chapter Notes

Ah, here we are at the outset of our fourth arc, already! Wow, time flies by super fast! But anyway, here's my take on Scary-oke, which I really hope you all enjoy since it was SO much fun to work on! (also arc 4 uses the Reverse Ceasar (+3) Cipher!)

Gravity Falls was as peaceful as ever under the cover of nighttime darkness, the stars hanging over the slumbering town in a moonless sky. While most of the townsfolk were fast asleep in these late hours of the night, this didn't exactly ring true for everyone. Specifically, Steven and Greg were still wide awake, nestled into the blanket fort the young Gem had constructed in the former rock star’s van as their ongoing monster movie marathon continued. Neither of them were paying too much attention to the clock however; after all, it had been quite a while since they had spent some quality father-son time together. And seeing as how things had been generally relaxed and quiet as of late, they decided that now would be as good a time as any to do so.
Steven let out a small gasp as the hero of the movie they were watching landed the finishing blow on the monster of the flick: a zombie. Greg couldn’t help but crack a small grin at how engrossed his son was with the film, even though it was quite old and rather cheesy. Still, the young Gem beamed in satisfaction as the protagonist embraced his love interest and kissed over their triumph as the credits began to roll.

“Oh man, that was the scariest movie we’ve watched tonight yet!” Steven exclaimed, propping himself up from his pillows a bit. “I wonder if real-life zombies would be as terrifying as that one.”

“Eh, probably not, kiddo,” Greg shrugged, smirking. “I mean, that zombie was pretty slow. The guys in the movie probably could’ve easily outran him if they had gone at more than a light jog.”

“Oh yeah? And how would you know?” Steven asked with a faux challenging chuckle. “Have you ever outran a zombie, Dad?”

“Can’t say that I have, Sto-ball,” the former rock star laughed. “And I can’t say that I’d really ever want to either.”

“Well what about any of the other monsters in here in Gravity Falls? You’ve lived here for a super long time—”

“I’ve only been here for 26 years, Steven. Then again, I guess that is kind of a long time…” Greg frowned. “Yikes. I’m getting old.”

“Yeah, but still,” Steven interjected. “You’ve been around long enough to see all the cool stuff here. Have you ever been chased by gnomes? Or have you ever high-fived a manotaur? Or hugged a werewolf?!”

“O-oh well, uh, I don’t know about all that…” Greg frowned apprehensively. “Your mom and the Gems usually would handle all that supernatural stuff. I’ve always figured it’s best not to get involved with it.”

“Aw, but you could have totally helped them, Dad!” the young Gem exclaimed enthusiastically. “It would be so cool to see you fighting alongside me and the Gems using—wait for it…” Steven paused, tapping the side of the van to create a dramatic drumroll. “The power of music!”

“Heh, well, I’m not really sure what good the ‘power of music’ would do against a werewolf or a zombie,” the former rock star chuckled. “Still, it’s good to know you still think your old man cool enough to keep up with the best of them.”

Steven laughed warmly as his father pulled him into an affectionate headlock and noogie. The playful moment was soon interrupted however, as a bright flash of light from outside flooded into the van through the windows. It only lasted a second, but that startling second was enough to catch both Steven and Greg completely off guard. “Whoa!” the young Gem exclaimed, breaking free from his father’s embrace as he ran to the back window, peeking out of it to find nothing but the Gem temple the van was parked in front of. “What was that?!”

“Eh, it must have just been a flash of heat lightning,” Greg shrugged with a casual grin, glancing out the front windows himself. His smile faded however, upon looking down the hill to the Mystery Shack, noticing as another sudden burst of blue light pulsed from the ramshackle building. The former rock star knew exactly what this meant, but even so, he had made a promise not to get involved in it. And that was a promise he was honor bound to uphold to his former boss. “U-uh, hey, Steven!” Greg quickly quipped, forcing a tight grin onto his face as he turned towards his unknowing son. “Hows about we pop another one of these movies in, huh? This next one has a
mummified cow on the cover.”

“Oh! You mean The Cowwy!?” Steven grinned, plopping back down in his spot beside his father. “That’s one of my favorites! Put it in! Put it in!”

“Way ahead of you, kiddo,” Greg smirked, putting the tape in as Steven settled in to watch it. However, as he turned to sit down once more himself, he happened to steal another look at the shack, which was still lightly enveloped in an ominous pale cobalt glow. A years-old fear started to fill the former rock star, especially as his mind turned back to the warnings Rose had whispered to him long ago, warnings that even the Gems themselves no longer had. Greg had hoped that Stan would have given up on this risky pursuit by now, but if the conman was nothing else, he was persistent. But even so, one thing was clear: the once-forgotten ghosts of the past were still very much present now. And given how much things had changed since then, getting rid of them would be far more difficult this time around.

Light continued to pour through seemingly every crevice and cranny of the Mystery Shack, flickering on and off as it appeared to grow stronger and more powerful with each passing minute. Still, Dipper and Mabel hardly noticed it as fast asleep as they were in the attic, a fortunate fact for Stan as he worked in the basement far below them.

Ever since obtaining all three journals, the conman had been hard at work configuring the massive machine, inputting whatever code or instructions the trio of books had to offer him concerning it. It was certainly laborious, heavily taxing work, but regardless, Stan kept at it, undaunted. After all, he couldn’t dare to think about turning back now that he was closer to his ultimate goal than he had ever been.

“Thirty long years and it’s all led up to this. My greatest achievement!” Stan grinned broadly as he basked in the intense light the machine was putting off. His smile faded however as he paused, glancing down at boxers. “Probably should have worn pants.”

Since the machine was still relatively unstable after being reactivated after so many years, it was to be expected that it would act up a bit. The conman let out a frightened cry as it spit out a small burst of flame, one that struck him in the shoulder before he quickly patted it out before it could really burn him. “Feisty… I like it!” he smirked as he headed back to the control panel, pressing the appropriate buttons and switches in the right order. For a moment, Stan paused to read the readouts on the monitor above him, each scan passing by in quick succession as all of them turned up negative. Still, that wasn’t a huge problem. He hadn’t expected to get any tangible results so soon anyway and as far as he was concerned, he had plenty of time left. So long as nothing went awry, of course.

“If I finally pull this off, it’ll all have been worth it…” Stan said to himself as he took a seat at the desk. His excitement turned to smug satisfaction as he happened to flip through journal 3, landing on a page that had an image of Rose upon it. “Hmph. And you said I wouldn’t be able to do it,” the conman remarked with disdain for the pink Gem. “Shows what you knew, pinky.” The conman only lingered on that page for a moment more before turning it back to the blueprints he needed. “I just have to play it cool; I’m already dodging a bullet with the Gems being clueless about this, but if any of them, or anyone else for that matter, ever finds out about this…” Stan trailed off, frowning as he glanced to the picture of Dipper and Mabel that he kept positioned on his desk at all times. A brief bout of worry filled him, especially as he glanced over their bright, innocent, smiling faces, but even so he quickly shrugged it off. “Yeah, right. I’ve come this far. Who could possibly catch me now?”
His confidence renewed, Stan pulled on the nearby glove sitting on the desk, its extra finger dangling freely as he pulled the machine’s switch down to maximum power. The massive influx of energy that burst from the machine not only flooded the basement with light, but its affects were apparent throughout the rest of the town too as a momentary power surge ensued, one that most of its residents missed in the midst of their peaceful slumber.

Yet while the townsfolk didn’t know it, this powerful spike of energy was noticed even far beyond the borders of Gravity Falls itself.

The small monitor glowed red as a single line ran across it in quivering, pulsating waves. The two agents sitting before the screen aptly spotted this sudden spike the moment it began, and, confused by it as they were, had spent quite some time theorizing what it could be.

“See, there! There it is again!” the first agent exclaimed to his partner, pointing to the surge.

“Incredible…” the other agent mused. “We haven’t seen readings like this for thirty years!”

“This is different from that smaller spike we had a few weeks ago… Is it coming from deep space? An enemy weapon site?”

The veteran agent frowned coldly as he zoomed in on the coordinates they had just received, going deeper and deeper until he pinpointed the general source of where these troubling readings were coming from. “Just as I suspected,” he concluded before turning to the rest of his team. “Gentlemen, we’re going to Gravity Falls.”

As he had done many a night over the past thirty years, Stan had stayed up most of the night with the machine, monitoring it and checking over various things as the journals advised. Of course, as the hours wore on long and lonely, it was no surprise that the conman eventually ended up falling asleep against the desk unintentionally. He had only been napping for about an hour, however, when his alarm went off, abruptly startling him awake.

“Huh?!” Stan darted up right in his seat, his glasses askew on his face as the alarm clock continued to blare loudly. “Oh, right,” he yawned, letting out a long sigh as he turned the alarm off and steeled himself to face the day ahead. “Showtime.”

Fortunately, the conman had mastered the art of putting up a completely inconspicuous front to practically everyone around him, and this would be no exception. Really, it couldn’t be, since so many eyes would be on him today. In both a celebratory and publicity move, Stan had decided to have a public-reopening for the Mystery Shack, which had been closed the past week so it could properly recover from the damage Gideon had left on it. It had taken quite a bit of work to get everything back up to shape, but with the Gems and Steven having volunteered to help, they had gotten it all done in record time. And now, with the shack restored and Gideon behind bars, both the Pines and the Gems had more than enough reason to celebrate their hard-earned victory.

Since Stan had made sure to widely advertise the grand reopening all over town, quite a large turnout had shown up for the event. The gift shop was packed with people, far more than it usually saw on an average business day, all of them eager to hail their collective group of heroes. While the Gems weren’t used to such adulation from humans, word had gotten around about their triumph
over the Gideon-bot, and the townsfolk showed their appreciation for protecting them from such a protentional threat well. Garnet remained as stoic as ever as she calmly signed any autograph book presented to her, and while Pearl humbly and awkwardly tried to play all of the praise they were receiving off, Amethyst soaked it in, gleefully crowd surfing as the kids watched on nearby.

“Oh my gosh, that looks like so much fun!” Mabel quipped brightly, ignoring the look of confusion Dipper sent her. “I wanna try!”

“Me too!” Steven whole heartedly agreed as both him and Mabel started off towards the crowd, only for them to be stopped by Stan.

“Hold it, you two,” the conman rolled his eyes, shoving them both back as he stepped into the gift shop. “There will be plenty of time for throwing yourselves at random strangers later. For now, it’s time to humbly accept the praise and adoration of all these good people.”

“Why do I get the feeling like Stan won’t exactly be ‘humble’ about this?” Dipper whispered to Steven and Mabel with a smirk, eliciting a chuckle from them both. But even so, the conman stepped up onto the counter as the Gems also came forward, knowing that it was time for the festivities to begin.

“Welcome, everyone!” Stan bellowed boldly before the crowd. “To the grand reopening of the Mystery Shack!” The conman grinned widely as the audience cheered their rousing support, something that he admittedly wasn’t very used to after years of being seen by the townsfolk as a sham and little else, but something he was more than happy to soak in now. “We’re here to celebrate the defeat of that skunk Lil’ Gideon!” Stan announced holding up a plushy of the now-jailed child physic. Remembering well how Gideon had unlawfully spied on all of them, the townsfolk erupted into a round of boos and jeers. “Please, please,” the conman interrupted. “Boo harder!” The crowd did so, even as Stan tossed the plushy to Amethyst, who casually tore it in half with a smug grin.

“But I didn’t catch that porkchop all alone,” Stan continued, affectionately wrapping his arms around the twins. “These two scamps deserve some of the glory.” The conman was prompted to correct himself, however, after Mabel playfully elbowed him in the gut. “Okay, okay. Most of the glory.” Still, the twins weren’t about to let Stan get off the hook without giving full credit where credit was due. Dipper made sure of that as he cleared his throat and nodded towards the Gems, who likewise looked to the conman expectantly. “Fine,” Stan rolled his eyes, though he was grinning nonetheless. “I guess the Gems helped too, if you wanna get specific about things.”

“If by ‘helped’ you mean squared off against a massive deadly automaton, then yes, we ‘helped’,” Pearl remarked with a joking smirk. “And then some, actually.”

“Yeah, we almost died,” Amethyst said, embellishing the details a bit for the sake of garnishing even more adulation from the crowd. And indeed it worked as the audience let out a collective, impressed gasp before applauding once again at the Gems’ heroism. “But we’d totally do it all again to save you all from certain doom or whatever.”

The crowd continued to cheer in gratitude as Toby Determined squeezed to the front, his “camera” raised as he prepared to take a photo of the triumphant group for the town paper. “Smile for the camera!”

“Your camera’s a cinder block, Toby,” Stan deadpanned dryly.

“I just wanna be a part of things…” Toby frowned, lowering his cinder block in disappointment.
“Smile for a real camera,” Shandra Jimenez cut in, arriving with her news crew.

“Everybody say something stupid!” Mabel exclaimed as the entire group crowded together for the photo. The Gems remained in their place in front of the counter, though Amethyst hoisted Steven up onto her shoulders as the twins stayed on top of it with Stan. Once they had each taken up silly, lighthearted poses, everyone flashed the biggest smiles they could before the camera flashed.

“Something stupid!” all of them quipped brightly as the photo was taken, leaving them to share a warm laugh over it afterwards.

“And don’t forget to come to the after-party tonight at eight!” Stan proclaimed, holding up a poster for said party.

“It’ll be wild!” Amethyst added with a brazen grin.

“But not too wild,” Pearl interjected cautiously.

“You’re both kind of right, actually,” Garnet noted vaguely, her expression somewhat serious, though she didn’t bother to elaborate at the moment.

“No matter how wild the party’s gonna be, you won’t wanna miss it!” Mabel quipped to the engaged crowd excitedly. “We’re doing a karaoke bonanza, people! Lights! Music! Enchantment!” To add extra emphasis to her point, she blew the pile of confetti on her palm into the audience. “And an amazing karaoke performance by our super-huge, super-awesome band: Love Patrol Alpha!” With a proud grin, Mabel held up her artistic rendition of said band, that included not just her uncle and brother, but Steven and the Gems as well, all of them clad in rather flashy sequin jumpsuits.

“Oh wow! I can’t wait!” Steven exclaimed, completely delighted at the idea. “I love karaoke! And what could be better than singing it with some of my favorite people in the world?”

“Absolutely nothing!” Mabel readily answered, smiling just as widely as the young Gem, even if no one else was equally as enthused. “Isn’t that right, you guys?”

“Uh, I don’t know about that…” Dipper frowned apprehensively.

“I never agreed to that ever,” Stan remarked plainly.

“Hm…” Garnet mused stoically, not completely on board with the idea herself.

“Do we really have to wear those outfits?” Amethyst asked, cringing somewhat.

“Goodness, I hope not…” Pearl muttered discreetly.

“Too late!” Mabel grinned victoriously. “I wrote all your names on the list! It’s happening!”

Before anyone could really protest, Wendy burst into the shack, blowing an airhorn to catch the crowd’s attention. “Buy a ticket, people! You know you don’t have anything going on in your lives!”

Eager to attend the aforementioned party, all of the townsfolk were quick to follow the cashier outside, leaving the Pines and the Gems behind and quite satisfied over the successful grand reopening. “Ah, this is the life,” Stan sighed contentedly, hopping off the counter. “The town loves us, we finally got that Gideon smell out of the carpet, and everything is finally going my way.”
“I have to say it is a welcome change of pace,” Pearl agreed with a small smile. “It’s hard to believe we’ve gone over a week without facing any deadly threats or dangerous monsters. Everything’s been so peaceful lately!”

“Ugh, but it’s so boring,” Amethyst groaned. “It kinda makes me wish something crazy would finally happen, ya know?”

“Seeing as how you three are basically disaster magnets, we probably won’t have to wait too long for that,” Stan remarked with a joking grin.

“I can’t say you’re really wrong there,” Garnet noted casually, eliciting small laughs from her teammates, and even a small chuckle from the conman himself. The ongoing comradery between them all had been going strong for over the past week now, to the point that Stan hardly even minded having the Gems down at the shack and the Gems didn’t complain over coming. It was as though all of the former disdain between them had faded after the tumultuous threat Gideon had posed to them all was now said and done. And in place of that disdain were surprisingly good feelings, feelings that the kids had all easily taken notice of and rejoiced in. After all, they couldn’t remember a time when their respective guardians had all gotten along so nicely, and if things continued as well as they were going, then that was something that showed no signs of ending at all.

And yet, despite the elation and revelry going around, Dipper found that he wasn’t able to take part in it as much as the others had, mostly for the sake of one thing that had been on his mind consistently over the course of the past week. And seeing as how Stan was in as pleasant a mood as he would ever be, he figured that now would be as good a time as any to bring it up to the conman.

“Uh, hey, Grunkle Stan?” Dipper began somewhat hesitantly, having put quite a bit of thought into how he wanted to pose his request. “Now that we have a moment, I’ve been meaning to, um, maybe ask you for my journal back?”

“Wha-? Journal?” Stan raised an eyebrow and for a moment, Dipper feared that he was going to say no, but instead, the conman did the exact opposite. “Oh!” he exclaimed, cracking a sardonic smirk as he reached under the nearby counter and pulled the journal out from under it. “You mean this old thing! It was so boring, I couldn’t even finish it!”

“Aw, what?” Amethyst asked with slight disappointment. “You mean you didn’t even get to the pages about us in there? Come on, Stan. There’s some pretty juicy tidbits about Pearl in there, if you know what I mean…”

“Amethyst!” the white Gem huffed in aggravation.

“Amethyst’s right, Mr. Pines,” Steven added. “There’s some really neat stuff about the Gems in the journal! And the pictures of them in it are super fancy and realistic! You should have checked them out!”

“Meh, I might have glanced over them for a minute or two,” Stan shrugged, handing the journal back to Dipper, who could only take it in bewildered silence. “I dunno. I honestly don’t really remember or care.” The conman made sure to remain as even and unconcerned as ever as the Gems shot him a brief questioning look, but sure enough, they bought his innocent font. And fortunately so too, seeing as how, in reality, he had poured over the Gems’ pages in particular for anything Rose might have possibly slipped into them to throw him off course. Of course, Stan also failed to mention that he had made meticulous photocopies of the journal in its entirety, just in case he would need to call upon the information contained within it again, which he very likely would.

“Wait,” Dipper spoke up, looking over the cover of the journal in complete confusion. “You’re just
gonna give it back to me? Just like that?"

“What else do you want?” Stan asked, smirking. “A kiss on the cheek?”

Dipper didn’t answer as he instead looked between his uncle and the journal once again, unsure of what to make of this unexpected turn of events. He hadn’t really known what Stan had wanted with the journal in the first place, but he had figured that the conman would pass it off as more than just mere folklore and fable upon actually looking through it. But, instead, Stan seemed to shrug it off completely, just as he did with almost everything else. And even though Dipper knew that this wasn’t unusual for the conman, something still wasn’t adding up all the same.

“Oh, I… I gotta go!” he quickly exclaimed, holding the journal as he started to run out, though not before briefly stopping first. “Steven, Mabel, you too!”

“Huh?” the young Gem frowned as him and Mabel exchanged a confused glance.

“We do?” Mabel asked, just as puzzled.

“Yes! Now, come on!” Dipper urged, grabbing them both by the wrist and pulling them upstairs.

“Hm… I wonder why they’re in such a hurry…” Pearl mused curiously.

“Who cares?” Stan asked dryly as Soos stepped up beside him.

“You know, I wouldn’t mind a kiss on the cheek,” the handyman offered ambivalently.

“Not gonna happen.”

The moment the trio made it to the attic, Dipper made sure to slam the door behind them and lock it tight in the hopes that neither Stan nor any of the Gems would think of eavesdropping but fearing it nonetheless. Steven and Mabel only grew more confused as they watched Dipper scramble around the attic in a paranoid rush, pulling the shade over the window down and turning the heads of all of his sister’s stuffed animals away, just in case.

“Uh, Dipper? Is everything ok?” Steven asked with apt concern as him and Mabel took a seat on the bed.

“Are you kidding me? Of course not!” Dipper exclaimed somewhat frantically, gripping onto the journal tightly. “Guys, we need to talk. Almost losing my journal made me realize that we’re already a good ways into the summer and I’m still no closer to figuring out the big mysteries of Gravity Falls. Gideon almost destroyed the town to get his hands on this journal, but why?” Steven and Mabel exchanged another worried glance as Dipper started to pace as he usually did when he was stressed, but even so, he continued. “The Gems were nearly ready to burn the journal without a second thought because of what’s written inside of it, but even they don’t know any of the answers to the big questions about it. Who wrote it? Where are all the other journals? What was Bill talking about when he said everything will change? There’s something huge going on right under our noses, and it’s time we stopped goofing around and got to the bottom of it!”

“Bro, you’ve looked at that thing like, a bazillion times,” Mabel pointed out, passing her brother’s concerns off as mere paranoia. “There’s nothing left to discover! Half the pages are blank, remember?”
Dipper sighed in frustration as he remembered just how true this was, especially as he flipped through the disappointingly empty second half of the journal. “But there’s still so much we don’t know about the town, the Gems, everything,” he said, still far from content at this gaping lack of knowledge. “I feel like I’m just one puzzle piece away from finally figuring it all out…”

“Don’t worry, Dipper!” Steven encouraged with a bright smile. “I’m sure you’ll get to the bottom of everything eventually. And until then, you can always count on us to help you out, right Mabel?”

“You bet!” Mabel chimed, grabbing Waddles as he passed by. “Lord Mystery Ham is on the case! ‘I play by me own rules, wot, wot?’” she mimicked a British accent, holding the pig up while she pantomimed.

“Aw, we should make him a little detective’s outfit!” the young Gem exclaimed, charmed.

“Funny you mention that because I’ve been working on one!” Mabel grinned, holding the half-finished costume up. “Isn’t it adorable?!”

“Oh, totally!”

“I don’t know why I tell you guys things,” Dipper deadpanned, sighing in exasperation as he shut the journal. He knew that Mabel and Steven tried their best to offer support, but it was still rather frustrating to know that he was really the only one who took such important matters seriously. Stan clearly didn’t care, and while Dipper would have gone to the Gems for answers, but knowing how secretive they often were, he really didn’t expect to get much help from them. Regardless though, he was determined to finally uncover the truth behind the journal and the mysteries contained therein, even if he had to do most of the work himself.

And, ironically enough, a party seeking to do the very same thing was arriving at that very moment.

While the townsfolk were busy buying their party tickets on the other side of the shack, a mysterious black vehicle pulled up into the parking lot. Two imposing figures emerged from it, their expressions hardened and stoic as they marched up to the tourist trap.

“Hey, Mr. Pines?” Soos frowned, glancing out the gift shop window and noticing the car, particularly the “U.S. Government” label on the side of it. “What’s the code word I’m supposed to yell when I see a government vehicle?”

Stan didn’t really catch this question at first, seeing as how he was in the midst of a friendly arm wrestling match against Garnet. While the conman was clearly losing, Amethyst still cheered him on from the sidelines as Pearl watched in muted amusement. However, the moment Stan heard Soos mention the government, he froze, allowing Garnet to easily slam his hand down into the table with a triumphant smirk.

“Wait, what? Government vehicle?” the conman asked, startled as he stood and rushed over to the window, his eyes widening as he saw said car.

“The government?” Pearl whispered to Garnet anxiously as the Gems also rose to their feet. “What are they doing here again?”

“Yeah, I thought we smooth talked them outta here years ago,” Amethyst scowled petulantly. “You think they would’ve gotten the memo that there’s nothing here for them to see.”

“Just remember what Rose always told us about dealing with the government,” Garnet advised
calmly. “No mentioning magic or Gem history. We keep our powers under wraps and refuse them access to the temple, no matter what they say. Until they leave, we’re to blend in, pass ourselves off as normal humans the best that we can.”

“Way ahead of you, G,” Amethyst smirked, seamlessly transforming into her idea of a tall, astute business woman, bun, glasses, briefcase and all. “How’s this for a boring, average, unassuming human?”

“Humans don’t shapeshift, Amethyst,” Garnet reminded firmly, crossing her arms.

“Ugh, fine,” the purple Gem rolled her eyes, assuming her usual form. “But the minute these guys leave, I’m gonna shapeshift into them just to make fun of them.”

While the Gems discussed their plan of action, they hardly noticed Stan’s sudden panic over the government’s arrival himself. Acting fast, the conman pulled the shades down over every window of the gift shop before running to the intercom and shouting to his lingering patrons through it. “The Mystery Shack is now closed! Everybody out! I will not hesitate to use the hose on the elderly!”

A mummer of confusion ran through the customers, but nonetheless they complied as they started to file out of the shop. In the midst of this chaos, the kids hurried down from the attic, curious to see what all the fuss was about.

“Grunkle Stan, what’s going on?” Mabel asked the conman worriedly.

“Yeah, you never shut down the gift shop,” Dipper added, just as puzzled.

“Oh no!” Steven gasped, suddenly concerned as he turned to the Gems. “Are we under attack by some sort of invisible Gem monster or something?”

“Steven, shh!” Pearl quickly quieted him, glancing around apprehensively.

Likewise, Stan was also quite nervous as he paced around the gift shop, until a round of heavy knocks finally sounded on the door. Still, he made sure to put on the flashiest grin he could muster as he went to answer it, hoping that he would be able to feign innocence believably enough.

The conman opened the door to reveal a pair of tall, broad-shouldered men, both clad in sharp black suits as they held up their IDs, showing that indeed, they had been sent from the U.S. Government itself. But even so, Stan spoke up first, allowing his usual knack for showmanship to guide him as he flashed the agents a smile that was a bit too big. “Welcome to the Mystery Shack, gentlemen! What can I get you? Key chains? Snow globes? These rare photos of American presidents?” the conman’s grin grew a bit more anxious as he pulled a $5 out of his sleeve, hoping it would work. Unfortunately though, these stoic agents weren’t the kind to be driven off by a mere bribe.

“My name is Agent Powers and this is Agent Trigger,” the senior agent introduced himself and his partner. “We’re here to investigate reports of mysterious activity in this town.”

“Activity,” Trigger added for extra emphasis.

“Mysterious activity?” Stan laughed nervously. “In the Mystery Shack? You gotta be joking!”

“I assure you I’m not,” Powers affirmed dryly. “I was born with a rare disorder that makes me physically incapable of experiencing humor.”
The conman chuckled once more, thinking that the agent had merely been joking, but Power’s impassive expression remained unchanged. “I don’t understand that sound you’re making with your mouth. Now if you’ll excuse us, we’re conducting an investigation.”

“Investigation!” Trigger exclaimed, pointing a threatening finger at the conman.

Stan could do relatively little as the agents pressed right past him into the shack, much to his chagrin. The Gems stiffened up a bit upon seeing the agents, but even though, they did their best to remain as coy and disinterested as they could as they stood casually near the counter, as not to arouse any sort of suspicion. Still, despite their best efforts, the agents were rather quick to notice the trio as they took a cursory look around the gift shop.

“Ladies,” Trigger gave the Gems a terse nod as him and Powers passed by them.

“Agents,” Garnet greeted just as sparsely, her arms still crossed. Amethyst and Pearl hovered close to her, the purple Gem keeping her sour gaze to the ground as the white Gem stood erect, her hands held tightly behind her back and her expression awash in hidden dread.

“You three look somewhat familiar…” Powers noted, looking them up and down suspiciously.

“Have we met before?”

“Can’t say that we have,” Garnet shrugged, still doing most of the talking seeing as how she was clearly the most levelheaded out of the three of them in this situation.

“Y-yes, I think we would have remembered encountering such… esteemed members of the American administration as yourselves,” Pearl added with a forced smile. “Don’t you gentlemen agree?”

The agents exchanged a tentative glance, but fortunately, they bought the act of innocence. Still, they weren’t quite done with the Gems yet. “If you don’t mind me saying so, you three look a little… out of place in a small town like this…” Trigger noted with a skeptical frown.

“Oh, that’s because the Gems are from spa-” Steven tried to interject before Pearl quickly slapped a hand over his mouth, much to his confusion.

“Spain!” the white Gem exclaimed in a panic, her eyes wide as her nervousness got the better of her. “W-we’re from Spain! R-right, you two?”

“Sí,” Amethyst shrugged, though she didn’t say much else since her Spanish was a little rusty. Fortunately, Garnet had it covered.

“Es precioso allí en esta época del año,” the Gem leader said quite fluently. Fortunately, this was enough to finally get the agents off their tails. With a simple nod of acceptance, they moved on, allowing the Gems to breath a discreet sigh of relief, even as their young ward looked to them, befuddled.

“What gives, you guys?” Steven asked with a frown. “Why did you just lie to those agents like that?”

“Steven, we-” Pearl began with a sigh, though she was quick to stop herself upon noticing one of the agents glance back at them over his shoulder. “We’ll tell you later.”

“But…”

“We’ll tell you later,” Garnet echoed, much more firmly, her tone telling the young Gem that she
The agents didn’t get much further along in their inspection before they were interrupted once more, this time by Dipper, who had been beyond intrigued from the moment he heard what the agents’ mission was. After all, it was the very same mission he had been working on all summer. “Wait!” he exclaimed, running up to the agents. “Did you guys say you’re investigating the mysteries of this town?”

“That information is classified, but yes,” Powers acknowledged, kneeling down to the boy’s level. “Look, between you and me, I believe there is a conspiracy of paranormal, or perhaps even extraterrestrial origin all connected to this town. We’re just one small lead away from blowing the lid off this entire mystery.”

Stan’s eyes widened a bit as he overheard this, briefly fearing that he had somehow been sloppy and these agents were onto him. Likewise, the Gems exchanged a worried glance, all of them alarmed at the prospect of the very same thing only for themselves. Still, Dipper hardly noticed any of their concerns as he grinned excitedly over the idea that someone else was finally as interested in these mysteries as he was. “No way! I’m investigating the exact same thing! I found this journal in the woods which has almost all the answers. If we work together, we could crack the case!”

The agents looked to each other somewhat skeptically, unsure of what to make of the boy’s clear enthusiasm, but even so, Powers handed him an official-looking business card. “If you have evidence of these claims, we should talk.”

“We could talk right now!” Dipper offered zealously. “Please, come in! I have so much to show you!”

However, before Dipper could really lead the agents into the den, Stan finally cut in, stepping between his nephew and the pair of agents with a forced laugh. “I’m sorry, agents,” the conman said rather dismissively. “The kid has an overactive imagination. And like, a sweating problem.”

“Ha! Zing!” Mabel quipped from the other side of the gift shop.

“Paranormal town stuff is just part of gift shop lore,” Stan continued. “Sells more tickets, you know?” With a snap of his fingers, the conman wordlessly instructed Soos to equip the agents with complimentary Mystery Shack memorabilia.

“Bam! Swag!” the handyman exclaimed, slapping fake antennae on their heads and bumper stickers on their chests.

“Stan is absolutely right,” Pearl pointedly agreed as both Garnet and Amethyst nodded their assent. “There really isn’t ‘paranormal’ a-and there certainly isn’t anything ‘extraterrestrial’ here in Gravity Falls. It’s a perfectly normal little town!”

“That’s right,” Garnet remarked rationally.

“Yeah, nothin’ to see here,” Amethyst added with an awkward laugh.

“C-certainly nothing that would warrant any looking into!” Pearl quipped before the purple Gem sharply elbowed her in the knee. “Um, I m-mean, nothing at all!”

Powers and Trigger exchanged another caustic glance at this, but even so, they seemed to take Stan and the Gems’ word for it, at least for the moment. “Regardless of whether or not that’s true, we still have other spots to investigate,” Powers said as stoically as ever as they both turned to leave. “We’ll be on our way.”
“I’m confiscating these as evidence,” Trigger said, grabbing a large armful of Mr. Mystery bobbleheads on the way out.

“Smart move.”

“No, wait!” Dipper called, running after the agents, distraught over how Stan and the Gems had practically destroyed his credibility with them. “We have so much to talk about!”

“Hold it, kiddo,” Stan was quick to stop his nephew at the door as it closed behind the agents. “Trust me, the last thing you want around during a party is cops.”

“Seriously, those guys were total buzzkills,” Amethyst remarked, making good on her word as she shapeshifted into Agent Powers and threw her voice to mock him. “Oh, blah, blah, blah, we’re investigating weird stuff, blah, blah, conspiracies, blah, blah, paranormal, blaahhh.” The purple Gem groaned as she shifted back into herself. “I’m glad they finally left. They were putting me to sleep!”

“So… why didn’t you guys let me tell them you’re from space?” Steven asked the Gems, still quite confused. “I mean, all of us know about it. So what’s the problem with telling other people?”

“The problem, Steven, is that we’ve lived in Gravity Falls a very long time,” Pearl sighed. “Long enough that the people of this town have gotten used to our presence here and think little of it. But outside of Gravity Falls… well…”

“People out there don’t adapt as well to the unknown as they do here,” Garnet said. “Especially to things like the supernatural.”

“Yeah, or aliens,” Amethyst added.

“But you guys are aliens!” Dipper exclaimed, aptly frustrated.

“And your point is…?”

“The point is those agents have no business sticking their noses around here,” Stan concluded firmly. “Which is why I’m confiscating that card.”

“Hey!” Dipper protested as the conman swiped the card the agents had given him, adding it to his already quite full box of contraband items.

“Now how’s about you try being a normal kid for once,” Stan said as he started to head for the den, taking the card with him. “Flirt with a girl, steal a pie off a windowsill or something.”

“But Grunkle Stan, you don’t understand!” Dipper pleaded, desperate not to lose this once in a lifetime chance.

“And don’t go talking to those agents!” the conman ordered as he left without sparing another word and leaving his nephew very disappointed.

“Ugh, that could have been my big break!” Dipper exclaimed, turning to the Gems in the hopes that they would see reason where Stan didn’t. “You guys can’t be serious about all this.”

“We’re completely serious,” Garnet confirmed, irresolute.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but we’re with Stan on this one,” Pearl remarked. “Having those agents poking around in matters they have no business investigating will only unnecessarily
complicate things. And honestly, the same thing goes for you kids.”

“But they could help us finally figure out why Gravity Falls is so weird!” Dipper argued insistently.

“Or they could totally ruin everything,” Amethyst said, exasperated as the Gems started to take their leave as well. “Listen, dude. We got a sweet deal here. Everything’s finally chill for once. Why risk shaking it all up for a few lame old mysteries that don’t even matter?”

“They do matter!” Dipper stressed, thoroughly aggravated over how even the Gems refused to take him seriously. “You guys know they do! You can’t just shrug all of this stuff off like it’s nothing!”

“And we’re not,” Garnet replied calmly. “But there are a lot of things that take priority those mysteries. And making sure we can continue to protect this town uninterrupted is one of those things.”

“Oh, speaking of which…” Amethyst interrupted as she stood in the doorframe leading outside. “We got agents at the temple…” She nodded to the government vehicle which was now parked before the temple statue.

“Ugh, we should have expected as much,” Pearl groaned in annoyance as she began to head out. “They just don’t know when to quit. I suppose we’ll just have to trick them into leaving just like we did the last time the government decided to pay us a visit.”

“Looks like we’ll have to break out the smoke machines,” Garnet noted dryly.

“And the crossbow!” the purple Gem smirked mischievously, running out the door. “You know what, this just might be fun after all!”

Dipper didn’t really get much of a chance to further debate with the Gems as they left, but Steven and Mabel could clearly see that he was still fuming over how both them and Stan had so easily dismissed him and his search for the truth. Likewise, the young Gem wasn’t in full approval of his guardians’ actions either, especially seeing as how they had slowly started opening up more and more over the past several weeks. But now, their recent, almost suspicious behavior seemed like a regression, one that Steven couldn’t say he was too happy about, seeing as how there was still a lot about the Gems he didn’t know himself.

“I still don’t know why the Gems are so worried…. I mean, what’s the worst that could happen if they let other people outside of Gravity Falls know about all the brave stuff they do to protect the Earth every day?”

“I know, right?” Dipper huffed in frustration. “Those agents have the experience and resources that could help us solve everything, but it’s like they just don’t care! What are the Gems and Stan so afraid of anyway?”

“Boys, boys, boys,” Mabel cut in, shaking her head with a grin. “You’re both so worried about all this heavy stuff, but maybe Grunkle Stan and the Gems are right. We’re throwing a party tonight! Dipper, can’t you go one night without searching for bigfoot or raising the dead or whatever?”

“I’m not gonna raise the dead,” Dipper scoffed. “I just need a chance to show those agents my book…” he said, pulling the journal out of his vest.

“Trust me, bro, the only book you’ll need tonight is right here!” Flashing a wide grin, Mabel held up a book of karaoke songs that she intended on utilizing to the fullest at the party later on.
“You know what, Mabel? You’re right,” Steven agreed with a smile as he leafed through the karaoke book. “We’ve waited this long to look for answers; I’m sure we can wait just one more night. Besides, I can’t wait to jam out to every song in here tonight!”

“That’s the spirit!” Mabel chimed brightly, even if Dipper sighed in aggravation over Steven apparently giving up so easily. “When I say kara—, you say —oke! Kara—”

“—Oke!” the young Gem readily exclaimed, stars in his eyes.

“Kara—”

“—Oke!”

“Kara—” Mabel started again, pointing to her brother this time, who only gave the pair a disapproving scowl. Yet even so, they shrugged his pessimism off, just as they usually did. “We could do this all day.”

Even though any guests had yet to arrive for the party, the exterior of the Mystery Shack was already alive with an air of festivity. A generous snack table had been set up courtesy of Soos, who discreetly took a few of the treats for himself as he laid them out. With his work at the car wash done for the day, Greg had volunteered to come by and help set up for the party with Steven, which is exactly what the two of them worked together to put up decorative lights.

“You should have seen those agents, Dad!” the young Gem exclaimed as he recounted the events from earlier that day to his father. “They were so tall and serious. I don’t think I saw either of them smile once! And the Gems were really actually kind of freaked out by them. Isn’t that weird?”

“Eh, not really,” Greg shrugged, his smile somewhat apprehensive. “You mom really was no fan of the government back in the day. She said it reminded her of—” The former rock star abruptly cut himself off, his eyes suddenly wide as he glanced down to his curious son. “Uh… it reminded her of… Huh, what do you know? I d-don’t really remember what she said about it after all! Sorry, kiddo.”

“Aw, really?” Steven frowned in disappointment, still wanting answers. “Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl really weren’t that clear about why they don’t want those government guys to know about them… Do you think it was because of whatever Mom said?”

“P-probably,” Greg nodded, sucking in an anxious breath as he quickly tried to change the subject. “But you don’t need to stress yourself out over all that stuff tonight, Sto-ball. Just cut loose and enjoy the party!”

“Hm… yeah, I guess…” the young Gem agreed half-heartedly, even if he was still pondering over it all internally. He couldn’t help but feel as though his guardians were still hiding something from him, from everyone really, something that they were afraid to let anyone else be a part of. It wouldn’t be the first time, of course, but still, Steven had thought that the Gems were starting to become more trusting and open. So why then, were they still hiding themselves behind that same old veil of secrets that should have been lifted by now?

“Well, I think we’re just about done hanging all these—whoa!” Greg was abruptly cut off as a blast of confetti suddenly struck him, startling him but thankfully not knocking him off his ladder.

“Sorry, Mr. Universe!” Mabel called from the nearby porch, lowering her confetti canon with an
awkward smile. “But hey, at least we know the confetti canon works!”

“It better for as much as I’m paying to rent that thing,” Stan remarked as he stood nearby, overlooking his party checklist.

“Oh! And the karaoke machine has all the best songs!” Mabel exclaimed, turning to said karaoke machine and switching through its offerings. “‘We Built this Township on Rock and Roll’, ‘Danger Lane to Highway Town’, ‘Taking Over the Stars’ by &ndra!”

“Oh my gosh, I love that song!” Steven gasped with a huge grin.

“Me too!” Mabel agreed just as zealously. “And we’re all gonna sound so great singing it tonight!”

“Listen, kid,” Stan interjected. “You do not wanna hear this voice singing. Trust me.”

“Grunkle Stan, karaoke isn’t about sounding good,” Mabel encouraged. “It’s about sounding terrible together. Right, you guys?” she called to the Gems as they arrived to the party.

“What are we talkin’ about?” Amethyst asked somewhat obliviously.

“We’re talking about how we’re all gonna perform karaoke together later!” Steven quipped. “It’ll be a great bonding experience for all of us! Maybe one that could help us all open up about ourselves a little more?”

“Oh right,” Pearl said, partially disinterested. “The singing thing.”

“I figured you three would be a little more excited for some karaoke action,” Greg noted with something of an awkward chuckle. “You know, seeing as how you guys love to sing.” The former rock star continued laughing for a moment or two, hoping that the Gems would join in, though they only met his humor with dry, deadpan stares. “Heh, woo boy….” he muttered with an anxious frown as the trio moved on, knowing that his attempts to strike up a comradery with the Gems were usually just as futile.

Dipper gave the Gems something of a discreet distrustful glance as they wordlessly passed by him and Wendy while they were putting up posters on the side of the shack. He was still admittedly quite upset with them as much as he was with Stan for undermining him in front of the agents earlier, especially since they had never really tried to discourage him from mystery hunting before. But now it seemed as though they were readily dismissing all of the oddities of Gravity Falls that they knew well and good existed, all for the sake of protecting their own hides. From what, Dipper wasn’t exactly sure, but nevertheless, it immensely irritated him that out of anyone, they were the ones who, along with Stan, wouldn’t allow him to peruse what could have been his best lead yet.

It didn’t take long for Wendy to notice how apparently perturbed Dipper was, and while she knew a little about the situation, she decided to try and lighten the mood a bit nonetheless. “Check it out! These black lights make my teeth looks scary!” she grinned standing in the glow nearby neon light. “It’s like a crime scene in my mouth! C’mon, you know you love it.”

Instead of being amused by this, Dipper simply let out a frustrated sigh, unable to think of really anything else but what had happened earlier. “It’s not fair. Finally, I meet someone who can help me solve the mysteries of this town and what happens? The Gems just drive them off while Stan confiscates their card from me.”

“Dude, I probably shouldn’t be telling you this,” Wendy began, lowering her voice so her boss wouldn’t overhear. “But I’m pretty sure Stan hides like, everything in his room. If that card you want is anywhere, it’s gotta be in there.”
“Really?” Dipper asked, his tone suddenly hopeful though it was quick to fade. “But wait… if I go into Stan’s room, I could get in so much trouble.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Wendy acknowledged before breaking out into a mischievous smirk. “That’s what makes it fun, dummy!”

Without really needing any further convincing, Dipper readily agreed to this daring escapade and the two began quietly plotting their raid of the conman’s room. Fortunately, no one too much notice as they finished the last of the preparations for the party just as the first round of guests were starting to arrive.

“Aww man, I can’t wait to smash these Stañatas!” Soos exclaimed excitedly as he finished setting up a table stacked with piñatas shaped like the conman’s head. However, the handyman didn’t have very long to admire them before his hard work was abruptly ruined.

“Smash!” Grenda shouted as she body-slammed into the table, breaking it cleanly in half and sending the Stañatas flying. “Grenda has entered the party!”

“Stan’s brains look delicious!” Candy remarked, scooping up some of the treats left from the ruined piñatas.

“Girls!” Mabel cried gleefully, running up to her friends and wrapping them both in a tight embrace.

“Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh, Mabel!” Grenda yelled, her eyes wide with wonder. “Is that a boombox sweater?!”

“See for yourself,” Mabel grinned proudly, nodding down to her latest sweater.

“Poke!” Grenda tapped the play button on the sweater, which immediately started flashing and playing upbeat music. Delighted, all three of the girls started to freely dance to it, laughing brightly all the while.

Steven chuckled himself as he stood a few feet away and watched, though oddly enough, he didn’t join them as he usually would have, seeing as how he was still quite distracted with his musings over the Gems. In fact, he was only broken out of his thoughts upon noticing the hand that Connie was waving in front of his face.

“Hello? Steven?” she asked with a bemused grin. “Anybody in there?”

“Oh! Sorry, Connie,” the young Gem grinned bashfully as he turned to her, his smile widening upon noticing the simple, yet festive red party dress she was wearing. “Wow! You look great!”

“Thanks…” Connie blushed somewhat shyly before quickly changing the subject. “So… why aren’t you joining in on all the fun?” she asked, nodding to Mabel, Candy, and Grenda, who were still having the time of their lives dancing.

“Well… I would.” Steven admitted. “But… well… I’ve just been… doing some thinking instead…”

“Oh really?” Connie asked curiously, noticing how strangely serious Steven was. “Thinking about what?”

The young Gem was more than prepared to answer her, but ironically enough, his guardians arrived and interrupted him before he could. “Hello, kids,” Garnet greeted with a warm smile.
“You guys ready to PAR-TAY?!” Amethyst asked boisterously.

“Y-you bet we are!” Steven quickly exclaimed with a forced laugh. “In fact…. We’re so ready to party that we’re gonna go get a head start on it over here! A-and we’re totally not gonna talk about anything we shouldn’t be talking about, so uh…. Yeah! Bye!”

Before the Gems could question their young ward’s odd behavior, Steven was quick to grab Connie by the hand and whisk her away out of the trio’s earshot. “Well, that was strange…” Pearl noted with a concerned from. “But I’m sure it’s nothing we need to be concerned about.”

“You’re right. P. The only thing I’m concerned about is that snack table over there,” Amethyst grinned, licking her lips hungrily as she rushed over to it.

“Amethyst, wait!” the white Gem called, running after her as Garnet hung back stoically. “You can’t just eat all of those snacks! Oh, at least use a plate, for crying out loud!”

As 8 o’clock rolled around, the main influx of party guests started to arrive, and they were certainly plentiful in numbers. No one wanted to miss what was set to be one of the biggest celebrations the town had ever seen, which was why folks of all ages were showing up for it.

“Aw, I thought this was gonna be a rave…” Thompson frowned in disappointment as him and the other teens arrived.

“Thompson! Take off your shirt and make it a rave!” Nate shouted with a daring grin.

“I’ll do anything for your approval!” Thompson cried, ripping his shirt off wildly.

“Ooo! Now it’s a real party!” Jenny laughed as Sour Cream pulled out a glow stick and started waving it around.

Of course, no more than a second later, Tambry snapped a photo of the now-shirtless Thompson with her phone, much to his embarrassment. “Aw, come on!”

“I promise I won’t send it to anyone,” Tambry remarked dryly, only to do the exact opposite and send the picture out to all her contacts.

As guests steadily continued to pour in, Stan stood at the admissions table with a proud smirk, more than ready to take their money as Greg helped him count it all up. “Whoa, Mr. Pines, you’re making a killing tonight,” the former rock star remarked, impressed.” Who knew that so many people would be willing to spend $10 to come to a party that they could have otherwise gotten into for free?”

“Tell me about it,” Stan grinned broadly. “The whole town is showing up! And no sign of those pesky agents either.”

“Oh yeah, Steven was telling me about them,” Greg frowned, lowering his voice a bit. “So, uh…. What are you gonna do if they find out about-”

“They won’t,” the conman said, his tone suddenly cold and hard. “I’ve gotten this far without anyone finding out about it. I’m not about to let two crackpot government crooks ruin everything.”

“Ironically, the Gems are apparently on the same page as you are about them,” the former rock star said. “Though they’re worried for totally different reasons, I guess.”

“Pfft, whatever,” Stan scoffed, crossing his arms. “Let them be skeeved out by those dumb agents.
As far as I’m concerned, they’re not gonna find out about it, and you’re not gonna tell them, right Greg?”

“Hey, I’ve kept that promise for over twenty years now,” Greg assured. “I have pretty much no reason to break it now.”

“Good,” Stan nodded tersely, moving away from the subject as he briefly glanced over his shoulder. “Wendy, Dipper! How are those posters coming along?” Upon not receiving a response, the conman turned fully to see neither his cashier nor his nephew were still working on putting said posters up. In fact, they were nowhere to be seen, something that instantly made the conman aptly suspicious.

Having managed to successfully sneak away from the party, Dipper and Wendy soon found themselves standing right outside of Stan’s room. The door in and of itself was somewhat foreboding, heavily tacked with warnings clearly meant to keep the twins, or more specifically Dipper, out.

“I’ll keep an eye out for Stan,” Wendy said as Dipper stepped up to the door. “You go rustle through his weird old man biz.”

Dipper nodded as he took in a deep breath and grabbed the door knob, only to find that it wouldn’t budge. “What? It’s locked!?” he asked, dismayed. “Seriously!?”

Before he could even begin devising another way to get in, a certain purple Gem happened to drop down from the ceiling right in between him and the door. “Boo!” Amethyst shouted with a rouge grin as she hung from the support beams. She laughed in amusement as Dipper stumbled back, startled, before dropping to the ground. “Ha! You should have seen the look on your face, dude! It was classic.”

“A-Amethyst?!” Dipper exclaimed, quite alarmed. After all, the purple Gem could certainly stand to throw a wrench into things if he wasn’t careful. “What are you doing here?”

“Eh, just hangin’ around,” the purple Gem smirked, shapeshifted her arms long so she could hang from the rafters again. “I think the better question is what are you guys doing trying to get into Stan’s room? What, are you gonna try and see if he has any cool weird stuff in there?”

In a burst of sudden fear, Dipper was more than prepared to shake such an accusation off, but Wendy ended up speaking up first. “Yeah, maybe,” she shrugged, as calm as ever. Dipper sent her a panicked glance at this, but she was quick to reassure him with a discreet wink. “Why? Are you gonna tell Stan or something?”

“Pfft, why would I do that?” Amethyst scoffed with a smile. “I’ve broken into Stan’s room plenty of times just to tick him off. In fact, here’s a bit of advice. He keeps the key on top of the door frame.” The purple Gem gave the door a sudden kick, which sent the key hidden above it tumbling down into the palm of her hand. “Here ya go,” she said, handing it to Dipper.

“Whoa… uh, thanks, Amethyst,” he said, taking the key with an inconspicuous grin.

“No prob, dude,” the purple Gem remarked as she started to head off. “And if you find anything creepy awesome in there like a dead body or a week-old sandwich or something, let me know!”

Both Dipper and Wendy released a shared sigh of relief the moment Amethyst was out of earshot,
knowing that all could have gone so much worse. “Ok, that was way too close, dude,” Wendy said
with a worried frown. “You might wanna get in there and get out before someone like Garnet or
Pearl shows up. Chances are they wouldn’t be as easy to get rid of as Amethyst was.”

“Good point,” Dipper noted, turning back to the door and quickly slipping the key inside of it
before heading on in.

As Dipper had expected, the interior of Stan’s room was rather poorly lit and musty, perhaps even
moreso than the rest of the shack was. Still, he didn’t bother to take too long to get a good look
around; after all, he was only here for one thing, which was why he didn’t hesitate to start
searching for it.

“Alright, Grunkle Stan, where did you hide that card?” Dipper muttered to himself as he began by
checking the nearby drawers. Of course, all he found upon an initial inspection were old copies of
Gold Chains for Old Men Magazine, boxing gloves and brass knuckles, photos of Stan and
Amethyst’s various Revenge Trip escapades, and disturbingly enough, catalogues for women’s
clothing and swimwear. “Ew!” Dipper cringed with disgust upon seeing them, only imaging why
the conman might have had them. “Pretending I never saw that!”

Moving on from the drawers, his next stop was in front of the large, self-adulating portrait of Stan
hanging from the wall. Dipper initially didn’t think much of it, but upon a second glance, he
happened to notice that something was rather odd about how it was hung. “Wait a second…” he
mused, pulling up a stool so he could properly push the portrait aside. And sure enough, a secret
compartment was hidden in the wall behind it, and contained in that compartment was the
conman’s infamous contraband box. “Yes!” Dipper exclaimed with an wide smile, easily finding
the agents’ card tucked inside. “I got it.”

Not wasting a single moment, Dipper rushed for the phone resting beside Stan’s bed and quickly
dialed the number on the card up, anxiously holding his breath as it rang for a moment before
someone finally picked up. “Agent Powers,” the senior agent greeted dryly through the phone.

“Hi! This is Dipper, th-the kid from the Mystery Shack,” Dipper began, trying not to let his
excitement get the better of him. “The one with the, um, ‘sweating problem’? B-but anyway, I have
that journal I wanted to show you!”

“And you’re certain this ‘journal’ will help our case?” Powers asked, somewhat doubtful.

“I’m a hundred percent positive,” Dipper replied firmly, believing that the agents would certainly
be convinced the moment they saw the journal.

“Very well,” Powers assented tersely. “We’re on our way.”

Dipper started to thank the agent, but before he could even get any words out, the line abruptly
went dead. With a surprised gasp, he turned to see none other than Stan standing over him, his
finger on the phone’s receiver and a rather irate scowl on his face.

“Sorry, Dipper!” Wendy called from behind the conman. “I got distracted…” she frowned, holding
up her phone to show the picture of Thompson Tambry had sent her.

“Kid, why did you call those agents?” Stan asked Dipper, his tone exasperated as he took the phone
away from him and hung it up. “If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a hundred times! The only
weird thing in Gravity Falls is the Gems, and even then they’re not that weird when you come right
down to it. But aside from them, there’s nothing ‘supernatural’ in this town.”
“Yes, there is!” Dipper exclaimed, beyond frustrated by the conman’s denial of everything he knew to be true. “After everything that’s happened, you have to know that by now!”

“All I know is that your dumb obsession is gonna get us all in trouble someday,” Stan remarked coldly, shoving his nephew out of his room. “Now go enjoy the rest of the party. ‘Cause when it’s over, you’re grounded!”

Dipper wanted nothing more than to continue arguing with Stan over the matter, but the conman’s hardened expression alone was enough to tell him that he’d get nowhere with trying to discuss this further. And really, it didn’t matter that much anyway, seeing as how he had successfully gotten in contact with the agents after all and they were indeed on their way. So instead, he simply left, though not before sending the conman a brief angry glance as he walked away.

Stan let out a long, tired sigh as soon as Dipper was gone, his cross scowl fading into slight regret. In all honesty, he really didn’t want to be so hard on his nephew over this; after all, he was simply curious and the conman couldn’t exactly fault him for that. But at the same time, Stan knew well just how dangerous such curiosity could be. He had seen firsthand what looking into these dark mysteries could end up doing to a person, and the last thing Stan ever wanted was for that to happen to someone as young and innocent as Dipper.

Still, the conman couldn’t dwell on all that now. With the agents no doubt on their way, he had to ensure that the basement would be removed from their notice, least everything fall apart completely. Which was why Stan made a beeline for the gift shop, or more specifically the vending machine as he input the familiar code into it. Since everyone was preoccupied with the party outside, fortunately there wasn’t a soul around to see him enter the hidden door to the basement so he could get to work.

It didn’t take too long for the party to get into full swing, and once it had, no one was enjoying it more than Mabel. As bouncy dance music flowed through the event, she made sure to immerse herself in it, not just through her moves, but through her mingling as well. After all, Mabel prided herself on being a spectacular hostess, and she had every intention on showing her social skills off with every one of their guests.

“Looking good, Mr. Fryman!” Mabel called to the fry shop owner as he busted freestyle moves before both of his quite embarrassed sons. “Gorney! You clean up nice!” she grinned, passing by the cheerful young lad. “Mr. Poolcheck! Move those crazy legs!” she encouraged, walking a bit faster past the high-strung pool manager. “You—you weird pool man.”

Mabel stopped short as she came to Sherriff Blubbs and Deputy Durland, neither of which looked too amused or enthralled as they looked over the wild festivities. “What’s the problem, officers?” she asked with a charming grin. “Did you catch my face going ninety smiles per hour?”

“We’ve got complaints about the loudest party in town,” Durland remarked coldly.

“Three words,” Blubbs said, his tone dead serious. “We want in.”

Mabel was quick to comply by inserting party horns into both of their mouths before lowering her voice down to an excited whisper. “Welcome to your dreams!”

As the party heated up even more, the Gems were mostly content to stand on the fringes of it, making sure that its guests stayed safe while also indulging in it a bit themselves. Amethyst had no
problem moving to the music as freely as she wanted, and while Garnet and Pearl were a bit more reserved about their levity, they still smiled and tapped their feet to the beat nonetheless. That is, until Greg happened to pass by.

“Uh, hey, you guys,” he greeted with something of an awkward smile. “How are you three liking the party?”

For a moment, the Gems gave the former rock star a bit of a dry glance before Garnet answered with a shrug. “It’s alright.”

“Heh, yeah,” Greg laughed halfheartedly. “You know, Mr. Pines asked me to play a few songs from my old set later on. You guys should come check it out. They were some of Rose’s favorites.”

“Oh really?” Pearl asked, her tone somewhat cold as she crossed her arms.

“Y-yeah,” the former rock star blushed, realizing that his attempts at small talk were quickly floundering. Which meant that now would probably be a good time to bail. “So um… have any of you guys seen Steven around lately?”

“Nah, not since him and Connie ran off earlier,” Amethyst remarked, shoving a handful of chips into her mouth. “They’re probably playing spin the bottle or whatever.”

“Amethyst!” Pearl scolded as Greg’s eyes widened a little upon hearing this.

“What? It’s probably true.”

As it turned out, the purple Gem’s assumption wasn’t exactly true. Indeed, Steven and Connie had gone off to a more quiet corner of the party, but only so the young Gem could fill his friend in on his guardians’ odd reactions to the agents’ arrival.

“And when I asked them why they lied to the agents, they just said something about how people don’t adapt to things like them outside of Gravity Falls,” Steven explained with a fretful frown. “But I still don’t get it. I’m sure if people knew about how hard they work to protect the earth, then they wouldn’t be afraid of the Gems! They’d love them, just like people here do!”

“Well, I don’t know, Steven…” Connie said thoughtfully. “Maybe the reason why the Gems are so afraid of the government is because they’re not from Earth in the first place.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” the young Gem asked, confused.

“I’m just saying, from what I’ve heard, the government doesn’t really react the best to aliens,” Connie remarked with a shrug. “Haven’t you ever heard of Area 51?”

“Area 50-what?”

Connie raised a confused eyebrow at this, but even so, she prepared to explain, only to be interrupted by Mabel. “There you guys are!” she exclaimed brightly. “The karaoke extravaganza is about to begin! You gotta come watch. It’s gonna be kawesome!”

“We’ll be there in a second, Mabel,” Connie assured with a smile. “We just gotta—whoa!” She was abruptly cut off however, as Mabel grabbed her by the wrist and excitedly began leading her off, unable to wait.

“Come on, Connie!” Mabel encouraged as the others simply let out an amused chuckle at her enthusiasm. “You too, Steven! We’re gonna miss the first act if we don’t hurry!”
“Don’t worry, I’m coming!” Steven laughed as he stood and prepared to follow the girls, only to be stopped again, this time by Dipper.

“Wait, Steven!” he grabbed the young Gem by the arm, glancing around briefly before whispering something in his ear.

“Whoa, really?” Steven asked, impressed by what Dipper had just told him.

“Yeah, and I’m gonna need your help,” Dipper nodded, knowing that Steven could certainly assist him when it came to the Gem side of things. “Now, come on!”

Before anyone, particularly Mabel, Connie, or the Gems, could notice, the boys hurried off, slipping away from the party and heading out to the path between the shack and the temple, where conveniently enough, the agents had arrived not too long ago. Powers and Trigger awaited as stoically as ever, glancing down at their watches a bit impatiently as Dipper and Steven hurried up to them.

“Hi!” Steven greeted the agents brightly. Dipper was quick to lightly elbow him however, silently reminding him that they were supposed to be taking this meeting very seriously. “Oh, I mean… good evening,” the young Gem turned his excitement down a bit, standing up straight to come across as sincere.

“Alright, boys, let’s make this quick,” Agent Powers said, his tone already quite bored. “We don’t have all night.”

“Don’t worry; you guys won’t regret this,” Dipper assured. “Working together, we can crack all of the big questions of Gravity Falls! Trust me, this book is the lead you’ve been looking for.” He paused as he pulled the journal out and handed it to the agents so they could look through it for themselves. “So I’m thinking we do a full scale investigation; forensics, researchers… Do you guys have a helicopter? Oh, I’m sorry, helicopters.”

“I wanna ride on a helicopter!” Steven exclaimed, his usual excitement returning. But even so, the agents weren’t quite convinced.

“Kid, I’d love to believe you, but this just looks like more junk from your uncle’s gift shop,” Powers scoffed, holding the journal up and pointing to one of its sillier entries. “I mean, a Leprecorn? I can’t be the only one who thinks that’s not funny.”

“I can confirm,” Trigger shook his head. “Not funny.”

“No, no! It’s real, I swear!” Dipper protested, suddenly panicked at the idea that even the agents wouldn’t hear him out on this. “You should ‘send it to the lab’. Am I saying that right?”

“You’re uncle was right about that overactive imagination of yours,” Powers said dismissively, handing the journal back to Dipper. “Now if you’ll excuse us, we have paperwork to do.”

“Boring paperwork,” Trigger emphasized as they both began to head back to their car.

“But wait!” Dipper called after them, desperate not to lose this chance. “What… what if I told you we have real, actual aliens right here in Gravity Falls?!”

The agents merely rolled their eyes as they continued on their way, clearly not buying this. Fortunately though, Steven was quick to vouch for this claim. “He’s right!” the young Gem exclaimed. “They’re called the Crystal Gems and they’re from a planet called Homeworld, way out somewhere in space! And believe me, I should know. I live with them! In fact, I am one of them!”
With a hopeful smile, Steven lifted his shirt to show off the gem on his stomach, something that did make the agents stop briefly in their tracks upon seeing it.

“Kid, I’ll level with you,” Powers said, clearly uninterested. “That thing looks more like sort of tacky decoration anyone could buy at the local dollar store than anything even remotely resembling an alien artifact.”

Steven and Dipper exchanged an alarmed glance at this, knowing they were quickly losing what little ground they had. But even so, they weren’t about to give up yet. “B-but its true!” Dipper stressed fervently. “The Gems really are aliens and they can do magic and—Steven! Quick! Show them your shield or your bubble or—”

“I think we’ve heard enough,” Powers interrupted fully turning away. “Like I said, we don’t have time to entertain flights of fantasy like these.”

“No, wait!” Dipper cried, distraught enough to really do anything to convince the agents at this point. “I can prove that all this stuff is real!” Acting fast, he opened the journal and frantically flipped through its pages, looking for something that was immediate and poignant enough. “Come on, come on,” he muttered to himself anxiously, not even paying any mind to Steven, who was curiously looking over his shoulder at the book as well. “Gnomes… cursed objects… Gem stuff… spells, aha! Listen to this!” he shouted after the agents before reciting the incantation on the page before him, not really paying much mind to what exactly it was for. “Uh… Corpus levitus! Diablo dominus!”

“Um… Dipper?” Steven spoke up worriedly, especially as an unsettling breeze began to blow through the trees above them. But even so, Dipper largely ignored him as he shouted out the final phrase of the spell, far too provoked to stop now.

“Mondo vicium!” he finished loudly, his final word echoing through the forest as the winds picked up a bit. Steven sucked in an anxious breath as the ground suddenly started to tremble under their feet, and Dipper’s eyes widened as he snapped the journal shut, unsure of what exactly the spell he had just recited really even was.

The agents’ full attention and alarm was now gathered as the localized earthquake grew violent, to the point that after mere seconds, it managed to tear a large and lengthy crack into the earth itself. Fortunately, Steven was quick enough to pull Dipper onto the safe side of the steadily growing rift along with him, especially as a sinister green light and ominous dark smoke started pouring out of it. Everyone watched with ever increasing fear and dread as a hand abruptly shot out of the crevice, preceding the appearance of the being that slowly pulled itself up out of the depths of the earth.

Upon a first glance, it was vaguely humanoid in appearance, though as it stumbled out of the fog towards the group, it was clear to see that this creature was far from a living person. Rather, it was a dead one, a zombie to be exact. Its form was tall, gangly and heavily decaying, grisly flesh rotting from its bones, one of its eyes hanging limply from its socket just as much as its jaw was. The reanimated corpse let out a low, feral groan as it slowly sulked towards the group, obviously hungry to feast on warm human brains.

While everyone else could only stare at the approaching zombie in fearful disbelief, Dipper let out a small laugh of satisfied relief, knowing that his spur of the moment plan had worked after all. “Ha! A zombie! A real, actual zombie! See? Spooky journal. 100% real. Now can we work together?”

“Mother of all that is holy!” Powers gasped, his usual collected demeanor completely broken at such an alarming sight.
“What do we do?!” Trigger exclaimed, taking a step back as the zombie gradually drew closer.

“It’s just one zombie,” Dipper remarked, hardly concerned as he began leafing through the journal for a solution. “Trust me, we see things like this all the time here, right Steven?”

“Oh, y-yeah…” the young Gem said with a nervous grin. “If worse comes to worse, we can always find them Gems and have them—AH!” Steven let out a frightened cry as the zombie suddenly lurched towards them, ready to attack. Throwing his arms out wide on instinct, he somehow managed to form his bubble around himself and Dipper right before the corpse could smack into it seconds later, clawing and beating against it in an attempt to get to the terrified boys. Fortunately though, Agent Powers reacted accordingly by bashing the zombie on the head with a large rock, easily knocking it out cold. “Whoa…. That was a close one…” Steven muttered, staring at the now downed zombie with wide eyes.

“W-what is that?!” Trigger asked in awe as he looked to the pink bubble surrounding the boys.

“Oh this? It’s my bubble,” the young Gem said as though it was obvious.

“See? We told you guys!” Dipper exclaimed with a proud smirk. “The Gems really are magical aliens! Now you have to believe us, right?”

Of course, the agents could only really gape at each other in shock, completely dumbfounded by everything they’d seen. The boys also looked to each other with slight concern, fearing that perhaps they were overwhelming the agents with too much at once. “W-well, hey, at least we only had to deal with that one zombie, huh?” Steven asked in an attempt to lighten the mood. However, this quickly proved to be frighteningly ironic as the ground started to tremble once more.

Without any provocation or warning, more and more zombies began crawling up from the still open crevice in droves, their eyes shining with a haunting yellow as they began to go after the horrified group. “Uh, you know what? F-forget I said anything!” Steven exclaimed fearfully as his bubble unfortunately burst at just the wrong time.

“Oh my gosh!” Dipper gasped, instantly deeply regretting ever reading that spell. “Y-you guys can help, right?” he asked the agents pleadingly.

“Kid, we’ve been chasing the paranormal for years but we have never seen anything like this before!” Powers remarked, backing away from the still approaching zombies fearfully.

“Get down!” Trigger warned his partner, but it was ultimately too late. Before either of the agents knew what was coming, a pair of zombies beset them both from behind, pulling them both down to the ground violently. The boys managed to jump away before the zombies could grab onto them too, but even so, there was nothing they could do to help the struggling agents as the reanimated corpses began to drag them both off into the darkness of the forest until only their terrified cries could no longer be heard.

“Oh man, what have I done?!” Dipper exclaimed, finally realizing the full extent of the disaster he had just inadvertently started. He had been so desperate to finally convince someone that the oddities of Gravity Falls were real and valid that he had failed to even think about what the consequences might be. But now, it was clear that his persistence had ended up creating an incredibly dangerous situation, one that he had no idea how to solve on his own.

“Dipper! Look out!” Steven abruptly broke him out of his thoughts however by pushing him out of the way before another zombie could pounce on them both. The boys barely had time to pick themselves up off the ground before the army of the dead was upon them again, intent on making
them both their next meal. “We gotta get out of here! Come on!” the young Gem shouted warningly. Dipper didn’t disagree as they both took off, narrowly avoiding the reaching hands of the zombie horde as they hurried back towards the shack as fast as they could, lest they fall victim to a terrible fate, just as the agents had.

Regardless of the danger awakening within the nearby woods, the party at the shack was still quite lively and festive, mostly because no one knew of the trouble coming. The stage was open for anyone who wanted to take it and preform karaoke for the rest of the guests as they danced and cheered along. Currently, Blubbs and Durland were at the height of their improvised rap duet, one that the excited crowd was certainly getting into.

“What up, fools, its Blubbs and Durls,” Blubs rapped, moving to the beat with his partner.

“Makin’ all that money and getting’ them girls!” Durland shouted the next part before Mabel took the mic to pump the crowd up even more.

“Is this party legendary or what?!” she called with a huge grin. “When I say ‘Mabel’, you say ‘Pines’! Mabel-!”

No more than a second later, of course, the earthquake that had rattled the forest finally made its way to the shack, striking fear into the hearts of all of the party guests as they felt it. A round of frightened screams rose up from the crowd, especially as the shaking grew more intense and violent, but even so, Mabel just assumed it was a show of merriment from the audience. “Mabel-!” she tried her call and response again, only for someone in the crowd to let out another horrified shriek.

“We’re all gonna die!”

“Why does that never work?” Mabel frowned, only to finally feel the ground trembling beneath her for herself.

“Whoa, I think it’s an earthquake!” Wendy shouted in alarm, quickly blowing her airhorn to alert the terrified party guests. “Hey, everybody! We gotta get outta here!”

Without needing much further provocation, the guests all started making a break for their vehicles, none of them too keen on sticking around in such hazardous conditions. Connie gasped as she tried to remain steady on her feet, her eyes wide as she glanced around at the horde of fleeing guests for one particular young Gem. “Steven!” she called, realizing that he was nowhere in sight, and neither were the Gems for that matter, something that was quite alarming considering what was happening.

“Connie, you gotta escape while you still can!” Grenda shouted as she ran by, Candy tucked safely away into her backpack as they made their escape.

“But what about-” Connie was abruptly interrupted as the ground jolted once again, this time knocking her to the ground completely. Immediately after picking herself up, she found that she was unable to do much to prevent herself from getting caught up by the bulk of the crowd as they ran off in a desperate panic. “No, wait!” she cried, trying to break free from the throng, though she was ultimately unable to lest she get trampled by them completely. “Steven!”

“Wait! Don’t leave!” Mabel also shouted out after the escaping guests, quite dismayed over how the party was falling apart so quickly. “We haven’t even done our dual family karaoke song yet!”
Still, Mabel didn’t really have time to chase the fleeing crowd down as Dipper and Steven returned to the party in just as much of a hurry as the guests were running away from it. The boys did stop as they made it to the stage, both of them quite out of breath as they tried to regather their bearings for a brief moment.

“Guys, what’s going on?!” Mabel asked them with increasing worry.

While they were both still rather breathless, Steven was the first to speak up, even if any information he tried to get out came in short, exhausted bursts. “W-we…. agents…. woods… journal… spell… zom-”

“Zombies!” Mabel cut him off with a frightened gasp as the army of the dead started emerging from the woods in pursuit of the boys. However, her fear only lasted a brief moment before turning into frustration. “Dipper, what’s the one thing I asked you not to do tonight?”

“Raise the dead…” Dipper said with a remorseful sigh.

“And what did you do?”

“Raised the dead…”

“S-so, uh, what are we gonna do?” Steven asked worriedly as the zombies menacingly approached them. “There’s so many of them, and only three of us!”

“Make that four!” Soos exclaimed as he heroically rushed forward, placing himself between the kids and the corpses to protect them. “Stay back, dudes. This is about to get intense.”

Of course, the zombies were hardly deterred as they instead surrounded the group and knocked over the nearby snack table, essentially surrounding them on all sides. With their backs pressed against the side of the shack and the zombies starting to close in on them, all they could really do was let out a round of shared frightened screams, that is, until Soos interrupted it. “Sorry, one second,” he said, taking his phone out and snapping a picture of the zombie horde, much to the kids’ disbelief. “Come on, you gotta admit this is pretty cool.”

“W-we gotta find the Gems!” Steven cried, glancing around desperately for any sign of his guardians.

“How are we supposed to do that?!” Dipper asked incredulously. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’re totally surrounded!”

“Duck!” Mabel warned just in time as one of the zombies swung its disembodied head towards them widely. Fortunately, they all managed to evade it, and better yet, this gave them all a small window of escape, one that they were quick to take as they rushed through the wall of reanimated corpses.

“Dudes, stay calm,” Soos cautioned breathlessly after they had put some distance between themselves and the zombies. “I’ve been training for this moment my whole life. With all the horror movies I’ve seen, I literally know everything there is to know about how to avoid zombies.”

Ironically enough though, no sooner had the handyman said this than a zombie just so happened to come upon him right from behind, sinking its teeth deep into his shoulder before he even realized what was happening. The kids let out a unified gasp of horror as Soos paled, his eyes instantly taking on the same empty golden glow as the other zombies, a sign that he had indeed become one himself. “On second thought,” the handyman said, his tone still amicable as he turned to the kids. “Gonna flip the script. Can I… eat your brains? Yea or nay? Seeing some yea faces
over here.”

Unable to really do anything else at this startling turn of events, the kids all prepared to make a panicked escape, only to find that, once again, they were cornered by another wall of zombies, all clamoring to get their hands on them. Terrified beyond measure, the trio crowded together closely, hoping that either a spur of the moment plan would come to one of them, or that a miracle would happen.

And fortunately for them, the latter hope came true.

Without warning, a large table suddenly crashed into the zombies to the left of the kids, mowing a several of the zombies down instantly. Seconds later, a familiar white spear skewered through several more of the corpses while a whip coiled around several more of them, squeezing them together tightly until their brittle bones finally snapped.

Steven, Dipper, and Mabel all let out a collective sigh of relief as the Gems seemed to drop down from the heavens before them. Their weapons were drawn and ready for attack as they stood their ground against the still converging zombies, not about to back down, despite the great threat. “Ugh, zombies,” Amethyst groaned with disgust, lashing her whip out at a corpse that got a bit too close for comfort. “Man, it’s been *years* since we’ve beaten some old dead heads in. Heck, it’s been so long I can barely even remember what happened last time.”

“Kids! Are you all alright?!” Pearl asked, turning to the still fearful trio behind them anxiously. “What happened?”

“Dipper accidentally summoned the zombies to try and convince those government guys that all the weird stuff in Gravity Falls is real!” Steven quickly explained, much to Dipper’s immediate protest.

“You did *what*?!” Pearl asked Dipper harshly, her jaw dropped in appalled shock.

“Dude!” Amethyst scolded as she fought to break the end of her whip away from a zombie.

“I-I didn’t mean to!” Dipper quickly tried to defend himself. “I was just—”

“There will be time to talk about this later!” Garnet shouted over the din of the groaning corpses. “For now, you three need to get inside! We’ll deal with them.”

None of the kids were really in any position to argue with this plan, which was why they took off through the clearing the Gems had created through the zombies earlier. At the same time, the Gems themselves properly leapt into action, launching their first attacks against the army of the dead without delay.

As a pair of zombies lurched towards Garnet, they were instantly met with her fists to their guts as the heavy blows from her gauntlets practically snapped their spines in half. Amethyst summoned another whip from her gem, swinging both weapons out widely and allowing them to coil around the zombies closest to her. As the purple Gem threw her whips together, the groups of corpses rammed into each other, their skulls breaking and their limbs going limp in defeat. Pearl went wide with her approach, leaping high into the air and tossing a spear at several of the zombies that had started going after the kids. Her attack stabbed the creatures through cleanly as the white Gem
landed, but before she could summon another spear, a zombie managed to latch onto her arm before chomping into her upper arm hard.

“Ow!” Pearl cried, swinging a fist out and punching the zombie directly in the face, knocking it away from her. Fortunately, since Gems were constructs of light rather than flesh, the bite had no effect on her, but even so, the wound still hurt quite a bit. “Ugh, I forgot how annoying these things were!”

“Yeesh, just how many zombies did Dipper summon?!” Amethyst exclaimed, backing up a bit upon noticing that the influx of corpses showed no signs of stopping.

“Stand your ground, Gems!” Garnet ordered, her fists clenched tightly as they all found themselves backed against the shack. “Don’t let them overwhelm you!” she shouted as the zombies seemed to do just that.

At the same time, Dipper, Mabel, and Steven continued to rush for the nearest entrance to the shack, only to of course be intercepted by a group of zombies, headed by none other than Soos. In an attempt to clear the way somewhat, Dipper grabbed a nearby shovel and swung for the nearest zombie, somehow managing to cleave it cleanly in half. Unfortunately, one of the other corpses managed to pry it away from him, leaving the kids seemingly defenseless and trapped once again.

“Quick! The golf cart!” Dipper exclaimed, pointing to the cart, which they could hopefully make good use of to outrun the dead horde. However, before the kids could even start making their way towards it, another faction of zombies pounced upon it, knocking it over as they began mindlessly biting it. “Oh come on!”

“Hoo, that’s a bummer,” Soos remarked with a grin, still rolling with his zombie pack. “Good news for me though.”

“Soos!” Dipper scolded harshly.

“Sorry, dude, I just really want those brains!” the handyman chuckled, not halting his pursuit as the rest of the zombies did the same.

Once more, the kids found themselves pressed against the shack, still too far away from the nearest door to try and break through the horde to get to it. “What do we do now?!” Mabel asked fretfully, as the army of the dead started to converge upon them.

“Uh… maybe I can try summoning my shield?” Steven suggested nervously, not entirely sure that it would work, knowing how fickle the weapon was when it came to appearing. Still, he tried nonetheless, lifting his shirt up and focusing all his energy on getting the legendary shield to materialize over his gem. “Come on! We could really use you right about now!” he pleaded with his gem, which, unfortunately, gave him no results.

“Stay back!” Dipper shouted to the zombie horde, throwing the nearest thing he could find at them, which happened to be a small disco ball. Of course, instead of actually hitting any of them, one of the zombies somehow managed to catch it in its mouth, swallowing it whole. Trapped inside the corpse’s exposed stomach, the ball emitted an array of colorful lights through its ribcage, which flashed brightly as the zombies merely continued their advance.

“Give it up, dudes!” Soos encouraged, leading the pack. “Your fighting only makes us look more rad!”

“Oh man, it’s like things just keep going from bad to worse tonight!” Steven cried as him and the
twins huddled together once more.

“W-what happened to the Gems?” Mabel wondered worriedly, noticing the trio was nowhere in sight. “And where’s Grunkle Stan?”

“How’s he supposed to help?” Dipper asked caustically. “He doesn’t even believe in the supernatural!”

As it turned out, the conman was actually completely unaware of the complete and total disaster going on outside as he had instead been sequestered deep within the basement for the past hour or so. Stan assumed that everyone, including the kids and the Gems, would be distracted with the party for quite some time, meaning that no one would really notice his absence as he continued his work at a steady pace.

Yet even so, Stan let out an exasperated sigh as he went through another set of buttons, watching with disinterest as the machine on the other side of the glass flashed its usual bursts of light. While he had hoped that his work would distract him from how he had snapped at Dipper earlier, but even so, he could hardly think of anything else. The conman knew he had to walk a fine and careful line with the twins, now more than ever, for the sake of protecting their entire family really. The only problem was that he couldn’t very well tell them why without undermining everything he had been working so long for. Of course, he did plan on telling them eventually, when they would all be more prepared for such an earth-shattering revelation. But for now, Stan had every intention of staying the course and remaining as discreet as possible. After all, he theorized, it would be better for them all this way.

But even still, that didn’t mean that a wrench hadn’t been thrown into things.

“Those agents could ruin everything,” the conman remarked to himself disdainfully as he picked up the first journal from the table. “Darn kid! He has no idea what he’s messing with. He’s stubborn, that’s his problem.” Stan paused as he glanced down at the journal, catching his own reflection on the golden six-fingered hand on its cover. “Sorta like me, I suppose…” The conman shook his head, knowing that he really couldn’t be called anything else but stubborn. After all, who else would have dedicated 30 years of their life to something this risky, something this challenging? Something that could very well be nothing more than a pipe dream in the end?

“But even so, I’ve got too much on my mind to worry about those kids right now,” Stan said dismissively, putting the journal back down on the desk as he went back to work. “Now, let’s see here…”

Of course, as the conman was preoccupied with the machine, he failed to notice the security feed coming in through the monitor on the dash behind him, which showed the twins and Steven still in the midst of fleeing from the zombie horde. They had decided to try and go around wide in an attempt to make it to the front door, only to be cut off by a single zombie as they rounded the corner. Fortunately though, Mabel took the offensive this time.

“Take that, suckah!” she shouted, swinging her karaoke machine wide at the corpse. The heavy machine landed a rather brutal blow, one that was enough to send the zombie’s head flying off and its body collapsing in defeat, much to the kids’ shared amazement. “Huh, this thing’s a surprisingly good weapon!”

Yet even still, the zombies kept on coming, relentless in their pursuit and uncountable in their number. With the path to the door finally clear, the kids charged for it, only for it to suddenly fly
open right as they made it there, resulting in them all falling against each other in their rush.

“Kids?” Greg asked as he looked down at the trio with apt concern. “What’s going on?”

“Dad!” Steven gasped, hurrying to his feet as the twins did the same. “No time to explain! We gotta get inside, now!”

Before the former rock star could ask any questions, the kids had managed to push past him into the shack and close the door tightly behind them. “Quick! We need to board up all the windows!” Dipper exclaimed, already hurrying to gather what he could to do just that.

“W-what for?!” Greg asked, alarmed at how apparently panicked the kids were.

“K, so long story short, there’s like a ton of zombies out there,” Mabel quickly explained, nodding to the window as the dead army inched towards it. “So we’re just hiding out in here, trying not to get eaten by then, you know, normal party stuff.”

“Z-Zombies?!” the former rock star exclaimed fearfully. “I’m in the bathroom for what, five minutes, and suddenly there are zombies running around? W-well…. Where are the-”

Greg was abruptly interrupted as the door slammed wide open again, and for a moment, everyone feared that the zombies were already upon them again. Thankfully though, this was far from the case as the Gems rushed in, making sure to shut the door once again and lock it up tight this time. All three of them looked clearly worse for wear as they leaned against the door, panting out of apparent exhaustion. Their clothes were torn, hair disheveled and they were all sporting more than a few bruises and zombie bites, though they were fortunately free from their transformative effects.

“Guys!” Steven cried, running up to his guardians with deep worry over their respective conditions.

“There’s too many of them,” Garnet reported tiredly, adjusting her cracked shades. “Even for us.”

“We barely made it in here alive!” Pearl exclaimed, standing upright as she looked over her various injuries. “These zombies are so much more aggressive than the ones we’ve dealt with in the past! One of them nearly ended up cracking my Gem!”

“And they just don’t know when to quit either!” Amethyst growled as she shoved a plank of wood in front of one of the windows, blocking a few zombies from entering. “They’re easy to beat, but so dang hard to get rid of!”

“S-so what do we do?” Dipper asked, hoping that the Gems of all people would have a solution. However, the trio merely exchanged an uncertain glance, they expression alone giving away the fact that they really had no idea what to do to save the day this time.

Still, no one had any time to fret over this, especially as the zombies beset the barred off windows, beating against the planks of wood until they all too quickly shattered, granting them access inside. “Hey, dudes!” Soos greeted brightly, leaning in the window as his zombie compatriots started pouring in. “By the way, I taught the zombies how to get into the fuse box. To these dues, I’m like, a genius or something! Get those brains, dawgs!”

No more than a second later, all of the power in the shack instantly shut off, casting the darkness and dim lights from outside into the shack and making things seem all the more like a living nightmare. Despite their weariness, the Gems summoned their weapons once more as they stood between the zombies and the kids and Greg, knowing well that this could be their last stand.

“Stay strong,” Garnet commanded, her fists tight as the zombies lurched towards them. “And if we
go down… we go down fighting!"

“Right!” Amethyst and Pearl nodded in unison, launching themselves at the creatures, weapons blazing.

Seeing as how they could do little to help, Greg was quick to take the initiative in keeping the kids safe by finding what he hoped could be their escape route. “Quick!” he shouted to the terrified trio, grabbing his nearby guitar. “This way!” The former rock star shoved the door to the den open, only to find a zombie standing right behind it. Acting on impulse, he swung his guitar at it, knocking it out cold, though there were still plenty more where that one had come from. And while the Gems were trying their best to keep the other corpses at bay, it was becoming increasingly obvious to the kids that there was no easy way out.

“Dipper, isn’t there something in the journal about defeating zombies?!” Mabel asked anxiously as they all crowded into the corner, zombies pushing past the struggling Gems just to get to them.

“No!” Dipper exclaimed, frantically flipping through the book only to come up with no real results. “There’s nothing in here about their weaknesses!”

“So is this…?” Steven trailed off, pressing against his father, who kept a secure hand on his shoulder in the face of this grave danger.

“I… I think so…” Dipper lowered the journal, the stark realization of the severity of the situation finally settling in. And indeed, it really did seem as though there was no hope. The zombies continued pouring into the shack without end, and it was clear that they were easily overwhelming the Gems. They had already pinned Amethyst to the ground, had cornered Pearl against a wall, and had grabbed Garnet by both of her arms, effectively restraining her from fighting back. And if even the Crystal Gems themselves couldn’t prevail over this deadly threat, then who could? “This can’t be happening…” Dipper shook his head in stunned disbelief. “I wanted answers so bad that I put everyone in danger. Now we’re toast, it’s all my fault, and no one can save us!”

No sooner had Dipper finished saying this, however, than a nearby zombie suddenly grabbed his arm tightly and quickly hoisted him up, more than ready to devour him without a second thought.

“Dipper!” Mabel and Steven cried in shocked, horrified unison. Likewise, upon noticing this, the Gems fought harder than ever to break free from the zombies surrounding them, though it was painfully clear that they wouldn’t be fast enough to save him, no matter how hard they tried.

“Whoa! Hold on!” Greg exclaimed, drawing his guitar back to swing towards the offending zombie. “I’ve got-” Before the former rock star could send his instrument reeling forward however, another zombie latched onto it from behind, forcing Greg to pull back against it, lest he lose his only means of defense. “Hey! Let go of that!”

“N-no!” Dipper shouted, struggling against the zombie still clinging onto his arm like it was a vice. Still, as the create began to draw in close, it was becoming increasingly obvious to him that there would be no escaping or rescue from this. Still, he knew he could only really blame himself for his own inevitable demise. After all, he had been warned time and time again to be careful, to not dig too deep too fast. But in the end, he hadn’t listened to any of those warnings, and had instead perused dangerous answers to dangerous questions, answers that were now very much proving to be not only his own undoing, but everyone else’s as well. “Mabel! I-I’m sorry!”

“Dipper!” Mabel practically sobbed, hating how completely helpless she felt in this situation, especially as the zombie opened its maw wide, pulling her brother in even closer. All three of the kids let out a unified terrified scream over what was happening, none of them able to stop it or the fact that they were all about to meet their own respective deadly fates.
Or so it seemed, until at last, a miracle finally happened.

Right before the zombie could manage to sink its teeth into Dipper, something slammed hard against the back of the creature’s head, sending it falling forward. Its grip instantly loosened, allowing Dipper to fall to the floor mostly unscathed as Mabel and Steven both rushed to him to make sure he was ok. As all of the zombies were distracted by this sudden change, the Gems took their change to break free from their hold as well and Greg even managed to reclaim his guitar. Still, no one knew quite what had happened until the zombie’s head was firmly and abruptly crushed under Stan’s foot.

The conman stood firm and strong in the door frame, his fez missing, his hair askew, and his suit filthy and tattered from fighting through the zombie horde. Fueled by adrenaline, he was panting as he gripped a baseball bat tightly, though nothing was more frightening than his completely livid expression as he looked down at his nibblings. “You two! Attic! NOW!” he shouted harshly, his tone fiercer than the twins had ever heard it before.

“Grunkle… Grunkle Stan…?” Dipper asked in breathless disbelief, but even so, Stan was having none of it at a moment like this, especially as the zombies started crowding once again.

“I said NOW!” the conman barked, pointing to the stairs. “And that goes for you two too!” he yelled to Steven and Greg, who, much like the twins, were in no position to argue with him. Without any further hesitation, they all rushed for the stairs, encountering a stray zombie or two on the way up, though the former rock star managed to make quick work of them with his guitar.

“And what are you three looking at!?” Stan asked the Gems with a cold scowl, clearly not in the mood to deal with them in light of the ongoing fray. Regardless though, the trio could only stare at the conman with shared shock, their jaws dropped in amazement over what had just happened. “Haven’t you ever seen a man beat a zombie’s head in before?”

It took a moment for the Gems to regather their bearings, but when they did, Amethyst was the first to speak up. “Woo! Heck yeah, Stan!” she cheered, summoning her whip with renewed verve as she rushed to his aid. “Let’s show these dead creeps who’s boss!”

“What is this world coming to…?” Pearl muttered, her eyes still wide with astonishment. “We were just rescued by… Stan of all people… I can’t believe it…”

“Believe it,” Garnet replied with a shrug, summoning her gauntlets as she knocked a round of zombies out. Likewise, the white Gem was quick to shake most of her awe away as she took up her spear, spinning it widely at a group of incoming courses.

“All right, you dead jerks,” Stan snarled at the zombies surrounding him and Amethyst as they stood back to back, ready to fight. “Are you ready to die twice!?”

“Yeah! Let’s get ‘em!” the purple Gem yelled boisterously, lashing her whip out and cutting several zombies down.

Stan beat a few away from him with his bat as the brawl was pushed into the living room, him and the Gems along with it. “The only wrinkly monster who harasses my family is me!” the conman growled, swinging his impromptu weapon out wide. “And the Gems, every now and then.”

“Hey!” Pearl protested crossly, sending Stan a disapproving glare.

“Behind you,” the conman nodded to the zombie coming up on the white Gem. With a startled gasp, she quickly spun around and stabbed it cleanly through as Amethyst let out a wild chuckle.
“Dang, Stan! You are on fire tonight!” the purple Gem hooted excitedly.

Still, Stan didn’t have much time to respond as he rammed the side of his bat into a nearby zombie, only for the corpse to latch onto it and bite it cleanly in half. The conman was hardly deterred however, holding his own right alongside the Gems as he cleanly clocked the zombie in the jaw with a brass-knuckled fist. “Anyone else wanna piece!?” he challenged boldly.

“Looks like they do,” Garnet replied dryly as the horde started to easily outnumber the four of them, especially as they began pouring in through the front door. “This way! Quick!” the Gem leader pointed to the stairs Greg and the kids had just hurried up, knowing they would be relatively safer up there. They still continued to beat zombies back as they made a beeline for the stairs, and after they had all made it to the top, Stan pushed the nearby grandfather clock down the staircase in the hopes that it would buy them at least a little time.

At the same time, the kids and Greg rushed into the attic, slamming the door shut behind them, though it was only seconds later that someone started pounding against it, no doubt the zombies arriving to finish them all off. “S-stay behind me!” the former rock star warned the kids, his guitar raised to strike. Fortunately he didn’t have to use it, for instead of the undead army, Stan and the Gems all burst into the room instead.

“Ugh, ow!” Stan groaned, letting out a cough as he tiredly leaned against the door for a moment. “Everything hurts.”

“Bar the door,” Garnet ordered, gently pushing the conman aside as Pearl jammed her spear into against the handle to keep the corpses from coming.

“Yeah, and put that thing down, Greg,” Amethyst scoffed in amusement, noticing the former rock star still wielding his guitar like a weapon. “What, are we gonna defeat the zombies with the ‘power of music’ or something?”

“Hey, you can’t blame me for being a little tense,” Greg remarked, lowing his instrument. “We are dealing with actual flesh-eating zombies after all.”

“Just like in the movies!” Steven exclaimed with a small smile in an attempt to lighten the mood a little. An attempt that really didn’t work, all things considered. “O-ok… so maybe not just like the movies…”

“Grunkle Stan, that was amazing!” Dipper exclaimed, thoroughly impressed by the conman’s heroism. “Are you alright?” he asked with apt concern upon noticing just how weary his uncle looked. Still, Stan only met this worry with a caustic look, one that all three of the Gems shared as they looked to Dipper for an explanation he didn’t really have. “Heh, w-well… at least you can’t deny that magic exists anymore, right?”

A beat of silence past as the conman looked away from the twins, his expression darkening as he stood up a bit Straighter. “Kid, I’ve always known.”

“Wait… what are you talking about?” Dipper asked, quite taken aback by this revelation.

“I’m not an idiot, Dipper!” Stan exclaimed, running a hand through his hair in frustration. “Of course this town is weird! And the one thing I know about that weirdness is its dangerous!”

At this juncture, a zombie’s hand abruptly broke in through the door of the room, prompting the entire group to quickly back away, but even so, the conversation continued. “And that danger is exactly what we’ve been trying to warn you kids about!” Pearl interjected, rarely agreeing with
Stan. “But did you listen to us? Of course not! Otherwise we wouldn’t be surrounded by an innumerable number of reanimated corpses right now!”

“Ok, I’ll admit that what I did was really dumb,” Dipper said with clear remorse.

“Really, really dumb,” Mabel added for good measure.

“Not helping!” Dipper gave his sister an aggravated glare before turning to Stan. “But that still doesn’t explain why you’ve been pretending like none of this stuff exists all summer!”

“Oh really? Because I think it’s pretty obvious,” the conman replied pointedly. “I’ve been lying about it to try and keep you away from it. To protect you from it!” Another zombie happened to break in through the window at this, though Stan was quick to send it plummeting to the ground far below with a single brutal blow. Still, as he stood at the window, he could see the mass of corpses still vying to get into the building as they began steadily scaling it, meaning that they wouldn’t have much time left. “Looks like I didn’t lie well enough…”

“So… what now?” Greg asked apprehensively, looking to the Gems. “You guys have a plan, right?”

The Gems merely exchanged a desperate glance at this before letting out a unified defeated sigh. “We don’t…” Garnet admitted, looking to the ground. “Not this time.”

“B-but we have to do something!” Steven urged fretfully. “We can’t just let them climb up here and eat all our brains! I’m still using mine!”

“Well, normally the journal would help us,” Dipper began, pacing around the room as he usually did in stressful situations like these. He took the book out one last time, glancing over the zombie page yet again only to find no aid from it. “But there’s nothing in there about defeating zombies! It’s hopeless!”

“Wait!” Mabel gasped as Dipper held the journal up over one of the black lights lying on the floor. “Look at the text! It’s glowing in the black light!”

“What?” Dipper frowned in confusion, grabbing one of the lights and holding it over the journal as everyone curiously gathered around to see. And sure enough, the moment the neon struck the brittle pages, it illuminated countless glowing notes and images, all of which had been completely invisible to the naked eye before. “No way!” Dipper exclaimed in stunned disbelief, instantly realizing just how much this revelation changed everything. “All this time I thought I knew all the journal’s secrets, but they were hidden in invisible ink this whole time!”

“Invisible ink?!” Stan muttered incredulously, his eyes widening upon seeing the hidden notes for himself.

“Wow!” Steven quipped in amazement. “And just when I thought the journal couldn’t get any cooler or more mysterious, it does! This is awesome!”

“Should we be concerned about this?” Pearl whispered to Garnet worriedly, thinking specifically of the pages detailing themselves.

Before Garnet could reply, another zombie managed to make it to the window, though a quick jab from the Gem leader resulted in its immediate defeat. “We’ll have plenty of time to be concerned about it later,” she remarked to the white Gem quickly, knowing that there were much more important matters to be dealt with now.
“This is it!” Dipper exclaimed after briefly skimming the newfound secret notes the zombie page had to offer before reading it aloud. “Zombies have a weakness! Previously thought to be invincible, their skulls can be shattered by the combination of a stringed instrument and a perfect several-part harmony.”

“A stringed instrument, huh?” Greg asked, grinning at his guitar. “What do you know? Looks like the power of music might just save the day after all.”

“Yeah but how do we create a several-part harmony?” Dipper wondered, looking over the journal once more. “I have a naturally high-pitched scream…?”

“I can make noises with my body,” Stan offered. “Sometimes intentionally.”

“Boys, boys,” Mabel interjected with a satisfied grin. “I think you’re both missing the obvious solution here.”

“Yeah! We gotta sing!” Steven exclaimed with a smile just as large.

“Sing?” everyone else asked in bewildered unison, none of them completely convinced of this idea.

“Uh, I don’t think we’ve ever used singing to beat monsters before…” Amethyst said incredulously. “Most of the time we just beat them up till they go away. But since that isn’t working for these guys…”

“I suppose we don’t really have any other viable options…. But could something that simple even work?” Pearl asked skeptically, looking to Garnet for answers.

The Gem leader simply shrugged as she nodded towards the window, reminding the group that they had no time to lose. “It’s worth a shot.”

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By now, the number of zombies surrounding the Mystery Shack was easily in the hundreds, maybe even more. While plenty of them had been taken down, it was still barely enough to put even a dent in how many of them there really were. By sheer brute force alone, the ravenous corpses had pushed their way into the shack, all of them mindlessly eager to feast on any flesh they could get their rotting hands onto. However, they were finally deterred in their mission as the sound of a microphone screech suddenly rang out through the building. Intrigued by this noise, the zombies started congregating towards its source, including Soos, though he was ultimately distracted by the TV as he passed through the den.

“Ooh! Gossiping Housewives is on!” the zombified handyman exclaimed with a grin, taking a seat on the recliner. One of the zombies groaned, beckoning him to join them as they continued their way outside, but even so, Soos merely shrugged them off. “Eh, I already sat down.”

Soon enough, the majority of the zombie horde had gathered outside, all of them quickly noticing the group standing on the roof awning high above them. Mabel had made quick work of setting the karaoke machine up, and Greg already had plugged his amp into it as he started testing a few scales to make sure everything worked properly.

“Ok, Pearl, it’s 56383,” Steven read the number of the song from the karaoke book.

“56383…” Pearl repeated as she punched in the number once again, growing increasingly frustrated with how the machine refused to cooperate with her.
“Uh, sometime tonight, Pearl?” Stan urged caustically, glancing down at the audience of zombies below them.

“I’m trying!” the white Gem snapped, clearly stressed over the pressure they were under. “Steven, are you sure that’s the right number? I keep typing it in, but it doesn’t seem to be playing!”

“Oh, you need to hit start,” the young Gem informed her.

“Ah… I see.” Pearl did so, and at once, an upbeat pop backtrack began playing from the machine, one that Greg easily picked up on and started strumming along to.

“Zombies and gentlemen!” Mabel shouted over her microphone. “I’m Mabel, they’re Dipper, Stan, Steven, Mr. Universe, and the Crystal Gems, and together we’re Love Patrol Alpha!”

“I never agreed to that name!” Dipper quickly clarified, already quite uncomfortable with this embarrassing situation in general.

“Uh… kids? Our lives may not be worth this,” Stan said with dry concern.

“Stop whining,” Garnet interjected firmly. “Just sing.”

“Hit it, Steven!” she encouraged, pointing to the young Gem as the words to the song appeared on the karaoke machine’s screen. Not that he really needed them in the first place.

“We can’t help it if we make a scene,” Steven began boldly, strutting across the stage a bit as a sign that he was clearly invested the number already. “On Friday night in our hot pink limousine…”

“Partying till dawn,” Dipper Shakily picked up where Steven had left off after the mic was passed off to him. “Got my favorite dress on?!! You guys, this is stupid!” he huffed to Steven and Mabel who were both having the time of their lives, despite the danger they were up against.

“We’re rolling to the party, turning heads stopping traffic,” Mabel sang brightly, swaying freely along to the beat. “I just keep dancing, posing, joking, laughing-” She was abruptly cut off as a zombie finally made it to them, lashing out towards her with a hiss. Fortunately, it was intercepted by a kick from Stan, but even still, it had served as a grim reminder that this was no game. “Guys! We have to sing together or it won’t work!”

“Way ahead of you!” Amethyst grinned, getting into the song herself as she sang the next part. “I’ve got a pair of eyes that they’re getting lost in!” she belted, playfully bumping up against Pearl and prompting her to sing along with her.

“Who cares what they say? We keep on walking,” both Gems sang, easily harmonizing before Stan begrudgingly picked up the tune.

“The boys are dazzled but they’re all just bores,” the conman sang, cringing at the sound of his own gravelly voice. Fortunately though, Garnet continued on clear and smooth.

“When I point they look, just show them the door!” the Gem leader was quick to motion to everyone else to gather around her, especially as Greg began strumming harder while the chorus approached.

“Ohhh, haven’t you noticed, girls are what we are?” the entire group sang together, harmonizing as best as they could. However, it seemed to be working as several of the zombies below let out high-pitched screams of pain, covering their ears in an attempt to block the melody out as several
of their heads even happened to explode altogether. Encouraged by this, everyone continued with
the chorus, much more hopeful about their chances this time around. “Ohhh, we’re taking over the
stars! Ohhh, haven’t you noticed we made it this far? Ohhh, girls are what we are!”

At this break in the song, Greg strummed a loud riff on his guitar with an excited smile, one that
brought several more of the zombies on the ground to their knees. The entire group exchanged
exhilarated grins, all of them completely into their performance by now. “Oh, everybody needs a
friend,” Steven, Dipper, and Mabel sang in unison, creating a miniature harmony of their own.

“And I’ve got you, and you, and you,” the Gems answered melodiously, spinning together as they
pointed to the laughing kids.

“So many, I can’t even blame them,” Stan and Greg sang together, jamming out to the beat before
everyone else chimed in.

“We’re queens of the disco! We’re too famous!”

With as much fun as they were all admittedly having, none of them were paying too much mind to
the zombies, who were all quickly falling in quick succession. As the song continued, the corpses’
heads caved in, unable to handle the harmony the group was sending out quite powerfully. But
even so, they kept it going, unable to stop such a stellar performance at its very height.

“Ohhh, haven’t you noticed girls are what we are?” the gang launched into the chorus once again,
huddling together over the same mic. “Ohhh, we’re taking over the stars! Ohhh, we’re coming into
view as the world is turning! Ohhh, we’ve made it this far!”

Before they could move onto the final lines of the song, one of the last remaining zombies
managed to scale onto the roof, catching Steven and Dipper off guard as it towered over them.
However, before it could attack, it was squarely met with a burst of confetti courtesy of Mabel’s
confetti canon. As the disembodied head landed in the punch bowl down below and the sun started
to rise behind the shack, the group regathered to bring their number to an energized end.

“Now everyone can see us burning!” the Gems, Stan, and Greg sang together, all of them smiling
brightly as they handed the next line off to the kids.

“Now everyone can see us burning!” the trio harmonized again before the others joined them for
their epic grand finale.

“Now everyone can see us burning!”

With one more riff from Greg’s guitar to finish things off, the group couldn’t contain their elated
cheers and laughter for very long. “Thank you!” Mabel exclaimed, blowing a kiss to the yard full of
now-defeated zombies before them. “We’ll be here all night!”

“Deal with it, zombie idiots!” Stan laughed triumphantly.

“We’re all karaoke beasts!” Amethyst howled, pumping her fists excitedly.

“I have to give you some credit, Greg,” Pearl remarked with a begrudging smile. “You really came
through for us with that guitar, against all odds.”

“So, thank you,” Garnet nodded, her tone sincere as she addressed the former rock star.

“Awww… well…” Greg blushed, rubbing the back of his neck. “You’re welcome. That really means a
lot coming from you guys. You know, I-“
The former rock star was suddenly cut off as the karaoke machine started playing the song they had just preformed again, much to everyone’s shared confusion. “Uh, Pearl?” Dipper asked with a frown. “Exactly how many times did you enter the song before hitting start?”

“Probably about 15 times,” Pearl replied, quickly realizing her error. Regardless, Steven and Mabel let out delighted gasps as they looked to each other, stars in their eyes as they jumped on this opportunity.

“Encore!” they shouted in cheerful unison, and as pumped up as they all already were, no one was really in any position to disagree as they started their song all over again.

After capping their repeat performances at five, the group carefully descended from the roof, the Gems going out first to make sure no zombie stragglers remained. The entire area surrounding the shack looked like something out of a post-apocalyptic movie, with the withered bodies of the decaying dead laying battered and broken at nearly every step. The building’s interior didn’t fare much better, as the zombies had clearly ravaged nearly every room, flipping over furniture, breaking windows, and tearing nearly anything they had touched to shreds. And yet, for as horrific of an experience as the zombie attack had been, no one was really that shaken by it, largely because they were all still on the high of their victory, even as they surveyed the damage.

“I’m really sorry about this, guys,” Dipper spoke up, looking to Stan and the Gems in particular. “I totally ruined everything.”

“Dipper, are you kidding me?” Mabel interjected with a grin. “I got to sing karaoke with some of my favorite people in the world! No party could ever top that!”

“Yeah!” Steven readily agreed. “That was seriously the funnest life-threatening situation we’ve ever been in. And I think we’ve been in enough life-threatening situations by now to know.”

“Still…” Pearl cut in rather pointedly, crossing her arms as her and her teammates gave Dipper something of a disappointed glance. “I do happen to recall a certain someone telling us that he would be “super careful” with a certain journal… don’t you, Dipper?”

“Right…” Dipper took in an remorseful breath, avoiding eye contact with the Gems. “I guess I sort of broke that one, didn’t I?”

“Sorta?” Amethyst scoffed. “Dude, you summoned a whole army of zombies. ‘Sort of’ doesn’t come anywhere near close.”

“Ok, I get it, you guys are mad,” Dipper said, his tone quite apprehensive as he still tried his best to play it all off regardless. “Which is understandable. But… you’re not gonna make me hand over the journal or anything, are you?”

The Gems simply looked to each other at this, their expressions hard at first before finally softening up a bit. “We can’t very well do that,” Garnet admitted. “After all, we already told you that you could keep it. But we do expect you to start using more responsibly from here on out.”

“Well, after what just happened, I really don’t think you’ll have to worry about that,” Dipper said with a small, relieved smile.

“We better not,” Garnet advised rather stoically. “But in the end, whether or not you get to keep that journal isn’t our call. It’s Stan’s.”
The conman raised an eyebrow upon hearing this, admittedly surprised, but even so, he met his nephew’s pleading gaze evenly. “Kid, listen,” he began with a tired sigh. “This town is crazy. And if you wanna know exactly how crazy, just ask the Gems, because they’ve been here w-a-y longer than I have. But still, you need to be careful. I don’t know what I’d do with myself if you got hurt on my watch. I’ll let you hold onto that spooky journal, as long as you promise me that you’ll only use it for self-defense and not go looking for trouble.”

“Oh…” Dipper tentatively agreed, knowing that this really wasn’t much different from what the Gems had asked of him. “But as long as you promise me that you don’t have any other bombshell secrets about this town.”

Stan set his jaw upon hearing this, knowing that he couldn’t in all honesty deliver on this promise. Which was why it was a good thing he wasn’t that entrenched in the practice of honesty in the first place. “Promise,” he nodded tersely, hiding his crossed fingers behind his back.

“Promise,” Dipper also agreed, doing the exact same thing, unbeknownst to the conman.

With all this talk of secrets and promises going around, Steven couldn’t help but frown a little as he glanced over at the Gems. He still felt as though they were keeping something from him, something big. Whatever that something was, he was certain it had to do with why they had been so anxious about the agents finding out about them. The young Gem had a sense that there was more to it than just his guardians nor originating from Earth; this was deeper, more integral, darker. And while Steven desperately wanted to know exactly what it was, he felt as though he wasn’t really ready to pose such a question to the Gems. At least not yet.

“Yikes, we have got a lot of damage to clean up,” Stan remarked as he glanced around the wrecked living room. “Where’s my handyman at anyway?”

As if on cue, Soos wandered into the room, somehow still zombified as he let out a ravenous groan. “Brains… Braaains…”

“Holy Moses!” the conman exclaimed, startled as he grabbed a chair to hurl at the zombified handyman.

“Aw, geez! Another one?!” Amethyst asked in dismay as all three of the Gems summoned their respective weapons.

“No wait!” Steven cut in before they could attack. “It’s just Soos!”

“Oh…” Stan and the Gems mused in realization, even if they were all still admittedly confused.

“Good thing there’s a page in here about curing zombification,” Dipper remarked, pulling the journal out and flipping through it. “It’s gonna take a lot of formaldehyde.”

“Ooh, and cinnamon!” Mabel exclaimed, reading over her brother’s shoulder.

“Come on, Soos, let’s fix you up,” Dipper began using the chair Stan had dropped to prod Soos into the kitchen, even if the handyman lamely struggled.

“Brains… Brains…” Soos groaned, reaching out in an attempt to get the kids, who were hardly phased, mostly since the Gems were sticking close behind them just to be safe.

“Soos, cut it out!” Mabel scolded petulantly.

“Yeah, everybody knows its super rude to try and eat peoples’ brains,” Steven added blithely.
“Heh, sorry dudes!” the handyman chuckled, unable to resist his zombie instincts.

As the others headed on into the kitchen, Dipper hung back a bit, taking out the black light he had saved before flipping the journal open again. “I can’t believe it!” he exclaimed to himself with an excited smile, briefly glancing over all of the previously undiscovered entries and passages, each one more interesting than the last. “All this time the author’s secrets were hiding in plain sight! A whole new chapter of mysteries to explore…”

As morning fell over the forest near the shack, a sort of calm had fallen over the area, a sign that the danger had passed and peace had been restored. Still, this stillness only lasted for a moment or two, before two disheveled, exhausted figures pulled themselves up out of the crevice the zombies had emerged from. Fortunately, they weren’t corpses themselves, but considering the night both agents had had, they had gotten dangerously close to becoming ones.

“That was insane!” Trigger exclaimed breathlessly, brushing the filth off his suit as he rose to stand. “I’ve never seen anything like this! Zombies, aliens, magical books! Who do we even report to?”

Powers’ expression was as unmoved as ever as he pulled the skull of the zombie that had bitten his suit off, watching as it crumbled to dust in his hand. “This is bigger than we imagined,” he said with cold resolve. “We need to bring in the big guns.”

“But they’ll never believe us!”

“Then we’ll make them believe us,” Powers asserted, taking a tentative glance up to the Gem temple in the distance. “This is the town we’ve been looking for.”

Despite their verve, both agents were caught off guard as Toby Determined, who still thought he was at the party, happened to wander by, blind-folded and wielding a stick that he swung about in an attempt to strike a piñata. “Ah! Another zombie!” Trigger cried, reaching for the gun on his belt.

“Drop your weapon!” Powers demanded, doing the same as they both aimed for Toby. “Drop your weapon!”

Upon hearing this, the reporter finally paused and lifted his blindfold, looking to the two agents with apt bewilderment. Realizing their error, the agents lowered their weapons.

“Oh… it’s just… who is that guy?” Trigger asked, confused.

“Just a very ugly man,” Powers responded, aptly relieved over how it had, miraculously enough, not been another brain-hungry zombie. But even so, the agents succinctly nodded to each other as they began to head back to their car, their mission to dig deeper into the secrets of this odd little unknown town.

And as far as they were concerned, they weren’t going to leave until they had gotten to the bottom of it all, supernatural and extraterrestrial alike.
Chapter 32: The Golf War

Chapter Summary

In which Mabel and Connie bribe a bunch of living golf balls and very subtle Dipific foreshadowing happens

Chapter Notes

Well, here's probably the only really "fluff" chapter in this arc, since the rest of it is gonna be drama city. But ah well, I still think it turned out ok. So enjoy my take on The Golf War! :D

While it was still relatively early in the day, that didn’t stop Dipper, Steven, and Connie from continuing their Lonely Blade movie marathon from the previous day. While they had watched the first third films in the Japanese action film series at the temple yesterday, today they had taken to the den of the Mystery Shack, the three of them nestled around the recliner with Lion and Waddles resting together close by. The climax of the fourth Lonely Blade film was at its height, and while the entire movie was in Japanese, the kids didn’t have much trouble keeping up with things thanks to the English subtitles.

“It was you!” Lonely Blade exclaimed dramatically, pointing his sword as his opponent. “You were the one who killed my brother, cursing me to fight alone forever!”

“Oh, Lonely Blade, you so lonely,” Steven remarked sympathetically.

“I think that’s kind of the point, Steven,” Connie said with a soft chuckle.

“You think you can defeat me?!” Lonely Blade’s nemesis asked challengingly. “The President of the Shadow Samurai Government?!”

“What?!” the young Gem gasped, sitting up. “The janitor is the evil samurai president? That’s bananas!”

“Seriously? That’s the big twist?” Dipper asked incredulously, not impressed. “It was totally obvious! He’s been mopping the floor in the background of literally every fight scene.”

“Yeah, and he’s even on the cover of the box,” Connie pointed out, holding said box up. “If they had really wanted to write in a good twist, then they should have made the delivery guy the president instead!”

“Oh man, exactly!” Dipper exclaimed. “Considering how unassuming and nice that guy was, it would have been way smarter for them to make him the villain! That would have been a much
better twist ending, if you ask me.”

“That’s what I’m saying! It’s thematically resonant with the rest of the movie, plus it would have created much better suspense!”

“Hm… I don’t see it…” Steven frowned, their analysis going right over his head.

Still, before either Dipper or Connie could go into detail, Stan interrupted, stepping into the den with a full pan in hand. “Who wants Stan-cakes?” he asked, nodding to the breakfast he had just made. “They’re like pancakes, but they probably have some of my hair in them.” Of course, despite this rare offer for free food from the conman, the kids were all quick to turn him down.

“Pass.”

“…No, thank you.”

“I’m…. I’m good.”

“Eh, more for me.” Stan shrugged with a grin. However, he didn’t have much of a chance to sit down and enjoy his pancakes before the shack’s door burst open and Mabel rushed in with a very excited squeal.

“It’s here!” she proclaimed brightly, holding up a newspaper as she ran around the den. “It’s here! It’s here! It’s here! I’ve been waiting all morning and it’s finally here!”

“What’s here?” Connie asked curiously.

“This is!” Mabel waved the paper she was holding around. “The Gravity Falls Gossiper accepted my article about summer fashion tips for squirrels! My picture is gonna be in the newspaper!”

“Whoa! Mabel, that’s so awesome!” Steven exclaimed in amazement. “You know, me and the Gems were in the paper one time, and so was the temple! But… only for an article about the most dangerous places in Gravity Falls that people should probably stay away from…”

A bout of awkward silence passed at this, though Stan broke through it a moment or two later. “So, let’s see that article, kiddo,” he said, sending Mabel a surprisingly encouraging grin.

“Check it!” she exclaimed proudly, holding the front page out for everyone to see while the conman read it aloud.

“Pacifica Northwest declares V-neck the look of the season,” Stan read, only for his grin to instantly fade into confusion. “What am I looking at here?”

“Whoa, whoa, what?!” Mabel gasped, looking at the paper herself to find that her article of squirrel fashions was nowhere to be found. Instead, the front page had been commandeered by an article by Pacifica, as well as a large, flashy photo of the heiress herself.

“Looks like someone bought their way to the front page,” Dipper remarked with apt distain for Pacifica, especially seeing how distressed Mabel was as she looked over the article.

“I’m surprised she doesn’t do that every day, considering how hard it is for her to stay out of the limelight for even a minute,” Connie scoffed just as crossly.

“Is it legal for a child to wear that much makeup?” Stan asked, a hint of contempt in his tone as well.
“Ugh! Pacifica!” Mabel growled, throwing the paper down onto the floor in frustration. “She always ruins everything!”

“Aw, I’m sorry about your article, Mabel,” Steven said with sincerity. “But look at the bright side! You can always share your squirrel fashion tips with all of us!”

“Yeah, and besides,” Dipper interjected supportively. “Who even reads newspapers anymore anyway?”

“Dudes!” Soos exclaimed as he walked into the room, holding a copy of the paper. “V-neck season is upon us! Who wants to help me get ahead of the fashion curve? I’m taking it one step further… With a W-neck!” The handyman paused as he drew a W onto the collar of his shirt before haphazardly attempting to cut along it with a pair of scissors. “Must… follow… newspaper…”

“Well… that was some bad timing…” Connie noted with a frown.

“Oh, come on!” Mabel groaned in loud frustration as she stormed over to the table, pouring herself a glass of orange juice and downing it all in one gulp. “Ugh, I need something to get my mind off of this.”

Before anyone could even suggest something that could cheer her up however, the television happened to do it for them as it cut to an amazingly appropriate commercial. “Looking for a distraction from your horrible life?”

“Victory! Honor! Destiny! Heroism! Valor! Mutton!” the commercial boldly proclaimed. “These old-timey words are alive and well at the Gravity Falls Royal Discount Put Hut! *No mutton available at the snack shop*.”

“There you go, Mabel! You love mini-golf!” Dipper exclaimed, grabbing his sister’s scrapbook off the nearby table to show the others. Sure enough, it featured a picture of a nine-year old Mabel taking home a gold medal in a minor league mini-golf tournament. “She’s been amazing at it since we were kids! What do you say, Mabel? We’ve had a stressful couple of days. How about we take a break, huh?”

“Great idea, Dipper!” Steven readily agreed. “Mini-golf is so much fun! There’s castles, and windmills, and having to outrun security after Amethyst jumps into the moat so she can collect all the lost golf balls and eat them all! It’s the best!”

“Well, everything but that last part is fun, at least,” Connie shrugged. “But still, Mabel, a few rounds of mini-golf would be a great for you to get your mind off of—y-you know what.”

“So what do ya say, pumpkin?” Stan asked with a warm grin. “Would kicking all our butts at mini-golf cheer you up?”

“Maybe a little…” Mabel said quietly, tugging gently on her hair while pouting.

“Come on, Mabel!” Dipper encouraged as he jumped to his feet. “Victory!”

At this, Mabel couldn’t really hold her usual zeal back as she brightly picked up where her brother had left off. “Honor!”

“Destiny!” Stan proclaimed, also caught up in the moment.
“Heroism!” Connie jumped in brazenly.

“Valor!” Steven declared with a huge grin.

“Mutton!” Soos finished as his W-neck inadvertently flopped down.

Seeing as how the excitement was infections, the entire group launched into a unified cheer as they began to head out, pumping their fists in the air in anticipation over their mini-golf adventure.

“Victory! Honor! Destiny! Heroism! Valor! Mutton! Victory! Honor! Destiny! Heroism! Valor! Mutton!”

“And the pig and the lion can look after the house!” Soos exclaimed before shutting the door behind him, leaving Waddles and Lion to continue lazily napping together as if nothing had happened.

While Gravity Falls was a rather small town, its local miniature golf course was surprisingly large and elaborate. Ye Royal Discount Putt Hutt consisted of the standard 18 holes, each hosting a different decorative theme, from a pirate ship, to the Eiffel tower, to mines, to a large windmill, to its central medieval castle. Business was certainly booming as several groups played through the course, including the Pines and the Gems as they had just arrived.

Surprisingly enough, it hadn’t been that difficult for Steven to convince the Gems to come along, seeing as how they didn’t really have anything better to do with their free time. Plus, as soon as they heard that it was for the sake of helping Mabel feel better, they couldn’t really say no. And so, even though they really didn’t understand the rules of the game that well, the trio was still along for the ride as the group came up to the first hole.

“Ahh, mini-golf!” Mabel grinned as she took in a deep breath, already feeling much more content now that she amidst her old pastime. “The sport of mini-champions!”

“The grass is fake, but the fun is real,” Dipper added, leaning against his golf club. “There’s something here for everyone!”

“So when do we get to the part where we start beating each other with these weird sticks?” Amethyst asked, swinging her club around as the group prepared to take on hole 1.

“Amethyst, that’s… not how you play mini-golf,” Connie said with a concerned frown. “Though I’m pretty sure that is a good way to get arrested…”

“Oh come on,” the purple Gem groaned. “First I can’t throw cannonballs into the pool and now I can’t hit people with sticks? Human stuff is so lame!”

“Hey, Garnet,” Stan smirked in apt amusement upon seeing the overtly colorful plaid pants the Gem leader happened to be wearing. “Nice pants. Where’d you get them from? Some old Scotsman’s garage sale?”

“They’re my dad’s actually,” Steven spoke up. “I found them while looking through his old golf clubs. They’re a little big on me, so I gave them to Garnet so she can wear them!”

“And I think I pull them off well enough,” Garnet remarked assuredly. “By the way, Stan, nice slippers.” She smirked as she nodded to the conman’s choice of footwear, which, sure enough, happened to be a pair of bedroom slippers, despite the fact that they were out in public.
“Hey! I’ll have you know it takes a lot of effort for a man my age to put actual shoes on!” Stan protested hotly. “Plus, these just so happen to be really comfortable slippers, so I see no problem wearing them out and about every now and then.”

“Hey could you guys maybe keep it down a little?” Dipper asked as he prepared to take his first swing. “I’m trying to focus here.” Turning away from the group, he did just that, taking the time to carefully line up the shot, only for his swing to end up missing the ball entirely. However, this did end up sending the ball teetering to the right, or rather, into the nearby shallow pond.

“Oh, excellent shot, Dipper!” Pearl applauded with a genuine smile.

“Uh, Pearl? I was supposed to hit it into the hole,” Dipper pointed out with slight confusion as to the white Gem’s excitement.

“Wait, really?” Pearl frowned. “Well then clearly I misunderstood the point of this game…”

“Don’t worry, bro!” Mabel encouraged, pulling a dinosaur sticker out of her vast collection and slapping it onto Dipper’s cheek. “You’re still ‘ext-roar-dinary’!”

“I’ll take what I can get,” Dipper concluded with a sigh, moving out of the way to allow his sister to take her turn.

Mabel stepped up onto the green with apt confidence, making sure to grip her club just right as she positioned her aim seamlessly. “Ok, do the hip wiggle and—yah!” Despite her apparent finesse in preparing her shot, Mabel simply whacked it, watching expectantly as it glided through the course without hitting so much as a single snag. The others were all aptly amazed as the ball rounded its way to the hole, slightly missing it, though fortunately it bounced off of McGucket’s nose as the old man napped on the green before landing its way in. “Yes!” Mabel cheered over her hole in one as the others applauded, clearly impressed.

“Holy smokes!” Stan gasped with a surprised smile. “Someone in our family actually has talent!”

“Grunkle Stan, you ain’t seen nothing yet!” Dipper remarked, knowing full well just how much of a shark his sister was at mini-golf.

“That was incredible, Mabel!” Steven exclaimed with a smile. “No wonder you’re such a pro at Golf Quest Mini! You’ve got the real world skills to back it up!”

“It’s all in the hips, Steven,” Mabel shrugged, even if she was quite proud over her success. “All in the hips.”

“Mm, I’d argue and say it’s a bit in the shoulders too,” Connie noted as she stepped up to take her turn. Her approach was far different from Mabel’s however, as instead of hitting the ball hard, her stroke was gentle and precise, though still enough to send the ball careening through the green and past any obstacles in its way. In the end, the ball squarely landed in the hole, much to the group’s collective surprise. “Oh nice!” Connie exclaimed with a grin. “Looks like I still got it.”

“Whoa! Looks like we got two mini-golf masters on our hands!” Soos quipped, grinning at the girls.

“Indeed! How did you get so skilled at this game, Connie?” Pearl asked curiously.

“My parents enrolled me in mini-golf camp a few summers ago,” Connie explained. “I’m probably a little rusty after all these years, but I can remember most of what they taught us.”
“Mini-golf camp?” Dipper asked with a good natured chuckle. “Yeesh, Connie, what extra-curricular activity haven’t your parents made you do?”

“Eh, they mean well,” Connie also laughed. “They say all this stuff is supposed to help make me a ‘well-rounded individual’, but mostly I think its help bolster my college resume someday.”

“Well still, it’s good to finally have some friendly competition,” Mabel remarked, grinning at Connie. “It gets boring always beating Dipper by so many strokes on every hole!”

“Hey!” Dipper protested as Steven let out a small laugh.

“Well, I guess this will be a good chance for us both to put our skills to the test,” Connie smiled as she exchanged a sportsmanly handshake with Mabel. “Good luck, Mabel.”

“Same to you, Connie!” Mabel exclaimed brightly, though Amethyst was quick to interject into the friendly exchange.

“So now do we get to hit each other with these things?” she asked, holding her club up as the girls looked to her in confusion. “Yes? No? Later? Probably later, right? Yeah, probably later.”

Since their group was so large, it took a while for everyone to get through each hole of the course, but even so, fun was certainly being had. Throughout most of the game, Mabel and Connie were neck and neck, scoring mostly holes-in-one, with a few rare flukes every now and then. Of course, the others lagged far behind their skill, to the point that none of them could hope to come close, which meant they were all competing for third place. Despite his best efforts, Dipper inadvertently ended up sending most of his shots into sand traps or tight corners, while the majority of Steven’s shots ended up landing outside of each course altogether. Soos’ score was already ranking far above par for each hole, and Stan clearly wasn’t putting much effort into his swings, seeing as how they would often miss the hole by a longshot. Even the Gems weren’t faring much better, with Garnet sending more than a few balls hurling towards the sky, Pearl coming up with complex, albeit non-functional formulas to try and land her shots just right, and Amethyst trying to eat her ball at nearly every hole.

By the time they had made it to the 18th hole, the dreaded Dutch windmill, Mabel and Connie were essentially tied for first place, with a very narrow margin existing between their scores. By their show of skill alone, the girls had already amassed a large crowd of patrons to watch their tense, yet friendly competition, and everyone waited on anxious, baited breaths to see who would come out on top. And indeed, it certainly seemed like either one of them could. Connie had already taken her shot, one that landed mere inches away from the hole, much to her disappointment. Mabel was set to go next, and already she was focusing all of her efforts into making this the perfect shot as everyone watched on in eager anticipation.

“Guys, this is amazing!” Dipper exclaimed as he finished tallying up the most recent score. “If Mabel gets one more hole-in-one, she’ll beat her all time high score!”

“But if she misses, then that means Connie could win,” Steven pointed out anxiously. “But I want Mabel to win too! Oh, this is so hard! Why can’t if just be a tie?!”

“I mean, it could be, if she misses,” Connie shrugged, not really bothered by either outcome. “At this point, it could go either way.”

“Or a different way entirely,” Garnet spoke up, adjusting her shades as vaguely as always.

Still, Mabel paid none of this speculation any mind as she lined her putter up to the ball, muttering
intently to herself as she did so. “You got this, Mabel. Just pretend the ball is Pacifica’s face!” With that satisfying thought in mind, she finally made her move, whacking the ball and sending it cleanly through the windmill’s tiny opening. It certainly seemed like the ball was going to make it all the way to the hole, but instead, it rolled around its fringe and into the small puddle against the wall, where it unfortunately stopped and stayed. “Aw, nuts!” Mabel shouted angrily, tossing her putter to the ground in a petulant huff.

Upon witnessing this failure, a murmur of dissent rippled through the crowd as it began to steadily disband, only leaving the original group behind. Still, they were all quick to meet Mabel on the other side of the windmill as she morosely went to retrieve her ball. “Garnet, tell me the truth,” Mabel began as they all arrived. “Did you see me missing that shot with your future vision?”

“Mm… I saw it,” Garnet acknowledged gently. “But I didn’t want to throw your game off by telling you about it.”

Mabel let out a loud, exasperated groan at this, but even so, Connie was quick to jump in at an attempt to reassure her. “Don’t feel bad, Mabel. This is a tough hole, even for me.”

“Yeah! Plus that means you guys are tied for first!” Steven quipped with a reassuring smile. “You both won, which in my book, is pretty amazing.”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it, kid,” Stan remarked, pulling Mabel’s ball out of the water and handing it back to her. “The whole thing’s random anyway.”

“Besides the Bermuda Triangle, how mini-golf works is our world’s greatest mystery,” Soos added.

“Isn’t it just a matter of force and gravity acting upon the ball in a way that propels it forward as friction and curves gradually work against it?” Pearl inquired eloquently.

“Anyway,” Stan said pointedly, ignoring the white Gem as he turned to both Mabel and Connie. “As far as I’m concerned, you two are still better at this than anyone else in Gravity—”

The conman was abruptly cut off as a random ball happened to easily sink into the nearby hole, resulting in a perfect hole in one. Everyone gasped in shock at this, though their shock soon turned to disdain upon seeing who had landed this incredible shot.

“Oh, would you look at that?” Pacifica asked dryly, casually positioning her putter over her shoulder as she sent the Pines and the Gems a snide glance. “I didn’t know if was ‘hobos golf-free’ day!”

“Oh come on!” Mabel huffed just as bitterly. “First the newspaper, and now this! How many other things can she ruin for me today?!”

The heiress didn’t happen overhear this as she strode over to the group confidently, her parents following not too far behind as they shared their daughter’s conceited demeanor. “Well if it isn’t the Pines family!” Pacifica remarked with faux delight as she launched an insult at each one of them. “Fat,” she pointed to Soos. “Old,” she said, nodding at Stan. “Lame,” she rolled her eyes as she got to Dipper. “And Braces!” she sneered, smirking at Mabel.

“Would it be wrong to punch a child?” Stan muttered, quite incensed as he clenched his fists.

“Maybe for you, but not for me!” Connie replied, already cracking her knuckles in anticipation.
“D-do we really have to resort to violence?” Steven asked with apt concern, though Pacifica was quick to cut in once more.

“Oh, and look who else turned up,” she raised an eyebrow as she turned to Steven, Connie, and the Gems. “Goofball, Glasses, and the Rhinestone Gems!”

“Oh, I’ll show her rhinestones!” Pearl hissed crossly, taking a step forward only for Garnet to stop her.

“Easy,” the Gem leader advised, as calm as ever until the heiress happened to throw a scathing remark her way.

“Nice pants by the way,” Pacifica mocked, pointing to Garnet’s golf pants. “They really go with that whole cringeworthy ‘stuck in the 70s’ look you’re trying to pull off and failing at”

The Gem leader’s expression darkened upon hearing this, and it was instantly clear to see she was anything but amused as her teammates looked to her expectantly. “On second thought…”

“Guys, I got this,” Dipper interjected before turning to the heiress with a smug grin. “Hey, Pacifica, how’s that whole ‘your family being frauds’ thing working out for you?”

“Great, actually!” Pacifica replied triumphantly. “That’s the thing about money. It makes problems go away!”

“Well it can’t buy you skill!” Mabel remarked. “You just walked into the game of two mini-golf champions, right Connie?”

“Right!” Connie readily agreed. “You may have gotten lucky on this hole, but we’d love to see you do half as good on any other whole here.”

“Pfft, ‘luck’ has nothing to do with it,” Pacifica scoffed before snapping her fingers. “Sergei!” At this command, a tall, lanky Russian man stepped forward, toting the heiresses’ golf clubs and other gear as he stood firmly beside her. “This is Sergei, my trainer.”

“The Sportlympics had mini-golf once,” Sergei said, his accent quite thick. “I took gold!” He pulled his shirt open a bit to reveal the large gold medal hanging from his neck, which was indeed for first place in mini-golf.

“Whoa… I wish I was good enough to get a medal in mini-golf,” Steven mused, amazed. His wonder was cut short however, as Amethyst quickly elbowed him as a reminder that they were against Pacifica in this. “Oh, uh, I mean…. I-it’s not that great.”

“Well, trainer or no trainer, Mabel and Connie could still kick your butt at mini-golf any day!” Dipper asserted, sending the heiress a harsh glare.

“Please. Don’t make me laugh,” Pacifica sneered, rolling her eyes as she moved onto the bonus hole, coldly addressing the girls on her way there. “Now, if you two don’t mind moving out of the way of the professionals…” With her usual pointed flare, the heiress stepped up to the hole and effortlessly took her swing, which landed right in the volcanic bonus hole and prompting a momentous explosion of celebration. “Enjoy sharing second place,” she remarked to Mabel and Connie, who had only watched on in severe unified frustration. “Give them a hand, folks!”

As the nearby crowd launched into a patronizing round of applause, neither of the girls were really paying them any mind. After all, they were far too incensed now after hearing Pacifica mock the skill that they were both rather proud of themselves over. “Ok, that’s it!” Connie seethed, gripping
her golf club tightly. “Time to knock that dumb smirk right off her ‘perfect’ little face!”

“Yeah! Now we’re talking!” Amethyst cheered, more than ready to put her club to good use.

“Hold it, you guys,” Mabel stopped them before they could go after the heiress. “I have something else in mind… Hey, Pacifica!” she called after her rival as she began to leave. “We challenge you to a rematch!”

“Oh, good idea!” Connie exclaimed with renewed verve as she turned to Pacifica. “Let’s see you put those supposed ‘skills’ of yours to the test!”

“I don’t think either of you wanna go there with me,” Pacifica remarked, still not turning to face them. “After all, isn’t it already embarrassing enough for you being poor and mediocre? Do we really need to have some petty little contest to prove it?”

“Oh, what, are you scared?” Mabel challenged daringly, going on impulse as she launched into a barrage of insults worthy of the spoiled heiress. “You… you walking one-dimensional, bleached-blonde, valley girl stereotype!”

Upon hearing such a verbal thrashing, the entire crowd took in a collective gasp of shock. Still, no one was more surprised or more enraged at this call-out than Pacifica herself as she abruptly spun around to face Mabel and Connie, her expression beyond livid. “Like, let’s do this!” she accepted crossly, flipping her hair for extra emphasis.

Without any further prompting from either side, all three of the girls met at the center of the course, their putters in hand as they prepared to face off. However, before they could even set the rules of their competition, clouds quickly started rolling in through the previously sunny skies above, making it clear that a sporadic summer storm was in the offing. While Mabel, Connie, and Pacifica were more than willing to compete through it, the Mini-Golf King thought otherwise.

“Hear ye! Hear ye!” the course’s owner called, driving up in his gaudy golf cart, which he accidentally happened to drive right into a nearby lamp post. “Ow!” he exclaimed, bumping into the pole several more times before righting his vehicle and continuing. “Stop at once! The park is now closed due to weather! The King of Mini-Golf has spoken!” With his message relayed, the Mini-Golf King put his cart in reverse, only for it to ram into another pole and topple onto its side with him still in it. “Ah! The king is down!”

“This isn’t over,” Pacifica declared to her opponents. “You two, me, midnight. We’ll see who’s best!”

“Oh, you bet we will…” Connie scowled as the heiress sauntered off.

“Yeah! We’ll be here!” Mabel exclaimed with heated zeal. All too quickly, the oncoming storm began as lightning flashed in the distance and rain began to drizzle onto the course. The Northwests were more than prepared for it though as they whipped their umbrellas out in perfect unison before heading off, laughing amongst themselves over everything that had just happened as Sergei ran dutifully after them. But even so, Connie and Mabel remained firm in their stance as they watched their shared rival leave, both of them more than eager to beat her at her own game later that evening. That is, until Steven accidentally undermined their show of resolve with his usual friendliness.

“Bye, Pacifica!” he called after the heiress cheerfully. “We’ll see you tonight! It’s gonna be a ton of fun, I’m sure!” The young Gem paused in innocent confusion as he noticed the disgruntled looks that everyone, especially the girls, were giving him at this. “What?”
The Pines and the Gems had settled on waiting out the rain at the local taco joint, allowing them all to get some fast and cheap dinner before the mini-golf faceoff later that night. Well, everyone but Garnet and Pearl, at least, as Amethyst readily shoved her face with the huge load of tacos she had ordered, much to the white Gems’ absolute revulsion and the Gem leader’s usual apathy.

Meanwhile, Mabel slumped against the table in something of a depression as she prompted Dipper to feed her nachos at consistent intervals. While she had been confident in her and Connie’s chances against Pacifica back at the golf course, the more she thought about it, the more she realized she wasn’t entirely sure if either of them really could beat her. After all, the heiress had an award winning-trainer on her side, and while Connie might have gone to mini-golf camp, all Mabel really had going for her was her own innate skill, which, if she was completely honest with herself, wasn’t as refined or sharpened as she wished it could be. After all, mini-golf was a fickle game of both dexterity as well as a good touch of luck. And if they ever wanted to win against adept heiress, then certainly they would need more than just a touch of that.

Still, while Mabel had mostly given up hope, Connie was doing anything but as she sat hunched over a small notebook, furiously scribbling notes down on it as Steven looked over her shoulder with apt confusion. “What are you doing?” he finally asked, unable to contain his curiosity any longer.

“Planning out our strategy,” Connie explained her pragmatic approach, still working fervently all the while. “I figure that if we map out the path and trajectory of each of our shots beforehand, then we’ll be able to anticipate any flukes and work around them beforehand. This always worked for me back at mini-golf camp, so it can’t fail now!”

“What’s the point?” Mabel spoke up with a fretful pout. “Pacifica’s got us as good as beat already. I guess it’s time to scratch mini-golf off my talents list…”

“Aw, don’t give up, Mabel!” Soos encouraged with a sympathetic smile.

“Yeah, if you guys beat Pacifica at this, then she can never rag on us again,” Dipper added reassuringly.

“And maybe you guys will get really cool mini-golf medals too!” Steven exclaimed brightly.

“I’m not in this for any medal,” Connie said, her tone rarely cold and harsh as much as it was resolved. “I’m in this because I want to finally put Pacifica in her place.”

“Sounds like as good a motivation as any,” Garnet remarked, crossing her arms.

“I agree,” Pearl nodded pointedly. “That girl is a horrid, vain, spoiled little brat, just like the rest of her family. If you ask me, she deserves far more than just being beaten in a simple game of mini-golf for those callous insults of hers.”

“More, huh?” Amethyst asked, a sly grin already crossing her face. “You know, whenever someone insults or ticks me or Stan off, there’s only one thing that always makes us feel better about it…”

“That’s right,” Stan cut in with an equally mischievous smirk. “And that thing is none other than a good, old-fashioned Revenge Trip.”

“Oh no, you two,” Pearl quickly spoke up in protest as Garnet shook her head. “I don’t care how awful that Northwest girl is! We are not about to indulge in one of your senseless romps of
“Debauchery and depravity!”

“Aw, c’mon, P,” Amethyst groaned. “We’ll keep this lowkey and small, I promise!”

“Yeah, all we’re gonna do is scribble some graffiti on the wall of Northwest manor,” Stan shrugged apathetically. “That’s child play compared to our usual Revenge Trip fare.”

“Seriously, guys, what’s the problem with that?” Dipper asked the two dissenting Gems. “Pearl, you said so yourself: Pacifica has it a long time coming.”

“The problem is that it’s immoral and illegal!” Pearl exclaimed hotly.

“And we’re not doing it,” Garnet said firmly. “That’s final.”

Stan and Amethyst let out a shared sigh of frustrated disappointment as they both sunk in their seats a little. Fortunately though, Steven was quick to lighten with his usual optimism. “Well, I still think you guys can win!” he grinned to Mabel and Connie. “And I’m sure that if you both start thinking that for yourselves, then you really will win! It’s like magic!”

“Or just plain old positive thinking,” Dipper cut in with a small, amused smirk.

“You know what? You guys are right!” Mabel exclaimed, slamming her fist down on the table as her usual zeal returned. “We just need to get in a little more practice before midnight, and we’ll have this in the bag!”

“Oh yeah, practicing would be a great way for me to test out all these shots I have planned out…” Connie mused, looking over her complex notes.

“Go to the golf course after dark, you say?” Stan interjected with a wry grin.

“No one said-” Pearl attempted to say before Amethyst interrupted her.

“Oh man, that would be super dangerous,” the purple Gem remarked callously. “Not to mention ‘illegal’ and ‘immoral’.”

“Yeah, I mean, we’d have to break in…” Stan mused just as innocuously. “Not to mention—just kidding! Let’s break in!”

While Pearl certainly had wanted to object to the idea of sneaking into the golf course after hours, her protests were ultimately shut down as Stan and Amethyst overrode her, leading the charge with cheers of excitement as the conman’s car crashed through the course’s toll gate. As they made it to the empty parking lot, the Gems dismounted from their shared spot on top of the car to see the kids off along with Stan, while Soos kept watch in case any security happened to come by. Putting their breaking and entering skills to good use, Stan and Amethyst made easy work of the fence surrounding the course, allowing the kids easy, yet inconspicuous access inside.

“We’ll be waiting right out here for you kids when you’re done,” Pearl assured with a smile.

“Yeah, unless we actually do end up tagging Northwest Manor,” Amethyst remarked with a shrug. “Which, considering these two buzzkills we probably won’t.”

“Be careful in there, you four,” Garnet made sure to advise. “Oh, and Mabel, Connie, good luck.”
“Thanks, Garnet,” Connie nodded with a sincere smile.

“Oh, and Mabel? One more thing,” Stan spoke up, opening the sticker book his niece had just handed him to hold onto and pulling out one of the countless stickers. This one in particular had a shiny gold trophy on it, as well as the words “U Da Best” featured prominently. With a supportive smile, the conman put the sticker on Mabel’s sweater, sending her a confident wink as she returned it with a warm smile. “Knock her dead, kid.”

Mabel responded with a bold thumbs-up before heading in after Dipper, Steven, and Connie, intent on her mission of improving her skills in the short time they had left. Meanwhile, Stan and the Gems stood somewhat awkwardly outside of the fence after the kids had gone in, an awkward silence that was soon broken by Garnet, especially after she noticed the hopeful glances the conman and the purple Gem were sending her way. “We’re still not going to vandalize the mansion. No matter how many times you ask.”

“Aw…” the pair sighed, disgruntled over how their Revenge Trip ambitions for the evening were apparently not to be.

Mabel and Connie had taken no time at all breezing through the first 17 holes of the course, pretty much all of their shots resulting in effortless holes in one. Still, it was quite clear that the final hole, the windmill, was still proving to be a substantial problem for them both. This was proven once again as Mabel hit yet another ball through the windmill, only for it to end up barely missing the hole on the other side once again.

“Darn!” she shouted in apt frustration. “Poop heck darn!”

“Aw, and you were so close that time, Mabel!” Steven frowned, leaning down to measure the small increment of distance between the ball and the hole. “Only 0.2 inches away!”

“Ugh, that’s not good enough!” Mabel exclaimed with a disappointed huff. “Pacifica’s not going to be 0.2 inches away when she lands the perfect hole-in-one and beats us both while making fun of our fashion senses and proving that she’s way better than us at everything!”

“Hold on a minute, Mabel,” Connie interjected calmly as she stepped up to take her shot. “I think I finally have this one figured out…” With intent focus, she made sure to line up her shot as precisely as possible, angling her putter as she eyed the path she intended her ball to take. “Ok… 30° by 70 °… Winds south by southwest… pull back and-” Letting out a deep, concentrated breath, Connie took her swing, watching with anticipation and hope that her well-thought out calculations would serve her well. And at first, it seemed like they would as the ball soared through the windmill, coming out the other end as it made a straight beeline for the hole. Yet in the end, it swerved to the side right at the last second, bouncing into the wall instead and ending up far from the hole. “Seriously?!” Connie asked with an aggravated scoff, putting her putter down. “Ugh, This is impossible!”

“I don’t get it,” Dipper frowned in bewilderment as he walked up to the windmill itself. “What’s wrong with this hole? It’s almost like-” He stopped short as he happened to catch onto a very faint, almost unnoticeable clanking noise coming from inside the structure. “Did you guys hear that?”

“Hear what?” Steven asked as him and the girls approached the windmill.

“Shh!” Dipper quickly cautioned, listening for the mysterious sound once more to ensure that it
was indeed there. “Grab your clubs,” he whispered to the others, who were all quick to do so, seeing as how they had no idea what they were about to find. Still, the four of them advanced towards the windmill at a steady, careful pace, their clubs raised and ready for attack. After they all exchanged a round of terse nods, Dipper brazenly stepped up to the windmill, taking in a deep breath as the others raised their clubs even more before quickly pulling the structure’s back panel off. And upon seeing what it had been hiding, the kids were scarcely able to believe what they saw.

An entire city existed inside of the windmill, completely in miniature and decked out in a folksy Dutch motif. Still, the numerous tiny inhabitants of this city were even more bewildering. Also clad in traditional Dutch garb and clogs, they all appeared to be humanoid golf balls, with large, colorful dimpled heads and disproportionately petite bodies. These curious creatures worked within their small scale home merrily, though their usual activity was abruptly halted as they noticed the group of much larger kids hovering over them.

Alarmed by this intrusion, the golf ball race let out a round of terrified screams as they huddled together for safety. Likewise, the kids themselves were aptly startled by this strange discovery as they let out their own respective frightened cries, their putters still raised though they didn’t dare bring them down yet. This exchange of panicked screams continued for quite some time, until the kids collectively realized that these tiny creatures certainly couldn’t pose them any threat, prompting them all to tentatively lower their clubs.

The members of the golf ball race were quick to notice this sign of armistice as they began to calm themselves into silence, even if they remained close together just in case. “We good?” one of the petite people at the front of the group asked kids anxiously. While still incredibly confused, they all nodded their assent. “All right then! Hi! Hello!” he greeted brightly. “I’m Franz, and welcome to our home!”

“What is all this?” Dipper asked, looking over the intricate mini-city with relative awe.

“Whatever it is, its adorable!” Steven quipped with a delighted smile. “Seriously, you guys are so cute!”

“Thank you, thank you,” Franz chuckled as several of the other golf ball people blushed at the compliment. “We know.”

“So, what are you guys?” Mabel asked with a frown. “Tiny humans or enormous mini-humans?”

“Neither,” Franz clarified with another laugh. “We’re the Lilliputtians! Lilli—Lilliputt—the name makes more sense written down. But anyway, we control the balls! Behold!”

At this cue, the panel on the side of the windmill flew open, revealing an incredibly complex system of levers and pullies, all of which served the purpose of moving any golf ball that went into the windmill through it. The Lilliputtians operated their machinery with skill, apt timing, and adorable cheerfulness, bright smiles on all their faces as they turned cracks, pressed buttons, and even let the ball bounce off them to help the ball along on its journey. And in the end, the ball shot cleanly out of the other side of the windmill before rolling straight into the hole as the kids all gasped in amazement.

“That’s incredible!” Mabel exclaimed with an awestruck grin.

“And so needlessly complicated,” Dipper added, bemused.

“It all makes perfect sense now!” Connie laughed, flipping through her now completely useless notes. “How could I have ever factored tiny living golf people into my equations? No wonder this
hole was giving us such a hard time!"

“Yeah! I guess luck really has nothing to do with mini-golf after all,” Steven shrugged. “Instead, we can owe it all to these guys!”

“Aw shucks,” Franz gushed proudly. “This is only our life-long passion. Would you like us to elaborate through song?”

“Yes!” Steven passionately agreed, always more than happy to hear an upbeat musical number. The Lilliputtians complied as they took in a collective deep breath and prepared to sing their piece.

“Actually,” Dipper quickly interrupted. “We’re good.”

Disappointed just as much as the young Gem was, the Lilliputtians all sighed as they began to disperse, heading back to their various roles and stations within the windmill. “So what are you hugelings doing here anyway?” Franz asked the kids curiously.

“Well, we kinda have to play this mini-golf tournament against our rival, Pacifica,” Mabel explained, though she was quickly cut off before she could say anything else.

The Lilliputtians all gasped and began to mutter amongst themselves, their usually upbeat, cheerful mood souring upon hearing this. “Oh, we know all about rivals…” Franz glowered crossly.

“Put a clog in it, ya windmill-lubbers!” a bold voice called from the other side of the golf course. Startled, the kids turned to see the pirate ship hole suddenly light up, a group of Lilliputtians clad in pirate wear standing atop its deck as they sent hostile glares towards the windmill. “These frilly bottom popinjays are terrible at controllin’ the balls!” the pirate captain exclaimed, drawing his tiny sword. “We are the ball masters, says I! Argh!”

The other pirate Lilliputtians arghed in loud agreement, though their revelry was soon interrupted as the nearby Eiffel Tower lit up next, a group of French Lilliputtians clinging to it with snooty scowls. “Shut your mouths, you show-boating pirates! Everyone knows ze Eiffel Tower hole is ze best!”

“Je ne sais quio! Sacrebleu! Au revoir!” one of the other French Lilliputtians added hotly.

“Stay your comments, ye churlish Frenchmen!” a knight Lilliputtian shouted from atop the castle hole. “None control the balls better than the knights of—Wiener Castle?” he paused, glancing down at the graffiti sprayed onto the castle wall. “Who wrote this?”

“We'll settle which hole is best!” Franz challenged brazenly as him and his fellow Dutch Lilliputtians rushed forward. “Attack!”

“Ohh, I’m shiverin’ in me timbers!” the captain Lilliputtian mocked as the other pirates began to swing off their ship. “Get them!”

“Long live the mini-king!” the Lilliputtian head knight cried as him and his breather hurried to the fray, their little blades drawn and ready.

The kids could only stand and watch in surprised confusion as the various factions of the Lilliputtians collided in a violent, miniature battle at their feet. From dueling with swords and other blunt objects, to simply fighting first to fist, the small-scale violence that was unfolding was actually quite impressive. None of the golf-ball people held back against their respective foes, landing punches and blows that did sustain real damage and giving the kids quite a bewildering spectacle to behold.
“Yikes….” Connie remarked with a concerned frown. “You know, they never told us something like this would happen back at mini-golf camp. It’s… kinda weird…”

“Are you kidding? These guys are a riot!” Dipper laughed, fully amused by the rather comedic display.

“Aw, but they shouldn’t fight!” Steven exclaimed fretfully. “They’re too cute and small and folksy to be beating each other up like this!”

While Mabel agreed with this, she couldn’t help but let out a small chuckle herself as she decided to address the Lilliputtians in the hopes of quelling their brawl. “Guys, guys! Calm down! Your fighting is inadvertently adorable!”

“Adorable we are, hugeling, but our tale less so,” Franz said, lying on the ground battered and beaten just like the his fellow Lilliputtians. “Every hole in the park thinks they’re superior, from the cowboys in the east, to the grimy miners of the south. If only there was some way to decide which side is the best with maybe, an award… or like a trophy, I dunno.”

“But Franz, look!” another Lilliputtian gasped, pointing up at Mabel’s sweater. Or more specifically, the trophy sticker attached to it.

“The sticker!” Franz exclaimed, jumping to his feet zealously. “The sticker could decide!”

“It does say ‘ze best’ on it!” one of the Frenchmen Lilliputtians proclaimed.

“ Decide for us, hugeling!” the head knight Lilliputtian demanded of Mabel. “Choose which mini- kingdom to give the sticker to, and end our war!”

All of the other Lilliputtians let out a unified cheer at this idea, every faction eyeing the sticker enviously as they all wanted to have it bestowed upon them. Still, despite their unanimous excitement, there was something of a discrepancy about it among the kids.

“Uh, I don’t know, you guys…” Mabel frowned, glancing down at her sticker apprehensively. “I’m not sure if we should get involved in your weird mini blood feud.”

“And besides!” Steven interjected with a smile. “You’re all so great that it would be like, impossible to decide!”

Clearly, the Lilliputtians were anything but appeased upon hearing this as they instead sent a cold glare the young Gem’s way. “Yeah… I don’t think that’s gonna cut it for them…” Connie muttered, taking in an apprehensive breath. “In fact, I’m pretty sure only one thing will…”

“Wait, you guys!” Dipper cut in, lowering his voice down to a whisper so the still arguing Lilliputtians couldn’t hear. “This is perfect! These guys control the course. Which means-”

“Which means if we have them on our side, then they can help us win!” Connie interrupted excitedly, having the exact same idea. “Not only could they help us both get perfect scores on every hole, but they could also sabotage every single one of Pacifica’s shots! It’s brilliant!”

“And all we have to do is tell them we’ll give the sticker to whichever group does a better job of helping us win!” Dipper added with a satisfied grin. “It couldn’t get any easier!”

“Mm…. I don’t know how I feel about this plan, you guys…” Steven frowned hesitantly. “I mean, I feel we’d just be taking advantage of these poor little guys if we did that….”
“Oh come on, Steven,” Connie reassured. “They said so themselves, they live for this stuff. Besides, by picking one of these groups for them, then their little war will finally end and maybe they’ll start getting along with each other.”

“Eh, I’m still not sure…” Mabel remarked just as concerned with this plan of action as Steven was. “I wanna beat Pacifica just as much as you do, Connie, but doesn’t this seem like cheating?”

“Pacifica’s rich, Mabel,” Dipper pointed out dryly. “She’s cheating at life.”

“Hm…” Mabel mused, still not entirely convinced. Still, after a little more convincing from both Dipper and Connie, Mabel and Steven both tentatively jumped on board with the idea, even if they were both somewhat anxious about doing so, largely for moral reasons. Still, they kept their worries to themselves as they came to stand before the mass crowd of Lilliputtians, who had temporarily put their feud on hold to hear what the “hugelings” had to say. “People of the eighteen holes!” Mabel called to the golf ball people after Dipper used one of their tiny trumpets to bring them to attention. “We’re gonna have a game of mini-golf! And whoever does the best job helping me and Connie win gets the sticker!”

“So work hard and try your best!” Connie added encouragingly. “You all have the same chances of winning. Of course, special bonus points will be given to the group that ends up embarrassing Pacifica the most, so keep that in mind!”

“It’ll be us, lass! Not these tulip-munchers!” the captain Lilliputtian exclaimed, sending a snide glare Franz’ way.

“I will not be insulted by a man with no depth perception wearing earrings!” the Dutch Lilliputtian seethed hotly.

“Whoa there, you guys!” Steven interjected before another mini-war could break out. “Being mean to each other is no way to get that sticker.”

“Steven’s right,” Mabel nodded firmly. “Just remember, as long as you guys are helping us, no fighting.”

The Lilliputtians’ collective demeanor quickly changed upon hearing this as they all perked up, exchanging broad, convincing smiles with both each other and the kids as a sign that they were going to behave themselves. At least, that’s what their smiles said while they crossed fingers behind their backs told of the exact opposite. But as far as the golf ball race was concerned, the kids didn’t really need to know that. After all, none of that would matter once the best among them was finally decided upon once and for all.

True to their word, Stan, Soos, and the Gems had remained in the otherwise empty parking lot to wait for the kids to return. Since the conman’s car didn’t have a great deal of space in it, the Gems had kept their place sitting on top of it, all of them quite bored as they waited in relative silence. Meanwhile, inside of the vehicle, Soos was hard at work with his scissors, snipping carefully along the dotted line he had drawn onto his tee shirt.

“Dude, I’m cutting W’s into all my shirts,” the handyman remarked to his disinterested boss. “Gotta give the public what they want.”

“Well, those kids sure are taking their time,” Stan mused, glancing out his rear-view window towards the course. “Looks like it’s gonna be a while.” The conman turned the radio onto a
relaxing station as Soos took off his shirt to be able to work on its neck easier. With a laid back sigh, Stan reclined his seat back, closing his eyes to take a short nap. Still, before he could, he opened his eyes once again to see Soos, still shirtless, reclined in his seat next to him with a coy smile.

“Sure are a lot of stars out tonight…” the handyman remarked casually.

“Welp, this is getting weird,” Stan quickly concluded, instantly sitting up in his seat to get out of the awkward moment.

Meanwhile, on top of the car, the Gems were still encompassed in their ongoing silence as Garnet meditated and Pearl quietly stargazed. Amethyst, on the other hand, was nowhere near as appeased as she let out a long, exasperated groan. “Ugh, this is so boring, I could shatter!” she flopped down onto her stomach, sprawling out as much as she could considering the limited amount of space.

“And to think, we could be smearing paint all over that dumb old mansion’s walls right now…”

“Amethyst, one day you’re going to learn that petty acts of vengeance get you nowhere,” Pearl said rationally.

“Oh yeah? When?” the purple Gem asked sardonically. “Cause it’s totally not today.”

Pearl let out a disgruntled sigh upon hearing this, looking to Garnet to reprimand Amethyst, though the Gem leader as completely silent as she maintained her relaxed, stoic focus. It was around this time that a long white limo pulled up not too far away from the conman’s car, one that clearly belonged to the Northwests based on its elegance and expensiveness alone. And inside of it, Pacifica’s parents were just finishing up imparting their daughter with something of a “pep talk” for her upcoming competition.

“Now just remember, Pacifica,” Preston began authoritatively. “Winning is everything.”

“Oh, and also looks,” Priscilla added as she used a small mirror to help her apply her copious lipstick. “Winning and looks.”

“Dad, relax,” Pacifica assured her father. “I’ve been practicing for like, a million hours, ok? I’ve got this. You’ll stay and watch, right?”

“Pacifica, darling,” Preston scoffed almost patronizingly. “Of course we can’t stay! We have a party to go to. We’ll just read about your victory in the paper tomorrow.”

The heiress frowned somewhat upon hearing this, but even so, she quickly shrugged the disappointment off. She was used to it by now, anyway. “Right,” she said diffidently as she got out of the car. “Sergei!” she snapped her fingers, prompting her trainer to emerge from the trunk of the limo as he grabbed her set of expensive golf clubs.

“Oh, and Pacifica?” Preston called to his daughter through the limo’s open window before she could head inside the course. “Whatever happens just remember one thing. You’re a Northwest. Don’t lose.”

Despite the relative harshness of this command, Pacifica nodded stiffly nonetheless before turning on her heel and making her way towards the course with Sergei trailing behind her. Surprisingly, she didn’t have any more insulting remarks for Stan, Soos, or the Gems as she sauntered past them, but that didn’t mean her parents didn’t.

“Oh, Priscilla, would you look at that?” Preston remarked mockingly, still peeking out the window as he dryly regraded the Gems. “The so called ‘Crystal’ Gems are so poor that they can’t even
afford their own vehicle! Instead they have to be taxied around on top of the beaten down old car of some no-account carnival Barker!”

“How embarrassing,” Priscilla laughed haughtily as her husband joined in.

While the Gems themselves were quite incensed upon hearing these scathing remarks, no one was more offended than Stan as he gripped the steering wheel of his car tightly. “Did… did he just insult my Diablo?!” he asked, completely appalled. The old vehicle happened to sputter a little at this juncture, prompting Stan to rub the steering wheel with tender affection. “Shh, baby, I know. Who cares what he says? He’s a rich, pompous jerk who deserves a good punch in the face.”

“Tell us about it,” Garnet muttered, her tone genuinely cross and hostile as she was finally broken out of her meditation.

“You know, it’s almost worth an ounce of pity,” Preston said to his wife, still smirking goadingly. “But instead, it’s just hilarious. I almost feel bad that our daughter has to wallow amongst such common filth for even a few hours. The sooner she wins this little competition the better.”

The wealthy couple shared another teasing laugh as the limo began to drive off, leaving the aptly enraged Gems and conman behind. Needless to say they were all infuriated, especially after hearing the Northwests indirectly insult the kids, even over them. Which was why, despite her earlier qualms, Pearl had no qualms about addressing both Stan and Amethyst with a very simple, very pointed question. “So what was that plan you two had about vandalizing their mansion again?”

“Now you’re talkin’!” Stan exclaimed with a daring grin, already throwing his car into reverse.

“Woo!” Amethyst cheered, jumping to her feet, though she fell right back into Garnet’s lap as the conman’s car lurched forward. Still, she hardly cared as she let out a rowdy laugh, one that Stan readily shared as the entire group sped off, their vengeful mission clear. “Revenge Trip! Revenge Trip! Revenge Trip!”

Pacifica strode into the mini-golf course with the upmost confidence, already completely assured over her victory before the game even began. After all, there was no way either Mabel or Connie could hope to beat her. With her well-bought and well-refined skill, the heiress knew that her triumph would only be a matter of a few easy, perfect shots.

“How much you wanna bet they’re no-shows?” Pacifica asked Sergei, only to immediately be proven wrong. The heiress and her trainer quickly spun around as an array of floor lights flashed on in quick succession, leading the way to Mabel, Connie, Dipper, and Steven as they stood already waiting to begin at the first hole.

“Hi!” Steven called, as friendly as always, though Connie was quick to shush him. “Oh, that’s right! I forgot. Serious,” he huffed, forcing his smile away and into a harsh, stoic expression instead.

“Looking for someone?” Mabel asked Pacifica with a knowing smirk.

“Waiting in the dark, not creepy at all,” the heiress rolled her eyes as she approached her rivals.

“We figured we’d get here early since we’re gonna be leaving early to celebrate once we win,” Connie retorted smoothly.
“Oh sure,” Pacifica deadpanned. “Just keep telling yourselves that. Seriously though, I don’t know why you bothered to come. Unless you’ve got something up your sleeves.”

“Oh, I guess you could say we’ve got a little something…” Mabel remarked innocently enough. Their cover was nearly blown however, as a Lilliputtian happened to poke its head out of her sweater sleeve briefly, prompting her to quickly shove it back inside before Pacifica could see. The kids all simply played it off with a nervous laugh, one that the heiress barely regarded as she checked over her nails.

“So are we gonna play mini-golf or what?” Pacifica asked, her tone already quite bored. “Because the sooner we get this over with, the sooner we won’t have to talk to each other anymore.”

“Sounds like as good of a reason as any to get started,” Dipper remarked with a sardonic smirk. Pacifica sent him an aggravated scoff upon hearing her own insult be thrown right back her, but even so, she simply shrugged it off as her, Mabel, and Connie faced off at the center of the course.


And on this command, the mini-golf match began. From the first hole alone, Mabel and Connie were able to easily tell that their deal with the Lilliputtians was going to serve them quite nicely. Pacifica’s very first shot ended up being a dud as the cowboy Lilliputtians moved the small covered wagon on the green over a bit so that it blocked the ball’s path, much to the heiress’s shock and frustration. However, the Lilliputtians were quick to oblige by shooting Mabel’s undershoot ball into the hole, and lassoing the ball that Connie shot back into it. As the group moved on, the girls made sure to show their gratitude to the cowboys with shared thumbs up, something that did not go unnoticed by the pirate Lilliputtians on the next hole. Determined to one-up the competition, they shot both of the girl’s shoots easily through the ship’s canons, blasting them both straight into the hole. Appalled by this, Pacifica took her turn, only for the pirates to shoot it right back at her, something that completely bewildered her seeing as how she knew nothing of the miniature people manipulating the entire game behind the scenes. Of course, both Mabel and Connie were reveling over the massive lead they had both gotten over Pacifica even at such an early point in the game. Neither of them cared so much about who one in the end, as long as it was one of them and not the heiress. If they could only see her eat her cold words in light of her agonizing defeat, then it would all be worth it in the end.

The next hole that the group came up to was rather simplistic, set up with a miner aesthetic and only one mere obstacle to overcome. Certainly it would be barely even a challenge for Mabel and Connie with the Lilliputtians on their side. “Heh, miner hole,” Dipper chuckled as him and Steven watched Mabel take her shot. “I wonder what cute, silly things go on down there.”

“I bet they have so much fun singing and using tiny pickaxes to move the ball around,” Steven remarked, beaming as the ball rolled into the mine entry. “I wish we could see it!”

The ball made its usual route down the chute into the mines below as two Lilliputtian miners met its cart and prepared to transport it into the shaft. However, before they could, a prospector Lilliputtian hurried to block their way in. “Stop! You can’t go in there! There’s been a gas leak! Anyone who goes in there will die!”

The miners gasped in fearful shock upon hearing this dreadful news, but their concerned whispers were soon silenced as a large, burly Lilliputtian miner broke through the crowd. “I’ll take it,” he volunteered boldly, yet stoically.

Immediately, a cry of distressed protest rung out from the observing crowd as a small Lilliputtian
girl rushed forward, tears in her eyes as she embraced the much larger miner. “No! Don’t go, Big Henry! We need you!”

“Go home, Polly,” Big Henry instructed firmly, gently pushing Polly back towards the others. With a resolve of iron, Big Henry began his journey, pushing the mine cart carrying the ball into the dangerous mine as the others all watched him go in solemn, morose silence. Upon entering the mine, Big Henry was already struggling to breathe amidst the seeping toxic fumes, but even so, he kept going, determined to complete this for the honor of his people.

Of course, the group outside was completely unaware of this as they all awaited the ball to emerge on the other side of the mine. Mabel and Connie took in a shared anxious breath as Pacifica checked her watch, while Dipper and Steven exchanged a confused glance, silently wondering if something had gone wrong down below.

Yet sure enough, Big Henry trudged on steadily, growing weaker and weaker with each passing second to the point that his consciousness was quickly fading. “Come on, Big Henry!” he shouted to himself, slapping himself to stay away. “You can do this!” And sure enough, he did do it. As the miner made it to the end of the seemingly endless shaft, he struggled to push the button that would send the ball back to the surface, but he did it nonetheless, collapsing to the ground in exhaustion shortly thereafter. In his final moments, Big Henry’s eyes filled with tears as he pulled out a picture Polly had drawn for him of the two of them. The simply memento brought a small smile to the dying miner’s face, one that gradually faded as he let out a tired groan before his body went limp. Still, his death was not in vain as the ball rose up from the mine and propelled gracefully into the hole on the other side.

“What?!” Pacifica gasped in angry shock, throwing her putter in a fit of rage as Sergei skillfully caught it. “Sergei! Soda! Now!”

As soon as the heiress and her trainer were gone, Mabel wasted no time in lifting up the mine cover to reveal the anxiously awaiting Lilliputtians inside. “Ok, you guys, that was bedokulous!” she exclaimed with an overjoyed smile.

“Yeah! You guys really know how to build up some great suspense!” Steven added enthusiastically.

“We were worried there for a minute, but you guys really came through,” Connie nodded contentedly. “Great job!”

“Hey, you know what? Little high-fives for everyone!” Dipper offered, lowering his finger down to their level so each of the miners could high-five it in celebration. “Nice one! You did it! You’re the man!”

“I don’t wanna call it out early, but…” Mabel began, smiling broadly. “I think the miners might have one of these in their future!” She pointed to her sticker, which of course sent a round of triumphant cheers throughout the miners, something that the Dutch Lilliputtians were quick to catch onto.

“Are you kidding me?!?” Franz exclaimed in frustration after observing this display from the windmill’s small telescope. “After everything we’ve worked for?!”

“Calm yourself, Franz,” another Lilliputtian assured. “There may be another way to win the hugelings’ favor. Knock on wood.” At this, both of them knocked on their clogs before leaping into working on their daring plan to achieve superiority.
Meanwhile, Pacifica sat on the bench near the vending machine with a bitter scowl as Sergei retrieved her a soda. She accepted it with a petulant huff, her foot tapping in frustration as she vented to her trainer. “There’s something going on, Sergei, I can feel it.”

“Maybe they have little people who control where the balls go,” Sergei suggested with a shrug.

“Hoo, we gotta get you English lessons,” Pacifica remarked, raising an eyebrow at the zaniness of that idea. “But seriously, think about it. I’m globally ranked. I’ve won countless awards! It’s ridiculous that those two nobodies are beating me!” The heiress scoffed harshly as she opened her can of soda, completely unaware of the tiny figures darting through the bushes behind her as she took a sip before coughing out its iconic pit. “Ugh, Pitt Cola! I always forget about the pit. Get me a different one, Sergei!”

The trainer went to go do so, leaving Pacifica to seethe by herself. However, she was only made aware that someone else was nearby as a small hand reached out from the shrubs and tapped her lightly on the shoulder. Confused, the heiress slightly turned, only to be tightly grabbed by multiple sets of small hands. She screamed in surprised panic as the hands yanked her into the shrubbery with a surprising amount of force, all before Sergei could make it back. When the trainer did return, he immediately dropped the soda he was holding upon noticing that the heiress had inexplicably gone missing. “This is bad.”

It had taken almost no time at all for Stan, Soos, and the Gems to gather all of the necessary supplies they would need for their miniature Revenge Trip. Armed just a sizable horde of spray paint in the trunk, they hurried to Northwest Manor, with Stan speeding the entire time and Pearl just barely able to hold her tongue about it.

Seeing as how the conman and the purple Gem were Revenge Trip masters, they took the lead in this mission. Knowing that avoiding getting caught was of the upmost importance, the had Garnet take out the nearby security cameras first, which she did skillfully so. From there, the Gem leader continued to keep watch as the vandalism began.

“So…. What exactly are we supposed to be writing with this?” Pearl asked with a confused frown.

“Anything that’ll tick those stuffy Northwests off,” Amethyst shrugged as she began scribbling the words “Rich Prudes” onto the wall.

“Think you can actually come up with something clever, Pearl?” Stan asked with a teasing smirk as he finished his first tag: “Go Northwest to Loser Town”. “Or do you need a little help from the pros?”

“Please,” the white Gem scoffed, aiming her can towards the wall. “I’m sure I can think of something scathing enough to make those Northwests-” Pearl let out a sharp gasp as she accidently sprayed a single line of paint onto the wall, dropping her can as she looked over the minimal vandalism she had done with wide eyes.

“Oh boy…” Stan sighed in slight exasperation as he exchanged a dry frown with Amethyst. “Told you she wasn’t cut out for this.”

“I-I am too cut out for it!” Pearl protested earnestly, reclaiming her can.

“Oh yeah? Then prove it!” Amethyst challenged. “Write the meanest, harshest, craziest thing you can think of on there! Go wild!”
The white Gem paused as she looked between the wall and the paint can in her hands once more as a small, brazen smirk crossed her face. “Go wild, hm?”

“How’s this, Mr. Pines?” Soos interjected as he finished graffititng his space. Stan overlooked his work, instantly letting out another disgruntled sigh as he did so.

“You’re not supposed to write your name, Soos,” the conman pointed out, nodding to what the handyman wrote: “You dudes are mean, love Soos”. “The point is to not get caught doing this, remember?”

“Oh right!” Soos exclaimed innocently, not well versed in the practice of vandalism himself. “Well, I can fix that!” With only a few more lines, the handyman “fixed” his mistake by adding the word “not” in front of his name. “Is that better?”

“Sure, Soos,” Stan said with a small, amused chuckle. “That’ll throw ‘em off, for sure.”

“Alright…. I’d say I’m… done!” Pearl proclaimed with a proud smile before stepping aside so everyone could see her work. Her tag was quite long, but even so, it was impressive, not only in how elegant the writing was, but in the white Gem’s choice of words as well: “Snobbish, self-entitled, greedy, supercilious, upper crust, corrupted, coldhearted, thoughtless, rude, arrogant elitists!”

“Whoa… P! You just thrashed them!” Amethyst gasped with a huge smile.

“You really think so?” Pearl asked. “Are you sure its not overkill?”

“Oh, it’s definitely overkill,” Garnet cut in, glancing over her shoulder at what the white Gem had written. “But in this case, it’s the best kind of overkill.”

“Seriously,” Stan agreed with a hearty laugh. “I’d love to see those Northwests try and buy their way outta this kind of embarrassment!”

The group exchanged a round of genuine laughter at this, though it was abruptly cut short as an alarm started to blare from behind the outer wall. “Aw man! We should have figured they’d have some kind of alarm rigged up!” Amethyst exclaimed with a scowl.

“W-what do we do?!” Pearl asked, startled by this sudden turn of events.

“What we always do when things start turning south!” Stan asserted as he began running for the car along with Amethyst. “Bail!”

Soos wasn’t too far behind the two of them, and while Pearl remained in stunned silence at this tactic for a moment or two, Garnet was quick to help her wits return to her. “You heard him. It’s time to bail.”

“R-right…” the white Gem said with relative uncertainty, but even so, she hurried along, hopping on top of the conman’s car along with her teammates. As they always did after every successful Revenge Trip, Stan turned the car radio up all the way as Amethyst let her hair blow wild and free in the whipping breeze. Caught up in this spirit of revelry, Soos took the shirt he had been working on turning into another W-neck off and let it hang out the window, while Garnet reclined casually atop the roof with a satisfied smile. Pearl was the last to join in on the fun, but when she did, it was in the form of a burst of laughter she was scarcely able to contain, one that the others were all quick to catch. In no time at all, the entire car was rattling with their shared joyous chuckles as they rode off into the night, their success secured, even if it was a small one. Still, for all of them, it certainly felt momentous.
Since Pacifica was taking quite a bit of time in returning to the game, the kids decided to work on tallying up everyone’s scores in the meantime. Not that they really needed to of course; after all, it was beyond clear that Mabel and Connie, as tied as their scores were, were going to completely trump Pacifica, no contest. As long as things continued the way they were going, then in just a few more holes, that sweet victory would finally be sealed.

“Oh man, it’s gonna be so great once we beat Pacifica,” Connie said with a vindictive smile, casually balancing her putter atop her hand for fun. “After all the times she’s insulted us and made us miserable, it’s about time she sees what that misery is like for herself.”

“I know, right?” Dipper asked with an eager grin. “I can’t wait to see the look on her face when we win. I’m thinking it’ll be like: ‘ugh!’” At this, he twisted his expression into a disgruntled scowl, one that was befitting of the heiress herself. “You know how she does that? ‘Ugh!’”

“Oh my gosh, that’s totally what she does!” Connie laughed, though the levity was soon interrupted by Steven.

“Uh, you guys? I still don’t know if what we’re doing here is… ok,” the young Gem said with a concerned frown. “I mean, it’s great that we’re winning, but can we really even call it winning if the mini-golf guys are doing all the work for us?”

“Don’t worry about that, Steven,” Dipper reassured with a wave of his hand. “After all, Pacifica doesn’t know about all this, so it’s not like it really matters in the grand scheme of things.”

“Dipper’s right,” Connie nodded. “Besides, winning is still winning, no matter how you look at it. So what if we needed a little help to get this far? Pacifica has a personal trainer helping her out. So really, what we’re doing is just a matter of evening the playing field.”

“Oh my gosh, that’s putting green?” Mabel cut in with a small, joking smirk.

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“, “Just enjoy your victory, Mabel,” Dipper encouraged, wrapping an arm around his sister’s shoulder. “Trust me; Pacifica will be fine.”

The kids shared a laugh over this, though it soon fizzled out as Mabel glanced down somewhat anxiously. “Guys? Is it bad that I feel good about Pacifica feeling bad?”

“Just enjoy your victory, Mabel,” Dipper encouraged, wrapping an arm around his sister’s shoulder. “Trust me; Pacifica will be fine.”

No sooner had he finished saying this however, then the conversation was curtailed as a rather familiar scream rang through the golf course. Startled, the kids all turned towards its source at the windmill, only to find Pacifica tightly tied up on the ground in front of it, courtesy of the Dutch Lilliputtians who stood guard over her. “What’s going on here!?” she exclaimed, struggling to break free from her bonds. “Let me go, you little creeps!”

The kids all let out a shared gasp of shock at this surprising turn of events, but even so, the Lilliputtians hardly noticed their alarm as Franz stepped up to them with a blithe smile. “Welcome, kids! Welcome!” he greeted cheerfully, as though him and his brethren weren’t holding the heiress hostage. “I can tell you’re loving this, right? Right?”

“What are you guys doing?!” Mabel asked with apt concern.

“Why did you tie Pacifica up?” Steven questioned, rather confused. “You know we can’t really
“finish the game without her, right?”

“Well, we could,” Connie noted with a shrug. “It just means she’d forfeit. Which would make things a lot easier, actually.”

“Like I’d ever do that!” Pacifica scoffed, still as haughty as ever, despite the apparent peril she was in.

“Still,” Dipper cut in adamantly. “This wasn’t part of the deal, tiny Dutchman!”

“Ok, but get this,” Franz attempted to appeal. “We saw you were favoring the minors, so we figured, what’s better than beating Pacifica? Killing her! Am I right?”

“As if!” the heiress exclaimed hotly, still trying to get free from the tight ropes wrapped around her. “I’m calling my parents. Where’s my phone?” Pacifica glanced over as much as she could to see that the Lilliputtians had managed to snatch her phone away and were in the process of texting insults to her friends on it. “Hey! Hey!”

“So how about it now, Hugelings?” Franz asked the kids with a confident smile. “Who’s ‘da best’ now?”

“No! Give us ze sticker!” the French Lilliputtians protested.

“The miners!” said group of Lilliputtians ran up frantically. “Give it to the miners!”

By now, every faction of Lilliputtians had worked themselves up into a heated frenzy, all of them clamoring for the exact same thing: the sticker and the honor it would bestow upon whoever received it. The kids looked to each other with growing dread as this conflict started showing signs of violent once more, all four of them knowing that the pressure was on to finally make a decision between them. However, in the end Mabel was the one to break through the rumble of angry shouts and threats.

“Enough!” she exclaimed boldly, catching the attention of every single Lilliputtian as their fighting came to an abrupt halt. “You know what? No one gets the sticker!”

An immediate ripple of disappointment filtered through the crowd of golf ball people, though a single French Lilliputtian shared their common sentiment quite nicely. “Sacre boo!” He shouted as all of the others were quick to join in on the disgruntled jeer.

“No, no boing!” Mabel shook her head as she took the sticker off her sweater and held it high out of their reach. “No one gets the sticker because you’re all being jerks!”

“Why can’t you all just try getting along?” Steven asked with a pleading grin. His suggestion, however, was very quickly shot down.

“Because we hate each other!”

“That’s kind of how rivalries work.”
“Well maybe… maybe rivalries are dumb!” Mabel proclaimed, a hint of realization entering her tone, especially as she happened to steal a glance over at Pacifica. “Maybe you don’t settle them with petty competitions. Maybe the only way to be ‘da best’ is by ending the fighting and working together!” With her point clearly made, she promptly crumbled the sticker up before shoving it into her mouth and swallowing it whole in clear view of all of the shocked Lilliputtians. Appalled as they were by the loss of their prize, however, they somehow didn’t go into an all out riot. At least not at first.

“It’s all so clear…” one of the Dutch Lilliputtians mused thoughtfully.

“If we work together…” Franz trailed off before the pirate captain picked it up.

“Then we can cut open her belly and get the sticker!” he shouted, holding his small sword aloft. All of the other Lilliputtians let out a unified cheer at this violent plan, their hatred towards each other dissolved as it had found a new target instead.

“W-well this definitely took an unexpected turn!” Connie exclaimed fearfully as her and the others all backed away from the charging Lilliputtians.

“Oh, you guys really aren’t appreciating the lesson here!” Mabel tried to appeal to them once more, only for them to continue their aggressive pursuit. This unfolding chaos was soon broken through though, as Pacifica let out another frightened scream. Apparently, the Dutch Lilliputtians had pulled a lever that worked to push the conveyor belt the heiress was tied to towards the windmill. To make matters worse, the windmill blades were whirling at a deadly speed, putting Pacifica in even more peril that she was already in.

“We gotta get out of here!” Dipper urged, just as ready to flee as Connie and Steven both were.

“We have to save Pacifica first!” Mabel protested earnestly, nodding the heiress’s way.

“Ok, but think about it,” Connie interjected, not as ready and willing to let Pacifica’s past cruelty go as easily as Mabel apparently was. “Do we really have to save her?”

“Yes!” Mabel exclaimed as though it were obvious as she grabbed Connie’s wrist to pull her along. “Come on!”

As the girls raced off, the boys were more than set to provide them with backup, though before they could, they were halted by Sergei’s fearful cry as he started teetering off of the pirate ship’s plank and towards the pond below. “Ah! Mister Dipper! Mister Steven! Niet! Niet!”

“Don’t freak out, man!” Dipper advised. “The water’s shallow! There’s literally no way you could drown.” Of course, no more than a second later, the trainer finally did fall into the pond, and face first at that as he immediately started to take in water. “Seriously?” Dipper asked with disgruntled disbelief.

“We should probably save him,” Steven noted, already hurrying to go do so.

“Right…” Dipper agreed, following not too far behind.

Meanwhile, the girls made good use of their respective athletic skills as they managed to push their way through the clamoring crowd of Lilliputtians. Connie made sure to clear them a path by knocking several of the golf ball creatures aside with her putter as Mabel started scaling a nearby lamp post to get on higher ground. Connie was quick to follow her up, and after making sure that the Lilliputtians could not follow them, both girls used the hanging string of lights above to swing their way towards the windmill, all while narrowly avoiding the tiny pencils the golf ball people
were lobbing towards them the entire time. Upon making it to the windmill mound, Mabel got to
work on untying Pacifica as Connie stood guard, swinging any Lilliputtian that got too close for
comfort away.

“Ugh, took you long enough,” the heiress complained as Mabel started undoing the knotted ropes.
“And watch the earrings. They’re worth more than your house.”

“You know, I kinda figured this was a bad idea,” Connie mused dryly after having knocking away
another Lilliputtian. “And it’s looking like I was kinda right about that.”

“Yeah… pretty much,” Mabel agreed, pulling her hands away as she gave Pacifica a critical frown.
“Maybe we just won’t untie you then.”

“No! Untie me! Untie me!” Pacifica demanded frantically.

“That’s what we thought,” Mabel smirked as she finished losing the ropes. Finally free, the heiress
quickly scrambled to stand, though the girls hardly had a moment to breathe easy as Connie found
herself pushed back by the sheer number of Lilliputtians crowded around the windmill.

“We have you at miniature pencil point!” the pirate captain growled, holding said mini-pencil up
threateningly. “There’s no way around us!”

At this integral juncture, instead of worrying for their chances, all three of the girls exchanged
almost amicable, yet certainly confident smirks. Sure, Mabel was much more content to work
together with Pacifica than Connie was, but still, none of that mattered now as they prepared to
face off against their tiny foes. “You guys ready to putt?” Mabel asked daringly.

“Always ready,” Connie nodded, her expression serious as she drew her putter back like a sword.

“Way ahead of you,” Pacifica added, reclaiming her club as Mabel handed it to her.

Without any further ado, the girls began their decisive strike. Not paying much mind to aim or
accuracy, all three of them stood back to back as they started whacking any Lilliputtian their clubs
managed to make contact with. Despite the danger they were in, it was admittedly exhilarating for
three mini-golf masters such as themselves to be using their skills for something this intense.

“You know,” Pacifica called to Mabel and Connie amidst their barrage of swings. “You two
actually aren’t that terrible. A little rusty, but-”

“Shut up and putt!” Mabel shouted, too caught up in the moment to care about such sentiments
now. Pacifica did so, sending just as many Lilliputtians flying as Mabel and Connie were. As fast
as they were swinging, they were succeeding in thinning through the golf ball race’s massive
numbers, to the point that sure enough, they had cleared all of the immediate ones away. And just
in time too, as Dipper and Steven soon pulled up in the course’s golf cart, with the rescued Sergei
in tow.

“Get on!” Dipper exclaimed to the girls urgently, knowing that more Lilliputtians were hot on their
tail.

“Where did you guys find a golf cart?” Connie asked, somewhat bewildered as her, Mabel, and
Pacifica climbed aboard.

“Well, Dipper says we’re just borrowing it,” Steven began with a fretful frown. “But considering
all of the other iffy things we’ve done tonight, I’m pretty sure we’re just gonna end up stealing it.”
“Steal, borrow, same thing,” Dipper shrugged, unconcerned.

“Who cares?!” Mabel cut in as she spotted a crowd of Lilliputtians charging for them. “Just gun it!”

Dipper did just that, flooring the cart’s gas pedal as the vehicle lurched forward. The others all hung on for dear life as the cart swerved past the obstacles and traps the Lilliputtians had put in their way, including a row of axes that they only narrowly sped past. On their way towards the exit, they were forced into a loop-de-loop obstacle on one of the holes, something that the kids were all able to hold onto for, though Sergei unfortunately right off the back of the cart.

“Sergei overboard!” the trainer cried as the kids zoomed on without him.

“I’ll get a new one,” Pacifica concluded, knowing it would be far too risky to go back for him now.

Still, as they finally made a beeline for the gate, it was clear that the Lilliputtians weren’t about to give up their sought-after sticker that easily. Pooling their numbers and efforts together, the golf ball people piled on top of each other, giving them enough height and strength to start pushing the course’s gates closed in the hopes of barring any form of escape.

“U-uh oh! They’re not gonna let us leave!” Steven exclaimed fearfully.

“Well we can’t just stop now!” Dipper argued, not slowing the cart down at all.

“Don’t worry! We’ve got this!” Connie assured, exchanging a determined nod with Mabel. Not wasting a beat, both girls quickly climbed onto the roof, clubs in hand as they prepared to fend this final obstacle off. However, before they could, they were suddenly stopped by a voice from behind.

“Don’t even think about it,” Franz said coldly, prompting both girls to turn around and look down at him. “You two call yourselves golfers? Without us, that club is useless in your hands!”

“Oh yeah?” Mabel asked with a challenging grin. “Then what’s ten minus six?”

“Ten minus-” Franz paused, caught off guard by this question as he began counting on his fingers. “Wait… hang on…”

“Fore!” both girls shouted in bold unison, swinging their clubs together in perfect timing. Their shot rang true, striking Franz hard and sending him flying right into the nearby bonus hole. The hole’s decorative volcano erupted vibrantly as the golf cart sped up it, giving the vehicle just the speed boost it needed to sail over the last crowd of Lilliputtians and through the nearly shut gates just before they closed. The cart came to a skidding halt in the parking lot, mere seconds after Stan, Soos, and the Gems pulled up, having just narrowly returned from their impromptu Revenge Trip. Considering the fact that the kids had escaped them, the Lilliputtians were quite enraged as they threw mini-pencils and even a spare ax over the fence, sending threats at the group the entire time.

“And stay out, you dumb hugelings!” Franz shouted harshly from the other side of the gate.

“What did you say, you little trolls?” Pacifica asked hotly, getting out of the cart and storming over to the fence. “I will sue you!” She slammed her fist into the gate, an outraged scowl on her face. “I will sue you and I will own you!”

“Yeesh,” Dipper remarked dryly to the others upon seeing this petty outburst. “I feel sorry for whatever poor sap ends up dating her in the future.”

While they were still sitting atop the conman’s car, the Gems, Garnet in particular, happened to
overhear this comment, and for whatever reason, it elicited an amused chuckle from the Gem leader. “What’s so funny?” Pearl asked with a confused frown.

“You’ll get it eventually,” Garnet smirked, letting out another small laugh as she adjusted her shades.

“You four!” Pacifica scowled crossly as she spun around to face the rest of the group. “I don’t know what you did or what’s going on, but if you think just because you saved my life, I’d—”

The heiress was cut off, her unfinished rant left hanging as she noticed the sticker Mabel was handing her, one that featured a cat and read “I a-paw-logize”. “I’m sorry, Pacifica…” Mabel frowned with genuine remorse. “We shouldn’t have cheated. You totally would have beaten us, fair and square, right Connie?”

“No,” Connie said coldly, only to change her stance upon receiving disapproving looks from both Mabel and Steven. And while she did put forth something of an effort to be amicable, it was clear that she still harbored a good bit of resentment for the heiress, even after everything they had been through. “I mean…. Yeah, maybe,” she paused for a moment, lowering her voice down to a mutter for her next statement. “If you got lucky or something.”

Pacifica’s glower deepened a little upon hearing this, but she actually decided not to fire any glaring retorts back this time as she instead but the sticker on her top. “Whatever,” she remarked with her usual haughty air. “You’re just lucky this sticker looks fantastic on me.”

“Hey, kids!” Stan shouted somewhat impatiently from the car. “Are we heading home or not? Cause I’d rather do that sooner than later if we are!”

“Yeah, especially if any cops are on our tails…” Amethyst whispered discreetly, though Pearl let out an alarmed gasp at this.

“C-cops?!” she asked, looking to Garnet worriedly. “We’re not going to get arrested for that t-tiny bit of vandalism, are we?”

“Mmm… probably not,” the Gem leader replied with a shrug.

Without needing much further prompting, Steven, Dipper, and Connie all made their way towards the car, climbing into the back. Mabel, however, hesitated for a brief moment before she got in, especially as she looked back to Pacifica, who was still standing near the gates of the park, glaringly alone. Conflicted, Mabel looked to the others, taking note of the fact that Steven gave her a small, supportive smile while both Dipper and Connie were shaking their heads in disapproval over the idea they both knew she had. Still, that really didn’t stop her from going through with it anyway.

“Hey!” she called to Pacifica. “Your parents aren’t here yet. Want a ride home?”

“Ugh, please,” the heiress quickly rejected with a bitter scoff. “As if I’d ever ride in your—” She was quickly interrupted, however, but an abrupt burst of thunder, followed by a flash of lightning in the skies overhead. Knowing that she really didn’t have any other options, Pacifica let out a sigh of defeat as she trudged towards the car, somehow managing to squeeze into the back (albeit uncomfortably so) along with the other four kids. While Stan’s car was far beyond its safe carrying capacity, especially with the Gems still riding on the roof, the conman hardly cared as he began to drive away from the golf course. Instead, him and Soos sang a short little ditty about driving while the car careened down the road, while on the roof, the noise of Amethyst and Pearl arguing about something could be heard even from inside. For a while, all five of the kids sat in relative silence,
with Dipper and Connie still feeling quite petulant over the fact that they had even allowed Pacifica to hitch a ride with them while Steven and Mabel were in their usual high spirits. The heiress herself couldn’t have been more uncomfortable as she was pressed tightly between the twins, her gloved hand resting on an unknown sticky spot and her hair already far too frazzled for her liking.

“Hey! I found two tacos!” Mabel exclaimed with a huge grin, pulling out the snacks from the back window before taking a bite out of one of them.

“Oh, I was wondering where Amethyst put those!” Steven chuckled mirthfully. “I’m sure she won’t mind if you eat them though, Mabel. She has like, a whole secret stash of them back at the temple!”

“Great!” Mabel exclaimed, her mouth full. All the while, Pacifica could only stare at her in complete awe, as if she was unable to really comprehend what was happening at all.

“You’re allowed to eat in the car?” she finally asked Mabel, her jaw still dropped in shock.

“Yeah!” Mabel nodded brightly. “The car is where secret surprise snacks happen! Want one?” she asked, holding her spare taco out to the heiress.

“Oh, I’m not supposed to take handouts,” Pacifica quickly shook her head, only to hear Connie and Dipper both let out a shared snicker beside her. “And what exactly is so funny?” she asked them with an unimpressed glare.

“This isn’t a handout, Pacifica,” Mabel interjected with an amused grin. “It’s called sharing!”

“Sha-sharrrring?” Pacifica asked, the word completely foreign on her tongue.

“Figures she wouldn’t even know what sharing is,” Connie muttered to Dipper, eliciting another small chuckle from them both.

“Sharing is when you give things to other people without asking for anything in return,” Steven explained with a patient smile. “It’s a really nice thing that friends do to show each other that they care!”

The heiress gave him a totally confounded look upon hearing this, several of the words and concepts he had used totally new to her. “Ok, now you’ve lost me.”

“You know what? Just take it,” Mabel laughed, handing the taco to her. Pacifica hesitantly took it, though she didn’t exactly eat it right away as she instead simply stared at it in muted confusion. On display all around her was a lifestyle that she had never really seen close up before. A lifestyle where one could eat what her parents would certainly deem as “peasant” food while in the car. Where people gave things to each other without thinking of money or favors that could be gained from it. Where the adults in charge consisted of morally ambiguous conmen, somewhat dim-witted handymen, and bizarre, yet supportive magical women. Where wealth, power, and appearances hardly mattered at all, and were instead replaced with fun, warmth, and freedom. And as much as it completely bewildered Pacifica, to the point that she could scarcely even wrap her head around it, she couldn’t deny that there was almost a strange kind of… comfort to it all. A comfort that she would certainly never let herself indulge in willingly. But still, a comfort nonetheless.

And yet, all too soon it was over. The car soon pulled up to the gates of Northwest Manor, Stan and the Gems all wearing proud, knowing smirks as the kids turned to take in their handiwork on the walls. Pacifica let out an appalled gasp as she saw all of the various insults graffitied onto her mansion’s outer gate, but even so, the vandals responsible for it played it quite cool all the while.
“W-who did this?!?” the heiress asked hotly, quickly getting out of the car.

“Good question,” Garnet shrugged casually from atop the roof.

“Well whoever it was, it certainly wasn’t us-” Pearl’s innocent statement was quickly interrupted by an elbowing and a shush from Amethyst.

“Hey, maybe it was one of your hundreds of servants,” Stan remarked to Pacifica with a broad grin. “You should fire him and send him down to the Mystery Shack. I can use someone to massage my bunions.”

Pacifica simply let out a frustrated growl as the conman and the purple Gem let out a laugh at her expense, but somehow, she managed to push her anger away and turn on her heel to head inside. “Thanks for the ride, or whatever,” she remarked flippantly, though she did pause for just a moment. “Oh, and Mabel? Um, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but… I had fun.” She smiled briefly, one that was actually genuine in contrast to her usual sardonic smirks, before she continued to the gates. “Oh, and tell your servant I like his W-neck!”

“Yes!” Soos cheered before the flap of his W-neck fell down once again.

“I can’t believe you guys graffitied her mansion,” Connie remarked to Stan and the Gems with an amazed smile. “That’s so awesome!”

“Eh, it was just a usual Revenge Trip,” Stan shrugged, even though he was still grinning. “Nothing special.”

“Whoa, Pearl, did you write that one?” Steven asked, pointing to the long insult written in the white Gem’s usual curly handwriting. “Because even if it is kinda mean, it looks really cool!”

“Why, yes, Steven,” Pearl crossed her arms, grinning in proud satisfaction. “I did write that! And I’d do it again too!”

“Whoa there, rebel,” Amethyst chuckled. “Might wanna calm it down there a bit. Don’t wanna spend all your excitement on your first Revenge Trip.”

“F-first?!” Pearl asked in sudden alarm, suddenly troubled at the thought of going on another morally ambiguous escapade like this again.

“So are you and Pacifica like, cool now?” Dipper asked Mabel with a confused frown as they watched her approach the mansion gates.

“I think we made some progress,” Mabel nodded confidently. “The important thing to remember is that at the end of the day, she’s just an ordinary kid like us.”

She was quickly proven wrong, of course, as the manor gates swung open to reveal the lavish Northwest mansion standing safely behind them, its massive structure and scope far more impressive up close than they were at a distance. Of course, the elegance was only heightened by the beautiful fountains dotting its lawn, as well as the graceful peacocks meandering about it. As if to hail the heiress’s return home, a round of blaring fireworks went off as she stepped through the gates, spelling out the words “Congratulations, Pacifica!” in the night sky. For a moment, the kids could only stare in shared awe at all this pomp and circumstance that Pacifica certainly got to enjoy on a daily basis, until they all quickly regathered their wits about them.

“Honestly, I’m not even surprised,” Connie concluded with a tired sigh, resting back in her seat as she crossed her arms.
“Wow… look at all those peacocks!” Steven exclaimed in amazement. “I wonder if they all have cute little names!”

“You should have charged her for that taco,” Dipper said to Mabel, who really couldn’t argue with him on that point.

“Agreed!”

“Hey, you got any more of those surprise tacos?” Soos asked from up front as the car began to pull away.

“Wait, surprise tacos?” Amethyst asked with a sudden frown. “Hey! My car stash!” She pouted in faux anger for a moment before breaking into a devious smirk. “Well since you guys are gonna eat all my tacos, I guess we’re just gonna have to take a trip through tumble tunnel!” Shapeshifting her arms wide, the purple Gem grabbed the sides of the car and began to shake it around as it drove down the road. The kids all laughed in amusement as they bumped against each other in the backseat, and Stan couldn’t help but join in, even if he was still trying to remain on the road for as much as Amethyst was rocking the car.

“A-Amethyst!” Pearl exclaimed, struggling to hold onto the roof. “Stop that this-”

The white Gem was abruptly cut off as Garnet placed a hand on her shoulder, sending her a coy smile as she shook her head and silently commanded her to enjoy the fun. And while Pearl’s first instinct was to protest this, she soon did, letting out a small chuckle and adding to the chorus of laughter rocking the car just as much as Amethyst was as it rolled down the road towards the rising sun.

Still, what no one was aware of as they headed home was that they had a tiny stowaway clinging to the car’s license plate, hiding just out of everyone’s view. “Laugh now, hugelings…” Franz muttered with a cold, calculating smirk. “But Franz will have his day! Franz will-” His vengeful musings were cut short as Amethyst’s rocking resulted in the car jolting violently as it went over a pothole. Unable to hold onto the license plate, Franz fell off and ultimately ended rolling into a shallow pit on the side of the road, unfortunately landing upside down. “Ah! Help!” he cried, squirming desperately in a futile attempt to right himself. “Sand trap! Ow! Somebody help me!”
Chapter 33: Marble Madness

Chapter Summary

In which the Gems are stubborn, Dipper and Steven are even more stubborn, and Peridot's a whiny asshole

Chapter Notes

Ah yes! Finally we arrive at a chapter I've been looking forward to for quite some time! But before we begin I should say that this chapter is a mix of both Warp Tour and Marble Madness, so hopefully that will make sense! Anyway, let's get started!

In the aftermath of their latest victory, the Gems pushed their way through the flowery meadow that had been their battlefield just moments ago with relatively high spirits. And this generally cheerful sentiment was something that most of the members of the spectating trio that had come along on this mission shared in as well. It hadn’t really taken too much pleading and prodding for Steven, Dipper, and Mabel to convince the Gems to bring them along on their latest quest, one that, aside from a random encounter with a Gem monster, hadn’t been too harrowing or life-threatening. And even as Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl took said monster on, the kids were content enough to cheer them on from the sidelines of the fray, one that had, much to their pleasant surprise, been a quick and painless win.

“I can’t believe that went so well!” Pearl exclaimed with a satisfied smile as her and Amethyst emerged from one of the countless towering flower patches surrounding the warp pad.

“Yeah,” the purple Gem agreed with a small chuckle. “That was kinda great when you hit it with your spear and it went like ‘boosh’!”

The white Gem humbly glanced away from her teammate, her cheeks lightning up in a pale blue blush as her grin widened. “And the way you were circling around it? Almost looked like strategy.”

“Heh, well you know,” Amethyst smirked just as bashfully. “I can do that stuff too.”

By now, Garnet had stepped out of the flowers herself, the defeated Gem monster trapped in the bubble above her palm before she calmly warped it away. Mabel came rushing out of the flowers next, completely covered in the colorful buds out of her own volition, as she had not only constructed herself a lively flower crown, but had also managed to fix several more of them onto her sweater as well.
“Ok, so I just gotta say that this is the prettiest Gem place we’ve ever been to, hands down!” she proclaimed with a wide smile. “Can we just stay here for the rest of the day and make more flower crowns?”

“Maybe some other time,” Garnet replied with an amused smile.

“Aw…” Mabel stuck her tongue out in faux disappointment. “But this place is so great!”

“Speak for yourself,” Dipper huffed in aggravation as he finally pushed his way out of the flower patch, looking quite perturbed as he gingerly rubbed his sore and swollen arm. “I got stung by at least four bees back there, all because of that dumb flower crown you just had to make me.”

“Don’t act like you didn’t love it,” Mabel sent her brother a wry smirk. “But hey, what’d you do with it anyway? Don’t tell me you just threw my careful craftsmanship away like it was nothing, Dipper!”

“Calm down, I didn’t,” Dipper reassured, rolling his eyes. “I just gave it to Steven. Though honestly, I’m kind of regretting that choice now…”

“Guys, wait up!” Steven called breathlessly as he managed to at last break out of the flower patch. The young Gem was clearly much worse for wear from his trip through it, as could be seen from his runny nose and watery eyes, both aggravated by the immense amount of pollen in the surrounding area. “Sorry I couldn’t help much with the monster,” Steven said to the Gems, his voice quite congested. “I think the flowers are making me-” He cut himself off, taking in a sudden gasp of air before abruptly letting it out in a heavy sneeze, the brunt of which happened to land on the Gem leader. “Oh! Sorry, Garnet!”

“I’ll live,” Garnet remarked, casually wiping the mucus of her hip.

“Steven! You’re supposed to sneeze into your antecubital fossa!” Pearl scolded, only to garnish very confused looks from all three of the kids.

“My… what?” Steven asked with a bewildered frown.

“You’re—this thing!” the white Gem pointed to the inner crook of her elbow before continuing on to the warp pad.

“Steven, if you’re so allergic to the flowers, why don’t you just, I dunno, take the flower crown off?” Dipper asked caustically.

“Why would I do that?” Steven asked with a sniffle as he readjusted said crown atop his head. “It’s so pretty and Mabel worked really hard on it!”

“Well at least somebody appreciates it,” Mabel sent her brother a pointed smirk as she joined Amethyst and Pearl on the warp pad. Garnet and the boys crammed onto it after them, and as soon as the white Gem preformed the obligatory check to make sure all of the kids were safely on the pad, they were off.

The irradiant column of light that was the warp stream was just as mesmerizing as ever as the group gently zoomed through it. Since the flowery meadow was quite far from the temple, the warp trip would take at least several minutes, which was something the kids didn’t really mind seeing as how warping alone was such a fascinating experience.

“Hey, you guys know what this would be a great time for?” Mabel spoke up with a smile before pulling her camera out of her sweater. “A scrapbook-erture!”
“Didn’t we already have one of those on the way here?” Amethyst asked, smirking.

“Well, yeah, but that was the *before* picture,” Mabel clarified. “This one’s the after picture, which is always objectively better than the first one! Now everyone huddle in and say ‘we beat a Gem monster!’”

Amused, the Gems complied, as did Steven and Dipper, while Mabel managed to squeeze herself into the picture while holding the camera out as far as she could. “We beat a Gem monster!” everyone exclaimed with shared smiles as the picture was snapped. However, the camera’s sudden, bright flash managed to cause Steven’s allergies to flare up once again. The young Gem took in a sharp gasp, his eyes watering and his cheeks warm as he tried his best to hold the oncoming sneeze back, especially as the Gems quickly repositioned themselves in the stream to avoid it.

“Do it at Pearl!” Amethyst laughed, pointing to the white Gem.

“Steven! Your fossa!” Pearl warned in a sudden panic.

“Oh! Oh! Let me get a quick pic of this too!” Mabel exclaimed, quickly aiming her camera. “I have the cutest sticker of a sneezing turtle that’ll go great with it!”

“Mabel, do you seriously have to-” Dipper was abruptly cut off as Steven finally let his pent-up sneeze go, unable to hold it in any longer. The force of it was enough to throw the young Gem back quite a bit, propelling him backwards towards the edge of the stream itself. Before he hit it however, Steven accidentally bumped into Dipper, knocking him back towards the edge as well. The Gems weren’t quite quick enough to catch either of the boys before they both partially fell through the stream’s intangible barrier headfirst, without hardly feeling it at all. Because of the suddenness of it all, it took them a moment to regather their bearings, but once they did, both Steven and Dipper were absolutely amazed at what they saw.

The space that existed outside of the warp stream could be described as just that: space. There was darkness only void darkness for as far as the eye could see, though it was occasionally dotted with small flecks of light akin to stars. This void was hardly still, however, as several thick, ominous clouds swirled within it, roaring with gentle, rumbling thunder and the occasional bright spark of lightning. Yet despite this, the air itself, if it could be called that, seemed to carry a sudden, sharp chill, one that was far removed from the mild temperance that existed inside of the stream. Time seemed to crawl as the boys stared at this hauntingly amazing sight with the same expression of awestruck wonder, wonder that neither of them could really put into words, though Steven did attempt it.

“Whoa…” the young Gem muttered, only to immediately gasp over his own sudden, inexplicable breathlessness. Dipper realized the same exact thing as he remembered to take a breath amidst his amazement, only instantly choke over air that wasn’t actually there.

Yet despite this frightening revelation, both boys’ attention was quickly caught as a light suddenly flashed from afar within the warp space, one that certainly didn’t come from any periodical lightning. Instead, it was a long, thin blue illuminant pillar, a warp stream identical to the one they were both still partially within. It appeared out of seemingly nowhere, traveling upward instead of down, and traveling along its speeding path was what the boys could only make out as but a mere blur of a round shadow, but a clearly visible one nonetheless.

“What-” Dipper attempted to ask despite the prevalent lack of oxygen. Though before he could get anything else out, a pair of hands suddenly pulled both boys back fully back into the stream at last, just as the unknown object in the adjacent stream disappeared from view.
“Careful!” Pearl cried fretfully, pulling both Steven and Dipper close to her and checking them over for any apparent injuries as they both instinctively sucked a much-needed breath of air. “It’s dangerous to stick your heads outside of the stream!”

“There’s not much air,” Garnet explained calmly as she flicked the frozen snot off of Steven’s nose. “And it’s very cold.”

“Whoa… Did you guys die out there?” Mabel asked the boys curiously.

“Heh, looks like it to me,” Amethyst chuckled, smirking at the pair as they still struggled to catch their lost breath. Still, neither of them paid her usually heckling any mind as they exchanged a stunned glance, knowing that they had to share what had just happened.

“Y-you guys!” Steven began, taking in another sharp gasp. “We… we saw something out there!”

“What?” Pearl asked, raising a confused eyebrow.

“H-he’s right! There was-” Dipper cut himself off as he coughed once again, still trying to recover lost air. “There was something else warping out there!”

“No way! Really?” Mabel asked with immense interest. “I wanna see it too!” Without any deterrence or delay, she eagerly pushed herself towards the edge of the stream as well, only to quickly be halted by Garnet’s outstretched hand.

“There’s nothing to see out there,” she concluded, her tone cold and resolved.

“Huh?” Steven and Dipper asked in slightly alarmed unison.

“Garnet’s right,” Pearl quickly interjected. “It’s impossible that anything would be out there. Perhaps the lack of air out there made you both see things?”

“I can see perfectly… Pearl?” Steven guessed, having to squint to look at the white Gem since his vision was still blurry thanks to his lingering allergies.

“You guys, we know what we saw,” Dipper asserted. “Ok, well… maybe we don’t know exactly what it was, but it was definitely out there! If you don’t believe us, just check for yourselves.”

“Sure, whatever,” Amethyst shrugged, still not really buying it. “If it’ll chill you guys out.” In mere seconds, the purple Gem stuck her head out of the stream before quickly pulling it back in. “Yep, just like we’re sayin’. Nothing’s out there but a bunch of clouds and cold.”

“B-but it was there!” Steven protested insistently. “We both saw it!”

“Yeah! If you guys would just-”

“Dipper, Steven,” Garnet firmly interrupted. “It’s like I said. There is nothing out there. There hasn’t been anything else for a long, long time.”

Pearl and Amethyst nodded their fervent agreement with this as Mabel simply shrugged, mostly accepting it. Still, neither Dipper nor Steven could be so complacent over the matter, especially considering the fact that they had seen it themselves. Something was out there, and even if neither of them had the slightest idea of what that something was, it existed nonetheless. And they weren’t about to let the Gems convince them otherwise so easily.
Seeing as how their mission with the Gems had taken up most of the morning, the kids still had the afternoon to do whatever they pleased. Seeing as how Connie’s afternoon had been freed up thanks to her violin lessons being cancelled, she was able to join the trio as they hung out outside the Mystery Shack in the pleasant afternoon sun.

“Ok Connie, so what’s this super cool thing you said you brought with you?” Mabel asked with excited curiosity, paying Steven and Dipper no mind as they both kept their gazes fixated on the temple up the hill.

“I’m glad you asked,” Connie grinned, reaching into her bag before pulling out a thick novel. “Ta da!”


“Whoa,” Steven’s interest was suddenly peaked as he looked to the novel. “Books! Cool cover! What is it?”

“Book 1 of the Spirit Morph Saga, which is only my favorite book series!” Connie gushed, smiling at the mysterious cover of the book, entitled *The Unfamiliar Familiar*. “It’s about this girl named Lisa, and she’s a witch! I mean, she doesn’t know she’s a witch at first, and she has a familiar, which is sort of like this spirit companion that everyone in the world has. And hers is a falcon named Archimicarus! Anyway, she goes on this quest to find her father after he’s kidnapped by a mysterious one-eyed man!”

“Ooo, mystery!” Steven exclaimed, now fully invested despite his earlier scrutiny.

“Sounds like something that would be right up your nerdy alley, huh, bro-bro?” Mabel asked, elbowing Dipper, who was still quite distracted with focusing on the temple.

“I’ve already read them all, actually,” he replied duly, still not bothering to glance away from the temple and instead focusing his thoughts on whatever him and Steven had seen in the warp space earlier.

“Wait, really?” Connie asked with an excited grin. “Finally, I have someone to talk to about them face to face with instead of having to vent on message boards and fan sites! So, Dipper… what’d you think of the ending of *Destiny’s End*?”

Upon hearing this question, Dipper instantly tore his gaze away from the temple at last, letting out a harsh scoff as he did so. “Are you kidding me? That ‘ending’, if it could even be called that, was awful.”

“Ugh, I know, right?” Connie thoroughly agreed, already incensed on the matter. “They spend three whole books subverting tropes and crashing through stereotypes and expectations and being really self-aware about being a pastiche, and for what?”

“For them to completely ruin it all by taking up 50 pages just to describe a cake,” Dipper remarked with equal disdain. “The first three books totally had me going with the mystery of the one-eyed man, only for us to never actually get a real name or backstory for him. It’s seriously the most disappointing and anti-climactic thing ever.”

“What drew the line for me was how they just uprooted all those themes about standing against absolute authority!” Connie added adamantly, not noticing the bewildered looks Steven and Mabel were giving her and Dipper both. “Lisa and her talking falcon, rebels challenging the stifling traditions of the magical bureaucracy? I loved that! But no, let’s just drop it all for ‘romance’ and
‘fluff’.

“Talk about pandering! Like, come on, could they have gotten any more schmaltzy. I couldn’t believe what I was reading when Archimicarus turned into—”

“Whoa, hold on a second!” Connie quickly interrupted. “We don’t wanna spoil it for Steven and Mabel, no matter how trite and hackneyed it is.”

“Oh yeah,” Dipper said with a small, embarrassed laugh. “Honestly, we probably said too much about it already…”

“Pfft, you guys are A-ok spoiling your nerd books for me,” Mabel groaned again, lying down on the ground lazily. “As long as it gets you and Steven to stop freaking out over whatever you saw when we were warping earlier.”

“Oh yeah! I almost forgot about that!” Steven exclaimed with a gasp. “Thanks for reminding us, Mabel!”

“Why can’t I ever keep my adorably big mouth shut?” Mabel whined in exasperation, covering her face with her sweater sleeve before the boys could even begin their worrying.

“What does she mean?” Connie asked the boys inquisitively. “What did you guys see?”

“We… actually don’t really know…” Dipper admitted hesitantly.

“It was some weird roundish thing zipping through a different warp stream!” Steven exclaimed. “The Gems said that it was nothing, but that means it’s gotta be something, doesn’t it?”

“It was something!” Dipper insisted. “Something that’s possibly really important or dangerous, especially if the Gems are right and nothing’s supposed to be out there. That’s why they should have listened to us and actually looked into it instead of just shrugging it off!”

“Ugh, you two have been going on about that thing ever since we got back earlier!” Mabel exclaimed tiredly. “Can’t you just give it a break already? The Gems said it’s all good, so we have nothing to worry about.”

“Mabel’s probably right,” Connie said, giving the boys an understanding smile. “I mean, we want the Gems to trust the four of us; maybe we should meet them halfway and trust them in return. Besides, if what you saw really was dangerous, then they would have already handled it by now, right?”

“Sure, if they had actually believed us about it in the first place,” Dipper muttered, crossing his arms.

“Hm… I guess so…” Steven sighed, even if he didn’t really agree. But even so, he figured that they wouldn’t have much luck convincing the girls of what they had seen since, much like the Gems, they hadn’t had the chance to witness it for themselves.

“Good! Then that means you two can finally stop being Worried Walters and relax for a change!” Mabel quipped jokingly.

“And it means we can get you guys started on these!” Connie held The Unfamiliar Familiar up to Steven and Mabel, the former perking up with excitement while the latter let out another bored groan. “Ahem,” Connie cleared her throat, adjusting the frames of her glasses as she began to read the novel aloud. “Chapter One: The Morning Thief…”
Steven attempted to focus more on the first *Spirit Morph Saga* book that Connie had successfully finished reading to him that night as he climbed into bed, as opposed to thinking of the unknown object from the warp stream. Still, the young Gem could think of little else as he snuggled into his covers, his already palpable concern steadily growing with each glance he happened to chance towards the warp pad down below. Certainly if something was indeed flowing throughout the stream at that very moment, then there was always a chance that it could wind up warping right up to the temple itself, right?

While these ominous thoughts definitely troubled Steven, he soon began to feel his eyes grow heavy with oncoming sleep nonetheless. He was quick to snap himself awake again though, fearing that if he let his guard down, even for a moment, then the unknown object would show up without any warning. And if it was actually dangerous, then its arrival was certainly something the young Gem wanted to be ready for.

However, what Steven wasn’t ready for was for a bright light to suddenly flood the loft, startling him upright with a terrified gasp. And yet, instead of it being the telltale flash of light from the warp pad, it was the pale glow from the refrigerator instead.

“Wha—Amethyst!” the young Gem exclaimed, looking down to see the purple Gem raiding the fridge as she often did at this late hour.

“Hey, Steven!” Amethyst greeted casually, snacking on the powdered cheese that came along with macaroni. “Want some macaroni cheese?”

Steven didn’t answer her, tucking behind his blankets a bit until the purple Gem began sauntering back towards the temple gate. “W-wait!” he called after her. “I…. I can’t sleep.”

“Why?” Amethyst licked the cheese residue off her hand. “Are you scared of that thing you and Dipper saw earlier warping right into the house and attacking you in your sleep?!”

“…No…” Steven squeaked anxiously.

“Oh good!” the purple Gem smirked teasingly, continuing on to the gate. “Glad to know you’re not totally wimping out on us after all! Well, nighty night! Don’t let the ‘warp monster’ bite! Ha!”

With a loud, callous chuckle, Amethyst opened the door to her room and entered, leaving Steven alone with his growing dread once more.

The young Gem bit his lip apprehensively as he looked to the warp pad once again, the familiar sight looking ominous and almost sinister as it glistened dully in the darkness of the room. It was silent and still now, sure, but how long could he really be sure that it would stay like that? Something was wandering through warp space freely, something unknown and certainly disconcerting. And for as long as it was out there, Steven knew that he would be unable to really think of anything else.

“Looks like I’m not sleeping tonight…” the young Gem muttered to himself with a long sigh. Still, if he was going to tackle anything that might try to come through the warp stream unwarranted, then he was at least going to tackle it with the proper arms. With firm resolve, Steven grabbed his water gun and crept downstairs to fill it up, already knowing that it was certainly going to be a very long night.
“Steven…” Pearl cooed in a sing-songy voice, lightly tapping the young Gem in an attempt to rouse him awake. Upon emerging from the temple that morning, Pearl and Garnet had found Steven snoozing propped up against the front door, water gun loosely hugged to his chest as he snored softly. The two elder Gems couldn’t help but feel somewhat guilty about their dismissive behavior the previous day, and so they intended on making it up to their young charge. As soon as he woke up that was. “Steven,” Pearl tried again, a little louder this time. “We’ve got a surprise for you-

“Ah!” Steven gasped as he jolted awake, his finger already on the trigger of his water gun. On instinct, he pulled it as he pointed the weapon at whatever was in his immediate vicinity, which of course happened to be Pearl. The white Gem let out a startled cry as she was struck by the watery blast, knocking her back away from Steven and thoroughly soaking her, much to her aggravation. “Oh! Sorry, Pearl!” the young Gem exclaimed, jumping to his feet upon realizing his mistake.

“Now you’re not getting any cookies,” Garnet remarked as she stood by, holding a trayful of cookies they had made Steven.

“Cookies?!” Amethyst asked eagerly as she emerged from the temple. “I’ll take ‘em!” Before Garnet could protest, the purple Gem snatched the cookie tray away from her, pouring the treats into her mouth without much restraint. “Amethyst, slow down,” the Gem leader advised, though Amethyst did anything but.

“Again, I’m sorry, Pearl,” Steven said with sincerity, wiping the sleep out of his eyes. “I just… I guess I didn’t…”

“Didn’t sleep,” Garnet finished thoughtfully as the young Gem trailed off.

Steven confirmed her suspicions as he let out an exhausted yawn. “Maybe,”

“Good morning, everyone!” Mabel greeted just as bright and blithely as ever as she burst into the house. Her cheerful smile quickly fell into confusion however, upon noticing Steven’s water gun, as well as the fact that Pearl was still sopping wet. “Whoa, what’s going on here? Were you guys having a water fight? Cause if you were, I wanna play! I’ll just have Dipper go get-” She abruptly cut herself off as she glanced over her shoulder, only to find that her brother had in fact not followed her inside, but was leaning against the doorframe outside, half asleep. “Seriously? Again?” Mabel huffed in annoyance, pulling Dipper inside and roughly waking him up fully in the process. “Now what did I tell you, bro-bro?”

“Uh… something about staying up all night reading the journal?” Dipper guessed tiredly, letting out a long yawn a moment later.

“That’s right, I told you not to do that because it would make you super tired the next day,” Mabel informed pointedly. “And what do ya know? Looks like I was right once again, cause you’re totally about to clonk out for like, the 20th time today!”

“No, I’m…” Dipper trailed off as he began to nod off once more, only for Mabel to wake him back up with a sharp snap of her fingers. “Huh?! What’s going—I-I mean, I’m totally awake! Yeah, not tired at all!” He let out a small awkward laugh, one that neither Mabel nor the Gems really bought as they all gave him unconvinced glances. “So, uh… what were we talking about again?”

“Yeesh,” Amethyst remarked dryly, rolling her eyes. “If I didn’t know any better, Dipper, right
now I’d think that you and Steven are twins instead of you and Mabel. You know, ’cause you both have the same big ol’ bags under your eyes.”

“You didn’t sleep last night either, Dipper?” Steven asked, his lingering exhaustion reminding him that this was something he easily related to.

“Ugh, no,” Dipper admitted, somewhat frustrated as he rubbed his eyes. “I was up all night looking through the journal for any hints about that… thing we saw in the warp stream yesterday!”

“And you didn’t find anything about it, which means that you pretty much wore yourself out for nothing,” Mabel added with a smirk. “Which is something you do all the time, but hey, I’m not here to judge.” She paused for a moment before discreetly whispering something else to the Gems. “Yes, I am.”

“Hold on a minute,” Pearl interjected, wringing the water out of her sash. “Is that seriously what all this fuss is about? You two are still thinking about whatever it is you think you saw yesterday?”

“We don’t think we saw anything, because we really did see it!” Dipper argued, more cross than he usually would have been, considering his exhaustion. “Right, Steven?”

“Yeah,” the young Gem readily, the smallest hint of desperation in his tone. “It was real, you guys! Something was warping somewhere in the warp!”

“And we need to figure out what that something was,” Dipper contended. “What if it’s something dangerous or violent? You three would care about it then, right?”

“Sure we would,” Amethyst said with a shrug. “If it was real.”

“But come on, you guys,” Mabel interjected just as dismissively. “When have Gem things ever been dangerous or violent before?”

“Are you seriously asking that question right now?” Dipper asked caustically, knowing he could give her countless examples of both of those things. “Seriously?”

“We wouldn’t lie to you guys about something like this,” Steven insisted earnestly. “If you’d just hear us out, then we could-”

“Listen,” Pearl interrupted, her tone firm and slow as she placed a hand on top each of the boys’ heads. “Both of you. Nothing on Earth can use the warps but us. Nothing. Do you both understand?” Neither Dipper nor Steven were willing to accept this conditioning so easily though, as they both glanced away from the white Gem sullenly. “Steven, Dipper,” Pearl appealed once again, her tone more authoritative this time. “Nod in agreement if you understand.” They didn’t of course, still resisting what they knew couldn’t be true, much to Pearl’s ever growing frustration. “Nod in agreement if-”

“I’m confident Pearl is right,” Garnet interrupted, looking to the boys calmly. “There’s no use in either of you staying up all night and waiting or looking for something that you’re not going to find. But…” Steven and Dipper took in a shared anxious breath upon hearing this, hoping that the Gem leader would at least listen to their concerns. “If it’ll make you both feel better, we can go check.”

Steven sighed in immense relief upon hearing this, and while it wasn’t exactly what Dipper had been hoping for, he nodded in tentative agreement with this plan nonetheless. After all, any amount of scrutiny on the Gems’ part in all this was better than none at all.
“Woo! Warp tour! Warp tour!” Mabel cheered, more than ready for another exciting Gem adventure, even if this one was going to be rather simple in nature. Still, no one wasted any time in squeezing onto the warp pad, seeing as how they had quite the trip ahead of them. And with another affirming nod from Garnet, the group set off on their so-called “warp tour”.

Their first stop was also their most recent destination: the flowery meadows. The area looked essentially the same as it did when they were there the previous day, the tall blossoms swaying to the peaceful breeze as the group warped in.

“Nothing unusual here,” Garnet noted, her hands on her hips. This information didn’t really discourage the boys though; after all, they still had plenty of other places left to go.

“Oh boy! Since we’re back here we can make more flower crowns before we go!” Mabel exclaimed, clasping her hands together with delight.

“No,” Dipper quickly deadpanned, far too focused on their mission to care about such trivial things.

Before they could move on, Steven happened to let out another heavy sneeze, his allergies stirred up by the dense pollen in the air once more. “Bless you,” Garnet excused him succinctly before they warped to their next destination.

Really, the next several spots that the group warped to turned out to be just as uneventful as the first. Some locations were familiar to the kids, some not, but all of them wielded the same results: nothing. Still, Dipper and Steven made sure to keep their eyes peeled, not just as they arrived to each spot, but in the warp stream as well. They hoped that with the thorough investigation they were doing, that they would be able to find at least a hint at something out of the ordinary, one that would point them in the right direction as to the location of the mystery object if nothing else. And yet with every new place they warped to, that hope steadily started to diminish, but even so, they didn’t once question whether what they saw had been real or not. Not only did they have each other was witnesses, but the memory they both had of seeing the unknown object was still so clear and fresh in both of their minds. There was no doubt that they had both seen it. No doubt anywhere except for with Mabel and the Gems.

“Well, this is the last place to look,” Garnet concluded as they arrived at the legendary Sky Spire, only for there once again to be nothing there of note.

“W-what?!” Dipper exclaimed in sudden alarm. “But… but that can’t be it! There’s got to be somewhere we haven’t checked yet! We need to-”

“Ugh, give it a rest already, bro-bro,” Mabel groaned, slightly annoyed. “Every place we’ve been today was super cool yeah, but also super relaxed. Why can’t you guys just accept that and let this thing go?”

“I agree,” Pearl nodded succinctly. “You both have blown this way out of proportion. We’ve looked all over! There’s nothing out here to find.”

“But you’re wrong…” Steven mumbled sullenly, rolling his eyes.

“Excuse me?!” the white Gem narrowed her eyes at her young charge.

The young Gem paled a bit, realizing his disrespectful mistake as he immediately tried to redact it. “I-I mean-”

“No, don’t take it back, Steven,” Dipper cut him off, looking to Pearl defiantly and scarcely caring
about crossing the line now. All day the Gems had refused to take either of them seriously, and he had grown beyond tired of it, which was why he had every intention of putting an end to it in any way he could. “You are wrong. And we can prove it!”

“Oh, really?!” Pearl gasped, completely appalled. “And how are you going to do that? Might I remind you that nothing on Earth can use these warps but us? So how do you intend on disproving that proven fact? With that little journal of yours? Ha! Good luck with that!”

By this point, Dipper was aptly infuriated, especially as the white Gem callously mocked the journal, but still, before he could send a heated argument back at her, Steven cautiously interjected. “W-well…. What if… what if it was from space?” he asked tentatively. Really, it didn’t seem like too outlandish of an idea, given the fact that the Gems themselves were from space, and they were they only things on Earth capable of warping. Still, this suggestion seemed to silence all three of the Gems completely, all of their eyes widening at the idea of this proposal, even if Pearl was the first to provide an answer for it yet again.

“I-” she cut herself off immediately, pursing her lips as she met the expectant gazes all three of the kids were giving her now. “I don’t appreciate your tone.”

Still, before either of the boys could try to support this newfound idea, the white Gem was quick to warp them all away from the Sky Spire and to another familiar spot: the Galaxy Warp. It was indeed the only place they hadn’t scoped out yet, but still there was no unknown object to be found there. Neither Steven nor Dipper really cared about that at the moment though; currently, all of their frustration was saved for Pearl, who began to explain why she firmly believed they were both wrong.

“These are the warps that once connected us to other planets,” she said, her tone quite patronizing as she made her way to the central warp pad. “If something tried to come from space, it would be through here. But wait!” she exclaimed with faux dramatics, spinning around to face the boys. “This warp pad is broken, marked inactive by the very depressed cartoon breakfast sticker you placed here yourself, Steven!” With a cold glare, she pointed to the Wailing Waffle sticker the young Gem had put on the central warp during their test of the pad weeks ago, proving that it was indeed out of commission.

“Look,” Amethyst interjected with a comforting smirk as she walked up to the boys along with Mabel. “Pearl’s right, as usual. Sure, it’s annoying, but you get used to it.”

“Seriously, you guys need to chill out,” Mabel added with a discontented frown. “Dipper, it’s already bad enough that I have to deal with your dumb paranoia over everything, but now you’ve gone and rubbed that paranoia off on Steven to the point that you both are covered in it and neither of you are any fun anymore! It’s driving me nuts!”

“We’re not being paranoid!” Dipper stressed adamantly. “We’re being careful, which is clearly something that none of the rest of you care about, otherwise we would have already found that thing by now!”

“If there was actually anything to find,” Pearl pointed out caustically. “Which, as we’ve just proven, there isn’t.”

Garnet affirmed this sentiment, placing a gentle hand on top of both of the boys’ heads and sending them a soft smile as they looked up to her dubiously. “We’re safe.”

Neither Steven nor Dipper found that they could really argue with this, even if they both really wanted to. Yet every time they tried to voice their growing concern, they only fell upon deaf ears
as the Gems stubbornly disregarded them, no matter how hard they tried to convince them of the truth. Which was why both of them were quickly starting to reach the conclusion that it was futile to really even try.

Dipper let out a bitter, defeated sigh as he crossed his arms, looking down to the ground with a sullen scowl. At the same time, Steven pouted anxiously as he looked to the central warp yet again, placing a hand beside the Crying Breakfast Friends sticker fixed upon it as he looked over its cracked, weathered surface. “Well…” the young Gem began, his tone still not entirely convinced. “I guess so…”

The Gems let out a collective sigh upon hearing this, one that Mabel also joined in on as all of their moods instantly improved. “Oh man, finally!” Amethyst exclaimed, stretching out casually. “That took all day!”

“Well at least we can finally head home and put this whole thing behind us,” Mabel said, sending a satisfied smile Steven and Dipper’s way. “And maybe you two can actually get a good nights’ sleep tonight instead of staying up worrying over nothing.”

Both of the boys bristled somewhat at this comment, but still, neither of them said anything, knowing that it would be wiser now to keep the peace, as much as it annoyed them to.

“Still,” Garnet spoke up, her hands on her hips. “It was important to make Steven and Dipper feel secure.”

“Yes, they both feel much better now,” Pearl concluded somewhat condescendingly. Of course, upon hearing this, both boys only grew even more irate over the entire situation. It was bad enough that the Gems had dismissed their fears entirely, but now they seemed to be completely talking down to them for it all. And the longer they silently simmered over it, the more unacceptable it became.

“I’m a little tired…” Steven began, his tone rarely cross and borderline hostile as he turned to face his guardians. “Of you guys telling us how we should feel!”

“Seriously, you guys are treating us like we’re little kids who are only making this stuff up but we’re not,” Dipper insisted hotly, his hands in tight fists at his sides. “We’re telling you the truth!”

“We know we saw something outside the stream!” Steven exclaimed, clearly livid by this point.

“And I know you didn’t!” Pearl retorted just as incensed. However this time, neither of the boys were about to back down from this false claim so meekly.

Garnet, Amethyst, and Mabel were all startled yet unsurprised as an inevitable argument broke out between Steven, Dipper, and Pearl. Then again, it wasn’t really as much of an argument as it was an all-out shouting match.

“Now both of you listen to me,” the white Gem asserted loudly and rather harshly. “I’ve been around much longer than either of you have. I know everything there is to know about the warp system. Which is why you two don’t tell me what I already know!”

Still, neither of the boys were hardly listening to a word she said as they ranted off their own immense grievances. “Why is it so hard for you to just listen to us?!” Steven exclaimed indignantly. “You don’t care what we have to say! You never do! You just want to do it your own way!”

“Whatever happened to ‘oh we’ll start trusting you guys more’?” Dipper asked just as angrily. “If
you really trusted us, then you’d actually hear us out and stop pretending like nothing’s wrong, just like you always do!”

This heated quarrel went on for quite some time, all three of them yelling over each other to the point that most of what they were shouting couldn’t really be made out by the trio watching in stilted silence from the sidelines. Garnet, Amethyst, and Mabel all exchanged uncertain glances for a moment before turning their attention back towards the ongoing argument, none of them bold enough to throw themselves into this intense conflict willingly.

“Uh, this is new,” Amethyst remarked with a small, amused chuckle. “I kinda like it.”

“Shouldn’t we try and stop them?” Mabel asked Garnet, who only shrugged apathetically in response.

“Ugh,” Pearl finally groaned, rolling her eyes as a break in the argument finally came. “You two just don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh we’re the ones who don’t know what we’re talking about?” Dipper asked with frustrated disbelief. “Sure, I mean, it’s not like we were the ones who actually saw it or anything!”

“It sounds like… maybe you don’t know what you’re talking about!” Steven shouted at Pearl, his voice echoing throughout the Galaxy Warp as the white Gem took in a sharp, shocked gasp. The others were quite alarmed at hearing the usually gentle and agreeable young Gem get so frustrated, but even so, he didn’t dare take it back now. Honestly, he likely wouldn’t have even if he wanted to.

By this point, however, Pearl was so frustrated with both boys that all she could really do was let out a petulant scoff as she crossed her arms and glared away from them. Of course, Steven and Dipper were still quite upset themselves, but at this juncture, Garnet finally decided to intervene.

“Alright, you two,” the Gem leader said, her tone calm yet firm as she stepped between the boys and Pearl. “That’s enough. Let it go.”

“But…” both Steven and Dipper attempted to interject, but Garnet quickly stopped them.

“I said, let it go,” she repeated authoritatively, making it quite clear that no matter how much they tried to argue otherwise, there would be no further discussion on the matter.

Mabel smiled as she finished positioning the pillows on her bed in a way that would comfortably accommodate both her and Waddles, before hoisting said pig up onto the bed as he trotted up to it. “There you go, my perfect pink angel,” she quipped, plopping Waddles down onto his pillow. “Now we can have a nice, cozy night’s sleep, unlike some people…” Mabel frowned, somewhat annoyed, as she glanced over at Dipper, who was pouring over the journal just as intently as he had the previous night. He was utterly exhausted, of course, but he wasn’t about to let that deter him from checking the book one more time, desperate for any answers it could possibly give.

“Complain all you want, Mabel,” Dipper said, not even looking up from the journal. “But I’m not giving up until I figure out what that thing in the warp stream was!”

“Why nooooot?” Mable whined, laying back on her bed and covering her eyes with her arm. “You heard what the Gems said! We’re safe!”
“That may be what they think, but I’m not about to believe it until I have proof.”

“Ugh, you’re so annoying when you get all obsessy like this! Remember the last time you went all crazy trying to prove something, Dipper? Cause I do! In fact, I remember it involving a bunch of gross zombies that tried to eat our brains out!”

“This is totally different!” Dipper snapped defensively. “Look, I’ll admit that I was totally reckless about the whole zombie thing, but I’m being the exact opposite about this! I’m trying to figure out the truth about this thing so we can all be safe.”

“Is that really why you’re doing this, Dipper?” Mabel asked, sending her brother a rather harsh glare. “Or are you just doing this because you wanna prove that you and Steven were right and the Gems are wrong?”

Dipper was more than ready to refute this assumption, but before he could, Stan happened to burst into the room, looking anything but pleased with his nibblings. “You two! Cut all that yelling out!” he growled sullenly. “It’s late, and I don’t wanna referee you munchkins if you get into a fist fight or something. Plus, I don’t have my camera on me to record it.”

“Grunkle Stan!” Mabel exclaimed loudly. “Dipper’s being dumb and he keeps stressing out over this stupid thing that him and Steven saw when we were out with the Gems yesterday!”

“Mabel!” Dipper quickly interjected. He was quite annoyed that she had no qualms over tattling on him, especially seeing as how the conman was already keeping a closer eye on him in light of the zombie incident.

“Oh yeah?” Stan raised an eyebrow as he looked to his nephew. “What kind of thing?”

“I-it was-”

“He doesn’t know what it looks like because they only saw it for like, a second.” Mabel informed pointedly. “If they saw anything at all, though I’m with the Gems in thinking that they didn’t.”

“Oh, so now you’re seeing things, kid?” the conman asked dubiously. “Figures. Reading a kooky journal like that will do it to ya.”

“Grunkle Stan, I’m not just seeing things!” Dipper argued intently. “What me and Steven saw in the warp stream was real, and it was-”

“Yeesh, calm down,” Stan interrupted with a small laugh. “I was just kidding. Still, if the Gems said it was nothing, then, as much as I hate to admit it, they’re probably right. They are the authority on all of that magic mumbo-jumbo, after all.”

“See?” Mabel sent her brother a smug smirk. “Told ya so.”

“Now both of you, get to bed,” Stan ordered as he prepared to take his leave. “And if you two actually do end up getting in a fight, don’t expect me to come up here and break it up. Besides, we all know Mabel would win anyway so it would be pretty much pointless to try and intervene.”

“Hey!” Dipper protested as Mabel let out a small snicker. The twins didn’t really didn’t converse much further with each other after Stan left, both of them still rather irritated with each other over the situation at large. Still, even after Mabel turned the main light off and nestled with Waddles into a comfy slumber, Dipper stayed up with the journal and a flashlight, just as he had the previous night, resolved to examine every word of it that concerned the Gems in the hopes that he would at the very least get some sort of lead. He didn’t make it very far into his search, however,
before he began to nod off, only to be roused awake by sudden tapping against the attic window.

Since Mabel was already fast asleep, she didn’t hear the repeating noise, but seeing as how he was on edge already, Dipper didn’t hesitate in checking it out. Being as quiet as possible as not to wake his sister up, he climbed up onto the nightstand to get a better look out the window, only to find a sight he hadn’t really been expecting.

“Steven?” he whispered incredulously, frowning down at the young Gem who stood in the yard down below, a pile of pebbles in his hand as he waved up at him. Lion stood beside him, licking his paw boredly, but the intent, almost desperate expression on Steven’s face was enough to convince Dipper to grab his hat and jacket and sneak out of the shack to meet him outside. “Steven, what are you doing here?” he asked the young Gem, who’s worry turned into slight relief upon seeing him. “Don’t you have any idea how late it is?”

“I do, but…” Steven frowned anxiously as he glanced behind him towards the temple. “I need your help. The Gems still won’t believe me, and I keep having mini-freaks out every time I look at the warp pad, and you’re the only person I can count on in this because you saw it too and-”

“Whoa, Steven, slow down,” Dipper interrupted. “What exactly do you need help with?”

“I-I want you to help me keep an eye on the warp pad,” Steven said with shaky resolve. “Just in case… it comes through. We still don’t know what it is, and… I really don’t like the thought of being there alone if it does show up. So… I know this might be a lot to ask, but… will you help me, Dipper?”

“Are you kidding? Of course, Steven!” Dipper instantly agreed, as though it was obvious that he would. “If that thing warps in, I definitely don’t wanna miss it.”

“Great! Thanks so much, Dipper!” Steven exclaimed, overwhelmed with relief as he abruptly pulled him into a tight hug.

“Steven! Not so loud!” Dipper was quick to pull away and shush him. “What if Stan or Mabel hear you?”

“Oh, right…” the young Gem blushed, lowering his voice down to a whisper. “Sorry!”

Not wanting to waste any time at all, both boys climbed onto Lion and rushed back to the temple in record time. The house was calm and quiet as they arrived, no signs of any unknown objects or unwarranted warping whatsoever. Still, they weren’t anywhere near appeased just yet. The pair began their vigil, one of them sitting on each side of the warp pad and scarcely taking their eyes off of it for a moment. While Dipper had the journal positioned in his lap, he was more ready to take notes in it than read it in the event that the unknown object did show up. At the same time, Steven had prepared himself a small snack of macaroni, bereft of cheese since Amethyst had eaten it all, but still it was something to help pass the idle hours. For almost an hour, the boys sat in still, perfect silence, their shared resolve filling in any sort of anxious conversation they might have had. Exhaustion and fatigue were weighing heavily on both of them, to the point that both of them were having trouble even keeping their eyes open for every long, but still, they forced themselves to remain awake. After all, if no one else was going to take this matter seriously, then they had to and were going to, for everyone’s sake.
Yet as time continued to drag on and still nothing happened, the wearier in their mission both boys started to get. Unable to bear the deafening silence along with his own growing dread, Steven finally spoke up. “Dipper? Why are we doing this?” he asked, his tone rife with uncertainty.

“What do you mean?” Dipper asked, finally glancing up from the warp pad.

“I mean…” Steven let out a frustrated sigh before he continued. “It’s been two days since we saw that thing… If it hasn’t shown up by now, then how do we know its gonna show up at all?”

“Oh it’ll show up,” Dipper affirmed intently, his tone somewhat unhinged. “It has to. And when it does, we’re gonna get the Gems and show it to them and then they’ll finally, finally realize that we were right all along!”

Steven sucked in an anxious breath at this, his doubt starting to grow even more as he looked to the warp pad again. “But what if it doesn’t? What if… What if we were wrong and everyone else was right?”

“You can’t be serious, Steven,” Dipper scoffed, angrily glancing away from the young Gem at this very suggestion. “We both saw that thing with our own eyes! The Gems, Mabel, everyone thinks we’re crazy for thinking that it’s real, but we’re not! And we have to show them that we’re not!”

“I know, but this-” Steven threw his arms out wide as he rose to his feet. “Staying up all night and sitting around waiting for who knows what? This is crazy! Let’s just face it, Dipper; nothing’s going to come through that warp pad.”

Before Dipper could even argue this point however, Steven was inadvertently proven right as something crashed into the house not through the warp pad, but through the ceiling instead. Both of the boys let out startled gasps as the small round, pale green orb smashed into the ground only a few feet away from them. Its surface was smooth and almost marble-like, and despite the intent it had left in the floor, it soon picked itself up as four short, leg-like extensions emerged from it, all of them detached from the orb itself. The machine made a swiveling noise as it pushed itself upright, before it began to skitter its way towards the warp pad.

For a moment, both Steven and Dipper were too stunned with shock over this turn of events to even do or say anything about it. And then, at the exact same moment, they both started to laugh.

“Oh my gosh! This is it!” Dipper exclaimed with a huge, excited smile as he watched the orb crawled its way towards them. “This was that thing in the warp stream! We were right!”

“No way!” Steven gasped, just as exhilarated, especially as he glanced up towards the hole the orb had left in the ceiling then back to the machine itself. “It really did come from space! Oh man, the Gems totally are gonna freak out when they see-” The young Gem cut himself off with another gasp as the orb continued to clamor forward, his elation suddenly turning to concern. “Uh, I-I think it’s trying to get to the warp pad!”

“What? But why would it-” Dipper was interrupted as the orb attempted to squeeze its way between them, using its tiny legs to try and push them out of its way. “Hey!”

“Whoa there, little guy!” Steven exclaimed to the orb, putting his hands onto it an attempt to stop it. “Hold on for just a—Ow!” Without warning, the orb’s insistent behavior turned violent as it lashed out, landing a surprisingly hard kick to the young Gem’s chest and knocking him back. Somehow, Steven had managed to hold onto the orb throughout this, and he still clung onto it as tightly as it could, even as it continued to struggle against him. “Guys! Come out here and check this out!” he shouted towards the temple gate in the hopes that the Gems would hear him, not even
noticing as a small hatch started to open up on the orb’s upper half, revealing a short, pointed nozzle.

“Whoa! Steven, look out!” Dipper shouted, rushing over with the journal still in hand. Before the machine could fire whatever projectile it had at its disposal at Steven, Dipper hit it hard with the side of the journal, sending it flying off of the young Gem and to the other side of the room. The impact actually managed to damage the orb somewhat, as a small crack now ran down its otherwise polished surface and a strange, unknown light teal liquid began pouring from it as it skittered about in a sudden panic.

“What do we do?! What do we do?!” Steven asked fearfully as he jumped to his feet.

“Uh… we should…” Dipper trailed off anxiously, only to gasp in surprise as the orb suddenly lunged towards the warp pad once more. “We gotta stop it! Come on!”

Steven didn’t argue as they both charged for the warp pad as well, making it there at the exact same moment as the orb. As the machine made contact with the pad, it lit up with its usual glow, a sign that it had no intentions of sticking around much longer. “Oh no, you don’t!” Steven exclaimed as both him and Dipper pounced on the orb, though this time, it oddly didn’t struggle. “Garnet! Amethyst! Pearl-”

The young Gem was cut off as, without warning, the warp pad activated, taking both of the boys and the orb with it. Still, they hardly noticed as they were propelled up the stream, both of them still clinging onto the orb in a mix of desperation and confusion. “I don’t understand!” Dipper exclaimed, glancing over the orb in bewilderment. “Where’s it trying to go?”

Steven didn’t have much of a chance to even ponder this question as he was suddenly struck from something from behind. “Huh?” he glanced back, only to let out a startled gasp to find that another orb, identical to the first one, had somehow entered the stream, followed by countless more. “They’re coming from all over?!”

Likewise, Dipper was also quite alarmed to see an influx of orbs coming in from the other side of the stream, all of them quickly converging towards the two of them. “Steven, they’re-” Before he could finish, all of the emerging orbs suddenly smashed into both of the boys seemingly all at once. The machines’ became only more aggressive as they roughly pushed the boys against each other before shoving them towards the edge of the stream in a clear attempt to remove them from the stream.

“Ow! Hey! Stop it!” Steven shouted at the orbs as him and Dipper attempt to push back against them, to little avail. The machines were surprisingly strong and enduring, and given their immense and ever-increasing numbers, it wasn’t long before they managed to partially push both boys out of the stream.

As soon as their heads were forced out of the stream and into the empty chill of warp space, both Dipper and Steven took in large gasps of air that didn’t really exist out there. Still, neither of them had much time to focus on that, as their attention was instantly garnished by something much more important. The otherwise sparse void was lit up with dozens, if not hundreds of different warp streams, each of them carrying mass amounts of the same orbs as they all seemed to converge at the same exact distant point.

“What—t—they’re all-” Dipper was unable to finish his stunned statement as the lack of air all around them quickly left him breathless. Alarmed and concerned by this, Steven wasted no time in trying to both them both back into the warp stream, even though the orbs were still trying to do the exact opposite.
“N-no!” Steven exclaimed, shoving their way back into the stream and allowing them both to momentarily catch their breaths. Dipper quickly joined him in fighting back against the persistent machines, though it was becoming painfully apparent that this was a battle they were going to lose. “We won’t let you—augh!”

Without warning, the orbs all suddenly pushed back hard against the boys, to the point that there was nothing they could do as they were both abruptly knocked out of the stream completely. They shared a gasp of panic as they were sent freely flying into the cold depths of warp space, with the only thing they had to mutually cling onto being the lone orb that they had both managed to get a firm hold on before being pushed out. For a moment, all the boys could do was exchange a stunned, fearful glance, both of them quickly realizing just how much danger they were in. Not only did the bitter cold atmosphere instantly start to get to them both, but the sparse amount of oxygen at their disposal only made things even worse, especially neither of them really knew how to conserve it.

“S-Steven!” Dipper gasped, immediately panicking as he desperately glanced around for any nearby warp stream. “W-we gotta find a-another—” He stopped short upon hearing a small, weak, somewhat unnerving chuckle come from the young Gem, who remained rather still as he floated along, dully holding onto the orb. “Steven, what—”

“W-we were right, Dipper,” Steven laughed, clearly in something of a daze as he grinned towards the orb. “W-we w-were right… And now…” His smile faded into a sort of morose, almost tearful sort of expression, one also marked with grim acceptance as he slowly let go of the orb. “W-we…. We’re gonna die… Two tired… frozen… little s-sadsacks…”

For a moment, all Dipper could really do was stare at Steven with the same kind of crestfallen despair, but even so, he wasn’t about to give up so easily. “N-no! We… we can’t!” he choked, realizing just how tight his chest suddenly felt, no doubt a sign of slow suffocation. “We… There… T-there has to be…” He trailed off, a stark shiver running through him that wasn’t just from the freezing cold. As horrifying as it was to think, they were both stranded in a place where they couldn’t possibly hope to survive for very long, all because of their own desperate, reckless desire to be proven right. And now, because of their stubbornness, the only thing they could prove for certain now was how foolish they both had been.

And yet, just as both boys were about to resign themselves to their cold, dark fate, something that was nothing sort of a miracle happened. As they continued to aimlessly float through warp space, a sudden pillar of light soared up right behind them both, a warp stream of all things, and not just any random one at that. For as they drifted close to it, a pair of hands reached out from inside of it, hands that were quick to grab onto both of the boys and pull them safely inside.

Garnet pulled both Steven and Dipper into a tight embrace against her, allowing them to cling onto her tightly as they both desperately gasped for air and shivered uncontrollably all the while. “Stay calm,” she advised, even if her own tone wasn’t as relaxed as it usually was. “Take slow deep, breaths.” Somehow, the boys were able to do as she commanded, their thoughts on nothing else but recovering from their near-death experience, even as Garnet retrieved the orb that she had pulled into the stream with them. “So this is what you both saw.”

Still clearly shell-shocked, the boys tentatively glanced up at the orb, both of them partially reviled at the very sight of it seeing as how it had nearly cost them both their lives. Dipper slowly nodded, looking away from the orb in slight shame while Steven looked to Garnet instead, hot tears of frustration forming in his eyes. “I don’t care about that!” he cried, wanting nothing more to do with any of it.
“I do,” Garnet replied intently, lifting her hand up to her visor as she appeared to wipe away what might have been tears. “I should have listened to you two. We promised we would start trusting you more, but we didn’t. I’m sorry.”

While the boys had mostly recovered, they still didn’t say much as they both looked up to Garnet with small, grateful smiles, something that she returned as she gently relinquished her secure hold on them. The moment of solidarity didn’t last long, however, as Pearl caught up with them in the stream, followed by Amethyst and Mabel not too much later.

“Finally!” Mabel exclaimed with clear exasperation. “There you guys are! What’s with you two, going on a crazy midnight warp run like that! The least you could have done is ask me to come along too!”

“Are you both okay!?” Pearl asked the boys with apt concern. “Amethyst heard the warp pad activate, and Mabel had come to the house looking for Dipper, and Garnet said you were both floating outside the stream and—” The white Gem’s hurried explanation was cut off as she took in a sharp gasp upon seeing the orb Garnet was holding. “W-what is that?”

“You mean… you don’t know?” Steven asked with a confused frown.

“Whoa…. That thing’s far out!” Amethyst remarked, quite intrigued with the machine.

“I wanna touch it!” Mabel grinned, reaching a hand towards it only to be stopped by Garnet.

“Not until we know for sure what it is,” the Gem leader said, her tone as firm as it usually was once again.

“It’s some kind of space robot!” Steven exclaimed. “There were tons of them! And it looked like they were all going to the same place.”

The Gems exchanged a dubious glance at this, none of them really sure what to make of this news. Yet even so, Dipper couldn’t help but speak up in order to address the elephant in the room, so to speak. “Ok, so I know this is probably a bad time for this, but…”

“Oh boy…” Mabel rolled her eyes, already anticipating what he was going to say. “Here it comes.”

“We told you so!” Dipper exclaimed with a triumphant smirk. “We were right all along and we told you so! Guess you guys will think twice about not believing us next time, huh?” He looked to the Gems, still grinning rather smugly, only to stop upon catching the incredulously glance they all sent his way. “Oh, uh…” he took in an anxious breath, looking away somewhat awkwardly. “L-like I said, bad time…”

It was only moments later that the group followed the orb in their possession to its intended destination: the Galaxy Warp. As soon as they made it there, the machine leapt out of Garnet’s grasp and made its way over to join all of the others as they crowded around and on top of the central warp pad. All of them were currently in the process of shooting their unknown teal liquid onto the pad, covering it completely as the Gems and the kids warily approached.

“What are they doing to the Homeworld warp!!” Pearl asked with growing worry.

“Dang, there’s a ton of them!” Amethyst remarked, her eyes wide as she tried in vain to count them all. Soon enough though, the machines all started to skitter back away from the pad, until, all at once, the liquid they had sprayed onto it vanished. What was left in its place was a warp pad that completely lacked all of the cracks and cervices that had previously disabled it, leaving it looking as good as new. “What? They fixed it?” Amethyst asked, bewildered.
“So what does that mean?” Mabel asked curiously as the Gems exchanged another stunned glance.

“I-” Pearl cut herself off with a nervous, fretful gasp. “I don’t know!”

They had no time to try and find out the truth, however, as the Homeworld warp suddenly light up, activating for the first time in centuries. A unified gasp of unbridled horror escaped the Gems, and likewise the kids were quite startled by it as well. But even so, Garnet kept a level head as usual as she quickly grabbed them all, leaping away from the warp pad and taking refuge behind one of the tall rocks surrounding the area. The Gem leader used one of her gauntlets to hold onto the stone, providing the kids with enough of a boost to serve as lookouts as the light from the warp pad cleared, revealing an unknown figure in its place.

It was rather easy to tell that this figure was a Gem, based on her unnaturally colored lime-green skin, as well as the rounded, triangular gemstone of the same color positioned on her forehead. Her hair was also in an oddly-triangular shape, its short, pale ends styled in three precise points. Really, everything about her was angular, from her pert, pointed nose, to the opaque visor over her eyes, to her unimpressed scowl. Her green coloration continued throughout her outfit, save for the light-yellow diamond on her chest and knee pads. She was rather slender and tall, her arms and legs both seemed to widen and flare out quite a bit past her joints, and even stranger was the fact that she lacked hands entirely. Instead, her “fingers” seemed to hover over the end of her arms, levitating obediently as they followed her every movement. She showed little signs of emotion as she glanced around, her fists on her hips as she stomped on the warp pad she had just arrived on experimentally.

“W-who is that?” Pearl whispered nervously.

“No idea,” Garnet replied, just as confused as they continued to observe this new Gem from a safe distance.

The green Gem turned around fully, still unaware of the groups presence as she lifted her hand. Her fingers somehow repositioned themselves, four of them forming an electronic screen littered with indecipherable information, which she navigated with her spare finger as she began to record a report. “Log date 3 1 2,” she began, her voice cold and calculating as she paid little mind to the orb crawling up her to perch upon her shoulder. “This is Peridot, reforming Earth hub maintenance check.”

“Peridot,” Steven repeated with a small smile as he glanced down to the other Gems. “Her name is Peridot!”

Of course, the Gems were quick to shush him, terrified of their cover being blown, but all the same, the kids were immensely curious with this turn of events. “Maintenance check?” Dipper muttered, raising a confused eyebrow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He got no real answer, however, as the Gems quieted him as well before turning their attention back to Peridot. “Warp repair was a success,” she reported, tapping away at her screen. “All 79 flash robinoids deployed and accounted for. Preparing to locate and manually reactivate Kindergar-” The green Gem suddenly gasped as she noticed the damaged orb, or rather, robinoids, at her feet. The machine sputtered as it attempted to crawl up her leg, before ultimately crumbling to the ground in defeat. Peridot gave it a critical glance, one that certainly wasn’t lost on Steven as he continued to observe her from afar.

“Aw, the little ones are like her babies!” he whispered with a charmed smile.

However, this couldn’t have been any further from the truth as Peridot’s calm demeanor turned to
obvious annoyance with the damaged tech. Clearly, she had already determined that the machine’s usefulness had reached its end as she stepped on its struggling form, pushing her foot down on it until it completely and utterly popped.

All three of the kids let out a shocked, rather horrified gasp at this display of heedless destruction, as small scale as it was. “I—if that’s how she treats her babies then she really shouldn’t be allowed around them anymore!” Mabel remarked in an anxious whisper, feeling quite sorry for the now obliterated robinoids.

The Gems overheard this, and while they weren’t able to see what exactly was going on for themselves, Amethyst and Pearl silently lifted their hands to ask if it was alright for them to come out. The kids quickly waved them off though before joining them in complete hiding, now actively frightened at the prospect of being found by someone as apparently merciless as Peridot.

“Now to access the domestic warp…” the green Gem said as she began descending the Homeworld warp’s stairs. “Huh?” she stopped short, however, upon noticing the Crying Breakfast Friend sticker still stuck to the side of the pad. Tentatively, Peridot retrieved it, giving it a scrutinizing look of confusion before suspiciously glancing around. “This site may have been compromised,” she noted, wasting no time in hurrying back up onto the pad. Acting quickly, Peridot placed a small, glowing device onto the pad only seconds before warping back to wherever she had come from. Mere seconds after her flight, the device went off, instantly deactivating every last robinoid in the vicinity.

As all of the machines went limp around the Homeworld warp, the Gems and the kids slowly and carefully emerged from their hiding spot, making sure that the coast was fully clear before approaching the pad. There was no doubt there were all rather shaken up by what they had just seen, but the Gems in particular were in a severe panic over it all.

“T-they’re coming back…” Pearl said, her voice shaky and raw with an age-old fear. “I can’t do this! Not again!”

“We’re dead!” Amethyst shouted, crossing her arms. “We are so dead!”

“So… that was another Gem, right?” Steven asked anxiously. The Gems nodded in flighty unison, though all of them were far too encompassed in their own immense worries to pay the bewildered kids much attention.

“Did… did she really come from Homeworld?” Dipper asked, his mind racing over what all of this could possibly mean. “What was she trying to do?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Garnet cut in, her tone oddly dark as she approached the warp pad with heated intention. The others all gasped in alarm as she summoned her gauntlets, which grew to a massive size as she held them high over the warp pad. And then, in a heavy, powerful swing, she brought them down, completely crushing the Homeworld warp once again. “She’s not coming back!”

Needless to say that everyone was quite solemn and shaken upon returning to the temple after everything that had happened. No one really said much about it or asked too many questions, mostly because there was far too much to say and far too many questions to ask. Still, the Gems insisted that the twins spend the rest of the night at the temple with Steven, promising that they would take on the burden of explaining things to Stan the next morning. And indeed they did, though in reality, they left out most of the details behind this impromptu sleepover when
explaining it to the conman, namely anything concerning the robinoids or Peridot. The twins were grateful for it too, seeing as how Stan didn’t really give them a very hard time about sneaking off to the temple in the middle of the night without telling him. Yet even so, all three of the kids were still in slight shock over the events of the previous night, which was why the Gems had suggested that they spend the next day taking their minds off of it while they began looking more into the matter. And while normally the kids would have argued against this idea and insist upon helping, they actually didn’t protest this proposal too much, considering the fact that Steven and Dipper in particular really needed to catch up on their sleep. So the boys spent the morning snoozing, and by the time they woke up in the early afternoon, Connie had arrived at the temple at Mabel’s invitation so they could all spend the rest of the day simply hanging out and relaxing like normal.

Still, the kids didn’t really stay up at the temple for too long, mostly because of the nearby warp pad serving as a grim reminder to the boys that they nearly met a shared end mere hours ago. So they headed down to the shack instead, and on the way down, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel filled Connie in on the details about what had happened last night. Of course, she was immensely curious about the whole ordeal, after they arrived at the shack and took up shop on the porch, their discussion of it gradually began to peter out. In place of talking about these stressful current events, their conversation eventually turned back to the Spirit Morph Saga, much to Steven’s interest, Mabel’s protest, and Dipper and Connie’s shared insistence that they continue reading it. And of course, the vote came to three to one in favor of starting the second book of the series: Welcome to the Wizard Wilds.

“Lisa ran to the steadily closing gates, her boots slamming into the rain-soaked mud under her and her heart pounding intensely,” Connie read, adding a dramatic flare to story, mostly for Steven’s sake seeing as how he was the one listening with the most rapt attention. “Archimicarus soared a protective distance above her, keeping a watchful eye out for-”

Her reading was suddenly interrupted by a low rumble afar in the distance, one that she was the only one to apparently hear as Steven and the twins apparently hadn’t noticed it. “This is a really good book!” the young Gem pointed out, urging her to continue.

“Uh… okay…” Connie frowned, but nonetheless, she continued reading. “Archimicarus soared a protected distance above her, keeping a watchful eye out for any of the shadow creatures that could have followed them from the forbidden forest. The coast seemed clear, but right as Lisa reached the village gates, she-”

Connie was cut off once again, this time by something that none of the others were able to overlook. A large, round sphere, one nearly identical in appearance to the robinoids from the previous night, crashed into the forest right beside the Mystery Shack from above, resulting in a short, yet sizable earthquake. The kids all gasped in surprise as they all jumped to their feet, especially as a set of stilted legs emerged from the larger robinoid and it pulled itself upright. Still, none of them had any time to question it whatsoever before the Gems arrived on the scene.

“What was that?!” Amethyst asked, her whip already summoned as she glanced around.

“I-it’s one of those robots from last night!” Dipper exclaimed, pointing to the robinoid as it crawled out of the forest towards them.

“Yeah, only this one’s not as cute or tiny. It’s like way bigger!” Mabel added, throwing her arms out wide for emphasis.

“What?!” Pearl asked in alarm as her and the other Gems looked to the hefty robinoid. As usual, Garnet was the first one to leap into action, jumping on front of the large orb and putting a stop to its advance with her gauntlets, even if it was clear that she wouldn’t be able to hold it back for long.
“Amethyst! Pearl!” the Gem leader shouted, prompting her teammates to hurry to her aid. The pair preformed a graceful leap high into the air, before coming down hard and fast at the robinoid from above. Their impact on it was powerful enough to shatter the machine completely, though Steven was quick enough to summon a bubble around himself, Connie, and the twins to protect them from the burst of sealing goo that resulted from the explosion.

“You ok?” Steven asked Connie with concern, dropping the bubble as he helped her to her feet.

“I love hanging out with you guys!” Connie remarked with an amazed smile over what she had just seen.

“I don’t get it,” Dipper said to the Gems as he glanced towards the downed robinoid. “I thought we got rid of Peridot last night. So then why are her machines still coming?”

“It’s hard to say…” Pearl mused. “I suppose it’s because she’s not done with… whatever it is she’s trying to do… Still, it’s odd… The robots from last night were nowhere near as big as this one…”

“Or as gooey!” Amethyst chimed with a rouge grin, revealing that she was covered head to toe in the robinoids’ liquid.

“Amethyst, we need to be careful,” the white Gem cautioned. “We still don’t know what this stuff is.” The purple Gem pouted for a brief moment, though her expression quickly turned into a wry, mischievous smile as a sudden idea came to her, one that Pearl was quick to catch onto. “Oh no,” she hissed, already taking a large step away from Amethyst. “Don’t you dare get that stuff on me!”

“Goop hug!” Amethyst shouted, holding her arms out wide as she began to chase after the panicked white Gem. “Come here, Pearl! Don’t you want a hug?!”

In the midst of this, however, Stan happened to emerge from the shack, having heard the crash and commotion from earlier. “Hey! What’s going on out-” The conman cut himself off, his anger dissipating into annoyed acceptance upon seeing the mess the destroyed robinoid had left in his yard. “You know, I could get mad about this, but after years of putting up with this sort of stuff, I really don’t think I have that kind of energy left in me anymore.”

“Stan!” Amethyst shouted, her playful grin growing even wider as she ran up to him and threw her arms around him, smearing his suit with the goo that was covering her. “Ha! Gotcha!”

“Ugh, Amethyst!” the conman growled in newfound frustration, scowling down at the mess on his clothes. “Why I oughta-” Stan cut himself off, taking in a deep, controlled breath. “Nope. I said I wasn’t gonna get mad and I’m not. I’m just gonna do this instead.” Without any warning, he suddenly shoved Amethyst off of the porch roughly, laughing in amusement as she clumsily fell to the ground.

“Hey!” the purple Gem protested, even if she was laughing just as hard. “Ah well, you just gave me a head start on getting back to Pearl!” The white Gem gasped upon hearing this as she began running in the opposite direction of the purple Gem, who was quick to give chase once more, still as drenched in as much goo as before.

“Grunkle Stan! That machine was one of the ones we were telling you about last night!” Dipper exclaimed fervently. “Turns out it was real after all, even if some people didn’t think so at first.” He sent Mabel a smug smirk, only for her to retort by petulantly sticking her tongue out at him.

“Kid, I don’t care what that thing is as long as it gets out of my yard,” Stan deadpanned. “Broken, goo-covered garbage like that is bad for business.”
“We’ve got it covered,” Garnet responded with a sparse thumbs up, even if Amethyst and Pearl were still chasing each other around.

“That’s all I ask,” Stan remarked dryly, turning to head back inside. “Now if you need me, I’ll be inside cleaning this gunk out of my suit. Oh, and if any more magical alien robots fall from the sky, count me out of it!”

Without sparing another word, the conman left, slamming the door behind him and leaving the Gems to do their work. “Peridot….” Connie spoke up thoughtfully, addressing the others. “Isn’t that the Gem you guys were telling me about? The one that’s trying to come to Earth?”

“Yeah,” Steven nodded. “We stopped her last night, but… I guess she can still shoot stuff here from space, including these things that are trying to do… something?”

“It’s not trying to do anything now,” Garnet said, looking over at the fallen robinoid with apparent distain.

“But… shouldn’t we try to figure out what it came here for?” Dipper asked, relatively concerned.

“We destroyed it,” the Gem leader remarked, picking a stray broken piece of the robot up off the ground before tossing it aside. “That’s all that mattered.”

The kids exchanged a doubtful glance upon hearing this, none of them very sure that the matter was that simple. Still, they didn’t get much of a chance to question it as Amethyst suddenly plowed into Garnet, cheerfully embracing her and smothering her side with goo. “Goop hug!” the purple Gem quipped, chuckling as Pearl approached, sullen and covered in the unsavory liquid herself. Garnet smirked as she pulled the white Gem into the team embrace, regardless of the goop drenching all three of them.

As it turned out, the next several days were only plagued by even more robinoids plummeting down to Earth from space. Fortunately, the Gems were privy to each ones’ arrival thanks to Garnet’s future vision, and they didn’t hesitate to track down and dispatch each and every one of them without delay, not even wanting to think about what the consequences might be if they didn’t. Steven accompanied them on most of these mini-missions, and occasionally Dipper and Mabel did too, even if each one only consisted of finding a robinoid and beating it into submission. This process of hunt and destroy was easy enough, but it was quickly starting to wear down on the Gems, especially since it seemed as though there was really no end to it in sight.

Still, whenever there did happen to be a break in this wild storm of robinoids, the kids took advantage of it to rest and catch their breaths from the tremulous passage of recent events. Steven, Dipper, and Mabel had taken to spending the early afternoon up at the temple, and instead of discussing the robinoids, or Peridot, or anything related to any of that, they once again tried to focus on discussing the Spirit Morph Saga.

“Come on, Steven, me and Connie have already been over this with you like, a million times already,” Dipper began, slightly exasperated. “The order goes like this: first there’s The Unfamiliar Familiar, then Welcome to the Wizard Wilds, then Overneath the Underworld, and finally it ends with Destiny’s End. Got it?”

“Um… I think so…” Steven said, looking over the set of books on the table with a frown. “I just have one question… What’s a familiar again?”
Dipper let out a loud, frustrated groan upon hearing this, one that Mabel shared, though for completely different reasons as she flopped onto the couch. “Ugh, this is so boring!” she complained, lolling her head to the side. “Are we ever gonna stop talking about these lame nerd books?”

“They’re not lame, Mabel!” Dipper protested defensively. “They’re really smart and well-written and interesting and deep. Until the last one, of course. That one sucks.”

“Well, I like all of them so far,” Steven cut in with a small smile. “Though I guess I’ll have to take you and Connie’s word for it on the last book…”

“Who cares?” Mabel stuck her tongue out languidly. “You guys going on and on about them almost makes me wish that another one of those marble things would show up just so something cool would finally happen!”

Of course, only seconds after she had said this, a distant rumble rattled the house. The Gems emerged from the temple gate almost as soon as it happened, the telltale aggravation on their faces filling the kids in on everything they needed to know. “Yes!” Mabel exclaimed with relief. “The timing of that couldn’t have been more perfect!”

“Augh! What is with these things?!” Amethyst growled, pulling at her hair in immense annoyance. “This is like the fifth one this week!”

“We’ll find it in the desert!” Garnet exclaimed, rushing to the warp pad. “Let’s go!”

The other two Gems were quick to follow, and sure enough, the kids weren’t too far behind either. While the Gems warped off first, Steven did so for himself and the twins very shortly after, to the point that their respective arrivals in the desert were only mere seconds apart. Still, as the kids arrived, they found that the Gems had already engaged the robinoid there. Amethyst and Garnet were pushing on it from the sides, while Pearl had perched herself on top of it and stabbed it continually with her spear in the hopes that its marble surface would crack.

“Stop! Coming! Here! You! Stupid! Balls!” the white Gem shouted, throwing her spear down hard with each word.

“Yeah! Let it out!” Amethyst hollered, lashing her whip out and coiling it around the robot. “Get crazy! Ha!” With a heavy tug, the purple Gem pulled the robinoid forward, causing it to teeter a bit, though it still didn’t fall.

“Guys! Wait! Stop!” Steven cried as he rushed forward along with the twins. “How many more of these things are you gonna have to fight?”

“We don’t know!” Pearl exclaimed, beyond stressed. “They just keep coming and coming and we don’t even know what they are! We don’t know anything!”

“Hey, welcome to the club,” Dipper remarked rather sarcastically.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Amethyst asked, raising a caustic eyebrow.

“He means… well, the three of us don’t know anything all the time,” Steven replied with a small, understanding smile. “It can be frustrating sometimes, yeah, but it’s ok to not know everything.”

“Trust us,” Mabel added blithely. “You guys will get used to being left out of the loop in no time! Plus it’s actually pretty fun, cause it means you get to experience all the fun of being surprised every time you have a bombshell secret dropped on you, just like we get to whenever you guys
“Well, I wouldn’t exactly say that learning bombshell secrets is always ‘fun’,” Dipper said with a shrug. “More like ‘shocking and most of the time really confusing’ but still.”

“But no one even knows what these things are here to do!” Pearl interjected with a tired sigh. “So it’s not like we can even figure the truth out from anyone!”

“Well… what about that?” Steven asked, nodding to the robinoid itself. “No one would know more about what it’s supposed to be doing than itself.”

“…What?” the white Gem asked, dumbfounded.

“Whoa, Steven’s got a point!” Mabel exclaimed with a newfound grin. “We could just follow the little guy and see where he wants to go! It’ll be like playing follow the leader, only with a big ol’ mysterious robot instead!”

“Hold it,” Amethyst cut in with a scoff of disbelief. “Are you guys nuts?!”

“Who knows what could go wrong?” Pearl added, adamantly disagreeing with this plan.

“Well, it’s gotta be easier than just aimlessly destroying these things every time a new one shows up, right?” Dipper asked, seeing no apparent problems with the idea himself.

“He’s right,” Garnet spoke up, still pressed up against the robinoid. “We can’t keep fighting these things forever. Well, we can, but I don’t want to. Let’s to it their way.”

“Yeah!” Steven cheered enthusiastically, wrapping his arms around the twins’ shoulders in celebration. “Let’s follow the funky flow!”

“We’re dead,” Amethyst remarked dryly, exchanging an uncertain glance with Pearl. Still, the Gems didn’t argue as they climbed up on top of the robinoid first, the kids squeezing onto it after them. It was a rather tight fight, and given the droid’s already spherical surface, remaining steady on it was something of a challenge, but they all somehow managed to stay on top of it without falling off.

“Alright, big guy,” Steven said to the robinoid, giving it a solid pat. “Mush!”

At this, the droid began to skitter forward, somewhat unsteady thanks to the group of passengers now riding on top of it, but even so it slowly made its way over to the nearby warp pad. The kids exchanged apprehensive smiles as their plan was sent into action, all three of them hoping that it would provide them with the answers they had been looking for since all of this began.

As soon as it made it to the warp pad, the robinoid teleported off, taking its large crowd of passengers along with it. Upon arriving at its intended destination, the entire group let out a collective gasp to see some very familiar darkened, desolate canyon walls surrounding them.

“Kindergarten…” Garnet muttered, clearly caught off guard by this.

“But why here?” Pearl asked with apt concern. “This site has been damaged enough by the Gems that were incubated here 6,000 years ago! That’s it! It’s confirmed. These things are up to no good!” With a determined scowl, the white Gem summoned her spear and prepared to strike the robinoid, but fortunately, she was stopped before she could.

“Wait!” Steven exclaimed, holding his hands up. “We don’t even know what it’s doing here. Can’t
we just… see where it wants to go?”

“Yeah, I mean, we’ll never find out what’s it’s doing here if we don’t at least follow it some of the way, right?” Dipper added with a shrug.

The Gems exchanged another uncertain glance, but as usual, Garnet was the one to have the final say on the matter. “Hm… Their way,” she nodded tersely. With an exasperated sigh, Pearl pushed her spear back into her Gem, which in turn, prompted the robinoid to get moving again.

The droid leapt from the warp platform and onto ground level, going at its usual pace as meandered about the Kindergarten, clearly having a particular destination in mind, even if no one knew where that could be. “What does it want here?” Pearl asked in an anxious whisper, as if she was afraid that the very sound of her voice could disrupt something in this scarred place.

“Maybe it just wants to see where Amethyst was made,” Steven suggested.

“Maybe it should mind its own business,” Amethyst remarked bitterly, crossing her arms.

“Oh, I don’t like this at all…” Pearl muttered, looking around the ominous walls of the Kindergarten apprehensively.

“Aw, come on, you guys,” Mabel quipped as brightly as usual. “You gotta admit this is kind of fun. Riding around on a nifty orb guy through a dark, scary Gem place? Way more interesting than sitting around talking about nerd books all day, if you ask me,” she said, sending a lightly teasing smirk Dipper’s way, though he merely returned it with an aggravated eye roll.

“Aw, but can’t you feel this guy’s funky flow?” Steven asked, patting the robinoid with a small smile. “He’s a funk master.”

“…I can’t believe we’re doing this,” Pearl said, her tone tight and rife with uncertainty.

The conversation was soon interrupted however, as the robinoid suddenly came to an abrupt halt right in the middle of the Kindergarten, much to everyone’s shared confusion. “Why’d you stop, little buddy?” Steven asked the droid, running his hands over its smooth surface.

“Something’s happening,” Garnet anticipated, not wasting any time in grabbing both the kids and her teammates and leaping off of the robinoid as a precaution. And she did so just in time too, as the droid’s legs retreated back into its body and a small burst of energy struck the ground underneath of it as it continued to hover in midair. Said section of the ground suddenly dissolved away without warning as the robinoid seamlessly shifted into a pyramid shape to accommodate the square hole it had created. The group let out a muted gasp as they watched the robinoid descend into the hole, fitting into it perfectly as it emitted a bright glow. The kids briefly looked to each other with growing excitement upon seeing this, especially as the droid began to sink into the hole, leaving the gap open for them to follow it down to wherever it had went.

“See?” Steven grinned to the Gems as they all ran to the edge of the hole. “I knew we’d find something cool! Let’s go!”

Without any further delay, the young Gem leapt right into the hole, Mabel eagerly following right behind him. “Woo! This is just like the Bottomless Pit, only hopefully this one won’t be so, well, bottomless!” she quipped cheerfully. “Come on, bro-bro!”

“Wait, you guys! I don’t know if this is such a good-” Dipper’s protest was cut off as Mabel
suddenly grabbed him by the arm and pulled him into the hole along with her, leaving the Gems behind in absolute shock over what the kids were doing. Still, they were quick to rush in after them, as nervous about this whole situation as they were.

Soon enough, the kids made a safe landing on the still descending-robinoid, the Gems joining them mere moments later. “Hey, guys! Going down?” Steven asked with a joking smirk, one that soon faded upon noticing his guardians’ shared stunned expressions. “Are… are you ok?”

“What is all this…?” Pearl whispered, looking to the massive clusters of wires lining the walls around them.

“Wait, so… you guys have never seen any of this stuff before?” Dipper asked with growing concern. After all, if the Gems themselves didn’t know what any of this was, then there was certainly no way for any of them to know what they were getting themselves into.

“Nah, man,” Amethyst shook her head, her expression rarely tense and fretful. “This is just as new to us as it is to you guys.”

The kids took in a shared anxious breath upon hearing this, their excitement quickly starting to wear down into the ongoing worry the Gems already had. Still, they didn’t want to judge the situation so quickly without knowing for sure what was going on. And, as the platform they were on came to a halt at the bottom of the hole, it seemed as though they were finally about to find that out.

The robinoid had stopped at a large, open, hexagonal room, the perimeter of which lit up in a pale green as the droid arrived at it. At the end of the room, a hand shaped pedestal rose up from the ground, a yellow diamond resting upon its palm. The group soon caught onto an odd swishing sound from beneath them, prompting them to look over the edge of the platform to see that its triangular tip drip down to form a small robot. The miniscule robot steadily made its way up to the room, unaware of the group watching on as it skittered up to the hand pedestal, firmly placing itself upon it and causing it to activate. An array of unintelligible data appeared on the walls of the room as the crystal at its core projected a large, wide monitor. And on that monitor was none other than Peridot herself.

Taking in a shared gasp of alarm, the Gems quickly grabbed the kids and jumped off of the platform so the green Gem wouldn’t be able to see them. And as she began to deliver another report, the group took refuge just out of sight.

“Established Gem Projection Link with control room,” Peridot began dully, her fingers forming another small screen on her end. “Plug Robinoid has successfully landed on planet Earth and entered the Prime Kindergarten Control Room in Facet Five. Will now proceed to perform status check of the Kindergarten.”

As Peridot’s screen turned itself around, the Gems released the breaths they had been holding upon realizing that she was still fortunately unaware of their presence. “Ugh, what’s she doing here?!” Amethyst whispered, her eyes wide with fear.

“Is she trying to reactivate the Kindergarten?!” Pearl gasped in immense alarm. “Doesn’t she know it’ll destroy all life on Earth?!”

“Why don’t we just ask her?” Steven suggested simply.

“Yeah! I’m sure she’d tell us all about it if we just asked,” Mabel eagerly agreed.
“Are you guys serious?!” Dipper asked in a disbelieving whisper. “That’s a horrible idea!”

“Dipper is right,” Garnet said tersely. “We’re facing an enemy we don’t know with technology we don’t understand. This isn’t the time to be asking questions.”

“Really sounds like it is…” Steven muttered, pouting lightly.

“Ok, here’s the plan,” Garnet began, turning to her teammates. “We can’t let her see us, so we wait for an opening. When she’s distracted, we destroy the power source on the far wall. The kids stay here!”

As the Gems continued planning their assault, however, the failed to notice the kids coming up with a plan of their own. Though for the sake of being discreet, Steven and Mabel did so without really using any words, instead just exchanging determined nods and smiles concerning what they intended on doing. And while this was lost on Dipper at first, it didn’t take him too long to realize what their dangerous plan was. “Oh no, you guys,” he quickly spoke up, adamantly disagreeing with the very idea. “We’re not gonna-” He didn’t really get a chance to finish, however, as Mabel abruptly grabbed him by the wrist once again and pulled him along with her and Steven as they started making their way for the control room. “O-ok, I guess we are then!”

The Gems had only just finished preparing themselves for their own plan, however, as they noticed that the kids were missing, and were indeed, scaling the nearby wires to go meet the green Gem for themselves. The trio gasped in exasperated alarm, but they didn’t dare try to stop them, lest they blow their cover completely, even if the kids were already well on their way to do just that.

“Now accounting for all operational injectors,” Peridot continued her report, unaware of kids’ arrival since her monitor was turned away from them. “Checking for aberrations in perimeter.” As she spoke, the kids were startled as two very large, robotic hands, independent of any sort of arms or wrists, rose up from the ground nearby. The pair of hands got to work on activating a pair of panels on the adjacent walls, which brought ejected a group of cylinders from the ceiling. “Ugh, this Gem tech is simply archaic…” Peridot sneered dryly as she continued her work.

“I don’t know, I think it looks pretty cool,” Steven suddenly spoke up with a small smile.

“Yeah, it’s all sparkly and futuristicy,” Mabel added just as brightly, ignoring Dipper as he facepalmed in exasperation over their shared innocent friendliness. “You guys really know what you’re doing with this stuff!”

For a moment, the entire control room went silent, the robotic hands freezing in place before they suddenly lifted from the walls altogether. Peridot’s monitor swiveled around just as quickly, her eyes wide with alarm and confusion as she noticed the trio standing before her.

“Hi!” the young Gem greeted warmly as Mabel waved to the green Gem while Dipper glanced away nervously. “I’m Steven, and this is Dipper and Mabel!”

Peridot remained silent as her screen drew in closer to the kids, her surprise turning into annoyed confusion as she looked over her log once more. “There appears to be an infestation of ‘Stevens’, ‘Dippers’, and ‘Mabels’ in the Kindergarten,” she reported, her tone rather cross.

“…What?” Dipper asked flatly, quite bewildered by the green Gem’s odd logic.

“Aw, we’re not so bad once you get to know us!” Steven quipped as Mabel let out an amused laugh.

Peridot glared back at the trio, raising an eyebrow as she looked over them with slight scrutiny.
“And how many more Stevens, Dippers, or Mabels are present in this area?”

“Oh, its just us!” Mabel informed her with a blithe grin. “Well, us and the-”

Dipper hurriedly cut her off by slapping a hand over her mouth to silence her. “Uh, like she said, i-it’s just us! N-nobody else!” he exclaimed with a very nervous laugh, remembering well just how much the Gems wanted to remain unseen in all this. And while he didn’t really understand exactly why, he figured that, based on Peridot’s apparently unconcerned attitude so far, that not mentioning them probably would be for the best.

“Hm, well that’s a relief,” Peridot remarked, seeming to buy it as she looked over her screen once more. “So tell me: have Stevens, Dippers, and Mabels replaced humans as the dominant species on Earth?”

“What?” Mabel chuckled, bemused by the green Gem’s apparent lack of understand. “We are humans, silly!”

“Oh really?” Peridot asked, her tone bored as she raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, but there’s lots of other humans too!” Steven exclaimed enthusiastically. “There’s my dad, Connie, Mr. Pines, Soos, Wendy, Sadie, Lars, Onion… I think. But yeah, lots of people, including us!”

“Hm…” the green Gem mused, rolling her eyes. “I suppose it is impressive that your kind managed to survive this long… Even if you won’t for very much longer.”

“Whoa, hold on, what?!” Dipper interjected, quite alarmed by the implications of this, though Steven spoke up before Peridot could divulge any further.

“Now we get to ask you a question,” the young Gem addressed the green Gem with a coy grin. “What are you doing?”

“What are you doing?”

“Oh,” Peridot began, her tone as aloof as ever as her screen turned itself back around. “Just picking up where we left off…”

The kids didn’t have the opportunity to ask her to elaborate, however, as one of the robotic hands hovered over them, quickly taking the form of a tight fist, one that raised up high with every intention of crushing all three of them. And yet, as Peridot brought it down, the kids were fortunately saved at the last second by Garnet, who thankfully intervened by catching the massive fist with her gauntlets before tossing it aside. The green Gem immediately took notice of this, her monitor turning around as she let out a sharp, startled gasp. “A Gem?!” she exclaimed in disbelief, though her surprise only increased as Amethyst and Pearl leapt into the control room, standing protectively before their kids with their weapons at the ready. “Ah! More?!” Peridot cried fearfully. “But the Red Eye didn’t report the presence of any Gems on this planet!”

“That’s because we destroyed it!” Pearl exclaimed with boldness far removed from her earlier panic.

“Y-you what?!” Peridot gaped, frantically looking to her screen. “So you were the ones who—B-but the records say that Gems were wiped out on Earth! Wait a minute… you’re the ones who have been destroying my Plug Robinoids! Are you the reason the Homeworld warp is down again?! Is this your bizarre icon?! she demanded, holding up an image of the Wailing Waffle sticker on her screen. “Augh! Why do you keep destroying my things?!”

“Because we are the Crystal Gems!” Pearl proclaimed fiercely, pointing her spear at the green
Gem’s monitor. All the while, the kids could only watch this exchange with shared, stunned fear, unable to even think about whatever mistake they might have made as the white Gem continued her brave declaration. “We’re still alive, and we’re still the guardians of this planet and all its living creatures!”

Peridot’s fury turned to blank confusion at this, as if she had no idea what the white Gem had been talking about. “The… Crystal Gems…?” Before the green Gem could ask any further questions, however, Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl courageously leapt into action. With fierce battle cries, they began a brutal assault on her hand constructs, lashing and beating away at them aggressively, much to Peridot’s immense frustration. “Stop!” she shouted hotly. “How dare you! I’m doing this one way or another! You’re just making it really difficult!” The green Gem seethed with visible rage as the Gems managed to take out one of her robotic hands with ease, crumbling it to ineffective bits.

“Now do you guys see just how bad of an idea this was?” Dipper asked Steven and Mabel dryly amidst all of this chaos.

“Yeah…” they both admitted in awkward unison, glancing away from the fray with clear regret.

“Amethyst, now!” Garnet shouted to the purple Gem as she went high and noticed her whip was wrapped around the other large hand.

“Destroy!” Amethyst growled, throwing the hand down hard at the power source at the back wall. The crystal instantly shattered, but not before Peridot managed to get one more word in edgewise.

“I’m reporting this, you CLODS!” she shouted angrily before her monitor vanished and the control room went dark, its link to Homeworld finally severed.

“Is… is it over?” Amethyst asked her teammates tentatively. Garnet and Pearl exchanged a brief, uncertain glance, but after a moment, they both let out a shared sigh of relief. Still, everything wasn’t entirely over, especially as the Gems approached the kids, giving them a round of exasperated, unimpressed stares.

“Ok, right off the bat, I wanna say don’t look at me,” Dipper quickly interjected. “This was all their idea, after all,” he nodded to Steven and Mabel, who met the Gems’ caustic gazes rather anxiously.

“Ok…” Steven admitted with a sigh. “So we might have gone… a little far this time…”

“A little?” Pearl raised an eyebrow, crossing her arms.

“Mmm, ok… a lot,” Mabel corrected with a frown. “But how were we supposed to Peridot was actually kind of crazy?”

“Really?” Dipper asked dryly. “You couldn’t have gotten that from how she totally destroyed one of her own robots the other night?”

“Well, you two weren’t completely wrong,” Garnet spoke up with a small, reassuring smile. “We did learn something new from your decisions.”

“And that something is…?” Steven asked curiously.

“…We have no idea,” the Gem leader admitted. “But we’ll figure it out eventually.”

“Alright!” the kids cheered with relieved unison before Garnet cut in once more.
“But yeah, this was a pretty bad idea.”

“Aw, man…” Steven and Mabel both sighed in defeat as Dipper merely rolled his eyes knowingly. Still, before the group left, they all looked over the wrecked control room once last time, both the kids and the Gems all silently mulling over the exact same thing. It was indeed as Garnet had said; they had discovered something new through this risky encounter.

And yet, only time would tell if they would ever really figure out what it all truly meant.
Chapter 34: Into the Bunker

Chapter Summary

In which Dipper is an awkward dork, Wendy is a total badass, Amethyst keeps dying, and the shapeshifter foreshadows shit

Chapter Notes

K so... here's this I guess. Its ok enough, kinda wrote it under a lot of pressure so that'll probably show but still there are some good things about it, so... yeah! Enjoy my take on Into the Bunker and Reformed!

If there was any idle pastime shared between Dipper and Wendy that they enjoyed most, it was watching the old, low-budget movies that were frequently aired on Gravity Falls public television and making fun of their hilariously poor quality all the while. And the pair was doing just that as they relaxed at the foot of the cashier’s bed, sharing a bowl of popcorn as they mockingly laughed along to the utter cheesiness of the zombie movie currently playing.

“What do we do, Chadley?!” the female lead of the movie cried, clinging onto her boyfriend as a horde of blood-thirsty zombies surrounded them. “I thought they were dead!”

“Far worse, Trixandra!” Chadley exclaimed overdramatically. “They’re... Nearly Dead But Not Quite!”

As the protagonist dropped the title, it appeared on the screen for a brief moment before returning to the melodramatic, clearly fake zombie attack. “Man, these movies are a lot less scary when you’ve actually fought regular zombies,” Dipper remarked, rolling his eyes at the movie’s lackluster effects that paled in comparison to how horrifying he knew genuine zombies to be.

“They’re slow!” Wendy shouted at the TV with faux frustration. “Just power-walk away from them!”

“How much you wanna bet that guy dies first?” Dipper asked with a smirk, only for that very thing to happen seconds later.

“Ah! My face is getting eaten a lot!” Chadley screamed as the zombies comically pounced on him, much to Dipper and Wendy’s equal amusement.

“Ha! Chadley ain’t pretty no more,” Wendy said as her and Dipper laughed over the main character’s ridiculous fate. Their levity was interrupted, however, as the cashier’s phone buzzed on
the bed nearby. “One sec,” Wendy grabbed her phone, her grin quickly turning into an aggravated scowl upon seeing the latest notification. “Ugh, another text from Robbie!”

“Oh yeah,” Dipper said, though he made sure to phrase his next statement carefully since he didn’t really want to pry too much. “Robbie. So, uh… how… how’s all that going?”

“Ugh, I’m over him, I just wish he was over me!” Wendy huffed in exasperation. “Just look at these texts! Winky frown? What does that even mean?”

Dipper hesitated before saying anything, excitement and anxiety filling him all at once as he realized this could very well finally be his chance. That is, if he didn’t end up getting in his own way again. “A-and you’re not… not, like… seeing any other guys, or…”

“Of course I am,” Wendy replied, not noticing Dipper forcing himself to hide his shocked dismay at this news. “Meet my new boyfriend, dude.” With a joking smirk, the cashier pulled up one of her stuffed animals, much to Dipper’s apt relief.

“Right, right,” he laughed a bit too awkwardly, averting eye contact with his crush as he began to pose the question he had been thoroughly thinking and fretting over for weeks now. “S-so, I was wondering if… If maybe y-you wanted to… You know… Maybe w-we could… I-I wanted to know if you…” Dipper took in a sharp, deep breath, cringing at his own complete inability to just tell Wendy how he felt, something that was so simple as a concept, but nearly impossible in execution. And seeing as how he had already messed up whatever slim chance he might have had, he let out a defeated sigh as he went off on a different tangent entirely. “If you… wanted to join me, Mabel, Steven, and the Gems on a mystery hunt tomorrow? Conspiracy stuff and all that?”

“Yeah, dude,” Wendy immediately agreed with a grin. “I love doing all that junk with friends. Yo, Chadley! Look out!” she laughed as she turned her attention back to the movie playing on TV, even though Dipper couldn’t really do the same.

“Yeah, that’s what we are…” he sighed in disappointment as he discreetly pulled a piece of paper out of his vest while Wendy wasn’t looking. Dipper frowned dejectedly as he glanced over the note he had written (and rewritten at least several times over) that openly confessed his own hopeless crush on the cashier, a note that he refused to ever let her see, lest it cause him untold mortification.

“That’s all we’ll ever be…” he muttered glumly, crumpling up the note before putting it away and flopping back onto the bed. “Friends…”

“Dude, you’re lying on my bra,” Wendy informed him with a hint of amusement in her tone.

Dipper let out a panicked scream upon glancing over to see that he was indeed on top of one of the cashier’s bras, prompting him to dart upright before the situation could get any more awkward than it already was.

Steven smiled contentedly as he sat on a nearby tree stump as Pearl, Greg, and Stan collaborated on trying to fix the former rock star’s broken-down van outside the shack. The young Gem didn’t pay their muttered conversing much mind, however, as he instead entertained himself with the Crying Breakfast Friends personality quiz on his phone.

“Sniffling Croissant!” Steven exclaimed brightly as he finished the quiz and got his result. “You really know me, internet. Hey, guys!”

“Yeah, Steven?” Greg asked, turning his attention from the engine him and Stan were holding
steady for Pearl as she worked on it.

“You guys should take this online quiz I found.” the young Gem quipped, holding his phone up so they could see. “It tells you what character you are from Crying Breakfast Friends!”

“Crying Breakfast-” Stan cut himself off, looking to Steven completely dumbfounded. “Kid, what the heck are you talking about?”

“Oh, it’s a really great cartoon with a huge cast of really interesting, relatable characters!” Steven explained with a smile. “And every single one of them is a result you can get in this quiz! Like I said, you all should totally take it!”

“Uh… why?” Pearl asked with a confused frown.

“It’s just fun to see yourself as a cartoon character,” Steven shrugged, looking back to his phone. “Like Weeping Egg Cup, who’s neurotic and uptight, or Pining Grapefruit, the sensitive older one who wishes he were a better role model, or Grumpy Pancake, who’s ill-tempered but has a hidden heart of gold.”

Pearl, Stan, and Greg all exchanged an aptly bewildered glance upon hearing this, none of them really sure of what to make of the odd characters Steven was detailing to them. “Uh, maybe we can do that thing after we fix the van,” Greg said with a patient smile.

“Yeah, or better yet, never,” Stan muttered, rolling his eyes as he got back to work.

Steven let out a disappointed sigh upon hearing this, but nonetheless, he accepted their answer. “Okay… I’ll just find someone else then!”

“Yo, Steven!” Amethyst called to the young Gem as her and Garnet stood on the fringes of the trail leading into the woods. “You ready to go?”

“Oh yeah! I almost forgot!” Steven jumped to his feet, putting his phone in his pocket as he prepared to head off.

“Oh, are you three going off on that ‘mystery hunt’ you mentioned earlier?” Pearl asked the young Gem before he could get too far.

“Yes!” the young Gem said, walking backwards as he addressed her. “We’re going to meet Dipper, Mabel, and Soos in the woods right now! Aren’t you coming, Pearl?”

“Oh, well, I-” the white Gem was cut off as something inside the van’s chassis suddenly burst, resulting in a thick plume of smoke and a shared exasperated groan from Greg and Stan. “I… think I’m needed here,” Pearl said with a slightly bemused grin. “But stay safe! And have fun!”

“Oh, we will!” Steven nodded as he joined Amethyst and Garnet. “Especially since I have this quiz to keep us all entertained along the way!”

The white Gem continued to wave her teammates off with a smile, one that faded into her earlier confusion as she turned back to the conman and the former rock star. “Do either of you understand that cartoon show?” she asked pensively.

“I don’t really understand anything anymore,” Greg admitted honestly.

“Ditto,” Stan dryly agreed as they got back to work sorting the van’s struggling engine out.
Meanwhile, Steven cheerfully strode alongside Garnet and Amethyst, the former silent and observant as ever and the latter casually snacking on the messy sandwich she had brought along for the hike. “So where’s this ‘super mysterious’ place Dipper wants us to check out again?” the purple Gem asked somewhat boredly.

“Apparently, its right on the temple hill,” Garnet replied, her attention focused on the path ahead. “The very same place where he supposedly found the journal. So this mission will hopefully give us some answers that are a long time coming. Which means I expect you both to take it seriously.”

“Don’t worry, G,” Amethyst smirked, her mouth full as she munched on her sandwich. “You know me. I’m as serious as they come.”

“Same here!” Steven nodded thoroughly. “Oh! Speaking of serious stuff, you guys gotta take this online quiz: ‘Which Crying Breakfast Friend Are You’?”

“I’ll pass,” Garnet said simply.

“Yeah, same,” Amethyst stuck her tongue out. “That show’s really weird. Who wants to watch a cartoon about people crying?”

“I do!” Steven protested, tears already starting to form in his eyes.

“Ok, ok!” the purple Gem quickly retracted for the sake of appeasing the young Gem. “Uh, what’s the first question?”

Steven quickly perked up as he looked back to his phone and read the question out loud. “Do you ever act without thinking?”

“Terrified,” the purple Gem deadpanned, licking the remains of her sandwich off her face.

“Amethyst, are you taking this seriously?” Steven asked with a frown.

“Of course, I am,” Amethyst rolled her eyes, making it quite clear that she wasn’t. Still, Steven tapped ‘yes’ on his phone under the question he had just asked her before moving onto the next one.

“Are you insecure about your relationships and how you are perceived by other people?”

The purple Gem’s lax expression abruptly shifted into discomfort upon hearing such a prying question, especially as she glanced towards Garnet. The Gem leader herself wasn’t really listening to the conversation as she stoically pressed on ahead, but even so, Amethyst was aptly anxious as she gave Steven an uncertain reply. “…No? Yes? Uh… what’s the right answer?”

“There is no right answer,” Steven said. “You’re just supposed to answer honestly.”

“Eh, I’m bored,” Amethyst quickly returned to her usual casual manner as she quickened her pace to catch up with Garnet.

“Wait!” Steven called as he ran after her. “I still have loads more probing personal questions to ask you!”
“They’ll have to wait till later,” Garnet spoke up, putting her hands on her hips as she came to a stop. “We’re here.”

“Hi, guys!” Mabel greeted the trio brightly as they arrived. Her and Soos were eagerly waiting near a tall, conspicuous tree that Dipper was intently pacing in front of while meticulously leafing through the journal. He stopped short, however, upon noticing that Steven and the Gems had shown up.

“Hi, guys!” Dipper said with relieved smile as he closed the journal. “I’m glad you could make it. Thank you all for coming.”

“Wait, so you’re saying this author guy has been squatting right underneath our temple for the past 30 years?” Amethyst asked incredulously. “All without us knowing about it? That seems kinda, I dunno, impossible?”

“We don’t know who the author is,” Garnet reminded solidly. “But he somehow knew a lot about us. It would have made sense for him to have gotten that information by observing us right behind our backs.”

“Literally!” Steven quipped jokingly.

“I don’t know…” Dipper interjected with a frown as he looked back to the journal. “Based on how the author wrote about you guys, it still doesn’t really seem like he got all this info just from spying on you… But that’s what we’re here to find out. We find that author, we learn the answers to everything. We just need to figure out a way to get down there…”

“Chop it down, dudes!” Wendy called as she pulled up to the group on her bike.

“Wendy!” Mabel and Steven greeted the cashier, pleasantly surprised that she was joining them.

“Oh, hey! You made it!” Dipper exclaimed, also quite excited to see her.

“Dude, I’m so stoked about this!” Wendy remarked, putting her usual hat on as she dismounted her bike. “I’ve been wanting to go adventuring with you guys. Sure beats picking up after my dad at home. So thanks for the invite, man!” She grinned as she passed by Dipper, giving a friendly punch on the arm.

“O-of course!” Dipper called after her with a smile that was far too wide and clearly flustered.
“Anytime you wanna… I, uh… We’re always… uh—”

“Uh oh!” Mabel cut in as her and Steven both sent Dipper broad, knowing grins while the Gems and Soos moved on towards the tree themselves. “Inviting Wendy on our mission? Methinks there’s romance afoot!”

“No,” Dipper quickly rejected this notion, even if he was more intent on convincing himself more than either of them. “Look, I’ve thought this through and I’m over Wendy. I’ve looked at it from every angle, and that thing was going nowhere. I know what matters to me now, and that’s finding the author of this journal.”

“Ha! You’re over Wendy?” Mabel smirked with wry disbelief. “Allow me to put on my ‘skepticals’.” Said skeptical were merely just Mabel forming circles around her eyes with her fingers, but even so Dipper was far from amused.

“Dipper, why don’t you just tell Wendy how you feel about her?” Steven asked with a good-natured smile. “It’s gotta be easier than just trying to keep it a secret. I mean, just how great things turned out when Bawling Bacon told Mourning Muffin about his crush on her in Crying Breakfast Friends.”

“Oh, that episode is a classic!” Mabel interjected, still keeping her ‘skepticals’ on.

“…I don’t even know what to say to that,” Dipper said dryly. “But still, I’m not going to tell Wendy anything because there’s nothing to tell. I’ve moved on. You guys should too.”

The pair merely exchanged a tentative glance as Dipper stepped past them, though Mabel made sure to get the final say on the matter. “Skepticals…”

“Hey, guys,” Wendy said as everyone gathered close to the tree. “Is it just me, or does that branch look kinda like a lever?”

“Huh, yeah,” Dipper agreed, looking up at the branch the cashier was referring to before turning away from it to properly pan. “But how do we get up there…? It seems like we’d need a ladder, or like, ladder-shoes. I’ll get Soos to draw up a prototype, maybe go get Pearl and have her help build them…”

“Should we tell him?” Amethyst muttered to Garnet as they watched Wendy use her belt to skillfully scale the tree behind Dipper.

“Eh, he’ll figure it out,” Garnet shrugged.

At the same time, Wendy had reached the lever and pulled the ax out of her belt. With a smooth flick of the wrist, she spun the weapon around and hit the lever with its dull end, easily activating it. “Boosh!” she exclaimed, sending a satisfied smirk down to the amazed group on the ground.

“Whoa! Wendy, dude, that was awesome!” Soos exclaimed with a grin.

“Oh yeah, my dad used to make me compete in these lumberjack games when I was a kid,” Wendy remarked with a humble shrug. “Guess I kinda ruled at it.”

Still, no one had too much time to be impressed as the tree suddenly began to shake violently. Unable to hold on, Wendy fell off of it with a frightened cry, though fortunately, the shrub at the foot of the tree broke her fall. She didn’t really have a chance to breathe a sigh of relief, however, as the ground surrounding the tree began to retract, though thankfully Dipper and Soos were quick enough to pull her away from the emerging opening. The group crowded around the circular hole,
watching in stunned awe as a set of stairs started jutting out from the lower half of the tree, stairs
that led to a metallic door down below.

“Uh… G?” Amethyst tentatively spoke up, looking to the Gem leader with apt concern. “Am I the
only one of us who’s thinking this looks sort of…”

“Familiar…” Garnet finished, her expression unreadable as she looked towards the hidden door
and nothing else. “No, you’re not.”

“Wait, have you guys been here before?” Steven asked with immense curiosity.

“I don’t… think so…” the purple Gem frowned, bewildered.

“Still, it feels like we have…” the Gem leader adjusted her shades, her tone slightly unnerved.
“It’s… hard to explain…”

“Well maybe going down there and checking it out will help jog your memory!” Mabel suggested
encouragingly.

The pair of Gems exchanged a dubious glance, neither of them, not even Garnet, really sure of what
they might find underground. Still, as always, Amethyst was the first to return to her usual verve.
“Well, what are we waiting for?” she asked with a forced, confident grin. “Let’s crash this creepy
joint!”

“Alright, guys, this is it,” Dipper said with bold resolve, making sure the journal was securely
tucked into his vest. “Remember, what happens down there, we tell no one.”

The others all responded affirmative to this in different ways: Mabel with a thumbs up, Steven with
a solid nod, Garnet with a clenched, determined fist, Soos by turning his hat backwards, Amethyst
with a casual salute, and Wendy by zipping her lips. Without the need for any further deliberation
on their plans, the group began descending the staircase down to whatever might await them in the
depths below.

What did await them behind the door was a rather small, rather cramped room. Its walls were
constructed out of firm, sturdy metal, and despite the dust and cobwebs clinging to nearly every
surface, there was certainly much to see. A small, decrepit cot sat against one wall, a cabinet used
to store weapons against the other, and shelves upon shelves of stock-piled food in boxes labeled
by year against another. The group all gasped in muted awe as they wandered into the room, all of
them somehow managing to squeeze into the claustrophobic corridor as they began to investigate
every detail they could.

“Ok, this is stupidly cool,” Wendy remarked with an impressed grin.

“I know, right?” Steven glanced around the room, his eyes alight with wonder. “Who knew all this
stuff was hiding right behind the temple?”

“Hm…” Garnet mused as the young Gem said this, remaining in one spot as she scoped the area
out. While her future vision usually was able to give her clear glimpses into what was ahead, it was
of no aid in providing her glimpses of what might have been before. And yet, every fiber of her
being resonated with the feeling that this place, as cramped and as darkened as it was, was a place
she had stepped foot in before, somehow and some when. She knew, even without asking, that
Amethyst likely harbored the same feeling, and Pearl would have as well if she was with them.
And perhaps, even Rose would have admitted to its familiarity if she was still around to see all of
this. Or better yet, fill in the gaps that they seemed to be missing.
“It’s like a fallout shelter or something,” Dipper noted, glancing over at a calendar fixed to the wall that was stuck on the year 1982. “It must have belonged to the author.”

“Yeesh, I feel sorry for the dude if he lived in this dusty old box,” Amethyst said, trying her best to pass off her own uneasiness towards the familiarity of it all. “Still, at least there’s plenty of good cans lying around to snack on.” With a satisfied smirk, the purple Gem grabbed a nearby empty can and downed it whole as Steven and Mabel shared an amused laugh at her odd appetite.

At the same time, Wendy pried a metal sign off the wall that read “Fallout Shelter”, grinning as she blew the dust off of it. “This is going over my bed.”

“Ha!” Mabel chuckled brightly as she pulled her head out of the barrel she had been investigating, not even caring about the countless caterpillars inching across her face. “My face feels fuzzy!”

“Aw, they’re so cute!” Steven quipped, gleefully petting one of the fuzzy creatures.

“This is incredible!” Dipper remarked, fully in his element now as he tried to imagine the mysterious author himself standing in this very room. “It’s like he was preparing for a disaster. But… what kind of disaster would need supplies for over sixty years…?” His smile faded as he looked to the extensive collection of storage boxes sitting on the nearby shelves, all of which were labeled with years dating all the way up to 2070.

“Oh my gosh!” Soos gasped as he opened up the weapons locker and pulled anything but a weapon out. “A Smez dispenser! I remember these things. What’s that?” he paused, holding the dog-shaped dispenser up to his ear with a playful grin. “Why yes, I will have some of your old-timey face food!” The handyman pushed a piece of candy out of the dispenser and ate it, choking a bit over its staleness. “Ew, dusty!” he cringed, before popping another one into his mouth.

“Ha ha! Look, Steven!” Amethyst smirked to the nearby young Gem as she found a gas mask hanging on the wall, one that she jokingly put on. “I’m a pachyderm!” Of course, Steven let out a charmed laugh at this, though his amusement turned into shock as Amethyst pulled a skull, albeit a fake one, out of the mask. “Oh! And there’s a prize inside!”

“Amethyst,” Garnet spoke up, turning to her teammate. “I thought you said you were going to take this mission seriously.”

“Hey, I am being serious,” the purple Gem retorted defensively, quickly tossing the gas mask aside. “Just figured I’d liven this stale old place up a little is all.” Amethyst flashed a hopeful grin at her leader, who, based on her unflinching expression, was anything but impressed by her levity. Still, she made no comment on it, much to the purple Gem’s simultaneous worry and relief.

“Wait, guys!” Dipper interjected as he happened to pick up one of the countless discarded cans off the floor, one that just so happened to be still somewhat full. “I think this can was opened recently…”

“The author still might be alive down here, then!” Soos exclaimed.

“Wait a minute…” Wendy cut in as she glanced over to the far wall, where a large map of Gravity Falls hung. The map itself seemed to be blowing against a mysterious unseen breeze, the source of which was revealed as the cashier pulled it off the wall, uncovering a slightly ajar hatch. “I think I know where he might have gone…” Wendy smirked to the others as they gathered around.

“Then here’s the plan,” Garnet said authoritatively. “We’ll follow this tunnel to wherever it leads. But since this is unknown territory we’re in, Amethyst and I will take the lead and the rest of you
follow behind us.”

Everyone nodded in agreement with this safe plan, knowing that the pair of Gems would be their best line of defense in case anything happened to go wrong. Garnet herself went first, crawling through the tight tunnel that led deeper into the darkness, with Amethyst heading after her, followed by the others.

“Oh Garnet,” Steven grinned with admiration as he climbed into the tunnel behind the Gems. “Stern but practical. Just like Spilled Milk.”

“Ugh, you’re not still on about that dumb cartoon, are you?” Amethyst asked, annoyed as she glanced back at the young Gem.

“Oh right, the quiz!” Steven pulled out his phone as he tried to hold it and shimmy through the tunnel the best he could. However, before he could read the next question, Mabel enthusiastically interrupted.

“Oh my gosh, you don’t mean the *Crying Breakfast Friends* personality quiz, do you?” she asked excitedly. “I just took that this morning. I got Sad Pear, just like I knew I would!”

“Whoa, Sad Pear is totally you, Mabel!” Steven readily agreed. “I got Sniffling Croissant, and now I’m trying to see which character Amethyst is. So, next question: Do you get defensive when people ask you questions about the feelings you prefer to keep hidden?”

“Pfft, I know *someone* who does,” Mabel remarked offhand, sending a goading smirk to Dipper.

“Mabel, please,” Dipper huffed in exasperation, though he did briefly glance back at Wendy rather apprehensively, though thankfully she didn’t notice.

Amethyst, on the other hand, was far more alarmed and perturbed upon hearing the podding question the young Gem had just posed. “Don’t get all psy-c-o-logical on me, Ste-ven,” she hissed somewhat harshly, glaring back at him.

The young Gem flinched a little at her bitter manner, though still, he wasn’t exactly sure what about his seemingly question had provoked her. “Uh… Sorry?”

“Everyone, watch your step,” Garnet cut through the conversation with a forewarning as the group reached the end of the tunnel. Once again, everyone was rapt with amazement as they emerged into a large, square chamber, its walls, floor, and ceiling all composed of metallic tiles, all of which bore strange, cryptic symbols on them. While purpose of this strange room was far from clear, everyone took the time to stop and scope it out nonetheless, more out of awe than anything else.

“Wow! And I thought that first room was cool!” Steven exclaimed, glancing around with wide eyes. “This one’s even more mysterious!”

“I know, right?” Wendy smirked in agreement. “Was this place built in the past or the future?”

“I dunno, dudes…” Soos muttered apprehensively. “This room is way creepy…”

“Not as creepy as Dipper’s internet history!” Mabel exclaimed with a broad, joking grin. “Heyo!” Despite the aggravated glare Dipper was sending her, Mabel gave him a playful shove nonetheless, which resulted in him stumbling forward onto one of the marked panels on the floor, a panel that just so happened to be a hidden switch. Without any warning, a blaring alarm began to sound as the other symbols on the walls lit up bright red. The hatch the group had just emerged from abruptly slammed shut and locked itself tightly, and while that wouldn’t have been drastically alarming, it
suddenly became a very dire fact. The tiles on the walls themselves began to push in towards the
group on all sides and from all angles with only one intention: crushing the intruders trapped
therein.

“That’s why I told you all to watch your step!” Garnet called over the loud alarm as everyone
crowded together fearfully.

Still, the only one among them who wasn’t completely distressed by the impending danger was
Mabel, mostly since her face was still covered in caterpillars. “Ha, it’s hard to be scared with
caterpillars on your face,” she grinned blithely.

“W-we gotta get out of here!” Steven cried fearfully, gasping in surprise as Garnet summoned her
gauntlets and slammed her hands into a nearby block in the hopes of stopping it.

“Way head of you, Ste-man!” Amethyst exclaimed daringly, leaping into action. While the others
tried in vain to push the tiles back, the purple Gem went high, using the rapidly moving blocks to
give her a boost as she positioned herself between two of them near the ceiling. Amethyst grunted
loudly as she shoved her foot against one of them, trying to use her entire body to keep them
separated as she looked down at the struggling group below. “Yo, G!” she called to the Gem
leader, who was barely paying her any mind as she pushed back against a tile. “Check this—huh?”
The purple Gem stopped short as she happened to glance up at the glowing tile right above her
head, marked with a symbol that was far too familiar for her, even if she didn’t really know how.
The blaring alarm and sense of urgency seemed to dull a bit as Amethyst started up at it, fascinated
and somewhat confused. And, with a slow, tentative touch, she gently placed her hand upon it, her
eyes lighting up as she pressed down on the apparent switch, turning its symbol from red to blue.
“Hey guys!” she shouted, barely even aware of the tiles aggressively pushing against her. “Look
what—”

Just as everyone glanced up her way, Amethyst let out a sharp, loud gasp as the blocks finally
pressed against her body too tightly. And yet, instead of sustaining any kind of injuries, the purple
Gem’s form abruptly disappeared in a bright puff of smoke, leaving nothing but her gemstone
behind. Everyone save for Garnet let out a collective gasp of shared horror at this, especially as
Amethyst’s gem began to freely fall from her previously high perch. Fortunately, Steven reacted
just in time by catching the stone before it could hit the hard ground and shatter entirely, but even
so, no one had any time to show anything other than shock to what had just happened, especially
since the walls were all still tightly closing in.

“Amethyst was onto something,” Garnet noted as she glanced up to where the purple Gem had
been, catching sight of the switch she had activated mere seconds ago.

“Wait, she was!” Dipper exclaimed, holding the black light over a page in the journal that detailed
the very room they were in. The hidden text revealed a set of glowing marks in particular, all of
which served as the key out of the encroaching death trap. “There are five more of these symbols.
Quick! Everybody find one!”

While Garnet worked to hold the tiles back the best she could, the others split up the best that they
could, each of them searching for the other five conspicuous tiles that could very well save them.
Soos found the first one, and seeing as how this was a life or death situation, he didn’t hesitate to
run for it without delay. “One!” he called, pushing the switch in firmly.

“Two!” Wendy shouted as she found the next one, jumping up to give it a solid punch.

“Three!” Steven announced as he used another block to get a boost to reach another switch.
“Four!” Mabel called, high fiving the next symbol.

Dipper paused as he frantically looked around for the final untapped symbol, only to spot it right as another block began to move in front of it. Acting fast, he ran for the switch, hurriedly climbing the blocks leading up to it and fortunately hitting right before it was covered up entirely. “Five!”

With all five of the switches activated, a door revealed itself on the far side of the room as it swung open, finally giving the group a window of escape. Still, it was a rather narrow window, seeing as how the tiles were still pushing in towards them just as quickly as ever.

“Run for it!” Mabel shouted, leading the way through the tight fit towards the door. The others were quick to follow suit, Garnet abandoning her post as she leapt through the opening deftly. Steven made sure that Amethyst’s gem was tightly secured in his grasp before fleeing, and though he was the last to escape, Dipper made it out just in time, even if his vest did happen to get caught between the blocks just as they finally all slammed shut on each other.

“Yes!” Wendy cheered in apt relief as soon as they were all safely on the other side of the security room. “That was nuts! You ruled back there, man!” she exclaimed, sending a congratulatory grin to Dipper.

“Heh, thanks,” he remarked with something of a bashful blush. However, the triumph of the moment was quickly cut short as Steven let out a distressed cry.

“Amethyst!” the young Gem wailed, distraught tears in his eyes as he held the purple gem close.

“W-what happened to her?” Mabel asked, also quite concerned as the others crowded around.

“Is… is she like… gone?” Soos asked with an apprehensive frown.

“No,” Garnet quickly confirmed.

“But… Amethyst got crushed to-” Dipper cut himself off, not entirely sure how to properly phrase it. “Well, I guess being crushed to death wasn’t exactly what happened to her…”

“Whatever did happen to her wasn’t pretty…” Wendy remarked, glancing at Amethyst’s gem with a frown. “I mean, how could she have actually survived something like that?”

“A Gem’s body is a construct of light,” Garnet began to explain, her tone as calm as ever. “Our physical forms are illusions. And sometimes, when we’re badly damaged, we’re forced to release those physical forms and retreat into our gemstones to regenerate.”

“So… so she’ll be ok, then?” Mabel asked, hopeful.

“She’ll be just fine,” Garnet assured with a smile. “This sort of thing happens to Amethyst all the time, believe me.”

“I-it happened to Pearl once too, a few months ago,” Steven sniffled, still hardly consoled. “A-and it took her two whole weeks to come back, and I already miss Amethyst so much!”

“Don’t worry,” the Gem leader encouraged, placing a gentle hand on her sorrowful young ward’s shoulder. “She’ll be back before you know it.”

And, as if right on cue, the purple Gem began to make her rather rushed reappearance. Everyone gasped as Amethyst’s gemstone radiated a practically blinding light, floating freely upwards out of Steven’s grasp. “Literally…” Garnet muttered upon seeing this, her smile fading as she watched
her teammate regenerate. A bright silhouette surrounded the stone, shifting subtly before landing on the most familiar form of the purple Gem. Or at least, so it initially seemed.

As the light faded from her, Amethyst landed squarely on the ground, a little out of it, but otherwise completely unharmed. Delighted to see her return so quickly, Steven rushed for her, wrapping her in a tight hug as the others all breathed a shared sigh of relief. “Amethyst’s back! Amethyst’s back!” the young Gem happily proclaimed as he threw his arms around her.

“Ugh…” Amethyst groaned rather tiredly as she gently pushed him away, only to notice something off about her hands. Or rather, lack thereof. “Huh?”

“Uh, Amethyst?” Dipper spoke up, quite bewildered by the purple Gem’s new appearance. “What happened to your… arms?”

“I think you mean legs, bro-bro,” Mabel quipped, correctly describing what Amethyst’s arms had been replaced with: another set of legs.

“Looks like you… grew a few feet since the last time I saw you!” Steven joked, much to the already confused purple Gem’s annoyance.

“Nice one, dude!” Soos chuckled. “Oh, I got one! Hey, Amethyst, can you lend me a foot? Get it?! C-cause you have—”

“Yeah, Soos, I get it,” Amethyst deadpanned dryly.

“That was fast,” Garnet interrupted, looking down at her teammate with a stoic frown. “Even for you.”

Amethyst was quick to push herself to her feet (her usual ones anyway) upon hearing this, pushing her alarm off as she casually brushed her bangs out of her face. “Eh, it’s no big deal,” she shrugged nonchalantly, smoothly transitioning to stand on her new arm-legs. “I didn’t wanna keep my biggest fan waiting!” She sent a playful smirk Steven’s way, eliciting a laugh from the young Gem that ended when she put one of her regular feet on top of his head. He rolled his eyes as he removed it, chuckling once more and not noticing that Garnet was nowhere near as amused with Amethyst’s antics.

“Let’s just keep moving,” the Gem leader resolved, pressing on ahead. Amethyst huffed an irritated sigh at Garnet’s terse manner, but all the same, she trudged on along with the others as they began exploring their new surroundings.

“Whoa, get a load of this crazy surveillance room,” Wendy remarked, impressed by the observation deck they now found themselves in. The atmosphere here seemed to be much calmer than that of the security room, its walls lined with a wide array of monitors and control panels. A few of the screens still seemed to be showing sparse video feed, though from where, no one really knew. Still, just like the first room, there was plenty of interesting clues and details here worth exploring, which is what the group split up to do.

“Check it out, dudes!” Soos exclaimed as he held a pair of beakers up to his eyes, making them appear comically large.

“Soos, Soos,” Wendy said, her tone serious before she broke out into a grin. “That is hilarious.”

“Hey, Steven,” Amethyst smirked to the young Gem as she remained standing on her arm-legs. “Watch me ‘roll with it’.” At this, the purple Gem proceeded to cartwheel easily using all four of her legs, something that Steven instantly wanted to try, only to fall flat on his face the moment he
attempted a handstand. Mabel got a good laugh out of this failed attempt, though she was more than ready to try it herself, only to stop short upon noticing Dipper’s vest still hanging from the edge of the security room.

“Hey, bro, you forgot your vest,” she called over to him, heading over to go retrieve it. However, as she pulled the vest loose, a piece of paper happened to slip out of it, something that instantly garnished Mabel’s attention and interest. “What’s this…?” she muttered before quietly reading whatever her brother had written aloud to herself. “Dear Wendy, I’ve always had a crush on-” She cut herself off with an excited gasp, covering her mouth up with the note in an attempt to stifle it. “Oh my gosh! Steven!”

“What’s-” Before the young Gem could even finish, Mabel shoved the note into his face, an overwhelmingly elated grin on her face.

“Look! Look! Look!” she urged eagerly, handing the note off to Steven. He took a moment to look over it for himself before mirroring her excitement with a gasp of his own.

“Oh my gosh!”

“That’s what I said!” Mabel exclaimed enthusiastically before turning towards her brother with a coy grin. “Hey, Dipper! Look what we found!”

“My vest, I hope,” Dipper deadpanned, grabbing that from her first, only for his eyes to go wide with shock upon seeing his note for Wendy. “W-what?! Where did you—Give me that!”

“I knew it!” Mabel exclaimed triumphantly even as Dipper snatched the note away from Steven. “I knew it! I knew it!”

“We both knew it!” Steven added with a bright chuckle.

“Yeah we did!” Mabel readily agreed. “You’re not over Wendy at all!”

“Oh! Were you gonna tell her today?!” the young Gem asked, hopping to his feet with an invested grin.

“No,” Dipper quickly protested, quickly glancing over his shoulder to make sure the cashier couldn’t overhear them. “I changed my mind; it’s a bad idea. I’d just embarrass myself and then I’d be another guy she hates, just like Robbie.”

“Dipper, you should just tell her already,” Mabel insisted. “One way or another, you’ll feel better about it afterwards.”

“Mabel’s right,” Steven nodded in agreement. “It’s like Garnet always says: honesty is the key to any relationship. And she would know, since she’s like, the master of romance or something!”

“You bet I am,” Garnet cut in from right behind the trio.

“Garnet?!” Dipper exclaimed in apt surprise. “H-how long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough,” the Gem leader remarked, adjusting her shades.

“Wait a sec, this is perfect!” Mabel quipped. “Garnet, you can just tell Dipper how him confessing his feelings to Wendy is gonna turn out so he can just go and do it instead of being all lame about it!”
“Hey!” Dipper protested, more than ready to argue with Mabel on this point, though once more, Garnet interrupted.

“Actually… I think this is one future Dipper’s going to have to discover for himself…” the Gem leader mused definitively.

“Oh come on, seriously?” Dipper sighed in exasperation, a part of him hoping that Garnet would have been able to provide him with at least some foresight on the matter.

“However,” she continued pointedly. “I will say that Steven was right about my advice. Whether things turn out or not, being honest about your feelings is always better than keeping them buried under the surface. Trust me.”

A sudden crash from the other side of the room cut through the conversation, prompting everyone to turn and see that Amethyst had accidentally dropped a glass beaker thanks to her handless-arms. “Whoops,” she said stiffly, playing the incident off with an awkward laugh. “Foot-hands, ya know? Turns out they don’t make very good… hand-hands…”

“I knew this would happen…” Garnet sighed, already preparing to go take care of the purple Gem, but not before imparting a few more words of wisdom. “Just remember what I said, Dipper. The truth can set you free. Literally.”

“Huh, I wonder what that’s supposed to mean,” Mabel remarked in slight confusion as the Gem leader walked off.

“So was that enough to convince you to go talk to Wendy about how you feel, Dipper?” Steven asked with an encouraging smile.

“Yeah, no,” Dipper replied flatly, still deeply resolved against the very idea.

“Ugh, come on,” Mabel groaned, frustrated. “Why not?”

“You guys just don’t understand,” Dipper said dismissively. “I can’t tell her, no matter how much I want to, ok? So just drop it already.”

Mabel and Steven were both more than ready to argue with this, but before they could, Wendy herself interrupted the conversation. “Dude, Dipper! You gotta check out this weird metal closet!” she called from the open closet she was standing in at the back of the surveillance room. With a small laugh, she jokingly took on a robotic tone to up the effect. “I am a robot, I have a metal closet.”

“Coming!” Dipper called back to her with an anxious laugh before briefly turning back to Mabel and Steven. “This never happened.”

Still, neither of them were anywhere near satisfied as they watched him hurry off, especially upon watching his rather stilted interactions with Wendy. “Aw, man…” Steven said with a worried frown. “Poor Dipper, holding in his feelings like that… That’s gotta be so hard…”

“I know, right?” Mabel huffed in annoyance. “He totally wants to tell her, but he’s just scared! But maybe all he needs is a little push…”

“A push? Like what?”

“Oh, you’ll see, Steven,” Mabel said with something of an ominous smirk. “You’ll see.” Without explaining anything of her impromptu idea, she rushed for her brother, reaching him before he
could even make it to Wendy and locking him into a sudden hug from behind. “Brother, whatever happens, I just need you to know something,” Mabel paused, her tone oddly serious as she looked him dead in the eyes. “This is for your own good.”

“What?” Dipper asked, only to get no answer as Mabel abruptly shoved him forward hard, right into the closet. Before he could even realize what had happened, she slammed the doors shut and locked them from the outside, grinning in satisfaction all the while.

“Oh, so that’s what you meant by a push,” Steven surmised thoughtfully as Amethyst let out an amused laugh at what she assumed was merely a prank.

“Nice one, Mabel!” the purple Gem chuckled. “Reminds me of that time I locked Pearl in the bathroom back at the temple. She beat on the door for hours! It was a riot.”

Meanwhile, inside the closet itself, it took Dipper a moment to gather his bearings, but when he did, the first thing he realized was that not only was he trapped inside of the nearly pitch-black closet thanks to Mabel. But he was also trapped in there with Wendy, of all people, a fact that instantly filled him with simultaneous exhilaration and panic, especially given their forced closed proximity to each other. “Mabel!” Dipper quickly shouted, pounding on the door adamantly. “Let us out!”

“Oh, I’ll let you out, Dipper,” Mabel smirked confidently. “As soon as you tell Wendy that thing you’ve been wanting to tell her! You’ll thank me for this later!”

“What’s she talking about?” Wendy asked Dipper, aptly confused.

“Nothing!” Dipper exclaimed defensively. “Mabel’s just been eating raw sugar packets again!”

“That’s beside the point!” Mabel called from the outside even as she dumped two packets of sugar into her mouth without a care. Her levity dulled a bit, however, upon noticing the somewhat disapproving frown the Gem leader was sending her way. “Aw, come on, Garnet. You said so yourself: Dipper needs to be honest about his feelings!”

“Yes, and I also remember saying that he needs to see how this all turns out for himself,” Garnet countered. “Still, I figured something like this would happen. That’s why I told him the truth would set him free. Because in this case, it apparently will.”

“So are we just gonna like, wait it out then?” Soos asked.

“You better believe we are!” Mabel proclaimed boldly, much to Dipper’s immense displeasure as he overheard this.

“Mabel, let us out now!” he shouted, beyond irritated by this point.

Wendy, on the other hand, was as levelheaded as always, only slightly aggravated by the relative darkness of their cramped surroundings. “Ugh, where are the lights?” she asked, fumbling around a bit until she managed to feel out a chord hanging from above. However, instead of turning a light on, pulling the chord resulted in a sudden spray of water, one that completely soaked and startled both Dipper and Wendy. Still, they were only wet for a brief moment as a strong gust of warm, drying air burst from all four of the surrounding walls, roughly pushing the two of them into each other as a dull red light beamed from a nearby sign that read “Decontamination Complete”. And while Dipper and Wendy were still rather caught off guard by what just happened, they were both more than relieved to see a door finally slide open on the other side of the closet, granting them access to an entirely new part of the bunker altogether.
This area was by far the most spacious yet, built amidst high cavernous walls marred by deep trenches of varying shapes and sizes. The same sort of technology from the surveillance room was apparent here, with pipes, tubes, and monitors all linking towards a series of empty glass pods, many of which showed the same sort of intentional damage the rest of the equipment filling the room did. The sparse overhead lighting flickered warningly as Dipper and Wendy tentatively stepped out of the closet and into this mysterious new space.

“Whoa, a hidden lab!” Dipper exclaimed, amazed and impressed by this intricate setup. “Maybe the author did experiments down here.”

“Hm,” Wendy mused, looking over the hole-strewn wall. “What do you think dug all these tunnels?”

“Let’s hope we don’t find out…” Dipper frowned, his curiosity quickly shifting to outright fear as a low growl, ominous suddenly echoed through the entire lab. Things only got more frightening however, as a large, lumbering shadow draped across the far wall. And from its creeping movements, it was clear that whatever it was, it was getting closer.

“Run?” Wendy asked in a stiff whisper.

“Run!” Dipper exclaimed in clear panic. And the pair did just that, racing for the only other way out they knew of: the closet. “Mabel, open up, for real!” Dipper shouted, pounding hard on the still locked closet door as Wendy did the same. “There’s a monster in here!”

“A monster, huh?” Amethyst perked up, hoping up from her arm feet to her regular feet. “Finally, some action! My feet were starting to fall asleep!”

“What’s so wise,” Soos nodded thoughtfully.

“Dipper, just say whatever Mabel wants you to say so she’ll let us out of here!” Wendy exclaimed, her usual calm all but gone in the face of this unknown danger.

Dipper took in a sharp, apprehensive breath at this, his heart racing with fear that went even beyond that of whatever was lurking in the nearby shadows. It certainly seemed as though this was the literal moment of truth, especially as the cashier looked to him expectantly. “W-Wendy, I… I…” he began just as clumsily as he always did whenever he tried to tell her this. Still, it was either this or—well, Dipper wasn’t entirely sure, but the more he thought about it, the more he realized that it was bound to be easier than telling Wendy the awkward truth. “I-I’m gonna find another way out!” he quickly exclaimed, grabbing the cashier’s wrist and pulling her back into the lab.

“Wait, what?” Wendy asked in alarmed confusion as she ran after him into one of the countless wide tunnels. “Dude, where are we going?” Dipper didn’t really give her much of an answer, as fueled by fear and adrenaline as he was, but the dead end at the end of the tunnel was enough to stop them both in their tracks. Unfortunately though, it wasn’t enough to stop the unknown creature that eagerly ravenously them. “What do we do?!” Wendy exclaimed, pressing against the nearby all as the shadow of the monster loomed ever closer.

“I-I don’t know!” Dipper admitted, fully regretting his rashness now. However, before the monster
could pounce out of the shadows and onto them, someone else miraculously enough pounced onto it. The pair watched in awed relief as the silhouette of a man fiercely tackled the beast, bravenly scuffling against it, despite its large size and bloodthirsty demeanor. In the end and with a few heavy punches, the man managed to beat the monster into submission, pulling something away from it and sending it skittering off in the opposite direction.

“Back, you heinous beast!” the man shouted after it, completely unphased by the outraged screech it sent back in his direction. With the threat subdued, the stranger emerged from the shadows, allowing Dipper and Wendy to see him clearly. His goggles, lab coat and gloves certainly gave him the air of a scientist, and while he was clearly on in years, he still stood firm and strong in the aftermath of his skirmish with the creature. “Well, I just pulled out a monster’s tongue,” he announced heroically before throwing said tongue down onto the ground.

For a moment, all either Dipper or Wendy could really do was stare at this mysterious newcomer with shared amazement and confusion, especially since they had no idea where he might have come from. But with that bewilderment in mind, Dipper was quick to remember the very reason why they had come all the way down here in the first place: to find any leads on the author’s whereabouts. And sure enough, it seemed as though they had found something even better: the elusive author himself. “It—it’s you!” Dipper gasped in apt shock, scarcely able to believe that after all this time, they had finally found him.

The author didn’t seem to have heard him, however, as he had already turned away from the stunned pair and began leading the way out of the tunnel. “Hurry now,” he urged insistently, his manner serious yet articulate. “I scared it off, but it’ll regenerate. These Gem monsters always do.” The author paused for a moment, his expression darkening into a scowl that neither of his newfound young companions noticed as he continued. “I wasn’t expecting guests. I’ve been down here for a very long time. Years! Weeks, maybe. I miss orange juice.”

“Y-you don’t understand,” Dipper spoke up, still overwhelmed with excitement. “You’re the guy I’ve been looking for!”

“He’s the guy?” Wendy asked, surprised.

“Wendy, he’s the guy!”

“The guy?” the author interjected, raising a confused eyebrow.

“I’ve got like, a billion questions!” Dipper exclaimed, scarcely able to contain his elation and curiosity. And really, how could he, seeing as how all of the answers he had been looking for all summer were finally within reach? “Why did you write the journals? How do you know the Gems? Who was after you? Why did you build this bunker?”

The author seemed charmed by this barrage of enthusiastic questions, letting out a small, bemused laugh. “My boy, I’d love to discuss all of this in time,” he began as they returned to the main part of the lab. “But for now, we have more pressing matters. It’s one of my experiments, a shape-shifter. Able to flawlessly take the form of anyone or anything it sees! It broke free from its cage of solid steel! I’ve gone half crazy trying to catch the creature alone, but now you’re here!” With a sincere smile, the author knelt down to Dipper’s level, placing a firm hand on his shoulder as he lifted up his goggles. “Will you help me catch it?”

The only way Dipper could even respond to such a question was with an excited gasp and an insistent nod. After all, meeting the author himself was one thing; but working together with him to solve a mystery was something he could have only ever dreamed of. And, against all odds, it certainly seemed as though that was a dream that was destined to come true.
“Very well then! Let’s get started! Come in! Come in!” the author beckoned as he led Dipper and Wendy through another one of the several tunnels into what seemed to be something of an unkempt living space. “I apologize for the state of things. I don’t get many non-mole people visitors. Now,” he turned to his two young companions, his manner as steadfast as ever. “The beast must have some kind of weakness we can exploit. I just wish I had my research on me! But alas, I lost my journals so many years ago…”

“Did you say journals?” Wendy asked, glancing at Dipper with a knowing grin.

“Dude, I found one of them!” Dipper enthusiastically exclaimed as he pulled the journal out. “That’s how we tracked you down here!”

“What? Could it be?” the author asked in apparent disbelief, eagerly taking the journal to get a better look at it. “My boy, I can’t express my gratitude!” he exclaimed brightly as he began to carefully leaf through the book. “Oh yes… after all these years!” The author grinned almost obsessively as he turned away from the pair once again, his eyes pouring over everything in the journal greedily, almost as if he hadn’t written every word himself. An assumption that perhaps might not have been all too outlandish after all.

Seeing as how they did little else to do, the group in the surveillance room continued exploring it to pass the time. Well, at least that’s what Soos and Mabel were doing as they freely rooted through the abundance of drawers near the control panel for anything interesting. “Sure are taking their time in there,” Soos remarked, casting a brief glance over at the closet before he resumed plundering. “Hey, do I look smarter with this coat and brief case?” he asked Mabel upon pulling on a tightly-fitting lab coat and grabbing an old metal briefcase. “I feel like I look smarter…”

“Oh yeah, you totally look 110% more genius-y, Soos!” Mabel quipped with an approving thumbs up.

“Yes!” the handyman cheered triumphantly.

At the same time, Steven followed close behind Amethyst as she sauntered about the room on all fours, something that was much easier now that all four of her limbs were legs. “Your new form is really interesting,” the young Gem commented with a smile.

“Thanks, Steven,” Amethyst replied rather dryly, blowing a lock of hair out of her face.

“I didn’t even know you could come back this different!”

“Thanks, Steven…”

“So… why’d you come back with four legs?” Steven asked curiously.

“Because I like walking!” the purple Gem huffed in clear aggravation with all of his comments.

“Wow…” the young Gem mused, amazed. “I want four legs too! Oh, or maybe four arms! Either of those would be so cool!”

“No it wouldn’t,” Garnet staunchly interrupted, glancing up from the files she had been pouring over. “Amethyst rushed her regeneration. She should have taken her time.”

“Like Pearl?” Steven asked, not noticing as Amethyst scowled sharply upon hearing this, her back
still turned to him.

“Yes,” the Gem leader nodded. “Pearl put a little more… thought into how she came back…”

“Ugh! Pearl, Pearl, Pearl!” Amethyst growled in bitter annoyance. “You know I can hear you, right?!” she asked hotly, pulling her hair aside to reveal an oversized ear. “I’m sorry I’m not like Pearl with her fancy form or her polite, boring personality!”

The purple Gem was clearly completely outraged by this point, angry enough that she landed a brutal kick to the nearby cabinet out of sheer frustration, not even noticing the heavy metal box precariously perched on top of it. That is, until it came plummeting down towards her. “Huh?” Amethyst glanced up, her eyes growing wide with alarm, but she could do little as the box fell squarely on top of her. Once again, her physical form was unable to handle such sudden stress, which was why it was quick to retreat into her gemstone. Fortunately, the stone itself went flying at this, narrowly missing the box landing on the ground and crushing it entirely and instead landing on the ground right in front of Steven.

“Amethyst!” the young Gem cried in horror as Mabel and Soos both let out shocked gasps. Garnet was hardly surprised, however as she instead rested a consoling hand on Steven’s shoulder as he sniffled morosely, clinging onto the purple gemstone gently. “G-Garnet, she… she got poofed again!”

“Man, Amethyst is really having some sucky luck today,” Mabel remarked with a concern frown as her and Soos headed over.

“This is a good opportunity for her,” the Gem leader concluded, unwavering. “Now she can focus on making a better form.” No sooner had Garnet said this, however, then Amethyst’s gem started to radiantly glow once more, a sign that she was already making a hasty regeneration. “Or not…”

The others watched with curious anticipation as the bright silhouette of the purple Gem surrounded her stone, though as the light faded, this time it was clear to see that Amethyst had drastically changed. This time, she had reformed herself to bear quite a striking, if not mocking resemblance to Pearl, complete with a nearly identical outfit and ballet slippers that were far too long for her small feet. Her long hair was now swept up to a point much like the white Gem’s usually was, even though it was immediately apparent to see just how impractical this was the moment she regathered her bearings and turned her head, her new style taking half of the beakers on the nearby shelf with it. “Aw yeah!” Amethyst snickered deviously, looking over her new form. “This is much better! What do you guys think? Aren’t I just Pearl-fect?”

Steven, Mabel, and Soos all laughed at this, greatly and unanimously amused at the purple Gem’s pun and her comical impersonation. “Ha! She’s doing Pearl!” the young Gem chuckled blithely.

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“Dudes, just imagine if the real Pearl was here,” Soos interjected with a grin. “It’d be like, impossible to tell the two of them apart!”

The kids shared another laugh over such a humorous, but Garnet was far less amused or impressed by Amethyst’s new appearance. Still, she said nothing of it for the moment, instead heading back to the control panel to continue investigating. She stopped short, however, upon noticing something that distinctively tipped her off, especially given her already uncomfortable vibes with the bunker as a whole. “Everyone,” she called the others out of their levity. “Get over here. There’s something you need to see.”

“What’s up, Garnet?” Steven asked as they all joined the Gem leader.
“Oh, is it those neat tube-y things?” Mabel pointed to the glass tubes visible through one of the working monitors. It wasn’t hard for her to find the button that got one of them working, even if it had a rather eloquent-label that read “Cryogenic Activation”. “Whoa!” she exclaimed in amazement upon pressing the button, which caused the tube to instantly fill with ice. Of course, Mabel didn’t hesitate to hit the button over and over again, smiling with delight as the cryogenic chamber reacted accordingly. “Frozen! Unfrozen! Frozen! Unfrozen!”

“That’s not what I meant,” Garnet spoke up, gently moving Mabel’s hand away from the button. “I was talking about that.” She nodded to a note taped to the far side of the control panel, one that Steven grabbed and read aloud.

“Experiment number 210: the shape shifter,” the young Gem frowned in confusion as he read. “Warning: extremely dangerous! Do not engage! A shapeshifter? Whoa, that’s sort of like you guys!” he exclaimed to Garnet and Amethyst.

The pair of Gems merely exchanged a wide eyed glance upon hearing this, both of them drawing up a complete blank at first. After all, certainly they would have remembered if they had ever encountered a non-Gem shapeshifter before, right? “This ringing any bells for you, G?” the purple Gem muttered, putting her Pearl impersonation off for the moment for the sake of her newfound nervousness.

“I… I’m not sure…” the Gem leader admitted truthfully. “It does sound familiar, but…”

“Uh, dudes?” Soos spoke up, his expression awash with sudden concern. “ Didn’t Dipper say there was a monster in there with him and Wendy?”

Mabel gasped fearfully upon being reminded of this, realizing that, despite her good intentions, she may have just put her brother in considerable harm. “I thought he was just joking!”

“You know Dipper’s jokes are terrible!” Soos exclaimed in a panic.

“We gotta go in there and save them!” Steven cried, already leading the way to the lab’s main primary entrance as the others were quick to follow. “Come on!”

While the Gems in particular were more than ready to leap into action against any potential danger as they all burst into the lab, they found no sign of any sort of shape shifter, or even Dipper or Wendy for that matter. The lab itself seemed to be oddly calm, but still, no one really found that to be a very comforting sign.

“Oh man, its so dark!” Soos exclaimed fretfully, trying to see through the dull lighting ahead. “How will we ever find them?”

“Leave that to Mabel!” Mabel exclaimed with a wide grin, pressing the light bulb on her sweater, which caused it to emit a surprisingly strong glow.

“Whoa!” Steven gasped, thoroughly impressed. “Mabel, you think of everything!”

“Seriously, that’s so rad!” Soos enthusiastically agreed. “Although isn’t electric clothing kinda like a fire hazard?”

“No, it’s a fun hazard,” Mabel corrected. “Now let me light the way!”

“We’re coming for you, dudes!” Soos called in the hopes that Dipper and Wendy might somehow hear him.
“And for that shape shifter too…” Garnet added coldly, knowing that if the creature was a threat, then it certainly had to be neutralized.

“Pfft, even if there is a shape shifter down here, it’ll be no match for my shiftin’ skills!” Amethyst quipped, briefly transforming into an appearance that was even more closely identical to Pearl before. Upon seeing Garnet glower at her doing this, however, she reverted back to her relatively new form, muttering crossly to herself as she did so. “And once I take it out, then maybe I’ll finally be good enough for you…”

As the author continued to skim over the journal on his own, his two young guests eagerly awaited to hear whatever conclusion he would soon hopefully reach on defeating the supposed shape shifter. Of course, Dipper was still beside himself with excitement over having met the author at long last, and based on first impressions alone, he was everything he had been expecting: bold, courageous, pragmatic, intelligent, and everything in between. And what was almost just as thrilling to Dipper was the fact that the answers to all of his longtime questions, namely the questions that even the Gems didn’t have answers for, were finally about to be answered by the source of them all himself.

“Wendy, isn’t this amazing?” he whispered to the cashier with a zealous smile. “I still can’t believe we’re actually meeting the real author!”

Wendy was ready to agree with him, though she instead stifled a shocked gasp upon noticing the label on the discarded can lying at her feet. “Dipper!” she whispered sharply, grabbing the can as she eyed the author with sudden fear, though fortunately, he didn’t notice. “Look!”

Dipper did so, looking to the can she was holding out to him with confusion at first, though that confusion instantly turned to dismayed alarm as he made the same realization Wendy had. The aviator shown in the bean can’s logo was distinctively identical to the very author standing but a few feet away from them, something that was far too conspicuous to be a mere coincidence. It was clear that the only logical conclusion to be made about this concerning twist was that the “author” was not all that he appeared to be.

“Uh, y-you know what?” Dipper addressed the “author” tentatively. “We should probably get going. Can I have my journal back?”

The “author” froze at this, looking up from the journal as he made a small, rather eerie hissing sound. All at once, he confirmed he was not only a fake, but inhuman altogether as his head did a full 180, his neck lengthening to accommodate the move and his eyes blinking sideways as he glared at the frightened pair menacingly. “You’re not going anywhere!” he growled, his deeper and much more sinister. Still moving, erratically, the creature dropped to all fours, its form morphing seamlessly as it quickly climbed up the wall, taking the journal with it. By the time the apparent shape shifter had reached the overarching ceiling, it had taken on its true, much more monstrous form. Its body was large and disproportionate, composed of slimy skin that was clear enough to that its white exoskeleton was visible through it. Its right arm was long and very slender, a complete contrast to its shorter, more bulky left arm. Four thin legs kept the creature upright, and its pinkish eyes lacked pupils while its mouth was a wide opening surrounded by sharp fangs and closed off by large teeth. “How do you like my new form?” the shape shifter asked even though Dipper and Wendy were quick to share how they felt about it with a unified scream of terror. “Go on, admit it! You like it!”

“You!” Dipper exclaimed, trying his best to be bold in the face of such a grotesque, intimidating
“What did you do to the real author?!”

“You’ll likely never find out,” the shape shifter said with cold triumph. “That six-fingered nerd hasn’t been himself in thirty years! But I thank you for bringing me this journal. He used to write it while I was in my cage. So many wonderful forms to take!” The creature laughed twistedly as it began to flip through the journal, seamlessly taking on the forms of many of the entries within it, from the Gremloblin, to a gnome, to the Centipeedle, to the slinker, all in quick succession and all completely flawless in accuracy.

Needless to say, Dipper and Wendy were equally alarmed at the shape shifter’s admittedly impressive transformative prowess. And certainly, with something like the journal in its possession, it would essentially have a complete menu of deadly monsters and creatures at its disposal, to use in whatever no doubt treacherous way it saw fit. “We gotta get that journal back!” Dipper whispered to Wendy while the shape shifter was still distracted with the book. Fortunately though, the cashier had an impromptu plan in mind.

“Hey, body snatcher!” she shouted at the shape shifter, picking up a discarded can from earlier. “Snatch this!” She threw the can hard at the creature, who side stepped out of the projectile’s path as it turned into a lumbering, frog-like monster. The shifter lashed its new long tongue out at the pair, though Wendy managed to shield them both from it using a nearby piece of scrap metal, which the creature only succeeding in pulling back towards itself. As the metal pelted the shifter squarely in the face, it was startled enough to loosen its grip on the journal, and as the book fell to the floor, Dipper didn’t hesitate to hurry and reclaim it.

“Run! Run! Run!” he shouted frantically as they both did just that, retreating back out of the dead end they were in. Of course, the moment it regathered its bearings, the shape shifter gave chase after them, clearly willing to take on whatever form it had to in order to claim the coveted journal for itself.

“So Garnet,” Amethyst began as the group pressed on through one of the tunnels to being their search. “What do you think of my new look? I’m more like Pearl now! Isn’t it wonderful? Why, I feel,” she cut herself off, preforming an elegant spin, not noticing as her long, quaffed hair hit Steven and Mabel. “Absolutely amazing!”

“We need to focus on listening for that creature,” Garnet reminded staunchly, not even bothering to spare a glance at the purple Gem. “Or for Dipper or Wendy.”

“Oh, but I simply can’t focus!” Amethyst exclaimed dramatically, still clearly mimicking Pearl. “All these holes are different sizes! We’ll have to organize them by shape and color. Didn’t anyone tell nature how I want it to look?!”

Of course, this performance got a good laugh out of Steven, Mabel, and Soos, but Garnet was quick to show her muted disapproval of it. “Don’t encourage her,” she said somewhat crossly, moving on ahead.

“But I need encouragement, Garnet!” Amethyst begged in faux fretfulness. “I need everyone’s constant approval! I need to loquaciously converse so I can show off how smart I am…” the purple Gem’s mocking tone turned to annoyance as she finished, rolling her eyes and crossing her arms as she thought of the white Gem.

“Uh, you can converse with us,” Steven offered, pulling out his phone. “Let’s finish this quiz! Do
you need to plan ahead before you act?”

“Oh, thoroughly!”

“Do you obsess over little details?”

“Completely entirely!”

“Ow wow!” the young Gem exclaimed, amazed at her imitation. “You’re so method! Next time, could you come back as me?”

“No, me!” Mabel insisted. “Oh! Or both of us at once! That would be super impressive!”

“Sure, why not?” Amethyst shrugged casually. “You guys know me. I’m a Gem of trades.”

Garnet finally stopped upon hearing this and slightly turned to face her teammate, unable to hold her pressing frustration towards the purple Gem’s callous behavior in any longer. “This is not a good choice for your form.”

“Lighten up, Garnet,” Amethyst scoffed. “Can’t you take a joke?”

“It’s not funny,” the Gem leader replied coldly. “You made yourself ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous?!” the purple Gem shouted, offended.

“Keep your voice down,” Garnet hissed in a sharp whisper. “The shape shifter-”

“You wanted me to be more like Pearl!” Amethyst interrupted hotly, her hands curled into tight fists. “And now I am!”

“Pearl would have taken her regeneration seriously!” Garnet chastised, still trying to be quiet, lest the shape shifter find them before they found it.

“What do you care?! My form is my business!”

“It’s my business when it affects the strength of the team!”

“So what?!” Amethyst spat, not even noticing as the others were all watching this ongoing argument with wide, worried eyes. “I’m not strong enough?!”

Garnet didn’t get a chance to answer this as a pair of very familiar frightened screams came from one of the connecting tunnels nearby. “Dipper! Wendy!” Soos exclaimed in alarm, recognizing the cries instantly.

“They’re this way!” Mabel pointed to the tunnel the screams had come from. “Come on!”

Everyone was quick to rush for the tunnel in the hopes of finally meeting up with the pair, though Amethyst lingered back a bit, still caught up in her own immense anger with the Gem leader. “Were you saying I was weak?!” she shouted after Garnet fiercely, trailing behind them all.

“Amethyst! Now is not the time for this!” the Gem leader retorted firmly, making it clear she would hear nothing more on the matter at the moment.

“Why not?!” the purple Gem yelled. “Why can’t you just accept me the way I am?!”

A large part of Garnet wanted to give Amethyst an immediate answer for this, but with the
dangerous circumstances they were currently in, such things would simply have to wait. “Amethyst,” the Gem leader said, her tone uncharacteristically shaken as she glanced back at her teammate for just a brief moment. “Enough.”

The purple Gem took in a deep breath but said no more, at least for the moment. It was obvious she had no intentions of dropping the issue at all, but for now she could only do as Garnet had said and put this tension aside. Even if it still bothered her immensely all the while.

At the same time, Dipper and Wendy were still trying to put as much distance as they could between themselves and the persistent shape shifter. While the creature made good use of its transformative abilities in chasing after them, they eventually managed to shake it by cleverly tricking it into taking the wrong tunnel. Still, the shifter wouldn’t be distracted with this ruse for too long, which was why the pair continued to rush through the maze of tunnels in the hopes of finding a way out. Though instead of that, they found the rest of the group instead. Or rather, quite literally ran into them.

The moment everyone realized they were all relatively safe and sound, a round of rushed, yet happy greetings were exchanged, though the relief was very short lived. “Wait!” Dipper interjected, sending a suspicious glance to Mabel, Steven, Soos, and the Gems. “How do we know they’re not the shape shifter?”

“Whoa, maybe I am!” Soos gasped. “Mabel, inspect my shape!” he exclaimed, pulling up his shirt and allowing Mabel to give playful poke to his stomach, much to the handyman’s amusement. “Do that again!” he laughed, and this time Steven complied by giving him another poke. “Even better the second time!”

“It’s definitely them,” Dipper concluded dryly, though he let out a horrified gasp upon noticing the rather sizable cut torn across Wendy’s knee. “Oh my gosh, Wendy, you’re bleeding!”

“It’s cool, it’s cool,” Wendy reassured, her tone calm yet firm. “It’s just blood, man. Don’t freak out.”

“What happened?” Mabel asked worriedly.

“We got attacked by the shape shifter,” the cashier began to explain, taking her over shirt off. She tore a swath of cloth off of the sleeve and tied it around her injured knee as a temporary bandage before wrapping the rest of it around her waist. “He broke out of his cage, pretended to be the author, and he wants Dipper’s journal.”

“No way!” Steven exclaimed, his eyes wide. “You guys actually saw that thing?”

“We need to track it down and subdue it,” Garnet said, resolved. “If we don’t, then there could be severe consequences.”

“Imagine if it escapes into town!” Dipper exclaimed fretfully. “It can transform into anything! We could never trust anyone ever again!”

“So what do we do?” Mabel asked apprehensively, though before anyone else could try to provide an answer to this, Amethyst was quick to cut in.

“Please,” she scoffed with little concern. “I totally got this covered, you guys. Just sic me on that shifty creep and I’ll make it wish it had never crawled out of which ever one of these holes it came from.”

“Normally I’d agree with a plan like that, but you’ve been acting irrationally all day, Amethyst,”
Garnet remarked stoically. “This is an unknown, dangerous creature we’ve up against and we can’t afford to send a loose cannon after it.”

“Oh, so now I’m a loose cannon?!” Amethyst asked bitterly. “If you don’t think I’m strong enough to do something like this, why don’t you just tell me to my face instead of sugar-coating it, huh?!”

“Amethyst, I’m not-”

“Yeah, you are! But I guess you wouldn’t have to deal with telling me the truth if Pearl was here instead of me!”

“Guys, cut it out!” Steven quickly interjected with a worried frown. “Fighting’s not gonna help us find that shape shifter!”

“Steven’s right,” Wendy spoke up staunchly, a look of solid determination on her face. “That thing took us into his home, tricked us, and tried to destroy us. I say we return the favor.”

Seeing as how it had lost Dipper and Wendy back in the tunnels, the shape shifter had taken to returning to the main part of the lab, its form constantly in flux until it settled back to its “author” appearance. “Dipper, my boy!” the disguised creature called with faux amicability, though in its unkempt fury, it did temporarily lose its form. “Come out! I must speak with you!” The already ill-mannered shape shifter had grown quite impatient over being denied what it wanted, to the point that it let out a fierce roar while taking on another nightmarishly monstrous appearance. “Reveal yourself, you single-formed human weakling!” The brutally creature pounded the ground out of rage and frustration, giving up all guises of calmness or friendliness without a second thought.

What the shape shifter was unaware of, however, was the pair of Gems waiting in the wings for the kids to carry out their part of the plan. In the meantime though, they let the creature continue lurking about, as much as Amethyst wanted to emerge and engage it in a head-on assault. Still, neither of them Gems could deny that, upon seeing the shape shifter for themselves in its original form, that it was remarkable familiar. So familiar in fact, that their attempt to defeat and restrain it almost seemed… redundant somehow.

Yet all the same, Garnet and Amethyst remained in their places, pushing such unsettling thoughts out of their minds as the twins entered the room to put their plan in motion. “Oh boy, Dipper,” Mabel began with a rather conspicuous smile. “That book sure is full of some great monsters!”

The shape shifter spun around upon noticing the twins’ presence, reverting back to its true form as it towered over them with eager satisfaction. “There you are!” the creature snarled twistedly. “Oh, and a new one! Should I be one…?” The shape shifter smirked deviously as it easily morphed into Mabel. “Or the other?” The creature kept its manic grin up as it turned into Dipper next. “How about both?! The real twins watched with growing horror as the shifter twisted its form into a nightmarish amalgamation of them both. Its body was raised on six legs, its upper half vaguely resembling Dipper while its bottom half looked like Mabel. Both halves were equally as monstrous however, with empty white eyes and two mouths filled with sharp, deadly teeth.

Needless to say that the twins were aptly terrified by this grotesque imitation of themselves, and as the shape shifter towered over them with a savage roar, they didn’t hesitate to flee from it before it could strike. Of course, the shifter gave chase, intent on getting the journal back, but the Gems took this as their cue to emerge and strike.
As the twins escaped, Amethyst and Garnet took their place in opposing the shape shifter, dropping down from above with their weapons already poised to attack. The purple Gem had resorted to shapeshifting back into her usual form herself, knowing that, even despite her frustration, this would be a much easier fight for The creature stopped dead in its tracks upon seeing them, letting out an intrigued hiss as it shifted back into its original form to size them up. “Well, well, well…” the shifter began, clear distain in its tone. “After all these years… Finally, you Gems come crawling back down here… Oh, but it seems that we’re two short. Tell me, where’s that tall, skinny one? Or better yet, that meddling Rose Quartz? What I wouldn’t give to rip her to shreds for helping him trap be down here in this subterranean hell all those years ago!”

The pair of Gems paused upon hearing all this, exchanging a look of bewildered confusion. “Uh, what are you talking about, dude?” Amethyst asked, raising an eyebrow as she kept her hold on her whip.

“You mean you don’t remember?!” the shape shifter asked, both apparently offended and curious. “How could you not!? You were both there! All four of you Gems played a hand in what happened here over thirty years ago!”

“We don’t know what you’re talking about,” Garnet said evenly, her gauntlets clenched into tight fists. “But if we really did have a hand in subduing you all those years ago, then we’ll gladly do it again.”

“Ha! So you think…” the shape shifter goaded, arching up high. “But whether you fools remember me or not, I’ll take immense pleasure in shattering you two once and getting that journal once and for all!” With another roar, the creature bore down on both of them, morphing its upper half into a monster with a wide, toothy maw meant to devour them both. The Gems easily leapt out of the way, but before Garnet could go in for the first strike, Amethyst hastily intervened by coiling her whip around its mouth.

“You can just sit this one out, G!” the purple Gem called, pulling back in her whip and dragging the shape shifter towards her. “I got this one covered.”

“Amethyst, you’re not going to-” Garnet tried to refute, but Amethyst wasn’t hearing it. With a daring grin, she started using the shape shifter’s own element against it by turning herself into Purple Puma as she landed a solid blow to the creature’s face after pulling it towards her. The shifter screeched in pain, transforming into a bird and taking off in order to escape any further hits. As soon as it had put some distances between itself and her, the shifter returned to its true form, sending the purple Gem a hostile glare as she they started circling each other.

“Ah yes…” the shifter hissed coldly. “I remember you. You’re the little loudmouthed one who always thought your meager shapeshifting could outdo mine. It must really burn you up that even all these years later, I’m still far more superior at it than you’ll ever be.”

“That’s some pretty big talk for something that looks like a gross, oversized milk sack,” Amethyst retorted confidently. Of course, this comment easily set the shape shifter off as it lunged towards the purple Gem, turning into a large, long snake-like creature as it did so. Amethyst met this assault as squarely as she could, making her form as broad and bulky as she could in order to do so. But even as she tried her best to hold its snapping maw back, the shifter still managed to sink its teeth deep into her arm, eliciting a loud cry of pain from the purple Gem.

“Amethyst!” Garnet shouted, aptly concerned as she began to rush to her teammate’s rescue. Amethyst, however, would have none of that.

“I said stay out of this!” she yelled hotly, using her free arm to lash her whip out at one of the
nearby broken cryogenic chambers. With a labored shout, the purple Gem lifted the tube up and hurled it hard at her teammate, temporarily blocking her from the fight and allowing Amethyst to duke it out with the shape shifter solo.

“You should have let her stay,” the shifter taunted, drawing the claws it had formed for itself close to Amethyst’s gemstone. “You’re going to need someone to pick up all the broken pieces of that gem of yours once I’m through with you!”

The creature pushed hard at her once again, forcing the purple Gem up against the wall as her energy and altered arms began to waver. Still, she wasn’t about to back down now. Especially not with Garnet still watching the fight from the other side of the cryogenic tube. “Shut up!” Amethyst growled, unable to think of any witty comeback as she finally pushed the shifter away from her. Embodying all of her raw fury, the purple game shapeshifted into a large bull and charged at the creature, which was quick to morph into an ever larger, several-armed monster retaliation. As Amethyst madly charged at it, the shifter easily caught her by the horns and tossed her aside hard. The purple Gem returned to her usual appearance as brutally she crashed into a storage cabinet before falling to the ground, quite battered and beaten. Yet even so, she shakily tried to pick herself up, clutching her injured arm and weakly summoning another whip as the shape shifter steadily approached her.

“Persistent little thing, aren’t you?” it asked mockingly, its true form standing tall and largely uninjured over her. “No matter. I know something that’ll get you to stay down. Or rather someone…”

Amethyst let out a shocked gasp, her eyes growing wide with alarm as the shape shifter took on another new form, however this one was far from monstrous or even really intimidating. Instead, this form was one that was far from mistakable for the purple Gem, one that brought back far too many bittersweet memories.

“R-Rose…” Amethyst choked, her whip dissipating into thin air as she looked up to the shape shifter’s imitation of the pink Gem. And indeed, it was spot on, from Rose’s curly pink locks, to her lovely white gown, to her soft, graceful features. The only thing off about the shifter’s performance was the cold, sinister smirk on its face, something that would have been so uncharacteristic on the real Rose Quartz.

“What’s wrong, Amethyst?” the shifter asked, perfectly replicating the pink Gem’s gentle voice as well. “Aren’t you happy to see me?”

Amethyst took in a sharp breath, taking an anxious step back as she stared at this alarmingly accurate replication of her now-deceased leader. “I… You… you’re not—” she stammered, shaking her head all the while.

“Oh come now,” the shifter tried to rationalize with a more inviting smile. The false Rose Quartz held a calming hand out to the shaken purple Gem, its other hand held conspicuously behind its back. “I’m not going to hurt you… After all, I’m still your lovely, beloved leader, aren’t I?”

Amethyst was far too stunned by what was happened to even respond at this point, unable to take her eyes off of the imitation of Rose to see what the shifter was doing with its concealed arm. Garnet, however, did take notice of it, but even as she beat against the cryogenic tube’s glass in an attempt to catch the purple Gem’s attention, the shifter continued speaking. “Look at you, so small and innocent…” the creature remarked, still using Rose’s voice as it gently placed a hand under Amethyst’s chin. “You’re missing something, something more than just memories… But what is it?” It paused, mulling over its own question for a moment, before its lips curled into a sadistic smile. “Oh. I know.”
Before Amethyst could even realize what was happening, the shifter’s elongated arm suddenly coiled itself tightly around her, lifting her up and strangling her all the while, even despite her panicked struggling. “You’re missing her,” the creature whispered hauntingly, its voice shifting from Rose’s to its own. Tears has barely started to fill the purple Gem’s eyes, but they never had a chance to fall as the shifter suddenly tightened its grip around her body hard. Hard enough to send her already injured form right back into her gem for the third time today.

“Amethyst!” Garnet shouted with immense worry, her first finally flying through the seemingly impenetrable glass and granting her access back into the lab. Startled, the shifter spun around to face her, morphing back to its true form as it lunged for her with a feral hiss. The Gem leader paid the creature no mind however as she deftly vaulted over it, caring for nothing else than for claiming Amethyst’s fallen Gem, which she successfully managed to do. Tucking the purple gemstone under her arm, Garnet raced past the outraged shifter, knowing that their initial plan had failed. Which meant that the only option they had left was plan B.

The kids all heaved a shared sigh of relief as Garnet rushed into the tunnel they had been hiding in, even if they knew the shapeshifter wasn’t too far behind her. Still, Steven was quite concerned upon noticing that only one of his two present guardians had managed to return safely. “A-Amethyst?” he wondered apprehensively, glancing to the Gem leader. Garnet’s already intense expression darkened, but even so, she gently deposited the purple gemstone into her young ward’s hands. Steven let out a small whimper upon seeing Amethyst reduced to nothing but her gem once again, but this time, no tears came. “Is it weird I’m getting numb to this?” he asked with a disheartened frown.

Still, no one had any time to worry over the purple Gem again as the shape shifter’s fierce roar signaled its soon-coming arrival. “Guys, it’s coming!” Dipper warned anxiously as the shifter came into view. “Do it now!”

Soos and Wendy complied as they both began pulling on the nearby water valve in the hopes that it would release the water within the pipes running throughout the bunker. However, seeing as how the valve hadn’t been touched in decades, the rusted wheel wouldn’t so much as budge. “It’s not working, dude!” Soos cried fretfully, right as the shifter finally caught up to them.

Upon seeing the entire group all together in one place, the shifter didn’t hesitate to lash out, specifically at Dipper in a violent attempt to get the journal. The creature flung its long tongue out, somehow coiling around the journal, even though Dipper did his best to try and fight to keep possession of it. “Hey! Let go!” he shouted, still struggling to keep his quickly loosening grip on the book.

“You leave him alone!” Wendy shouted, rushing to Dipper’s rescue with her ax in hand. The cashier used the weapon to easily cleave through the shifter’s outstretched tongue, but even then, it was hardly finished. The creature quickly reformed its tongue at shot it out at Wendy this time, but instead of cutting it, she used it as a boost to jump on the shifter itself to launch a more direct offensive. She was more than ready to use her ax to land a finishing blow on the disgruntled shifter’s head, but mere seconds before she could, Soos and Garnet managed to finally turn the closed water valve. And as a result, the floodgates were quite literally opened.

With hardly any warning, a heavy stream of water suddenly burst from the nearby pipe. The initial flux of water hit the shape shifter and Wendy first, easily knocking them back into the tunnel as the shifter let out a high pitched cry all the while. It didn’t take long for everyone else to get caught up in the uncontrollable flow, sweeping them all off their feet and pushing them all down the tunnel like a rushing river would. In the abrupt chaos of it all, not only did Amethyst’s gem accidentally fly out of Steven’s grip, but Dipper lost the journal and Wendy collided hard with a rock, effectively
knocking her into semi-consciousness. Fortunately, the tunnel system had a surprisingly efficient drainage system, so the flood didn’t last too long before subsiding, leaving everyone soaked and scattered about throughout the tunnel.

With the water gone, it still took the group a good while to regather their bearings and regain lost air. Dipper was the first to fully do so, more out of surprise and worry than anything else as he noticed Wendy’s ax lying discarded on the ground in front of him, the cashier herself nowhere in sight. “Wendy!” he cried, cold fear filling him as he stumbled to his feet and grabbed the ax. The others didn’t notice as he ran off down the tunnel in an attempt to find her, but Steven did realize that another member of the group was missing upon pulling himself up to a sitting position.

“A-Amethyst?” the young Gem wondered nervously, looking around to see that the purple gemstone was gone. He looked to Garnet with apt concern as she put a comforting hand on his shoulder, and fortunately, the Gem leader remained as levelheaded as always, even despite her own worry.

“Her gem is this way,” Garnet stood, nodding in the opposite direction and prompting the others to follow her. “Let’s go.”

After their initial inspect of the nearby tunnels, the group decided on splitting up, with Mabel and Soos going one way and Steven and Garnet going another, in order to find the purple gem before the shape shifter could. The latter pair, despite the Gem leader’s guidance, were having an admittedly difficult time finding the purple Gem in the labyrinthine tunnels. Ironically though, it didn’t take too long for her to find them.

Of course, Amethyst did make her reappearance as dramatic as possible, with her shadow against the wall being the first thing that her teammates saw as she approached. However, seeing as how that looked nothing like her, Garnet made sure to place a protective hand on Steven’s shoulder in the event that the shape shifter was preparing to beset them instead. When the purple Gem did come into view however, both of them were quite surprised and bewildered by the newest form she had decided to take.

“Okay, you know I wasn’t feeling this at first…” Amethyst began with a grin as she awkwardly stumbled towards the pair. Her body was completely disproportionate, her left leg and right arm appearing normal while her other two appendages where unnaturally huge, muscular and bulky. Her hair was an unkempt mess, and it was clear that every lumbering, uneven step was a struggle for her, but even so, she came to stand before Garnet and Steven with clear pride in how she had made herself look. “But I think I might be coming around! Yo, Steven! My seems straight?”

The young Gem could only look at Amethyst with apt concern over her misshapen appearance as he clung onto Garnet’s leg rather fretfully. “Does that new form… hurt you?” he asked anxiously, hoping that this wasn’t the case.

The purple Gem jolted a bit upon hearing this, but she was quick to shrug it off. “No,” she scoffed before returning to her usual daring grin. “Hey Garnet, how’d you like to mix it up with this!?” she laughed, flexing her new muscles. “Just a little something I put together, ya know.”

“This form isn’t sustainable, Amethyst,” Garnet admonished, shaking her head in disapproval.

“But…” Amethyst blushed, her shame and anger finally reaching their boiling point as she let them both out. “You’re the one who said I needed to be stronger!” The purple Gem threw her massive fist down in fury while Garnet shielded Steven from the rubble that came flying up from the blow. “You know what?! Fine! I’ll take that dumb old shape shifter out myself! Then maybe you’ll finally see that I’m not weak!”
Before either Garnet or Steven could hope to talk her out of such a risky plan, Amethyst stormed off, punching any and all obstacles in her path away as she began her aggressive search for the creature. “Amethyst, wait!” the young Gem called after her worriedly, but as he began to run after her, Garnet quickly took the lead.

“Stay behind me,” the Gem leader cautioned firmly, charging after the purple Gem in the hopes of stopping her from doing something reckless. Steven staunchly did as she said, even if he was unable to shake the fear that Amethyst might not get off as easy as merely being poofed for a fourth time.

At the same time, Dipper continued his search, hurrying down the narrow tunnel with Wendy’s ax still tightly held in his grip as he looked for any sign of her. When he did manage to finally spot her though, he couldn’t hold back a gasp of shock and panic. The cashier lay, seemingly unconscious, at the foot of a short drop in the tunnel, her clothes still soaking wet, her hair disheveled and her entire form askew.

“Wendy!” Dipper shouted, not hesitating to hurry down to her, his heart pounding with adrenaline and worry and dead and hope all at once. “No, no, no!” he muttered fretfully upon reaching her, kneeling down beside her to check over her various cuts and bruises. Fortunately, none of them looked to be too bad, but even so, Dipper knew he could hardly use that as a gauge to tell if the cashier was really alright or not, especially given the fact that she was still completely listless. “Can you hear me!? Please be ok!” he practically begged, already starting to tear up with the very thought that Wendy might not wake up after all.

Desperate for any signs of consciousness, Dipper lightly shook her, only for her head to loll to the side, her breathing shallow to the point of it barely being present at all. He let out a shaky breath as he gently put her down, his warm, grief-fueled tears finally falling. “W-Wendy… I… you can’t be…” he trailed off, shaking his head in disbelief at the idea that his longtime crush could so easily be gone forever. “T-this is all my fault! If I had just told you when we were in the closet, we wouldn’t be in this mess! But I was too scared and now you could be hurt or worse, and I never even got to tell you that I’m like—in love with you Wendy!” The confession came out far easier this time than any other time Dipper had practiced it before, but given the terrible circumstances, he was hardly happy about that fact. Instead, all he could feel was guilt and despair as he let out a small, tight sob, grimly coming to terms with the fact that the unthinkable had happened.

Except it hadn’t.

“Uh… Dipper?” Wendy spoke up with an uncomfortable frown as she stood a few feet behind him, having just arrived with the journal in hand.

Dipper gasped in complete shock as he leapt to his feet and spun around to face her, simultaneously relieved, confused, and embarrassed upon seeing the cashier safe and sound. “W-wha—Wendy?! Wait, then who’s—”

Before he even finished asking the question, the other Wendy, clearly the shape shifter in disguise, quickly picked itself up off the ground and growled ferally. The creature roughly pushed Dipper aside as it instead launched itself at the real Wendy, outraged over how she had foiled its nearly perfect plan. The moment the two cashiers collided, it became effectively impossible to tell the two of them apart, especially as they began intensely grappling with each other for the coveted book.

“Give me back that journal!” one of the Wendys shouted, pulling the book hard but still not prying
“Never!” the other cashier protested, even as she was pushed down to the ground, still clinging onto the book tightly. “Get off of me!” she yelled, kicking her double hard in the stomach. Neither of them relinquished their hold on the journal as they stood once more, effectively playing a match of tug of war with it, one that had no apparent winner. As this duel continued on, all Dipper could really do was stand on the sidelines and watch with apt fear and confusion as the two Wendys, completely indistinguishable from each other, fiercely scuffle with each other. Still, he did have enough wits about him to pick up the fallen ax from nearby, knowing that it would easily be his best bet and putting this brawl to an end and stopping the shape shifter dead in its tracks.

If he could only tell which one of them actually was the shapeshifter, that is.

“Give it back!” one Wendy shouted aggressively.

“You give it back!” the other Wendy retorted, equally as incensed.

“It belongs to Dipper!”

“Yeah it does! Hit her with the ax!” one of the cashiers yelled to Dipper himself quite intensely.

“Don’t listen to her, Dipper!”

“She’s the shape shifter!”

“No, she is!”

“Uh… I… um…” Dipper stammered nervously, clutching the ax tightly as he looked between the two Wendys with complete uncertainty. “I-I don’t know who’s who! Give me a sign or something!”

Both of them proceeded to comply, all while still grappling for the journal. One sent him an almost flirtatious smile and wink, but the other one merely gave him a cold, serious expression as she zipped her lips and threw away the key. And for Dipper, that was more than enough to cue him in on which Wendy was the real one, and which one was the fake.

With bold confidence in his decision, Dipper flung the ax at the imposter, watching with relieved satisfaction as the shape shifter roared in pain and reverted back to its true form. Fortunately enough, they were all quite close to one of the few still working cryogenic chambers, and even more serendipitous was the fact that Steven and Garnet just so happened to run into the room at that exact moment.

“You guys!” the young Gem gasped in alarm, especially upon seeing the outraged shape shifter rip the ax out of its injured stomach. Garnet didn’t hesitate to summon her gauntlets, their search for Amethyst momentarily forgotten in the heat of this intense moment.

“Quick! Push him in!” Dipper exclaimed, pointing to the ready cryogenic chamber. They all hurried to do so, yet before any of them could even strike the shape shifter, someone else did instead.

“Not so fast, you shifty creep!” Amethyst yelled as she dropped down from above onto the creature. Everyone gasped in surprise as she used her thicker arm to put it into a tight headlock, holding it steady even as it started struggling against her. “Ha! Not so much fun being all tied up, is it?”
“Amethyst, what are you doing!?” Dipper asked in apt alarm.

“Oh, you know,” the purple Gem grunted as casually as she could, even as the shifter angrily roared over her. “Just handling your monster problem for ya! After all, the only shape shifter we need around here is me!”

“Amethyst, let it go!” Garnet ordered hotly, especially as the shifter formed a large hand to grab Amethyst by the head with. “Now!”

“No!” the purple Gem shouted back, clearly struggling to maintain her slipping advantage as the shifter began to pull her down. “You wanted me to be stronger and I’m doing it! I’m being what you want!”

“I don’t want this!” the Gem leader tried to appeal, concern leaking into her usually authoritative tone.

Amethyst let out a strained shout as she tried to shove the shifter towards the cryogenic chamber, only to be shoved that way herself. “Then what do you want?!” she asked Garnet almost desperately. “Just tell me and I’ll do that!”

“I can’t tell you, Amethyst!” Garnet exclaimed amidst the purple Gem’s scream of pain as the shifter finally thrust her to the ground hard. “You have to figure this out for yourself!”

“She can’t!” Steven suddenly gasped in stark realization as the others all turned to him in confusion. “She doesn’t want to think about herself!”

A look of complete shock washed over Amethyst’s face upon hearing this, her struggling against the creature coming to a halt as she looked to her teammates with wide eyes. “What?” was all she had time to say before the shape shifter pushed down on her hard, resulting in her poofing once again.

The shape shifter merely laughed coldly over this victory as it picked the purple gemstone up, holding it up for the rest of the startled group to see. “What a weak, pathetic fool!” it mocked triumphantly. “You all are for thinking you ever defeat a master of forms like me! Now, prepare to meet the same-” The creature was abruptly cut off as Garnet landed a brutal punch to its face, causing it to not only stumble back with a cry of pain, but also forcing it to release Amethyst’s gem. Fortunately, Steven was quick to safely claim it before it could hit the ground and shatter.

“Good catch,” Garnet quickly congratulated her young ward before turning to Dipper and Wendy. “Now’s the time!”

The pair quickly complied, charging for the shifter along with Steven and Garnet as they all worked together to shove the stunned, yet still struggling shape shifter fully into the cryogenic tube. The creature had no chance to overpower them and escape, however, as it found itself abrupty locked inside of the tube. While the others had no idea how such a fortuitous event was unfolding, Mabel and Soos simply high fived as they watched everything unfold from the surveillance room. Mabel was the one to fully seal the deal, as well as the shape shifter’s fate, by pressing the tube’s activation button with a wide, victorious smile.

“Frozen!” she proclaimed brightly.

“Boosh!” Soos exclaimed as the two of them fist-bumped over their success before hurrying to join the others in the lab.

As the cryogenic chamber began to freeze over, the shape shifter did everything in its power to
escape its incoming icy fate. “No! Let me out” it cried desperately, beating against the heavy glass as it morphed into several forms, from a rock monster, to a flame beast, to its ‘author’ guise, to even Rose Quartz, before finally going back to its true form just as the glass misted over with ice, covering it entirely.

A beat of unsteady silence filled the lab in the midst of the shape shifter’s apparent defeat. For a long moment, everyone continued staring at the cryogenic chamber, fearing that the shifter might somehow break out of it, but thankfully it never did. “Is… is it over?” Steven asked tentatively, breaking the silence.

“It would seem so,” Garnet responded, adjusting her shades as her gauntlets dissipated.

“Let’s get out of here, dudes,” Soos concluded, already turning to head back the way they came as the others followed.

Yet, before any of them could even leave the room, the shape shifter’s low, ominous laughter reached them from the cryogenic chamber. Surprised to see that it was even still cognizant, the group turned around with a collective gasp to see the creature press up against the glass one more time. “And so once again, you Crystal Gems think you’ve bested me…” it began speaking to Garnet in particular, its tone as cold as the ice encompassing it. “That ‘future vision’ of yours may grant you glimpses of what’s to come, but it can’t fill in the gaps of your past, can it? He must have done something to you three, something that made you forget about all of this… Still, I can’t help but wonder if Rose herself ever had those gaps at all…”

Garnet offered no response to this mysterious, brazen taunt, but even so, her hands were clenched into tight fists at her sides as she sent the shifter a fierce scowl. But even so, the creature wasn’t finished quite yet.

“And as for you, Dipper…” the shifter said, sending the boy a piercing glare. “You think you’re so clever, don’t you? But you have no idea what you’re up against. You’ll never find the author. If you keep digging, you’ll meet a fate worse than you can imagine. And this will be the last form you’ll ever take!” Just as the cryogenic tube finally froze over entirely, the shifter turned into Dipper, letting out a panicked scream that would be forever preserved as it at last frozen completely. This scare tactic, as underhanded as it was, was more than enough to aptly frighten the real Dipper, who could only stare at his now-frozen double with a look of stunned horror.

“Heh,” Soos suddenly chuckled, trying to make the rather dark mood lighter. “Good luck sleeping tonight!”

Needless to say that after such a traumatic experience, no one was too keen on staying in the bunker any longer. And so the group emerged from it in relative solemn silence, letting the tree that led to it return to its normal, inconspicuous appearance. Apparently, they had been in the bunker all day, as the sun had set and dusk had fallen, painting the forest a warm shade of violet as fireflies gently flittered about. It was a comforting sight for everyone, especially when compared to the dark, dank, twisted corridors of the bunker.

“Dude, I think I’m kind of adventured out for a little while,” Soos spoke up once everyone was back on level ground. “My face hurts from doing this all day,” he pulled a shocked, screaming face, one that Mabel couldn’t help but chuckle at upon seeing.

“Yeah, but you gotta admit we’re all total heroes!” she remarked with a satisfied smirk.
“Hey, who wants to get some heroes breakfast, huh?” Soos asked with a grin as he tWild Mabel’s hair.

“Syrup on cereal!” she cheered, hoping up onto the handyman’s shoulders.

“Mabel, you’re a visionary!” he exclaimed, impressed as he began to tote her away. “Steven, aren’t you coming?”

“In a minute!” Steven called halfheartedly, sighing remorsefully as he looked down at Amethyst’s gemstone in his hands.

“Don’t worry.” Garnet encouraged, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Like I said before, she’ll be fine.”

“B-but she’s usually back by now!” the young Gem protested fretfully. “Do you think something’s wrong?”

Garnet paused, looking to the gemstone herself as her smile faded. “I…” she began, her tone almost uncertain, though she quickly recovered from it. “No. Nothing’s wrong. She’ll be back soon, I promise.”

Steven finally smiled upon hearing this, fully believing this promise as Garnet began to lead him back towards the temple. As they left, Dipper was quick to realize that him and Wendy were the only ones left around, which meant that now was likely as good a time as any to address his awkward confession. “Look, Wendy,” he began, averting eye contact with the cashier. “About earlier… In the heat of the moment, I might have said some… dumb things. So can we just pretend that none of that ever happened? Please?”

“Dude, dude, its ok,” Wendy reassured, putting a hand on his shoulder as she knelt down to his level. “I always kinda knew…”

“Wait, you did?!” Dipper asked, his eyes wide with complete surprise.

The cashier let out a small, good-natured chuckle at this as she rose to stand. “Yeah, man. You think I can’t hear that stuff you’re constantly whispering under your breath?”

“Oh, man…” Dipper groaned in absolute embarrassment, face palming as he plopped down onto a nearby log.

“Listen, Dipper,” Wendy said as she sat down beside him. “I’m like, super flattered, but… I’m too old for you. I mean, you know that, right?”

“Ugh…” Dipper sighed, still not meeting the cashier’s gaze. “Mabel, Steven, and even Garnet said that confessing would make me feel better.”

“Well, how do you feel?”

“Anxious… and scared… and kinda itchy.”

“Don’t be itchy, man,” Wendy laughed warmly. “Let me tell you something. This summer was super boring before you showed up. I have more fun with you than practically anyone else. And if you ever stopped being my friend, I would, like, throw myself into the Bottomless Pit!”

This finally elicited a small laugh from Dipper, even if it was still only a halfhearted one. “So… things won’t be too awkward now?”
“I just wrestled myself, dude,” the cashier remarked with a smirk. “That was awkward. If you can handle that monster, you can handle a little awkwardness.”

“So, friends?” Dipper asked, hopeful.

“Yeah, dude!” Wendy instantly agreed, playfully shoving him off the log. “Friends.”

Both of them shared another laugh as Wendy stood and pulled Dipper back onto the log before she began to take her leave. “Oh, and hey, Dipper?” she turned back to him once more as she reached her bike. “See you for movie night later. Your place this time, ok?”

Dipper only nodded as he watched the cashier ride off, a bittersweet smile on his face that quickly faded once she was out of view. A small part of him had always figured that things would turn out like this if he ever did end up revealing his feelings to Wendy, and yet he had still dared to hope that things could have been different. Still, now that everything was out in the open, he found himself somehow strangely accepting it. After all, Wendy had promised that nothing would really change between them, something that was certainly a relief. But no matter how things would be in the future, Dipper knew that another part of him would always still always have feelings for Wendy, as unrequited as they were. And while it would take some time to heal from her gentle rejection, at least he could take solace in the fact that their close, playful friendship would remain. And that would certainly be good enough for him.

Still, Dipper didn’t get too much time to mull over everything that had happened, especially as Mabel popped out of the bushes right behind him. “Sooo… how’d it go?” she asked, overwhelmed with curiosity.

“How—what did you hear?!” Dipper asked, surprised at his sister’s eavesdropping.

“Everything, all the time,” Mabel quipped coyly.

“Yeah, we totally heard everything.” Steven admitted with a grin as he emerged from the bushes himself.

“I’m not here!” Soos called, still hiding in the shrubbery.

“But I am,” Garnet said casually as she revealed herself, stepping out from behind a tree.

While Dipper normally would have questioned the fact that all of them had been spying on him, he wasn’t exactly up for it as he instead looked down with a heavy sigh. “You guys, how can everything be so amazing and so terrible at the same time?”

“Mm, I’m sorry for being so pushy, Dipper,” Mabel said with sincere sympathy and guilt.

“Same here,” Steven concurred, still holding onto Amethyst’s gem with his free hand. “But hey, look at the bright side! At least you don’t have to feel awkward around Wendy anymore!”

“Somehow I kind of doubt that…” Dipper remarked with a frown.

“Dipper, there’s no reason for you to feel ashamed over what happened,” Garnet spoke up with a small, reassuring smile. “It’s true that sometimes these things simply just… don’t work out. But that doesn’t mean that this was your only chance at finding love. That special someone is out there for you, trust me.”

“You wouldn’t happen to know who that special someone is, would you?” Dipper asked glumly, hoping that the Gem leader could give him some kind of absolute reassurance over the matter.
But instead, Garnet softly chuckled, adjusting her shades and shaking her head. “Even if I did tell you, you’d never believe me.”

“Aw, cheer up, bro-bro!” Mabel encouraged, wrapping an arm around her brother’s shoulder. “Maybe that special someone is on the list of potential rebound crushes I’m making for you!”

“Thanks, Mabel,” Dipper chuckled a bit at this, though the moment of levity was cut off as Soos sat on the other end of the log, his sudden weight tossing the kids up a bit.

“I’m still bummed that we’re no closer to finding the author guy,” the handyman sighed in disappointment. “Oh well. At least I got his sciencey coat and briefcase.” Soos held said metal ‘briefcase’ up, only for it to flop open and reveal a dusty screen and computer keys inside, as well as a label that read “Property of F”. “Whoa! What the-?”

“Soos, that’s not a briefcase!” Dipper exclaimed in apt surprise. “That’s a laptop!”

“And a really busted up one too,” Mabel added, noting how ragged and rundown the tech was.

“Wow! It’s so old and cool!” Steven quipped with a wide smile. “I wish Amethyst were here to see this! Well, technically she is here…” he paused, casting a brief glance down at her gemstone. “But still.”

“I bet I could get this thing fixed up in a few days,” Soos mused, looking over the laptop. “It’s gonna take a lot of duct tape…”

“This could be our next clue!” Dipper grinned with newfound excitement over this find. “But… will it actually tell us anything?” he asked, turning to Garnet for answers once again.

“Hm… it’s definitely worth looking into…” the Gem leader mused. “I do recommend being careful in how you go about it, but still. I feel like there’s a good chance that it’ll be able to get at least a few answers out of it… But as always, its all about looking in the right places…”

Since everyone was rather tired from the eventful day they had, they all decided to spend the evening relaxing at the Mystery Shack, Steven and the Gems included. Pearl was already there, having just finished fixing the van with Greg and Stan, and needless to say she had a multitude of questions, especially upon seeing Amethyst’s solitary gemstone. But all the same, the kids took the much needed opportunity to relax, as Dipper and Wendy got their movie night started, having put pretty much everything they had discussed earlier behind them. Soos and Mabel had made their syrup on cereal concoction and were enjoying it as they played cards with Stan. Steven was the only one who didn’t really feel like joining in on any of the fun as he instead remained stationary near Amethyst’s gem, keeping a close eye on for any sign that the purple Gem was coming back. And as he kept up this vigil, Garnet and Pearl discussed everything that had happened in the bunker quietly enough that no one managed to overhear their anxious whispers.

“So that shape shifting creature claimed to know us?” the white Gem asked worriedly. “And Rose?”

“Yes,” the Gem leader nodded tersely. “It said we knew the author too.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense,” Pearl shook her head. “Until a few weeks ago, we had never even seen that journal before! How in the world would we have-”
“Something isn’t adding up,” Garnet interrupted, her arms crossed as she glanced down. “Everything down in that bunker felt so… familiar… I don’t know how to explain it. But it was the same feeling I got when I saw that journal for the first time.”

“S-so… what should we do?” the white Gem asked, wringing her hands apprehensively.

The Gem leader didn’t answer right away, but when she did, all traces of uncertainty in her tone were replaced with resolve instead. “We keep looking for the truth. And we don’t stop until we find it.”

Pearl’s expression was still awash with worry upon hearing this, but even so she nodded, knowing not to question her leader’s decision. And so, instead of addressing the matter any further, she decided to move onto another pressing issue. “So…” she said, walking over to Steven and placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. “How long has it been?”

“Four hours…” the young Gem replied, his voice a concerned mutter as he lay sprawled on the floor.

“Four hours?!” the white Gem exclaimed in genuine surprise. “She’s never taken so long! What do you think she’s doing in there?”

“I’m not sure,” Garnet answered truthfully. “I was too hard on her…”

“So what happened to her this time anyway?” Stan spoke up with dry curiosity. “She didn’t throw herself off another cliff or anything again, did she?”

Everyone who had been to the bunker exchanged a stark glance at this, all of them remembering their vow to keep what happened down there a secret. And while Garnet had discreetly detailed some of the earlier events to Pearl, she calmly made sure not to do the same for Stan. “She got hit playing chicken with a train.”

“Again?” the conman cracked up a bit upon hearing this succinct lie. “That’s like, the third time she bit it to a train, isn’t it? Sheesh, Amethyst will never learn, will she?”

“Actually…” the Gem leader smiled as she turned towards Amethyst’s gem as it finally started to glow. “I think she will this time…”

“Oh! Oh! She’s back!” Steven cried excitedly, backing up to give the purple gemstone some space as it lifted up into the air. “Alright, everyone, be supportive.”

The others all nodded in agreement as they watched the silhouette of light form around the stone, shifting and remolding at various intervals before finally remaining fixed. As the light faded, Amethyst appeared, not with bulging muscles or an imitation of Pearl or even legs for arms, but as her natural self once more. But even then, not without a few modest changes. The colors of the purple Gem’s top and leggings had reversed, her tank top now nearly black and lacking her usual fallen shoulder strap, while her leggings were lavender with neat black stars cut into the knees. But aside from those alterations, Amethyst was largely the same, a fact that she seemed quite comfortable with as she landed and casually stretched out.

“What?” she asked, noticing the surprised looks everyone was giving her.

“Aw, you barely changed!” Steven pouted in disappointment.

“Steven!” Pearl quickly chastised for his insensitivity.
“Well I think you look great, Amethyst!” Mabel complimented with an excited smile. “Seriously, black is so your color!”

“Yeah, lookin’ good,” Stan remarked with a wry smirk. “But you better still be able to pull off Revenge Trips in that new getup of yours.”

“Heh, you know it,” Amethyst chuckled, though her smile quickly faded as Garnet stepped up to her. A moment of awkward silence passed between the two Gems, the purple one glancing away from her leader bashfully, especially in light of what had transpired between them in the bunker. But in the end, Garnet was the first one to break it with a sincere, gentle smile.

“It’s perfect,” she said with full approval in her tone.

“Eh, whatevs,” Amethyst shrugged, suppressing a light blush as she rubbed her arm. “It’s just what feels right.”

“That’s why it’s perfect,” Garnet nodded, finally getting the purple Gem to blush fully. Regardless of what had happened underground or anything that the sinister shape shifter might have said, the Gem leader was glad to see that Amethyst finally realized that perhaps she didn’t have to be the biggest or the best. She only had to be herself. And with this subtle new form, that was a lesson she had fully embraced.

“It’s a marked improvement!” Pearl remarked, clapping her hands together with a delighted smile. “You finally fixed that shoulder strap that’s always bugged me!”

“Well done, Amethyst!” Pearl did the same, gently joining the embrace right before Garnet did.

“Oh boy! Group hug!” Mabel exclaimed excitedly, hopping out of her chair and pulling Stan out of his. “Come on, Grunkle Stan!”

“Oh no! Group hug!” the conman tried to protest, but he was no match for his niece’s unbridled enthusiasm.

Likewise, Soos, Dipper, and Wendy gladly joined the large collective embrace, all of which was centered around the very flustered purple Gem. “Guys, cut it out!” Amethyst exclaimed, annoyed. “Do we really have to do this?!”

“Yes,” Steven solidly affirmed, hugging the purple Gem just a bit tighter. “It’s hug time!

“Ugh, this is so dumb!” Amethyst groaned, rolling her eyes. Still, even she couldn’t hold back an infectious, satisfied smile as she soaked all of the affection going around in. Hugs weren’t exactly a rare thing for either the Gems or the Pines, but still, both groups joining together for such a thing was an amazing feat that even Amethyst, despite all of her pretend protests against it, could say no to.
Chapter 35, Part 1: Alone Together

Chapter Summary

In which Steven and Connie fuse into a gorgeous, anxious dance machine

Chapter Notes

Ah so before we get into this one, allow me to explain a little something about chapter 35. As you might have noticed, its actually split into 3 parts (or it will be once its finished). This is what I like to call a "mini-arc", since its a miniature arc within the larger arc. And this particular mini arc is entitled Fusion Fiascos, since all three of these chapters are related not chronologically, but by a similar theme instead (fusion, of course!). So with this little explanation (that I hope made sense) out of the way, let's get started! Enjoy my take on Alone Together!

Chapter 35: Fusion Fiascos

Part 1: Alone Together

EXIC LC YLQE,
XII LC KLKB,
QEFP BUMBOFBKZB
EXP LKIV YBDRK

“A five-six-seven eight!” Pearl snapped her fingers in time to the beat of the music, prompting Steven and Amethyst to begin practicing. The Gems had recently reached a stark realization in the midst of their first harrowing encounter with Peridot and their ominous ordeal in the bunker that they all might need to ready to take on a large potential threat, no matter what form that threat might take. Which was why they had decided that it was time to progress their young ward’s training further and faster and start training Steven in the ins-and-outs of one of the most unique abilities known to Gem-kind: fusion.

And seeing as how most fusions began with dancing, that’s where the Gems decided to start with Steven. Amethyst was first up for showing the young Gem the ropes as she guided him through a very basic moveset while Pearl and Garnet supervised. “Synchronize!” the white Gem reminded, still snapping along with the music. The purple Gem tried doing just that as she attempted to pick Steven up, only to end up haphazardly dropping him to the ground, much to their shared amusement. “Be serious,” Pearl huffed, rolling her eyes as the pair laughed over her. Still, they did sober up a bit and try again, with Amethyst taking up the lead again as she successfully lifted Steven high above her head, only to elicit another burst of laughter from them both.

Frustrated by their insincerity, Pearl intervened and decided to take charge using a demonstration and Garnet’s assistance. “Pay attention now, Steven,” the white Gem instructed firmly as the young Gem earnestly watched on. Gasping each others’ hands, Garnet and Pearl launched into an elegant waltz, complete with a spin and pierrotite from the white Gem. The dance gradually
became more complex, with Garnet lifting Pearl and swaying her from side to side before gently pushing her against the wall. The Gem leader’s shadow hovered over the white Gem’s smaller frame, a light blue blush filing her cheeks as Garnet kept her hands pressed against the wall near her head. “See?” Pearl glanced over at Steven. The young Gem, while quite impressed and intimidated by such advanced moves, nodded with determined resolve to try it for himself.

Of course, that attempt was a less than stellar one, despite Steven’s best efforts. Unfortunately, he was a bit too short to match up with the much taller white Gem whilst trying to copy Garnet’s moves. The Gem leader did her best to help by giving him a bit of a boost, but the young Gem still couldn’t quite get a handle on the complicated dance, despite his best efforts.

Amethyst soon took over again, her smaller stature making it a bit easier for Steven to keep up with her. And for the most part, the young Gem was able to follow along with her simple hand gestures, though she completely lost him upon fluidly swiveling her hips, something that he wasn’t quite flexible enough to do. Even so, Steven took after Garnet’s moveset next, trying to keep a good pace with her as she rapidly tossed her arms about in perfect syncopation. And while he quickly fell behind her, he still replicated her solid finishing pose nonetheless, even if he was quite bewildered at her apparent skill. Pearl took another crack at things after this, preparing to guide Steven through a basic ballet set, only to end up tripping over him, resulting in the young Gem falling flatly to the ground, much to the white Gem’s concern.

And so the rest of the practice session continued in much of a similar way, with plenty of missteps and faltering on Steven’s part, but even so the Gems remained very patient in teaching him all that they could. Yet for every move they tried to show him, the young Gem always ended up being just a beat or so off, though he never threw in the towel, despite how tired he was starting to get. Still, after seeing no viable signs of fusion and after Steven hit the ground hard for the tenth time in a row, the Gems unanimously decided that it was time to call it quits for the night.

“I don’t get it,” Steven frowned in disappointment as everyone congregated in the kitchen to catch a much-needed breather. “I thought I almost had it… What could I be doing wrong?”

“Don’t worry, Steven,” Pearl reassured. “Nobody expects you to be able to perform fusion right away.”

“Yeah!” Amethyst agreed, hopping up onto the counter. “It’s really hard, even for us!”

“Not for me,” Garnet remarked coolly, leaning against the fridge.

“We’ll keep working on the dance for now, and who knows? Maybe in a few years…” Pearl trailed off, briefly pausing with a thoughtful frown. “Hm… Though I wonder if Steven’s body is even capable of fusion. Fusion merges the physical forms of Gems, but Steven’s half human. He’s organic.”

“Organic?” Steven cut in, confused and somewhat worried at what the white Gem was implying. Namely the possibility that he might never be able to accomplish fusion like the other Gems could.

“Aw, come on,” Amethyst scoffed Pearl’s concerns off. “This is Steven we’re talking about here! Who knows what’s gonna happen?!?” The purple Gem attempted to lighten the mood with a bold an hearty laugh, though no one joined in as Garnet stepped up alongside Steven, her arms crossed and her manner as stoic as ever.

“Well, I think Steven can do it,” she said with complete confidence, looking over to the young Gem. Steven met her gaze with slight apprehension, rather uncertain about his potential for fusing himself. After all, the Gems had years upon years of practice fusing with each other to form
completely new Gems entirely, from the swift and deft Opal, to the strong and sturdy Sugilite, to the massive and imposing Alexandrite. Considering how amazing and awe-inspiring each of those fusions were, the young Gem wasn’t sure if any fusion he was a part of could even compare if he could actually fuse at all. And if he really couldn’t…

Steven was quick to push such a thought out of his mind. Of course he could fuse. Even if he was half human, he was still a Gem nonetheless and that meant that fusion was a possibility for him just as much as any other Gem ability was. Certainly, with enough time and practice, he would be fusing with his fellow Gems in no time.

Right?

Since Steven was still rather worried about the prospects of fusion, the Gems encouraged him to take his mind off of it for now, knowing that there would be time to work on formulating a fusion dance for him later. So instead, they suggested that he go out and enjoy the rest of his evening, especially since it was particularly pleasant and picturesque outside. Steven took them up on this suggestion, calling up Connie, Dipper, and Mabel so they could all hang out and relax together in the crisp warmth of the evening. The kids had settled in a serene open clearing not too far away from the temple, one that was peacefully illuminated by both the fading glow of twilight and the fireflies lazily meandering about. And while Steven was supposed to be using this time to forget about his fusing woes, he couldn’t help but bring them up to the others, seeking solace and solidarity more than anything else.

“And we’ve been at it all day, but so far I really don’t have anything to show for it,” the young Gem confessed with a fretful sigh. “Pearl thinks I might not be able to do it at all because I’m ‘organic’, whatever that means, but Garnet said she thinks I can do it. But to be honest, I’m not so sure…”

“Aw, don’t sell yourself short, Steven!” Mabel reassured brightly. “You said the same thing about your healing powers and look at you now! You’re the spitting image of a magical healer!”

“Heh, good one,” Steven chuckled half-heartedly while Dipper and Connie merely rolled their eyes at the pun. “Thanks, Mabel.”

“I don’t get what dancing has to do with fusion in the first place,” Dipper remarked somewhat skeptically. “I mean, how does it even work? Do each of the Gems use the same dance no matter who they’re fusing with, or is it different every time? How do they even know if they’re doing it right? Is it like a feeling or is it something else?”

“I wish I knew…” Steven pouted. “Because whatever it is, I don’t have it…”

“Can’t you just get the Gems to write out the steps?” Connie suggested with a small smile. “That’s bound to make it a little easier to understand, right?”

“No… I don’t think it’s just about the dancing,” the young Gem theorized, his expression serious as he glanced down. “When they fuse, they glow and kind of… phase into each other. I don’t know if I can even do that…”

“Well maybe all that stuff happens after you get the dancing part down,” Mabel purposed with a growing grin. “And until then, you can always practice your dancing skills with us! Right, guys?”

Dipper and Connie exchanged a rather uncertain glance at this, neither of them too keen on the
idea. “Uh… I don’t know about all that…” Dipper said diffidently.

“M-me either…” Connie agreed, glancing away anxiously.

“…Ok…” Mabel briefly frowned before turning back to Steven. “Well, you can always practice your dancing skills with me. In fact… I think it’s time for a… random dance party for no reason!”

Steven let out a much-needed laugh at this, his spirits lightened just a bit even if his worries over fusion still had yet to be resolved. “Ok, let me just—whoa!” The young Gem had no time to even stand for himself before Mabel grabbed him by the arm and pulled him up herself. The pair had already dissolved into a hopeless round of giggles even as they began to dance, even if said “dance” only really consisted of them spinning around in wild, uncalculated circles together. Dipper and Connie couldn’t help but laugh along with them as they watched their usual antics, especially as Steven and Mabel accidentally tripped over each other and ended up falling down in tandem, still breathlessly chuckling all the while.

“You know, I’m not sure how this will actually help me learn how to fuse,” Steven spoke up, still smirking brightly as him and Mabel picked themselves up off the ground. “But it sure is fun!”

“Yeah it is!” Mabel heartily agreed. “Hey, you guys!” she called to Dipper and Connie. “Join the dance party! It’s always more fun with more people, trust me!”

“Um, I think I’m fine letting you guys have all the-” Dipper was abruptly cut off as Mabel suddenly pulled him to his feet. “M-Mabel!” he attempted to protest, though he was laughing nonetheless as Mabel spun him around just like she had done with Steven.

“Come on, bro-bro,” she grinned wryly as they haphazardly “danced” around the clearing. “You gotta learn another dance besides the Lamby Lamby Dance eventually.”

“Hey!” Dipper’s smile quickly turned into an annoyed scowl upon hearing this teasing remark. “I know other dances besides the-” Mabel cut him off once more by suddenly spinning him out, resulting in him lightly crashing into a nearby tree, something that brought a laugh out of both twins.

Steven also chuckled upon seeing this, and his warm smile remained as he turned towards Connie, who was still sitting on the ground nearby, smirking lightly herself. “Don’t you wanna dance too, Connie?” the young Gem asked her patiently.

“O-oh,” Connie blinked, taken aback upon glancing up at Steven with surprise. “Well… well, it’s just… I… I’ve never really danced in front of anyone before…”

“Really?” Steven asked, taking a seat in front of her, even as the twins continued to playfully dance several feet away.

“Yeah…” Connie admitted, glancing away bashfully. “There was a dance at my school, and I was really excited about it but… I just couldn’t bring myself to go.” She let out a sigh as she hung her head and closed her eyes, softly muttering her next statement. “I just couldn’t stop thinking about everyone staring at me…”

Steven bit his lip upon hearing this, his own concerns over fusion fading away as his worry instead shifted completely towards Connie. And as usual, he couldn’t resist the urge to help her feel better. “Well… no one’s staring right now…”

Connie looked up upon hearing this, finding the young Gem’s claim to only be partially true, for while Dipper and Mabel were still preoccupied, Steven was intently looking to her with almost a
pleading expression. “Um... you are.”

“Oh yeah...” the young Gem blushed a bit as he looked away. “One sec.” Steven reached into his pocket and pulled his phone out and looked through it briefly before finding what he was looking for. As he set the phone down in the nearby grass, a light, upbeat, yet relaxed pop melody began to play from it.

“Woo! Finally, some jams to dance to!” Mabel cheered from across the clearing, already twirling to the beat and dragging Dipper along with her.

Steven and Connie shared a laugh over her enthusiasm before the young Gem got up from the ground and backed up a few paces, covering his eyes as he did so. “So what I was trying to say was...” he smiled, still blushing softly as he extended his hand out to Connie. “Come dance with me.”

For a moment, Connie could only look to Steven with apt surprise, still quite hesitant and shy over her own dancing abilities, or lack thereof. Still, she couldn’t very well say no, especially upon looking to the hand he was still eagerly holding out to her. Which was why she took in a deep breath and, pushing her anxiety away for just a moment, she took it.

Of course, Steven quickly broke his promise not to look upon peeking out from behind his arm, smiling happily as he uncovered his eyes completely and looked to Connie. She met his grin with a soft, sweet one of her own, a light blush filling her cheeks as she allowed him to take the lead, pulling her in closer. And without any further hesitation about it, the two began to dance.

Their dance was much slower and more than the rowdy and silly moveset the twins were still having fun with, but even so that was perfectly fine for Steven and Connie. They kept their eyes on their feet as they bounced back and forth to the beat of the song, though things started to get a little looser as Steven suddenly spun Connie. They broke apart at this, the young Gem laughing mirthfully as he backed up and swayed to the music by himself. Connie did the same thing, chuckling brightly as she twirled about, her long hair spinning about with her. Steven blushed once more upon seeing this, his smile widening at just how much fun Connie was having by cutting loose and letting herself be free.

From there, the escalating elation between the pair could no longer be contained. They both simultaneously burst out laughing as they began to run about the clearing, hardly even dancing at all anymore as they skipped and jumped, completely carefree. Inspired by this freedom, Mabel and Dipper cut off their own dance and readily joined them. Soon enough, all four of the kids were cheerfully running circles around each other as the music rang out just underneath their unanimous chuckles as brightly as ever. And while the clearing itself was rather dark due to the waning light of dusk and the fleeing fireflies, it felt as though there was enough light from the sheer joy and exhilaration everyone was sharing to go around for quite a while.

Still, it wasn’t really enough for them to see by, which was why it didn’t take long for the twins to haphazardly crash into each other, sending them both clumsily plummeting to the ground in a unified burst of breathless laughter. Likewise, Steven and Connie also ended up accidently tripping over each other, but instead of falling, something else happened entirely. As the young Gem started to fall, Connie reacted quickly, catching him just in time. The pair paused for a beat, their cheeks warm and flush as they realized just how close their faces were to each other, separated by mere inches of air. Still, they couldn’t help but share a gentle laugh as they drew in closer, resting their foreheads together and reveling in each other’s warmth.

And yet, what neither of them saw as they chuckled together was the sudden bloom of pink light that had begun to radiate from Steven’s gem. In fact, they still didn’t see it even as it began to
overtake them both entirely. By the time it’s glow illuminated the entire clearing, however, Dipper and Mabel had taken notice of it, and needless to say their jaws simultaneously dropped in surprise upon seeing what had happened once it faded.

Still, Steven and Connie were in the dark, quite literally, they found as they slowly opened their eyes. Instantly, they could both tell that something was off, though neither of them could really place what that something was. It was as though they were still holding onto each other, and yet that couldn’t have been the case since they had somehow ended up in a sitting position on the ground, their arms loose at their sides. What was even stranger was that the first thing they saw upon opening their eyes was a pair of long, shapely, rosy-brown legs right in front of them, legs that couldn’t belong to either of them, but still shifted in time to their movements nonetheless.

“Whoa…” they gasped, their eyes widening at the singular deep, yet still rather feminine voice they heard instead of either of their own. “Why am I-” They paused, frowning upon noticing Steven’s discarded flip flops and Connie’s flats lying near them. An arm, much longer and more mature than it should have been, reached towards one of the shoes, picking it up as they examined it curiously. “Why is… your sandal too small for my—your feet…?” They trailed off, glancing up in bewilderment towards the twins, who could only stare back at them with wide eyes and completely stunned expressions. “Guys, what’s…” they paused again, looking to the adult sized hands that apparently belonged to them, dumbfounded. “What’s going on?”

“That’s… a really good question…” Dipper remarked with apt confusion.

“Ok, you’re a really cool-looking mysterious stranger, whoever you are,” Mabel began with something of a small smile, despite her own puzzlement. “But uh… where’d you come from? And where did Steven and Connie go?”

“Huh?” they raised an eyebrow, frowning as they shook their head. “Mabel, what are you talking about? I’m… I… we’re… right here…?” The twins exchanged a doubtful glance upon hearing this, neither of them sure of what to make of the odd but beguiling person who had so suddenly appeared in place of Steven and Connie. And yet, the pair themselves was still mostly convinced that they were right. “Guys, look, I-” They cut themselves off with a sharp gasp, looking to their longer legs and arms once again. Their eyes were huge as they slowly ran their hands over their legs and surprisingly slender yet curvy figure, confirming that they could both feel the sensation of the gentle touch simultaneously. Their growing amazement only increased as they glanced down at their light jean shorts, as well as the cropped pink tee-shirt bearing a remarkably familiar star emblem on it, one that was covered by a shorter, light blue tank top. But by far, what was the most telling was the unmistakable pink gemstone fixed to their shared navel, the one thing that told them they were no longer Steven or Connie.

They were both.

“Steven?!?” they gasped in shock, their hands pressing against the sides of their very long, very thick dark wavy hair. “Connie! I-I did it! Y-you did it?” The twins could only watch in continued confusion as the stranger slowly and shakily began to pick themselves up off the ground and having trouble doing so thanks to the unfamiliar distribution of their weight. “Wait,” they began again, their shared mind having a complicated time trying to grasp what was happening. “This is—no. This is… great!” They grinned widely as they finally pushed themselves up into an uneven standing position. “Oh my gosh, look at you now!” They exclaimed, glancing down at their impressive new form. “I can’t believe it!”

“Um, hey, remember us?” Dipper spoke up somewhat caustically. “Care to explain what the heck is going on here?”
“Dipper, Mabel!” they laughed, looking down at the twins seeing as how they now easily towered over them both by quite a bit. “It’s me! It’s us!”

“Uh… we’re not following…” Mabel frowned, still confused.

“You guys!” they exclaimed, unable to contain their excitement as they rose to their full height. “I’m a fusion!”

“What?!” both twins gasped in shared shock, something that the fusion got quite a good chuckle out of.

“Yeah, I guess it is pretty surprising…” they smirked, putting a hand against their neck and blushing slightly.

“You guys!” they exclaimed, unable to contain their excitement as they rose to their full height. “I’m a fusion!”

“Yeah, I guess it is pretty surprising…” they smirked, putting a hand against their neck and blushing slightly.

“Wait, so what you’re telling us is that you’re… Steven and Connie… fused together?” Dipper asked, still trying to understand, even if the entire concept was beyond baffling.

“Uh huh,” the fusion nodded, still smiling brightly.

“Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh!” Mabel squealed in sudden excitement as she ran up to the fusion, taking both of their hands. “This is so awesome! I mean, when the Gems fuse it’s awesome enough on its own, but you guys fusing is literally the most awesome thing to ever happen! You guys look just like a super model!”

Mabel!” Dipper quickly scolded, especially as the fusion froze, their face red in newfound embarrassment.

“No, uh… it’s ok,” they chuckled somewhat awkwardly. “I mean, we are pretty tall now, so it kinda makes sense…”

“So, how did this even happen in the first place?” Dipper asked, looking the fusion up and down curiously. “I thought only Gems could fuse with each other.”

“I honestly have no idea,” the fusion shrugged. “One minute, we were just dancing and the next, we’re… like this,” they motioned to themselves. “And it feels great! Well… great and a little weird but… I think we’ll get used to it.”

“So who’s in charge of what?” Mabel asked inquisitively, looking up to the fusion with a wide smile. “Does Steven control your legs while Connie works the arms, or is it the other way around? Do guys take turns talking or are you both talking at the same time and it comes out as one voice? Do you have any special fusion powers? Like flying? Or singing really good? Not that you guys can’t already do a great job of that when you’re apart, but still.”

“Hm… I don’t think we—I mean, I have any special powers, aside from the ones Steven already has…” the fusion mused thoughtfully. “And as for who controls what, we just… sort of do it together. It’s… kind of hard to explain…”

“So now that you guys are… uh, together… what now?” Dipper asked tentatively.

The fusion didn’t answer this right away but instead seemed to take a moment to think. And as they did so, both of the halves that composed them were at an initial loss. After all, by all accounts, they shouldn’t have even been able to exist together in this way. But now that they did, they couldn’t very well let it go so soon. They weren’t sure how long they intended on staying fused, but if one thing was certain between them both, it was that they wanted to enjoy every second that they were together for. And what better way to do that than by taking pride in what they now were. “I have to
show everybody!” they exclaimed brightly, already leading the way up to the temple, with the twins following not too far behind.

Needless to say, all three of the Gems were completely shocked into dumbfounded silence upon seeing the fusion for the first time. At first, they didn’t really recognize the mysterious stranger at first, they were still scarcely able to believe who they really were even after hearing it from the twins and the fusion themselves. Still, the fusion stood confidently before them nonetheless, taking in their wide-eyed stares evenly enough.

“So?” the spoke up, grinning broadly and exchanging a glance with the twins as they stood alongside them. Mabel easily returned their excited smile, though Dipper was a bit more apprehensive about how the Gems might react, given how they didn’t always have the easiest time dealing with new things. “Pretty cool, right?”

The Gems managed to shake themselves out of their stunned amazement, though it was clear that they were still quite taken aback as Pearl spoke up. “H-he fused? With Connie?!”

“Pearl,” Amethyst cut in with an amused snicker. “Look at Garnet.”

Both Gems did so, glancing at their leader, who wore a huge, delighted smile on her face and her hands clasped together joyously as she took the sight of the fusion in. Yet, oddly enough, she said nothing, holding her elation in as Amethyst and Pearl looked back to the fusion once more.

“So,” Amethyst turned to the twins with an eager grin. “Were you guys there when these two… you know…?” her smile turned sly as she linked her fingers together playfully.

“Amethyst!” Pearl quickly scolded her for the innuendo, but the purple Gem let out a coy chuckle nonetheless.

“Yeah we were there,” Mabel chimed in with a wide grin. “We saw the whole thing and it was so cool! One minute they were just Steven and Connie, and the next-”

“There I was,” the fusion finished with a small shrug.

“And after that we were all pretty much left completely confused,” Dipper finished somewhat dryly.

“Well I can certainly understand why…” Pearl mused as she walked up to the fusion and began to curiously examine them. “This is unprecedented! A Gem fusing with a human being? It’s impossible! Or at the very least inappropriate…”

Amethyst pushed the white Gem out of the way as she ran up to the fusion, laughing brightly all the while. “But wow! You two look great together!” she exclaimed, glancing up at them. “How does it feel Steven? Connie? …Stevonnie!?"

“That’s it!” Mabel snapped her fingers excitedly. “I’ve been trying to come up with a name to call you guys and Stevonnie is perfect for you two!”

“Uh, its literally just Steven and Connie’s names mashed together,” Dipper pointed out, crossing his arms.

“Yeah, that’s what makes it so great,” Amethyst said with a smirk. “Because they literally are
Steven and Connie mashed together.”

“Well, I guess we’ll go by Stevonnie then,” the newly name fusion chuckled brightly. “Oh, and by the way, Amethyst, it feels amazing!”

“Yes… well…” Pearl interjected, wringing her hands uncomfortably. “I’m glad you’re enjoying yourselves, but you two should unfuse this instant.”

“What?” all four (or rather, three) of the kids asked in unified confusion at the white Gem’s request. Still, none of them were more appalled by this suggestion that Stevonnie themselves.

“I don’t understand,” the fusion said with a serious frown. “Pearl, you were so worried that Steven wouldn’t be able to do this. Aren’t you proud of him?”

“O-of course I am!” Pearl quickly exclaimed, though it was clear that she really had no idea how to hand this situation, which was why she turned to the Gem leader for a rescue. “Garnet, help me out here,” she muttered, nodding to Stevonnie.

Garnet did so, though not in the way that Pearl was hoping for as she walked up to Stevonnie, still standing a bit taller than even the rather tall fusion. “Stevonnie, listen to me,” the Gem leader began, her tone firm as she placed a hand against the fusion’s face. “You are not two people. And you are not one person. You… are an experience! Make sure you’re a good experience. Now…” Garnet’s solid expression turned into her wide smile from earlier as she imparted her next set of directions to the compelled fusion, directions that they would hopefully have no problems carrying out. “Go have fun!”

And that was exactly what Stevonnie set out to do.

On Garnet’s mere prompting alone, the fusion gleefully rushed out of the house, dragging Dipper and Mabel along with them. After all, they saw, they figured that all four of them might as well go have fun together, especially given the new exciting circumstance of them being fused. Energized by elation and excitement, Stevonnie eagerly led the way to the lake, where, on a mere shared whim, the fusion let loose and threw caution to the wind as they began jogging across the shoreline, their long hair bouncing after them as they bounded across the strip. Dipper and Mabel were only able to exchange a puzzled glance as Stevonnie sprinted off, grinning brightly as they preformed an impressive string of deft cartwheels down the shore. Still, the twins, curious about what the fusion was doing, attempted to follow them, though they weren’t that successful since Stevonnie, with their longer legs and impressive speed, easily outran them. Yet Stevonnie didn’t slow their pace for a second, fueled by a feeling that neither of their halves could really even describe. Whatever it was though, it was incredible, sparking a kind of warmth and levity within them that kept them going strong.

Regardless though, the fusion did briefly come to a halt as they reached the edge of an outcropping hovering over the depths of the lake. For a moment, they peered over the outcropping towards the dark waters below, somewhat uncertain, before they completely pushed that uncertainty aside and went for it. Stevonnie took a running start before freely leaping off of the edge, plunging into the still-warm lake with a shout of exhilaration. The fusion loftily backstroked towards the nearby shore, letting the light current carry them back onto dry land as they laughed mirthfully all the while. Their amusement petered out a little though, as they noticed the twins standing over them, both of them seemingly breathless and exhausted.
“Oh, hey, guys,” Stevonnie greeted brightly as they sat up, still dripping wet. “Why do you two look so tired?”

“Oh… no reason,” Dipper deadpanned amidst trying to catch his breath.

“Whoo! Well this little night run sure was fun!” Mabel chimed, a bit more energized, as she usually was. “So what do you guys wanna do next?”

Stevonnie prepared to answer this, though apparently, their growling stomach got to it first. “I’m thinking donuts…” they mused, smiling as they nodded to the Big Donut, which fortunately was but a brief walk away.

“So which one of you guys is hungry?” Mabel asked the fusion curiously as they made their way towards the store. “Steven or Connie? Or both? Do both of you guys want the same thing or is one of you taking charge and steering your stomach towards donuts?”

“Mabel, could you maybe stop asking them so many questions?” Dipper interjected, somewhat aggravated by his sister’s usual enthusiasm.

“I can’t help it!” she gushed, grinning to Stevonnie. “Steven and Connie being fused is just way too cool not for me to be completely hyped about!”

“Yeah, but you’re probably starting to get on, er, Stevonnie’s nerves,” Dipper pointed out, looking to the fusion for confirmation of this.

“No, not really,” Stevonnie smiled warmly. “We’re pretty hyped about it too, to be honest. It’s like… it’s like everything I do, we do together, at the same time and for the same reasons. I know that probably doesn’t make a whole lot of sense, but… it all just feels so… right, you know?”

“But isn’t it kind of weird that you guys are basically just sharing the same mind and body?” Dipper asked with something of an uncomfortable frown. “Because that seems like it would be sort of weird. N-no offense.”

“Huh, I haven’t actually thought about it that way…” Stevonnie mused, glancing down. “I… I guess it is a little weird….” For a moment, the fusion seemed oddly flustered, their usual apparent confidence interrupted as they seemingly tried to reconcile this stark realization between themselves. But in the end, they were quick to recover from it. “B-but I’m fine. We’re fine. Everything… everything’s fine.” As the twins looked to Stevonnie with slight concern, they offered them a reassuring smile, though they couldn’t really deny that it was also an attempt to reassure themselves as well.

Fortunately, the fusion didn’t have to suede them any further as the group arrived at the Big Donut. Sadie and Lars were both on shift for the evening, though considering their lack of customers, they were content to pass the time in quiet, casual conversation as they leaned close to each other. They were so caught up in their discussion that they barely even paid the twins any mind as they entered the store first, though both of them instant froze the moment they saw Stevonnie walk in.

“Hi, Sadie! Hi, Lars!” Mabel greeted blithely as she skipped up to the counter, Dipper and Stevonnie not too far behind her.

“Um, are you guys… ok?” Dipper asked somewhat worried upon noticing how stunned they both seemed to be.

“W-wha…” Sadie mumbled dully, her and Lars both flush and completely unable to take their eyes off of the beguiling fusion as they approached.
“H-h-how can I… h-help… me…?” Lars addressed Stevonnie, stammering nervously and sweating a bit.

While the twins exchanged a confused glance at the cashiers’ odd behavior, Stevonnie simply flipped their still-wet hair back, wringing it out as they coolly gave their order. “Four donuts, please.”

Sadie and Lars continued to stare at the fusion, their mouths both agape in awe, as the latter quickly reached into the nearby case and produced a small bag containing the donuts they had asked for. Stevonnie still didn’t notice their apparent amazement as they stepped a bit closer to the counter, pulling out some of the money the Gems had given them before they left the temple earlier. “What do I owe you?” the fusion asked casually, even as Lars looked to them with wide eyes.

“Oh, nothing!” she exclaimed insistently, gentle pushing Stevonnie’s hand away as she blushingly glanced away. “I-it’s on the house…”

“Really?” Stevonnie asked, raising an incredulous eyebrow.

“Mm hm,” both cashiers nodded their heads in unison pushing the bag towards the fusion.

“Well, if you say so,” Stevonnie shrugged with a grin as they took the bag.

“Woohoo! Free food!” Mabel cheered as they all headed for the exit.

“Yeah, but why?” Dipper frowned, glancing back at the still-awestruck cashiers as they left. Stevonnie also looked back at them, stopping at the door to impart something of a word of advice. “But just so you know,” the fusion began, their hair concealing everything but their eyes as they glanced to the flustered pair. “That isn’t a very sound business practice.”

And without another word, they were gone, the twins departing with them as Sadie and Lars were both left in complete and utter astonishment at what they had just seen. But all the same, the kids set out, heading down the main street of town as they looked for a good spot to eat their easily acquired treats.

“So uh… I can’t be the only one who that that was weird…” Dipper said, nodding back to the Big Donut.

“What’s so weird about it?” Mabel smirked. “I mean, we got a bunch of free donuts. What could be better than that?”

“Nothing I can think of,” Stevonnie grinned, reaching into the bag. “And there’s enough for all of us! One for each of you guys,” the fusion handed off a donut to each of the twins. “One for me, and one for… uh… me.” Stevonnie suddenly came to a stop as they reached a nearby bench, not noticing as the twins went on without them. Still, Dipper and Mabel were quick to notice as they turned towards the fusion, whose expression was awash in uncertainty as they looked to the pair of donuts in their hands.

“Hey, Stevonnie?” Mabel spoke up with a worried frown. “Are you ok?”

The fusion didn’t respond, still seemingly preoccupied by the donuts, though their thoughts were consumed by something else entirely. “Uh… Stevonnie?” Dipper tried to get their attention again,
and this time it worked.

“Huh?” Stevonnie blinked, glancing up with relatively wide eyes.

“Is something wrong?” Mabel asked, concerned.

Stevonnie didn’t answer right away, looking between the twins and the donuts and then finally themselves, their expression unreadable. “Um… no…” they slowly shook their head. “No, nothing’s…” they trailed off, their brow furrowing as they focused their gaze on the donuts once again.

“Uh, Mabel?” Dipper interjected with an uncomfortable frown, noticing the fusion’s rather transparent apprehension. “Why don’t we go and get some more donuts?”

“What?” Mabel asked, her mouth full as she munched on her donut. “But I’m not even done my first one yet—” She didn’t even have time to take another bite, however, before Dipper suddenly knocked the pastry right out of her hand. “Hey!”

“Oops,” Dipper remarked dryly. “Oh no, it fell. Now we have to go get more. Come on, Mabel.”

“Boo,” Mabel groaned, playfully sticking her tongue out at her brother as they started to head back to the Big Donut. “We’ll be right back, Stevonnie!”

“Yeah, okay,” the fusion nodded absentlly. “I… we’ll be here…” Stevonnie barely even watched the twins leave as they took in a long, somewhat wavering breath, their gaze still fixated on the donuts they were holding. “Seriously though, are you ok?” they asked themselves quietly, one half speaking to the other, though it was impossible for them to really make any distinction between them. “We can stop if you…” the paused, pulling the two donuts apart a bit before shaking their head to clear it. “No, no, it’s fine,” they reassured themselves, drawing the donuts back together. “Don’t worry.”

Stevonnie nodded in silent acceptance, taking a seat on the bench as they finally began snacking on one of their donuts. It felt quite odd to them, to at last be realizing the nature of what they really were now. Garnet had indeed said it correctly when they were neither two people nor one person, for they certainly didn’t feel like either of those. They were separate to be sure, but at the same time united in every sense of the word, sharing the same mind, the same body, the same existence. They were Steven, and they were Connie, and they were something beyond even the two of them. They were a fusion. They were an experience. They were Stevonnie.

Still, even they weren’t even sure what all of that truly meant yet.

Stevonnie was so lost in their own thoughts that they didn’t even notice the figure that had quietly stepped up to the bench they were on until they suddenly cleared their throat. The fusion glanced up in surprise, expecting to see that the twins had returned, only to see Sour Cream standing nearby instead.

“Oh, hey, Sour—faced stranger,” Stevonnie awkwardly greeted, remembering that pretty much no one would recognize them as they were now. “Wow, cool pants.”

“C-cool,” Sour Cream gulped, apparently flustered as he handed the fusion a flier. “Rave tonight.”

“Like… a dance?” Stevonnie asked, curiously looking over the poster.

“Yeah…” Sour Cream blushed, his hands in his pockets. “At the warehouse. I’m DJing, and a bunch of my friends from the internet are gonna be there. There’s gonna be free… glow sticks…”
“Yes!” the fusion exclaimed without really thinking about it, compelled by newfound excitement alone. “I’ll definitely be there! Thanks!”

“C-cool,” Sour Cream nodded, still quite flustered as he headed off. Stevonnie grinned as they looked back to the flier, hoping that this would finally provide them with the sort of “fun” that Garnet had suggested they go find. After all, what could be a better time than doing what had brought them both together like this in the first place?

“Stevonnieeee!” Mabel called brightly as she ran up to the bench and plopped down beside the fusion, Dipper doing the same not too long after. “We’re back! And we have more donuts! Hopefully, somebody won’t waste them by throwing them onto the ground this time…”

Dipper merely rolled his eyes at this before addressing the fusion. “By the way, Sadie and Lars asked about you. From the way they talked, they really, really wanted to see you again for… some reason.”

“Well, I’m afraid we won’t have time to drop in and say hello,” Stevonnie smirked broadly. “Because I just got invited to a party.”

“Whoa, really?!” Mabel asked excitedly, looking over the poster as the fusion held it out for the twins to see. “No way! Just when I thought tonight couldn’t get any cooler, now we get to a super cool dance party! This is gonna be legendary!”

“Uh, hold on a second, you guys,” Dipper interjected. “Before we go running off to this party, you might wanna take another look at that flier. It says, ‘teens only’. So in other words, not us.”

“Aw, man…” Stevonnie sighed, leaning back against the bench. “And I really wanted to go too…”

“Wait!” Mabel gasped, excited by the idea she just had. “We may not be able to go to the party, but that doesn’t mean you can’t, Stevonnie! After all, you guys pretty much look like a teen, so no one would even know the difference!”

“O-oh,” the fusion frowned, glancing down anxiously. “Well… I guess so… but can you guys come along anyway?”

“Uh, sure?” Dipper shrugged, confused. “But why? You know we probably won’t be able to go in there with you guys, right?”

“Y-yeah, I know…” Stevonnie said, even though they internally wished that Dipper and Mabel really could accompany them. They couldn’t very well admit that though, even if a certain half of them saw no real problem with confessing their honest feelings to the twins of all people. The truth, as embarrassing as it was, was that they were using the twins as something of a crutch, a way to anchor themselves to normality, to who they were apart from their fusion. They weren’t even entirely sure why they might need such an anchor in the first place, but something inside of them both told them that they did, that they’d be at a complete loss without one. Which was why Stevonnie was rather insistent on having that anchor with them, especially at a highly social event such as the party they still very much wanted to attend. “But uh… it’d still be cool if you guys could come hang out nearby anyway… j-just for a while… I mean… you don’t have to if you don’t-”

“Are you kidding?” Mabel abruptly interrupted, hopping off the bench. “We’ll totally come, Stevonnie! Even if we can’t party with you guys, we can still cheer you on while you tear up the dance floor!”
“Heh, yeah…” Stevonnie laughed with only partial enthusiasm, their confidence starting to falter. “Tear up the dance floor… That… that’s totally what we’re gonna do…”

The rave was being held at the old abandoned warehouse at the far end of town, but as the kids arrived and scoped the party from the outside in, they could see that the decrepit factory was anything but empty tonight. A small multitude of teens and young adults, some familiar and some not, were freely dancing under the colored spotlights hung from the high ceiling. Sour Cream DJed the party from the platform high above the dance floor, composing a smooth chiptune beat using a unique setup of soundboards, keyboards, and Game Guys. As he turned the music up to an upbeat electronic melody, the partygoers cheered in excitement and vamped their dancing up to further show it.

“Whoa…” Stevonnie murmured as them and the twins surveyed the party from right outside the warehouse’s crumbled wall. “This looks… kind of intense…”

“Yeah, it does…” Dipper agreed, slightly concerned. “Are you guys sure you’re up for this?”

“Of course, they are!” Mabel cut in before Stevonnie could really answer. “You guys totally got this! Now get in there and show everyone how awesome you two are together!”

“Right,” Stevonnie nodded evenly enough, taking in a deep breath as they straightened to their full height. “Well, here goes nothing.”

“Have fun!” Mabel called out after Stevonnie rather loudly, much to Dipper’s alarm.

“Mabel, keep it down!” he warned in a harsh whisper, ducking down behind the outer wall a bit. “We’re technically not even supposed to be here, remember?”

“Oh yeah,” Mabel nodded before calling to the fusion again. “Have fun!” she exclaimed in only a barely quieter whisper, not even noticing as her brother face-palmed in aggravation.

Meanwhile, Stevonnie walked onto the dance floor confidently enough, though all the while, they were still trying to reassure themselves that they could handle this, even despite the curious stares they received as they sauntered through the crowd. “You got this,” they repeated in a muted whisper, noticing the stares even though they tried their best to ignore them. “I got this,” they said again, their voice much more wavering this time as they anxiously glanced back towards the twins outside. They both offered the fusion encouraging smiles and thumbs-up, but that still wasn’t enough to make them feel better, especially considering how many inquiring eyes were upon them. “We got-”

Before they could even finish their mantra, Stevonnie, not watching where they were going, happened to bump into one of the partygoers accidently. Both fortunately and unfortunately though, this particular partygoer happened to be immediately familiar to the fusion.

“Oh! Sorry, Wendy!” Stevonnie apologized before they could stop themselves, though upon realizing their mistake, they were quick to slap a hand over their own mouth. Wendy turned around hearing this, just as bewildered as all of her accompanying friends were upon taking a cursory glance at the flustered fusion.

“Oh, hey,” the cashier greeted in casual confusion. “Do I… know you?”
“Um, me?” Stevonnie asked with a forced, awkward grin. “N-no! I don’t! I mean, I-I don’t think I— I mean, I… I…” As the fusion continued to stammer on, they were hardly even paying any mind to odd stares the group of teens were giving them, and they certainly didn’t happen to notice Wendy steal a glance down at the conspicuous pink gemstone on their navel.

“No way…” she interrupted Stevonnie’s ramblings, both puzzled and incredulous as she glanced between the fusion and their gem. “Steven?”

Stevonnie completely froze up, their eyes wide and their posture hitched upon being partially found out. None of the other teens seemed to notice their alarm however as they instead all looked to Wendy in apt confusion. “Uh, Wendy?” Lee spoke up, dumbfounded. “That’s not Steven.”

“Look, I know it sounds crazy, guys,” the cashier turned to her crowd of friends. “But they have his-” Wendy cut herself off as she glanced back to where the fusion had been, only to find that they had conveniently slipped away from the party entirely.

Of course, Stevonnie had only retreated right outside of the warehouse, not hesitating to hurriedly tell the twins about what had just happened, even in the midst of their apparent panic.

“Wait, so Wendy actually recognized you guys?” Dipper asked, surprised.

“Well, she recognized Steven, but yeah, pretty much,” Stevonnie nodded, running a hand through their hair. “I don’t know how though! I thought we were being pretty discreet! Even if a ton of people were staring at us…”

“Aw, but what’s so bad about letting people know who you really are, Stevonnie?” Mabel asked rather innocently. “I’m sure if people knew you were Steven and Connie mashed together, they’d think it’s really cool, just like we do!”

“Uh… well…” Stevonnie trailed off, though they didn’t get much of a chance to explain themselves before the conversation was suddenly interrupted.

“So, Stevonnie, huh?” Wendy asked with a wry smirk as she stepped out from the other side of the wall, revealing that she had been eavesdropping.

“Wendy!” Stevonnie and Dipper both exclaimed, startled, though Mabel was much more pleasantly surprised.

“Hi, Wendy!” she greeted as brightly as ever.

“Hey, Mabel,” the cashier chuckled, crossing her arms as she looked to the fusion again. “You know, I knew that gem looked familiar. But how could I have guessed that you were both Steven and Connie! That’s pretty wild, dudes.”

“I-I can explain!” Stevonnie quickly interjected. “We—we were just dancing and then we accidently fused and then we got invited to this party and we really wanted to go, so we—”


“Yeah they did!” Mabel exclaimed with a grin. “It’s this super cool thing that only Gems can do, but Steven did it with Connie somehow and bam! We got ourselves a Stevonnie!”

Wendy raised a bewildered eyebrow, not fully convinced as she glanced to Dipper for verification. “She’s right, actually,” he said with a shrug. “Honestly, we couldn’t even make this stuff up if we tried.”
Well, I guess I have no choice but to buy it then,” the cashier smirked, shaking her head. “But still, why’d you guys run away from the party? I mean, even if you two aren’t technically teens, nobody in there needs to know that. I mean, you had all my friends fooled.”

“Yeah, I know…” the fusion sighed apprehensively. “It’s just… I’m—we’re sort of worried about… I don’t really know… not fitting in, or something like that…”

“Don’t be,” Wendy encouraged with a smile. “Listen, dudes, your secret is safe with me. Go back in there and have some fun! I mean, when else are you guys gonna be able to sneak into a rad, ‘teens-only’ party like this one?”

“She’s got a point,” Dipper pointed out in agreement. “This is sort of like a crazy, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity kind of thing.”

“Yeah!” Mabel nodded zealously. “And if I were one of you guys, I’d totally take that opportunity to party as hard as I could!”

“Oh believe me, I want to,” Stevonnie said with a wistful grin. “But…”

“But your holding yourself back,” Wendy mused patiently. “It’s ok, you guys. Look, if you need any help in there, I got your back. All you need to do is cut loose and let yourselves have a good time together. You’ll feel a lot better after you do, trust me.”

“Mmm… are you sure?” the fusion asked, still somewhat uncertain.

“Positive,” the cashier nodded before grabbing their wrist and pulling them back towards the party. “Now come on! The party’s just getting started!”

“You really think they’ll be ok in there?” Dipper asked Mabel as they continued to watch the party from the other side of the wall.

“Eh, I’m sure they’ll be just fine,” Mabel shrugged with a rather unconcerned smile as Wendy managed to coax Stevonnie over to her group of friends.

“Hey, guys, I’m back,” the cashier greeted her fellow teens casually. “And there’s someone I’d like you to meet. This is Stevonnie.”

“Uh… hi,” the fusion waved to the teens as they all looked to them with welcoming nods and smiles.

“Oh, it’s Stevonnie!” Jenny exclaimed in newfound understanding. “For some reason, Wendy thought you were our friend Steven.”

“O-oh, really?” Stevonnie gulped nervously, though fortunately, Wendy cut in.

“Hey, cut me some slack, Jenny,” the cashier crossed her arms. “It’s hard to see under all these neon Sour Cream has set up in here.”

“So are you new around here, Stevonnie?” Nate asked curiously.

“Um… I guess you could say that?” the fusion shrugged, uncertain about how to explain themselves. Fortunately, they didn’t really have to as the beat thumping throughout the party suddenly picked up even more.

“Looks like Sour Cream’s pumping things up,” Buck noted as coolly as ever.
“Rave time!” Lee and Nate cheered in unison.

“You know what that means, Thompson!” Lee exclaimed with a goading grin.

“No! I’m not taking my shirt of this time!” Thompson protested hotly, though Lee and Nate were quick to provide him with the proper encouragement.

“Thompson! Thompson! Thompson!” they chanted zealously, finally wearing Thompson down just enough.

“The peer pressure’s too strong!” he cried, ripping his shirt off and waving it over his head.

“Tambry, you better not post any pictures of this online like last time!”

“Too late,” Tambry deadpanned, having already uploaded an embarrassing snapshot to the internet.

“Aw, man, this is great,” Wendy laughed over her friends’ antics along with Stevonnie. “See? I told you guys you’d have a great time.”

“Heh, yeah,” the fusion chuckled warmly, a bright smile on their face as they glanced around the party with fresh eyes. Instead of something daunting or intimidating, they saw fun, lively scene, one that they could easily see themselves falling into.

And so they did.

With a spring in their step and a newfound confidence about them, Stevonnie stepped out onto the dance floor, guided by a shared sense of elation, the very thing that had brought them together in the first place. They were hardly aware of anyone watching them as they made their first moves, bold and smooth and eye-catching. Wendy and her friends were the first to catch sight of the fusion’s dancing, and needless to say they were all instantly impressed by the natural skill they were already putting on display.

Even Sour Cream spotted them from his DJing platform, pausing from his mixing to watch them for a brief moment. “Amazing…” he mused in apt awe, before returning to his composition and adding a descant to the beat just for the fusion.

And Stevonnie took to the beat quite well, their bare feet gliding across the dance floor as though it was nothing but air. A wide grin was fixed on their face as they twirled about, their long hair flying with the movement. Still heedless to the crowd gathering to watch them, Stevonnie took a running start for their next move, smoothly sliding to their knees and bringing their arms up gracefully. With each move they made, clusters of bright sparkles seemed to emerge from the fusion, only adding to the charm and allure that everyone who was watching them saw. Even though they were observing from the outside, the twins were dumbfounded into absolute silence at how Stevonnie was indeed ‘tearing up the dance floor’, to the point that they had it entirely to themselves by now. Yet still the fusion didn’t notice as they launched themselves high into the air, preforming a deft full-body twist before landing squarely on one knee with a satisfied sigh. Indeed, they had done it. They had finally achieved the night of liberating fun they had been seeking. Everything finally felt just right.

Yet it was only as the veil of contentment lifted that things started to go wrong.

As Stevonnie rose to stand once more, the very first thing they noticed were the many sets of eyes fixated solely on them. Everyone seemed to be completely amazed by the fusion, not just their dancing skills but them as well. Several members of the crowd even let out muted gasps of wonder, and several more had their mouths hanging completely agape in shock. But all the same, one thing
was clear: they were all focused on Stevonnie and Stevonnie alone.

“I-I thought this was a dance party,” the fusion spoke up with a nervous laugh as they glanced around. Specifically, they looked to Wendy for help, but even she seemed to be helplessly awestruck by the stunning display Stevonnie had just put on. “Why isn’t anyone else dancing?” No one in the surrounding crowd dared speak, for even if they could, no one would have had anything to really say, seeing as how they were all at a total loss for words. Stevonnie’s apprehensive smile quickly faded into an anxious frown, both halves of their heart racing with newfound fear, the world seeming to sink all around them. “This… This is what being cool at a cool dance is, right?” they asked no one in particular, their eyes darting around the room. “This is how it’s supposed to be… Why isn’t it like it’s supposed to be?!”

By now, the fusion had begun to hyperventilate, stress overwhelming them as they closed their eyes tightly. Yet strangely enough, when they opened them, the crowd was gone, only replaced by huge, dark, ominous shadows looming high over them on all sides. As the silhouettes began to spread higher, Stevonnie couldn’t help but feel crushingly small, especially as shards of what seemed to be glass also rose up from the floor. They never touched the fusion however, as instead a disco ball seemed to form around them, trapping them in its small, cramped spherical interior. Stevonnie’s breathing had grown frantic, their hands shaking as they looked to the spinning lights darting far too quickly around their claustrophobic, self-imposed prison. Alarmed and disoriented, the fusion spun around, desperate to find a way out of this trap, of this party, out of all of it. Every emotion they felt, especially dread and anxiety, all seemed as though they were multiplied tenfold, all threatening to tear them cleanly apart. Their shared mind was going far too fast with thoughts of fear and dismay and panic and far too many other things to even place a name to them all. They were far from the good experience they should have been; instead, their very existence was an experience rife with doubt and desperation to find out what they really were, who they really were. And now, they were further than ever from finding that out.

Yet, before the fusion could crumble under the weight of their own insecurities, their attention was suddenly directed elsewhere as another figure suddenly stepped into their disco ball without warning. He was a young man, a teen, but one that neither of them had ever met before, clad in stylish clothes and carrying a foreboding kind of confidence about him, one that instantly set Stevonnie on guard as he calmly sized them up.

“Hey, baby,” he greeted with a smooth, flirtatious smirk, his hands on his hips as he stood apace from the fusion. Stevonnie hardly even noticed the visage of the disco ball abruptly disappear, replaced by the surroundings of the party once again. Everyone had apparently gone back to conversing about themselves, no one paying the fusion any mind except for this one lone young man.

“Huh?” Stevonnie finally spoke up, raising a confused eyebrow at the young man’s seemingly smug manner.

“Get ready,” he leaned in, offering his hand to them before smoothly sliding around them in a failed attempt at impressing them. “It’s Kevin Time.” The young man, Kevin, apparently, reached for Stevonnie’s hand once more, but this time, it was abruptly slapped away, though not by the fusion themselves.

“You better take good, long step back if you know what’s good for you, Kevin,” Wendy scowled harshly, stepping in between the fusion and the young man rather protectively.

“Wendy!!” Stevonnie sighed in apt relief at the cashier coming to their rescue.
“Hey, like I said, I got your back,” Wendy glanced back at the fusion with a reassuring wink.

“Well, look who it is,” Kevin cut in with an icy smirk as he looked to the cashier. “I guess you’re really not over me after all, Wendy. Not that I blame you though; I’d get jealous too if I saw me flirting with another girl.”

“Doing what with another who now?” Stevonnie spoke up, eyes wide in alarm and confusion.

“Ugh, get real, Kevin,” Wendy rolled her eyes crossly. “I broke up with you, remember? Then again, it was probably hard for you to pay attention to me dumping you since you were too busy swooning over your own reflection.”

“Whatever,” Kevin scoffed dryly. “Why don’t you just step aside and let me and this cutie dance?”

“They’re not interested,” the cashier said tersely as she began to lead the distressed fusion away.

“Why don’t you let her decide that for herself?” Kevin asked pointedly, his hands on his hips as he sent the pair a determined scowl.

“Oh, well, uh…” Stevonnie began anxiously, beyond uncomfortable with this bizarre turn of events. “She’s right… I-I’m really not interested…”

“See? Told you,” Wendy gave Kevin a cold, triumphant smirk as they urged the fusion to take a breather outside the party. “Oh, and if I catch you messing with them again tonight, then there won’t be any teeth left in that stupid, smug smile of yours. Just keep that in mind, ‘baby’.”

The cashier didn’t even give him a chance to respond before turning on her heel and marching off after Stevonnie, joining them and the twins outside the wall. Needless to say that after seeing the fusion’s near-meltdown earlier, Dipper and Mabel were quite concerned for their wellbeing, and they didn’t hesitate to show that concern through a barrage of curious questions the moment Stevonnie stepped outside.

“Are you guys ok?” Dipper asked with a worried frown. “What happened in there?”

“I… I don’t know!” Stevonnie admitted, running a hand through their hair as they let out a deep breath. “E-everyone was just… staring at me and… and I didn’t know w-what to do or what to say! I… we just sort of froze up and panicked and… everything else was basically one huge blur after that…”

The twins and Wendy all exchanged a brief, troubled glance upon hearing this, none of them really sure of how to reassure or encourage the disconcerted fusion. So instead of trying to offer them advice that likely wouldn’t help them, Mabel instead returned to asking Stevonnie about their experience in something of an attempt to distract them from their ongoing dread. “So… who was that scummy guy you were talking to? And what did he want?”

“Ugh, that was Kevin,” Wendy interjected with clear disdain as she crossed her arms. “We dated for like, a week, a while back. But I dumped him as soon as I realized how much of a self-absorbed, sleazebag he is. Trust me, Stevonnie, he’s definitely not someone you want to hang around.”

“I’ll take your word for it…” the fusion muttered, admittedly hardly even thinking about their encounter with Kevin at the moment. Instead, their thoughts were preoccupied with their own lingering doubt. After all, they had nearly fallen apart entirely back in the party for reasons that they couldn’t honestly even explain; with the restless and fretful state they were still in, how could they really expect to stay together much longer? Their shared mind was still in a frenzy, even if
that frenzy was much quieter than it had been before, but still, a frenzy nonetheless. And if being
together, if being fused, brought them both such feelings of anxiety and apprehension, then was it
even worth it for them to stay fused at all?

In fact, Stevonnie was so distracted by their own unspoken fears that they hadn’t even heard what
Wendy had just asked them until she placed a hand on their shoulder. “What?” the fusion blinked,
slightly startled out of their thoughts as they looked to the cashier with wide eyes.

“I asked you if you’re sure you guys wanna go back in there,” Wendy repeated, clearly concerned.
“Because to be honest… you’re not looking like you’re doing so hot…”

Stevonnie blushed in embarrassment upon hearing this, only now realizing that they were rather
pale and lightly sweating as a result of their own internal stress. Still, guided by instinct alone, the
fusion quickly put themselves together again, standing up at their full height and taking in a deep,
determined breath. “No, we’re… I’m fine,” they clarified convincingly enough. “After all, I-I got
this.”

“Yeah, you do!” Mabel cheered encouragingly. “Go Team Stevonnie! Go Team Stevonnie!”

The fusion let out a small laugh at this zealous cheer, but even so, Wendy wasn’t fully sure that
they were ready to go back inside, despite their apparent show of confidence. “Just remember,
guys,” she addressed the fusion cautiously. “If you need to bail out of there for any reason, then
that’s totally fine. After all, you are still new at this.”

“Yeah… you’re… right, actually,” Stevonnie mused, amazed at how being new pretty much
summed everything about their experience up. And maybe, despite all of the pitfalls they had
encountered thus far, they had finally realized they were indeed a new experience. Which meant
that there was always a chance for them to become a truly good one eventually.

With a newfound spring in their step, Stevonnie followed Wendy back into the party, relieved and
reassured by her promise to stay by their side for as long as they needed her to. The fusion figured
that she was yet another anchor to them, much like the twins, but at least she was an anchor who
could actually go into the party with them at least. And for them, that was certainly better than
nothing.

Which was why it didn’t take long for Wendy to notice Stevonnie’s apparent sense of dependency,
seeing as how closely the fusion was following behind her as they returned to the party. “Guys,
don’t worry,” she sent them a reassuring smile as she glanced back at them. “You said it yourself:
you’ve got this. And like I said, I’ll be here for you guys as long as you need-”

“Yo, Wendy!” Nate suddenly hurried up to the cashier with Tambry and Buck in tow. “You gotta
get over here! Thompsons about to do the worm with his shirt off!”

“Ten bucks says he cuts his stomach on the floor and he cries,” Tambry glanced up from her phone
to smirk at Buck, who lightly grinned in response.

“You’re on.”

“Ok, guys, just hold on a—whoa!” Wendy didn’t get a chance to convince Stevonnie to come
along before Nate suddenly grabbed her by the hand to pull her over to the others.

“Come on, Wendy! You’re gonna miss it!” he urged eagerly, dragging the cashier off. The fusion
instantly panicked at this, a sharp gasp escaping them as they tried to follow Wendy as her friends
unknowingly whisked her off into the thick crowd.
“Wendy! Wait!” Stevonnie called after her, only to end up getting accidentally knocked back by somebody caught up in their dancing. The fusion clumsily stumbled backward, nearly falling to the ground entirely, though a stray hand managed to catch theirs and pull them upright. Yet upon seeing who their “rescuer” was, Stevonnie was anything but relieved.

“Well, hey there, baby,” Kevin greeted with a sultry smirk as he held the fusion close, not relinquishing his grip on their wrist. “Glad to see you away from that buzzkill Wendy. Are you finally ready for our dance?”

“L-like I said,” Stevonnie began, clearly uneasy as they pulled themselves away from him. “I really don’t want-”

“Playing hard to get, huh?” Kevin interrupted coyly. “I like that. Guess you just need some convincing first.” He sent the fusion a flirty wink as he stepped a pace away from them, the music seeming to become more intense as he began to dance solo. Surrounding partygoers paused upon noticing Kevin’s bold, swift, almost aggressive moves, which were certainly skillful to say the least. In fact, it seemed that the only ones not impressed by his suave and narcissistic ways, aside from Stevonnie themselves, were the twins as they continued to watch the party from afar.

“Ugh, that guy is such a creep!” Dipper exclaimed, aptly disgusted by Kevin’s egotistical behavior that could be seen even from their distant vantage point. “Why won’t he just take Stevonnie’s no for an answer?”

“Seriously!” Mabel agreed with a petulant scowl. “Somebody really outta teach him a lesson in-” She cut herself off with a sudden gasp, startling her brother quite a bit as she suddenly shook him in excitement. “Dipper! I just got the best idea ever! We should fuse, go in there, and beat the snot out of that Kevin guy for messing with Stevonnie! It’s the perfect plan!”

For a moment, all Dipper could do was send his sister an incredulous look before finally finding the words to respond to her outlandish idea. “You know, Mabel, that’s a great plan, it really is,” he said with obvious sarcasm. “Except… there’s just one tiny problem with it.”

“Oh yeah? And what’s that?”

“We can’t fuse! We’re not Gems, remember?”

“Oh yeah…” Mabel frowned in disappointment over her admittedly impossible plan being shut down. Though her disappointment quickly turned to alarm upon glancing back to the party only to realize that a certain fusion was nowhere to be seen. “Hey, where’s Stevonnie?”

As it turned out, Stevonnie had taken the first opportunity they saw to flee from both Kevin and the crowd as quickly as they could. However, instead of retreating inside, they instead rushed to a nearby wall, leaning against it as they hunched over in a desperate attempt to calm their panicked breathing. Even though there was ample space around them and in the warehouse in general, they still felt tightly cramped, as though they had been locked in a very small box from which there was no escape. Their long pent-up nervousness had finally built itself up into a mighty wave, one that threatened to crash upon them and tear them apart literally any second now.

“I don’t understand what’s wrong,” Stevonnie panted tightly, eyes wide as they stared at the floor. “You have fun dancing, but this dance isn’t fun. You’re supposed to like this. W-why don’t we like this?!” The fusion let out a sharp breath as they fully stood, their trembling fists clenched tightly as they looked at their shared form with emerging loneliness. “I wish you were here…” they sighed, leaning against the wall and loosely hugging themselves in a weak attempt to feel closer. But the truth was, despite all they were currently sharing, they couldn’t have felt any further apart. “If we
were together, it would be ok. But... we are together, and it’s not... I... I’m alone...”

“Not tonight,” Stevonnie’s closed eyes flew open to see Kevin press his hand against the wall near their head. His constant flirty grin was still present as he looked up at the fusion almost greedily, as if they were more of a prize to be won than an actual person. “Hey baby, why’d you leave me on the dance floor?”

“I-I don’t-” Stevonnie cut themselves off upon hearing how tremulous their voice sounded. So instead, they forced themselves to be firm as they pushed Kevin’s hand away with a stern scowl. “I don’t want to dance anymore.”

“What are you talking about?” Kevin asked, clearly not taking them seriously as he brushed a hand through his hair. “We’re the best thing that’s ever happened to this place! Come back out with me.”

“Why should I?” the fusion asked defiantly, growing angrier by his callous manner by the second.

“Because we’re angels walking among garbage people,” Kevin patronized. “We’re perfect for each other.”

“How can you say that?!” Stevonnie exclaimed, aghast and infuriated. “You don’t even know us!”

“Whoa, whoa,” Kevin held his hands up, even though he was still smirking. “I’m just looking for a dance! Don’t get crazy.”

“No one is crazy! I just don’t like being alone here!”

“Well if you’re so lonely, then dance with me!”

By now, Stevonnie was beyond frustrated, scarcely able to believe just how impetuous and stubborn Kevin really was. Which was why the decided that enough was enough. If he wasn’t going to give up, then they might as well give him exactly what he wanted. “Ugh, fine!” the fusion growled hotly, sending a piercing glare Kevin’s way. “You wanna dance? Let’s go.”

Needless to say that not only was Kevin surprised at Stevonnie accepting his invitation, but he was also quite startled when they grabbed him by the arm and roughly dragged him onto the dance floor. “Oh, and it’s Stevonnie,” the fusion clarified as they scowled down at their unwanted dance partner. “I am not your baby.”

Before Kevin could even say anything to this, Stevonnie launched into a dance that was a far cry from their smooth, graceful movements from earlier. Instead, this dance was aggressive and wild, with hardly any rhyme or reason to it at all as the fusion merely flailed about in a frantic frenzy. Their hair swung about wildly as they kicked and punched the air forcefully, letting out all of their frustration and apprehension in the only way they could think of. This time, they paid no mind to the countless sets of eyes staring at them in befuddlement, nor did they even pay Kevin any thought as he looked to them, quite intimidated by just how intense they really were.

“O-okay, bring it back, girl,” he spoke up, his usual smug confidence completely gone as he nervously backed up a few steps.

By now, nearly everyone at the party had turned their attention to Stevonnie and their almost unhinged dancing style. With her friends distracted, Wendy finally managed to rush back over to the fusion, though she paused at the fringes of the gathering crowd, just as surprised as everyone else was, especially upon seeing the gemstone on Stevonnie’s navel begin to brightly glow. Still, the fusion didn’t stop dancing for a second, their stress, anger, and emotional exhaustion all finally
coming to a violent collision. A collision that, ironically enough, ultimately ended up ripping them apart.

In a sharp flash of light, Stevonnie disappeared, and in their place emerged the two halves they were made of in the first place: Steven and Connie.

The pair fell out of their fusion and onto the ground rather roughly, initially too dazed by what had just happened to even make sense of what was going on. The nearby crowd let out a unified gasp of shock and disbelief, all of them taken aback and aptly surprised at the true identity of the mysterious fusion. But of course, no one was more alarmed at this revelation than Kevin.

“That’s two kids! I’m out!” he exclaimed, clearly shocked as he immediately took his leave from the party entirely.

At the same time, Steven and Connie had finally managed to regather their bearings, even if they were still getting used to the old feeling of being apart as they both tentatively sat up. “W-we’re back…” the young Gem said stiffly, his eyes wide as he looked to Connie in bewilderment. But instead of saying anything in response, she simply burst out laughing, unable to hold any of her countless emotions in any longer. As her laughter turned hysterical, Steven couldn’t help but join in, and by the time he pushed himself up off the ground, he was laughing so hard that he was essentially crying but he honestly didn’t care. Neither of them did. And after the night they just had, honestly, how could they care about anything anymore?

While the partygoers were all still frozen in shock, Sour Cream was really the only one to usher in the newfound levity as he threw out a cascade of glow sticks from his DJ platform and onto the crowd below. With no more reservations holding them back, Steven and Connie happily indulged, their laughter loud and bright as they began to run around the dance floor freely amidst the rain of glow sticks.

Of course, the twins had witnessed everything that had just happened from outside, and while Dipper was just as stunned as the rest of the crowd was, Mabel easily shared in on Steven and Connie’s elation. “They’re back!” she cheered excitedly. “And look at them go! Come on, Dipper! Let’s get in there and join the party!”

“Mabel, I don’t think we should-” Dipper didn’t even get a chance to finish his protest before Mabel abruptly grabbed his wrist and dragged him past the wall and into the party anyway. The attending teens hardly even paid the twins any mind as they rushed onto the dance floor, Mabel gladly joining Steven and Connie as they cheerfully danced about while Dipper took a place in the crowd alongside Wendy.

“Ok, this has seriously been one of the weirdest nights ever,” he remarked incredulously, watching as the others have their wild dancing.

“Tell me about it,” the cashier smirked, crossing her arms. “But hey, you know what they say: if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.” With a boisterous cheer, Wendy stepped out into the dance floor herself, joining in on the fun with Dipper hesitantly following soon after. Slowly but surely, the other partygoers eventually followed suit, still besides themselves with confusion over what they had seen, but even so, most of them were willing to shrug it off for the sake of continuing the party.

Still, even as the party picked up once more, Steven and Connie remained rather close to each other for the rest of the night, even if they were no longer fused. Certainly, Stevonnie had something to do with that, for as good as it felt to be apart, neither of them could deny that being together had felt even better. True, the experience had been rife with anxiety, fear, and uncertainty, but it had also been filled with excitement, euphoria, and elation, and in the end, all of those good
things far outweighed the bad. Neither Steven nor Connie could deny that, for everything they had been through tonight, they would gladly do it all again if they could, if only for the warm, bright, cherished feeling of simply being together.

And that alone was a feeling that neither of them could wait to experience again someday.
Chapter 35, Part 2: Together Forever

Chapter Summary

In which Steven and Mabel fuse into a four-eyed ball of hyperactive excitement

Chapter Notes

Ahhhh! I'm so excited about this chapter! I've been wanting to write it for so long and I think it turned out so great and I really hope you all think so too! Its completely original, and it introduces a fusion I've been so eager to introduce for so long! And if you'd like to take a peek at what they look like, check them out here: http://minijen.deviantart.com/art/Maven-sketches-2-681680665

But with that out of the way, enjoy! (and please feel free to let me know what you think!)

Chapter 35: Fusion Fiascos

Part 2: Together Forever

QTL COBB PMFOFQP,
QLDBQEBO XP LKB,
TEV TLRIA QEBV TXKQ
QL BKA XII QEB CRK?

Steven stifled an excited grin as he watched the Gems scramble about the house, gathering up
supplies for their latest mission. Of course, the supplies were actually intended more for him than them, since they were certainly going to be gone overnight on a distant monster hunt that they had deemed far too dangerous for their young ward to accompany them on. Still, Steven hardly minded staying behind this time. After all, while the Gems had been planning this mission for the past several days, the young Gem had been busy discreetly planning something of his own to occupy his time during their absence.

“Alright, Steven,” Pearl smiled as she finished folding the last of the young Gem’s shirts and putting it away. “That should be enough clean shirts to last you until we get back.”

“Thanks, Pearl,” Steven said with a slightly confused grin. “But uh… why do I need so many extra shirts if you guys are only going to be gone overnight?”

“Oh, well you know what I always say,” the white Gem began, nodding to the pile of neatly creased clothes. “Preparation is the best policy!”

“That’s honesty, Pearl,” Garnet coolly corrected the phrase. “But still, there’s no problem with being prepared.”

“I don’t get why you guys are worrying so much anyway,” Amethyst spoke up. “Like Steven said, we’re only gonna be gone for one night. He’ll be fine, right dude?”

“Right!” Steven enthusiastically agreed. “In fact, I’ll be even more than just fine. I’ll be great!”

“And why do you say that?” Pearl asked with an inquiring smirk.

“Ohhhh! Are you plannin’ on throwing down and partying hard while we’re gone, Ste-man?” Amethyst asked boisterously, putting the young Gem in a light headlock.

“Maaaybe…” Steven grinned coyly, pulling himself out of the purple Gem’s grip.

“Well, just make sure you don’t party too hard,” Garnet remarked with a smile that was quick to fade into foreboding sincerity. “That goes for both of you.”

“Both of who?” the young Gem asked, aptly confused.

“You’ll get it soon enough,” the Gem leader said as she made her way to the warp pad. “Or at least, I hope you’ll get it…"

Steven frowned, still quite befuddled as Amethyst and Pearl hopped up onto the pad alongside their leader. “Well, have fun with your wild party anyway, Steven!” the purple Gem called casually. “Wish I could be here to show your hundreds of guests how to really let it lose!”

“Amethyst, please,” Pearl scoffed, rolling her eyes. “He’s not going to have hundreds of guests.” She paused briefly, concern flashing over her face as she glanced to Steven. “Are you?”

“Nah,” the young Gem said with an honest shrug. “It’s just gonna be me, Connie, Dipper, and Mabel. We’re just gonna hang out around here, eat some snacks, watch some movies, you know, normal stuff for us.”

“Oh well that’s a relief,” the white Gem sighed calmly. “Though ‘normal’ stuff for you four usually seems to involve some kind of deadly monster or dangerous mystery or some other mishap… Just try to be careful, ok?”

“Got it!” Steven nodded firmly.
“Geez, can we just go already?” Amethyst asked with an impatient huff. “You guys act like we’re gonna be gone for years.”

“Hm… I suppose we should be on our way…” Pearl frowned before turning to the young Gem one last time. “Goodbye, Steven! Have fun! And remember to-”

“Stay safe, I know,” the young Gem let out a good-natured laugh. “Bye, guys! See you tomorrow!”

The Gems all waved their farewells back to their young charge as they warped off, leaving him alone, though, as he anticipated, not for long. Steven grinned to himself, his back still to the front door as he counted aloud in anticipation. “Three… Two… One-”

“It’s party time!” Mabel proclaimed, carrying Waddles as she burst into the house, Dipper and Connie following not too far behind her.

“Yeah it is!” Steven chimed in zealous agreement, spinning around to face them. “And it’s gonna be so awesome!”

“Well, as awesome as it can be with just the four of us,” Dipper remarked with a bemused smirk.

“So, what are we going to do all day since we have the whole place to ourselves?” Connie asked curiously.

“I think the better question is, what aren’t we going to do?!” Mabel replied with a huge smile as she sat Waddles down so he could join Lion on the couch. “Ever since Steven told me the Gems were gonna be gone overnight, the two of us have been planning out all of the wild and crazy fun that’s gonna fill the next 24 hours!”

“That’s right,” Steven nodded eagerly. “We have it all figured out. We’ll watch movies, play video games, maybe even hang out in my mom’s room again since the Gems aren’t here to tell us we can’t.”

“Ooo, Steven!” Connie chuckled jokingly. “You’re really living on the edge with plans like that.”

“Heh, maybe a little,” the young Gem laughed with something of a bashful grin.

“But no matter what we do, it’s all gonna be the best time ever!” Mabel quipped excitedly. “And you guys know why?”

“Um, because hopefully we won’t have to deal with anything that could get us killed this time?” Dipper guessed with a shrug.

“Nope! It’s because me and Steven planned everything,” Mabel beamed proudly as she threw an arm over the young Gem’s shoulder. “And nobody knows how to have fun like the two of us!”

“We really can’t argue with you guys there,” Connie said, sharing a laugh with Dipper as the pair decided to prove their point. In a perfectly coordinated move, Mabel tossed up a handful of the glitter she always had on her up into the air while Steven threw some confetti that he had gotten for the party. Together, both substances created a colorful, sparkling rain, one that covered the two entirely as they laughed and reveled in their shared enthusiasm. They didn’t even bother trying to shake the glitter or the confetti off as the laughter petered out and Steven let out a sudden gasp.

“Oh! That reminds me!” the young Gem exclaimed. “Before you guys got here, I was thinking about how we’d kick things off, and I figured that there’s no better way to get a party rolling than with snacks! You guys did bring the snacks, right?” he asked the twins.
Neither of them answered right away, instead exchanging a tentative glance that was soon broken as Dipper let out an aggravated sigh upon noticing Mabel guiltily biting her lip. “Seriously, Mabel?” he asked, exasperated. “I told you like, 20 times before we left the shack not to forget the snacks!”

“Aw, what can I say, Dipper?” Mabel said, putting on a charming, apologetic grin. “I was just so excited about the party that I couldn’t think about anything else!”

“I know, right?” Steven interjected. “I was so pumped for this that I actually forgot to eat breakfast this morning!”

“No way, me too!” Mabel exclaimed, awestruck by the coincidence.

“Whoa!” Steven gasped, stars in his eyes as he was clearly getting carried away by their shared excitement. “Then that means that instead of being Crying Breakfast Friends, we’re actually No-Breakfast Friends!”

“Steven, that’s the most hardcore thing ever!” Mabel practically shouted with verve as her and Steven enthusiastically high-fived. “No-Breakfast Friends forever! Or at least until the next time we eat breakfast.”

While, Dipper was far less entertained by their hyperactive zaniness, Connie couldn’t help but let out an amused laugh upon hearing their somewhat nonsensical proclamation. “What are we gonna do with you two?” she asked, shaking her head with a wry smirk.

“Love us because we’re great,” Mabel suggested coyly as Steven chuckled his agreement.

“Well, I’ll tell you what I’m gonna do,” Dipper spoke up staunchly. “I’m gonna go get those snacks. Come on, Mabel.”

“Oh, you know, I would come, but I-” Mabel cut herself off as she plopped down onto the couch, squeezing in between Lion and Waddles. “Just got comfy. So sorry, bro-bro, but I’m a no-go.”

“Figures,” Dipper scoffed, rolling his eyes.

“I’ll go with you to get the snacks, Dipper,” Connie offered. “It’ll give you a good chance to finish telling me about that theory on the Wizard Wilds you mentioned the other day.”

“Oh yeah!” Dipper instantly perked up at this, already leading the way to the door. “Well, we might as well get going. We’ll be back in a few minutes,” he said to Steven and Mabel.

“Try not to cover the house in glitter and confetti, ok?” Connie asked with a smirk.

“No promises,” the young Gem saluted jokingly. Dipper and Connie shared a small, amused laugh as they left, leaving Steven and Mabel behind to exchange a wide, eager smile. “So are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Steven,” Mabel began, leaping off of the couch. “If you know me, then you know I am. So…”

“Let’s get this party started!” they both shouted in boisterous unison before doing just that.

Knowing that Dipper and Connie wouldn’t mind if they kicked things off early without them, Steven and Mabel proceeded to jumpstart the fun by haphazardly tossing the streamers and the rest of the confetti that the young Gem had on hand all over the house. From there, they made sure Lion and Waddles were both properly equipped with party hats before taking copious amounts of
cheerful selfies with their respective pink pets. But still, the party didn’t really begin until Steven turned the radio on to a pop station, one that instantly got them both excited the moment they heard the familiar tune playing.

“Oh my gosh, I love this song!” Mabel exclaimed brightly, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet.

“Me too!” Steven laughed, already dancing around to the fast beat of the song. Mabel readily did the same, her movements uncalculated but energized and free nonetheless. Steven’s moves weren’t any more controlled as he slid across the floor, only to end up falling flat on his face as a result, chuckling loudly all the while. Mabel laughed hard as she hurried over to help him up, and though Steven surprised her by grabbing both of her hands as he stood and pulling them both into a fast, loose spin. By now, both of them were laughing so much that they could barely breathe, but they didn’t care. Instead, they just kept on “dancing”, twirling around the room together and scarcely even thinking about stopping any time soon. After all, how could they think about stopping when they were having so much sheer, unbridled fun?

As the song playing on the radio picked up its speed, so did Mabel and Steven, both of them throwing their heads back to accommodate their breathless laughter. For the most part, they remained steady, even if the world around them seemed to spin just as much as they were, though they hardly paid it any mind. Still, for as long as they had been dancing, it only made sense that one of them would trip up eventually, and this time it was Mabel. As the back of her heel happened to catch on one of the floorboards, she began to tumble backwards, inevitably pulling Steven down with her. Still, their laughter didn’t cease even as they crashed to the ground, even as they fell squarely onto each other, even as Steven’s gem lit up with a sudden, but familiar pink light, and even as that light enveloped them both.

In fact, they only continued to laugh as they lay on the floor, breathless but content and heedless of how their laughter sounded a bit… off. Yet as they opened their eyes, they noticed that something was off about their vision as well, though they couldn’t exactly pin down what. Their laughter faded into a curious frown as they lifted a hand up to their eyes, which widened upon noticing that hand was quite a bit larger than it should have been. Still, they waved it up and down, their confusion only doubling upon noticing that it didn’t leave their field of vision even as they lifted it up to their forehead. Bewildered, they slowly reached a finger to their forehead, only to somehow end up poking themselves in the eye.

“Oh!” they exclaimed, bolting upright into a sitting position as they gingerly rubbed the injured eye. “Why is my eye-” they cut themselves off with a gasp upon hearing their own voice clearly, singular, bright, and remarkably different. Still, the eye mystery was far more disconcerting for them, though they soon got their answer to it as they reached their hands to the edges of their head, and without poking any of them out this time, they managed to feel out just how many eyes they actually had. “Four eyes…” they whispered, shocked. “I have four eyes! Wait, I do?! That’s so cool! But how—what—what happened?”

Taken aback, they looked to their hands, seeing that there was only two of them as opposed to four, and two legs as well, both much longer and more shapely than they usually were. Long white socks, akin to the ones Mabel usually wore, reached up almost to their knees, yet somehow they were wearing a pair of pink sandals that were unquestionably Steven’s. By the time they glanced at the blue-violet skirt they were wearing, half of them had managed to piece it together, and as they found the pink stone over their exposed stomach, the inevitable realization dawned upon the other half.

“Oh my gosh…” they breathed, all four of their new eyes huge as their jaw dropped in shock. Still,
it didn’t take them long to break out into a smile so huge that it practically made their cheeks hurt. “We FUSED!” A rush of elation filled their newly shared mind and body as they let out a delighted squeal, letting themselves fall back down as they hugged themselves tightly. “We fused, we fused, we fused!” With another loud gasp, they sat up again, looking over to Lion and Waddles, who were both watching them curiously from the couch. “I gotta see what we look like!”

Unable to contain their immense excitement, the fusion placed their hands on the ground and slowly began to bring themselves to a standing position. However, since they weren’t exactly used to their new height, they were quick to end up toppling to the ground once more, thick brown hair falling over their upper set of eyes as they did. “Ok…” they huffed, blowing the hair away. “Let’s try that again…” They did so, managing to unsteadily pull themselves to their full, rather tall height, their legs shaking all the while as they tried to maintain balance. “Hey, look at us!” the fusion exclaimed with a proud grin. “Standing and all that cool junk. We’re doing great already! Now… to the bathroom!” Of course, no more than a second after this resolved proclamation, the fusion ended up tripping over their own two feet, falling to the floor yet again. After several false starts and clumsy trip ups, they miraculously managed to inch their way towards the bathroom, mostly learning how to properly walk by the time they practically fell on top of the sink. Still, despite how haphazard their brief journey had been, the fusion let out an amazed gasp as they glanced up at the mirror and took in their reflection for the first time.

Indeed, they looked like a perfect mix between Steven and Mabel, with a fair complexion, round face, and sure enough, four eyes, the upper pair being a fair bit smaller as they rested evenly above the usual pair. Their hair was a thick abundance of loose, medium-brown curls, coiffed and poofy at the top and pronounced with a pink headband. Aside from the long socks and violet skit, their top was a plush pink sweater, one that cut off at their elbows and at the midriff to reveal their gem. The design on it was a clear mix between the star on Steven’s usual shirt and Mabel’s favorite sweater, a star with colorful streaks pouring out from underneath it. The fusion smiled broadly as they looked over their tall, slender, admittedly appealing form, only to notice something else about their dimpled grin.

“Whoa…” the mused, leaning a bit forward and grinning to get a better view of the glimmering braces on their teeth. “These are new! Heh, yeah, they might take a little getting used to for you... Sorry… What? No way! I think they’re cool! Really? Yeah! Well, I think this is cool! What is? This!” They cut off their one-sided conversation between their two halves as they pointed to themselves. “Us! Just look at us! We look so awesome together! Yeah, we do! I mean, four eyes? That’s at least twice as many eyes as most people have! Which makes us twice as-”

The fusion found themselves being interrupted by the sound of the front door of the house opening. “Mabel! Steven! We’ve back!” Dipper called as him and Connie stepped into the house, both of them toting bags filled with a wide variety of snacks. However, what neither of them saw was the fusion as they tucked into the bathroom corridor, just out of their sight.

“Oh man, this is going to be so great!” they whispered to themselves excitedly. “Dipper and Connie are gonna totally flip out when they get a load of us! We should surprise them! Great idea! Thanks, I knew it was a good one.”

“Oh, so let me see if I’ve got this straight…” Connie said to Dipper as they sat the snacks down in the kitchen, still referring to the Spirit Morph Saga theory they had been discussing ever since they left. “So, according to your theory, the Wizard Wilds were actually a gateway to another dimension that Lisa’s been in this whole time?”

“Yeah,” Dipper nodded firmly. “I mean, it only makes sense in context. Like I said, all the other characters just felt... off after she passed through there. And in my experience, even the smallest
“I think you might have been reading a certain journal a bit too much then,” Connie remarked with a small chuckle, one that Dipper couldn’t help but join in on a beat later. However, their levity was short lived as a certain fusion finally decided to emerge from their hiding place.

“Ta da!” the fusion chimed loudly, leaping out into plain view with an exciting flair. Startled, all Dipper and Connie could initially do was stare at them in absolute bewilderment, but even so, a wide, cheerful smile claimed the fusion’s face as they looked down at the pair. Still, there was only a very brief moment of silence on both sides before the fusion spoke up again. “Oh wait, can we do that again? I feel like our ‘ta da’ was a little flat. Oh, good point, good point. I think this time we should come out with a little more ‘sha-pow!’ or ‘ba-boom!’ Or maybe some-”

“Uh, whoa, hold on,” Dipper cut in, trying to not sound completely dumbfounded, even if him and Connie both very much were. “Before you redo your… uh, ‘grand entrance’, do you mind telling us exactly who you are and how you got in here?”

The fusion gasped, seemingly offended, though they still smiled slyly nonetheless. “Why, Dipper! It hurts that you don’t even recognize your own sister!”

“What?” Dipper raised an eyebrow, looking over the mysterious stranger once again only to realize that the sweater, headband, and braces were all unmistakably familiar. “Mabel?!”

“Well… you’re half right…” the fusion winked, subtly motioning down to the gem on their navel.

“No way…” Connie gasped, her eyes widening in realization. “Steven?!?”

“Mm hm,” the fusion nodded, a huge smile on their face as they held their hands behind their back.

“Wait,” Dipper looked to them with newfound shock upon figuring out what was going on. “Did… did you guys-”

“Mm hm!” the fusion cut him off, nodding once again, this time more enthusiastically.

“So…” Connie ventured, her jaw dropped in awe. “So you’re a-”

“Mm hm!”

“And you’re-”

“Mm hm! Mm hm! Mm hm!” the fusion was hopping up and down in unbridled elation by this point. “And it feels great. Oh, you guys can’t even imagine—well, I guess you can, Connie, since you and me—er, Steven have fused before, but still—it’s incredible!”

“Heh, yeah it… it really is…” Connie said with a small, awkward smile, subtly glancing away from the fusion as she rubbed her arm.

“So, what do you guys think?” they asked, twirling around blithely, though almost tripping to the ground in the process. “Don’t we look awesome? Admit it, we totally do.”

“Uh, sure…” Dipper said halfheartedly, still quite bewildered by this strange situation. “So um… why do you guys have four eyes?”

“I dunno,” the fusion shrugged honestly. “But isn’t it neat? Check this out. Now I see you…” they smirked, covering up their upper set of eyes with their hand before moving it down to their lower
eyes. “And now I still see you! It’s like some sort of crazy fusion eye magic!” With a bright laugh, the fusion continued shifting their hand between both sets of eyes, blinking and winking and crossing them all the while just for fun. In the midst of this, they didn’t notice Dipper and Connie exchange a perplexed glance, neither of them entirely sure of what to make of the fusion’s sudden appearance and exuberant demeanor. But in the end, Connie was the one to finally break through their fun, a wave of newfound worry washing over her as she looked to the sanguine fusion again.

“Um… Steven? Mabel?”

“Yeah?” the fusion answered, though Connie never got the chance to pose her question as they gasped sharply. “Oh my gosh! Connie, you just reminded me! We don’t even have a cool fusion name for ourselves yet!”

“What are you talking about?” Dipper asked, confused.

“Y’know, like how I—or, Steven and Connie went by Stevonnie when they were fused?” the fusion explained. “I want something like that too! It’ll be way easier than you guys having to call us ‘Steven-and-Mabel’ all the time, at least. So let’s see here…” the fusion’s cheery tone turned thoughtful as they began to pace around the den. “Steven plus Mabel equals… Stabel!” Their excited smile quickly faded upon saying this name out loud. “Huh, that sounded a lot cooler in my head… Or is it our head…? Eh, whatever. Either way, Stabel is out. We can’t go around calling ourselves another word for a barn! No, instead we need something exciting, something really us…”

“Uh… you guys?” Connie tried to get their attention again, only for the fusion to instantly quiet her.

“Shhh!” Stars were in all four of the fusion’s eyes as they let out a softer gasp this time. “I got it! Mabel plus Steven equals… drumroll please!” They looked to Dipper and Connie expectantly, only to receive confused stares in return. “I said: drumroll please!” This time, the pair loosely complied, lightly tapping on the nearby coffee table to create a rather weak drumroll, but still, it was more than enough for the fusion to proclaim their new name by. “Maven!”

“Maven?” Dipper and Connie repeated in puzzled unison.

“You heard me,” the newly-dubbed fusion grinned proudly. “From here on out, just call us Maven! It just sorta rolls right off the tongue, doesn’t it? Maven, Ma—ven, Mmmav—en, Mave—ennn, Mav—.”

“Maven?” Connie interrupted, using the fusion’s new name rather hesitantly.

“Yeah?” Maven grinned, clearly relishing being called by their shared moniker.

“Uh… well… I was just…” Connie frowned, unsure of how to go about posing this question to the new fusion. After all, a part of her remembered well just how odd and different it felt to be part of a fusion, and the last thing she wanted to do was make either Steven or Mabel as uncomfortable as she had frequently felt that night. So instead, she redacted her question and reshaped it as an observation instead. “Um… you guys sure do seem like you’re having a… a good time together…”

“Good? Are you kidding? We’re having an amazing time!” Maven gushed, ecstatic. “I mean, one minute we were just dancing and laughing and having fun and the next—bam! We’re a totally awesome four-eyed fusion! This has seriously gotta be the best day ever. We’ve only been fused for like, I dunno, how long as it been?”

“Uh, maybe around 15 minutes?” Dipper guessed, checking his watch.
“Whoa, really?” the fusion asked. “It feels like it’s been so much longer! Still, all 15 of those minutes have been some of the funnest I can remember!” To accentuate their point, Maven attempted another twirl, only to end up completely falling this time. Still, they hardly cared as they instead burst into zealous laughter as they lay on the floor, their long hair strewn around them in a haphazard mess. Their laughter only increased as Lion and Waddles both sauntered over to them, both of them gently licking the fusion’s face, somehow recognizing them as the amalgamation of their respective owners.

“Are you guys sure you’re not having a little… too much fun?” Dipper asked, aptly concerned upon seeing Maven go into what was essentially a full-on laughing fit. Still, the fusion was quick to calm down a little, pulling themselves upright into a sitting position as they urged their pink pets away.

“Whaaaaat?” they asked, their tone joking and incredulous. “No way! Since when was having ‘too much fun’ ever even a thing? Now, you know what would be fun?”

“Um… actually starting the party we all came here for?” Connie suggested with an admittedly anxious smile.

“Hm, that could be fun…” Maven mused. “But I was thinking of something even funner: taking this fusion show on the road!”

“Uh… I don’t know if that’s such a good idea, you guys…” Dipper remarked, looking the fusion up and down skeptically.

“Pfft, come on, Dip-bro,” Maven playfully scoffed. “I know you guys both love me, but you can’t keep all this excitement to yourselves. Now come on!” They quipped, picking themselves off of the floor and rushing to the door, throwing it open with gusto. “The world’s just dying to get its first taste of Mav—ah!” As the fusion attempted to make their way down the steps, their balance was thrown off yet again, their clumsiness showing as they loudly tumbled over the porch railing. Alarmed, Dipper and Connie rushed to make sure they were unharmed, and sure enough, as they looked over the railing, Maven confirmed that they were. “We’re ok!”

“Oh boy…” Dipper sighed tentatively to Connie. “Something tells me that this is gonna be a long day…”

Connie simply frowned as she watched the buoyant fusion easily pick themselves up off the ground, laughing warmly all the while as they wrapped their arms around themselves in something of a tight, celebratory ‘hug’. “Tell me about it…”

The walk down to the Mystery Shack was anything but uneventful as Maven enthusiastically led the way, not sparing any of the countless quips that happened to come to their shared mind. Neither Dipper nor Connie had much of a chance to say anything in edgewise as the fusion recounted in excruciating detail exactly how they fused and how they felt. Aside from externally conversing with themselves, Maven had a bit of a habit of repeating themselves, which was why it ended up taking them most of the walk for them to explain why they unanimously loved their shortened sweater. Their excited banter was only broken up by them occasionally stumbling over their own two feet, a testament to their newfound shared clumsiness, though for the most part they managed to remain standing. Still, by the time they made it to the shack, the fusion had already come up with a rather intricate plan for their first ‘public’ appearance, one that they ended up roping Dipper and Connie into helping them with, even if they were nowhere near as enthusiastic about it as
Regardless, the fusion eagerly waited right outside the gift shop entrance as the pair went inside. It was a rather slow business day, so Stan and Soos were really the only ones around, but before either Dipper or Connie could even say a word to them in greeting, Maven ended up bursting in far ahead of their cue. “Did somebody mention Steven and Mabel?!” they chimed, their usual huge smile wide on their face.

“No, because we literally just walked in here,” Dipper deadpanned, giving the fusion a somewhat exasperated look.

“I thought you said you were going to wait at least five minutes before coming in,” Connie added with a frown.

“Oh…” Maven’s excitement dimmed down, but only a little. “Whoops. Dang it! That makes two botched entrances in one day… We gotta step up our game! Oh! I know! We should-”

“Hey, you!” Stan cut in, sending an annoyed scowl at the fusion, clearly not recognizing them. “Tall, loud, and kooky! Close that door, buy something, and get out before I have you run in for having too many eyes.”

Instead of being offended by this remark, Maven simply let out a boisterous laugh, one that admittedly caught the conman, as well as everyone else off guard. “Oh, Grunkle Pines, you’re so funny!” they chuckled, deriving even more confusion from the others.

“What?” Stan simply asked flatly after a moment of bewildered silence as the fusion walked over to him, heedless of the apparent awkwardness of the moment.

“And whoa, look at that!” Maven gawked, stars in their eyes. “I’m even taller than you are, Mr. Stan! I mean, it’s cool enough being taller than Connie and even more taller than Dipper, but we’re like a giant! You know, in a way, maybe you could even call us a… giant woman! Eh? Eh?”

The fusion’s excitement was once again met with blank stares of bewilderment from both Stan and Soos, while Dipper and Connie merely frowned apprehensively over how carelessly Maven seemed to be presenting themselves. Still, the conman was the one to break the silence, shaking his head to clear his puzzlement away as his usual stoic manner returned. “Alright, someone care to explain what the deal with four eyes over here is?” he asked, not even noticing as the fusion’s usual smile turned to surprise upon hearing this. Fortunately, before they could attempt their own extravagant way of explaining themselves, Dipper cut in and did it for them.

“Uh, well… you see, Grunkle Stan…” he began tentatively, not quite sure how to describe the situation in a way the conman would understand. “That’s sort of… Mabel and Steven… fused together into… the same person…”

“Fused?” Stan raised an incredulously eyebrow as he glanced towards Maven, who’s usual smile had returned in full. “You mean that crazy thing the Gems do with each other where they turn into huge broads with a bunch of eyes and arms?”

“Yep!” Maven beamed proudly. “And this broad just so happens to have four of those! The eyes, I mean. We only have two arms! By the way, what’s a broad?”

“Geez,” Stan rolled his eyes, his aloof scowl returning. “Well, there’s no question about it. That’s definitely Mabel and Steven in there. Nobody else is as goofy or naive as those two.”

“Aw, thank you!” Maven gushed, not fully understanding what the conman had meant. “Though if
you want, you can just call me Maven. It’s a lot easier and a lot awesomer.”

“Dudes, this is so cool!” Soos exclaimed as he walked up to the fusion. “You’re like, exactly what I pictured a Steven-Mabel fusion to look like! See?” The handyman grinned as he held up a rather sloppy sketch, one that only bore a very vague semblance to the fusion themselves, but it managed to easily impress them nonetheless.

“Whoa!” Maven gasped, taking the drawing and glancing over it. “It looks just like us!”

“Soos, did you draw a picture of Mabel and Steven fused?” Dipper asked, aptly confused.

“…No reason…” Soos replied tersely, awkwardly stuffing the drawing away into a folder simply labeled ‘fusions’.

“So, you kids aren’t doing anything… weird in there, are ya?” Stan asked, eyeing the fusion up and down suspiciously. While Maven didn’t quite catch onto his train of thought with this question, Dipper and Connie did and both of them were more than flustered enough for the fusion at the mere implication.

“Weird?” Maven asked innocently, raising an eyebrow. “Like what?”

“Oh, you know,” Stan shrugged flippantly. “Like holding hands or hugging or-”

“Oh yeah!” the fusion exclaimed brightly, straightening up and heading for the door voluntarily. “You know, I’ve already been planning out meet and greets with everyone in Gravity Falls! Whoa, really? That’ll be great! We’re gonna have to go fast if we wanna say hi to everyone! Eh, I’m sure we’ll have enough time. After all, if I know you, and if I know you, then I know we-”

“Ok, we get it. You guys are excited, what else is new?” Dipper cut in, somewhat annoyed by Maven’s near-constant back-and-forth amongst themselves. Even so, the fusion continued to happily ramble really only to themselves as they stepped outside the shack, Dipper and Connie dully following them and leaving Stan and Soos behind.

“Whoo,” the conman breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m glad they left when they did. I was worried I was gonna have to give them ‘the talk’.”

“You can always give me ‘the talk’, Mr. Pines,” Soos offered blithely, clearly not gathering what Stan had just implied. “And when you’re done, then I can show you the fusion I drew of you and me!” The handyman pulled out another rough sketch from his fusion folder. “I call him ‘Stoos’!”

“Soos, put that thing away,” Stan cringed upon seeing the drawing, making his opinion of it clear, even if Soos was hardly offended. “It’s making my eyes hurt just looking at it.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Mr. Pines,” the handyman reassured. “The next version will be even better. Maybe I’ll give us four eyes, just like Maven! That way we can be Super Stoos!”

“Yeah, you go ahead and do that…” Stan deadpanned dryly, heading to the den. “I’ll just… be over here. Way over here…”
Needless to say, Maven was as cordial and talkative as ever as the kids headed into town. As the fusion had planned, they offered a cheerful greeting to every single person they passed by, be they acquaintances or total strangers. Of course, they got plenty of curious stares due to both their odd number of eyes as well as their incredibly lively demeanor. But even so, Maven hardly noticed seeing as how they were having far too much fun to even overhear the bewildered gasps or confused whispers concerning them.

“So I think I’m finally getting the hang of this whole ‘walking without falling’ thing,” Maven remarked to Dipper and Connie as they followed behind them. “There’s really nothing to it once you—ow!” The fusion cut themselves off as they abruptly ran into a pole that they had been too distracted to notice. “Hey now!” they laughed it off, rubbing the sore spot on their head as they stepped past the pole. “Who put you there, you sneaky little pole? Ah well. Anyway, what was I saying? Oh yeah! Walking!”

Undeterred by their clumsiness, Maven continued their chipper monologue, only interrupting themselves to see hello to any new faces they saw. “Yeesh, do those two ever stop talking?” Dipper remarked to Connie with a small, sardonic smirk.

“I heard that, Dipper!” Maven interjected before Connie could respond, though all the same the fusion was grinning wryly. “And you know what I think? I think you might just be a little bit jealous.”

“Jealous?”

“Yeah! ‘Cause you’re the only one out of all of us who hasn’t gotten to fuse yet!” Maven goaded. “And you should really try it sometime! No joke, it’s one of the best feelings ever.”

Dipper didn’t reply to this appeal right away, instead glancing the fusion up and down skeptically before tersely looking away. “Uh… no thanks. I’m good.”

A look of slight disappointment filled Maven’s face for a moment, but once again, they were quick to shake the negative emotion off. “You don’t know what you’re missing, but oh well, I guess. More fusion fun for me!”

Jaunty as ever, the fusion skipped on ahead, continuing their parade of greetings, much to Connie’s bewilderment in particular as she watched them casually and sociably interact with everyone they encountered. “How do they do it…?” she asked softly, staring at Maven incredulously, though the fusion didn’t notice. “They make it look so… so easy…”

“Make what look easy?” Dipper asked, having overheard her.

“Being fused!” Connie huffed. “When me and Steven were Stevonnie, it was great, yeah, but were nothing like… like that,” she nodded towards Maven, who was in the midst of heartily shaking Mr. Smiley’s hand. “We were shy and scared and… awkward. So why was Stevonnie so anxious when Maven’s so… so not anxious?”

“Well they are made up of two of the biggest social butterflies, like, ever,” Dipper pointed out. “Still, I’m sort of getting the feeling that maybe they were wrong about me being the jealous one here…”

“What?!” Connie scoffed, offended. “I am not jealous of them!”

“Whoa, calm down,” Dipper said with a small laugh. “I was just kidding. To be honest, I kind of agree with you. ‘Maven’ is… well, they’re a lot to handle. If we’re lucky, then Steven and Mabel
will probably just end up wearing themselves out and split up before they get too out of control.”

“I hope so…” Connie muttered, sending a small, brief, almost resentful glance the fusion’s way.

All the same, Maven was still effectively in their own little world, though their already constant excitement only doubled upon seeing a familiar pair heading down the street in their direction. “Candy! Grenda!” they shouted exuberantly, running on ahead to greet the girls. “Hi, guys! Notice anything different about us?” They laughed, twirling blithely and not noticing Candy and Grenda exchange a befuddled glance of apt confusion.

“Who are you, you mysterious, sparkly stranger?” Candy asked curiously, noting the glitter that covered the fusion from when Steven and Mabel had thrown it over themselves earlier.

“And where did you get that adorable sweater?!” Grenda asked in her usual boisterous way.

Maven simply laughed once more, quite used to people not recognizing them by now. “Both of those questions have a pretty simple answer that’s totally gonna blow your minds!” they exclaimed with a dazzling grin. “You see, girls, I’m what happens when you take a Steven and a Mabel and fuse them together into an awesomely magical, always loveable Maven!”

“Whaaaat?!” Candy and Grenda asked in stunned unison, looking to the fusion in incredulous amazement upon hearing their astonishing claim.

“Crazy, I know, but it’s completely true!” Maven smirked broadly. “And if you don’t take my word for it, just ask Dipper and Connie. They were there!”

“No, we weren’t,” Dipper clarified. “We showed up right after you guys fused, remember?”

“Oh, right,” the fusion shrugged. “Eh, close enough.”

“You two look incredible together!” Candy quipped to Maven, clearly impressed.

“I know, right?” Maven smirked confidently. “I’m like, the total package! Beauty, brawn, and… uh… that third thing!”

“Brains?” Connie suggested dryly.

“Ew, no!” the fusion stuck their tongue out. “We don’t have brains all over us. That would be gross!”

“Oh my gosh, you guys! Oh my gosh!” Grenda interjected with a huge gasp. “I just realized something awesome! You guys fusing is just like me and Candy when we fuse into Grendy!”

“Whoa, you guys can fuse?!” Maven asked, awestruck, even though Dipper and Connie were quick to exchange a doubtful glance.

“Yes!” Candy readily agreed. “Allow us to demonstrate.” With a large smile, she began to climb up Grenda’s back, easily perching herself upon the larger girl’s shoulders. They were still a good bit shorter than the actual fusion, but even so, Maven was quite impressed.

“Wow!” they gasped, stars in their eyes as they looked the other ‘fusion’ up and down. “And I thought our fusion was cool! You guys make such a beautiful fusion!”

“They can’t be serious…” Dipper remarked to Connie, both of them aptly bewildered by the fusion’s bizarre excitement.
“It’s very nice to meet you, ‘Grendy’,” Maven winked as they shook Candy’s hand.

“Nice to meet you too, ‘Maven’!” Grenda and Candy attempted to say in unison, though they did stumble up a bit, though the fusion only chuckled warmly in response. However, this levity happened to catch the attention of a certain heiress who was passing by, and as usually, she didn’t hesitate to throw a scathing remark the group’s way.

“Hey, Candy!” Pacifica called as she walked past, smirking haughtily all the while. “How’d you manage to hitch a piggyback ride from a real pig? Ha!”

The girls’ shared cheerful mood was instantly shattered upon hearing this biting insult, and without even a word in edgewise, Candy slowly dismounted from Grenda’s shoulders. Still, even if they didn’t have anything to throw back at the heiress, Maven was more than prepared to do the job for them. “Hey!” the fusion shouted, pouting impetuously. “That was a really mean thing to say, Pacifica!”

“Oh really?” the heiress turned to face Maven, a brief look of bewilderment washing over her expression before it returned to her usual smug scowl. “Uh, have we met before? Because I’m pretty sure I’d remember meeting an oversized, loud-mouthed, four-eyed freak like you.”

For a moment, the fusion’s eyes widened with what seemed to be hurt, but they were quick to shake it off in the midst of their righteous frustration. “You haven’t met me before, but if you know Steven and Mabel, then you know me,” Maven paused for an awkward moment before clarifying. “Mostly because I am them. Fused together. By the way, its ok to be impressed by how great we are. Honestly, I would be too.”

“Are you kidding me?” Pacifica scoffed, raising an eyebrow upon hearing this. But all the same, this information gave her more than enough ammunition to tease them with. “Who would ever be impressed with you?”

“Oh, lots of people,” Maven grinned. “For starters, these two were pretty impressed,” they nodded to Dipper and Connie, who could only glance at the fusion somewhat worriedly. “And so were Soos and Grunkle Pines. And when the Gems get back I’m sure they’ll be super wowed by us too!”

“Yeah, well I’m not,” Pacifica rolled her eyes. “I mean, just look at you. You look like you’re a teenager but you’re dressed like you’re five. Your hair’s just one big frizzy mess desperately in need of some conditioner. And as for those four eyes of yours? I don’t even think I need to say that they’re downright creepy.”

“W-what?” Maven asked, their usual cheery demeanor diminishing quite a bit upon being verbally thrashed in such a way.

“And honestly,” the heiress continued, heedless of her hurtful words. “If you really are some weird fusion of Mabel and Steven, then that just makes you an even bigger walking disaster.”

Maven seemed to shrink back a little upon hearing this, their expression conveying both surprise and distress, as though Pacifica had physically injured them instead of emotionally. And oddly enough, the fusion didn’t even have any sort of retort to any of it, instead glancing down meekly as they tried to reconcile the matter between themselves silently. Which was why both Dipper and Connie unanimously decided that it was time for them to intervene.

“Hey, Pacifica, why don’t you back off already?” Dipper asked hotly, sending the heiress a cross glare.
“Seriously, what’s your problem?” Connie asked, just as incensed. “Maven didn’t even do anything to you, so leave them alone!”

“Hey, it’s not my fault that something weird always happens whenever you guys are around,” Pacifica scowled. “You know, I’m surprised that you two haven’t ‘fused’ into the world’s biggest nerd yet.”

This insult hardly even phased Dipper or Connie seeing as how they were both too mutually frustrated by the heiress’s callous manner and especially by her harsh treatment towards the fusion. “Say you’re sorry,” Dipper said rigidly, eliciting yet another scoff from Pacifica.

“What? To you two? Ha, as if.”

“Not to us,” Connie glowered. “To them.” She pointed at Maven, now standing behind them, still uncharacteristically silent and morose.

“Oh, sure,” the heiress deadpanned. “I’ll be sure to do that as soon as I-” Pacifica abruptly cut herself off, her smug smirk turning into a look of surprise upon stealing another glance at the fusion. Maven held onto themselves in a tight, protective embrace, their mouth buried into the collar of their sweater as they looked away fretfully. Though what oddly enough got the heiress to finally change her teasing tone was the transparent tears welling up in all four of the fusion’s eyes. “Whoa,” Pacifica breathed, her own eyes wide and filled with incoming regret. “Uh, I didn’t mean to… Look, you guys aren’t… I… Um…” she trailed off, letting out a remorseful sigh as she looked away herself. “Sorry.”

Upon hearing this, Maven finally glanced up, letting out a small sniffle as they hurried to wipe their first few tears away. The fusion was surprisingly quick to bounce back, and in mere seconds they were back to their usual perky selves. “Aw, don’t worry about it, Pacifica!” they beamed, looking as though they had never let sadness overtake them at all. “I know you really didn’t mean any of that! Besides I know it’s kind of hard to find the right words to describe a super cool fusion like me.”

“Uh… yeah…” Pacifica said stiffly, still not making eye contact with the fusion out of guilt. “I… I’m just gonna… go…”

“Bye, Pacifica!” Maven called out after the heiress as she awkwardly departed. “We’ll have to meet up for another game of mini-golf sometime soon! Hopefully we won’t run into any murderous living golf balls next time!”

“Ugh,” Connie groaned after Pacifica was out of earshot. “You know, you’d think that whole disaster would have taught her not to be such a little-” She cut herself off as Maven suddenly placed a hand on both her and Dipper’s shoulders. They both glanced up at the fusion curiously, only to see them stifling a huge, grateful smile by biting their lip.

“Uh… you guys?” Dipper frowned in confusion upon seeing this, but before he could question their sudden elation further, Maven suddenly knelt down to their level and wrapped them both into a tight, practically crushing hug.

“I knew it!” the fusion gushed, refusing to relinquish their embrace with the startled pair. “I knew you guys really do like me!”

“W-what?” Connie asked, finding it somewhat hard to breathe with Maven holding onto them so tightly. “Of course we like you! We always have. I mean, you are Steven and Mabel after all.”
“Yeah, I know,” Maven finally let them go, though they were still kneeling to remain on eye level with the pair. “But I’m not talking about them. I’m talking about me: Maven! I could tell you guys were a little iffy on me when you first saw me, but after how you just came to my rescue like that, now I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you two really like me on my own! Which is just… so… great!” Unable to contain their building delight, the fusion pulled Dipper and Connie into yet another hug, not even noticing the concerned glance they were exchanging all the while, especially in light of the confusing, rather alarming points that Maven had just implied.

“Oh, yeah…” Dipper said apprehensively as Connie let out a small, awkward, forced laugh. “It’s… great…”

For the remainder of the afternoon, Maven continued their excitable trip around town, stopping at all of Steven and Mabel’s respective favorite spots, including the Big Donut, the ice cream shop, Gravity Fries, the pet store, and more. Of course, Dipper and Connie tagged along, mostly for the sake of making sure that the boisterous fusion didn’t accidentally get themselves into any trouble, but the entire affair was punctuated with an underlying sense of worry that neither of them dared to bring up to Maven themselves. Still, neither of them could deny that they were concerned. Seeing as how they had been fused since that morning, Maven had already surpassed the amount of time Stevonnie had been fused for, a fact that bothered Connie in particular. And yet even so, they showed no signs nor made any mention of wanting or needing to split up, almost as if they had no intentions of doing so at all. As a matter of fact, they were still going strong by the time the group returned to the shack as the sun was just starting to go down.

“Woo!” Maven exclaimed, contentedly plopping themselves down onto the couch on the porch. “Some day, huh? I know we kind of missed out on our party, but if you ask me, this a ton more fun! Don’t you guys think so?”

“Oh… yeah…” Connie dully nodded along with Dipper, both of them looking away from the fusion. “Well, it’s getting late. My parents will be expecting me home soon…”

“Aw, already?” Maven frowned. “But we were having such a great time! Are you sure you gotta go, Connie?”

“Yeah, I really should…” Connie shrugged, finally glancing towards the fusion with a sense of newfound hopefulness. “And… I was kind of hoping to say goodbye to Steven and Mabel before I left…”

“Oh,” Maven leaned forward, their expression innocent and oblivious. “Ok, bye!”

“Oh… I don’t think that’s what she meant, guys,” Dipper interjected, crossing his arms.

“Huh?” the fusion raised a confused eyebrow before turning back to Connie. “Then… what did you mean?”

“I mean I want you to-” she cut brusquely herself off, biting her lip anxiously. She had no idea how to phrase this in a way that wouldn’t offend or hurt either of them, which is what blurring out how she really felt about the situation would certainly do. So instead, she continued awkwardly dancing around it in the hopes that they’d comply. “I… I meant… I wanted to say goodbye to both of you: Steven and Mabel.”

“Ohhhh I get it!” Maven exclaimed with newfound supposed understanding, rising from their seat.
For a moment, Dipper and Connie looked to them in anticipation, but their hopes were quickly dashed as the fusion remained just that and merely pulled Connie into a fond, farewell embrace. “Bye, Connie! Have a great night! We’ll see you tomorrow!”

“Uh… yeah…” Connie replied halfheartedly, clearly disappointed as the hug dissipated and she turned to leave. “See you guys… tomorrow…”

Maven continued to cheerfully wave after Connie as she headed off, heedless of the disapproving look Dipper was sending them until they happened to steal a glance down at him. “What?” they asked, not understanding his apparent exasperation.

“Um, don’t you guys think you’ve been at this for… long enough?” he asked, trying his best to tread carefully with what he said.

“At what?” the fusion asked, though there were quick to glean what he meant. “Oh, you mean being fused? Come on, Dip-bro! We’re barely even getting started! I at least gotta stick around long enough to show the Gems when they get back tomorrow!”

“So… what? You two are just gonna stay fused overnight then?”

Maven paused, taking an apparent moment to consider this possibility before reaching their unanimous conclusion. “I don’t see why we can’t,” they shrugged blithely. “It’ll be just like a slumber party!”

“Wait, you’re not serious, are you?” Dipper asked, looking to the fusion dubiously.

“Well, of course we are! And this slumber party will be even better than our last one since hopefully this time Lion won’t barge in and try to sleep on your face! Plus, I’ve never slept as a fusion before… What if we end up having the same dream? Oh my gosh, that would be so awesome! I really hope we do!” Maven continued to excitedly ramble to themselves as they headed inside the shack, already coming up with plans for their latest slumber party. Dipper followed not too far behind them, letting out a tired sigh as he silently hoped the evening would go by quickly.

Unfortunately, the evening went by anything but quickly for Dipper, though for Maven, it passed far too fast. Fueled by their seemingly boundless energy and ecstasy, the fusion launched themselves into the array of festive activities they had planned, from baking cookies, to mixing together a new take on Mabel juice that they aptly called “Maven juice”, to sneaking Lion into the shack so he could join the cuddle session they were having with Waddles, to trying on different pairs of sunglasses over both sets of eyes. By the time they finally decided to start settling down and getting ready for bed, they had managed to fill at least several pages of Mabel’s scrapbook with a colorful retelling of their self-proclaimed “fusion fun”. Fun that they had every intention of continuing into the next day after a good night’s sleep.

“Hm…” Maven mused, holding Mabel’s usual night shit up to themselves and seeing that it was a good deal too small for them to fit into. “Well, I guess we’ll just have to sleep in our sweater for tonight. That’s not a problem. It’s so cozy, after all! No wonder you wear these things all the time! Heh, yeah, they are pretty great, aren’t they?”

As the fusion continued to converse to themselves, Dipper subtly observed them whilst sitting in bed, pretending to read the journal, though even so, he kept his pressing concerns to himself, just as he had for most of the evening. Yet at the same time, he was quickly starting to come to the conclusion that perhaps it would be better to finally present them to Maven, especially after spending the past several hours of watching their unbridled enthusiasm run amok. The lengthy stint of their fusion’s stay, as well as their general intensity and apparent disregard for anything aside
from themselves as certainly alarming. In fact, all of those things combined had Dipper admittedly worried for what the long-term effects on both Mabel and Steven might be, even if he didn’t have the experience in fusion himself to know if it was potentially harmful at all. Still, as Maven continued to ready themselves for bed, he decided that perhaps it was time to at the very least bring the matter up to them.

“Uh, Maven?” Dipper spoke up, still not quite used to calling them by their shared name.

“What’s up, Dip-bro?” Maven brightly replied, spinning around to face him with a bright smile.

Dipper hesitated before continuing, largely out of the fear that what he was about to ask could very well offend them, which was honestly the last thing he wanted to do. Still, he knew that this had to be addressed. “Um… so exactly how long do you guys plan on keeping this up for?”

“What, you mean being fused?” the fusion asked, stretching out a bit. “I dunno. Till whenever, I guess. I figure we’ll just keep riding it out for as long as it feels good. And to be honest, it still feels pretty darn good.”

“Ok but… you know you can’t stay fused forever… right?” Dipper asked tentatively.

Now it was Maven’s turn to take pause, their four-eyed gaze subtly shifting downward as they offered a hasty response. “Oh, uh, yeah, I know. But, for right now, I really don’t see any problems with us staying like this. We’re all having a great time, everything’s great, we’re all great! So… yeah! No worries!”

“Well… I kind of can’t help but be a little worried about you guys…” Dipper admitted with an apprehensive frown. “I mean, the Gems said so themselves; this whole humans and Gems fusing thing is totally new territory. We still don’t know if there’s any crazy side effects to it or not. I just… don’t want to see either of you guys get hurt…”

A look of immense concern washed over the fusion’s face upon hearing this, but once again, they were quick to chase it away and return to their normal sense of complacency without a hitch. “Aw, don’t be silly, Dipper!” they scoffed with a small, reassuring laugh. “I think that you’re maybe being just a little paranoid, but I guess that’s usual.”

Maven let out another light chuckle as Dipper simply rolled his eyes, somewhat frustrated by their refusal to take him (or anything else for that matter) seriously. “Still, we feel fine. Better than fine, actually, we feel-”

“You got it!” the fusion exclaimed, winking with both sets of their eyes. Their cheeriness did diminish a little though as they took notice of Dipper’s rather crestfallen expression, one that a part of them couldn’t help but feel somehow strangely responsible for. “But hey!” they added, speaking without really thinking. “Uh, if it’ll make you feel better, we’ll… we’ll, uh… we’ll unfuse after the Gems get back to tomorrow. Does that sound ok?”

“Really?” Dipper asked, raising a suspicious eyebrow at them though there was clear hopefulness in his tone. “You guys really mean that?”

“Um… o-of course we do!” Maven laughed awkwardly, conspicuously hiding their hands behind their back. And with good reason too, seeing as it kept their tightly crossed fingers conveniently out of Dipper’s sight. “I… I promise.”

Fortunately for the fusion, Dipper seemed to buy this as he let out a relieved sigh and closed the
journal for the night. “Well, that’s good. You guys probably need a break from each other by now anyway, right?”

“Uh… maybe?” the fusion somewhat lied, knowing that their two halves were anything but tired of each other. If anything, the longer they remained together, the more they wanted to remain so. But given the nature of the ongoing conversation, they suddenly felt as though they couldn’t admit that. So instead, they simply walked over to Mabel’s bed, flopping down onto it and instantly noticing that their long legs dangled over the edge by quite a bit. “Aw, the bed’s too short!”

“Well, given that you guys are like, 6 feet tall now, I could have told you that a twin-sized bed wasn’t going to be the most comfortable fit,” Dipper deadpanned with a small, amused smile as he turned the attic light out. “Good night.”

“Yeah…” Maven frowned, for the first time feeling uncomfortable and out of place as they curled up into a ball under the covers just so they could fit under them. “Good… good night…”

Despite their brief bout of insecurity the previous night, Maven had, as usual, bounced back to their usual perky, overzealous self by the time they woke up, still fused, the next morning. A fact that Dipper found out the hard way as the fusion abruptly and excitedly shook him awake. “Dipper, wake up! Wake up, Dipper! Wake up!” Maven practically shouted, pulling on his arm in an attempt to rouse him.

Of course, Dipper couldn’t very easily remain asleep with the fusion essentially yelling right in his ear, so instead he groggily sat up and wiped the seep from his eyes. “Ok, ok, I’m up-”

“Get up already!” Maven exclaimed obliviously, grabbing him by the shoulders now as they continued to shake up. “We gotta hurry! The Gems will be back from their mission any minute now! I can’t wait to see the look on their faces when they see us, they’re gonna go nuts!”

“I think I might know somebody who’s already there…” Dipper remarked as Maven finally let him get out of bed. Still, he could hardly be bitter towards the fusion, especially upon remembering the reassuring promise they had made last night.

“Come on, come on! We gotta go!” Maven barely gave Dipper any time to put his hat or vest on before grabbing him by the wrist and pulling him along after them. It was apparently still quite early in the morning as they were already out the door of the shack before Stan was up to open for business. Though Dipper was clearly having a hard time keeping up with the excited fusion as they ran all the way up to the temple, Maven didn’t slow their pace for a second, not wanting to miss the Gems’ arrival. And sure enough, they didn’t, bursting into the house just as the warp pad lit up and the Gems returned.

“Steven!” Pearl called with a contented smile. “We’re back!” The white Gem opened her eyes to glance around for the young Gem, but instead of finding him, all three of the Gems were met with a familiar yet unfamiliar figure eagerly standing a few feet away from the warp pad. “Wha-?”

“Hi, guys!” Maven greeted with a chipper smile and wave, scarcely able to hold back their delight, though they did for the sake of remaining inconspicuous.

“Steven!” Pearl called with a contented smile. “We’re back!” The white Gem opened her eyes to glance around for the young Gem, but instead of finding him, all three of the Gems were met with a familiar yet unfamiliar figure eagerly standing a few feet away from the warp pad. “Wha-?”

“Hi, guys!” Maven greeted with a chipper smile and wave, scarcely able to hold back their delight, though they did for the sake of remaining inconspicuous.

“Uh… who the heck are you supposed to be?” Amethyst asked, hopping off the warp pad to tentatively approach the fusion. However, before Maven could begin to explain themselves, Dipper finally made it to the temple himself, quite tired after having essentially chased them all the way
up the hill.

“O-ok!” he exclaimed breathlessly, having to lean against the door to regather his bearings. “I made it. What did I miss?”

“Like pretty much everything,” Maven rolled their eyes good-naturedly. “Try and keep up next time, Dip-bro.”

“Dipper,” Pearl spoke up with a befuddled frown. “Do you know this… person?” her tone became even more confused as she glanced towards the beaming fusion.

“Uh yeah?” Dipper shrugged. “They’re-”

“Shhh!” Maven abruptly cut him off. “I want them to guess! Though really, it’s not that hard of a guess once you take a look at the clues…” Their smile widened as they pointed towards both their gem and their braces, looking towards the Gems expectantly all the while. The trio was admittedly stumped, or at least, Amethyst and Pearl were, until the purple Gem finally managed to piece it together.

“No way!” she gasped loudly, her jaw dropping in surprise. “Steven? And Mabel?”

“Maven,” Garnet interjected, already knowing their shared name thanks to her future vision.

“Ding ding! Correct!” Maven cheered, clasping their hands together happily. “Amethyst, since you guessed it first, you win!”

“Oh yeah?” Amethyst smirked, crossing her arms. “Win what?”

“Uh… a high five from me!”

“Eh, good enough,” the purple Gem shrugged, accepting the fusion’s high five with an amused laugh.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Pearl cut in, looking to Maven incredulously. “You mean to say that you two—you two being Steven and Mabel… fused?”

“Yep!” Maven grinned proudly. “And aren’t we awesome at it? I mean, check us out! We even have extra eyes and everything, just like you guys get when you fuse!” The Gems exchanged a stilted glance at this, none of them quite sure what to think, but even so the fusion continued with a gasp of realization. “Oh my gosh! I just thought of something! Technically, I’m a Gem now too, just like you! And if we have your Gem, then that means we can break that flashy shield out, can’t we? Oh yeah! It’s worth a try, at least! Then let’s do it! Maven Fusion Weapon Summoning Powers… go!”

With this bold proclamation, the fusion held their arm out, eagerly anticipating that the iconic pink shield would appear over it. And though nothing initially happened, Maven was more than prepared to try again. “I said go!” they shouted once more, glancing down to their gem this time only to see it was still bereft of any sort of glow. “Go!” Their determined expression turned to one of disgruntled confusion, their arm lowering as they reached towards their gem. “I wonder if I’m not saying the right thing… I don’t think that’s how it works… It’s more like… a feeling. What kind of feeling? I… haven’t really figured that out yet… But it’s a good feeling, whatever it is! Oh, sort of like how we feel? Yeah! A lot like that actually…” Maven trailed off into a warm smile, though it was short lived as they noticed their gem finally start to shine in its lustrous pink light.

“T-they… they can’t really summon the shield while they’re fused…” Pearl whispered to Garnet,
clinging onto her arm tightly amidst her almost disturbed confusion. “Can they?”

“It’s not just the shield,” the Gem leader replied, her stoic expression fixed as she watched the fusion’s face light up with excited awe while an entirely new weapon materialized in their hand. “It’s a-

“Grappling shield!” Maven exclaimed with huge smile, holding their very unique, somewhat odd weapon up for everyone to see. Indeed, it couldn’t really be described as anything else but a grappling shield. Its body and barrel looked largely normal, aside from its deep pink shade and the familiar rose insignia on its side, the sake colorful trail that poured from the star on the fusion’s sweater streaking out from it. However, its defining feature was clearly the miniaturized version of Steven’s shield attached to it in place of a hook, tethered to the barrel with a sturdy, thorny rope. The entire weapon seemed to sparkle and glimmer continually, something that excited Maven even more as they looked over it admiringly.

“A grappling shield?” Dipper repeated incredulously. “How are you supposed to use that as a weapon?”

“Like this!” the fusion exclaimed, taking aim with a daring grin. Not putting too much care into accuracy, Maven fired the shield off, watching with delight as it slung forward and darted across the house with each broad swing of the barrel they made. The Gems were just quick enough to leap out of the way as the shield darted towards them, ricocheting off of the warp pad and towards the kitchen. In the process, it ended up crashing into the microwave door, easily shattering it before the shield zoomed over to the loft, tearing right through the pillows on the bed and sending feathers flying everywhere. Maven panicked somewhat at the unintentional damage they were causing, which was why they were quick to yank the shield back towards them. By the time the shield zipped back into its original position against the barrel, it had made quite a mess, something that the fusion could only let out a small, awkward laugh over. “Heh, whoops! Guess this thing can really pack a punch, huh?”

“Could you two please be a bit more careful?” Pearl asked, already fretting over the mess. “I know this is new for both of you, but still try to exercise some form of self control, ok?”

“Aw, don’t worry, Pearl!” Maven smirked as they casually twisted the barrel of the grappling shield around in their hand. “I totally got this-” The fusion was abruptly interrupted as the weapon suddenly fired, the shield flying out and its flat face smacking them squarely against the head. The force of it was enough to knock Maven completely to the ground hard, much to the alarm of the Gems and Dipper, but sure enough, the fusion was quick to recover, like always. “I-I’m ok!” they assured, haphazardly picking themselves up as they rubbed the new sore spot on their head while the grappling shield disappeared into a brief burst of sparkles.

“Pfft, oh my gosh, dude, you are hilarious,” Amethyst laughed hard at the fusion’s antics, catching a small look of ire from Pearl, though she hardly cared. “Steven and Mabel should have fused a long time ago! Maven’s a total riot!”

“Yeah, I am!” Maven brightly agreed. “I’m just full of laughs! And charm, and excitement, and a bunch of other stuff! Aren’t I, Dipper?”

“Oh, you’re full of something…” Dipper muttered sarcastically, crossing his arms as he looked away from the fusion.

“So, when exactly did this happen?” Pearl asked, giving Maven a scrutinizing glance. “Did you two fuse just a few minutes ago, before we got back?”
“Nope,” Maven shook their head. “It happened yesterday morning right after you guys left. And we’ve been keeping this fusion party rolling ever since!”

“W-what?!” the white Gem gaped, aghast. “Y-you’ve been fused… since yesterday?! T-that’s… unheard of, especially for a first time fusion! A few hours is understandable, but an entire day and night?! There’s no telling what effect that could have on either of you! Clearly, you two need to un-”

“Pearl,” Garnet cut in just in time, calming her teammate with a firm hand on her shoulder. “I’ll handle this.”

Though they had been caught somewhat off guard by Pearl’s sudden alarm, Maven was quick to perk up again as the Gem leader stepped up to them. “Hi, Garnet!” they greeted brightly, their hands behind their back as they smiled up at her.

“Hello, Maven,” Garnet replied, her tone even, gentle, yet steady. The Gem leader didn’t say anything else after this though, as she instead seemed to start staring the fusion down. Maven’s smile quickly faded at this, and without really meaning to, they shifted rather uncomfortably under Garnet’s shade-obscured, yet still intent gaze.

“Uh… Garnet?” they frowned apprehensively. “I-is something wrong?”

The Gem leader still didn’t answer right away, but when she did, she let out a deep breath, as if to harden her resolve. “There’s something you both should know about fusion…” she began tentatively.

“Oh, what? You mean that it’s amazing?” Maven asked, their smile somewhat returning. “Because we already knew that! In fact, it-”

“No,” Garnet held her hand up in an unspoken command for the fusion to remain silent and let her speak her piece. “When we fuse, most of the time, we do it for the sake of a mission or a goal. It allows us to work off of each other’s strengths and become beings greater than ourselves. And that’s exactly why it feels so ‘amazing’. The excitement that you’re feeling is exactly what you’re supposed to feel. It means that your bond is stable, strong, healthy. And as a result, so is your fusion.”

“Aw, thanks so much!” Maven beamed happily, wrapping their arms around themselves. “You know, I knew we-”

“But,” the Gem leader interrupted once more, her tone shifting somewhat. “There is a danger to that excitement, and to fusion itself, one that, due to your lack of experience with it, you both might be at risk of.”

The fusion’s eyes widened, a small hint of fear flashing over their expression upon hearing this. “W-what is it?” they asked, their usually loud voice but a mere whisper now.

“Losing yourselves,” Garnet answered simply, though she did elaborate upon noticing Maven’s clear confusion. “For some Gems, but not all, the longer they remain fused, the more their individual personalities begin to fade away into the fusion. And if they stay together for too long… then those personalities…”

“They… they disappear?” Dipper guessed, growing even more worried for both Mabel and Steven as Garnet only nodded gravely in response.

Maven themselves sucked in a sharp breath at this confirmation, their expression awash with
confusion, dread, fear, and far too many other emotions, none of which they really knew how to handle. But right before they let those pressing emotions rise to the surface, they quickly shook their head clear, pulling themselves to their full height as they pushed their incoming anxiety away. Just like they always did. “Whaaaat?” Maven asked, forcing out a scoffing laugh. “Come on, guys, you know us! We’re not gonna ‘lose ourselves’ or anything like that! We’re totally fine! I mean, we’ve only been fused for a day. And we can just unfuse any time we want to!”

“Oh, you mean like right now?” Dipper asked, glancing up at the fusion incredulously. “After all, you guys did promise that you’d unfuse after you showed the Gems, so…”

“Oh, uh… yeah, I guess I did…” Maven frowned, awkwardly scratching the back of their neck. “But um… w-we should probably wait for Connie to get here first! You know… j-just because…”

“Because what?” Dipper raised an eyebrow, already getting the feeling that the fusion wasn’t going to uphold their bargain.

“Just because, ok?!?” Maven exclaimed, somewhat frustrated. They instantly let out a startled gasp as soon as they said this though, especially upon seeing the unimpressed look Garnet was giving them. “Uh… I… I mean-”

“Maven, listen,” Garnet said, her tone patient as she placed a hand on the fusion’s shoulder. “I’m not going to tell you that you have to unfuse. That’s your choice, and not anyone else’s. But I do want you to just remember what I said. When the time is right, you’ll both know what is for the best.”

“Uh… y-yeah…” Maven unsteadily agreed, their hands in tight fists at their sides as they swallowed hard. Upon hearing the Gem leader’s warning, the fusion could tell that something suddenly felt off for both of their respective halves, something that might have always been there but had only been unnoticeable until now. But as for what that something was… they had no idea. “We… we’ll know…”

Upon arriving at the shack later that morning, Connie was both surprised and somewhat disappointed to see that Maven was still around, though much like Dipper was, she mostly kept her peace about it. Still, it was basically impossible for her not to start worrying about the situation even more as the fusion hotly recounted what Garnet had told them earlier.

“And then she told us that we might ‘lose ourselves’,” Maven ranted as they paced around the den, Dipper and Connie dully listening to them as they sat on the couch. “Which is crazy because who’s more us than us!? But I told her I’m fine and I am! I mean, I look fine, don’t I?”

“Uh… sure,” Connie frowned, noting how the fusion did look somewhat out of sorts amidst their apparent aggravation. “But… you guys are going to unfuse eventually… aren’t you?”

“Oh, yeah, ‘eventually’,” the fusion assented, even if their tone was quite noncommittal. “For right now I’m just… waiting for the right moment to split up. I don’t wanna rush this sort of thing, you know.”

“And you guys really aren’t worried about what Garnet was saying actually happening?” Dipper asked tentatively. “You know, that whole thing were your personalities basically just disappear?”

“Of course, they’re not!” Maven scoffed, crossing their arms. “They’re both still in here, in me! And I’m totally in control, just like I have been from the beginning and just like I’m going to stay
Connie and Dipper exchanged an aptly concerned glance upon hearing the fusion’s odd phrasing of this incensed proclamation, and they didn’t hesitate to question them on it. “‘They’?” Connie asked, raising a confused eyebrow.

Maven froze, their eyes widening as they quickly tried to correct themselves. “I-I meant we. We’re both still in here.” The fusion paused, noticing the questioning, doubtful look that both Dipper and Connie were sending them. “Oh come on, guys! Quit worrying about me! Like I keep telling you, I’m fine, really!”

“If you say so…” Dipper sighed, finally seeming to relent. It was merely a ruse though, one that the fusion bought as they smiled, allayed for the moment, clearly not wanting to address the pressing matter at hand any longer. “Hey, Connie? Do you mind helping me grab something from the kitchen really quick?”

“Oh, sure,” Connie nodded, somewhat understanding his intent with this sudden request. “We’ll be right back,” she told the fusion, who simply nodded cheerfully as they plopped down onto the recliner.

“Ok, but don’t take too long in there, you two!” they called after the pair as they stepped into the other room. “I have big plans for a lot more fusion fun today and I wanna get started on them as soon as possible!” Almost as soon as they had brightly relayed this message, however, Maven’s smile quickly faded, their four-eyed gaze drifting down to their hands resting in their lap. They still couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off, and the more they thought about it, the more they realized that this feeling was far from new. In fact, it had started plaguing them as early as yesterday, really only a few hours into their fusion. And only now were they starting to realize what it was. When they had first fused, they could both feel each other within their new form, fully and entirely, as though they were sitting beside each other and holding hands. Both of the halves that composed them manifested themselves so clearly, through words, actions, and even conversation amongst themselves. There was a clear divide between where Steven ended and Mabel began and vice versa, one that the fusion had been content and comfortable with amidst their mutual excitement. But the longer they remained fused, the more Maven stopped feeling that clear divide, almost as if it was thinning out entirely. The back and forth between them had gradually lessened, to the point that their shared streams of consciousness had almost become singular. It was almost as if the two halves of their whole had gone quiet, or instead, they had fused into one internal voice, much like their bodies already had. In a strange, almost frightening sense, it was almost as if they had-

Maven let out a soft, audible gasp, quickly steering their mind away from the thought before it could even be completed. Of course, they weren’t disappearing. If they were disappearing, then that meant that they were losing themselves, and if they were losing themselves, then that would mean that they weren’t in control. But they were in control; they had said so themselves and they firmly believed it. This was their fusion and they could handle it. They could stop any time they wanted to.

The only problem was… they didn’t really want to.

Maven was soon broken out of their deep musing however, upon overhearing brief, quiet snippets of Dipper and Connie’s conversation in the kitchen. And even from what few bits and pieces of words and sentences they could hear, it was more than enough to tell the fusion that the conversation was focused on them: “-out of hand-”, “-too long-”, “-losing themselves-”, “-unfuse-”. That final word, one that came from Connie, was what at last prompted Maven to stand up, and, as
if guided by mere dread alone, sneak over towards the kitchen, hiding themselves just on the other side of the wall so they could eavesdrop on what the pair was saying.

“Knowing them, the last thing they’re gonna wanna do is unfuse,” Dipper said, his tone quite exasperated. “Every time someone so much as brings it up to them, they just shrug it off or dance around it, like it’s not even an option for them.”

“Yeah, it needs to be their only option!” Connie huffed, distressed. “It’s for their own good! If they don’t, then they’ll be gone and we’ll just be stuck with… ‘Maven’ forever!”

“And what’s so bad about that?!” Maven spoke up, their tone already quite upset as they emerged from behind the wall.

“Y-you guys!” Dipper exclaimed in apt surprise. “We… we didn’t know you were-”

“I don’t understand!” the fusion quickly cut him off, their expression both angry and morose. “Yesterday… You guys… I thought… I thought you two actually liked me for me, and not just because of what I’m made of! But now I guess the truth comes out… you guys hate me!”

“Ugh, seriously?” Dipper exclaimed, not hiding his frustration with the fusion this time. “How do you still not get it?”

“Get what?”

“Maven,” Connie began, her tone a good bit softer than Dipper’s, but still quite adamant. “We don’t hate you. It’s just… we really miss Steven and Mabel.”

“B-but…” Maven’s brows furrowed in bewildered confusion as they looked down at themselves. “I… I am Steven and Mabel! Why isn’t that good enough for you guys, or for the Gems, or for anyone else?!”

“Because you’re not just Steven and Mabel anymore,” Dipper sighed tiredly, glancing away from the fusion pleadingly. “You’re Maven. Garnet was right; you two really are losing yourselves.”

“You’re both already so far gone that you just don’t even see it!” Connie shook her head sadly. “And that’s why you have to unfuse. Before you guys disappear… forever…”

Tears were finally starting to form in all four of Maven’s eyes, but they just barely managed to hold them back. A part of them desperately wanted to understand, aside from what just their words and expressions conveyed, exactly how Dipper and Connie must be feeling, and yet, for some reason, they couldn’t. The only emotions they could feel were their own, and those emotions were not only conflicted, painful, and pressing. They were huge. “W-well… well…” the fusion stammered, trying their best to reconcile all of the negative feelings racing through them, even if they were powerless to keep them from running wild. And so instead, those countless feelings manifested themselves in the only way they could at the moment: through anger. “Well… maybe I don’t want to unfuse!”

Maven’s furious shout hung heavily in the air for a moment seeing as how neither Dipper nor Connie really knew how to react to it aside from staring at the frustrated fusion with wide, shocked eyes. Still, when the stilted silence was broken, Connie was the one to do it, and with a sudden sense of rage that was almost equal to Maven’s own. “It doesn’t matter if you ‘don’t want to’,” she scowled, her usual calm demeanor anything but. “You have to!”

“No, I don’t!” the fusion argued back fiercely. “What if I wanna stay like this, huh? What’s the problem with just letting me have fun and be me?!!”
“The problem is that if you guys stay like this,” Dipper began, his tone calmer than Connie’s but notably dejected and glum. “Then Steven and Mabel will basically just… fade away. And I honestly don’t think I have to tell you why that’s a problem, seeing as how, like you said, they are you.”

“O-oh, yeah? W-well…” Maven trailed off, still filled with far too much anger, desperation, and grief to even think rationally as they fired off an intense response without even thinking about it. “Well, I don’t really care if they fade away or not!”

Of course, the very moment these words left the fusion’s mouth, they instantly regretted them, especially as they watched Dipper and Connie both freeze with surprise and mutual disappointment and despair. Still, it was too late to take them back now, as much as Maven wanted to, especially as a heavy wave of familiar fear and anxiety washed over them. And this time, there would be no pushing it away. “I… I didn’t—” the fusion struggled, a choked sob finally escaping them. They knew they had crossed a line, a line that they had never meant to step over, but had recklessly crossed nonetheless. And because of that, they had absolutely no idea how to try and make it right.

So instead, they didn’t.

Without so much as a single word, Maven turned on their heel and rushed out of the kitchen, ultimately running out of the shack without so much as even entertaining the thought of turning back. They didn’t even slow their pace as Dipper and Connie hurried after them, pleading with them to stop so that they could talk all of this through instead of arguing about it. But Maven knew that it was far too late to simply talk about it now. Really, if there was any suitable way to solve this problem, then it was far beyond their knowledge or reach.

Though it had recently started raining outside, even that didn’t stop Maven as they burst out of the shack, still refusing to let their pressing tears fall as their sandals splashed quickly in the mud with each running step. Because of the rain, Dipper and Connie were quick to stop following the fusion, especially as they ran into the nearby woods, but still they barely noticed. At this point, the only thing guiding them was their own deep, intense desperation to escape. They didn’t know what they were really doing or where they were really going. All they knew was that they had to get away. From their guilt, from their overwhelming emotions in general, from perhaps even themselves.

In the midst of trying to block everything out, Maven had no idea how long they had been fleeing for, or even where in the woods they were. They were effectively drenched, thanks to the rain, their poofy, curled hair sopping with water and their sweater and socks both heavy and soggy. And yet as the adrenaline of their flight finally started to fade, they gradually slowed their pace to a walk, before ultimately stopping to hunch over and catch their lost breath. For once, their thoughts were oddly as silent as they were, though they figured that was because there were just too many of them bouncing around their head for any single one to take dominance. In fact, by this point, the only thing they felt was cold, both inside and out, though this cold was occasionally punctuated by regret, dread, or sorrow, or sometimes even all three. What had once been fun and exciting had all at once become suffocating and painful. Yet they knew they couldn’t stop yet. Because somewhere, hidden deep down inside of them, beyond the dread and fear, that fun and excitement was still there, waiting to fill them with their warmth and pleasure once again, just like the return of the sun after the rain.

A sudden, familiar laugh sounding out from nearby was what finally broke the distraught fusion out of their breathlessness. A sharp gasp escaped them as they bolted upright, their four eyes widening as they listened for the laugh again, only to hear a different, but still very familiar one. The first laugh echoed through the area only seconds later, and before Maven was even aware of what was happening, the back and forth laughter had pointed them towards a sight that deeply
alarmed them. The fusion only saw them for a second, but they saw them nonetheless: Steven and Mabel both running laughingly through the woods just ahead of them. The two halves to their whole, already slipping away from them altogether.

“W-wait!” Maven choked, a deep sense of fear racing through them like lightning. The fusion stumbled forward, running after the pair without even thinking about the logistics of how they were seemingly separate and apart from them. “Wait, come back!” They shouted desperately, tears finally slipping down their cheeks as they tried to catch up with the two fading halves of themselves, knowing that if they didn’t, they could very well lose themselves forever. “Wait! Please, we-”

Maven was cut off as their sandal suddenly caught onto a rock in their path, one that instantly tripped them up and sent them crashing to the ground. The fusion fell face-first into the mud near a small stream, their face and clothes tarnished by it as they shakily picked themselves up, Steven and Mabel’s respective laughter fading away into silence as they did so. “W-wait...” they pleaded softly, their hand shaking as they reached out into the darkened, empty woods ahead of them. “Please…”

The fusion let out a small, morose sob as they pulled themselves into a sitting position, tentatively glancing over to their reflection in the nearby stream. Despite the mud and tears, they still looked every bit like the perfect cross between Steven and Mabel that they were on the outside. But on the inside... they weren’t so sure if that was even true anymore. “I-it’s just us...” they muttered despondently before bitterly glancing away from their reflection. “It’s just me.”

Unsure of what else to do, Maven pushed themselves away from the stream and sat against a large, nearby tree, pulling their legs close to their chest in a tight embrace. Their sweater was too short for them to go to ‘sweatertown’ but they still did the next best thing as a pink, sparkling bubble formed around them, blocking them from the rain and really everything else but their own misery. With a heavy heart, Maven at last realized that everyone had been right about them; they had let this get far too out of hand and had gone way off the deep end with their fusion, to the point that they weren’t even sure if it was possible for them to end it now, even if they wanted to.

And even still, they weren’t so sure that they even did want to end.

“Hey,” the fusion spoke up to themselves, their voice anxious and small. “A-are you still there? … Yeah, I’m still here. Good... So... so should we...? I-I guess so... But... I... I really don’t want to be alone right now... Neither do I...” Maven sighed, hugging their legs closer to themselves as they buried their face into their knees. “What are we gonna do?”

“I think you both know the answer to that.”

Maven gasped, startled as they glanced up to see Garnet standing right outside of their bubble, soaked from the rain but hardly phased by it as she looked down at the fusion with an unreadable expression. “G-Garnet!” they exclaimed, instantly dropping the bubble to let the Gem leader get closer. “H-how did you... why are you... what’s-”

“Shh,” Garnet quieted them, kneeling down to their level. “Relax. Steady yourselves, and breathe.”

Maven did so, taking in a deep breath that they ultimately let out in the form of a ragged sob. Unable to contain their overwhelming emotions any longer, the fusion let them all out, throwing themselves forward into the Gem leader’s already awaiting arms as they wept loudly. For quite a while, Garnet said nothing, simply providing them with a much-needed shoulder to cry on as she placed a soothing, protective hand upon their back. In fact, the Gem leader only spoke after Maven’s broken sobs started quieting down, and when she did begin, her tone was as gentle and
comforting as it was steady and intent.

“Maven,” Garnet said, catching the fusion’s attention as they slowly looked up at her, tears still streaming from all four of their eyes.

“Hm?” they asked, their tone distant and almost dazed.

“I heard about what happened,” the Gem leader adjusted her shades.

“O-oh…” Maven glanced away, ashamed. “You did?”

Garnet nodded calmly. “You really shouldn’t feel that bad for it though. With a fusion as strong and as healthy as yours… it makes sense that you’d want to maintain it. But there does come a point where you have to ask yourselves why.”

“W-why?” the fusion frowned, wiping a few of their tears away. “W-well… because it just… it feels so good. It’s like… I don’t know, like we’re both at a party where the only guests are us, but that’s ok because we’re both having such a fun time! It… its wonderful… Or at least it was…”

“And it’s not wrong for you to feel that way about it, believe me,” Garnet assured. “But it’s also wise to consider how others outside of yourselves are feeling as well.”

“Others…” Maven muttered, glancing down guiltily. “Dipper and Connie looked like they really upset when I told them I wanted to say fused… But I don’t get why! I like being me, being this! So… why don’t they like it?”

“It’s not that they don’t like you, Maven,” Garnet clarified, as calm as ever. “It’s that they can still see something that you’ve started to forget.”

“A-and what’s that?”

“That for as much as you are a fusion, you’re still two different, separate people with different separate lives,” the Gem leader said. “If you were to remain fused, then those lives would remain forever intersected, always following the same parallel path through every moment and experience. For… some Gems, this is actual a more ideal existence than staying apart. But most of those Gems aren’t like humans are. They don’t have individual family or friends or connections that would motivate them to live separately. But you two do. And the effect that you choosing to stay fused on all of those connections you both have… well, it would spread far wider than even what you could imagine.”

“I… I hadn’t really thought about it like that before…” Maven mused gently as they thought of all of the people in both of their lives that their selfish choice would impact. Stan, Soos, Candy, Grenda, Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl, and especially Dipper and Connie. What would all of them think of never seeing either of them as individuals again and instead only having them as the sum of their parts? “I never wanted to hurt anybody…” the fusion admitted truthfully. “It’s just… I love this feeling I have from being fused, from being together so much! I… I don’t want it to end…”

“And it doesn’t have to,” Garnet assured, though Maven interjected before she could continue.

“But it will!” the fusion protested adamantly. “Everyone’s all worried about what will happen if Steven and Mabel fade away, but what about me?! If they unfuse, then I… I’ll… I’ll disappear… forever…”

“No, you won’t,” the Gem leader said, placing a hand upon the distraught fusion’s shoulder. “Maven, you are the embodiment of Steven and Mabel’s friendship. You are a symbol of the close
bond and trust between them. And as long as that bond exists, then you’ll always exist in some form, whether they’re fused or not.”

“Are you sure?” Maven asked, their tone both doubtful and hopeful.

“Positive,” Garnet nodded, finally smiling gently as her hand slipped off of the fusion’s shoulder. “But like I said before: this is your choice. Not mine, or anyone else’s. And in the end, I trust that you’ll make the right one. For everyone.”

Maven said nothing for quite a while as they simply sat, pondering over what the Gem leader had just told them. They couldn’t deny that her words held a good amount of truth to them, but even still, they had their reservations. What if, for instance, Garnet was somehow wrong? What if Maven ended the moment that Steven and Mabel returned? What if they weren’t able to fuse again? What if this was destined to be the only time and way they could ever truly feel their bond and share their elation as intimately as they were now?

And yet… what if they remained together forever? What if they returned to everyone fused and had to take in the disappointed stares and hear the discouraged whispers of everyone they held dear? What if, one day, they really did lose touch with both of their halves, forgetting who they really were and what it was like to live apart? What if their lives were eternally set on that parallel path, neither of them ever deviating and always staying on the same course, the same life, the same everything?

Of course, “what ifs” weren’t going to give Maven the answer they were really searching for. In fact, that answer existed inside of them; it always had. They had just been too blinded by themselves to see it until now. And as they set their resolve towards that final answer and the difficult choice that came with it, both halves of their whole hoped that it was, indeed, the right one.

As soon as the rain finally ended, Dipper and Connie emerged from the shack, both of them resolved to set out and find Maven with the intent of apologizing. For both of them, tracking the lost fusion down as far more important than anything else at the moment, including convincing them to unfuse. As far as they were concerned, that didn’t even matter as long as Maven was alright. And if the state that they fled in was any indication, then chances were that they likely were not.

“So, what are we even supposed to say to them once we find them?” Dipper asked Connie as they headed for the woods. “‘Hey, guys, sorry for complaining about you two being fused earlier. Now do you mind finally unfusing already?’ I’m sure they’d just love to hear that.”

“We’ll think of something,” Connie said, her remorse hidden under a thick layer of hardened determination. “Right now, we just need to focus on finding them. If they’re anything like Stevonnie was, then them being that upset and alone could end up being… pretty bad for them. Which is why we have to hurry and make sure they’re ok!”

“That won’t be necessary,” Garnet said as she emerged from the forest right before the pair could go into them.

“Garnet?” Dipper asked, confused as him and Connie stopped in their tracks. “What are you doing here?”
“Just bringing these two home,” the Gem leader smirked, glancing briefly behind her. At this prompting, Steven and Mabel hesitantly stepped out from behind Garnet, both of them still muddy and disheveled, but surprisingly enough, finally unfused.

“Uh, hey, guys,” Steven greeted with a halfhearted smile, one that Mabel didn’t share. “Long time no see, huh?”

“Steven!” Connie grinned with delight as she rushed forward, pulling the young Gem into a tight embrace.

“Mabel!” Dipper exclaimed, just as relieved as he hurried to hug his sister in the same way.

The pair wasn’t exactly surprised by the welcoming embraces, but they were hard pressed to return them, especially after everything that had happened. And really, now that it was all said and done, there was no way either of them could get off the hook without addressing it in retrospect. “Ugh, guys, look,” Mabel spoke up with a dissatisfied frown as she pulled away from Dipper a bit. “We’re really sorry for… well, you know… going so nuts with this whole fusion thing.”

“Yeah…” Steven agreed, glancing away as he scratched the back of his neck. “It’s just… we were having such a good time together and I guess we got so distracted by that that we didn’t even realize that we were hurting you.”

“Hurting us?” Connie asked, shaking her head. “Steven, you two weren’t hurting us. We were just worried about you! We didn’t want to lose either of you, and we’re so glad that we didn’t, right, Dipper?”

“That’s right, and if anyone should be sorry, it’s us,” Dipper nodded firmly. “The last thing we wanted was to make either of you guys so upset. We should have been more careful in-”

“You should have been more careful?” Mabel asked, finally letting out a small laugh at the irony of it all. “Bro-bro, we should have been more careful! I mean, we totally leaped off the deep end into fusion insanity!”

“Yeah, we were pretty out there…” Steven smiled somewhat sadly. “But to make up for it, maybe we could finally get to throwing that party we were supposed to have yesterday?”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea,” Garnet said with a broad smile as Dipper and Connie both nodded their complete approval. The Gem leader began leading the way up to the temple, the kids all eagerly following after her, though it wasn’t long before Mabel started hanging back a bit.

“Hey, Steven?” she called, prompting the young Gem to slow his pace too.

“Yeah, Mabel?” Steven turned to face her with a small, albeit strained smile.

“I… I just… Well, I…” Mabel stammered, not entirely sure of what to say as she awkwardly rubbed her arm. “I… I’m sorry for… for, uh…”

“For holding on too tightly?” Steven asked, his smile turning genuine and understanding. “I’m sorry too. But its ok! I guess we’ll just have to be a little more careful next time we form Maven.”

“Wait, what?” Mabel asked, quite surprised. “You… you’d wanna be Maven again after all that crazy drama?”

“Well, of course I would!” the young Gem beamed brightly. “Being Maven with you was so much fun! It would be so awesome to do it again sometime!”
For a moment, all Mabel could really do was stare at Steven incredulously upon hearing this, her cheeks filling in with a slight blush that thankfully the young Gem didn’t notice as she glanced away from him bashfully. “Y-yeah…” she smiled softly, alarmed by how her quickly her own heart was suddenly beating. “Awesome…”

“Now, come on!” Steven encouraged as he started continuing up to the temple. “We gotta get this party started for real this time!”

Mabel quickly perked up at this, letting out a small laugh as her and Steven hurried to catch up with the others. It was a relief for both of them that, despite how they had almost ended losing themselves to their fusion, they both still remained safe, sound, and completely in tact. And at the same time, they both knew that Maven had as well. Garnet had been right in saying that Maven would always persist so long as their friendship did. Even if they weren’t physically present, Maven could still be seen in the smiles they shared, the jokes they enjoyed, and the fun they had together. Their fusion would always be a part of them, always serving as a reminder of their close-knit bond and the clear trust that exist between them.

And, of course, Maven would always be there, somewhere inside of them both, eagerly awaiting their inevitable, excitable return just as much as Steven and Mabel were.
Chapter 35, Part 3: Forever Alone

Chapter Summary

In which Steven and Dipper fuse into a four-armed, flustered, practically schizophrenic mess

Chapter Notes

Ohhhhhhh boy everyone. This is it. One of THE chapters I've been looking forward to writing the most and its finally done and here for you two read! I'm so excited! So since I'm so excited I won't keep you too long! Enjoy!

(Also, if you'd like to see my personal designs for Stepper, you can do so here: http://minijen.deviantart.com/art/Stepper-sketches-2-684593219)

Lion let out a soft, roaring yawn, only briefly opening his eyes before settling back into a peaceful snooze amidst begrudgingly letting Steven and Mabel play with his mane. All the same, the pair conversed cheerfully while they collaborated on braiding the pink beast’s luxurious pastel locks while relaxing on the floor of the shack’s den.
“I still can’t believe we’ve never done this before!” Mabel quipped, tying off another small braid with a floral clip. “By the time we’re finished, Lion’s mane is gonna be the prettiest portal to a secret magical tree ever!”

“I know!” Steven agreed with a smile as he began to take on another tendril of pink hair. “And I’m so surprised at how calm Lion’s being about this. He usually never lets me play with his mane for this long!” Of course, no sooner had the young Gem said this than the pink beast suddenly awakened and stood up, stoically shaking the braids and clips out of his mane, essentially undoing all of the pair’s hard work on it. “Heh, I guess I spoke too soon,” Steven said with a small shrug as Lion casually padded off.

“Lion, wait!” Mabel gasped, hopping to her feet as she hurried after the pink beast. “You gotta let us finish! Or at least keep the braids in long enough for take a few pictures of how adorable you’ll look!” Steven could only let out an amused chuckle as he watched Mabel try to reign Lion in, only for her attempt to be thwarted by the pink beast abruptly and broadly licking the side of her face. “Hey!” Mabel protested, though she was unable to hold back a laugh as she playfully pushed Lion away. “Did I ask for any Lion kisses? No, I didn’t! And just for that I’m gonna use twice as many flower clips this time!”

As Mabel tried and failed to hop onto the pink beast’s back to continue braiding, Steven continued laughing, though his levity was only briefly interrupted as he happened to stop Dipper rushing downstairs from the attic. “Hi, Dipper!” the young Gem greeted brightly, seeing as how this was the first time he had seen him today.

“Hey, Steven!” Dipper called back quickly, barely even glancing over his shoulder as he hurried to the kitchen. “I can’t talk right now, I’m super busy.”

“Well, what do you know!?” Mabel smirked teasingly as she willingly fell off of Lion. “Looks like somebody finally decided to step out of the ‘conspiracy cave’ for a minute to get some fresh air.”

“Ha! As if there’s even time to do that,” Dipper remarked sardonically, practically running out of the kitchen with an armful’s stash of Pitt Colas. “The only reason I can down was to refuel. I feel like I’m just on the verge of uncovering something huge, and if I don’t keep my train of thought up, then I’ll lose it completely!”

“What do you mean ‘something huge’?” Steven asked curiously, though before Dipper could answer, Mabel let out an exasperated groan.

“Steven, don’t ask him that,” she said, flopping down onto the floor, already bored. “If you do, then he’s just gonna go off on another one of his nerd rants about his boring research.”

“No, I won’t!” Dipper scoffed in protest. “And besides, this ‘boring’ research I’m doing is actually really important!”

“Here we go…” Mabel mumbled as she rolled her eyes, rolling over to lie facedown on the carpet. But even so, Steven listened intently as Dipper began to explain nonetheless, putting his sodas down as he began to restlessly pace back and forth.

“After everything that happened in the bunker, I realized that we’re still not much closer to finding the author,” he said, his tone serious and devout. “I mean, Soos is fixing up that old laptop we found, sure, but who knows how long that could take, or if it’ll even give us any answers at all? So, I figured that in the meantime, I need to take matters into my own hands. For the past few days, I’ve been pouring over the journal, carefully examining every single page for anything I might have overlooked before.”
“And have you found anything yet?” Steven asked, quite invested.

“…Not yet,” Dipper huffed, somewhat frustrated. “But I’m not giving up! Besides, this isn’t just about finding out who the author is anymore. You guys remember what Peridot said when we saw her at the Kindergarten the other week, right?”

“Yeah, we do,” Mabel interjected, rolling onto her back. “She said: ‘I’m reporting this, you CLODS!’”

“Wow, Mabel!” Steven exclaimed, impressed. “You do a really good Peridot impression!”

“Thanks. I’ve been working on it.”

“No, no, no!” Dipper cut in, aggravated. “Before that. She said she was there to ‘pick up where they left off’. But what does that mean? Who’s ‘they’? Homeworld? Someone else? What to ‘they’ even want to do? What was Peridot really doing at the Kindergarten? Or the Galaxy Warp? And why was she-”

“Ok, ok, we get it!” Mabel interrupted, her tone clearly exasperated. “There’s a lot of questions that we don’t have any answers for yet. But that’s fine, bro-bro. The Gems have got that mystery covered!”

“Oh really?” Dipper crossed his arms skeptically. “Steven, how much new information have the Gems uncovered about what Peridot’s up to since what happened at the Kindergarten?”

“Uh… pretty much nothing…” Steven admitted, scratching the back of his neck. “They’ve been pretty busy with other missions lately, so they haven’t had a lot of time to look into the whole Peridot thing.”

“Which is exactly why I’m doing it for them,” Dipper asserted with a determined grin. “Somewhere in the journal there’s got to be something that can at least point me towards some answers. Not only am I going to figure out who the author is, but I’m also going to find out what Peridot’s up to so we can stop her once and for all! And after we do, the Gems will be so impressed by all my hard work that they’ll have no choice but to take me seriously from now on!”

“Dipper,” Steven said with a small, good-natured laugh. “You don’t need to prove anything to the Gems! They already take all of us seriously!”

“Steven, do I really need to remind you of how we nearly froze to death outside of the warp stream just because of how much the Gems didn’t take us seriously?” Dipper asked dryly.

“O-ok… well…” the young Gem frowned, glancing down awkwardly before perking up and chancing the subject. “Well, hey! Why don’t you take a little break from all that researching and hang out down here with us for a while?”

“Yeah!” Mabel chimed in enthusiastically. “We were just giving Lion a super cute makeover. You know, braiding his mane, putting adorable tiny hats on him, the works! If you stick around, I’ll even let you put the bow on his tail!” She grinned as she held up a tiny pink bow in one hand and the tip of Lion’s tail in the other.

“As… fun as that sounds,” Dipper began rather sarcastically as he reclaimed his stash of sodas and turned towards the stairs. “I’m gonna have to pass.”

“Aw, come on, Dipper,” Steven encouraged with a pleading smile. “You look like you’ve been working really hard-”
“He’s been up with the journal for the past two nights in a row,” Mabel cut in, rolling her eyes impetuously, though Dipper didn’t try to dismiss her claim, mostly because it was true.

“Whoa, really?” the young Gem asked, quite concerned. “Well that’s all the more reason for you to take a break! At least sit down and relax for a bit, maybe go take a walk outside, or-”

“Sorry, Steven, but no,” Dipper interjected, resolute. “I’ve got to get back to work. I’ve already wasted enough time just standing around here talking, and every minute I’m not upstairs researching is another minute we don’t know who the author is or what Peridot’s planning! This is serious stuff you guys, and if I were you, I’d be taking it as seriously as I am.”

“I’ll tell you what I’m taking serious,” Mabel remarked with a coy grin. “Lion’s cute face! Isn’t that right, Lion?” she asked dramatically, smooshing the pink beast’s face with her hands as she leaned in close. “Isn’t that right?”

Dipper simply let out a disgruntled sigh as he began making his way up the stairs, shaking his head in disappointment and slight dejection all the while. “Sometimes I don’t know why I even bother…” he muttered sourly, though Steven happened to overhear him as he watched him leave with sincere worry.

“I can’t believe Dipper’s been up for two nights straight trying to figure all that stuff out…” the young Gem remarked with a frown once Dipper was out of earshot. “He really seemed like he was more stressed out than excited about it…”

“That’s because that’s just how he is when he gets all ‘obsessy’ like this,” Mabel said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “And to be honest, I hate it when he’s like this. He gets all moody and boring and he becomes like this total loner, spending all his time with his dumb books and notes. It’s not healthy!”

“It doesn’t sound like it could be,” Steven noted fretfully. “There’s gotta be something we can do to help him relax before he totally wears himself out…”

“Forget it, Steven,” Mabel shook her head. “I’ve tried to get Dipper to loosen up tons of times before, but it never works. All my plans usually just end up annoying him or making him mad and he gets like: ‘Mabel, cut that out! I’m busy!’ or “Mabel, go away! I’m in the middle of something really important!’ And it drives me nuts! Why can’t he just drop all that boring research stuff, lighten up and have fun for a change?!”

“Maybe he just needs a little push in the right direction?” Steven suggested with a small smile.

“Ha, good luck with that,” Mabel rolled her eyes. “I’m telling you, Steven, anything we try isn’t going to work. Dipper’s like, no joke, one of the most stubborn people I know. And I should know seeing as how I’ve known him longer than literally anyone.”

“Yeah, but we’ve got to at least try!” the young Gem exclaimed earnestly. “Dipper may be stubborn, yeah, but he works harder than anyone else at what he does. We both know that, Mabel! And the stuff he’s researching is pretty important, especially if whatever Peridot wants to do is bad. So I figure the least we can do is show him how much we appreciate all his hard work by helping him unwind a bit.”

“Well, I still don’t think this is going to work, but I’m down for whatever you have in mind,” Mabel pensively agreed. “Speaking of which, what did you have in mind?”

“Well…” Steven began with a widening grin. “I was thinking something along the lines of… a
“Steven,” Mabel said boldly, quickly taking up the young Gem’s zealous smile as she instantly jumped on board this fledgling plan. “You had me at ‘party’.”

Dipper let out an exasperated sigh as he pinched the bridge of his nose in the hopes that it would restore his waning focus where it belonged: on the journal. He couldn’t exactly say he was tired; after all, he had pulled all-nighters before and he had managed to catch a few minutes of sleep here and there last night whenever he happened to accidentally nod off. But he was certainly starting to grow a bit weary with his self-imposed mission. For all of his intent and careful searching through the crinkled pages, weathered words and cryptic illustrations, Dipper had relatively little to show for it. The previously obscured black light text did reveal a few new interesting details concerning the details behind how the Crystal Gems ended up in Gravity Falls, but they were hardly pertinent to the pressing matters at hand. Frustratingly enough, the journal only occasionally made reference to the Gem Homeworld, and really only in passing. Dipper did manage to decipher one code pertaining to more in depth notes concerning Gem history, but it merely cut off into a footnote reading “see journal 1 for more information”. And seeing as how he didn’t even know the whereabouts of journal 1 much less where within it such information would be contained, it was safe to say that lead had hit a dead end very early on.

Still, Dipper refused to let that deter him. There had to be something he was missing, something between the lines that he just wasn’t getting or a piece of a puzzle he just hadn’t found yet. Certainly, the journal contained some form of a clue, whether it be about the Kindergarten, or the Galaxy Warp, or Homeworld, or even more elusive than all of those things, the identity of the elusive author himself. Some way or another, those clues were there, just waiting to be uncovered, and no matter how much digging he had to do, Dipper was determined to find them. And really, by all accounts, he felt as though he had to find those clues and the answers they pointed towards. For if he didn’t, then who else would?

In fact, Dipper was so engrossed in scanning over a page concerning Gem weapons that he didn’t even notice a certain pink lion wedge the attic door open with his nose before slipping in, accompanied by his usual pig companion. He still paid the pair of animals no mind as they casually sauntered towards his bed, which was covered in copious pages of loose-leaf notes he had taken over the past two days of research. But Dipper did finally notice Lion and Waddles when the latter happened to suddenly snatch a large mouthful of said notes and promptly turned to make off with them with his pig accomplice in tow.

“Hey!” Dipper hotly shouted after the pink beast, quickly jumping off the bed to follow him. “Lion, get back here with my notes!” Of course, Lion didn’t stop, but continued pouncing off, running off much like a mischievous cat would with the crumbled pages still in his maw. “Ugh, seriously, Lion?!” Dipper asked, frustrated, though he kept his distance as the pastel beast let out a possessive, warning growl. “Why do you always have to be so—hey!” Dipper cut himself off as Lion brusquely leapt past him, clearing the way to the attic door as Waddles trotted cheerfully behind him. Aptly annoyed but refusing to lose his hard-earned research, Dipper gave chase, hurrying after the pink beast as he retreated from the attic, leaving a certain cryptic journal behind in the process.

And of course, no more than seconds after her brother left the attic, Mabel easily slipped in without notice, swiping the book and sneaking downstairs with it. She made sure that things were still going according to plan as she passed by the den, where Lion still distracting Dipper as he chased
the pink beast around essentially in circles, shouting aggravated ultimatum...
Steven pouted a bit upon hearing this, clearly disappointed that all of their hard work and hopefulness was about to go to waste. Fortunately though, Mabel had a plan. “Well, ok, if you say so…” she said, feigning disappointment. “Oh, but wait! How are you gonna get any research done if you don’t have your journal?”

This instantly caught Dipper’s attention as he briefly turned around to give his sister a quizzical glance. “What do you mean?”

“Ha!” Mabel smirked triumphantly. “We got you, bro-bro! While you were chasing Lion around trying to get your dumb old notes back, I snuck off with the journal and hid it in a place you’ll never find it.”

“You what?!” Dipper turned around fully, much more alarmed by this news. “Mabel, that’s not funny! Give it back, now!”

“Oh, I’ll give it back…” Mabel remarked coyly. “But only after you relax and enjoy this totally awesome party we set up for you!”

“Ohooo!” Steven exclaimed, stars in his eyes at how impressively Mabel had just flipped the entire situation around. “This is great! Now you’ll definitely want to stick around, right, Dipper?”

Dipper let out a harsh scoff of disbelief upon hearing this, appalled and irritated at just how easily he had been tricked into what had, in retrospect, been such an obvious trap. Still, given that he couldn’t progress any further in his investigation without the journal, he had no choice but to very begrudgingly play along. “Ugh, fine!” he exclaimed, severely aggravated with them both and not afraid to let it show. “But I’m only staying for an hour. No more, and preferably, a lot less. And when that hour’s through, you guys give me my journal back. Got it?”

“Oh, we got it…” Mabel exchanged a sly smirk with Steven, both of them already fully intending on doing whatever they could to get this party to last much longer than a measly hour.

“And I’m not dancing,” Dipper asserted crossly. “I don’t care if you guys have all of BABBA’s best hits on or not. It’s bad enough I have to waste time out here in the first place. I’m not completely embarrassing myself too.”

“Oh, you won’t…” Steven assured casually, still smiling conspicuously.

“And could you guys stop talking like that already?!” Dipper huffed, annoyed. “It’s starting to creep me out.”

“Oh, we will-”

“Mabel!”

“Ugh, fine, we will,” Mabel said plainly, rolling her eyes at her brother’s frustration. “Now without any further ado…”

“Let’s party!” both Steven and Mabel proclaimed in excited unison, gathering close and sandwiching a very perturbed Dipper in between them. And while he remained sullen and sour, that didn’t stop the pair from cheerfully kicking their “break party” off with a literal bang, curtesy of the party poppers Mabel happened to have on hand. Dipper was anything but amused as Steven laughingly showered him with confetti, eventually prompting him to retreat and take a seat next to the snack table, which he only very lightly partook of out of protest. Still, Steven and Mabel both figured it was a start, and while Dipper had made it clear he had no intentions of dancing himself, that didn’t mean they couldn’t. While neither of them were diehard BABBA fans, they still had
quite a fun time dancing to the Icelandic group’s music, though they did so apart from each other, mostly for the sake of avoiding unintentional fusion. Yet all the same, they didn’t let their bittersweet memories of their time together as Maven stop them, especially as they bounced around the “dance floor” wildly and recklessly. For a while, Dipper was only barely watching them, instead choosing to sit, scowling and arms crossed as he impatiently checked his watch every few minutes. Still, even he couldn’t hold back a small smirk of amusement as Mabel tried (and failed) to perform a front flip, only to end up falling flat on her face. And, in time, that smirk turned into an outright laugh as Steven and Mabel ended up accidentally ramming into each other, sending them both comically falling to the ground in a messy heap of limbs.

Though somewhat discombobulated after falling, Steven couldn’t help but let out a small, hopeful gasp upon hearing Dipper’s continued laughter from his spot near the snack table. A wide smile filled the young Gem’s face as he realized that they were finally starting to wear down his rather strong, stoic defenses. “It’s working!” Steven whispered to Mabel as they picked themselves up quickly to continue their impromptu plan. “Come on, Dipper!” the young Gem hurried over, holding an enthusiastic hand out in offer. “Dance with us!”

“You’re telling me to let go?” Mabel asked with an incredulous chuckle. “I think you’re the one who needs to let go here, bro-bro.”

“She’s right, Dipper!” Steven encouraged with a smile as he stopped dancing himself, but only for a moment. “All of that research you’ve been doing is important, yeah, but taking breaks and having fun is important too! You’re at a party! And there’s never any shame in having fun at a party.”

Dipper didn’t really say anything in response to this, even as Mabel finally let him go to continue dancing on her own, essentially leaving him standing in the middle of the floor to watch her and Steven continue to have the time of their lives. While he hadn’t before, he suddenly felt quite left out as he watched them and the clear, genuine fun they were having and reveling in, a kind of fun that, he had admittedly been denying himself of lately. And the longer he stood on the outside of that fun looking in, the more he strangely found himself wanting to join in on it, to the point that, on a mere whim of impulse alone, he decided to do just that.

Mabel let out a surprised gasp as she felt someone grab her hand out of the blue, but her face lit up with an elated grin upon seeing that someone was none other than Dipper. “What do you think you’re doing?” she asked with a knowing smirk, pausing her dancing for just a moment. “I thought you said you weren’t going to dance.”

“W-well, I guess now I am,” Dipper said uneasily, clearly having to swallow his pride just to be
out here on the dance floor. “Now let’s just do this before I change my mind, ok?”

“You got it, bro-bro!” Mabel grinned brightly, not hesitating to pull her rather unprepared brother into a lively dance to the ongoing pop ballad. For a while, the twins spun freely around the yard, tripping over each other’s feet several times, though that didn’t stop them. Steven smiled in warm satisfaction as he watched them, his excitement only growing upon noticing that Dipper was laughing just as hard as Mabel was as they meandered about to the music. As the first chorus of the song reached its apex, Mabel decided to shake things up as they danced past Steven, and, without any warning, she spun Dipper out just so the young Gem could fortunately catch his hand before he fell.

“Nice catch, Steven!” Mabel called as she continued blithely dancing on her own.

“Guess that means it’s my turn!” Steven said to Dipper with a hearty, mirthful laugh.

“I guess so,” Dipper chuckled with equal amusement, though he did let out a surprised gasp as the young Gem suddenly pulled him forward. The boys’ dance was by far less sloppy or free-spirited than the solo dance Mabel was currently pulling off, but even so, it was clear they were having fun with it. Their shared laughter rarely stopped as they spun around, every now and then spinning each other out but remaining linked by their hands before spinning back in. There was a certainly looseness and bounciness to their moves, making it clear that neither of them really knew what they were doing, though neither of them could really care less. They only thing they knew was that they were both having an amazing time, something that excited Steven the most, seeing as how, despite all of Dipper’s earlier protests, there was no denying that he was, at last, genuinely cutting loose and having fun.

All three of the kids were caught up in their own respective dances that they only vaguely noticed that the song was about to come to an end. And so, to end their dance on what would certainly be a high note, Dipper and Steven both acted upon the same idea, spinning each other out one last time, but keeping contact by their hands alone. By the time the song reached its final few notes, they had stopped spinning and instead stood bold and bright, arms outstretched wide yet connected as they both began to laugh hard and happily, both of them more than fulfilled by the sheer fun they had just had. And yet, amidst their shared amusement, neither of the boys were aware of the bright pink glow of the gemstone under Steven’s shirt. This light poured out from the stone and filled in a surprisingly wide radius, one that soon overtook Steven and Dipper both, silencing their laughter all at once as it prepared to fill it in with something else entirely.

Mabel was so caught up in her own lively dancing that she initially didn’t notice this expanding light. Though seeing as how it was hard to ignore, she caught sight of it soon enough, and, bewildered, she stopped dancing and turned to face the wide glow that had obscured her brother and her best friend. But as that glow started to thin out and dissipate, she couldn’t hold back a stunned gasp at what, or rather who appeared in their place.

He stood as confidently as he had before, no longer laughing but still smiling widely and brightly. However, the moment he opened his eyes, that smile disappeared instantly as he became aware of the feeling that something was alarmingly off, though he couldn’t figure out what. Confused, he glanced around to both sides, puzzled to see that he stood alone, even if he hadn’t mere seconds ago. “Where did you—” he instantly cut himself off, a hand flying to cover his mouth out of shock upon hearing a deeper, yet still youthful voice that certainly wasn’t his come out of it. “W-why does my voice sound—” he interrupted himself once more, frightened as he confirmed that voice was indeed somehow his after all. His eyes were wide as he finally managed to glance down at Mabel, who seemed much shorter than she should have been as she stared up at him, her jaw dropped in clear awe at what she was seeing.
“Mabel, what’s wrong?” he asked hesitantly, still unnerved by the sound of his own voice, but he forced himself to put that concern aside for now. Of course, Mabel was still too dumbfounded to give him a proper answer, so instead, he posed his question again, this time even more frantically. “Mabel?! Why are you looking at me like—” He stopped short with an abrupt, terrified cry as he finally glance down at himself, only really noticing one thing about his current appearance, which alone was enough to throw him into a full on panic. He had not only two usual arms hanging from his shoulders, but a completely new other pair, ones that jutted out from a little lower down his torso and had hands clenched into tight, shaking fists of fear. “W-what the heck is going on?!” he asked in apt alarm as he used one of his upper hands to grab onto one of his lower arms to confirm that they were indeed somehow real. “I have four arms! Yeah, I can see that, but why do I have four arms?! I don’t know, but they’re so cool! What?! No, they’re not! Where did they even come from?! And why am I so tall of the sudden? And we do I—”

“AHHHHHH!” His barrage of frightened questions was cut off by a loud, excited scream from Mabel, who had somehow managed to figure out what had happened on her own. He looked to her, startled and bewildered by her apparent elation, especially as she looked to him with a huge, delighted smile. “What?!” he asked anxiously, holding all four of his new arms close to him out of surprise as Mabel continued to happily squeal without end. “What is it?! What’s wrong?! Why are you—AHHHHHH!” His alarm suddenly turned into the exact same ecstatic scream, a huge smile claiming his expression as half of him realized the same thing Mabel had, even if the other half was still left in panicked confusion. “W-wait! Why am I—AHHHHHH!” he cut himself off once more with another overjoyed shriek, one that Mabel joined in on as she bounced up and down on the balls of her feet in excitement. “Wait!” he tried again, only to burst into happily screaming for the third time. “AHHHH!—Why are—AHHHH!—Ugh! Why are we—AHHHH!—Can you please—AHHH!—let me—AHHHH!—finish already!” He finally stopped at this, forcing himself to calm down, even though there was still a wide, exhilarated grin on his face. “Oh! Sorry! What were you saying? Ugh, finally. Now, what exactly are we all screaming about?”

“Dipper! Steven!” Mabel laughed, grinning up at him knowingly as she finally provided an answer. “You guys fused!”

For a moment, the only thing the new fusion could do was stare down at her with wide, shocked eyes upon hearing this, shock that grew as he glanced down to all four of his hands once again. “W-we… we… what?” he asked in quiet awe, though that awe instantaneously shifted back into unbridled glee once again. “Yeah, we did! How do we look?”

“You two look awesome together!” Mabel gushed brightly. “I totally love that whole four arm thing you have going on there! I mean, it was cool enough that Maven had four eyes, but four arms is even cooler! You guys could be like, some kind of juggling master!”

“You think so?” the fusion grinned down at his newfound extra limbs, apparently not bothered by them at all. “Because I think we could—Whoa, whoa, hold it! What’s wrong? What’s ‘wrong’ is you guys; we didn’t fuse.”

“Oh, yeah, you did,” Mabel pointed out. “I’m looking at your fusion right now.”

“No, you’re not!” the fusion protested anxiously. “Because if we fused, then that means we… we’d… we’d be taller! Oh, but we are! See?” He glanced down at himself, easily gaging that he was more than twice as tall as Mabel was. “O-ok… well, uh… Oh, I know! If we fused, then we’d have extra eyes or arms! Which… we technically do…” The fusion took in an apprehensive breath, lifting one of his lower hands to his chin as he began to pace back and forth, surprisingly already
steady on his new, longer legs. “Oh, hold on! We can’t be a fusion, because if we were a fusion, which we’re not, then we’d have your-” he stopped short as he glanced down at the unmistakable pink gemstone resting upon his partially exposed stomach. “…gem…”

“Well, looks like the evidence is irrefutable!” Mabel quipped happily as the fusion silently covered his mouth in shaken shock. “You’re a fusion now, boys! How does it feel? Feels pretty awesome, doesn’t it? I should know, since I’ve done it before myself.” The fusion didn’t answer right away, instead staring at the ground before him with wide, almost fearful eyes as he let out a small, shaky breath. Slowly, one of his upper hands came to rest upon his opposite shoulder, as if he was steadying himself in a way that only partially worked. Of course, the fusion’s apparent distress didn’t go unnoticed by Mabel, as her eager smile quickly faded into apt worry. “Uh… are you guys… ok?”

The fusion gasped, snapping himself out of his alarm and forcing himself to perk up and smile cheerfully once again. “Uh, yeah! Everything’s ok! We’re just fi… we… we’re just… I… I can’t believe it…” The assurance in his voice completely faded into an awestruck mutter as he shook his head in overwhelmed disbelief.

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“Um… well, believe it, Ste-bro!” Mabel exclaimed, sending the fusion a sly wink. “Get it? Because you’re Steven, but you’re also Dipper? Pretty clever, huh?”

“Y-yeah, I get it…” the fusion frowned, rubbing his arm uncomfortably as he glanced to the side. Mabel frowned herself upon seeing just how uneasy the fusion seemed to be, a feeling that she couldn’t really say she knew too well in regards to fusion, seeing as how comfortable and confident Maven had been. Still, she couldn’t deny that it concerned her quite a bit to see the fusion of her brother and best friend be so obviously tense and anxious, which was why she had every intention of fixing that in any way she could. “Uh, hey!” she spoke up with a reassuring smile. “Why don’t we go inside so you guys can see what you look like for yourselves? I’m sure that’ll get you both super pumped about this whole fusion thing, right?”

“Oh, yeah!” the fusion suddenly smiled himself, almost seamlessly switching out of his discomfort and back into excitement. “That’s a great idea, Mabel! What, what? Yeah! I mean, I already know we have four arms, but I wanna see what else there is aside from that! What, is having four arms not weird enough for you? Because it’s definitely too weird for me…”

“Aw, don’t be like that!” Mabel chastised lightly. “You guys look great, trust me! And you’ll think so too after you get a load of your new fusion digs. Now, come on!”

“Mabel, wait, I-whoa!” the fusion was cut off as Mabel grabbed one of his lower arms and pulled him towards the shack, eliciting both annoyance and laughter from him. Still, he half-followed and was half-dragged by Mabel to the attic, where the best full-length mirror in the house awaited.

“Well, go ahead and take a look!” Mabel exclaimed as she gave the hesitant fusion a push towards the mirror. “Five bucks says you’re gonna be all like-” she gasped, throwing on a shocked, yet amazed expression before giving the fusion a challenging grin.

“Oh please, I’m not gonna-” his scoff quickly faded into silence as he happened to steal a glance at his reflection in the mirror in front of him.

“Yes!” Mabel cheered in a whisper upon seeing the fusion’s jaw drop in awe as he took in his reflection for the first time. “I win!”

Of course, the fusion paid her no mind as he instead simply stared at himself with wide, curious
eyes. If he had any lingering doubts about being a fusion before, they were instantly put to rest upon seeing the perfectly equal semblance he bore to both Dipper and Steven. His eyes were bright and expressive, yet alert and intelligent, going well with the rest of his somewhat boyish yet almost mature features. As he was already well aware of, he had four arms, all of which were surprisingly well toned, much like the rest of his body, clearly a merging of Dipper’s thin frame and Steven’s stocky build. Likewise, his hair was on the darker end of brown, short, but thick and unmistakably curly, even if most of it was well contained under Dipper’s usual pine tree cap. He also wore his dark blue vest overtop Steven’s pink star shirt, which was short enough to reveal the gem on his navel and had somehow gained an extra set of sleeves to accommodate the lower set of arms. All of that, along with a long pair of comfortable jean pants and a set of grey and white sandals, culminated to create a look that was surprisingly appealing and intriguing, even if his extra arms did throw it off just the slightest bit.

“Whoa…” the fusion finally spoke up, turning a bit to catch a better look at himself. “We actually look kind of… Great? Yeah, that’s exactly what I was thinking! W-well, I was gonna say…”

“Adorable!” Mabel chimed in, startling the fusion by snapping a photo of him. “Oh, that’s a keeper for the scrapbook!”

“Adorable?!” the fusion exclaimed, offended. “We are not adorable. Well… we might be, just a little… No, we’re not!”

“So if you’re not adorable, then what are you?” Mabel asked with a goading smirk. “Handsome? Because hey, you actually have muscles for once, Dipper. And the ladies love muscles.”

The fusion let out a small, somewhat uncomfortable laugh at this, his face lighting up in an embarrassed blush as his levity quickly faded into a scowl. “Ok, this is getting weird,” he said stiffly, looking to his reflection once more. “Huh? What’s so weird about this? I think the better question is what isn’t weird about this?” The fusion frowned as he lifted his lower arms up, cringing at how admittedly odd the sensation of controlling them was. ‘Oh, come on! I know it’s a little different at first, but you’ll get used to it! Trust me. Get used to it?! Why would I ever want to get used to—Whoa, hold that thought!” he gasped, his eyes wide as he noticed something interesting while looking at his reflection again. “What is that?” Intrigued, he slowly started lifting a hand up towards his forehead, but his other half was quick to catch onto his intention and hurriedly put a stop to it by grabbing his wrist tightly to halt his approach. “No,” he said simply, his tone rigid and his expression set in a hardened scowl that soon turned into hesitant confusion. “Why not?”

“Yeah, why not, Dipper?” Mabel asked, crossing her arms and grinning knowingly. “Are you afraid of letting Steven see your birthmark?”

The fusion snapped a glance of angry panic over at her, but this news only made him all the more curious. “You have a secret birthmark?!” he asked with a fascinated smile. “I wanna see it! No, you don’t, and you’re not going to. Aw, come on… can I see it? Please? No. But why not? Because… because I said so! But I just wanna know what it looks like!”

“You might as well let him see it,” Mabel interjected, still smirking. “After all, in a way it’s sort of his birthmark now too.”

The fusion was still scowling as he looked to the mirror once more, a brief look of hopefulness crossing his expression before he finally let out a relenting sigh. “Fine…” he released his tight grip on his other hand. “Just… just don’t laugh, ok? Why would I laugh? I’m sure whatever your—or our birthmark, is, it’ll be super cool! Just like us! …Right…” Without anything holding him back, the fusion removed his hat, freeing the upper half of his poofy, somewhat messy hair, which was
soon pushed upward so he could get a better view of the mark on his forehead. And when he did, both halves of his whole froze in surprised amazement at what they saw.

“What the…?” he muttered, confusion filling his expression first before astonishment quickly replaced it. “Wow! It’s the Big Dipper! Just like the constellation! Yeah, but… what’s with the star?” His bewilderment quickly returned as he leaned in a bit closer to the mirror, taking note of the small star perfectly contained within the mark iconic constellation, which, when he was on his own, had always been expectantly empty. Still, as strange and somewhat disconcerting as that was, he easily bounced back into excitement with a gasp of realization. “Oh my gosh! This where you got your name from, isn’t it? Uh, well its—”

“Dipper’s not his real name, Steven,” Mabel informed casually. “It’s just a nickname.”

“Can you please stop telling him things?!” the fusion asked, aggravated first, then awestruck. “Whaaaat?! You mean I’ve known you all this time and I don’t even know what your real name is!! That’s crazy! No, it’s not, because as far as I’m concerned, nobody needs to know it. Aw, but its ok! You can tell me! No way! I already let you see the birthmark, I’m not letting you—” The fusion cut himself off with a startled gasp, his birthmark and gem both briefly flashing as he took a stumbling step backwards. “W-what was that?!” he asked, breathless and alarmed before breaking into a huge, knowing smile. “Whoa, so that’s your real name?! Wait… what? How did you—what did you do?! I… don’t really know. But whatever I did, I guess I found out that your real name is Ma—Don’t.” He cut himself off, his tone harsh as he glared at his reflection. “I’m serious. Don’t say it. O-ok… I guess I won’t then…”

“Yeesh, calm down, Dipper,” Mabel rolled her eyes. “It’s not like your real name is even that embarrassing. Oh! But speaking of names, I just realized something! You don’t have one yet!”

Mutual confusion filled the fusion’s face as he looked down at her. “Uh… yeah we do?”

“No, no, I’m not talking about Steven or Dipper, I’m talking about you,” Mabel corrected with a smile. “The fusion! Stevonnie and Maven both had names, so you need one too!”

“Er… no, we—Oh my gosh, we totally do!” the fusion gasped. “I can’t believe I hadn’t thought about that until now! … You guys aren’t serious, are you?”

“Of course, we are!” Mabel nodded firmly. “Now let’s see here… Steven and Dipper… Dipper and Steven… How about we try… Diven?!”

The fusion scoffed, turning his nose up at the purposed name as he put his hat back on. “You are not calling us that. Yeah… I’m not really feeling ‘Diven’ either…”

“Ok… well… how about Stedip?!”

“Eh…?” the fusion stuck his tongue out. “I’m not a fan of that one either… Yeah, because it sounds dumb.”

“Pfft, everybody’s a critic,” Mabel sighed petulantly, but still, she wasn’t about to give up. “Ok, let’s try… Dipen?”

“No.”

“Stever?”

“Nah…”
“Dien?”

“Are you kidding?”

“Ugh, cut me some slack, guys!” Mabel exclaimed in frustration. “It’s not like combining your names is as easy as just tossing Steven and Dipper together and getting—” She gasped, her eyes widening as a new idea struck her. “I got it… You—you being the fusion of Steven and Dipper—shall henceforth now and forever be known as… Stepper!”

 “…Stepper?” the fusion repeated incredulously, though elated stars appeared in his eyes just a second later. “I love it! It sounds so cool! W-what? No, it doesn’t. Yeah, it does! And it fits us so much! Well, even if it does fit, we’re not going by it. Huh? Why not?”

“Yeah, what gives?” Mabel asked, just as confused. “Stepper is the perfect name for you guys!”

“It’s not about the name!” the fusion, now apparently dubbed as Stepper, exclaimed in annoyance. “Then what is it about? It’s about the fact that we don’t even need a name because we’re not staying like this. Like what? Fused? What?” he asked in unison with Mabel, both of them surprised and upset upon hearing this. “B-but I don’t understand… Aren’t you having fun? Fun?!” he scoffed in appalled disbelief. “We have four arms and you just read my mind or… something! How is that fun?! Oh yeah… I… I’m sorry about the whole mind reading thing… But like I said, this whole fusion thing just takes a little getting used to! Right, Mabel?”

“Right!” Mabel agreed with an enthusiastic nod. “Then again, it took us like no time at all to get used to being Maven so… maybe you just need to be a little patient about it?”

“Patient about what?” Stepper asked with a scoff. “Getting used to being… this?” he pointed to himself. “Look, I know it can feel a little weird and awkward—Oh, awkward doesn’t even begin to describe how it feels—but it’s so worth it! If you just give it a chance, then you’ll see that it’s really not so bad, I promise! Are you sure about that? Because it feels weird and uncomfortable and confusing and… and I just… I don’t want to feel like this! But it’s ok for you feel like this! I can feel it too, a-and it doesn’t feel good, but I know how this can feel. So… how is it supposed to feel then?”

“It’s supposed to feel like the best thing that’s ever happened to you, Ste-bro!” Mabel quipped with a reassuring smile. “Well, at least that’s how it felt for us.”

“She’s right,” Stepper said with a small, fond smile. “And that’s how it felt for me and Connie too. And… I want it to feel like that for us… But… why? Because you’re my friend, and you like I said before you deserve to have a little fun. And as far as I know, there’s no better way of having fun than fusion! You… you’re really serious about this, aren’t you? Of course I am! But… I don’t want to force you to be this if you really don’t want to. I just… really hope you’ll at least give this a chance… please?”

The fusion was silent for a moment at this, conflict and pleading both written all over his expression. For as disconcerted and uncertain as half of him felt, the other half clearly wanted this to work out, for them have the experience of sharing this mind and body at least for a while. As he happened to glance over at Mabel, he could see that she shared the same sentiment as she looked up to him with hopeful eyes, silently begging to him to stay together just for the spectacle of it all. And while he still wasn’t fully on board with the idea, upon being pressed from both sides, he realized he didn’t really have much of a choice. “Ok, fine,” he relented, taking in a deep breath as he looked to the mirror once again, pulling himself to full height. “We’ll stay… like this. For you two. Don’t do it for us! Do it for yourself. Uh… sure, whatever you say. But we’re not going to stay like this for too long. Just for a little while, got it? Aw, but why? Because I saw what staying
fused for too long did for ‘Maven’,” he pointed out dryly, casting a small, critical glance towards Mabel, prompting her to glance away guiltily. “And I really don’t want the same thing happening to me. Hm, fair enough, I guess.”

“Ahhh! I’m so excited for you guys!” Mabel exclaimed, quickly perking up as she grabbed the fusion’s lower arms and spun him around, much to his surprise. “This is gonna be so great! You two are gonna have such an awesome time together, trust me! I already have so much fusion fun planned for you guys! We should—”

“Whoa, hold it!” Stepper quickly interjected. “Before either of you guys get carried away, we need to lay down a few ground rules about this whole fusion thing. Like what? Well, for starters, we aren’t going on any little ‘fusion parade’ around town like Maven did.”

“Aw, but come on, Stepper!” Mabel encouraged with something of a teasing smirk. “Don’t you wanna show the world how awesome you are?”

“I do!” Stepper exhaled with an excited grin that was quick to disappear. “Well, I don’t. If we actually went out looking like… this, then people would go running the minute they see these extra arms of ours. Huh… you might have a point about that…”

“Well, if you guys aren’t gonna go out on the town, then what are you gonna do?” Mabel asked, disappointed.

“I’ll tell you what we’re gonna do,” Stepper asserted calmly as he took a seat on Dipper’s bed. “We’re just going to sit here and do nothing for a few hours until we get this whole fusion thing out of our system. And then you guys are going to give me back the journal, I’m gonna get back to my research, and we’re going to pretend like this whole thing never happened, ok? What? No! Not ok! We can’t just sit here and do nothing! We’re fused! We should at least do something fun while we’re together!”

“Seriously, Dipper,” Mabel scowled at the fusion, knowing well that this stubbornly passive behavior was coming from her brother. “Can’t you at least lighten up and let yourself have a little fun instead of pushing everyone away just like you always do?”

“I’m not pushing anyone away!” Stepper protested, crossing his upper arms. “You’re the ones who keep insisting that we stay like this, so the only way we stay like this is if you both bear with me. Well… I guess that is what we agreed to, isn’t it?” The fusion let out a long sigh as he flopped down to lie on his back, knowing he had no choice but to comply with his other half. “I wish we could at least go show the Gems…”

“Oh my gosh, Stepper!” Mabel gushed, perking back up to excitement again. “That’s such a great idea! Let’s go do it! Like, right now!” Out of a severe desire to curb what would no doubt be a boring afternoon, Mabel rushed over and grabbed one of Stepper’s lower arms, abruptly pulling him upright and to his feet before he could have any say on the matter.

“Mabel, wait!” Stepper protested hotly as she began dragging him out of the attic, even though he partially was voluntarily following after her. “I said we aren’t going anywhere!”

“And I said we are!” Mabel chimed insistently.

“Oh! So did I!” the fusion himself quipped, raising one of his spare hands.

“So, its two to one, which means we win!” Mabel cheered, practically pulling Stepper down the attic stairs, despite his best attempts to remain anchored to the banister. “Now quit being stubborn
already and… come on!” She finally managed to rip the protesting fusion away from the railing, though thankfully, she didn’t have too much trouble getting him out of the shack. Still, the trip up to the temple was a very slow one. All the way up the hill, Stepper was in constant flux between eagerly heading for the temple out of excitement and turning on his heel to head back to the shack out of petulant anxiety. Still, with Mabel’s help, the conflicted fusion eventually made it to the temple, even if she did essentially have to push him up the porch stairs and to the door.

“Ok, Stepper,” Mabel said with a confident grin. “I’m gonna go in and give you guys the best introduction ever! So wait here and don’t run off.”

“No promises,” Stepper scowled, crossing his lower arms before reassuring her. “Don’t worry, Mabel. We’re not going to run off. Uh, no; we’re totally bailing out of this. But I want the Gems to see us! They’re gonna think we’re so cool! How do you know that? Their reactions to Stevonnie and Maven were pretty mixed, at best; what makes you think they’ll take us any better? Uh… well… I guess we—”

“Oh, well you just get in there already?!” Mabel finally shouted in clear frustration, finally pushing the fusion into the house as she threw the door open. Startled, Stepper stumbled into the house, nearly falling to the ground, though he managed to use his extra arms to catch his balance in full view of the Gems who sat before him on the couch. The fusion took in a sharp gasp as he straightened up and looked over at them with wide eyes, both halves completely unsure of what to
say as the Gems took him in with equal surprise.

“Uh… um… hi, guys!” Stepper exclaimed, his tone surprisingly bright as he held up a hand in greeting, one that one of his lower arms soon slowly pushed down as his smile switched to anxiety. Flustered by the Gems’ apparent stunned silence, the fusion glanced away, sucking in a deep breath as he prepared to head back for the door. “Uh, you know what? I’m just gonna go-”

“Oh no, you don’t!” Mabel quickly stopped him, pushing him back over to the Gems. “Everyone, I’d like you to meet the one, the only… Stepper!”

“Mabel!” Stepper snapped, quickly casting a heated glare at her for outing him like this. However, his frustration was replaced with surprise as Amethyst suddenly broke out laughing from her spot on the couch.

“Oh my gosh, this has gotta be the best one yet!” the purple Gem howled, holding her stomach as she chuckled hard. “I told ya we should have been placing bets on when this was gonna happen!”

“You know I would have won,” Garnet spoke up, stoically adjusting her shades.

“And, man!” Amethyst exclaimed, jumping up from her spot on the couch as she approached the disconcerted fusion. “Just look at you! Steven, I gotta hand it to you; first Connie, then Mabel, and now Dipper? You really get around! If you know what I mean…”

“W-what?” Stepper asked the purple Gem, alarmed and confused by what she had just implied.

“Amethyst!” Pearl scolded sharply, quickly rising from her seat as well.

“And hey, check me out!” Amethyst continued with a wry smirk, shapeshifting an extra pair of arms to match the fusion’s. “I’m pulling a—what’d you say his name was again?” she asked Mabel aside.

“Stepper.”

“Stepper? Really?” the purple Gem scoffed, glancing the bewildered fusion up and down. “I would have gone with Stedip.”

“Oh well,” Mabel remarked. “They didn’t go for it.”

“Oh well,” Amethyst shrugged. “I’m pulling a Stepper!” She laughed, using her lower arms to point playful finger guns at the fusion, who blushed in embarrassment as he secretly tried to hide his lower arms behind his back.

“Amethyst, could you please stop terrorizing them!” Pearl asked in a huff as she walked up to Stepper, pushing the still-laughing purple Gem away. “Sorry about that, boys. By the way… you two haven’t been fused for an… unprecedented amount of time… have you?”

“Oh… no?” the fusion raised a confused eyebrow. “We’ve only been fused for about an hour, I guess. And even then, that’s still too long, if you ask me…” he muttered his last statement, which Pearl didn’t happen to catch as she let out an allayed sigh.

“Oh, well that’s a relief, especially after-” the white Gem abruptly cut herself off as she happened to glance over at Mabel, who met her gaze with a curious, innocent look. “Uh… after nothing!” Pearl laughed her insensitive near-slip up off, quickly chancing the subject as she turned back to the fusion. “S-so, Stepper, was it? It’s quite fascinating that you would have four arms, especially seeing as how you’re 75% human!”
“Fascinating?” Stepper frowned, gently at first, though it soon turned to melancholy as he gingerly gripped one of his lower arms out of shame. “You mean it’s weird, don’t you…?”

“Oh! No, I didn’t—” Pearl stopped short, her eyes wide at the prospect of offending the fusion. “I was just implying that your arms are an anomaly given the already improbable chances of your existence as a fusion!” Of course, her phrasing only managed to impact Stepper in a way that seemed to visibly offend him, something that could be seen by the confusion and discomfort in his expression. “Wait! That’s not what I meant!” Pearl tried again, flustered herself by now. “What I meant to say was—well, you see I—Oh, why is it so hard to talk to these new fusions!?”

“Pearl,” Garnet fortunately interrupted right on time, lightly pushing her flabbergasted teammate away from the alarmed fusion. “I’ll take it from here.”

“Ah, but I—good idea…” Pearl finally hung her head in defeat, retreating to stand alongside Amethyst and Mabel, both of which couldn’t help but send her amused smirks as she petulantly joined them.

Because of what he had assumed Pearl had implied, Stepper was so disconcerted and awash with worry, that by the time Garnet stepped up to him, he barely even noticed her presence until she spoke up. “Stepper,” she said, instantly catching the fusion’s attention.

“Ah!” he gasped, startled as he looked up at her. “Oh, uh… hey, Garnet…” Still apprehensive, Stepper was quick to look away from her, holding onto both sets of his own arms as his fretful gaze met the floor. And yet, Garnet silently drew it back up towards her as she placed a gentle, motherly hand under his chin and lightly tilted his head up towards her, something that clearly caught the fusion off guard.

“Stepper,” the Gem leader began again, her tone intent, firm, and almost cold. Yet at the same time, even though her expression was mostly concealed by her shades, there almost seemed to be a hint of pity in it. “I need you to listen to what I’m about to tell you, because it’s very important.”

“O-ok…?” Stepper consented, his voice a shaky whisper as he looked to Garnet with wide, almost nervous eyes.

Garnet paused for an oddly long amount of time, almost as if she wanted to keep the fusion in suspense. Or almost as if she didn’t want to tell them what she knew she had to. “You… are an unstable fusion.”

Stepper bristled upon hearing this, his eyes growing even wider as he took a sudden step back away from Garnet, as if what she had just said had injured him. “I’m… what?”


“I… I don’t understand…” the fusion shook his head, his voice nearly trembling from unanimous nerves. “What does all that mean? T-this ‘unstable’ thing… is it bad?”

Garnet let out a deep breath, her hands falling to her sides as she finally averted Stepper’s questioning gaze. “Fusion is a state that requires a bond of complete and total harmony between all participating parties. For a fusion to be stable, healthy, and functional, the sum of its parts must foster a connection based on mutual trust and understanding, strong enough that they’re united in both mind and body, in every sense there is. Both halves have to want and feel the same thing. That steady foundation must exist for a fusion to work. And you, Stepper… you don’t have that foundation.”
“H-how can you tell?” Stepper asked, his expression awash with concern. “Can you like, feel it o-or something?”

“Don’t need to feel it,” Garnet shook her head. “I can see it.”

“Yeah, its kina obvious that you guys are a nervous wreck,” Amethyst interjected laxly. “No offense.”

“Amethyst, please!” Pearl snapped hotly before turning to the alarmed fusion. “But, well… yes, you two do seem a little… unsteady… but still, what fusion isn’t during their first time?”

“Maven wasn’t!” Mabel spoke up with blithe innocence, though she was quick to retract upon noticing Stepper’s clear distress by this revelation. “Uh… I mean… w-we were totally unsteady. Basically, we were one big, awkward, four eyed, adorable disaster!”

“No, we weren’t…” Stepper spoke up, his voice still very soft and small and his eyes taking on almost a haunted look. “Maven was fine. Better than fine, really! They were… perfect! Stevonnie was perfect! I’m… I…” he trailed off, staring down at all four of his hands. “I don’t even know what I am…”

“Stepper,” Garnet interjected, as calmly as ever as she placed a firm hand on the dejected fusion’s shoulder. “Even if you are unstable, that doesn’t mean you’re unsustainable. After all, you’ve managed to remain fused for this long. Clearly, something in both Steven and Dipper wants to keep you together, to see this work out.”

“I do want this to work out!” Stepper exclaimed, though his earnest tone quickly shifted to one of uncertainty. “I… I don’t know if I… I just… Like I said, I don’t know… But I want to know! I want us to have this, for both of us… Please…” The fusion was quiet for a long moment, and no one bothered to interrupt his focused thinking as he looked between his hands once more, as if the halves that composed him were silently debating for once instead of doing so out loud. And while the conflict and dread were clear in his expression, determination and resolve could be found there to. And in the end, that determination was somehow enough to push him forward. “H-how do we become stable?!” he asked Garnet intently, his tone almost desperate.

“You have to find the harmony between yourselves,” the Gem leader said simply.

“W-well, how do we do that?!” Stepper asked rather frantically.

“I can’t tell you how,” Garnet remarked, crossing her arms. “It’s a very different process for every fusion and it all depends on the two of you. But what I can tell you is that you both need to meet each other on the same ground. You need to allow a connection of trust to grow between yourselves. And once that connection has grown, there’s where you’ll find the harmony you’re looking for.”

“Well, that’s vague…” Stepper muttered somewhat sarcastically, though it easily shifted back into worry. “A-and if we can’t do that?”

Once again, the Gem leader looked away from the fusion, adjusting her shades as she frowned deeply. “If you can’t… then your fusion will continue to destabilize until both halves of yourself pull even further away from each other. And then… you’ll fall apart.”

“F-fall apart…” Stepper repeated, his breathing still shallow as he absently ran a hand through his hair. Half of him knew well what the sensation of abruptly ending a fusion was like, and while it wasn’t at all painful or necessarily even bad, it was still wasn’t something he wanted to experience,
mostly because it always symbolized the conclusion of a feeling he had come to relish: the feeling of simply being fused. His other half didn’t know what “falling apart” would even be like if it happened, and though he had professed to wanting this experience to be over as soon as possible, he also somehow feared its cessation for reasons he couldn’t possible explain. But in the end, neither halves could reach a suitable conclusion among themselves. Should they just let their instability overtake them until they inevitably split apart? Or should they actually put forth the effort into keeping themselves together, just for the sake of seeing where this might lead?

Uncertain of which road to take, Stepper glanced over at Amethyst, Pearl, and Mabel, all of whom offered him no help as they simply averted his gaze awkwardly. As he looked to Garnet once more for guidance, the Gem leader simply upheld her firm stance, only offering him a small nod that told him only one thing: that this was his choice to make. Together.

“I… I… I want to…” the fusion took in a deep breath, squaring both sets of shoulders as he puffed his chest a bit in determination. “I’m—I mean, we’re going to find that harmony!” he declared brazenly, though his confidence soon petered out to his usual uncertainty. “O-or… y’know, try and make ourselves more stable, or w-whatever…”

Garnet’s stoicism broadened into a wide, clearly pleased smile upon hearing this. In fact, she could scarcely contain her newfound elation as she suddenly pulled Stepper into a tight, reassuring hug, much to his surprise. “And you will find it,” she confirmed softly, still smiling. “It won’t be easy, and it’ll take work and compromise from both of you, but you can and will find it. I know it.”

“W-well, it’s a good thing you have future vision then…” Stepper frowned as the Gem leader relinquished her hold on him. “I don’t even know where to start with this whole ‘harmony’ thing… B-but we’ll figure it out! And the best part is, we can do it together!”

“That’s the spirit!” Mabel cheered, running up to the fusion. “And I can help you guys find it too! I know all about what being in a super-stable fusion is like from when we were Maven, so my expertise is bound to come in handy!”

“Expertise?” Stepper looked to her incredulously. “You guys literally only fused once.”

“Hey, same for you, Ste-bro, though you’re still going for it!” Mabel smirked, grabbing the fusion’s lower hands. “And we’re all so proud of you for trying! Right, guys?” she asked, turning towards the Gems.

“Oh, well, uh…” Pearl trailed off, glancing aside with uncertainty.

“Uh, sure?” Amethyst shrugged halfheartedly, though luckily Garnet stepped in once more to give the fusion a much-needed confidence boost.

“Yes,” she firmly agreed. “We’re very proud.”

“Aww! Thanks so much, you guys!” Stepper gushed with a bright smile that dropped into a look of hardened resolve. “Well, I guess we better start trying to figure this fusion thing out… I don’t think that’ll be too hard…Speak for yourself. Well, technically, I kind of am!”

“Alright, you two, enough one-sided banter,” Mabel rolled her eyes in amusement as she began pushing the fusion towards the door. “We’ve got some harmony to find!”

“Yeah!” Stepper cheered enthusiastically as he allowed himself to be pushed outside. “Harmony! Harmony! Harmon—Could you maybe stop pushing us, Mabel?! We have two working legs—and four working arms—don’t remind me. Anyway, we can walk. And run, and jog, and jump, and do
The fusion continued to ramble amongst himself as Mabel finished shoving him out, sending the Gems a somewhat uneasy laugh and shrug before leaving herself. “Are you sure they’ll—or rather, he’ll be alright, Garnet?” Pearl asked the Gem leader somewhat worriedly after the kids had all left. “He seemed rather… well…”

“He’s a mess, just like I said before,” Amethyst shrugged plainly, eliciting an aggravated glare from the white Gem.

Garnet simply adjusted her shades, her future vision providing her with a glimpse of what might result from this situation. “He may be a mess now, but whether or not he gets past that is entirely up to him. All we can do is wait and see if he does.”

“Ok, boys!” Mabel began boldly, pacing back and forth in front of Stepper as he sat on the floor of the shack’s den. “Operation Find The Harmony is a go!”

“Oh!” Mabel perked up into a wide grin upon hearing this news. “That’s great then! That means you two are starting to rub off on each other! Quick! The Dipper half of you! Say something Steven would say!”

“Uh… Mabel? I don’t think that’s how this works…” Stepper remarked, raising an eyebrow.

“No, no!” Mabel shook her head. “I said say something that Steven would say, not your usual ‘Doubtful Dipper’ stuff.”

“Heh, Doubtful Dipper! That’s a good one!” Stepper laughed, though he instantly cut himself off in frustration. “Ok, are we actually going to be serious about this, or are we just going to keep messing around? Aw, but we’re just having a little fun! We’re not supposed to be having fun! We’re supposed to be finding this ‘harmony’ thing, remember? But who says we can’t have a good time while looking for it? Because we should be taking this seriously! But I don’t get why it has to be so serious. We’re just trying to make ourselves stable. Of course, you wouldn’t get why this is serious! You never do! You always so-“

“Hey, hey, hey!” Mabel quickly cut in upon noticing the fusion’s singular argument begin to escalate. “You guys need to tone all that crazy tension down! You’ll never find the harmony acting like that. Now, just take a minute to cool down and take a deep, relaxing breath…”

Stepper took her advice, closing his eyes as he took in a long, slow breath. Though before he could let it out as peacefully, the door leading to the gift shop suddenly slammed open abruptly, courtesy of a very perturbed Stan. “Kids!”
“G-Grunkle Stan!” Mabel gasped in surprise, not even noticing Stepper as he hurriedly scrambled to his feet, his eyes wide with alarm.

“What in the name of all that’s worth money is with all that junk you munchkins left in the yard?!” the conman asked hotly. “That dumb pig and crazy lion got into those snacks and left a huge mess out there that somebody’s gotta clean up. And I can tell you that somebody isn’t gonna be…” Stan trailed off, his anger shifting into dry bewilderment upon finally spotting the fusion, who was currently trying his best to conceal himself behind Mabel. “Uh, Mabel?” the conman said, raising a questioning eyebrow. “Who’s the four-armed freak trying and failing to hide beyond you there?”

“F-freak?!” Stepper exclaimed, offended as he properly stood.

“Aw, Grunkle Stan, you scared him!” Mabel exclaimed fretfully, turning to the fusion. “Just look at him! He’s got that deer-in-the-headlights look and everything! Poor thing!”

“What? No, I don’t!” Stepper protested, his alarm quickly turning into a scowl. “Well, you gotta admit that Mr. Stan did kind of scare us a little. Whatever. Maybe he scared you, but not me. I… think he got us both, to be honest. But its ok, Grunkle Pines! We know you didn’t mean to!”

For a moment, the only thing Stan could do was stare at the fusion in bewildered confusion for a moment, before a wave of exasperated recollection and realization washed over him. “Oh great, another one,” her remarked sardonically, rolling his eyes as he stepped closer to Stepper, who was rather stiff under his dry scrutiny. “And let me guess… this time, its Steven and Dipper, isn’t it?”

“Uh… well, I-” the fusion shakily attempted to explain himself, though Mabel enthusiastically cut in for him.

“Yes!” she chimed brightly. “I call him Stepper!”

“A name I never agreed to, by the way!” Stepper spoke up, still flip-flopping between personalities. “But a name that I think is just great!”

“Speaking of great,” Mabel grinned at Stan, nodding towards the fusion. “Isn’t that what he is? Cause I certainly think so!”

“Well, he sure is something, pumpkin,” the conman said with a small, bemused sneer as he looked over the fusion again. “To be honest, I didn’t know either of them swung that way, but eh whatever floats their boats I guess.”

“Uh… what’s that supposed to mean?” Stepper asked, simultaneously disturbed and confused by this statement.

“Oh nothin’,” the conman shrugged nonchalantly. “You’ll get it when you’re older. But for now… Hey, Soos! Wendy! Get in here and get a load of this!”

“W-what?!” Stepper gasped fearfully. “Grunkle Pines, don’t call them in here! No, do call them in! They’re gonna love us! No! They can’t see us like this, especially not Wendy! But I thought you were over her. I am! Then why are you so nervous? I’m not nervous! Yeah, you are, I can feel it! Oh, can you just-”

“What’s up, Mr. Pines?” Soos asked as him and Wendy casually entered the den.

“Yeah, you wanted us to see-” the cashier cut herself off, both her and the handyman’s jaws dropping as they noticed Stepper. Of course, the only thing the flustered fusion could do at such a moment was let out a loud groan as he buried his face in his upper hands, even though one of his
lower ones offered the pair a wave of cheerful greeting. Neither Mabel nor Stan could suppress small chuckles upon seeing Stepper’s embarrassment mingled with obliviousness, altogether creating quite a humorous scenario as Soos and Wendy reacted to him.

“Whoa… Nice extra arms, dude…” the handyman said fervently, even if he still had no idea who the fusion really was.

“Uh… thanks?” Stepper frowned, holding one of his spare arms awkwardly, especially as Wendy slowly approached him. The cashier’s eyes were wide with rare wonder, her usual calm all but gone and replaced with a soft blush, one that was much more poignant on the bewildered fusion as she stared at him in awe.

“Um… hey,” she greeted him as casually as she could, coyly glancing away as she absently played with her hair. She looked back to him once again, this time with an undeniable flirtatious smile, one that made Stepper’s jaw practically hit the floor with shocked disbelief. “What’s up?” she asked, sending him a playful wink.

For what seemed like ages, the fusion was at a complete loss for words, and even when he did find them again, they came out in stumbled, disjointed ramblings. “I… uh… you… not… u-up… um… we… uh…” As he trailed off, his eyes wide as the half of him in control failed to make sense of what he was saying. So the other half decided to simply take the reins instead. “Oh, not much,” he shrugged with a sudden blithe, composed, but still innocent smile. “What’s up with you, Wendy?”

“Huh?” Wendy blinked out of her flirtatious manner, confusion filling her expression instead. “But… but how did you…?”

“Psst, Wendy!” Mabel interjected, barely managing to contain her laughter as she whispered to the befuddled cashier. “That’s actually Steven and Dipper.”

“Mabel!” Stepper snapped, completely outraged over how she had ruined the moment. “Wait, I don’t understand. What just happened? And why are we so sweaty all of the sudden?” The fusion was quick to slap one of his lower hands over his mouth at this, anxiously glancing towards Wendy, who looked to him with disturbed shock.

“O-ok! This just got way too awkward…” she remarked, tearing her gaze away from Stepper as she briskly walked away. “I-I’m just… I’ll just be over here for a second… Yikes…”

“W-Wendy, wait!” the fusion called out after her as she retreated to the other side of the room for a moment. Of course, by now, both Stan and Mabel were besides themselves with laughter, to the point that they were both practically in tears over what had just happened, much to half of Stepper’s frustration as he sent them a fierce glare.

“Whoa, hold on a second!” Soos cut in with a surprised gasp as he looked to the fusion. “Did you two dudes fuse?”

Stepper let out a long sigh, though it quickly turned to excitement before he could say anything. “You bet we did! O-on accident, of course! We didn’t mean to. But we did, and so here we are as Stepper! Again, I didn’t agree to that name! Well, I think it’s kinda safe to say that its stuck by now. Unfortunately…”

“Aw, I’m sort of disappointed…” the handyman frowned as he looked to the fusion. “I mean, you guys look totally awesome together, don’t get me wrong, but you don’t look anything like my design for a Steven-Dipper fusion!” At this, Soos pulled out his ‘fusion folder’ and presented Stepper with a drawing that, against all odds, bore a striking similarity to him.
“Soos, what are you talking about?” Stepper asked in slight confusion as he looked over the sketch. “This looks almost exactly like us. What? How do you see that? I mean, it’s a great drawing, Soos, it really is but… yeah I gotta agree, it just doesn’t look like us at all…”

“Yeah, I can’t really see it either…” Mabel remarked as she got a peek of the drawing, looking between it at the fusion.

“…Are you guys serious?” Stepper asked dryly, letting out a small sigh of exasperation.

“Alright, alright, enough gawking over him,” Stan cut in, pushing Soos away from the fusion. “It’s not like he’s any less of an annoying smart-aleck or an unbearable optimist like this than they are when they’re apart. Nothing new to see here.”

“Hey!” the fusion protested, even if half of him was quite confused. “I think we’re pretty new… In a good way! More like a really uncomfortable way…”

“Still…” Stan continued, ignoring what Stepper had just said as he began to circle the fusion in examination. “That weird four arm thing you got going on there does have some potential… I think people would pay good money to see that many arms not artificially glued onto a person, but on a real… sort of person instead.”

“Wait… what?!” the fusion asked with a scoff that instantly shifted into elated excitement. “Oh my gosh, Mr. Stan! You really wanna make us an attraction here at the Mystery Shack?!”

“Eh sure,” the conman shrugged. “Plus, seeing as how you’re half-family, I could get away with only half-paying you. Or I just won’t pay you at all. That honestly works even better, if you ask me.”

“Oh, of course, we’ll—No!” Stepper fiercely cut himself off. “No way, Grunkle Pines! We are not headlining as one of your dumb attractions just for people to look at us and laugh! But people wouldn’t laugh if they saw us! They’d probably really like us, and think we’re cool—Are you serious?! Just look at us! We have four arms! There are literally two personalities running wild inside our head, and they couldn’t be any more different! So? What’s the problem with all that? We’re still trying to do this together, aren’t we? The problem is that we’re—we’re a—we—Augh!”

The fusion derailed into a sudden sharp cry of distress as his entire body was covered by a bright white light, one that was quick to consume him completely. Soos and Wendy gasped in alarm upon seeing this, and even Stan looked to him with newfound concern, especially as his form began to waver and his ongoing cry started to split apart into two separate, but very familiar voices. Fortunately though, Mabel recognized what was happening, and with a fearful gasp, she quickly rushed over to the destabilizing fusion, taking his lower hands tightly before they could dissolve into nothing.

“Stepper!” she exclaimed adamantly over both Steven and Dipper’s disjointed, struggling shouts, their fusion’s form crumbling apart more and more with each passing second yet for some reason, still not falling apart entirely. “You guys gotta stick together! Remember what Garnet said! Remember your mission! Operation Find the Harmony isn’t over yet!”

Upon hearing this appeal, something in the faltering fusion seemed to shift, his outcry turned from being disconnected and strained to unified and determined. Mabel gasped again as he pulled his trembling lower hands away from her, and all she could do was watch with wide eyes as he struggled to pull that set of arms close to himself. After what seemed like ages of fierce turmoil on the fusion’s part, he finally managed to wrap his arms around himself in what looked like a desperate hug. As he tightened this embrace, the light that had enshrouded him abruptly disappeared, revealing that Stepper was, against all odds, somehow still together.
Still, this small victory was not without its cost. Exhaustion from the ordeal he had just passed through filled his features, and as his eyes suddenly began to roll back into his head, Stan took a large, hurried step forward in an attempt to catch him as he started to sway. The conman was a second too late, however, as Stepper collapsed to his knees, breathless but supporting himself with his upper arms as his lower set still held him in a tight embrace that he refused to break. Overwhelmed with worry, Mabel rushed to hug him herself, though the fusion silently held up a hand to stop her in her tracks before she could. His expression was unreadable, largely obscured by shadow thanks to the brim of his hat hanging low as he weakly pulled himself up to stand. And though he was a little unsteady on his feet at first, he succinctly turned around and walked out of the room without spared another word or glance for anyone.

“Stepper!” Mabel called, concerned, as she ran out of the shack after him. “Wait up!”

A beat of awkward silence passed in the den after the kids had left, seeing as how no one was entirely sure of what to make of what had just happened. But of course, Stan was the first to break it, playing the entire situation off as though it hadn’t been incredibly disconcerting and alarming. “Yeesh, talk about your split personality,” he remarked, feigning sarcasm. “For a minute there, I thought he was actually gonna pass out or something. Then again, considering who he’s made of, I guess that wouldn’t have been too far out of the realm of possibility.”

“Oh, they’ll be fine,” the conman rolled his eyes passively. “But I’ll tell you what you two should be worried about. Getting back to work!” At this staunch command, Soos and Wendy found that they had really no choice but to comply, as concerned as they were. And yet, as they headed back towards the gift shop, Stan lingered a moment longer in the den, finally letting his own apprehension show as he cast a frowning glance towards the door Stepper and Mabel had just went through. “Oh boy…” he sighed with undeniable worry that went easily beyond what had just happened. “I really hope you kids know what you’re doing with all this magic mumbo-jumbo…”

“Stepper!” Mabel exclaimed, easily catching up with the fusion, seeing as how he had stopped just past the porch. His manner was still quite tense as he stood, his upper hands clenched into tight fists at his side while his lower arms held onto those arms consolingly. His eyes were still largely concealed as he kept his gaze downward, not even glancing over at Mabel as she came to stand alongside him. “Hey, a-are you guys ok?” she asked with a frown as she looked over the clearly troubled fusion. Stepper gave her no signs of response aside from a very soft, almost inaudible sigh as he looked away from her even more. Mabel bit her lip anxiously at this, completely at a loss of what to do to help him, especially after what had just happened. “Oh boy…” he sighed with undeniable worry that went easily beyond what had just happened. “I really hope you kids know what you’re doing with all this magic mumbo-jumbo…”

“You two managed to pull it together anyway! Literally!” She let out a bright laugh at this, in the hopes that it would spread to the fusion, but of course, it didn’t as his continued empty silence only lingered. “W-well, uh… don’t worry! There’s still plenty of other things we can try to get you two to be-”

“What’s the point?” Stepper finally spoke up, his tone dejected and morose as his grip on his own arms tightened. “We’ve been trying all day just to stay together. How are we supposed to find the harmony if we can’t even do that?”

“Aw, come on, you guys, don’t sell yourselves short!” Mabel encouraged, running to stand in front of the fusion instead of beside him. “If there’s anyone who can do this, it’s you two! All you need
is… Oh! I know! What you guys really need is a deep, genuine bonding experience! That’s bound to get you guys in perfect harmony!”

Stepper finally looked at this, his dejection fading into curiosity. “Bonding experience? Like what?”

“Uh… well…” Mabel paused to mull over this before providing him a mostly suitable answer. “Like something you both like doing, or something that would get you guys to work together instead of always arguing. Or something that does both…”

“…Did you have anything in mind?” the fusion asked, raising an eyebrow as he waited to see where she was going with this.

“Of course!” Mabel perked up at the realization of her newfound idea. “Why didn’t I think of this before?! Steven, you like adventure, don’t you?”

“You know I do!” Stepper exclaimed, starting to bounce back from his earlier melancholy.

“And Dipper, you love mysteries, right?”

“I… can’t really argue that I don’t…”

“Then there’s one sure fire thing that’ll get you as stable as a Stepper can be!” Mabel exclaimed excitedly. “A mystery adventure!”

“…A… what?” Stepper asked, mutually confused.

“A mystery adventure!” Mabel repeated just as zealously as before. “You know, kinda like a mystery hunt, only with 100% more adventure! Doesn’t it sound awesome?!”

“A mystery adventure, huh?” the fusion mused, seeming to take the suggestion seriously. “I guess there wouldn’t be any harm in anything like that. After all, there’s no way it could make things worse by this point… And who knows? It might even be fun! Do you really wanna go there with that whole ‘fun’ thing again after what just happened? …Uh… well… m-maybe instead of having fun, w-we’ll finally find the harmony! It would definitely be about time for that to happen…”

“So is settled then!” Mabel proclaimed confidently. “Let’s go, boys! To find adventure, mystery, and most of all…” She trailed off, grinning to Stepper, who only returned it with a look of blank confusion. “Uh, this is the part where you’re supposed to chip in with ‘harmony’!”

“Oh, Harmony!” Stepper cheered, determined at first, then uncertain. “Y-yeah… harmony…”

“Ok, so where do you guys—or should I say—you, Stepper,” Mabel paused as she sent the fusion a sly wink that he didn’t quite understand. “Think we should start with this whole mystery adventure thing?”

“Hm…” Stepper pondered this, quickly diving into conversation with himself as he began pacing around. “Well, when we go on mystery hunts, don’t you usually figure out what we’re going to go look for with the—” the fusion suddenly cut himself off with a sharp gasp. “Oh my gosh! The journal! I’ve been so distracted with all this fusion stuff that I almost forgot about it! O-oh… well, I don’t really see why you would have needed it before now. It’s not like we’d find the harmony in there anyway, right? Uh, m-maybe we could? A-after all, there are a few notes in there about fusion that could be helpful… Really? Yeah, but the only problem is… I don’t know where it is since somebody felt the need to hide it earlier…”
Mabel shrugged awkwardly as Stepper sent her an unimpressed glance. “Hey, it was the only way I could get you to stay out here, bro-bro,” she said defensively. “And aren’t you totally glad you did? You guys would have never fused if I hadn’t hidden that journal!”

“Whoa, you’re right!” Stepper gasped with a smile. “How lucky was that? Probably too lucky… But uh, you still know where it is, right? I’m sure it would be really handy on our little, um… adventure mystery?”

“That’s mystery adventure, Ste-bro,” Mabel corrected. “And of course I know where it is! Steven knows too, seeing as how he watched me hide it and everything. In fact, it’s right over-“ She stopped herself right before she could reveal the book’s location, looking to the fusion with an appalled gasp. “Hold on just a second! This isn’t just Dipper trying to get the journal back so you guys can unfuse and he can just go back to his dumb old research, is it?”

“Um… no! I’m just trying to-“ Stepper interrupted his own defensive protest as an instantaneous flash of light sparked from both his gem and concealed birthmark. He let out a shocked gasp amidst his surprise, his eyes widening first before filling with hurt anger. “He was just trying to get the journal, just like you said! I can’t believe you! You were lying to us! Ok, seriously?! You need to cut it out with that weird mind reading thing! It is not ok! No, I’ll tell you what’s not ok: pretending like you actually wanted to do this when you don’t! Please, that’s not why I—wait.” The fusion paused, his frustration turning to stark realization. “If you can read my mind while we’re fused… then maybe I can do the same thing to you! W-what are you-“ Stepper gasped once more, his upper hands flying to his forehead while his lower ones reached for his gem, all while they both briefly lit up once more.

“Steven, wait!” Mabel exclaimed adamantly. “Don’t let him-“

“Oh, so that’s where you put it, huh?” Stepper smirked triumphantly at Mabel before letting out a disappointed sigh. “Sorry, Mabel… I-I didn’t know how to stop him. Well, at least now you know how creepy it feels to have somebody randomly probing your thoughts. Also,“ the fusion turned back towards the porch, kneeling down to find that the journal was, sure enough, sitting under it. “Under the porch, Mabel? Really? I gotta say, not your best hiding spot.”

“I wouldn’t have had to hide it in the first place if you hadn’t been such a nerdy lame-o.” Mabel remarked, petulantly sticking her tongue out at the fusion.

“Call me whatever you want. I’m just glad we can finally put this whole awkward mess behind-“ Stepper stopped short as his hand touched the journal, a huge gasp escaping him as the book disappeared into thin air the instant he made contact with it. “W-what just happened?!“ he asked in alarm as he pulled back and quickly stood. “Where did it go?! It vanished! Yeah, I can see that, but why? And more importantly where?!“

“Maybe it just decided to hide itself so you two would stay fused longer,” Mabel purposed with a small, satisfied grin at this odd turn of events.

“Not helping!” Stepper exclaimed hotly. “Well… it’s gotta be around here somewhere, right? Oh, it better be, because I-“ The fusion stopped short, his eyes widening with surprise as he glanced down at the brightly-glowing gemstone on his navel. “W-what’s happening?!“ he exclaimed, his alarm only growing as a radiant pink orb slowly began to emerge from the stone. “I-it’s ok! This is normal! …I think. But it’s just our—How many times to I have to tell you that no part of this is-“ Before he could get his final word out, the orb split from his gem, instantly taking shape into something else entirely as the light abruptly faded from it. Before Stepper could even realize what that something was, it began to fall towards the ground, though his lower arms somehow managed
to awkwardly catch it right before it could. Confused and curious, the fusion glanced at what he was now holding, his shock only growing as he held it out to get a better look at it.

“I-is that… the journal?!” Stepper exclaimed, his jaw dropping in mutual shock as he glanced over the seemingly familiar, leather-bound tome. And yet, something was undeniable off about it, even from a first glance. “N-no… It’s not… it looks… This is… What is this thing?”

As opposed to the telltale book the kids had all seen many times before, this journal was quite different in mere appearance alone, bearing only a vague semblance to the usual one by way of size and thickness. Instead of burgundy, its surface was a dark shade of pink, and altogether the book was far less weathered and battered, instead looking pristine and new as it lightly shimmered with a continual pale glow. There was something of a rose theming to it, with designs of pink petals in its corners and thorny vines along its spine. However, the design on its cover was by far the most interesting thing about it: instead of a six-fingered hand, it was a large yellow star, harboring the effigy of a smaller Big Dipper inside of it. For a moment, the only thing the fusion could do was stare at this mysterious journal with apt confusion, though before he could even make any comment on it, Mabel made one of her own.

“Whoa!” she gasped, amazed as she looked at the journal herself. “Looks like you got a journal upgrade! This one’s way prettier than the usual old, dusty one!”

“Oh, hey! Good idea!” Mabel exclaimed zealously, suddenly plucking the journal right out of Stepper’s hands before he could stop her.

“Hey!” he protested, trying to grab it back from her, but she was easily able to keep it out of his reach.

“Uh… sure it is…” Stepper frowned, finally pulling himself out of his initial surprise as he held the book a bit closer. “No, but really, what is it? I… I think… it’s our weapon… What?”

“Yeah, seriously, what?” Mabel asked, just as confounded. “How are you guys supposed to use a book as a weapon? Are you just supposed to throw it at monsters or something?”

“I… don’t know…” the fusion looked over his journal with tighter scrutiny this time. “Maybe there’s something inside of it that”-

“And probably nothing in there about how Dipper used to sleep with a stuffed turtle named Mert every night when until he was eight!” Mabel cut in with an unrestrained snicker, one that instantly caught the fusion off guard. “Cause this journal’s totally got that covered and so much more!”

“Wait, what?!” Stepper exclaimed in alarm, instantly pulling the journal away from Mabel to get a better look for himself. And sure enough, much to his appalled shock and bewildered confusion, page after page of the first half of the book was filled with information about really only one thing: Dipper. From preferences to pet peeves, interests to skills, and even memories from both childhood
and recently, it was as though this mysterious journal had assembled a perfect profile far more accurate and detailed than anything even he could have compiled himself. And needless to say, this revelation completely floored half of the already dumbfounded fusion. “W-wha—How did all of this stuff get in here?!” he asked hotly, his face red with embarrassment. “I have no idea, but this is so cool! I’m learning so much neat stuff about you! H-hey! Don’t look at this! Well, how can I not look at it when we’re using the same eyes? Ugh, just.” Stepper cut himself off, abruptly snapping the journal shut in disgruntled frustration. Of course, it was only seconds later that his upper hands undermined that choice, pulling the journal away so it could reopen it and continue exploring. “Hey! I said don’t—whoa, cool! This part’s about me!” The fusion gasped, an intrigued smile filling his features as he noticed that the entire second half of the book seemed to be dedicated to Steven in the very same way its first half had concerned itself with Dipper. The split between the two halves seemed to be right down the middle, though Stepper was far too preoccupied investigating his strange yet remarkable journal to even bother to spare a glance at whatever might be on the page where the halves intersected.

“Oh!” Mabel gasped in sudden realization as the fusion continued to pour over his tome in disturbed, yet excited curiosity. “I get it! That journal’s 50% about Dipper, 50% about Steven, and 100% about you, Stepper! It makes perfect sense!”

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Stepper staunchly corrected, closing the journal again. “Why is this book about us and nothing else?! Maybe because its magic? It did come from my—I mean, our gem, after all. So what? Are you telling me the journal turned into this just because we’re fused? That’s the only explanation I can think of.”

“It’s just like how Steven’s shield and my grappling hook turned into a grappling shield when we fused into Maven!” Mabel quipped cheerfully. “Our weapons fused, just like we did!”

“Yeah, but this… thing isn’t even a weapon at all!” Stepper scoffed, pointing to his journal with clear disdain. “Maybe there’s just something about it we’re not seeing… No, we’ve seen the whole thing and its totally obvious. Not only is this journal embarrassing; its useless! Wait!” The fusion tried to stop his upper arms before they petulantly threw the odd journal down in a huff, turning his nose up at it as it disappeared into a burst of soft light as it hit the ground. “What did you do that for?!” Stepper asked himself in frustrated disbelief. “If we had gotten a better look at it, then maybe we could have figured out what it can really do! It’s a book, for crying out loud; it can’t do anything! Well maybe it could if you’d just give it a chance! And maybe while you’re at it you could trying giving this a chance for once too!”

“G-guys!” Mabel tried to intervene, already fearing a repeat of what had just happened inside the shack. “Don’t fight with each other! Remember Operation Keep The-

“I am giving this a chance!” Stepper exclaimed hotly, completely ignoring Mabel as his argument with himself continued. “I’ve been giving this a chance all day, but it’s getting harder and harder to accept things like having four arms, and mind reading, and a creepy magical journal that’s filled with every little detail there is to know about me! Why does all that stuff bother you so much?! It doesn’t bother me! Yeah, because you’ve done this before! You’re used to it! I’m not! But you’ll get used to it! You keep saying that, but it’s just… not happening! Because you won’t let it happen!”

“Stepper-” Mabel attempted to cut in once more, though this time the fusion didn’t block her out.

“Don’t call me that!” he snapped fiercely. “Oh what, do you really have a problem with our name too? That’s not our name! …Names—Whatever! The point is I never asked for this to happen in the first place! Well it’s not like I ever tried to force you into it. Yes, you have! That’s literally
what you’ve been doing all day long!”

“Stepper-” Mabel persisted, growing increasingly more worried for the fusion as both of his halves grew more frustrated with each other.

“You just keep pushing and prodding at me to stay like this, and I just don’t understand why! It’s because I want to help you! Help me what? Feel awkward and uncomfortable inside my own head, because if that’s what you were trying to do, then it definitely worked! Ugh, how do you still not get it!? Get what? That you’re trying way too hard? No! That the reason I want this to work so badly is because of-”

Stepper suddenly found himself abruptly cut off, not by Mabel this time, but by a very abrupt, very loud crash that rattled the entire area. The fusion in particular almost lost his footing, though he managed to catch himself by relying on the nearby porch beam, his extra arms aiding him in regaining his balance. “Whoa! What the heck was that?!?” Mabel asked in newfound alarm, already starting off towards the source of the crash before prompting Stepper to do the same. “Come on, you guys! We gotta check it out!”

The fusion was really in no place to argue, his eyes still wide with surprise as he realized that he was trembling, though more out of lingering anger than fear. Still, he surprised his anger and conflict for now, heading after Mabel towards the sudden commotion out of curiosity more than anything else. And indeed, the sight the kids found after a rather short walk through the woods was certainly something to see.

An entire round of trees had been completely decimated by a pod of large, green, spherical orbs, the very same kinds that Peridot had sent to earth just a few weeks prior. The robots had already sprouted their legs, though these were different than the short stubs the green Gem’s robinoids usually had. Instead, they were lanky and versatile, their long, sinister tendrils raising the bots high off of the ground as they began combing through the nearby area. While the kids were quite startled by such a frightening group of machines, fortunately they were far enough out of their line of sight that they avoided detection as they tucked safely behind the trees. And even more opportune was the fact that before the robinoids could even get close, the Gems themselves arrived on the scene, their weapons already drawn as they seized up their upcoming opponents.

“Whoa! Look at these crazy things!” Amethyst remarked, prematurely swinging her whip around. “Hey, now!” she lashed her weapon out as one of the robinoids’ long arms suddenly spiraled towards her. “Getting friendly with us already, huh? Pretty cheeky of ya, if you ask me.”

“I can’t believe Peridot’s still sending these things here!” Pearl huffed, jumping out of the path of a plummeting robotic limb before sending her spear flying at the bot who had attacked her. “She knows we’re just going to destroy them, just like we did with all of her other robots, doesn’t she?”

“Not this time, you Crystal Clods!” the green Gem’s nasally voice rang out as one of her robinoids rose up high over all the others. A monitor flashed over the round body of said robot, showing Peridot herself upon it as she looked down upon the Gems with a smug grin.

“Peridot!” Garnet shouted, her gauntlets already clenched into tight, threatening fists.

“Well, well, well,” the green Gem’s smirk remained as her robinoid drew in close to the Gems. “You three must think you’re so clever, what with destroying the control room at the Prime Kindergarten. But you failed to anticipate that I wouldn’t merely take your traitorous behavior lying down. I’m not about to let you defective rebels interfere with my assignment again! So I figured, why not just take you three out the easy way and then simply proceed as planned!”
“So what? Are you just gonna bore us to death all this ‘revenge’ talk or are we actually gonna fight?” Amethyst asked dryly, rolling her eyes.

“Grrr, see *this* is exactly why you Crystal Gems deserve to be taken out!” Peridot growled crossly. “You’re just a bunch of impetuous, annoying lumps!”

“Takes one to know one,” Garnet shrugged casually as Amethyst and Pearl both chuckled at her clever retort, setting the green Gem off even more.

“We’ll see who has the last laugh when my attack robinoids are through with you!” she shouted, fiercely commanding her bots to action. “Go! Shatter them! Shatter them so I can be free of their aggravating meddling once and for all!”

The Gems had no time to reply to this as the robinoids all converged on then, their sharp tendrils shooting out towards the trio at an alarming speed. Fortunately, they managed to cleanly leap out of the path of the mechanical arms, but even still, the kids all shared fearful gasps as the robinoids began their aggressive barrage of attacks all while Peridot continued to watch on and laugh in amusement at the Gems’ rather futile attempt to destroy them.

“Oh my gosh!” Mabel exclaimed fretfully, stepping out from the tree line a bit, even if Stepper stayed back. “You guys, the Gems are in trouble! We gotta get out there and help them get rid of those spidery robot things somehow! Come on!” She charged forward out of the woods, more than ready to do whatever she could to aid the Gems, even if she had no idea what. But she stopped short upon noticing that the fusion wasn’t following her, instead clinging to one of the trees as he looked to the attacking robinoids almost fearfully before apprehensively glancing down at his lower hands. “Uh… Stepper? Aren’t you coming?”

Stepper jolted at this, somewhat surprised as he quickly glanced up, his eyes wide with immense uncertainty. “Uh… give us a minute,” he said, forcing a reassuring smile onto his face. “W-we’ll be right behind you.”

Mabel frowned as she noticed the fusion’s clear hesitance, and though she wanted to ask him the reasoning behind his delay, she knew it likely wouldn’t be the wisest thing to do, given his current unsteady state. “Ok… Well, I’ll see you out there, I guess…”

“Y-yeah…” Stepper waved her off absently, glancing to the ground. “See… see you…” As he trailed off, Mabel hurried out into the open, leaving the fusion behind to watch as she tried to distract the attack robinoids away from the Gems, much to their shared disapproval and alarm. Even as he stayed in his hiding spot, the fusion could see just how much danger they were all in, with Peridot’s robinoids relentlessly attacking them on all sides, and while a large part of him did want to run out into the fray himself, he still ended up holding himself back all the same. “We need to go help them…” he said to himself, his voice an earnest whisper. “I-I know, but… we can’t. Not… not like this. Why not?!”

His voice suddenly rose as he took a large step back into the woods, the low branches obscuring much sunlight from falling on him. “Are you seriously that embarrassed about being this that you can’t even let it go during an emergency like this?! I’m not embarrassed, I just—Yes, you are! I can feel it! You’re embarrassed by our arms, and our journal, and by being fused and… and by *me*. No, I’m not! I just… I’m just… Oh, I don’t know! Why does it even matter?!”

Stepper let out a loud, frustrated groan at this as he thoughtlessly pushed back even further into the woods, not even noticing as they apparently seemed to get darker. “It matters because you *need* this! Need what? To be fused? Because at this point, I’m pretty sure that’s the *last* thing I need! No, it’s not just about being fused! It’s about how you always try to shut yourself away from
everyone! You always think you have to be alone, but you don’t. I-I don’t try to shut myself away from—Yes, you do and you don’t even realize it! That’s why we set that party up for you! Because we wanted you to finally take everything off your shoulders and open up and just… have fun for once! But… you just won’t let yourself enjoy this… And that’s why we can’t find the harmony… The things we want… they’re just way too different… We’re way too different…”

The shadows of the forest seemed to pounce upon the fusion as he said this, though instead of remaining black and dark, they abruptly turned to varying shades of pink and blue, all of which appeared to paint Stepper in messy, uneven splotches. The fusion let out a soft gasp of alarm at this, but he was quick to disregard it as a sudden rush of anger filled in for his former regret. “O-oh yeah? Well what about you?! W-what about me? I never wanted to be this in the first place, but you’re trying to keep us together just so you can have the same feeling you did with Connie and Mabel! No! That’s not what I—Yeah it is, and I can feel it; it drives you crazy that we’re not as compatible or as stable as Stevonnie and Maven were. N-no, it doesn’t! I… I just…”

Stepper sighed, closing his eyes as the colors covering him seemed to drift apart, looking less like mixed splotches and veering more into equal halves. “I just wanted to have that feeling again… Well, sorry if I’m not good enough to give you that feeling! Because I guess the only things you’re feeling with me is all of the stress and awkwardness and confusion that I’ve been feeling ever since any of this began! Hey, none of that’s my fault! It’s not like I’m the one making you feel any of that! Yeah, you are, by forcing us to stay like this.”

The fusion’s eyes widened as the colors on him abruptly snapped into perfectly even halves across his body. “W-what? I told you before, I’m not forcing us to do anything! Yes, you are! You might have said that you weren’t going to force us to be this, but you went back on it! When did I do that?! When we were falling apart back at the shack! I was ready to let go, I wanted to let go, but you wouldn’t let me! You just… pulled us back together without even caring about whether or not I wanted you to or not… You didn’t even ask…” Stepper gasped at this, one of his upper hands flying up to cover his mouth out of pained shock. “Y-you… you’re right… I didn’t ask… I didn’t even think about… about what you were… what you might have…” The fusion gasped once more, his body lurching forward as the connected colors on him abruptly snapped apart. With this, Stepper’s form was only enshrouded with the destabilizing white glow for a moment before, with far too many warring thoughts in his head and emotions in his heart, he finally fell apart.

The boys collapsed away from each other, the colors returning to normal as bits and pieces of light began to spill in from the canopy of trees overhead. In the distance, the sounds of the Gems combating Peridot’s robinoids could vaguely be heard, but Dipper hardly paid that any mind as he slowly sat up, his head throbbing as he let out a small groan. “Ugh, why do I suddenly have such a—” He abruptly cut himself off however, upon hearing the sound of his own natural voice, as well as looking down and seeing his usual short legs, the regular journal tucked into his vest, and, sure enough, only two arms instead of four. “Oh my gosh!” he exclaimed with a small, admittedly relieved grin. “W-we’re back! It’s just me again! And—Steven!” Dipper gasped, instantly jumping to his feet and looking around for the apparently missing young Gem. “Steven, we un-”

“Yeah… I know…” Steven muttered dejectedly, prompting Dipper to quickly turn around to face him. The young Gem sat, his back turned to him and his knees pulled to his chest, his body language alone conveying that he was anything but happy about their sudden unfusing.

“Oh no…” Dipper frowned with sudden regret, already feeling quite guilty about Steven’s obvious melancholy. Not really knowing what to do to make the young Gem feel better, he slowly walked over and sat down on the ground beside him, noticing as he slightly turned his head away from him the moment he did. A long bout of silence passed between the boys, one that seemed to suggest all of the countless things both of them wanted to say to each other and yet not conveying anything at
all. In the end though, Dipper felt the most obligated to break this silence, and he started with a long, remorseful sigh as he tried to piece together exactly what he wanted to say. “Steven, look, I’m-”

“Dipper,” Steven quickly interrupted, his voice somewhat shaken as he spoke with his head still buried into his knees. “I’m so sorry.”

“What?” Dipper frowned in apt confusion. “Steven, no, don’t be sorry. If anyone should be sorry, it should be me.”

“No, it should be me!” Steven retorted earnestly, finally looking up as tears started to well up in his eyes. “I knew you weren’t comfortable, but I just keep pushing you and pushing you! It’s like… it’s like I couldn’t take no as an answer, and all because I wanted another ‘perfect’ fusion! But we weren’t perfect, and I… I guess I couldn’t accept that. You wanted out, but all I did was pull you back in every time, without even giving you a choice about it! I-I made you feel…”

“Trapped…” both boys said in unison, their voices equal in dismay and regret as they finally exchanged a glance.

“Steven…” Dipper sighed again, still unsure of how to voice his own apology, though fortunately, Steven still wasn’t done with his.

“And the craziest part of it all, was that this all started from me wanting to help you have a little fun…” the young Gem looked away again with a somber sigh of his own. “A lot of good that did. I only ended up making everything worse… And all because I had to take things too far…”

“But you only had to take things that far because of me!” Dipper exclaimed insistently, throwing out any form of planning on his apology as he just let it out instead. “Every time you reached out to me to try to get me to enjoy myself, all I did was push you away! Mabel was right, I really do do that to everyone…”

“But that’s ok,” Steven said forgivingly. “I mean, that’s just how you are, Dipper. And… I think I’ve finally realized there really isn’t a problem with that. It’s like we said… we’re really different. And… maybe that’s good thing.”

“Steven, holing myself away from everyone just to research stuff and forcing myself to spend all my time alone for it… really isn’t a good thing…” Dipper admitted, glancing away in shame. “If there’s one thing fusing with you taught me, it’s that.”

“R-really?”

“Yeah. I mean, being fused and essentially sharing a mind and body was really weird and uncomfortable and overwhelming, but… I think I finally understand what Garnet meant when she told Maven that fusion turns you into something greater than yourself…”

“I-it really does…” Steven smiled softly. “It’s like you can feel everything that you’re feeling and everything that the other person is feeling. And when both of you are feeling good, its… it’s incredible. It feels like there’s nothing in the world that could bring you down from that. And…. that’s what I wanted for us, I guess…”

“And I just wouldn’t let us feel like that…” Dipper remarked somewhat bitterly. “I was so wrapped up in how stressed and anxious I felt that I wouldn’t let all of your excitement and happiness about it rub off on me. We could have had such a great time together, but I had to go and be stubborn and mess everything up, just like I always do…”
“Don’t beat yourself up about it. I mean, this is my fault just as much as it is yours. And to be honest, I’m actually really glad we managed to fuse at all. I mean, did you see how cool Stepper was!”

“Yeah, you know, I actually have to admit… he was—we were kind of impressive. And like Mabel said, we had some pretty nice muscles, which was definitely a plus.”

Steven let out a genuine laugh at this, one that Dipper couldn’t help but join in on. A newfound understanding seemed to exist between the two boys, one that had been born out of their intense conflict of personalities and had come to replace that conflict with a different kind of foundation instead. A foundation of trust rather than misgivings, of similarities as opposed to differences, and compromise instead of contempt. And the contentment they both felt at the establishment of this new foundation was as clear to see as the smiles on both of their faces. “Steven,” Dipper began as he rose to stand. “I’m sorry for being such a stubborn stick in the mud. Do you think you could ever forgive me?”

“Of course, I can, Dipper!” Steven exclaimed brightly. “But only if you can forgive me for being so pushy.”

“It’s a deal,” Dipper laughed, grabbing Steven’s extended hand as he stood so they could shake on it. “But uh… I think in the middle of all this apologizing and feeling sorry for ourselves that we sort of forgot about something important…”

“Oh my gosh, you’re right!” Steven gasped in realization. “The Gems and Mabel are still fighting off Peridot’s robots! They’re gonna need our help!”

“Well…” Dipper grinned somewhat leadingly as he glanced to the side. “I do know of a certain fusion who might be able to do an even better job of lending them an extra hand, or two, or four…”

Stars appeared in the young Gem’s eyes upon hearing this proposal, a surprised gasp escaping him at the same time. “Oh, Dipper! Do you really mean it?!”

“I do,” Dipper nodded, resolved. “But only if we’re both on the same page about it this time.”

“Right,” Steven sobered up a bit, though it was clear he was still excited. “Well, I guess we better—whoa!” The young Gem was cut off as Dipper abruptly grabbed his wrist and pulled him into a loose, yet lively dance. Of course, the dance itself mattered little considering the revived comradery between the boys, and before they knew it, amidst their shared laughter and revelry, a familiar bright light enveloped them both. And out of that light, Stepper emerged, looking identical to how he had appeared before, but feeling so incredibly different.

“Whoa,” the fusion gasped as he opened his eyes, looking over himself with a growing smile. “We did it! On purpose this time! And wow… It… it feels so much better now… Is this…? This is… It is. This is how it’s supposed to feel.”

Stepper’s already huge grin widened even more at this before it ultimately escalated into a laugh that he was powerless to contain. In fact, his newfound joy at the innate delight that was simply existing in such a harmonious state was enough to send him tumbling to the ground amidst his heavy laughter, both sets of arms wrapping him in a tight embrace. It was as though all of the doubt and anxiety and inner conflict that had plagued him before had completely vanished, instead replaced with a kind of warmth and elation that he could scarcely even begin to describe. Instead of awkward and strange, he felt natural and at peace, both halves of his whole finally content to be as they were, together and united in every way there was.
In fact, Stepper was so caught up in his own ecstasy that he almost didn’t notice his gem light up with a bright pink glow. Still, he saw it nonetheless, cutting his laughter short as he quickly rose to stand. As he expected, the same odd pink journal emerged from it, no doubt still filled with copious notes on both of his halves. However, what the fusion found alarming was that he didn’t even have to catch the journal. Instead, it drifted out from him and remained floating in place an arm’s length away from him, its unique cover facing him squarely, almost as if it was beckoning him to touch it. Confused, Stepper reached out to do just that, and the moment his fingers skimmed the emblem on its cover, which flashed brightly as he did so. He quickly pulled his hand away, however, as the book flattened itself out, flying open and flipping its pages rapidly on its own accord. Stepper watched the entire process with awestruck curiosity, until at last, the pages stopped right at the very center of the tome, the light finally fading from it, his birthmark, and his gem, all at the same time.

Intrigued as ever, the fusion leaned forward to get a better glance at the page the still floating journal had opened to, one that contained no information about either of the boys, but instead featured only one thing: a large drawing of Steven’s shield, one that spread across both pages in full, delicate detail. “What the…?” Stepper finally muttered, raising an eyebrow as he drew his hand into the image. The journal shined once more as he placed his hand upon it, one of his lower arms coming to rest a small distance underneath the book at the same time. As if guided by instinct, the fusion slowly started lifting up his other hand, and as he did, a visage of the iconic pink shield began to rise up from its image on the pages as well, sparkling brightly all the while. Stepper gasped in amazement, his eyes wide as he somehow managed to pull up an entire shield from the journal, one that was smaller than its usual counterpart, but still corporeal and three dimensional as he flattened it down to float over the open book. “Well, what do you know?” he asked himself with a satisfied smirk, especially as he noticed just how surprisingly sharp the edges of this newly-generated shield were. “I guess I really can use a journal as a weapon after all! And I think I know of a perfect way to test it out…”

Despite all of their best efforts, the Gems were quickly starting to realize that Peridot and her attack robinoids were nowhere near the easy opponents they thought they’d be. In fact, the green Gem’s bots were surprisingly very powerful and very precise, something that kept Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl on their toes throughout the duration of the battle, lest they be shattered by the mechanical tendrils that seemed to be shooting about everywhere. Peridot’s continual mocking and taunting aside, it didn’t help that, amidst the battle they also had to keep an eye on Mabel, who adamantly refused to flee in favor of assisting the Gems as much as she good. Fortunately, she had her grappling hook on her, like she usually did, but the tool wasn’t able to do much after one of the robinoids managed to knock it cleanly out of her hand and away from her reach. It was around this point in the fight that the tide seemed to turn even more against the Gems as, in an attempt to push Mabel out of the way of one of the robinoids before it could snatch her, Amethyst managed to get tangled up in one of its lengthy coils. Garnet and Pearl, and even Mabel followed soon after, the bots tightly and firmly restraining their limbs and tossing their weapons away from them.

Peridot laughed triumphantly as she directed her robinoids to pull her struggling opponents up towards her towering screen, more than prepared to hold her incoming victory over them. “Struggle all you want,” she goaded smugly. “None of it will matter after you all are broken to itty-bitty, soddy bits!”

“Not if we break your insipid robots first!” Pearl retorted back crossly, wrigglingly fiercely in an
attempt to wrench her arms free from the robinoids holding her.

“Ha! Like there’s a chance of that happening,” the green Gem rolled her eyes. “Clearly I am the one who is about to emerge from this encounter as the victor while you all face agonizing and crushing defeat at the hands of a far superior Gem! I’m so excited about it I can hardly contain myself!”

“Ugh! Contain this!” Mabel huffed, her arms pinned down, though she still managed to kick her shoe off, letting it fly right into Peridot’s holographic monitor.

“Hey!” the green Gem exclaimed hotly, glancing down at the mark the now fallen shoe had left on the bot below her. “Your gravity connector cover scuffed up my robinoid! Just for that, I think I’ll finish you off first, you ‘Mabel’!”

Mabel gasped in sudden alarm as two rather sharp tendrils emerged from Peridot’s personal robinoid, both of their deadly tips aimed right at her. However, before either of them could attack, a sudden pink blur happened to rush by, one that sliced both coils cleanly in half. “W-what?!”

Peridot exclaimed, appalled as the tips crashed to the ground. Another unknown projectile flew in seconds, cutting the tendril that was wrapped around Mabel, freeing her and allowing her to land on the ground below mostly unharmed. Grateful yet confused by this sudden rescue, both her and the Gems turned towards its source to find a figure that none of them had really been expecting.

“Stepper!” Mabel gasped, overjoyed as she watched the fusion emerge from woods with a far different manner about him this time. His former uncertainty and fretfulness was far removed and instead replaced by confidence and assurance as he stood firm, ready to face off against the robinoids himself. Floating above one of his lower palms was his unique tome, which he had unanimously decided to dub as his shield journal, and resting just a few inches above it was another weaponized shield, one that he was fully prepared to send flying at a moment’s notice.

“Peridot!” he exclaimed boldly, not even flinching as the green Gem turned her robinoid to face him. “Let the others go, now!”

For a moment, Peridot simply looked to the fusion with an expression of dumbfounded confusion before she let out a dry scoff. “Please. Are you kidding me? Why would I ever do something that amicable or agreeable? These are my enemies I’m about to destroy here! Duh.”

“Fine,” Stepper shrugged with a small, daring smirk. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.” With a shout of gusto, the fusion flung his shield out from the journal, watching with satisfaction as it flew fast and high. Its blade-like edges easily snapped the coils clinging onto the Gems, releasing them and allowing them to renew their own weapons, though all they could really do was stare at the fusion in amazement and slight alarm as he ran forward into the fray.

“Boys, wait!” Pearl called fearfully as Stepper rushed for one of the robinoids head on, another shield forming over his journal. “You can’t fight like that! Y-you’re unstable!”

“They were unstable,” Garnet corrected with a clearly proud smile as she watched the fusion launch his shield at the nearest bot. “You can’t fight like that! Y-you’re unstable!”

The Gems did so as the projectile crashed directly into the machine, ripping through its spherical body like a knife. Peridot gasped in shock as her bot exploded from this strike, but Stepper didn’t even bother to celebrate this small victory as he ran onto the next one, throwing yet another shield and downing yet another robinoid.

“Yeah!” Amethyst cheered, pumping her fist as the Gems remained on the sidelines, seeing as how
the fusion actually had things handled himself. “Go, Stedip!”

“That’s Stepper,” Mabel corrected with a satisfied grin, delighted to see that, against all odds, the boys had succeeded in their mission.

After watching a third robinoid blow up, however, Peridot finally started attacking back, making her extreme frustration quite clear in the process. “Who do you think you are, you interloping, four-armed….whatever you are!?” she asked fiercely, glaring down at the fusion as several robinoid arms chased him in vain.

“Who am I?” Stepper repeated with a coy grin, positioning another shield over his journal as one of his spare arms casually readjusted his hat. “Oh, nobody too special. But if you care so much about names, like some people do…” he paused, sending a playful wink Mabel’s way as she let out a small, amused laugh. “Then I guess you can just call me Stepper.”

“Yes!” Mabel exclaimed excitedly. “The name finally stuck with both of them! I knew it was a good one!”

“Ugh! They’ll be calling you Shattered when I’m through with you!” Peridot growled in outrage as she pushed her robinoids even harder. Stepper managed mostly jump out of the path of a tendril that spiraled towards him, yet while he cut through said arm with a shield, he failed to notice another one that snuck up on him from behind. The fusion gasped in surprise as his upper right arm was caught, quickly followed by his lower left one soon after. As his other left arm was grabbed, the shield journal fell out of his grasp, leaving him essentially defenseless, a fact that Peridot was more than happy to brag about. “Well, it looks like you’re all out of options, you ‘Stepper’. So what do you intend to do now that you’re mere seconds away from your inevitable demise?”

“Oh gee, I don’t know…” Stepper remarked, his tone clearly sardonic, a fact that set the concerned Gems somewhat to ease in the idea that he likely knew what he was doing. “I guess you really got me, Peridot. But uh… you forgot one just little thing…”

“Oh?” the green Gem asked, rolling her eyes. “And what’s that?”

“My fourth arm,” the fusion smirked, pulling the arm he had wisely hidden behind his back forward and revealing a shield still hovering over it. Peridot only had time to let out a startled gasp as he tossed the projectile forward hard, watching with satisfaction as it rammed right into the green Gem’s personal robinoid, sending it tumbling to the ground hard. Since the key robinoid was connected to all of the others, the remaining bots all collapsed as it fell as well, all of them deceiving as the master unit crashed and burned. Still, in the machine’s final moments, Peridot’s monitor remained, and she didn’t hesitate to launch all of her intense fury at the fusion for foiling her plans so easily.

“Augh! You… you too-many-limbed, malformed, human, abomination of a clod!” she shouted furiously, glaring daggers at the fusion as he merely returned it with a triumphant grin. “I’ll make you wish you were never formed! This isn’t the last you’ll see of me! I’m going to complete my mission, no matter what I have to do! Even if I have to come to that miserable planet of yours myself, I’ll-” The green Gem’s threat was cut off right in the middle as the main robinoid finally exploded, abruptly cutting off her transmission as her monitor disappeared.

Stepper’s smile widened a bit as he saw this, knowing that, for as harrowing of a task as it had been, his job was done. And with its completion, so too came the bittersweet end of his functional reason for staying together. After all, for as great as being fused now felt for them, half of them knew very well that it was shame to spoil oneself with too much of a good thing. And so, with contented sigh, Stepper closed his eyes and bowed his head a bit, fall four arms falling to his sides.
as the pale glow that represented unfusing enshrouded him, this time completely on his own terms.

As the peaceful glow disappeared, so too did the fusion, leaving the two halves that composed him in his place. As Dipper and Steven opened their eyes and exchanged a glance, neither of them could suppress their huge, elated smiles, though before they could celebrate the victory they had just shared on their own, Mabel and the Gems were quick to pounce upon them first.

“AHHHH!” Mabel practically screamed, pulling both of the boys into a tight, celebratory hug. “Oh my gosh, you guys, that was so awesome! You totally kicked Peridot’s butt! Well, not her butt, but all of her robots’ butts! …Do robots even have butts?”

“I-I think what Mabel is trying to say is that you two did an exemplary job!” Pearl applauded with a warm smile. “Both of you should be very proud of yourselves for such wonderful work!”

“Yeah, you guys totally bailed us out!” Amethyst smirked. “Who knew that all it took to beat Peri’s dumb robots down was four arms and weird shield-making book?”

“I guess we did,” Steven laughed as him and Dipper humbly accepted the adulation.

“And I gotta say,” Dipper interjected with an amused grin. “The look on Peridot’s face when we flung that shield at her? It was-”

“Priceless!” both boys exclaimed at once, chuckling brightly as they did so before Mabel and the Gems joined in.

“Well, it looks like you two managed to find the harmony after all,” Garnet grinned as she placed a hand on both of the boys’ shoulders. “I never doubted that you would. After all, some of the strongest fusions are made up of two halves that seem like exact opposites, but have more in common than they think they do. Believe me.” The Gem leader’s tone turned a bit vague as she adjusted her shades mysteriously, though she was still smiling all the while.

“Ah, this is so great!” Mabel exclaimed, delighted by all of the warm feelings going around. “Since you guys are so full of harmony right now, you should totally form Stepper again! Just so we can all check out just how awesome that journal really is! Please?”

“Uh… I think we’ve had enough Stepper for one day, Mabel…” Dipper remarked with small, somewhat tired smile.

“But that doesn’t mean you’ll never see him again,” Steven clarified. “Right, Dipper?”

While Dipper would have certainly opposed such an idea earlier that day, now he could only offer the young Gem a confident smile and an affirmative nod to the very real possibility of them fusing again someday. “Right, Steven. But for now, I think there’s something really important I need to get back to.”

“Let me guess,” Mabel huffed, already exasperated. “Researching?”

“Nope,” Dipper shook his head, still grinning as he threw an arm around Steven and Mabel’s shoulders. “Hanging out with you guys.”

“Aww, Dipper!” Steven gushed happily, stars in his eyes as he pulled both twins into a tight hug, one that the Gems had no choice but to join in on as their young ward silently beckoned to them. And yet, in the midst of it all, Dipper and Steven exchanged one last warm smile, one that reminded them both, just as much as the memory of being Stepper himself did, just how much their friendship had been tested and tried over the past several hours alone. And yet, it had come out of
it all undoubtably changed, yet largely better than it ever had been. As Garnet had advised them to, they had found the harmony, but not just for the sake of their fusion, but for the sake of their own bond even outside of it. And that harmony was something that neither one of them intended on letting slip away from them any time soon.
Chapter 36: Rose's Scabbard

Chapter Summary

In which Pearl is gay, Stan is bitter, and Rose is a mysterious enigma, as always

Chapter Notes

K, so I think this is a pretty average chapter, but it does have its shining moments, so I hope you'll all like it well enough. So here it is, my take on Rose's Scabbard. Enjoy!

As the summer weeks continued to roll by, it had become something of an unspoken custom for the Gems to bring Steven, Dipper, and Mabel along on their less-dangerous missions. Their reasoning for this was twofold, mostly as a response to the kids pleading to join them but also because they made for good company, livening up what would have otherwise been boring, routine trips and investigations. And much like the past several adventures the kids had accompanied the Gems on, this one was no exception to them providing their own varied brands of intrigue and amusement.

The destination of their exploration today was quite far from Gravity Falls, practically an entire continent away though merely a few minute’s trip by warp pad. It was a vast, wide, hilly landscape, with countless earthen platforms of all sizes somehow suspended aloft in the sun-speckled sky. Though what really made this locale interesting were two distinct features: massive, daunting, ancient weapons of all different kinds, digging into the ground that served as the fertile home for countless oversized wild strawberries, growing as far as the eye could see, something that particularly peaked Steven and Mabel’s shared interest.

“I’ve never seen so many strawberries in one place before!” Steven quipped, grinning as he passed by one of the aforementioned fruits that happened to be nearly as big as he was. “They all look so tasty!”

“I know, right?” Mabel smirked as she plucked another one of the smaller (but still quite large) strawberries, adding them to the hefty armful she had already collected. “I can’t wait to get these babies home and turn them into something even tastier. I could make a huge strawberry shortcake! Or the world’s biggest strawberry sundae! Or, if I find a bunch of other giant fruits, a really big fruit salad!”

“Ok, but am I the only one who’s wondering why all of these strawberries are so big in the first place?” Dipper asked with a curious frown as he passed by a particularly massive one. “Or better yet, why all of these huge weapons are just lying around everywhere?”
“Oh, that’s a wonderful question, Dipper!” Pearl cut in with a bright smile as she eagerly shared her wisdom on the matter. “This field was the site of a historic battle. Every weapon here was left by a Gem over 5,000 years ago!”

“Whoa, no way!” Steven exclaimed, sharing an awestruck expression with the twins. “That’s so cool!”

“And all these weapons are so pretty!” Mabel added as she looked over at a towering broadsword nearby. “Why would anybody just leave them behind?”

“These weapons serve as the final memorials to the Gems who met their heroic ends here!” Pearl exclaimed with a dramatic flair. “I don’t like to disturb them, but Garnet says we can’t just leave them lying around.”

As the white Gem said this, Garnet picked up a massive battle axe from the strawberry patch nearby, slinging it over her shoulder with not much effort at all, despite how much larger than her it was. “Never know when you might need one of these.”

“I need one of those all the time!” Steven quipped, stars of excitement in his eyes.

“So do I!” Mabel exclaimed, just as enthused. “Can we take some giant weapons home too, Pearl?”

“Mabel, come on,” Dipper interjected with a scoff. “These things are huge, deadly weapons. We can’t just carry them back to the shack like they’re plain old souvenirs! ...Can we?” He asked, directing said question to the white Gem.

“O-oh, well I do suppose that is what we’re here to do in the first place, isn’t it?” Pearl shrugged with a small smile. “But still, instead of a lumbering war axe, why don’t you kids look for something that’s more... you?”

“Done and done!” Mabel grinned, dropping her load of strawberries as she ran over to a tall purple sabre, placing a hand on its dull side and grinning up to its hilt proudly. “This one just screams me, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah it does!” Steven readily agreed.

“Mabel, that thing’s bigger than you are,” Dipper pointed out as he went over to join her. “How are you even going to get it out of the ground, much less back to the warp pad?”

“With your help, duh!” Mabel rolled her eyes. “Now, come on! If we both pull hard enough, I’m sure we can pull this up and drag it home! It’s gonna look so cool hanging over my bed!”

“As if it would even fit over your bed,” Pearl commented sarcastically, but even so, he consented in helping his sister in trying to lift the heavy weapon up out of its long-time resting place. As she watched their rather futile attempt to even get the sword to budge, Amethyst let out an amused chuckle, one that Garnet shook her head in disapproval over.

Inspired by the twin’s excellent find, Steven grew even more zealous for the idea of finding a weapon of his own among this impressive collection. “Ok, Lion! Come help me look!” he called to the pink beast, who simply turned and walked away at this prompting, as stoically as ever. “Aw, come on!”

“You really need to train that thing better,” Pearl commented, crossing her arms as she watched Lion saunter over to a nearby cluster of strawberries.
“Oh, we’ve been making progress!” Steven informed brightly. “Now he even looks at me when I say his name! Watch: Lion!” Of course, the pink beast did anything but heed the young Gem’s call, far too distracted by digging through the patch of leaves before him to even spare him a single glance. “Lion!” Steven tried again, only to get the same result. “Lion!” By the third attempt, the young Gem realized that Lion likely wasn’t going to listen at all. “Uh... sometimes, he does...”

Pearl frowned dubiously at this, though her attention was peaked as the pink beast finally did lift his head up, revealing that he was now carrying something he had apparently found in the dirt in his maw. “What’s he got now?” she asked curiously, though her confusion quickly changed into a shocked gasp upon seeing exactly what Lion had managed to retrieve. “It’s the scabbard for Rose’s sword!”

“Really?!” Steven exclaimed in surprise upon hearing this. He only got a glance at the large, bright pink scabbard as Pearl began prying it away from Lion, eventually succeeding in claiming it and shooing the sullen pink beast away. Still, the fact that it apparently belonged to his deceased mother was more than enough to peak the young Gem’s interest. “Hey, guys!” he called to Garnet, Amethyst, and the twins. “Get over here and check this out!”

They did so, Dipper and Mabel leaving the sword they made essentially no progress on pulling out of the ground behind for the moment as they headed over to get a better look at the scabbard Pearl was proudly holding out for them all to see. The pink sheath was rather simple in design, visibly sturdy and hardly even damaged at all, despite being exposed to the elements of the battlefield for countless centuries. In fact, the only other noticeable things about it aside from its size and coloration was the familiar rose emblem associated with the pink Gem herself marked on both sides and the fact that it was noticeably empty.

“Whoa... It’s so beautiful...” Mabel gushed, amazed as she looked over the scabbard. “What is it?”

“It’s a scabbard, Mabel,” Dipper informed somewhat caustically, though both Steven and Mabel only replied with blank looks of confusion. “You know, the thing you put a sword inside?”

“Ohhh,” the pair nodded in mutual understanding, neither of aware that there was an actual word for such a thing until now.

“And to be honest, I think this scabbard looks... sort of familiar...” Dipper remarked, pulling the journal out of his vest as he began to curiously flip through it.

“What?” Pearl blinked, her smile at this find instantly fading upon hearing such a claim, though she was quick to pick it up again with something of a forced laugh. “Oh, you must be thinking of another scabbard, Dipper. This scabbard has been missing for years now. Why, it’s been centuries since I’ve seen it myself! Until now, of course.”

“Uh, no, I’m pretty sure this is it,” Dipper said upon finding a sketch within the journal that was remarkably similar to the very sheath Pearl held in her hands. “I mean, the author didn’t label it or anything, but it looks exactly like that scabbard, see?”

The white Gem frowned suspiciously as she briefly glanced over the image on the open page, which was indeed identical to the scabbard, right down to it even being bereft of the sword it was meant to contain. A brief hint of alarm and confusion filled her expression, though she was very quick to suppress it with more dismissiveness. “Ooh, well... I’m sure that’s just a mere coincidence,” she scoffed, turning her nose up at the book. “After all, the scabbard is quite simple in its design. Whoever wrote that journal probably just assumed what the scabbard would have looked like and drew that.”
“What? A coincidence?” Dipper asked, confused and somewhat annoyed at how Pearl was simply passing this depiction off like it was nothing. “But how would he have-”

“And besides,” Pearl cut him off, her former verve returning. “This isn’t just any mere, average, ordinary scabbard. This is the scabbard to Rose’s own sword, the very same sword she skillfully wielded in battle in this very field centuries ago!”

“Mom fought here?” Steven asked, overwhelmed with curiosity by now.

“That’s right!” Pearl nodded enthusiastically. “And I fought alongside her!”

“Man, I bet that battle was nuts!” Amethyst spoke up, excited by the very mention of the momentous war she had missed out on. “I wish I could have seen it!”

“No, you don’t,” Garnet admonished firmly, setting her axe down for a moment. “Countless Gems were broken here. It was a maelstrom of destruction and death.”

“But we won!” Pearl jumped in with a bright grin. “Steven, your mother led us to glorious victory! The odds were against us, and our hearts were uncertain,” the white Gem’s tone became more and more dramatic as she continued detailing this striking tale to the immensely intrigued kids. “The enemy’s forces far outnumbered our own, but we didn’t give up! We chose to fight alongside Rose, who bravely led us into battle without a moment’s doubt or hesitation. And here, we made our stand against our Homeworld!” Needless to say that all three of the kids were aptly amazed by this exciting recollection, which was why they all continued looking to Pearl for more of it, which she was more than happy to give to them. “Rose was the one who ensured our triumph that day,” she said, her tone a bit softer as she smiled down at the scabbard fondly. “And she ensured our triumph in every battle that followed it. She was the one who brought us together, who inspired us to be more than what we were made for...” A light blue blush filled in the white Gem’s cheeks as she held the scabbard a bit close to her, her smile widening as she recalled all of the times her illustrious former leader had held onto it herself. “She... She was... exceptional...”

Pearl maintained her wistful, reminiscing smile throughout the entire trip back to the temple, largely ignoring the kids and her teammates as she continued to gently cling onto the treasured scabbard. In fact, she was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she barely even noticed as they all warped back into the temple with their impressive haul of weapons retrieved from the battlefield.

“This is great!” Amethyst smirked, turning to head to the temple gate with her towering armful of smaller weapons. “My room’s been needing another pile.”

“Now, be careful with this sword, you two,” Garnet advised the twins as she handed the large sabre Mabel had picked off to them. Fortunately, she had carried both the sword and her battle axe back to the warp pad, but seeing as how she had to squeeze the axe into the temple somehow, the twins were basically on their own with the sword. “It’s very sharp and very heavy.”

“Don’t worry, Garnet,” Mabel reassured confidently. “Between the two of us, getting this pretty pointy stick down to the shack should be a-” She was abruptly cut off as the Gem leader finally let go of the sabre, letting it rest in the twins’ outstretched hands though it didn’t stay there long. Its hefty weight was more than enough to pull both Dipper and Mabel down with it, though thankfully they let go of it and let it fall to the wooden floor near the warp pad just in time.

“What’s that you were saying about getting this thing down to the shack?” Dipper asked, raising a dubious eyebrow at his sister.
“Uh… Garnet? A little help here?” Mabel asked the Gem leader with a frown, not ready to relinquish such an interesting piece so easily.

“I’m… a little busy right now,” Garnet grunted as she lifted her own axe up, working on keeping it balanced as she headed for the temple gate herself. “Amethyst! Help me with this axe!”

“I… guess we’ll just have to figure out a way to get this sword out of here ourselves then…” Dipper said, glancing down at the oversized blade worriedly.

“Oh! I’m thinking our plan to move it should include squirrel-driven sleds, or ‘squeds’ for short!” Mabel quipped, excited by her impromptu plan.

“Mabel, I have a feeling that’s… that the best idea in the world…”

“How will we know unless we give it a try?”

“We really don’t need to try a plan like that to know it’s not going to work!”

“Pfft, says you.”

As the twins continued to argue over how they were going to transport the sabre and Garnet and Amethyst struggled to force the battle axe into the temple, Steven remained on the warp pad along with Pearl, laughing in light amusement over the ongoing commotion from both ends. His attention was quickly diverted away from it all, however, as Pearl let out a soft, longing sigh beside him, her gaze still focused on the scabbard. “It’s been ages…” she murmured, her expression almost dreamlike as she blushed once more. She was finally broken out of her fixation on it as she noticed the young Gem curiously staring up at her. “What is it, Steven?”

Steven glanced away somewhat, mostly towards the scabbard as rubbed his arm a bit before posing a question he had been wanting answers for as long as he could remember. “What was mom like?”

Pearl’s soft blush deepened upon hearing this question, a gentle, affectionate smile crossing her features as she looked to the portrait of Rose Quartz herself hanging from the far wall. “She was… courageous, and brilliant… and beautiful…” The white Gem glanced to the scabbard briefly, another soft, nostalgic sigh escaping her before she looked to her young ward warmly. “Sometimes, you look so much like her…”

“Really?” Steven asked with his usual schmaltzy grin as he looked back from the picture of his mother to Pearl.

“Eh-” the white Gem frowned, suddenly uncertain, though she decided not to not really give much of an answer as she instead glanced behind her at Garnet and Amethyst, who were still struggling to fit the axe through the temple gate.

“Yeah, lift it backwards!” the purple Gem encouraged.

“You mean pull,” the Gem leader corrected, pulling her weight against the weapon.

“Yeah, pull, sure, if you wanna be all fancy about it.”

Though Steven was still expectantly waiting for a response, Pearl shifted her gaze over to the twins, who were still bickering over what method of getting the sabre down to the shack they were going to implement. “Mabel, for the last time, we’re not using a team of trained squirrels to get this thing down the hill!” Dipper exclaimed, quite annoyed by his sister’s persistence.
“Aw, but the squirrel idea is such a good one!” Mabel sighed fretfully. “And besides, how else are we supposed to get it to the shack?”

“How am I supposed to know!? You’re the one who decided to you had to bring it back with us in the first place!”

“Uh, have you seen it, bro-bro? It’s so pretty!”

“Yeah, and it’s so huge that we can’t even lift it, for crying out loud!”

A moment or two later, Pearl finally turned back to Steven, perking up with relief with that what she was about to do likely wouldn’t turn into a big deal. Mostly because she didn’t think it really needed to be one. “Hey, Steven…” she began with a small smile, holding the scabbard out to him. “Maybe… maybe you should hold onto this…”

“Whoa…” Steven gasped in amazement as he took the prized possession that had once belonged to his mysterious mother, stars in his eyes as he looked over it. “Thanks, Pearl!!”

The white Gem simply let out a small, warm laugh at her young ward’s clear gratitude for this gift, though even as she accepted his thanks, her gaze still happened to drift up towards Rose’s portrait as she replied to it. “You’re welcome…”

Though it took quite a bit of work and time and a well thought out plan on Dipper’s part, the twins eventually managed to haul the giant sabre down to the Mystery Shack. Steven helped them out with this task as much as he could, though he took special care to make sure that he didn’t drop or misplace the scabbard the entire time. When they did get the oversized sword down the hill, Stan was the first to see them coming with it, and he was quick to staunchly refuse to let them take it inside, much to Mabel’s disappointment. Still, the conman did allow them to shove it into the ground near the shack in the hopes that its interesting appearance and large size would intrigue potential customers from afar. Still, getting the sword itself into the soil was much easier said than done.

“Ok, keep pulling!” Mabel called down from her spot atop the sabre’s cross guard to Stan and Dipper as they tried to get the blade to dig deep enough into the ground all while struggling to keep it standing upright. “I said keep pulling! Its barely even moved an inch!”

“W-well, it’d be a lot easier if you actually came down here and helped us, Mabel!” Dipper exclaimed, practically panting in exhaustion as he glared up at his sister.

“I am helping!” Mabel protested. “I’m sitting up here so I can weigh it down for you guys! So yeah, I’m being super helpful!”

“Geez, kid, could you have picked a bigger sword to drag home with you?” Stan asked with a scowl as he wiped the sweat from his brow. “My back’s not cut out for this kind of manual labor anymore. Why don’t you get over here and do this instead of me, kid?” he called over to Steven, who was in the midst of playfully swinging his mother’s scabbard around like it was an actual sword. “It’d be a far better use of your time than standing around playing with… whatever that girly blunt object you got there is.”

“This isn’t a blunt object, Mr. Pines,” Steven chuckled as he held the scabbard in front of him for the conman to see. “It’s a scabbard that used to belong to my mom! Isn’t it neat?”
Stan caustically looked between the young Gem and the scabbard in his hands, his expression far from impressed before he turned back towards the large sabre. “Sure, kid, whatever you say,” the conman deadpanned, rolling his eyes as he continued trying to pull the sword down into the ground.

Steven’s smile faded as he glanced down at the scabbard for a moment, curiosity filling his features as he looked over at Stan again. “Hey, Mr. Pines?!”

“Oh, what?!” the conman grunted sourly as he finally managed to shove the tip of the blade a bit into the ground, their sudden progress catching Dipper a bit off guard as he accidently stumbled back from it a bit.

“You knew my mom when she was still around, right?” the young Gem asked, walking up to the sabre himself.

“Yeah, I did, unfortunately for me…” Stan remarked coldly, letting go of the blade as he crossed his arms. Of course, the moment he did, the sabre happened to fall backwards, its headway in the ground meaning nothing at all against its top-heavy weight. As it collapsed to the ground, Mabel fell off of its hilt, prompting Dipper to hurry and try and catch her, even if he just broke her fall instead.

“We’re ok!” Mabel called, even if her and Dipper had fallen into a messy heap on the ground.

“Eh, I’ll just have Soos tack that thing down later,” Stan shrugged, only briefly glancing back at the sabre before Steven caught his attention once more.

“So if you knew my mom, then you could probably tell me more about what she was like!” the young Gem exclaimed brightly. “I mean, the Gems are always talking about her, but I think it’d be nice to get an outside perspective for a change, you know?”

Stan let out a long, aggravated groan upon hearing this, rubbing the bridge of his nose as he looked away from the expectant young Gem. “Kid, I’m in no mood to open up that can of worms right now.”

“What do you mean?” Steven frowned in confusion as the twins headed over to join in on the conversation. “I know you said you guys never got along that great, but things couldn’t have been bad between you two, right?”

“Bad?!?” Stan scoffed harshly, suddenly quite upset and angry. “Are you kidding me, kid?! Things between me and her weren’t just bad, they were-” The conman abruptly cut himself off, especially as he glanced over at the twins who were looking to him with just as much curiosity as the young Gem was. “T-they were… You know what? Let’s just say things were bad and leave it at that, ok?”

“But why?” Mabel asked with an inquisitive frown.

“Yeah, what happened between you and Rose that made you apparently hate her so much?” Dipper asked, just as confused.

“N-nothing happened,” Stan shrugged crossly, looking away from the trio. “She just… I dunno— rubbed me the wrong way from the minute I first met her. And I don’t think anybody could blame me for it, seeing as how she was nothing but a huge nuisance! She always acted like she was better than everyone else, like she could do no wrong and like was so perfect-”

“Y-you mean she wasn’t?” Steven asked fretfully, knowing the conman’s views contradicted everything Pearl had told him earlier about his mother.
“Of course, she wasn’t!” Stan exclaimed hotly. “I don’t know what kind of sweet, fluffy little lies
the Gems have been feeding you, kid, but your mom was far from the amazing, perfect, flawless
goddess those three thought she was!”

“That’s quite enough, Stan!” Pearl shouted furiously as she leapt onto the scene seemingly out of
nowhere. Her expression was absolutely livid upon as she rushed to stand in between the conman
and the kids, more than ready to refute everything he had just said without a moment’s doubt.

“Oh great, the “Rose Protection Squad” is here,” Stan rolled his eyes dryly. “What, are you here to
worship the ground she walked on since she’s not around for you sing her praises to her directly
anymore?”

“How dare you!” Pearl hissed angrily. “You have no right to say such terrible things about Rose,
Stan! You barely even knew her!”

“I knew her enough to know she was pompous, self-righteous snob,” Stan remarked callously.
“Sorta like you, Pearl. Guess the apple didn’t fall too far from the tree.”

The white Gem simply let out an irate growl at this, sending a hostile glare to the conman all the
while. “You’re wrong about her! Completely and absolutely wrong! Rose was kind, and selfless,
and fair, and honorable, and—”

“And nosy, and stubborn, and annoying, and most of all, she was a liar,” Stan scowled pointedly.
“Honestly, it’s kind of mind blowing that you haven’t figured that out yet after all these years,
Pearl. Then again, I guess it’s hard to see the truth when you’re so blinded by that dumb crush you
still have on her even now that she’s gone!”

Pearl gasped, appalled by the bold accusation Stan had just made about Rose, but even so, she
wasn’t about to let him get away with it. “You have no idea what you’re talking about! Besides,
the real reason why you always had such an issue with Rose was because she was able to see you
for the cheating, scandalous charlatan you really are!”

“Hey! I don’t know what half of what you just called me meant, but I take offense to that!”

“Good! You were supposed to!”

“Oh yeah? Well, I—”

“Guys, stop it!” Steven finally interjected, unable to allow such a fierce argument to continue as he
pushed his way between the two. Likewise, the twins also looked to the white Gem and the
conman with apt concern, quite alarmed at the brutally harsh words that they had just thrown at
each other. Even as the young Gem pushed the pair a safe distance away from each other, they
were still exchanging hateful scowls, something that worried him even more. “Look, I get that you
guys had really different opinions about Mom, but… if she was still here, I bet she’d hate to see
you guys fighting about her, just like I do!”

Pearl’s cold expression melted away as she heard this, her eyes widening a bit as she spared a
gentle glance down at Steven. “Y-you’re right….” she admitted with an ashamed sigh. “She
would…”

“And, while I’m not really an expert on what Mom might have done…” Steven shrugged with a
small, bittersweet, almost pleading smile. “I’m sure she would have really loved to see you guys
make up and get along? Please?”

The white Gem bristled a little at this, shifting her gaze to the conman, even if she made no attempt
to apologize or even show amicability. Likewise, Stan simply crossed his arm and turned his nose up at her, his scowl still as present as ever. “Yeah, sure, whatever,” he remarked tersely, clearly not meaning it as he turned to head back into the shack. “I’ve had enough drama for one day anyway. I’m gonna uh, take a nap, or something…” The conman made sure to avert eye contact with everyone as he said this, not wanting anyone to catch on that he really intended to head for the basement lab instead. “Oh, and Pearl? One more thing,” Stan’s tone turned rather bitter once again as he stopped at the porch, slightly turning back to the white Gem. “One of these days you’re gonna wake up from that little fantasy world of yours and realize that Rose wasn’t as great or perfect as she was cracked up to be. And when you do… I’ll be right there to give you the biggest ‘I told you so’ you’ve ever heard!”

Pearl scoffed in indignant disbelief as Stan simply slammed the door to the shack behind him, outraged that he still insisted that Rose was anything less than exemplary. Still, as ready as she was to throw a barrage of angry words back at him, she refrained upon noticing all three of the kids staring at her worriedly. “Oh, kids…” she sighed in slight embarrassment, glancing away as she rubbed her arm. “I’m sorry you had to hear all that… Still, I simply couldn’t take Stan trying to defame Rose’s good name lying down, especially seeing as how not a single thing he said about her was even remotely true…”

“It sounds like things between Rose and Grunkle Stan weren’t just bad,” Mabel remarked with a frown. “They were really, really, bad.”

“Yeah, but I still don’t understand why,” Dipper said, shaking his head in confusion. “What was their problem with each other anyway?” he asked Pearl, hoping that she could provide at least some answers seeing as how she had been around back then too.

“Well, it’s quite simple, really,” Pearl said pointedly. “Rose was always very forward and honest where she could be, while Stan doesn’t know the meaning of the word honesty.”

“I guess we can’t really argue with you there,” Dipper shrugged, knowing that Stan was far from the most candid person in the world.

“So you see,” Pearl continued. “It only makes sense that there would be tension between a paradigm of morality and virtue like her… and someone as unscrupulous as him… Still,” the white Gem clasped her hands together, her mood brightening as she abruptly changed the subject. “Enough about all that nonsense for now. Steven, how are you liking your mother’s scabbard?”

“Liking it? I’m loving it!” Steven quipped, retrieving the scabbard from the spot on the ground where had left it. “I’ve been practicing with it ever since we got down here. If anything tries to eat us, I’ll bop them with this!” The young Gem broadly swung the scabbard out, eliciting an excited grin from Mabel, a look of confusion from Dipper, and a small, amused laugh from Pearl.

“That’s just the scabbard, Steven,” the white Gem informed gently. “It held your mother’s sword. Nothing else could fit so perfectly inside. For all this time, it’s been… incomplete…”

“Well, let’s complete it, then!” Steven concluded boldly.

“Yeah!” Mabel eagerly chimed her agreement in. “Let’s find that sword and shove it in there! Where is it?”

Pearl hesitated a bit at this, looking around nervously for a moment before looking to the kids, first with uncertainty that soon turned to acceptance and trust. “Can you three keep a secret?”

“A secret?!” Steven exclaimed with excitement, far too loudly for the white Gem’s liking.
“Shh!” she quickly quieted him, glancing around the area once again. “Keep your voice down, Steven! It’s a secret, even to Garnet and Amethyst.”

“Really?” Dipper asked, quite intrigued. After all, if this supposed secret, whatever it might be was kept hidden even from the other two Gems, then there was a very high chance that it would be worth delving into. “What kind of secret?”

“A very special one,” Pearl grinned slyly, her voice still at a whisper. “Rose had a place that she kept hidden from all but me. But Steven, you have her gem. That place is yours now! And I can show it to you! After all, if Rose’s sword is anywhere, it would definitely be there.”

“Uh, ok,” Steven shrugged with a small smile, ready for whatever the white Gem had in store.

“Oh my gosh, this secret place sounds so cool and mysterious!” Mabel chimed in, mirroring Dipper’s investment in this proposed adventure. “Can we go right now, Pearl? Can we? Can we?”

“Oh, well, uh…” Pearl’s smile faded as she trailed off awkwardly. She didn’t exactly have it in her to tell the twins that they couldn’t really accompany her and Steven to this secret place, mostly because it was, in her opinion, far too hallowed and sacred for any human to visit. Not to mention the fact that it had once been reserved solely for her and Rose and nobody else. So instead, she decided to put the truth off a bit by detailing a bit more about it, in the hopes of discouraging them from wanting to come along. “Well, you see, kids, this place isn’t exactly… easy to access. True, it is right here in Gravity Falls, buried deep underground. But its entrance is… rather unsightly. To deter huma—I mean, unwanted intruders from getting inside, Rose hid its entrance away deep within the town cemetery, knowing that most humans—I mean, unwanted intruders would be far too superstitious to even venture in there and go snooping around for it! She was always so clever when it came to things like that…”

“A magical Gem place hidden in the cemetery?” Steven questioned thoughtfully. “Why does that sound so familiar…?”

“Because it is familiar!” Dipper exclaimed in sudden realization. “Pearl, this place you’re talking about… I think we’ve all been there before!”

“W-what?” Pearl froze, looking to the kids in apt disbelief.

“Oh yeah!” Mabel grinned, recalling what both of the boys already had. “That really cool sparkly cave filled with all those weapons! The one we found on Pioneer Day while being chased by the cops! Ah, good times. Good times.”

“S-sparkly cave… Filled… filled with weapons?!” Pearl gasped in alarm, knowing this description certainly fit the bill. “B-but how did you—no.” She quickly cut herself off, shaking her head incredulously. “There’s no way you kids could have been there before. You three must be thinking of someplace else, certainly!”

“Well, why don’t we just show you where we’re talking about?” Dipper suggested, rather confident that the cavern they had been to before and the secret spot Pearl had mentioned were one and the same. “That way you can tell us whether or not it’s the same place.”

“O-oh, yes, good idea,” Pearl agreed, still somewhat shaken by the prospect that the secrecy of Rose’s special spot had been somehow tarnished. “You can three take me there yourselves. Though still, I highly doubt we’re all referring to the same location. But all the same,” the white Gem nodded, prompting the kids to start leading the way to this unknown place. “I suppose it’s at least worth a look…”
While the kids were all in high, relatively excited spirits for their trek over to the town graveyard, Pearl was much more reserved, mostly out of concerned curiosity. Though she still doubted that the place the kids were leading her to even remotely related back to Rose, she was still interested in seeing it for herself, if it was even real at all. However, as they arrived at the cemetery and the trio led her to a remarkably familiar statue, Pearl’s alarm and fear at the idea of Rose’s sanctum no longer being a secret increased. In fact, those feelings only spiked as the kids somehow managed to activate the switch on the statue’s finger that forced it to slide aside, revealing the hidden underground entryway below it. But all the same, the white Gem kept a straight face as the kids led her down into the darkened, narrow corridor, hoping that somehow in the midst of it, they’d end up veering off the familiar path and go somewhere else. Even if she knew that this tunnel only really led to one place.

“So, is this looking familiar yet, Pearl?” Steven asked with a smile as he walked alongside the white Gem.

“O-oh, well, uh…” Pearl frowned as she glanced around the tight tunnel walls, which of course struck a nostalgic cord to her, though she refused to admit that so soon. “I-it… it might look a little familiar. But I’ve seen lots of dark, dank corridors in my day, so it’s really too soon to say for certain if this is the one that leads to Rose’s secret sanctum.”

“Why’s this place such a big secret anyway?” Mabel wondered curiously. “Because of all the really cool magical Gem weapons that are hidden inside it?”

“Er—yes…?” Pearl flinched, still bothered by the fact that the kids apparently knew what Rose had kept stored there. “I-I mean, p-perhaps. Still, there are a lot of places all over the Earth where Gem weapons are stored, like… like that battlefield we were at earlier! And besides, the weapons Rose held onto were far more powerful and more unique than any of those, which is why she decided to hide them away in a place where they would be safe and secure until she needed them.”

“So if the only things in this ‘secret’ place are weapons, then why don’t Garnet and Amethyst know about it?” Dipper asked inquisitively. “And why are you the only one Rose showed it to, Pearl?”

“Well, that’s because I was Rose’s sole confidant,” Pearl remarked with a proud grin. “For the words and secrets she could share with no one else, I was there to listen!”

“Why’d she keep so many secrets?” Steven asked, not truly understanding why his mother might have needed to keep things hidden from so many, especially since nearly everything he had heard about her always made her seem so open and transparent instead.

“She had to, Steven!” Pearl professed boldly, still smiling with adulation for the pink Gem. “It’s the mark of a great leader. Knowing just what to keep hidden from everyone you’re trying to protect. Everyone except me!”

“But how is hiding things from people supposed to protect them?” Dipper asked, somewhat doubtful of this train of logic.

“Yeah!” Mabel chimed in. “Wouldn’t it have been easier for Rose just tell everyone everything? Then everyone could be in on all those secrets, and then—”

“And then they wouldn’t be secrets anymore,” Pearl interjected pointedly, shaking her head. “I
don’t think you kids really understand. Then again, I don’t really blame you. None of you have ever been embroiled in the dramatic, dangerous life-or-death dilemmas of a massive war before, and thank the stars for that. But believe me what I say that all of the secrets that Rose kept hidden from others, she kept for the sake of the greater good. Just like *everything* she did. She was always, *always* thinking of humanity, of the earth, of her fellow Crystal Gems over herself. And that selflessness, that abnegation, that integrity, that bled into her every word and action during the war and even long after it…”

As Pearl let out an admiring sigh, the kids exchanged a brief, somewhat confused look. There was no denying that the white Gem had a penchant for defending everything about Rose to the very end, and they supposed that it did make sense. After all, Pearl had known Rose for a long time, and had followed her loyally for longer than any of them (or anyone currently living, to be perfectly honest) had been alive for, long enough to truly know her and grow a deep, unwavering sense of respect and adoration towards her. It was understandable that she would be firm in her resolve to brazenly stand up and defend the pink Gem’s reputation, especially since she was no longer around to do so herself. And yet at the same time, it was somewhat concerning to see just how far Pearl was willing to defend Rose, especially if her fierce argument with Stan earlier was any indication. In a way, it was as though the white Gem refused to even listen to any implications that her former leader could have been flawed or imperfect in any regards at all, the very mention of such a thing being more than enough to set Pearl off entirely. It almost seemed like something of an obsession to her, one that she refused to let go of, lest she fail Rose and her memory altogether. And while the kids somewhat understood where she was coming from with her hardened resolve, none of them could deny that something about it set them all on edge all the same.

But even so, none of them questioned her about it further as they finally reached the end of the tunnel, the apparent dead end still as open as it had been when Lion burst through it weeks ago. Pearl’s eyes widened in disbelief upon seeing this, but her jaw completely dropped as the kids freely ran into the open cavern without any signs of trepidation at all, all of them showing their immediate familiarity with the place as they splashed into the shallow water over its floor.

“Here we are!” Steven announced with a broad smile, running up to the central circular platform as Pearl followed him at a much slower pace.

“Ah, this place hasn’t changed a bit!” Mabel grinned, her hands on her hips as she looked over the shimmering cave. “It looks exactly the same as it did when we found ol’ President Trembley in here a few weeks ago!”

“P-President Trem—You found him *here*?! In Rose’s secret armory?!” Pearl asked, appalled. “But I thought he just… I don’t know—broke out of that block of peanut brittle he, for some asinine reason, froze himself in and wandered out to the surface!”

“No, this is definitely where we found him,” Dipper frowned, somewhat confused by why the white Gem would think otherwise. “And it’s also where we basically got arrested and were nearly dragged off to Washington, D.C. Actually, to be honest, since it was apparently a matter of ‘national security’, I wouldn’t be that surprised if the U.S. Government knew about this place by now, so uh… yeah…”

“They *what*?!” Pearl exclaimed in a panic, floored by the idea that the government, of all entities, could have knowledge of this place. “B-but that’s ridiculous! Rose and I are the only ones who have ever witnessed the armory’s magnificence before now!”

“Except for us!” Steven quipped, obliviously blithe. “But when we first found it, we didn’t even know what this place really was. And now we do, thanks to you, Pearl!”
The white Gem was beyond flustered at this point, her frustration steadily growing as she walked past the trio in a huff. “How… how did you three even find out about the armory in the first place?!” she exclaimed hotly. “Don’t tell me there’s somehow an entry on it in that… that journal, of all things. …Is there?” she asked hesitantly as she looked to Dipper.

“Uh, well… I don’t really see any entries on it…” he replied after pulling out the journal and flipping through its Gem-related page.

“Well, that’s a relief…” Pearl sighed, only somewhat allayed.

“But it does mention it…”

“What?” the white Gem asked, her tone rather flat but still clearly upset.

“Oh yeah!” Mabel exclaimed, looking at the journal over her brother’s shoulder. “It says it right here on the page about you guys’ weapons! The larger pieces of the Crystal Gems’ artery-”

“That’s artillery, Mabel,” Dipper corrected somewhat dryly.

“Whatever,” Mabel stuck her tongue out at her brother briefly before she continued reading. “The larger pieces of the Crystal Gems’ artillery are safely tucked away within Rose’s secret armory, which is described in further detail in journal 1.”

“J-journal 1?!” Pearl balked, stunned by this revelation. “T-there’s more of them?! But… but how did he… Whoever wrote this, he couldn’t have… There’s no way!”

“Um… Pearl?” Steven spoke up apt concern upon seeing how distressed the white Gem seemed to be over the matter. “A-are you ok?”

Pearl froze at this, her gaze snapping over to her young ward and the twins with the slightest hint of disdain in her features. “If… if that thing,” her expression turned into a sharp glare as she briefly glanced at the journal. “Wasn’t what let you three to this place… then what did?”

“Oh, Lion showed it to us,” Steven informed, perking up into a grin once again.

“The lion?!” the white Gem exclaimed, eyes wide with disbelief.

“Yeah!” Mabel interjected enthusiastically. “He let out this huge roar that crashed through that wall over there and bam! Before we knew it, we were in a super-secret, super-pretty, super-sparkly cave!”

“And there’s all sorts of great stuff hidden in here too!” Steven exclaimed, hopping up onto the pedestal, the twins joining him.

“I know!” the white Gem huffed in frustration. “That’s why I wanted to bring you here! Now, let me just show you how you can access the artillery.”

“That’s ok!” the young Gem assured, walking up to the hand switch as it rose out of the ground. “I can do it without you.”

“W-wha…?” Pearl flinched, watching in bewilderment as Steven confidently slapped his hand onto the switch. However, instead of activating the impressive collection of weaponry, nothing really seemed to be happening, that is, until the young Gem realized why.

“Oh, right!” he remarked before turning to the twins. “Hey, uh… you guys mind lending me a
“hand here?”

“You bet!” Mabel grinned, readily running over to him.

“Uh, yeah, sure, Steven…” Dipper assented somewhat less enthusiastically, remembering how they had gotten the weapons to show up the last time they were here.

“Ok… go!” Steven exclaimed with a daring grin, prompting Mabel to poke him in the side playfully. At this movement, the first collection of weapons rose out of the pedestal’s side, much to Pearl’s surprise. “We got some… axes!”

“The Axes of Ages…?” the white Gem murmured, taken aback by the sight of the familiar weapons.

As the axes disappeared into the ground once more as Dipper pressed against Steven’s shoulder. “We got spikey chain lady and her metal dealies!” Mabel quipped as the statue toting an array of flails rose up.

“The Heretic’s Anguish?!” Pearl exclaimed, growing more disgruntled by the second.

“And a three pack of light cannons,” Dipper noted as Mabel pushed Steven’s nose, bringing the cannons up.

“The Quartizine trio!”

“And… Oh! A whole lot of armor guys,” Steven reported as both twins poked him in the sides at once, making the sets of armor appear.

“The Armor of the Fallen!” Pearl scowled, so frustrated by this point that the kids could clearly hear it in her tone.

Steven paused, his brow furrowing a bit as he looked up to the white Gem somewhat innocently. “What were we looking for again?”

“Her sword! Your mother’s sword!” Pearl practically shouted indignantly as she projected a hologram of said sword from her gemstone for the kids to see. “It’s a straight-bladed saber that’s pink with a red handle. There are vines etched in the guard that connect to a rose-shaped pommel. And it-”

“Oh! We’ve seen that thing before too!” Mabel suddenly interrupted.

The projection from Pearl’s gem briefly shifted into an exclamation point to express her shock by this news as she looked to the kids with wide eyes. “H-huh?”

“Yeah, in fact, we discovered it, like, the exact same day we discovered this place,” Dipper added, not entirely sure why this fact caused Pearl such apparent alarm.

“And I know where it is now!” Steven exclaimed with an eager grin. “Come on, I can show you!”

For a moment, Pearl stayed standing in place as the kids began to lead the way out of the armory, far too dumbfounded and stunned to even move. Needless to say, she was floored, not just by how much all three of the kids seemed to know regarding all of Rose’s seemingly best-kept secrets, but just how casual they were about it all. The armory, the sword, these were all things that Rose used to discuss with her in confidence, they were secrets the pink Gem had chosen to entrust to her and her alone. And yet, somehow and some way, not only did Steven seem to know about it all, but so
did Dipper and Mabel, something that confounded Pearl seeing as how none of them had even known Rose personally at all. Still, the white Gem forced herself to remain calm (or at least as calm as she could be) for now. After all, even she didn’t know the resting place of Rose’s sword, seeing as how it apparently wasn’t in the armory. There was no way, no way that any of the kids could know where it was if she didn’t.

Right?

“Dadadadadadada… here it is!” Steven sung as he pulled the large pink blade cleanly out of Lion’s glowing mane back at the temple. The twins stood by, not too surprised at this, seeing as how they had helped him get it out of there the first time, but the Gems were all quite astonished by this display, especially Pearl.

“R-Rose’s sword…” her tone faltered as Steven handed the prized blade over to her. “But… but how did it get in there?”

“I don’t know,” Steven shrugged. “But there’s a ton of stuff in there. I keep stuff in him too!” At this, the young Gem easily hopped into the pink beast’s mane, emerging from it only seconds later, only this time, he was sitting atop his bicycle. “Ta da!” he grinned proudly, riding the bike around the den a bit as he rung its bell. “By the way, Mabel, here’s that ice cream cone you asked me to store in there last week.”

“Thanks, Steven!” Mabel grinned, gladly grabbing the cone and taking a lick. “Wow! It’s still cold and everything! I knew it wouldn’t melt if I put it in there!”

“It has grass on the side of it,” Dipper pointed out caustically, briefly glancing up from the journal. “Well, since this grass came out of a magical lion’s mane, I’m sure it’ll taste just as magical!” Mabel countered, turning the cone over and licking the other side before instantly choking on the grass that was on it. “Ugh! I was wrong! I was so, so wrong!”

“So how’d you guys figure out that thing was in there anyway?” Amethyst asked in casual curiosity, which was a far cry from Pearl’s alarmed bewilderment over the matter. “What, did that ol’ journal tell you about it?”

“No, but it is in here,” Dipper noted, glancing down at the page with the sketch of Rose’s scabbard on it, though this time with the help of his black light. “I gotta admit, it was kind of a cool idea on the author’s part to draw it in here using invisible ink.”

“Oh yeah!” Steven grinned as he looked over the otherwise invisible drawing. “That is really cool! It’s like it’s some sort of super-secret black light bonus!”

“Oh, come on!” Pearl suddenly exclaimed, irate and exasperated. “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“What’s wrong, Pearl?” Mabel asked with a worried frown.

“What’s wrong is that… that book!” the white Gem huffed, glaring at the journal. “Spying on us from afar and jotting down a few notes on us is one thing, but to know about Rose’s sanctum, her sword, about her so intimately and accurately… How did this ‘author’ person even get all of this information?!”

“Maybe he really was someone you guys used to know back when Mom was still around,” Steven
suggested. “And he just, I dunno, wrote the journal without telling you.”

“I don’t know…” Dipper interjected, still flipping through the Gem section of the book. “There isn’t really anything in here that makes it seem like the author was trying to keep the fact that he was writing about you three a secret. In fact, there’s actually a bunch of places where he implies that you guys helped him with his research on Gravity Falls.”

“Oh yeah?” Amethyst asked with a somewhat doubtful smirk. “Like what?”

“Like this,” Garnet said, somewhat jolted by what she saw as Dipper handed the open journal over to her, though she read the entry aloud nonetheless. “Today the Gems presented me with another odd magical item they had found in their travels, though this time it was not one of their own: the Cloak of Occasional Visibility. This mysterious article makes its wearer completely invisible—half of the time. The other half of the time, it flickers on and off again, usually at the worst possible moment, while you wander around trying to find a good invisibility ‘signal’. Very frustrating. In fact, it’s so frustrating that the Gems professed that it never works for them, so they found it best to give it to me. Not that I’ll ever have much use for such a thing, but all the same, I appreciate the thought.”

“T-the Cloak of Occasional Visibility?” Pearl balked once Garnet was done. “But… but we didn’t give that old thing away to someone! We just lost it! …D-didn’t we?”

Garnet simply shrugged, not entirely sure herself as Amethyst grabbed the journal and turned it to another page. “Oh whoa!” she exclaimed, intrigued as she looked it over. “This one’s about that creepy bunker we went to the other day! We found a location for our hidden storage bunker! Rose had originally purposed to me that we could keep our supplies within the temple, or more specifically, in Amethyst’s room, but seeing as how I’ve actually been inside of that disastrous mess before, I don’t think keeping our extremely dangerous equipment in there would have been a very wise idea. Hey!” the purple Gem scoffed in offense. “My room is not a mess. It’s just a little… cluttered.”

“H-he’s been inside the temple too?!” Pearl gasped, taking an alarmed glance back at the gate. “But that’s impossible! Who would have ever opened the gate for him? I know I never let some strange, unknown human wander into the temple.”

“Neither did I,” Garnet reported.

“Yeah, me neither,” Amethyst frowned, perplexed.

“Maybe Mom did,” Steven purposed innocently.

“But that’s… that’s just preposterous!” the white Gem turned her nose up bitterly. “Ridiculous! Completely out of the question! There’s never been a human Rose has trusted enough to take into the temple before. And even if there had been, we would have known him too!”

“But we didn’t know him,” Garnet said, her tone somehow still stoic and calm amidst all this. “And I think it might be time we come to terms with that, Pearl.”

“But it doesn’t make any sense!” Pearl protested adamantly. “Give me that thing!” she suddenly swiped the journal out of Amethyst’s hands, furiously flipping through its pages for more evidence against this claim and instead only getting the exact opposite. “It’s clear to me now that in these uncertain times, the only one I can still turn to is my original research partner, the Gem I would trust my life with, Rose Quartz.” The white Gem had to pause briefly at this, her entire form trembling a bit, before she forced herself to continue. “In light of everything that’s happened, I feel
as though Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl would simply shun me, but Rose has never been so quick to judge. Despite her understandable outrage with the true nature of our project, the bond of confidence between us still stands. I was always able to bear my secrets to her, just as she often entrusted her own secrets to me. I can only hope that she’ll understand. She has to understand. She’s the only one I... T-the only one...” Pearl’s reading grew even more shaken and uneven as she finished. “The only I still completely trust...”

The journal snapped shut at this, the white Gem turning on her heel away from the others as she held the book tightly against her chest. The other two Gems and the kids all exchanged a look of slight concern, none of them really knowing what to say to Pearl to calm or to allay her. Still, Amethyst did make an attempt by trying to pass off the entire matter as casually as possible. “So, uh… I guess that sorta proves that the author guy really did know Rose, even if we didn’t,” she shrugged, awkwardly scratching the back of her neck. “I mean, it is a little weird that she never introduced him to us or anything, but it’s not like it’s the end of the world.”

Almost as soon as the purple Gem said this, something in the white Gem seemed to snap, her manner going from alarmed and confused, to outright livid and enraged. “No!” she shouted, spinning around to face them all. “Like I said, it makes no sense! There’s no possible way that Rose could have known the author, because if she had then I would have known him too! And even if I had known him, Rose still wouldn’t have imparted any of her secrets to some… some nobody!”

“Well,” Steven spoke up, wanting to diffuse Pearl’s quite apparent frustration over the matter by changing the subject. “What about Mom’s, uh, super secret place?” he asked, lowering his voice down to a not very discreet whisper. “You knew about that.”

“But the author sorta did too, didn’t he?” Mabel interjected somewhat innocently.

“Mabel, shh!” Dipper quickly quieted her, knowing pointing that out would do nothing to quell the white Gem’s stress.

“A-and… oh, the sword!” Steven exclaimed. “You knew about the sword!”

“And I don’t even think the author knew about where Rose hid it, seeing as how Lion isn’t mentioned in the journal at all,” Dipper said, not recalling any entry of the pink beast, at least not in the journal he possessed.

“But I didn’t know where she hid it either!” Pearl argued, glancing over at Lion sharply. As she approached the pink beast out of petulant curiosity, he merely growled at her, refusing to let her even so much as touch his magical mane. “Did… did Lion have something to do with Rose too?”

“Ohhhhh… of course!” Amethyst exclaimed in realization. “That’s why he’s pink!”

“It was a little obvious,” Garnet pointed out

“But… Rose didn’t have a lion…” the white Gem shook her head.

“Well, it seems like it’s her stuff in there,” Steven pointed out, finally putting his bike back into Lion’s mane.

“No!” Pearl protested firmly, her already palpable indignation growing even moreso. “Rose didn’t have a lion, because if Rose had a lion I would have known about it! And like I said, the very same goes for that… ‘author’ person, whoever he was!”

“Rose kept many things secret,” Garnet interjected as rationally as she could. “Even from us. If she
didn’t see it fit to tell us about Lion or the author, then there’s a good chance she had her reasons for it.”

“But she never kept secrets from me!” Pearl stressed, distraught. “I was the one she told everything to!”

“Yo, you’re not the only one who misses her!” Amethyst scowled crossly.

“You can’t understand how I feel!” the white Gem practically shouted, gripping onto both the sheathed sword and the journal tightly. “None of you had what we had!”

“She probably just wanted to protect you,” Steven cut in with a small, reassuring smile. “Like everyone else.”

“Yeah, I mean, you said so yourself that she always used to do that,” Dipper reminded carefully. “That she always kept secrets from everyone for the ‘greater good’, or something like that.”

“And you said it was the mark of a great leader!” Mabel added, trying her best to lighten the mood. “And a bunch of other really fancy things about it too that I can’t really remember right now, but still.”

“Yeah!” Steven agreed, though he could tell that his attempt to console the very upset white Gem wasn’t really getting anywhere. Still, he wasn’t about to give up now. “It’s probably just like what Garnet said; Mom must have had a pretty good reason for not telling you about—”

“How would you know?!” Pearl interrupted, her tone far harsher than the young Gem was used to as he looked to her, startled. “You’ve never even met her!” As the white Gem shouted this, her fist slammed into the nearby wall out of sheer frustration, the very same wall that the iconic portrait of Rose herself hung. Easily knocked loose from its hanging, the picture began to tumble down towards Pearl, who could only gasp in alarm as she looked up at the falling image of her beloved liege. Fortunately, Garnet stepped in just in time, catching the portrait before it could hit her or the ground. For a moment, the white Gem remained frozen in place, shocked and shaken, but as she briefly looked towards the equally stunned young Gem, her building emotions finally came to a head.

Before Steven, or anyone else for that matter, could even say a word to her, Pearl turned heel and hurried off towards the warp pad, a tight sob escaping her as she clung onto both the sword and the journal all the while. “Fine, go!” Amethyst shouted after her harshly, her hands clenched into angry fists. “Go cry about it, like you always do!”

The purple Gems’ words fell on deaf ears as Pearl simply warped out of the temple, much to the kids’ shared concern for a number of reasons. “Aw, poor Pearl!” Mabel exclaimed with sincere sympathy. “We gotta go after her and make sure she’s ok!”

“And not to mention, she still has the journal! We have to get it back!” Dipper added, quite alarmed by that fact alone, especially given the white Gem’s current unstable mindset. Though still, he did catch shared disapproving frowns from both Steven and Mabel at this, prompting him to correct his statement. “And uh, make sure Pearl’s ok, like you said.”

“Where did she go?” Steven asked, turning to his two remaining guardians.

“Who cares?” Amethyst glowered, crossing her arms bitterly. “I hate it when she gets like this.”

“Garnet?” the young Gem looked towards the Gem leader, who offered no response as she simply continued to hold onto the portrait of Rose, almost as if she was frozen in place too. “I-is she ok?”
he tried again, only for Garnet to remain silent, not so much as even glancing over her shoulder at him. “Well, uh… we’re going to find her. Lion, do you know where she went?” he asked, turning to the pink beast who simply let out a soft roar as his answer. “I’m… going to assume that means you do.”

“Let’s go find Pearl!” Mabel proclaimed boldly, already climbing onto Lion’s back as the boys soon joined her. The pink beast didn’t need much prompting, save for a mere pat from Steven, before he bowed low and let out a fierce roar, one that managed to tear open a transport portal that hopefully led to wherever the white Gem had fled to.

Garnet finally turned somewhat as the kids rode Lion through that portal, a hint of genuine concern in her tone as she imparted them with the best well wishes she could offer at the moment. “Good luck…”

As it turned out, Pearl had retreated to the very place that had started all of this sword-and-scabbard related drama earlier that very day: the strawberry battlefield. Night had fallen over the rolling expanse of oversized fruits and massive weapons, but with the full silver moon hanging high in the radiantly starry sky, which allowed the kids to easily spot the white Gem almost as soon as Lion’s portal landed them there.

“Pearl!” Steven called over to her with apt concern. Her back was turned away from them, the sword and journal both still wrapped tightly in her embrace and her expression awash in grief and despair. She bristled upon hearing the young Gem’s call however, and she didn’t hesitate to spare a glare over her should at the kids, showing that she was clearly not pleased with them following her. “Leave me alone!” Pearl shouted fiercely, not hesitating to sprint off in the opposite direction. The kids exchanged a look of confused concern at this, none of them quite sure as to why the white Gem was so adamant on simply sitting in her feelings of frustration and sadness instead of letting them help her get past them. But all the same, the trio continued to peruse her, with Steven pressing Lion onward to create another portal just for them to catch up with her. Pearl gasped in heated alarm as the pink beast and his trio of riders suddenly appeared alongside her, though of course, this only prompted her to run faster in an attempt to further distance herself from them.

“Wait for us!” Steven shouted earnestly, pushing Lion on to try and keep up with her, to little avail. “We just wanna help you!”

“Yeah!” Mabel added just as fervently. “If you slow down a bit, then I’m sure we can all just sit down and talk all of this really heavy stuff out and-”

“No, we can’t!” Pearl argued, stopping only briefly as she jumped onto one of the first of what nearly seemed like a disjointed staircase of floating earthen platforms. “Now get that thing away from me-” she scowled hatefully at Lion. “And all of you, just go home!”

Without sparing another word, the white Gem continued deftly jumping from platform to platform, the load she was carrying barely even slowing her pace at all. As they reached the edge of the cliff, Lion came to halt, his trio of passengers dismounting as they all fretfully watched Pearl run even further away from them and her own pressing problems.

“You better sit this one out, Lion,” Steven said to the pink beast as he patted his side, knowing he was be the last thing the white Gem wanted to see at the moment.
“Actually, Steven, we should probably sit this one out too,” Dipper cut in, referring to both himself and Mabel. “After all, you’re easily the best out of all of us when it comes to making people feel better, which is probably what Pearl needs the most right about now.”

“Oh, come on, bro-bro,” Mabel huffed, wanting to be a part of this. “I’m great at making people feel better. Remember last week when I cheered Soos up by going out and finding that stray cat for him? Then again… that cat did end up scratching his face up before running away… not to mention that Soos is actually allergic to cats…” She frowned as the boys looked to her dubiously, ultimately forcing her to retract her earlier claim. “You know what, Steven, it might be better if just you went up there after all.”

“Oh, well then here goes nothing,” Steven said with resolve as he turned towards the staircase of platforms. “Pearl!” he called after the still fleeing white Gem, narrowly jumping onto the first one as he struggled to remain steady atop it. “It’s ok! I’ve had a talk with Lion and he’s gonna, uh, chill out here! It’ll be just the two of us, nice and private!”

Pearl offered no response, nor even a glance down at him as she neared the uppermost and largest grassy platform, prompting Steven to continue following her. “G-good idea!” he called, jumping to the next platform, which wobbled a bit upon his landing. “I’ll meet you at the top!”

“Do you think he can actually make it all the way up there?” Dipper asked Mabel, aptly concerned as they watched Steven struggle to bridge the gap between the floating pieces of earth.

“Eh, I’m sure he’ll be fine,” Mabel grinned with a wave of her hand, failing to notice Steven barely his next jump and only catching onto the edge of another platform by a thin margin.

But all the same, the young Gem kept going, despite how daunting and challenging this upward climb was. Even as he began to near the highest outcropping himself, he was breathless and exhausted, having had several close calls that could have resulted in him falling into the wide, deep chasm below. Still, his spirits remained as high as they could, given the circumstances. “This… this is really hard to do in sandals!” he joked up to the white Gem, letting out a small laugh that, of course, she did not return.

“Go away!” she shouted down to him, pausing only briefly to send him another cold glare before continuing on her way onto the last platform.

“Pearl!” Steven called back, growing desperate as he hopped onto another platform, nearing that wide finishing jump himself. “Did I… did I do something wrong? You gotta tell me!”

As Pearl disappeared from his view, Steven took a few steps back on the small platform he was on, knowing that there was a good chance he might not actually make this last jump, given just how far and high he would have to go. He paused before attempting it though, casting a small, somewhat fearful glance down to the twins and Lion, who were all still intently watching him from what seemed like miles below now. But despite his nerves and his fatigue, the young Gem pushed himself onward, getting a good running start before he made his bold leap towards the last platform.

Time seemed to slow as he sailed through the air towards it, and for a moment, it seemed as though, against all odds, that he was going to make it. However, his confidence in this belief was instantly shattered as he caught sight of Pearl, standing atop the platform itself. Rose’s sword was locked tightly in her grip, held high over her head as its tip pointed downward towards the journal resting before her in the grass. There was no question that her intention was to run the blade through the book, as if doing so would sever whatever mysterious connections the pink Gem apparently had to its unknown author once and for all. And she was more than ready to do it too,
though as she noticed Steven getting closer, her gaze abruptly snapped in her direction, allowing him to clearly see the anger, sadness, and agony written all over her expression. And that intense look of disdain was enough to end the young Gem’s jump right in its tracks.

“Steven!” Pearl’s fury dissipated into panic as Steven suddenly started falling, missing even the edge of the platform by a wide margin. From their spot on the ground below, the twins echoed this shout of fearful concern, both of them more than ready to jump onto Lion and rush to his rescue in a moment’s notice. Fortunately, they didn’t have to, as Steven managed to catch onto one of the vines growing out from the chunk of earth before he could fall too far. For a moment, all the young Gem could do was hold onto the roots for dear life, refusing to look down for a moment as he instead looked up. Briefly, he could see Pearl glancing over the edge at him, but she was too far for her to clearly read her expression. Oddly enough though, she made no effort to come down at help him up, something that confused Steven a bit, but reminded him why he was doing this in the first place: to help her.

“Steve, are you ok!?” Dipper called up to the young Gem from down below, still quite alarmed by what had almost just happened.

“Uh, yeah!” Steven shouted back, even if he was effectively hanging by a metaphorical thread.

“Do you need us to come up there and help you?” Mabel asked loudly, more than ready to hop onto Lion to do so.

“N-no!” the young Gem assured as he began to steadily scale the thick roots upward. “I… I got this!”

Neither of the twins were entirely convinced by this, but still, they decided to let him continue on by himself, watching with shared relief as he eventually did climb up to the top of the platform safe and sound. Still, while that had been simple enough, neither of them were really sure how Steven planned on going about resolving the real matter at hand here, but even so, they didn’t dare doubt that he could. After all, they had both seen him fix this kind of problem before, especially when it came to his fellow Gems, with more tact and skill than anyone else. And while Pearl’s current breakdown was perhaps the heaviest and most intense they had witnessed thus far, there was no question that Steven would be able to work his magic, whatever that was, once again.

As the young Gem shakily rose to stand atop the large outcropping, he was beyond exhausted, mostly physically, but also somewhat emotionally as well. Still, he put his own feelings on pause for the moment, especially as he looked ahead and saw the white Gem sitting on the ground just several feet away. Her back was turned to him, her knees pulled to her chest and a hand cupped over her mouth as she let out a small, depressed sob. Apparently, she had given up on her attempt to stab the journal, as it instead sat a short distance away from her, intact and unharmed, Rose’s sword resting in its scabbard close beside her. Steven could tell just by looking at her just how shaken and distressed she was as he took a small, hesitant step towards her, but before he could even say a word to her, she spoke instead.

“To think that she would entrust her secrets, secrets that she only ever shared with me and me alone… to a complete and utter stranger…” she muttered bitterly, her tearful gaze fixated on the journal. “Who was he? Why didn’t I know him? Why did he matter so much to her that she would trust him… over me?”

Steven stopped at this, his already concerned frown deepening as he realized he had all of these same questions concerning his mother and the author himself. And yet, for as curious as he was to know what the link between the two of them was, he knew that now was no time to ponder over such things. Now was the time for something else altogether. “P-Pearl,” he began, somewhat
unevenly, though he forced intent into his tone as he took another step towards her. “Pearl, you have to tell me what’s wrong.”

The white Gem’s shoulders dropped a little at this, a small, ironic, almost inaudible laugh escaping her as she finally addressed her young ward himself. “Sometimes… you even sound like her…” she admitted incredulously, her hand digging a bit into the grass beside her. “Do you remember this place? Do you have any of her memories? We were right here.” Pearl finally stood as Steven finished his approach, stopping just a few feet away from her as she pushed the journal aside with her foot so that it could rest alongside the sword. “It was over 5,000 years ago… On a night just like this one…”

As if to answer several of Steven’s pressing questions, a bright holographic image flushed out of Pearl’s gemstone, an imagine that was unmistakable even from behind: Rose Quartz. The young Gem was stunned into complete silence at this, his expression solemn as he glanced up at this projection of his mother, one that Pearl humbly bowed to one knee before out of loyalty and respect. As the hologram of the pink Gem finally turned, Pearl spoke for it as well as herself, acting out the decisive conversation that had taken place between them so many centuries before.

“Pearl…” the hologram of Rose spoke, the white Gem’s voice a touch softer as she gave it a voice.

“Yes?” Pearl immediately answered, looking up to her leader intently.

A look of worry washed over the pink Gem’s transparent face, one that, while still incredibly beautiful, was etched with a kind of exhaustion and regret that Steven never knew his mother could even feel. “I’m going to stay and fight for this planet,” she said, glancing away from the white Gem. “You know, just as much as I do, that the things that live here, as precious and special as they are, deserve to survive and be free. And so, I’m ready to do what I must to give them that freedom. This war won’t be easy and it won’t be short. You don’t have to do this with me.”

“B-but I want to!” Pearl professed boldly, without a moment’s doubt. “I want to fight by your side! To stand by you and be there for you, no matter what the cost!”

“I know you do…” Rose said, the concern on her expression only deepening at this. “But this isn’t as simple as you think. It’s not just about fighting and battles and the other Gems… It’s about what comes after it all ends. Please, please understand… if we lose, we’ll be killed. And if we win, we can never go home.”

Pearl scoffed lightly at this, letting out a small, incredulous laugh as she shook her head. “Why would I ever want to go home, if you’re here?” she asked, smiling brightly up at her beloved leader.

At first, Rose seemed taken aback by this, but her surprise quickly shifted into a warm grin followed by a soft, small chuckle. That smile remained as she extended her hand out to the amazed white Gem, as if it was both a sign of the resolved pact they were making together, and so, so much more. “My Pearl…” Rose’s tone was soothing and sweet and fond, all things that seemed to fill the white Gem with inspiration and hope and affection all at once.

“You’re wonderful…” she sighed contentedly, lightly taking her leader’s hand and placing a gentle, loving kiss upon it. The moment she did so, the hologram abruptly burst into the bits of light it was made of, startling Pearl somewhat as it broke her out of the moment and reminded her that nothing had really been there all along. A beat of silence followed, only the sound of the nighttime crickets filling it until Pearl spoke once again. “Everything I ever did, I did for her…” she sighed, turning her gaze up towards the stars. “I followed her, to the ends of the Earth, and trusted every word she said like it was law. And she trusted me too… Or at least… that’s what I
always thought…” The white Gem looked down, casting a small glance at the journal before shaking her head and dropping her kneeling stance into a sit. “And now, she’s gone. But I’m still here. Sometimes, I wonder if she can see me through your eyes,” she said, addressing Steven as he quietly lowered himself to his knees behind her. “What would she think of me now…?”

The young Gem hesitated during the silence that followed, unsure of what to say after everything he had just seen and heard. While Steven was usually quite empathetic and quick to pick up on the feelings of those around him, he was having something of a hard time completely comprehending what Pearl was going through at the moment, mostly because her feelings about his mother, her passing, the sword, the journal, and everything else were all so complex and deep. But perhaps, he didn’t need to understand what those feelings were as much as he understood how to help her deal with them.

Pearl was taken by surprise a bit as Steven suddenly hugged her from behind, his head resting against the back of her shoulder as he filled in the gaps for her the best he could. “Well… I think you’re pretty great.”

The tears the white Gem had been holding back finally welled up to the surface at this lone, simple, yet genuine statement, one that was enough to fill her with overwhelming relief, guilt, joy, and grief all at once. She took in a deep breath, one that was almost more like a sob as she let it out, and though she didn’t return her young ward’s embrace, she didn’t try to stop it either. The two of them stayed like that for quite some time, neither one saying anything, not that there was really much to be said in the first place. Even as they broke apart and stood sometime later, the bulk of the words that passed between them came in the form of a terse but sincere apology from Pearl, one that Steven readily accepted as she helped him bounce down the floating platforms and back down to the twins and Lion.

While Dipper and Mabel did softly joke with Steven and Pearl about how long they had been waiting for, neither of them could deny that they were quite relieved to see that the young Gem had managed to get his guardian to come around. It was clear that the white Gem’s ongoing melancholy still remained, but all the same, she put on a soft, amicable smile for all three of the kids as she revealed that she had brought both the journal and the sword back down with her, both of them perfectly intact. The former she simply handed back to Dipper, mostly because she didn’t really want much else to do with the implications contained within it, and the latter she entrusted to Steven, though he was quick to put insistently place her hand back upon its pommel as a sign of goodwill. Pearl’s smile widened a little at this, even if it still looked like she was ready to burst into tears at any moment. But for the kids’ sake, she held them back.

Knowing that the sword would be safest within its former resting place, that’s where they all agreed it should go again, until there ever came a need for it the future. Lion’s eyes were glowing bright as he bowed low, allowing Steven and Pearl to push the sheathed blade into his mane together. Still, even with the precious sword finally at rest, the kids could tell that the white Gem was still a bit down, which was why Steven took the lead in trying to cheer her up. With a wry grin, the young Gem began pulling a string of tied together hankies out of the pink beast’s mane as something of a “magic” trick, one that he easily recruited Mabel to help him out with. They continued their attempt to entertain Pearl by pulling several more random objects out of Lion’s mane, making cheerful jokes and jabs all the while. And though the white Gem was mildly amused by these lighthearted theatrics, her genuine interest was only garnished after Dipper handed the open journal over to her, pointing out a particular passage that she had never seen before. And, as Pearl curiously began reading through its contents, tears finally started forming in her eyes once more:

“If there’s one thing between the Crystal Gems that is completely without question, it’s the breadth
and depth of Pearl’s unwavering devotion to Rose. Her every word, thought, and action all seem to be aimed to the goal of showing her undying loyalty to her leader. While some might call this kind of behavior obsessive or even manic, I find her dedication to be quite admirable, something that Rose firmly agrees with me on. She once told me just how much she appreciates Pearl’s endless resolve, how it serves as a constant inspiration to her to be the best leader she can be for all three of her fellow Gems. To pledge oneself to another, not out of fear, but out of the deepest sense of love and respect... it’s certainly understandable that such fidelity would serve as an inspiration, even to someone as inspirational as Rose Quartz herself.”

A soft, yet almost happy sob escaped Pearl as she finished reading this, one of her teardrops hitting the page as she placed a gentle hand over it. While this was something that Rose had never confided in her about, the white Gem strangely enough bore no anger towards the author for knowing it over her. In fact, receiving the revelation that Rose, of all people, saw her as an inspiration, now, filled Pearl with immeasurable comfort and contentment. And, as she solemnly shut the journal and gave it back to Dipper, she smiled at the book instead of glaring at it, realizing that, perhaps, despite its mysterious, unknown origins, it wasn’t as much of an affront to the bond of trust between her and Rose after all.

Still, the white Gem only had a moment to come to peace with the journal, for as soon as it left her hands, Steven called for her attention once more. As she looked over to him, her confusion soon turned to complete surprise, her jaw dropping in amazement as the young Gem pulled none other than Rose’s iconic battle flag out of Lion’s mane. Her spirits practically soared upon seeing the flag, which she had believed to have been lost centuries ago, and emboldened by its reappearance, she insisted on detailing its role in the war to the kids. As they all took a seat against Lion and enjoyed the popcorn Steven had pulled out of the pink beast’s mane, Pearl jumped to her feet, gripping the flag tightly as she began dramatically recounting how her, Rose, and the other Crystal Gems stood their ground against their Homeworld and triumphed for the sake of the Earth and its inhabitants. The kids were all fully gripped by the white Gem’s compelling tale, though by the time she was finished hours later, they all mutually agreed that it was about time they headed home for the night.

The battle flag rested over Pearl’s shoulder as she sat upon Lion’s back, the twins both sitting half asleep behind her and Steven smiling softly as he guided the pink beast back to the warp pad in front of her. After everything that had happened over the past few hours alone, the white Gem wasn’t entirely sure how to feel at this juncture, her emotions swirling in both lingering regret and sadness but also hope and peace. As she took a small glance down at the young Gem in front of her, something inside of her seemed to tremble a bit, both with pain and with fondness. Steven was so much like his mother, so much that it sometimes hurt Pearl to even think about the similarities between them. But at the same time, he was so drastically different from her, in ways that continued to confuse and bewilder the white Gem more and more each day. In fact, the more Pearl thought about it, the more she was starting to realize that perhaps she didn’t know as much as she thought she did.

She had been Rose’s oldest and most beloved confidant, but even that didn’t mean that the pink Gem told her everything, something that both Lion and the journal were clear proof of. And while some part of her might have seen this as a betrayal or a sign of mistrust, another part of her wanted to believe that Steven had been right. Perhaps, instead of trying to keep things from her out of duplicity and chicanery, Rose had sequestered some things from her to protect her, to keep her safe and happy and loved. And the more Pearl pondered over this possibility, the more she realized that such an action on Rose’s part was not only noble and selfless, it was the purest, most sincere form of showing how much she really did mean to her.

Pearl had always believed it to be her job to shield Rose from anything that could have harmed or
injured her, but Rose had done the very same thing for her, only in a completely different way. She
had protected Rose, Rose had protected her, and in that way, they had kept each other not only
alive for centuries upon centuries; they had kept each other thriving. And, as they left the
battlefield where they had decided to make their brazen stand together more than 5,000 years ago,
Pearl knew that she wouldn’t have had it any other way.
Chapter 37: Blendin's Game

Chapter Summary

In which Soos hates his birthday, the kids fight in gladiatorial time combat, and Past Greg is a loveable mess of a new dad

Chapter Notes

Ah, so here we go with a chapter that I think is sorta meh, but hey you might enjoy it so I'll just causally leave it here while also advertising my new UF AU oneshot collection: Alternate Universe Falls! Check it out if you can't get enough of UF! You can find it here: https://archiveofourown.org/works/11339385

FK X DILYKXO YXQQIB
LKB ZXKKLQ TXSBO
LKIV ELMB QEXQ QEB LAAP
XOB BSBO FK VLRO CXSLO

Year 207012

The Infinitentiary was by far one of history’s most infamous, most impregnable prisons, built to contain the worst of the worst offenders of the laws of space time. The Time Paradox Avoidance Enforcement Squadron ran a tight ship in the prison under Time Baby’s strict command, ensuring that all of the criminals locked within its heavily guarded walls received the punishment they deserved for their time-related felonies. The correctional facility itself was suspended high above the surface of the Earth, its floating structure making escaping from it a nearly impossible feat. But that wasn’t to say it never happened, especially since such a fabled, unheard of, and daring escape was currently in progress.

Of course, the moment said escape was discovered, the Infinitentiary was put into a full lockdown, with all of its many gates and doors sealed tightly shut and all of its alarms blaring loudly. All available squadron officers were on the call to hunt down the fleeing conflict and bring him back to the prison, dead or alive. But this particular prisoner was crafty; he had to be to break out of a facility as fortified and inescapable as the Infinitentiary. He hurried through the darkened, bustling city streets far below the facility, all while under the cover of a cloak he had managed to swipe before his jailbreak. A sizable faction of squadron officers were hot on his tail, with seasoned operatives Lolph and Dundgren leading the pack, intent on catching the criminal and putting him behind bars once more.

“I’ve got to hand it to this perp,” Dundgren remarked to his partner as they perused their target down an alleyway. “He’s pulled off quite the getaway. No one’s ever broken out of the Infinitentiary before.”

“He’s either the bravest time convict I’ve ever seen,” Lolph said with a nod of agreement. “Or the dumbest.”
Almost as soon as the time officer said this, however, the criminal they were after just so happened to blindly crash into a nearby wall, clumsily stumbling backwards with a very loud, very overt cry of pain. The runaway ended up tripping over a large stack of barrels, knocking them over as he fell himself, his hood accidentally dropping to reveal his identity to the gathering crowd of both squadron officers and spectators: Blendin Blandin.

“Ow!” the former time officer cried, ignoring said crowd as he grabbed his injured leg. “My time knee! Oh, time dang it!”

“Definitely, the dumbest,” Dundgren deadpanned as him and Lolph finally caught up to the escaped convict.

“Freeze!” Lolph ordered as his fellow officers circled the very startled Blendin, who could really do nothing to run and hide at this juncture. “You’re surrounded by the Time Paradox Avoidance Enforcement Squadron! Anything you say can and already has been used against you in future court.”

“W-wha—but I-” Blendin attempted to come up with anything to say in his defense, but Dundgren succinctly cut him off before he could even get so much as a coherent word out.

“This is it, Blendin,” the officer said coldly as a few of the other officers secured the perp’s wrists with time cuffs. “End of the time line. Any last words?”

“Uh… Uh… I-I… Uh…” Blendin stammered, sweating nervously as his mind raced to come up with a way out of being sent back into the harsh, unforgiving walls of the Infinitentiary. And fortunately for him, he managed to think of the perfect way just in the nick of time. “I… I invoke GLOBNAR!”

The surrounding crowd let out a collective gasp upon hearing this, the very word sending a ripple of shocked and fearful whispers throughout it. But even despite the alarming connotations the very mention of Globnar carried, the squadron officers were unfazed by Blendin’s bold proclamation of it. “Very well,” Dundgren said, pulling out a tablet. “Speak the name and century of those accused.”

“The three kids who ruined my life,” the former time officer snarled bitterly. “Dipper and Mabel Pines and Steven Universe. 21st century.”

As soon as Blendin named the kids, Dundgren’s tablet easily located them from centuries ago. A live feed clip of the twins playfully whacking each other with soft bats as the young Gem laughingly joined in seconds later popped up, the trios’ names listed plainly underneath. Almost instantly, this video was transmitted to every screen and monitor within a several mile radius, the words “Globnar Tributes” branded across it in large, foreboding red letters. A wide, almost manic grin spread across Blendin’s face as he saw this, knowing that the revenge he had spent many a prison night dreaming of was soon about to become a reality.

“So be it,” Lolph said grimly, nodding to the former time officer as the young trio’s fate was sealed. “May Time Baby have mercy on their souls.”

Present day

The Mystery Shack’s vending machine wasn’t often fully stocked, with Stan only bothering to get
it filled once every few weeks, or whenever any visiting tourists got so puckish that they began snacking on the exhibits themselves. And seeing as how a guest had taken a pretty sizable bite out of the cornicorn the previous day, the empty machine had been completely filled with snacks and sweets, much to the shared excitement of the kids, who were determined to be its first customers.

“Excuse me!” Steven called as him and Connie navigated their way past a group of gift shop customers, following not too far behind the twins as they rushed for the full machine. “Sorry!”

“Outta the way!” Mabel exclaimed much more boisterously, somewhat rudely pushing her way through the crowd amidst her hungry excitement. Still Dipper made sure to offer the customer his sister had unintentionally knocked over a terse apology before all four of the kids reached the tantalizing array of treats.

“There it is, you guys,” Dipper remarked with a broad smile as the four of them stood before it. “A completely full vending machine, just waiting for us to empty it.”

“I’ve never seen it stuffed full of so many tasty things!” Steven quipped, stars in his eyes. “Gummy Koalas, Cheese Balls, Pop-Pops… I can’t even decide what I wanna have first!”

“I wanna have everything first!” Mabel practically shouted, just as enthused.

“Well, unfortunately, we can only get one snack out of there at a time,” Connie chuckled, pulling a dollar out of her pocket. “Still, it’s not like we don’t have plenty of them to choose from.” The others watched in eager anticipation as she slid the dollar into the machine, pressing the buttons for the first selection, a bag of candy. All four of the kids pressed their faces to the glass, all of them cheering excitedly as the coil pushed the snack forward, only for it, against all odds, to come to an abrupt halt right before the candy could drop, much to their shared alarm and chagrin.

“No!” Dipper exclaimed in apt dismay. “It’s trapped!”

“Everything is terrible forever!” Mabel wailed, pounding her fists against the machine to no avail.

“They should make laws against this!” Steven cried, quite upset.

“What do we do now?” Connie asked with thoroughly disappointed frown.

“Psst! Hey, dudes!” Soos suddenly interjected, walking past the morose group with a broom in hand. “You wanna know a trick?” A sly grin spread across the handyman’s face as he rhythmically tapped the side of the vending machine. “Bibbity-bob. Wop!” At this, the machine’s door miraculously swung open, something that completely impressed and delighted the kids at once. “A genius taught me that once. This just in,” Soos’ smirk widened as he reached into the open machine and grabbed a generous armful of treats. “The weather station’s calling for a… candy blizzard!”

The kids cheered brightly as the handyman tossed his haul upon them, most of the candy landing in their outstretched arms while the few pieces that did fall to the floor were quickly recovered. “Forget taking off the wrappers, I’m eating these now!” Mabel exclaimed with a daring grin as she proceeded to do just that. Steven laughed in amusement as he watched her humorously struggle to do so, before throwing caution to the wind and shoving his armful of candy into his own mouth as well.

“Ah! This isn’t working anywhere near as well as I thought it would!” Steven cried amidst his full mouth, his arms flailing as him and Mabel crashed into each other in a reckless panic.

“Augh! This was a mistake!” Mabel shouted, choking on her candy from her spot beside Steven on the floor.
“Not that this isn’t awesome or anything, Soos,” Connie spoke up as her smile faded into slight worry. “But won’t Mr. Pines be mad about you breaking into the vending machine and giving us all this free candy.”

“Eh, I’ll just tell Mr. Pines to take it out of my next paycheck,” Soos shrugged blithely. “I mean, I was gonna use that money to buy candy anyway, so I figured I might as well spread a little of that sugary action to you guys, just ‘cause.”

“Soos, you are the greatest human to ever live,” Dipper said with a sincere smile.

“Hey, no sweat, dude,” the handyman grinned, taking the compliment in stride as he casually adjusted his hat. “After all, I’d do anything for the Pines family.”

“Soos!” Stan suddenly called from the den. “I need to scratch myself in two places at once!”

“And I mean anything,” Soos said with resolve upon hearing this, turning to heed his boss’ call. “Coming, Mr. Pines!”

“Are you two gonna be… ok?” Connie asked, turning to Steven and Mabel as Soos left. The pair was in the middle of practicing the Heimlich maneuver on each other so they could cough up the candy they were both respectively choking on. Mabel had already mostly recovered, and as she finished helping Steven, the young Gem collapsed fully onto the ground in slight exhaustion.

“Y-yeah! We’re good!”

“Whoa, guys, check it out,” Dipper said, heading over to the nearby table. “Looks like Soos left his wallet behind. Better make sure we get it back to him.”

“Wait!” Mabel jumped to her feet and rushed over. “I’ve never seen Soos’ wallet before. Don’t you wanna learn some Soos secrets?”

“Oh! I’d love to!” Steven initially agreed. “But, uh… isn’t that sort of like invading his privacy?”

“Yeah, I don’t know if we should— whoa!” Dipper cut himself off upon noticing a card peeking out of the handyman’s wallet. “Soos has a membership at the laser tag place? I didn’t know they let adults in there.”

“Ooo, and he’s got a punch card for Fish Stew Pizza too!” the young Gem quipped, pulling said card out of the wallet. “I gotta hand it to Soos, he has really good taste!”

“I’m not sure if I’d call a place that only serves fish-flavored pizza ‘good taste’…” Connie remarked with a dubious frown.

“That might not be good taste, but this totally is!” Mabel interjected as she pulled a slice of salami, of all things, out of the wallet next. “Emergency salami! Soos, my respect for you has grown.”

“Jésus Alzamirano Ramirez,” Dipper read off of Soos’ driver’s license out of mere curiosity alone. “Organ donor. 6 foot, 1…”

“And hey, look at that,” Connie cut in, also looking over the license. “His birthday… that’s today, isn’t it?”

“Whoa, it is!” Mabel gasped as she caught a glimpse of the date.

“Oh no!” Steven exclaimed fretfully. “And we didn’t even get him anything! This is a travesty of
“Because I don’t think he actually told anyone about it, Steven,” Dipper clarified with a frown. “Which is pretty weird when you think about it. Why would Soos just not mention that his birthday was coming up?”

“Uh, duh!” Mabel exclaimed. “It’s probably because he wants someone to throw him a surprise party! I can relate; I’ve been waiting for a surprise party my whole life.”

Ironically enough, at this juncture Candy happened to run in out of nowhere, cheerfully tossing a handful of confetti onto Mabel from behind. “Surprise!”

“Too little, too late, Chiu,” Mabel responded coldly, turning to face her friend with an unimpressed scowl.

“Aw…” Candy sighed in disappointment as she sulked off.

“Wait, guys! I just had a great idea!” Steven quipped with an excited gasp. “What if we threw Soos a surprise birthday party?! After all, he’s always so helpful and nice and fun; it’s only fair that we show him how much we appreciate everything he does by throwing him the awesome party he’s been waiting for!”

“That is a great idea, Steven!” Connie smiled as they twins nodded their enthusiastic agreement with this plan.

“Yeah!” Mabel chimed in brightly. “Between the four of us, we’ll throw Soos the biggest, best, and most surprisest birthday party he’s ever had! Now…” she trailed off with a sly smile, one that the others shared as they huddled together. “Let’s… get… party… planning!”

Despite the relatively short notice they were on, the kids managed to put their impromptu party plans into action rather quickly, setting things up in front of the shack and doing so quickly in the hopes that Soos wouldn’t prematurely notice. To ensure things went off without a hitch, the four had contracted a bit of help with their altruistic endeavor; Mabel had easily brought Candy and Grenda in to aid in setting things up, and Steven had little trouble getting Greg to come by and help out as well. Amethyst had been an unexpected addition to the self-proclaimed “party crew”, but merely spotting the growing layout of snacks as she passed by the shack was enough to convince her to stick around and “help” in her own unique way. After an hour or so of intensive work from everyone, they had what looked to be a very promising party to show for it. Balloons and streamers hung from the surrounding trees, bright confetti sprinkled all over the ground, and of course, the ever-growing snack table that was about to be diminished if the purple Gem had anything to do with it.

“Amethyst!” Steven called after her as he noticed her sneaking towards the table with a sly smirk. He put its attempts of trying to keep a party hat on Lion’s head aside as he rushed over to stop her, throwing himself between her and the table. “Stop! You can’t eat these yet! We have to wait for Soos to get here.”

“Aw, come on, Steven,” Amethyst stuck her tongue out in protest. “I was only gonna grab a few chips. And by a few I mean that entire bowl! And maybe some of that candy too!”

“Amethyst, no!” Steven halted her attempt to lunge past him, pushing her back a bit as he continued to block her way. “No! No…” He threw his arms out wide, sending her an unserious
warning glare as she placed her hands on her hips in frustration. “No.”

“Ugh, fine!” Amethyst finally complied, petulantly walking away. “But the minute Soos gets out here, that snack table is all mine!”

“More exclamation points!” Mabel called up to Grenda as she painted a banner reading “It’s your birthday, yo!!!” “More, I say!”

“Wow, you guys thought of everything!” Grenda exclaimed with a wide smile upon finishing her work.

“Grenda, twins are born birthday experts,” Mabel remarked, sharing a confident grin with her brother.

“We’ve shared every birthday together, so we know how to make them perfect,” Dipper nodded in firm agreement. To emphasize their point, the twins cheerfully high fived and touched heels, simultaneously blowing on party horns as they kept up this playful stance.

“You know, I know a thing or two about throwing a good party myself,” Steven interjected with a coy grin. “Like the time I threw birthday parties for each of the Gems!”

“Oh yeah, I remember that,” Amethyst quipped, leaning against the young Gem. “You turned yourself into an old man and nearly kicked the bucket. Good times, good times…”

“Y-you what?!” Greg asked, alarmed as he looked to his son with clear alarm.

“Oh, don’t worry, Dad!” Steven reassured. “Everything turned out ok in the end! Well… mostly ok…”

“I feel like maybe I should be a bit more concerned with what goes on with you and the Gems when I’m not around…” the former rock star frowned worriedly.

“Guys!” Connie called out in a loud whisper, running up to the group from the other side of the shack. “Get ready! Soos is coming!”

“Ok, places, everyone!” Dipper exclaimed as they all rushed to hide behind the snack table, just out of view.

“Everyone, be QUIET!” Grenda shouted overtly, even if everyone was already in silent anticipation for the handyman’s arrival.

Fortunately, Soos was still in the dark about what was going on, quite literally seeing as how Candy had managed to blindfold him as she led him towards the party. “Alright, you promised a giant hummingbird, so I’m expecting to see a giant hummingbird,” the handyman remarked with an eager grin. Candy smirked as she exchanged a ready nod with the group peeking over the table, counting down before she yanked the blindfold off of Soos, allowing him to see the party for himself. “H-huh?!” the handyman gasped, somewhat alarmed as his smile instantly dropped.

“SURPRISE!” everyone shouted brightly as they jumped up from behind the table, rushing up to the very startled handyman.

“Happy birthday, Soos!” Mabel quipped exuberantly. “We’ve got everything you love: cake-flavored pizza, pizza-flavored cake-” Of course, as soon as she introduced these bizarre treats, Amethyst suddenly leapt onto the table, making good on her promise as she greedily and sloppily helped herself.
“…We’ll make more later,” Connie said stiffly after a moment of awkward silence.

“But for now, since you’re the birthday king, you get to wear these!” Steven exclaimed from atop Greg’s shoulders as he put a flashy crown on Soos’ head and a short red cape on his shoulders. “Dad made this awesome outfit suit for me and it brings me special birthday luck every year!”

“Eh, it’s just a little something I threw together after going to the craft store when Steven was a baby,” Greg shrugged humbly. “Still, I’m sure there’s more than enough birthday magic left in there for you, Soos.”

“O-oh… Well, uh…” Soos frowned fretfully, trying to avoid looking to the young Gem and his father as he looked to the cape on his shoulders instead. Still, no one seemed to notice his apparent discomfort as Mabel continued showing off the rest of the party.

“And we have one more treat for you…” she grinned, running up to the makeshift stage they had set up. She pulled the curtains open to reveal Toby Determined, clad in a tacky red leotard and a gaudy blue bow, tap dancing with an almost painfully awkward flair.

“Razzle dazzle, friends!” Toby exclaimed amidst his flashy dancing. “It’s the Razz-Dazzler! This is what my life has become!”

“I… I…” Soos attempted to speak up once more, his uneasiness growing more and more with each second, though he couldn’t really think of how to voice his many concerns at the moment.

“Quick! Everyone pose for the birthday smiles memory album!” Mabel exclaimed as all the kids rushed to do so.

“Ok, everyone, get in close and say ‘birthday’!” Greg grinned as he aimed the camera to snap the photo.

“Birthday!” all of the kids cheerfully proclaimed, though Soos oddly remained silent. Eager to see how the picture had turned out, they all gathered around to see it, though their excitement quickly diminished upon noticing that Soos was clearly frowning in what was otherwise a very happy photo.

“Soos, what’s wrong?” Dipper asked as everyone turned to the handyman, concerned.

“Yeah, don’t you like this super fun party we set up for you?” Steven asked with a curious frown.

“It’s, uh… I-it’s nothing,” Soos quickly assured, though his deeply upset expression conveyed that it was likely anything but nothing. “I… um… I gotta go fix a pipe, o-or something…” Without sparing another word, the handyman turned on his heel and hurried off, his head lowered and his hands clenched into tight fists. Before he was entirely out of the vicinity, however, he did cast one more glance back over his shoulder, specifically at Steven still fondly perched upon Greg’s shoulders, before letting out a small, wistful sigh and disappearing around the corner of the shack.

“Huh, I wonder what’s up with him,” Amethyst remarked once he was out of earshot, the remains of the snacks she had eaten all over her face. “You don’t think he’s mad that I ate all his pizza cake, do ya?”

No one got a chance to respond to this, for amidst their worry over the handyman, Stan and Wendy happened to walk around the same corner Soos had just disappeared behind, both of them just as concerned. “Hey, did you guys see Soos?” Wendy asked the group with a frown, looking back in the direction the handyman had wandered off in. “What happened to—Oh, no,” She quickly cut herself off upon noticing the party, sharing an alarmed glance with Stan before she began to
explain. “Ok, so you guys didn’t know so it’s not your fault, but Soos **hates** his birthday.”

“What?” the kids asked in bewildered unison, none of them understanding how anyone could despite their own birthday, especially someone who was usually so upbeat and cheerful like Soos.

“But why?” Greg asked, just as confused.

“It’s a total mystery.” Wendy said with a shrug. “I guess he’s been like this since he was a kid. Some weird personal biz or something.”

“There’s gotta be something we can do!” Mabel exclaimed intently.

“Yeah, isn’t there some way we can help him have a good birthday?” Connie asked fretfully.

“We’ve tried everything,” Wendy shook her head sadly.

“I even petitioned the government to have this day removed from calendars,” Stan interjected. “Because of that, I’m not allowed to fly on airplanes anymore.” The conman held up a mugshot of himself that was copiously stamped “banned” and “flight risk” to prove his point.

“Ohhhh, so that’s why they wouldn’t let me on that plane that one time I shape shifted into you!” Amethyst exclaimed with newfound understanding.

“Why were you trying to get onto a plan disguised as me in the first place?” Stan asked, raising a suspicious eyebrow at her.

“I had my reasons…” the purple Gem said with a mysterious smirk.

“Aww, I feel so bad about accidently upsetting Soos on his birthday…” Steven frowned sympathetically as the group peeked around to see the handyman morosely sitting on the porch steps. Soos let out another saddened sigh as he looked over a colorful postcard, though no one paid that as much attention as they did the fact that he was so depressed in the first place. “We have to at least try to fix this somehow!”

“I don’t know, guys,” Wendy said, somewhat doubtful. “He seems pretty down. Maybe we should just give him some space and leave him alone, you know?”

“No one should be alone on their birthday,” Dipper protested with growing resolve. “There’s gotta be a way to cheer him up. We just have to try harder!”

“You’re right, Dipper!” Mabel exclaimed with newfound enthusiasm, already coming up with a plan that would certainly succeed where their party had failed. “It’s time for us to bring out the big guns!”

The “big guns”, of course, were all based upon a guess the kids had made based on their investigation of Soos’ wallet earlier. And that guess was that the best way to cheer the handyman up would be with a good old-fashioned, rousing game of laser tag.

“Allright, guys,” Soos began as the twins led him, blindfolded once more, into the laser tag joint downtown. Steven, Connie, Stan, Wendy, Candy, Grenda, Amethyst, and Greg followed not too far behind, all of them wanting to join in on helping give the handyman a good birthday, even despite his mysterious disdain for it. “Blindfold me once, shame on you. Blindfold me twice—wait a
minute,” Soos cut himself off, pausing as he got a better idea of his surroundings through his other senses. “Hot dog smell? Sticky floors? Future sounds?” Overwhelmed by curiosity, the handyman removed his blindfold, taking in a surprised, but excited gasp as he took in the bright neon lights and retro carpeting of the laser tag center. “Laser tag? I-I love laser tag. How’d you guys know?”

“Oh, we definitely didn’t rifle through your wallet?” Mabel laughed awkwardly before Dipper elbowed her warningly.

“We just wanted to make up for... uh, earlier by taking you out so you can have some fun,” Steven smiled warmly. “And since you just so happen to like laser tag, we figured this would be the perfect way to do it!”

“Welcome to the year 8000,” the laser tag announcer’s bold voice suddenly blared out from the intercom, signifying the game was about to begin. “Society: collapsed. Fog machines: everywhere.”

“Whoa, if all that’s true, then it sounds like the future is gonna be my kind of party!” Amethyst exclaimed with a daring grin.

“Eh, I’m sure society will be just fine in the future,” Greg shrugged with a small laugh. “I mean, it’s not like some giant baby is gonna take over everything, you know? Still, I think they might be right about fog machines being everywhere…”

“Oh well, that’s good enough for me,” Amethyst shrugged blithely.

“Are these walls just mattresses spray painted purple?” Wendy asked as she poked the over-cushioned wall nearby.

“I think this place used to be a mattress store back in the day,” Stan remarked, glancing around the place.

“Oh, I-I don’t know, guys,” Soos said to the kids, frowning as they started putting on their laser tag gear. “I’m not sure if I’m up to this today.”

“Aaaw, don’t worry, Soos. Once you get in there, you’re bound to start feeling better!” Connie assured with a smile.

“Connie’s right,” Dipper agreed confidently. “As soon as you start playing with us, you’re gonna have a great time.”

“We promise, no matter what happens, we won’t leave your side,” Mabel vowed with complete sincerity.

“We’ll be like one big super laser tag team!” Steven quipped. “Together, we’ll be unstoppable out there!”

Soos hesitated for a moment, glancing towards the exit before looking to the kids’ hopeful, pleading expressions once more. And fortunately for them, he couldn’t very well resist them. “Well... I guess I could give it a shot…”

“That’s the spirit!” Mabel grinned encouragingly as the doors to the arena began to open.

“Prepare for laser battle!” the announcer exclaimed boldly. “In three... two... GO!”

With a unified cheer of excitement, everyone ran forward, laser guns in hand, into the fog-filled
room. Soos and the kids brought up the rear, though the handyman paused a moment upon noticing his shoes were untied. “Wuh-oh. Better tie these cowboys.” Soos bent down to do so, as the kids ran on ahead without him, even as the room in front of them seemed to abruptly change. Instead of dark and foggy and illuminated only with neon lights, the kids found themselves entering a bright, almost sterile white space, which was oddly enough empty and bereft of all of the other players, save for two tall, muscular men clad in highly technological armor.

“Whoa, hold on a second,” Connie said as they all stopped in their tracks, confused. “Something seems a bit off here…”

“I know, right? This is even cooler than I imagined!” Mabel exclaimed, unfazed. “Look at how real these laser guys are!” To test the durability of what she thought was nothing more than a mere dummy, she kicked one of the men squarely in his armored crotch, which, oddly enough, lit up and spoke in a robotic tone once she was done.

“Kick deflected! Thank you for buying Digi-Cod, the smart codpiece!”

“Wait, what?” Mabel asked, aptly bewildered at this.

“I-I’ve never seen one of those that could talk before…” Steven remarked, unnerved as all four of them simultaneously noticed the wall behind them leading back to the laser tag joint’s lobby start to close up.

“Oh no! Soos!” Dipper called to the handyman as he hurried to join them, only for the room they were all in to abruptly disappear, leaving Soos alone as he ran into the regular laser tag arena.

Unfortunately, the handyman hadn’t noticed the kids vanish, which was why he was aptly confused and alarmed upon looking around the darkened arena, knowing that they promised to stick by him only for them to be nowhere to be found. “Mabel? Dipper? Steven? Connie? Dudes?!”

What Soos didn’t know was that, in a self-contained room that existed mostly outside of the flow of time, all four of the kids were just as adamant to reunite with the handyman, especially considering the unknown position they were apparently in now. “Hey!” Mabel shouted in protest, kicking at the hard, metallic white wall trapping them all in. “Let us out of here!”

“Nice try, but that’s solid time-tanium, kid,” one of the officers standing at the back of the room finally spoke up.

“Hey, what’s the big idea here?” Dipper asked petulantly, turning to face the stoic pair. “Who are you guys?”

“Yeah, and why’d you trap us in this super white, colorless room?” Steven asked, looking around. “Seriously, this place could use a new coat of paint. My vote goes to pink. Or blue. Or green. Or all three!”

“Steven, I think we should be focusing less on the color of the room and instead more on how to get out of the room,” Connie said, noticing that there were no apparent exits to the sealed chamber.

“That won’t be happening,” the other officer cut in coldly. “There’s only one way out of here.”

“And it’s through me!” a vaguely familiar voice called out, diverting the kids’ attention to the previously unseen third figure in the room. Only his head and hands were visible however, thanks to his camouflage uniform, something he was quick to notice and try to rectify. “Oh, uh…” he started fiddling with his watch in an attempt to get it to work as his suit shifted to show several different environments. “Sorry! Come on, come on…” he grumbled, getting increasingly more
frustrated with his technology until he finally punched it, which somehow managed to get it to work, turning the suit back to its usual grey. “Aha! Through me! A-and that’s what it would have been like… i-if I had just gotten it right the very first time… B-but it’s still as effective!”

For a moment, all four of the kids simply looked to him in blank confusion, his face and voice not fully registering in any of their memories, though Connie was by far the most befuddled. “Who is that?” she asked plainly.

“I’m not sure…” Steven mused thoughtfully. “Though I think I’ve seen him somewhere before… But he’s just not ringing any bells…”

“Oh wait!” Mabel interjected. “He’s that time traveler guy! You know, the one from the fair?” she asked the boys, both of whom only nodded tentatively, remembering their time travel shenanigans that day, but not much about the time traveler they had gotten the device to do it from. “What did you say your name was again? Blendo… Blondin…”

“No, I think it was Blublin… right?” Steven guessed, exchanging a glance with Connie.

“Don’t look at me,” she shrugged passively. “I’ve never even seen this guy before.”

At this juncture, Dipper suddenly snapped his fingers, reaching what he assumed was the right guess. “Blar-Blar!”

“There it is!” Mabel nodded with a grin.

“Oh yeah, that sounds about right,” Steven agreed soundly.

“It’s Blendin!” the time traveler cut in fiercely, beyond frustrated at this point. “Blendin Benjamin Blandin! How could you not know my name after you ruined my life?!” Once again, the kids were all mutually confused by this claim, eliciting another angry groan from Blendin. “Initiate flashback!” he shouted, pressing a button on his watch that projected a holographic clip that he petulantly narrated over. “It was after you stole my time traveling device to win your stupid pig and save your dumb lion! I was cast out of the Time Anomaly Removal Crew, my whole life’s purpose, gone! And then, I was given ten squared life sentences in time prison. I spent every day since then plotting my vengeance… and now, finally, the day I’ve been waiting for has come!”

“Uh, Blendin?” one of the time officers, Dundgren, cut in, interrupting the time traveler’s rant. “Didn’t you say you were plotting your vengeance against three kids? Because there are four here.”

“Uh, yeah,” Connie raised her hand a bit shyly. “I, uh, wasn’t really involved in any of this, so… can I just… go home?”

“No!” Blendin snapped, completely unconcerned with this fact. “I don’t care if we picked up one extra kid! Nobody’s going anywhere until I get my REVENGE!”

“Awww,” Steven interjected with a sympathetic frown. “We’re really sorry about getting you sent to prison and ruining your life and everything, Mr…. Mr., uh… What’d you say your name was again?”

“Blendin…” the time traveler growled, sending the young Gem an irritated grin.

“Blendin, right!” Steven exclaimed. “I’ll make sure to remember that for next time.”

“Look, what Steven’s trying to say is that we’re sorry,” Dipper tried again, much more succinctly. “But we’re in the middle of something really important right now.”
“It’s our friend’s birthday today,” Mabel exclaimed worriedly. “And we promised we wouldn’t leave his side. He really needs us right now!”

“What?” Blendin asked with a scoffing laugh. “You really think some dumb birthday matters right now? Do you even know where you are? Welcome… to Globnar!”

At this, the far end of the room suddenly shifted open, unveiling a sight from the future that made all four of the kids’ jaws drop simultaneously. Stretched before them was a massive arena, far more advanced and deadly than any of them had ever seen before. Within its high walls, a large host of combatant events were taking place, from portal fights, to clock battles, to monster brawls, to age-changing-blaster brawls. Of course, many injuries and casualties were resulting from these fierce duels, all of them quite violent and horrific in their own right and all of them enough to set all four of the kids on edge even more than they already were.

“What… this looks like some kind of video game!” Steven remarked, somewhat impressed by how intricate and action packed it all was.

“Or a reality show,” Mabel added, just as intrigued. “Are we in Japan?”

“It’s gladiatorial time combat!” Blendin corrected hotly, nodding to the event’s latest winner and loser. “The winner gets a precious time wish.” The victor of the match held up said time wish, a glowing golden orb, with a triumphant grin as he looked down to his pleading opponent. “And then decides the loser’s fate!” Almost on cue, the winner lifted his thumb up, only to instantly turn it down with a grim smile. The loser let out a agonized cry as he was instantly disintegrated on the spot, leaving not a single trace behind. “And you four are officially challenged!” Blendin proclaimed, smirking down at the shocked, aptly frightened kids. “Dundgren!” the time traveler shouted as he walked off. “Get me my war paint!”

“Yeesh, you guys sure do seem to make some pretty crazy enemies…” Connie remarked to the others with an anxious frown.

“W-what are we gonna do?” Steven asked fretfully. “We can’t stick around here and fight in a futuristic battle to the death, no matter how cool that kinda sounds. What about Soos?”

“We gotta get out of here and get back to him!” Mabel agreed insistently, though her enthusiasm faded a bit as she took a glance around the seemingly impenetrable room. “But how?”

For a moment, all of the kids were at a complete and total loss over what to do to get out of the seemingly impenetrable chamber they were trapped in, as well as the impending, likely incredibly dangerous battle ahead. That is, until Dipper happened to notice a compact time travel device hanging from one of the time officer’s belts. “I have an idea.”

“Hang in there, Soos,” Mabel said as the group put their heads together to begin plotting their daring escape. “We’re coming for you!”

As the game of laser tag kicked off, Soos quickly found that, as alone as he was, he was essentially a moving target for all of the other players, something that likely wouldn’t have been the case if the kids were there to offer their support. But oddly enough, they were still nowhere in sight, much to the handyman’s growing distress. “Mabel? Steven? Dipper?” Soos called somewhat desperate, straining to catch a glimpse of the kids through the darkness and fog. “Requesting backup! Ah!” the handyman let out a startled cry as he was suddenly hit by lasers on all sides. “Oh! Oh no! Make
“Ha ha!” Robbie laughed impetuously as he ran up to Soos, blasting a laser right into his chest piece. “Laser Robbie!”

“D-dudes?” the handyman nervously called for the kids again as he fled, knowing that today was only going from bad to worse.

Seeing as how Blendin had demanded that he have time to prepare for the upcoming Globnar battle, the kids were left with ample opportunity to carry their escape plan out. Much of it involved a two-fold distraction, which was why they split up to execute it, with Steven and Connie collaborating on one half while the twins carried out the other.

“Hey, Mr. Beldin?” Steven asked as him and Connie stepped up to the time traveler.

“For the last time, it’s Blendin!” he snapped in frustration, not bothering to glance down at the pair as Dundgren applied his war paint for him. “And what do you want?”

“Mr. Blendin,” the young Gem corrected as him and Connie both put on amicable grins. “Whatcha doin’?”

“Getting ready to take you four on in Globnar!” Blendin proclaimed with a broad smirk.

“Why?” Steven asked with innocent curiosity.

“Because you kids got me fired and sent to jail!”

“Why?” Connie asked inquisitively.

“How should I know? P-probably because you thought it was funny to watch a well-respected time official lose everything he’s ever worked for!”

“Why?” Steven asked once more, which of course only irritated the time traveler even more.

“Why what?! Nothing I just said was posed in a way that you could possibly have any questions about it! Y-you’re not making any time-sense!”

“Why?” Connie simply asked with a small amused grin as Blendin only got increasingly more angry and annoyed. At the same time, she sent a small, discreet thumbs up behind her back to the twins, signaling that it was time for the to enact their part of the plan.

“Oh my stars!” Mabel gasped overdramatically as she walked up to Lolph, who stood guard at the entryway to the arena. “Could it be? My little, uh…” she trailed off, taking a glance at the time officer’s nametag. “Lolphie! It’s me! Your great-great-great-” She paused for a brief second, sending a questioning look to Dipper, who signaled for her to keep going as he snuck around to the other side of the officer. “Great-great-great-” She finally did stop as he finally put a hand up. “-Great grandmother! From the past times!”

For a moment, Lolph simply looked down at Mabel quite skeptically, but sure enough, he ended up taking the bait as his expression lit up into a warm smile. “Gam gam?”

Relieved, Mabel continued playing along, making sure not to draw any attention to Dipper as he successfully managed to slip the time travel device off of the officer’s belt. At the same time,
Steven and Connie continued distracting Blendin, their barrage of why questions replaced with basic banter instead.

“Look, I’m just saying, green is a super intimidating color,” Connie informed the time traveler.

“I’m shaking in fear just looking at it!” Steven quipped, putting on a faux frightened expression.

“You know what? I think you two are right,” Blendin grinned confidently as Dundgren applied green face paint on him. “Neon green is good, this is a good color for me. It’s fierce, a-and unexpected, and—HEY!” the time traveler suddenly snapped as he briefly stole a glance over at Lolph, or rather, at Dipper stealing the time travel device clean off of Lolph’s belt. “What?! No!” he shouted, catching the attention of both of his accompanying officers. “You can’t let them escape! Stop them!” With their distraction blown, Steven and Connie quickly rejoined the twins, despite Blendin’s attempts to catch them only ending in him tripping both himself and Dundgren.

“Gam Gam!” Lolph called after Mabel, shocked and hurt. “How could you?!”

“I ain’t no one’s Gam Gam, sucka!” Mabel retorted triumphantly as the four of them ran out of their captors’ radius.

“By the way, green isn’t really that intimidating!” Connie called back to Blendin, rolling her eyes. “It just makes you look like someone smeared baby food on your face!”

“Ugh! Don’t just lie there! Get them!” Blendin ordered the fallen officers fiercely, despite the fact that he was on the ground himself.

“H-hurry!” Steven urged as the officers picked themselves and started hurrying after them. “Back to Soos’ birthday!”

“Ok!” Dipper nodded in firm agreement, fumbling with the time machine as they all ran. “I think… I’ve… got it!” He pulled the tape out of the device somewhat haphazardly, though as the officers prepared to jump them, he didn’t have much of a chance to pay attention to the accuracy of the date they were going to go back to. Still, all four of them linked arms right as the tape snapped back into place, whisking them away from the future right before the officers could apprehend them once more.

The kids had expected to land safe and sound back in the present day in the laser tag joint where Soos would hopefully still be waiting for them. However, what they didn’t expect was to land squarely onto a mattress of all things, in a well-lit retail store as opposed to the noisy spaced-out décor the laser tag arena was known for.

“Huh,” Steven remarked as they all bounced down upon the mattress. “Well, that was a surprisingly soft landing.”

“Uh… are we back?” Mabel asked with a confused frown as she glanced around what should have been the laser tag joint.

“Oh no, look!” Dipper exclaimed fretfully, pointing to the store’s indoor sign. “You guys, the laser place is a mattress store! We went too far in the past!”

“Time travel, man!” Mabel huffed petulantly. “Why you gotta be so complicated!”
“W-well, this isn’t too big of a problem, isn’t it?” Connie asked, though before she could elaborate, Blendin, Lolph, and Dundgren just so happened to travel back to their exact time and location, landing just a few mattresses away. “Ok, now it might be a problem.”

“Hide!” Steven exclaimed just quietly enough that the time officers didn’t hear them. Before they could even be spotted, all four of the kids crammed underneath the mattress they had landed on before Blendin and his escorts jumped onto it.

“It looks like they overshot their destination by ten years…” Dundgren remarked, looking over the screen his watch was projecting.

“I-I don’t see them,” Blendin scowled, wiping off his face paint despite his bound wrists. “You better find those kids!”

“You’ll get your justice, Blendin,” Lolph assured with apparent sincerity.


“I hate that guy,” Lolph remarked to his partner as soon as Blendin was out of earshot.

“Let’s move,” Dundgren said, resolved. The pair preformed an impressive jump and flip over the mattress, landing squarely near the door and exchanging a celebratory fist bump as they walked out. The instant they were sure the trio was gone, the kids emerged from their hiding spot, hoping that they could continue to evade Blendin and his escorts that easily for the remainder of this misadventure.

“Ok, so all we gotta do is go forward ten years,” Dipper said evenly. “We can be back before Soos even realizes we were gone.”

“Oh no!” Steven gasped fretfully, scooping up its scrambled, disconnected pieces. “The time thingy! We must have broken it accidentally when we landed! How are we supposed to get back to the present now?”

“Dipper, you’re good with sciencey nerd stuff like this,” Mabel said, taking the pieces of the time device from Steven and handing them over to her brother. “Can you fix it?”

“Uh, maybe?” Dipper shrugged, someone uncertain as he looked over the broken device. “It’s worth a try I guess. But I’ll need some tools first.”

“Oh! I know the perfect place to get some!” Steven exclaimed brightly. “The carwash! My dad always has a few spare tools that he never uses lying around. I’m sure he won’t mind if we borrow a few. Plus, its super close to here!”

“Sounds like a plan as any,” Dipper said as he led the way out of the store. “But let’s try to lay low until we get there. We don’t want to change the future. Or cause the future. I forget how this works exactly.”

“Oh! I know the perfect place to get some!” Steven exclaimed brightly. “The carwash! My dad always has a few spare tools that he never uses lying around. I’m sure he won’t mind if we borrow a few. Plus, its super close to here!”

“Sounds like as a plan as any,” Dipper said as he led the way out of the store. “But let’s try to lay low until we get there. We don’t want to change the future. Or cause the future. I forget how this works exactly.”

“Whoa…” Connie remarked, somewhat amazed as they began to head downtown towards the carwash. “So this is Gravity Falls ten years ago?”

“Everything is samey, but also differenty…” Mabel mused, curiously taking the sights in, as the
other three were doing as well.

While most of Main Street’s familiar buildings and businesses remained in place with what they kids were familiar with in the present, there was still a large handful of noticeable changes, mostly in the numerous familiar faces they happened to pass by. Tyler Cutebiker balanced a boombox on his shoulder as he leaned against the wall beside a billboard for the Gleeful auto mart, depicting Bud and a newborn Gideon, though the ad had been graffitied to appropriately enough, give the future child psychic with devil horns and a tail. A younger Vidalia walked past the kids, a grocery bag in one hand and Sour Cream, only about 5 or so, holding her other one. On a bench across the way, Lars and Ronaldo, both kids as opposed to their usual teen age, casually hung out, the latter enthusiastically showing the former a library book of conspiracies he had found, even if Lars was only passively impressed by it. He did non-discreetly look away out of embarrassment, however, as a younger version of Robbie ran by, chasing after Thompson with a water gun. They bumped into Mr. Smiley, bereft of his facial hair and sporting an afro, who scolded them for their recklessness, even despite his usual wide grin. As the kids turned a corner, they passed by a dance studio, where inside, Toby Determined was hard at work trying to get his “Razz-Dazzler” routine off the ground.

“A dah buh dee, dah buh dee do, yeah!” Toby sang, cheerfully tapdancing in his gaudy leotard.
“Look out, Broadway, here I come!”

This confident proclamation was soon interrupted as Mabel suddenly banged on the window from outside, having watched the whole display. “This dream goes nowhere, Toby!” she shouted firmly but honestly.

“Aw, marbles!” Toby snapped his fingers in apt disappointment.

The kids continued heading for the carwash, still curiously observing all of the differences there were between the present they knew and the past they were currently in. In fact, they were so caught up in sigh seeing, that they didn’t even notice the trio of tricycles speeding towards them until they screeched to a narrow stop right in front of them.

“Oh, hey, look!” Steven exclaimed with a surprised smile, easily recognizing the trio of girls as younger versions of Wendy, Tambry, and Jenny. “Its-”

“Shhh!” Connie quickly quieted him, remembering how dangerous it could be to be so conspicuous in the past.

“Oops, sorry,” Tambry apologized to the older group of kids. She paused, however, as Wendy leaned over to whisper something in her ear, something that she didn’t hesitate to blatantly blurt aloud. “My friend thinks your cute,” she said to Dipper, much to Wendy’s immense embarrassment.

“Oh my gosh, you guys!” Wendy exclaimed hotly, shoving both of her friends off their trikes.
“Shut up!”

In light of this rather awkward revelation, all Dipper could really do was let out a small, somewhat flustered laugh, his cheeks almost as red as Wendy’s currently were. “Uh, thank you,” he chuckled, glancing away from the younger version of his former crush. “I mean… you’re super young, so this is kinda weird…”

“Now you know how she feels, creep,” Mabel joked with a wry smirk, sharing an amused laugh with Steven and Connie as they moved on ahead.
“Heh, yeah,” Dipper said, his smile disappearing into stark realization as the girls continued on their trikes past him. “I—uh… wow… Wow…”

Fortunately, the kids didn’t run into any more familiar, yet younger faces as they made their way over to the carwash, which was mostly the same as it was in the present, right down to Greg’s recognizable van sitting in front of it. Since there was relatively little business at the wash, the kids managed to sneak up to the van, remembering that they were supposed to remain unseen (even if they had already been seen).

“Ok, it looks like the coast is clear,” Connie said, peeking out from the other side of the van to make sure the former rock star wasn’t roaming about. “Let’s go.”

Still being as discreet as possible, the kids headed over to the other end of the van, which, conveniently for them, was hanging wide open. “Remember, we’re only here to grab a few tools,” Dipper reminded seriously. “Then we’re going to get out of here before Mr. Universe or anyone else can see us, got it?”

“Got it,” Connie and Mabel nodded affirmatively, though Steven was easily distracted by what was sitting in the back of the van.

“Oh my gosh, you guys!” he gasped with an excited smile, holding a somewhat tattered pink blanket up. “It’s my old blanket! Ah, man, it’s been years since I’ve seen this thing! Mostly because Amethyst accidentally ate it when I was 6… But still, I used to take it with me everywhere!”

“Awww!” Mabel gushed, equally as enthused. “I bet you looked so cute carrying that blanket around when you were a lil’ baby Steven!”

“Yeah, I gotta admit, I was pretty adorable,” Steven grinned a bit bashfully. “But still, I am a little confused seeing it here. I mean, like I said, I used to take this blanket everywhere I went when I was little…”

“So, what’s so confusing about that?” Connie asked. “A lot of kids have security blankets when they’re younger, Steven. It’s not like that’s weird or anything.”

“Oh, I know,” the young Gem nodded. “But what is weird is that my blanket is here… but I’m not. Well, I mean, I’m here, but young me isn’t. And I have a feeling that’s not just a coincidence sorta thing…”

Before anyone could even come up with a guess for this confusing matter, the door to the wash swung open, revealing a slightly younger, albeit very frazzled Greg. “Steven!” he shouted loudly, his eyes wide and his expression conveying clear panic. Fortunately, he didn’t notice any of the kids as they were quick to slip around behind the van the moment the door opened, nor did he manage to spot them as he ran to the back of the van, wildly searching through it. “Oh man, now his blanket’s gone too?! the former rock star asked in alarm, unaware that the future version of his son standing mere feet away was still holding onto it. “Ok, Greg, s-stay calm,” he reassured himself, running a hand through his thinning hair as he took a seat. “After all, kids randomly disappear every day, don’t they?” A beat of silence followed this guess, followed by another burst of fear. “No, they don’t! Oh, w-what if this is another crazy Gem thing no one warned me about? Can Steven turn invisible?! I-I don’t think Rose was able to do that… was she?”

“Invisible?” Dipper whispered, sending Steven a confused glance. “Steven, what’s he talking about?”
“I don’t know…” the young Gem frowned, taking a brief peek around the van at his distressed father. “I guess I was too young to remember.”

“I can’t just sit around here!” Greg exclaimed, leaping up from his seat with worried resolve. “I gotta find him, before he gets hurt! Or worse, before the Gems find out I lost him… Oh, boy…” The former rock star swallowed nervously as he took off towards town, shutting the back of his van and locking it in his wake. As soon as he was gone, the kids emerged from hiding, all of them equally as bewildered at what they had just overheard.

“Whoa, Steven, I can’t believe you just went AWOL like this when you were little!” Mabel exclaimed, impressed. “That’s so hardcore.”

“I… don’t think I did though…” the young Gem shook his head, tying his blanket to the van’s door handle so that it would be there when his father returned. “I can’t remember running away, and Dad and the Gems never told me I did… And I think that’s the kind of thing I think I would have at least heard about before…”

“Wait a second,” Connie spoke up, her eyes wide with realization. “Steven, what if the reason why your younger self mysteriously disappeared all of the sudden is because you’re here!? Maybe it’s against the laws of space and time for two versions of a person to exist in the same time and place, and that’s why the version of you from this time vanished! To prevent some kind of reality-shattering paradox!”

“Whoa, I hadn’t thought about that!” Steven gasped in amazement at this theory. “But wait… if I’m here, then were did young me go? And how am I still here if my younger self is gone? Ugh, time travel is so confusing…”

“That’s what I’m sayin’!” Mabel quipped, crossing her arms. “It’s super cool, but it makes your brain hurt if you think about it for too long. Though this does make me wonder if the younger versions of the rest of us are gone too… We should go and see!”

“There’s no time for that, Mabel,” Dipper rolled his eyes. “Honestly, this whole thing about younger Steven disappearing gives us all the more reason to get back to the present as soon as possible. Who knows what kind of weird, future-changing paradox us just being here could cause?”

“But we still have to fix the time machine,” Connie reminded. “And Mr. Universe locked the van. Where are we supposed to find any tools now?”

Fortunately, Dipper was quick to find a solution to their ongoing problem upon noticing the nearby sign pointing towards the Mystery Shack “I think I know a place…”

If the car wash was mostly unchanged from past to present, then the Mystery Shack was apparently ageless, as it looked nearly identical to how it appeared in the present as the kids arrived at its past counterpart. Conveniently enough, Stan was distracted with showing off his then-new wax museum exhibit to a group of tourists, allowing the kids to easily slip past him and enter the shack through an open window. And sure enough, the toolbox was in its usual spot underneath the unattended counter, the place where it would usually stay even ten years later.

“Aha! Bingo!” Dipper exclaimed with a relieved grin upon pulling the toolbox out. “Alright, let’s see here….” Despite his limited knowledge on how such futuristic technology functioned, Dipper
got to work on trying to repair the time travel device, with Connie opting to help him out as much as she could. Content to let the pair work without interfering too much, Steven and Mabel instead curiously glanced around the shack of the past they were standing in, though it wasn’t long before their attention was diverted towards the vending machine. Or namely, the young boy about their age standing in front of it.

“Aw, c’mon candy, fall!” the kid exclaimed, banging on the glass a bit, only for his snack to remain stuck. Steven and Mabel exchanged a sympathetic smile at this, both of them wordlessly agreeing to head over and help the poor kid out.

“Allow me,” Mabel grinned to the boy as she walked up beside the machine. “You just need to know a guy on the inside. Bippidy-boop. Wop!” she playfully copied the method for knocking the machine open that Soos had demonstrated earlier that day, and sure enough, it worked perfectly. “Jackpot!” Mabel cheered as she reached inside the open machine to grab some candy. However, as she handed her load off to the boy, her and Steven both shared a shocked gasp upon seeing just who this boy was.

“Thanks, dawg!” the 12 year old Soos smiled warmly as he took the candy Mabel offered to him. “You must be some kind of genius!”

“Whoa, its Soo—uch a cool shirt you have on there!” Steven quickly turned his awed exclamation around upon remembering how fragile the past was. “I mean, a T-rex with an American flag? That’s so neat! And patriotic! I love it!”

“Oh really?” Soos grinned as he proudly glanced down at his shirt. “Thanks, dude. It’s my special birthday shirt! It’s nowhere near as rad as one up there, though!” He pointed towards the very same question mark shirt his future counterpart always wore, walking over to it and smiling admiringly, leaving Steven and Mabel behind, both of them aptly amazed.

“Alright,” Dipper said as him and Connie rejoined the pair with a now-fixed time travel device. “I think we’ve got this thing working.”

“It took a lot more nails that we thought it would…” Connie added. “And a lot more glue, oddly enough.”

“You guys!” Mabel exclaimed, her shock turning into a huge grin. “Look over there!” She eagerly turned both of them around to face the younger Soos, who was still distracted with exploring the shack to notice their shared awe.

“No. Way,” Dipper remarked, his eyes wide with disbelief over the coincidence of encountering Soos, of all people, in the past, especially considering the circumstances.

“Yes way!” Steven grinned excitedly. “How crazy is it that we’d find Soos here at the shack? It’s like destiny or something!”

“Or just really good, really strange luck…” Connie mused, a bit more reserved over the matter.

“Mi precioso!” an older, almost elderly woman called for Soos as she entered the shack. “You keep wandering off. You don’t want to be late for your big day!”

“Sorry, Abuelita!” Soos grinned, blithely hurrying over to his grandmother before exiting the shack with her.

“Big day?” Mabel asked once the pair had left. “This could be the birthday where that personal biz went down. We could finally find out why Soos hates his birthday!”
“Yeah! And maybe once we know what went wrong, we could do something to help Soos fix it so he can have a good birthday in the present!” Steven purposed enthusiastically.

“That’s… actually a pretty good idea,” Connie assented. “As long as we just go and see what’s up, without changing anything in the past.”

“Connie has a point,” Dipper agreed, glancing at the time travel device in his hand. “We can go and see what happened with Soos, but let’s be quick about it. And careful, ok?”

“Bro-bro, please,” Mabel assured. “Careful is my middle na-” She cut herself off upon accidentally flinging her arms out, only to end up knocking a whole stack of bobbleheads over. “Oops.”

Knowing they didn’t have much time to clean the mess up, the kids simply decided to leave it as they slipped out of the shack without anyone paying them any mind. And they managed to leave just in time too, for right after they departed, Greg arrived at the shack, breathless and frantic as he hurried over to Stan, who had just finished directing his next tour into the museum.

“Mr. Pines!” the former rock star shouted hectically, catching the conman quite a bit off guard. “I need your help!”

“Greg? What the heck are you doing here?” Stan raised an eyebrow at his former employee. “What, did you get another semi-truck stuck in that wash of yours, because I already told you, I don’t know how to help you out with that.”

“N-no! It’s even worse than that!” Greg exclaimed anxiously. “Steven’s missing! I just turned around for a second—just a second—and when I look back over my shoulder, he’s completely gone!”

“So what?” the conman asked with a stoic shrug. “The kid probably got tired of watching you wash cars all day and decided to hit the road. Can’t say I blame him, I’d get bored of that too after a while.”

“Yeah, but that’s just the thing. It’s not like Steven to just… run off like this!” the former rock star stressed. “He even left his special blanket behind! W-what if someone, or something, took him!? After all, this town is full of all sorts of weird monsters and creatures; what if one of them ate him or something! Or what if he somehow floated up into space or something?! I mean, he is half magic, after all. Anything’s possible!”

“Geez, Greg, calm down,” Stan rolled his eyes, still largely unconcerned. “You’re acting like you lost your own head instead of just your kid.”

“I probably will end up losing my head if the Gems find out about this…” Greg remarked somewhat fearfully.

“Oh yeah, because the three nutcases who tried kidnapping him a few years back have plenty of room to get on your case about losing him,” the conman deadpanned as he began to head back into the shack. “Listen, Greg, I got a tour to run and gullible customers to swindle, so I don’t have time to help you look for your little ankle biter.”

“B-but, Mr. Pines, I-”

“Greg,” Stan paused for a beat, his tone firm, yet also almost strangely reassuring. “Relax. The kid’s fine. He’ll probably turn up in a few hours after he’s got this runaway thing out of his system. After all, kids never really go away, as much as you might wish they would…”
“I hope you’re right…” Greg frowned fretfully as he prepared to leave. “Still, I’m gonna keep looking for him, and I’m not gonna stop until my son is safe and sound! Wish me luck!”

“Yeah, sure, good luck,” Stan waved his former employee off dryly, not paying him too much mind as he opened the door to the shack, only for it to completely fall off its hinges. “Ugh, again?! That’s the third time this week! Note to self: send that no-good handyman of mine packing before the entire shack falls down!”

The kids made sure to stay a safe distance behind Soos and his Abuelita as they followed the pair home, or more specifically, to the festive birthday party that was just kicking off in the backyard. And even upon a first glance, it looked like it was quite the party. The entire yard was decked out with colorful balloons and decorations, and large handful of guests had turned out, most of them roughly around Soos’ age and most of them running around playing and enjoying themselves. Still, the kids made sure to remain out of sight as they quietly observed the party from behind a row of nearby bushes, paying particular attention to the younger version of Soos, who, oddly enough, seemed like he was in mostly high spirits, despite it being his birthday.

“Who’s a handsome birthday boy?” a young woman asked as she playfully pinched Soos’ cheeks.

“It’s you!” another woman chimed in, just as brightly as the boy let out an amused laugh while both girls headed off.

“Soos, you are such a lady’s man!” Abuelita chuckled as she walked up to the table with a large box.

“They’re my cousins, Grandma!” Soos stuck his tongue out jokingly. “Gross!”

“Look, mijo,” Abuelita opened the box with a wide smile to reveal a delicious-looking treat. “I got you a racecar cake.”

“Aw, nice! It’s just the one I wanted!” Soos grinned excitedly, cheerfully embracing his grandmother. “Thanks, Abuelita!”

“Man, I don’t know why Soos hates birthdays,” Dipper remarked as him and the others continued to watch the party from their hiding spot. “This looks great!”

“I know, right?” Steven smiled as he looked over the festivities. “This party looks like so much fun! I wish we could actually go to it instead of just watching it from the outside.”

“Well, we could,” Connie said somewhat sardonically. “But it would be at the risk of ruining the future for everyone here, including ourselves.”

A beat of awkward silence passed between the kids at such a heavy implication, before Mabel voiced the conclusion that they had all quickly reached. “Yeah, we probably shouldn’t…”

Back within the party itself, Soos cheerfully took a seat at the table, helping himself to the icing stuck to the racecar toy that had topped his cake. His innocent levity was briefly interrupted, however, as one of the party guests plopped down into the seat next to him at the head of the table.

“Uh, sorry, dude, but could you move seats?” Soos asked the kid politely. “That’s the seat of honor.”

“Uh, who’s it for?” the kid asked, confused.
Oh, well… it’s for my dad actually,” Soos smiled fondly. “I haven’t seen him in like… eight years. But he’s coming today!” Coincidentally enough, the doorbell happened to ring at that exact moment, something that Soos easily heard and instantly got excited over. “That must be him!” he exclaimed, hopping up from his seat as he quickly adjusted his party hat. Curious to see what Soos’ dad might be like, the kids followed as he ran to the front door, the four of them congregating around an open window to watch whatever apparent reunion was about to unfold.

“Alright, Soos,” the future handyman conditioned himself, taking in a deep, steadying breath as he prepared to answer the door. “Today’s the big day. Be cool. Be. Cool.” Steeling his resolve once more, Soos put on the biggest, most welcoming smile he could muster as he opened the door to greet his father, whom he hadn’t seen since he was very little. His father, who contacted him so infrequently, but whenever he did, it felt like a momentous occasion to him. His father, who, after years of waiting and hoping and dreaming, he was finally going to see face-to-face again after so many years.

His father, who, once again, failed to show up.

“Postcard for… Soos,” the mailman at the door said as he handed said card over to the confused boy before succinctly walking off.

Soos’ confusion soon sank into a frown as he looked over at the colorful postcard, which on the front, read “Hello! From New Orleans”. The message on the back, however, was what really concerned the future handyman as he turned it over and read it aloud. “Sorry, champ. Couldn’t make it this year. Real busy again. See you next year, for sure. Dad.”

A small, disappointed sigh escaped Soos as he finished, ashamed with himself for getting his hopes up so high only for them to be completely dashed yet again, just as they were every year. Upon realizing his father had stood him up once more, however, Abuelita quickly swooped in to place a comforting hand on his shoulder as one of his older cousins offered him verbal encouragement. “Hey, don’t sweat it, cuz. You’ll see him next year.”

“Heh, yeah…” Soos remarked somewhat morosely as he pulled out a shoebox filled with the countless other postcards his father had sent him in the past. All of them were from different places across the country, but all of them carried the exact same indifferent, largely empty apology, word for word. “Uh, I’m gonna go lie down. You party without me, dudes.”

“Wait!” Abuelita called out worriedly as her grandson sulked to his room. “What about your presents?! To try and entice him, she pressed a key on the keyboard she had wrapped up for him, but even that wasn’t enough to get the dejected future handyman to stick around. The kids were quick to duck down under the window as Soos passed by it, but as upset as he currently was, he likely wouldn’t have noticed them there anyway.

“So that’s why Soos hates his birthday,” Dipper said with solemn realization. “It’s the day he realized his dad isn’t coming back.”

“That’s so sad…” Steven frowned sympathetically. “If we didn’t have to worry about the future falling apart, I’d go in there and hug young Soos right now!”

“So how much partying can fix something like this?” Mabel asked worriedly.

“I don’t think all the parties in the world could even come close to fixing this…” Connie shook her head sadly.

A moment of dejected pity and silence passed between the group, none of them knowing quite
what to do to help Soos in such a difficult matter, as much as they all wanted to. Still, they didn’t get much of a change to even try and come up with any viable ideas before they were abruptly assaulted by a sudden blast of water, courtesy of a younger, but still just as unruly Robbie. “Heh, dorks!” he callously laughed at the expense of the somewhat annoyed older kids. “Young Robbie!”

Blendin was still largely seething over the kids escaping as his escorts led him through town in search of the four of them. And, unfortunately for Lolph and Dundgren, the time traveler made sure to make his frustration over the matter very well known.

“I-I can’t believe you two let those kids get away!” Blendin exclaimed hotly. “What kind of Time Paradox Avoidance Enforcement officers to you think you are? Letting yourselves be outsmarted by four kids, kids from the ancient, backwards days of the 21st century, of all time periods! The century where they invented ‘emojis’ and ‘internet memes’! These are dark times we’re walking in, you two, dark times indeed.”

“I can snap your neck in 235 different ways and if you don’t stop talking then I’ll utilize 27 of those ways right here and now, all at the same time,” Dundgren threatened plainly, only needing to send the time traveler a warning glare to prompt him to nervously snapped his mouth shut.

The newfound silence was soon interrupted however, as Greg, still desperately searching town for Steven, happened to spot the futuristic trio pass by. “Oh, cops! Thank goodness!” he exclaimed with relief as he ran up to the group, stopping them in their tracks. “Officers, I need your help! My son’s gone missing and I need to find him! He’s young, about yea tall, wearing an oversized shirt with a star on it, and his name is Ste-”

“Sorry, sir, but we’re not those kinds of cops,” Lolph interrupted rather apathetically. “Now if you’ll excuse us, we have to be going.”

“W-what?” Greg frowned in confusion as he looked the pair up and down, noticing their armored uniforms. “Oh, are you guys part of the FBI or something? That would probably explain those cool, futuristic eye pieces you got on there. Well, at least they look like something someone in the FBI would wear…”

“Ugh, we don’t have time for this!” Blendin growled in clear aggravation. “They’re not part of your archaic little ‘FBI’. They’re officers of the Time Paradox Avoidance Enforcement Squadron, sent from the year 207012 to help me capture four kids who I plan on completely and utterly annihilating in gladiatorial time combat!”

For a moment, the only thing the former rock start could do was stare at the perturbed time travel, aptly bewildered by what he had just heard, even if he didn’t buy it. “Yeesh, and I thought I was a mess…” Greg scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. “Are you ok, buddy? You got some… problems you need to talk to someone about or something?”

“I don’t have any problems!” Blendin snapped almost manically as he pressed on ahead. “Lolph! Dundgren! E-enough wasting time! We have to find those kids so I can have my REVENGE!”

“I’m still not entirely convinced I shouldn’t use those 27 neck-snapping techniques on him,” Dundgren remarked as they begrudgingly followed the time traveler.

“I say go for it,” Lolph stoically agreed as Blendin continued to angrily stammer ahead of them.
“W-wait!” Greg called out after the trio. “What about my son?!” Of course, he received no response from them as they simply went on their way, leaving the distraught former rock star alone in his search once again. “Well, I guess I’m on my own…” he shrugged as he continued looking for the missing young Gem as he did the only thing he could think to do at this juncture: call out for him. “Steven! Where are you, kiddo?! I’ll get you a whole bunch of Cookie Cats if you come home! Eh, who am I kidding? I was gonna do that for him anyway, but still. Come home anyway! I don’t know how much more of you being missing my poor blood pressure can take!”

Soos let out another glum sigh as he sat on his bed, the lights in his room turned off as he tried his best to block out the festive sounds of the party still going on outside. For as almost as long as he could remember, every single one of his birthdays had come with a promise from his father that he would be there to see him. And every single one of those birthdays had passed with that promise always being broken in the exact same way. And after her grandson go through this heartbreak and disappointment for the eighth year in a row, Abuelita decided she had finally had enough of it.

“Ay, Soos’ father is a deadbeat!” she hissed fiercely to herself as she stood outside of Soos’ bedroom, her distain for her son-in-law clear as she threatened him in Spanish. “¡Si alguna vez muestra su carota por aquí, se la voy a partir pieza por pieza!” Still, as frustrated as she was, she forced her anger to simmer down for the moment as she prepared to comfort her crestfallen grandson. “Soos!” she called with a soft smile as she entered his room, carrying a plate of cookies in. “I made you cookies shaped like dinosaurs!”

“I don’t want cookies…” the future handyman replied, glancing away bitterly. “I wanna see Dad again…”

“A-and he wants to see you too,” Abuelita assured as she took a seat on the bed beside him. “He’s just… busy…” Her expression darkened for a moment, knowing that whatever her son-in-law was apparently preoccupied with was likely nowhere near as important as his own son.

“Busy in New Orleans,” Soos remarked petulantly, pouting as he crossed his arms.

“Aye, yes…” Abuelita admitted hesitantly. “But trust me, mio. You will feel better someday. I promise.”

“Eh, maybe someday…” Soos shrugged, not fully believing her. “But not today…”

Unbeknownst to the future handyman and his grandmother, the kids were still secretly eavesdropping from right outside the window, and after hearing this depressing exchange, all four of them felt even sympathy for Soos’ disheartening plight.

“Ugh, this is awful…” Mabel frowned as they all sank down away from the window.

“I know, right?” Connie asked, just as cheerless. “At first, I thought that whatever reason Soos had for disliking his birthday was something simple, like a rained-out birthday party, or an out of control clown. But this? This is on a whole other level…”

“We promised Soos a happy birthday, but how can we give him that now?” Dipper asked incredulously. “This goes way beyond anything any of us know how to fix.”

“W-well we can’t just give up!” Steven urged earnestly. “There’s gotta be something we can do to-”
“T-this way!” Blendin’s unmistakable voice shouted out from not too far away, startling all four of the kids, especially as the time traveler and his escorts arrived at the party.

“Quick! Hide!” Dipper exclaimed, and no one protested as they all jumped to their feet and hurried off to tuck behind the nearby bushes before the trio from the future could spot them.

“They’ve gotta be around here somewhere!” Blendin scowled as he glanced around, setting his sights on a tree a few feet away. “I-I think I heard them!”

“Freeze!” Lolph shouted, taking aim the tree with his blaster. Without any further warning, he fired, blowing the tree to bits and revealing young Robbie behind it, though he was quick to run off crying in fear over what had just happened. “I’ll trace their chrono-signatures,” the time officer ordered, unfazed as he went on to do just that while his partner continued to guard Blendin.

“Man, the sooner I defeat those kids in Globnar, the sooner I can win my time wish!” the time traveler expressed with an eager smirk.

“Tell you what I’d do if I had a time wish,” Dundgren remarked casually. “Retire early, spend more time with the kids-”

“Nya nya nya, with the kids!” Blendin interrupted impatiently. “Don’t you know a time wish can do literally anything?! Any impossible problem solved-” he snapped his fingers. “-just like that? I mean, just imagine the possibilities!”

“Whoa…” Steven mused having overheard this information. “Sounds like that time wish thing is pretty powerful…”

“Wait, you guys, that’s it!” Dipper exclaimed with a gasp of realization. “The time wish! If we defeat Blendin in that space battle…”

“Then we can wish that Soos’ dad came to his twelfth birthday party…” Connie filled in the blanks.

“And all of Soos’ birthdays would be fixed forever!” Mabel finished excitedly with a snap of her fingers. “Just like that!”

“Oh my gosh! That’s such a great idea!” Steven exclaimed, stars in his eyes, though his enthusiasm diminished into worry for a brief moment. “But do you really think we can win this Globnar thing?”

“Between the four of us, I’d say there’s probably a 50/50 chance,” Connie shrugged truthfully.

“Well, it’s the only chance we have,” Dipper said with firm resolve. “Besides, it’s for Soos. He would do the same for us.”

The others all nodded their intent agreement with this plan, all four of them more than ready to put themselves on the line for the sake of the kindly handyman they all knew and loved. And so, after taking a moment to harden their determination for whatever dangers lie ahead, the kids emerged from their hiding spot, ready to do whatever they had to to win that time wish. “Here we are, Blendin,” Dipper announced as they all headed over to the time traveler, their hands held up in abdication. “We surrender.”

“It’s them!” Blendin shouted, pointing the kids out to his escorts, who were quick to surround them.
“Freeze!” Dundgren ordered, pointing his blaster at them as he prepared to cuff them all.

“Careful,” Lolph cautioned his partner as he aimed his own gun at the kids. “They’re from the past. They might have powder muskets or slap bracelets.”

“Don’t worry,” Connie reassured evenly. “We aren’t going to trick you guys this time. Instead, we want to accept your challenge, ok?”

“Yes!” Blendin cheered fiercely. “Let the Globnar begin! Prepare… for GLOBNAAA-” The time traveler’s battle cry was abruptly silenced as Lolph pressed a button on his watch.

“Hey, turns out I can mute him.”

“Man, I wish we’d known that sooner,” Dundgren remarked dryly. All the same, the time officer out his time traveling device and pulling the tape back, instantly sending them all into the far distant future, leaving only the red screwdriver the kids had used to fix the other device behind in their wake.

By the time Greg had scaled the hill up to the temple, he was all but breathless, his energy completely depleted and his hope running very low. He had spent all afternoon frantically searching all over town for even the slightest sign of Steven, only for his hunt to turn up totally empty. And as much as he didn’t want to, he knew it was only fair that he report the young Gem’s baffling disappearance to his future guardians, even if he knew they’d probably never forgive him for letting it happen.

“O-ok, Greg,” the former rock star steadied himself as he approached the temple door. “Just be honest with them. They’ll appreciate that.” He took in a deep breath, pausing as he lifted his hand to knock on the gate. “Well, either that or they’ll beat me to a pulp, but… hopefully it’ll be the first one. Here goes nothing, I guess…”

Steeling his resolve one last time, Greg prepared to knock, only for the door to magically slide open before he could. Startled, the former rock star stumbled back, falling onto the ground as the Gems emerged from their temple, all of them standing over him looking quite confused.

“Ah! I-I’m sorry!” Greg cried prematurely, already shielding himself from the trio’s currently non-existent wrath. “I-it was an accident! I was just—Please, I—”

“Greg?” Pearl interjected, looking to the former rock star suspiciously. “What in the world are you babbling on about? And what are you doing here in the first place? And most importantly, where’s Steven?”

“Yeah, and why are you all nervous and sweaty?” Amethyst asked with a bemused smirk. “You just rob a bank or something? Cause if you did, you should’ve asked me to come along!”

“Wha—no!” Greg shook his head, still not picking himself up off the ground. “I… W-well, y’see… I just… I was at the wash and, uh… I was… A-and Steven, he… Well, he, uh—”

Garnet suddenly held her hand up to silence the former rock star’s anxious ramblings before summarizing what he was trying to say quite simply. “You lost Steven.”

“I, uh… Y-yeah… pretty much…” Greg admitted sheepishly, glancing away from the Gems out of shame.
“You what?!” Pearl asked in appalled shock.

“How did you lose an entire Steven?” Amethyst asked, just as bewildered. “I mean, I get that he’s tiny and everything, but he’s not that tiny.”

“I-I don’t know what happened!” Greg shook his head defensively. “One minute he was just playing in the back of the van like he usually does, and the next, he was just… gone! I’ve looked all over town for him, but I can’t find him anywhere! It’s like he just… disappeared into thin air! …That isn’t a normal Gem thing, is it?”

“It most certainly is not!” Pearl huffed, both alarmed and exasperated. “I can’t believe you let something like this happen, Greg! For all we know, Steven could be anywhere! We have to find him, before he gets hurt!”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do all day!” Greg protested, still quite panicked. “I’m worried sick about him! W-what if we can’t find him?! What if he’s gone forever? Or what if he’s-”

“Greg,” Garnet interjected once more, her tone as even and steady as it usually was. “Calm down. We’ll find him.”

“B-but how do you know-”

“Because I know,” the Gem leader adjusted her shades. “Now, take us to the last place you saw Steven.”

“The last place…” Greg calmed his tense breathing down a bit as he paused for a moment. “Oh! The carwash! Like I said, he was sitting in the back of the van. But… I already searched the entire place top and bottom for him.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to take a second look,” Garnet advised wisely.

“Well then what are standing around here freaking out for?” Amethyst asked, already running on ahead. “We got ourselves a Steven to find!”

For a moment, all Greg could do was stare at the Gems in disbelief as they led the way, his eyes wide with both relief and surprise that, while they were as upset as he thought they would be, they were still willing to help him look for the young Gem. Still, his shock didn’t last long as he scrambled to his feet, intent on finding his missing son and bringing him home safely. “Y-you guys! Wait for me!” he shouted, chasing after the Gems and nearly falling down the hill in the process. “Don’t worry, Steven! We’re coming for you!”

The very first thing the kids noticed upon their abrupt arrival in the futuristic Globnar area was that it was much, much larger than they thought it had been upon their first look at it. Then again, for the all of the varying events of the time combatant competition that were held within its towering walls, it only made sense that it was huge. The hundreds, likely thousands of seats lining the arena were all filled with an excitable crowd, all of them eagerly cheering and shouting for Globnar to begin, especially as its tributes appeared in the very center of the arena. However, this round of thunderous excitement was soon curtailed as a large panel in the floor of the far end of the area slid open. And from this opening rose the infamous, terrifying Time Baby himself.
bouncer. Despite his chubby, youthful, baby-soft face, Time Baby’s expression was set in a cranky scowl as he appeared, instantly demanding the absolute respect of everyone in the arena. Well, mostly everyone.

“Aw, what an adorable baby!” Steven remarked with a bright grin amidst the crowds’ continuing cheering, which Time Baby was quick to put to an end.

“Silence!” he shouted, his voice unexpectedly deep and booming. An immediate hush fell over the arena at this command, save for one lone, still-ecstatic spectator, who was quickly silenced by Time Baby’s vaporizing laser vision.

“O-ok, I take it back!” the young Gem exclaimed fearfully upon seeing this violent display, the other three easily sharing his alarm. “He’s way more terrifying than adorable! Even if he is still pretty adorable…”

“Welcome, Globnar tributes!” Time Baby began, addressing the kids and Blendin. “I have a very important nap to get to, so let’s make this quick. You each have a chance to settle your time-feud through gladiatorial combat.”

“You will have until Time Baby finishes drinking the cosmic sand in this hourglass,” the robot accompanying Time Baby announced, holding a bottle shaped like an hourglass, filled with an unknown, sparkling substance.

Of course, like most babies, Time Baby protested as the bottle was lifted up towards him, stubbornly turning his nose up at it. “No!”

“Come on,” the robot urged, poking Time Baby’s cheek with the bottle.

“Ow!”

“It’s good for you!”

“Wah!”

“Get ready, kids,” Blendin sent a challenging grin to his four opponents. “When I get that time wish, you’ll wish you were never born. Or rather, you’ll wish you were born, because I’m gonna wish you were never born!”

“Wait, how would we wish we were born if we were never born in the first place…?” Steven frowned, confused. “Wouldn’t that mean we would have never existed or-”

“That doesn’t matter, Steven,” Dipper interjected somewhat dryly. “What matters is that we’re gonna win that time wish. After all, there’s four of us.”

“And only one of you!” Connie added, grinning confidently at the time traveler.

“And we have hair!” Mabel proclaimed proudly.

“O-oh yeah?” Blendin scoffed, offended. “Well… well I have training!” To prove his point, the time traveler grabbed a nearby energy spear, giving it a deft, skillful spin before pointing it right at the surprised kids. “What do you think I did all that time in prison?”

The kids exchanged a round of worried glances at this, their hopes that this would be an easy win somewhat lowering a bit. But even so, they couldn’t back down now, even if they wanted to. They were going to do whatever they had to to win this challenge, claim the coveted time wish, and use
it to give Soos the excellent birthday he deserved. No matter what it took to get them there.

Upon finally accepting the bottle of cosmic sand, Time Baby pounded his large fist into his carrier, instantly gathering everyone’s full attention. “Let the Globnar… BEGIN!”

At this proclamation alone, the large leaderboard hanging over the arena lit up, showing zero points at the moment for both sides. The instant everyone’s handcuffs slipped off of their wrists, Blendin made sure to make it doubly known that the games were beginning with a fierce, high-pitched battle cry, one that kicked the events of Globnar off in full force.

Keeping in line with the rather chaotic nature of the future, Globnar seemingly had no rules or referees, save for Time Baby himself, who was much too focused on his cosmic sand to pay too much attention to the games. The contest itself consisted of a seemingly endless round of events, each different and more harrowing than the last. The first competition was a duel, held on the face of a rapidly rotating clock that the kids and Blendin were trying to knock each other off of with large, battling sticks. Initially, it seemed like Dipper and Connie had the upper hand against the time traveler in this, though as Steven and Mabel pitched in to try and help, Blendin managed to swat all four of the kids away, the rotating clock hand doing its job in knocking all four of them down, giving the time traveler the first point. The kids made up for it however in the next round, which was in the form of a light cycle race. At first, Blendin was confident that he would triumph in this too, but the kids quickly overtook him upon Mabel’s clever suggestion that they pop a wheelie, which, interesting enough, sped the cycle up quite a bit, giving them the win. Not all of the challenges were based on strength or speed though, as was the case with the round featuring time chess, which wasn’t too different from normal chess, save for the rampaging, bloodthirsty, clock-faced monster who suddenly interrupted the game halfway through. From there, the competitions and the number of points gained seemed to be a back and forth between both teams, with neither of them gaining any sort of significant lead. Through the “time line” run, to the time dog eating contest, to cuckoo clock suit combat, to a fight against a time shark and countless other events, the time traveler and the kids stayed neck and neck, with neither sign showing any signs of giving in or letting up, save for their shared wear and tear and general exhaustion after going through hundreds of dangerous events nonstop. Their penultimate challenge was to overpower and defeat a fearsome, clock-eyed monster, a struggle that both sides ultimately had to end up working together on, lest they all lose their lives to the frenzied beast. In the end, they managed to push the monster back and trap it in the door it had first emerged from, but not after a very close-call battle with it.

“Very good,” Time Baby voiced his approval over this success as he paused from his meal. “You have escaped the Cyclocks.”

“Yes! Blendin for the almost win!” the time traveler cheered, taking a glance up at the scoreboard. The kids also looked to it, a bit more fearfully as they saw the score was incredibly close: 763 points for them, and 764 points for Blendin. All it would take was one more point for them to either win the elusive time wish, or be wiped from existence entirely. It was a narrow margin to be sure, but all four of them were determined to overcome these daunting odds, regardless of whatever no-doubt incredibly perilous final event awaited them.

“There is only one final challenge for Globnar;” Time Baby began, boldly and dramatically. “An ancient game, thousands of years old, chosen for its exemplification of pure strategy. The ancient art… of laser tag!” With the mere mention of the game, a glowing maze materialized within the arena, with laser vests and guns appearing for each of the tributes. “The one who touches the victory orb first will win!” Time Baby decreed, pointing to the glowing golden orb resting atop the platform at the end of the maze.
While the crowd was going essentially wild with excitement over this final event, all the kids could
take to exchange a bewildered glance, none of them quite sure what all the fuss was about.
“Laser tag?” Dipper raised an eyebrow as he looked down at the laser gun in his hands.
“Seriously?”

“You know, considering how many times we nearly died in all those other challenges, I thought
this last one would be a bit more… I dunno, deadly?” Connie remarked just as incredulously.

“Oh, I know it doesn’t seem challenging now,” Blendin smirked, holding his laser gun at the
ready. “But just wait till they turn that fog machine on. Then you’ll be done for! You just wait
until—”

The time traveler was abruptly cut off as Steven and Dipper opened laser fire on him from both
sides, his vest buzzing with each and every single unseen strike, aptly aggravating him. “Man, this
is the funnest challenge yet!” Steven exclaimed with an excited grin as he kept on shooting at
Blendin’s backside. “No wonder they saved it for last!”

“You guys, grab the orb!” Dipper called up to Mabel and Connie, who had easily made it to the
platform while Blendin was distracted. “Got it!” Mabel exclaimed as both her and Connie placed
their hands upon the orb, showering the arena with a bright flash of light.

At the exact same moment, Time Baby at last finished off the last of his cosmic sand, tossing his
empty bottle down as a loud buzzer rang. “It is finished!” he exclaimed before his robot gave him a
gentle pat on the back, eliciting a small burp from him in the aftermath of his meal. Thunderous
applause rang up from the crowd as the kids’ score instantly shot up to 999 points, much to their
shared elation, and relief and Blendin’s immense panic and outrage.

“No!” he shouted fiercely, collapsing to his knees in defeat. “No! NOOOOOOO!”

“We did it!” Dipper exclaimed with an excited smile.

“This calls for a group hug!” Steven cheered warmly, pulling the others into a tight embrace that
they were more than happy to return upon their triumphant victory.

“You have made victory in Globnar,” Time Baby addressed the kids as his bouncer hovered over
to them. “Before I give you your time wish, tell us; what fate have you decided for the loser?”

“Oh geez…” Blendin muttered nervously, sweat pouring from his brow as he dreadfully awaited
whatever sentence the kids had in store for him.

“Death!” Mabel suddenly proclaimed wildly before they even had a chance to convene on the
matter.

“Mabel!” Dipper quickly scolded.

“Oh… she frowned, somewhat embarrassed as she redacted her statement. “Kinda got carried
away there…”

At this awkward juncture, the kids unanimously decided to huddle up and discuss exactly what
they were going to do with the currently groveling time traveler. “Ok, so Blendin did try to wish us
out of existence,” Dipper began. “But… it was kind of out fault for ruining his life in the first
place.”

“Yeah, and he’s kind of too sad to be a real bad guy,” Mabel added with a small frown.
“Honestly, he seems more emotionally unstable than anything else,” Connie noted, glancing over her shoulder at the still-panicking time traveler. “And maybe just a little bit crazy too…”

“Well, maybe there’s something we can do to help him not be so crazy,” Steven suggested with an amicable smile. “After all, it’s the least we can do after getting him fired and arrested and everything.”

“You know what, Steven? I think you might be onto something there,” Dipper said with growing realization. “Maybe if we treat him right in the present, he’ll turn out better in the future.” The others all nodded in agreement with this concept, none of them really bearing any ill will towards Blendin, which meant none of them had any reason to dole out a cruel or even harsh punishment upon him. “Ok,” Dipper said, resolved, as they all turned to face Time Baby. “As long as you keep an eye on him, we’d like to set Blendin free and restore his position at the Time Anomaly Correction Unit.”

“And give him pretty hair!” Mabel added boldly.

“And a nice gift basket!” Steven chimed in brightly.

“So be it,” Time Baby nodded, not questioning their choice as he snapped his fingers and made it so.

Blendin gasped in complete shock as his handcuffs fell off, his eyes wide with disbelief as he looked to the kids. “W-what? You’d do that for me?” As the kids nodded, the time traveler’s bewildered expression widened into a huge smile, especially as a decent tuft of hair sprouted on his head and a colorful gift basket filled with various treats appeared in his hands. “I got my job back!” he cheered, overjoyed as he turned to Lolph and Dundgren standing nearby. “I feel like hugging somebody!”

“Remember what I said about being able to snap your neck in 235 different ways?” Dundgren remindedcoldly.

“T-that I do,” Blendin was quick to back off at this, though he did reach into his gift basket. “B-bon bon?” he offered with a nervous smile, though thankfully for him, both time officers stoically, yet surprisingly accepted the treats without sparing him a word.

“Now, children,” Time Baby spoke up, playfully smooshing his cheeks together as he spoke. “What is it that you want for your time wish?”

Out of nowhere, a radiant glowing orb, the physical representation of the time wish itself, appeared, hovering down towards the kids, who were all mesmerized by both its beauty and power for a moment before they remembered the matter at hand. “Thank you,” Mabel said with a grateful smile. “But the wish… isn’t for us.”

“Not you? But then who?” Time Baby asked, clearly baffled. “Who is worthy to receive such power?”

Back in the laser tag joint of the present, Soos had just finally managed to slip out of the arena, breathless and distressed and disheartened, not from how many times he had been hit (which had been many) but from how he had been completely alone for the entire experience. And after glancing around the lobby for the missing kids, the handyman realized that perhaps it was finally time to throw in the towel on what was, sure enough, yet another completely miserable birthday.
“Dudes?” he called for the kids one last time before letting out a dejected sigh. “Aw, who am I kidding? I’m not up for this.” His saddened frown deepened as he pulled a coin out of his pocket. “Heads I stay, tails I go home and make myself some dinosaur shaped cookies.”

As the handyman flipped his coin to help make his choice, he failed to notice the flow of time suddenly slow to a complete standstill all around him until the coin itself halted in midair in front of him. “Huh,” Soos raised a confused eyebrow as he flicked the apparently frozen coin a bit. “That’s… unconventional…”

His attention was quickly diverted away from the coin, however, as a bright flash of light appeared just a few feet away, revealing the kids and Blendin as it cleared. “Soos!” all four of the kids called in unison, all of them relieved to be back in their own time and even more relieved to see that the handyman as still there.

“G-guys!” Soos exclaimed in apt surprise over their sudden appearance as they all rushed to embrace him. “Where have you dudes been? I-I’ve been looking all over for you!”

“We’re sorry we left you hanging, Soos,” Dipper apologized with a regretful frown. “We got caught up in all this time travel junk-”

“Young me disappeared in the past!” Steven exclaimed, raising his hand. “Huh, I hope I made it back ok…”

“And there was a time cyclops-” Mabel continued amidst Steven’s musing.

“And a pretty interesting game of time chess-” Connie added with a wry grin.

“And don’t forget about the-”

“Time race!” All four of the kids exclaimed with a shared laugh of amusement over the wild ordeal they had just been through.

“But the point is,” Mabel said a moment later after they had all sobered up from their bout of levity. “Soos, we know how to fix your birthday!”

“Whoa, really?” Soos asked, his eyes wide with bewilderment and awe. “Wait. You guys did all that crazy dangerous stuff… for me?”

“Yes, of course we did, Soos,” Connie said with a warm smile.

“Yeah!” Steven quipped enthusiastically. “You always do so much for us, that we figured we’d give you the best birthday present of all by returning the favor! Now, Bledon, show him what he’s won for being the best Soos in the history of the universe!”

“I’ve already told you, it’s Blen-” the time traveler cut himself off with a slightly exasperated sigh as he shook his head. “You know what? I-I’m just gonna let it slide this time. It’s not worth the energy. Anyway, behold, your time wish!” Blendin proclaimed as he pressed a button on his watch, unveiling the glowing time wish as it floated over to the amazed handyman. “The power to alter time, paradox free, in any way you choose!”

“We figured that the only thing that can really make you happy is meeting your dad,” Dipper suggested with a small smile.

“Then maybe that would make all of your birthdays better,” Connie added sensibly. “Including this one.”
“But no matter what, the choice is yours, Soos,” Mabel reminded, nodding to the stunned handyman.

“You… you mean I can finally see my dad, just by touching this thing?” Soos asked almost quietly, his tone hopeful but also somewhat conflicted. “And you guys battled through time and space just to get this for me?”

The kids simply nodded humbly at this, none of them really wanting to make a big deal out of the matter, even if it was quite momentous to the handyman. Slowly, Soos pulled the postcard his father had sent him ten years ago, amazingly enough, the most recent in a very long line of disappointments from the parent he had never really had a chance to know. But now, floating just a few inches in front of him, was the chance he had been waiting almost his entire life for, to meet his father, to know him, to maybe even have the relationship he always wanted with him. To say it had been everything he had ever dreamed of was an understatement. And yet… as he looked down to the four kids who had risked life and limb to give him this chance, the handyman started to wonder if that was really what he wanted after all.

“What are you waiting for, Soos?” Dipper asked expectantly, noticing the handyman’s hesitance.

“Yeah! Make that wish!” Steven cheered supportively. “Make that wish!”

Soos paused, stealing another glance down at the postcard before unceremoniously putting it back in his pocket. “Alright, here goes nothing,” he said with resolve before placing his hand firmly upon the time wish. The orb lit up with a bright, brief light, however, when it cleared, the only thing that happened was that the kids were instantly cleaned up from their arduous Globnar battle, their clothes neat and in-tact and their various cuts and bruises completely healed. And needless to say, all four of the kids were quite befuddled by this occurring as opposed to Soos’ mysterious father appearing.

“Wha—huh?” Steven frowned in confusion as he looked himself over.

“Wait, what happened?” Mabel asked, just as dumbfounded as they all glanced to the handyman.

“Bam!” Soos grinned contently. “I fixed you dudes up!”

“Wait, that’s what you used your time wish on?” Connie asked incredulously.

“But Soos, what about meeting your dad?” Dipper asked, not following whatever the handyman’s odd line of reasoning was. That is, until he explained it.

“Well, birthdays are supposed to be spent with the people who care about you,” Soos began with a soft, fond smile that briefly turned into a bitter frown. “But that dude didn’t care enough about me to visit me even once, let along fight monsters through time and space like you dudes. I mean, you had a gladiator fight, just to make me happy! I’ve been ridiculous about this whole birthday thing for a long time. Whoever my dad was, he can take a hike!” With a carefree smile, the handyman tossed his father’s postcard into a nearby trash bin before pulling all four of the kids into a warm embrace. “I know who my family is now, and it’s you dudes. Thanks for giving me the best birthday ever.”

“Aw, Soos! You’re so welcome!” Steven laughed heartily as they all returned the handyman’s hug. However, for as heartwarming as the moment was, Blendin was far from charmed by it as he observed it, completely shocked.

“Are you kidding me?!” the time traveler asked in appalled anger. “Do you have any idea what you
just wasted?! Do you know how many have died to get that time wish, the wars that were started—"

“Oh, that’s not all, dude,” Soos interjected, the hug disbanding as he held up a slice of pepperoni pizza. “I also wished for this slice of infinite pizza. Watch.” The handyman took a generous bite out of the slice, which regenerated itself less than a second later. “And it can do that for like, infinity.”

The kids all voiced their impressed approval of this wish, and even Blendin could remain angry upon seeing it in action. “Ok, phew,” he remarked, relieved as he prepared to make his return to the future. “T-that’s a good time wish.”

“You know,” Soos said with a growing smile as he turned to the kids once more. “There’s still ten minutes before laser tag closes. You dudes wanna play?”

“Yeah!” all four of the kids chimed in excited unison, laughing along with the handyman as they ran into ran into the laser arena. All the while, they wished Soos cheerful birthday wishes, which, for the first time in ten years, the handyman was more than happy to accept.

“O-ok!” Greg exclaimed breathlessly as he ran up to the van, the Gems following just a short distance behind him. “So like I said, he was sitting right here inside the van, just minding his own business when he disappeared.”

“So you gonna open the van up and let us see or not?” Amethyst asked impatiently, her hands on her hips.

“R-right!” Greg fumbled for his keys, quickly unlocking the van doors. “But I’m telling you guys, he’s not in there! I don’t know where he could be, and I-I feel like such a terrible father for losing him, and—”

“Hello, Steven,” Garnet greeted the young Gem with a soft smile as Greg pulled the van doors open.

“Huh?!” the former rock star let out a shocked gasp as he turned to see his young son, sitting in the exact same spot where he had vanished from, content and cheerful as he played with his favorite blanket.

“Hi, Daddy!” Steven exclaimed with an upbeat smile.

“Steven!” Greg cried as he quickly swept his his formerly missing son into a tight embrace. Overwhelmed with relief as he was, the former rock star couldn’t very well hold his tears back as he let out a small, though still quite frazzled laugh. “Oh thank goodness you’re ok! Where have you been, buddy? I’ve been looking all over for you!”

“I dunno,” the young Gem shrugged innocently.

“Still in that ‘I dunno’ phase, huh?” Greg smirked, wiping his tears away as he turned towards the Gems. “Look who’s here to see you, Steven!”

The Gems all offered kindly smiles and waves to their future ward, who perked up with instant excitement upon seeing the trio. “Hi, Garmet! Hi, Amest! Hi, Pearl!”

“Well, at least he still knows how to pronounce my name correctly,” Pearl remarked with a
“What gives, Greg? Were you trying to pull some kinda lame prank on us or something?” Amethyst asked, raising an eyebrow at the former rock star. “Cause if it is, I’ve seen way better.”

“N-no, this wasn’t a prank!” Greg protested defensively. “Steven really was missing! And I don’t know how he ended up back in the van, seeing as how I locked it up tight before I left. It’s like magic or… or some sort of weird time paradox thing or something.”

“Greg, please,” Pearl scoffed, rolling her eyes. “It’s bad enough that you want us to believe that Steven mysteriously vanished into thin air for several hours, but to blame it on something as silly and inconceivable as a time paradox? Now that’s just ridiculous.”

“B-but… but I-”

“Now if you’ll excuse us, we have to be getting back to the temple,” the white Gem said, promptly turning to head on her way, but not before bidding the young Gem a fond farewell. “Goodbye, Steven!”

“Yeah, Bye, lil’ Steven!” Amethyst called, following after Pearl.

“Bye, Amest! Bye, Pearl!” Steven waved after the pair brightly, even if Greg was still somewhat shell-shocked as they left. The former rock star let out a long, exhausted sigh as he took a seat in the back of his van, setting Steven down to sit beside him. Garnet lingered behind for a moment, her arms crossed and her expression as casual as ever as she waited for Greg to speak his mind on the matter. “Aw, geez…” he muttered, running a hand through what was left of his hair. “What am I doing? I worry about this kid day and night, and I do everything can to keep him safe and happy and he still randomly disappears on me! Maybe… maybe I’m not really cut out for this dad thing after all…”

“Greg,” Garnet spoke up after a beat of silence, placing a reassuring hand on the former rock star’s shoulder. “Don’t sell yourself short. You may still be new at this, but if it’s any consolation, so are we. You spent all day looking for Steven, and I’m willing to bet it was all worth it come back here and see him safe and sound.”

“It… it really was…” Greg sighed once more, smiling fondly as he glanced over at his young son, distracted with his blanket, but unharmed and happy all the same.

Garnet smiled at this as well as she adjusted her shades. “You may still be new at this, but if it’s any consolation, so are we,” she said, her tone completely sincere. “And for what it’s worth, I think you’re doing a great job at this whole ‘dad thing’. If she was still around, Rose would be very proud of you.” She paused, her smile widening a bit as she reached over to tussle Steven’s hair gently, eliciting a light laugh from the young Gem. “Proud of both of you.”

“Thanks, Garnet,” Greg said with an allayed, grateful grin. “After the day I’ve had, I think I needed a pep talk like that.”

“Anytime,” Garnet nodded with a small smirk before making her exit by leaping off to catch up with her teammates.

“Bye, Garnet!” Steven called after her, waving up at her as she leapt high into the air.

“Well, my little disappearing Sto-ball,” Greg grinned as he gave his son a playful tickle. “I think it’s time you had your bath, isn’t it?”
“I dunno,” the young Gem shrugged blithely.

“Heh, I wonder when you’re gonna grow out of that one,” the former rock star chuckled as he picked his son up. “Probably around the same time I figure out what happened to you today, huh?"

“I dunno,” Steven quipped cheerfully.

“Yeah,” Greg shook his head with an incredulous smile as he held Steven a bit closer, both out of nerves and out of abundant relief. “Me neither, son. Me neither.”

“I still can’t believe Greg roped us into playing along with that little charade of his,” Pearl huffed, disgruntled, as her and Amethyst headed back towards the temple, Garnet trailing not too far behind them. “All that time wasted on going over there, and for what? For Steven to be completely and utterly fine!”

“Tell me about it,” the purple Gem groaned, rolling her eyes. “I mean, at least when we tried hiding Steven from Greg, we actually took him somewhere and didn’t just him sitting around all bored or whatever. G-man should have stepped up his game if he really wanted us to flip out.”

“Cut him some slack, both of you,” Garnet interjected patiently, pressing ahead to join her teammates. “He’s trying, just like all of us are.”

The other two Gems surprised their frustrations for the most part at their leader’s chastisement, even if they still did grumble a few of their complaints about the situation while they were passing by the Mystery Shack.

Ironically enough, around the same time as the Gems were walking past the shack, Soos wandered onto the property himself, having found a mysterious screwdriver lying in his yard after his birthday party ended. The tool had the shack’s label branded onto its side, and while he didn’t know how it had ended up in his yard, the boy decided it was only right to return it to its proper home.

Soos was ready to do so by finding the shack’s proprietor, but before he could even head inside, said proprietor emerged from the museum door, absolutely livid as he roughly threw his employee out into the yard. “That’s it!” Stan yelled, outraged. “You are singlehandedly the worst handyman I’ve ever seen! Now beat it before you end up breaking another piece of my property!” The conman watched with a hostile glare as his former employee scrambled away in fear, leaving Stan to let out an exasperated sigh as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Ugh, I knew I should’ve never let Greg go…”

“Uh, hey,” Soos spoke up somewhat timidly upon seeing this display, but all the same, he approached the conman. “Excuse me, sir?”

Stan snapped his attention over to the boy, giving him a somewhat caustic, unimpressed expression as he looked him up and down. “Hey, you, gumdrop,” he remarked dryly. “Think you can fix a golf cart?”

“Well, uh, I don’t know if I—”

“Boom,” Stan snapped his fingers, not needing to hear any more as he tossed an oversized shack staff shirt at Soos. “You’re hired. One size fits all.” The conman had no more words to spare for the somewhat confused boy as he went on to greet the crowd of tourists that had just arrived at the
shack. “Step right up to the Mystery Shack, folks! Step right up!”

Needless to say, Soos was somewhat bewildered as he pulled the shirt off of his face, shocked that he had been hired at his first job ever just like that and on his birthday no less. His grandmother would certainly be proud to hear about this, likely claiming that it was a sign of him growing up and becoming a man in his own right. But Soos hardly cared about that at the moment as he looked over to his new boss, who, from the first, relatively short impression he had given off, seemed gruff and stoic. And yet, despite his apparent cynicism, Stan had decided, for whatever reason, to give Soos a chance, which, ironically enough, was something his own father had never really reached out to give him before. And while he didn’t know where this chance might lead or what might someday come of it, it was a chance that the newly hired handyman was more than happy to take.
Chapter 38: The Dinner Shack

Chapter Summary

In which Stan offends Connie’s parents, Alexandrite does not make a good mom substitute, Soos doesn’t understand cooking, and the kids struggle to hold it all together

Chapter Notes

Meh, so this is a bit of a shorter chapter, but still a fun one and a lose one in preparation for all of the angst and drama that’s set to unfold over the next several chapters. But for now, enjoy my take on Fusion Cuisine (yeah I know its a bit late but oh well)

"Doctor, it’s my son. There was an accident, I-"

"I know what we have to do. Nurse!"

"Yes, doctor?"

"Prep the patient for emergency surgery. We gonna go… under the knife!"

At this intense cliffhanger, the high stakes medical drama went to a poorly-timed commercial break, leaving all four of the kids in immense suspense as to what might happen next as they all congregated on Steven’s loft to watch it. Connie had been the one to recommend Under the Knife, and after marathoning just a few episodes of the show’s gripping plot and diverse characters, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel were just as hooked on it as she was. Which, considering just how different each of their interests and tastes were, was quite an amazing feat in and of itself.

"Ugh! This show is so good!” Connie exclaimed happily as the commercials droned on in the background.

“Tell me about it!” Mabel eagerly agreed as she casually leaned against Dipper. “That dreamy nurse guy totally makes the whole show!”

Dipper rolled his eyes as he playfully pushed his sister off of him. “Personally, I’m in it more for the ongoing mystery epidemic subplot than any ‘dreamy’ nurses.”

“Well I ‘m into all of it!” Steven grinned enthusiastically. “I’m so glad you showed us Under the Knife, Connie. It’s something really cool that we can all enjoy together!”
“Well, I’m glad to see you guys like it so much,” Connie chuckled warmly. “By the way, thanks for letting me watch it here, Steven.”

“How come you can’t watch the show at home?” the young Gem asked curiously.

“My mom says this doesn’t represent a real emergency room,” she replied, nodding back towards the screen as the show came back on.

“How did his legs get into… his brain?!” the nurse exclaimed overdramatically as the kids all took a moment’s pause at this implausible line.

“I mean, I guess she would know since she actually works at a hospital,” Connie continued. “But still, she just doesn’t understand that its satire.”

“Whoa, I couldn’t imagine not being allowed to watch a show as good as Under the Knife,” Mabel remarked, somewhat bewildered. “Especially since Grunkle Stan lets us watch pretty much whatever we want.”

“Yeah, like that one time he let us watch that old claymation horror movie that scared you so much you couldn’t sleep for almost a week,” Dipper said with something of an amused smirk.

“Can you blame me?” Mabel asked with a fearful cringe. “Those clay figures move so… unnaturally.”

“The Gems let me watch anything I want too,” Steven changed the subject after another stilted beat of silence. “Like Crying Breakfast Friends, and Lonely Blade, and Ducktective, and Tiger Fist, and Canine Court, and-”

“Ok, Steven, we get the point,” Dipper cut his lengthy list off, somewhat exasperated.

Nonetheless, Connie let out a small laugh at this, though it was capped off by her glancing away a bit bashfully. “Well, I feel like my parents are little more… strict than the Gems or Mr. Pines are…”

“What do you mean?” Steven asked inquisitively, though before Connie could answer, her cellphone suddenly rang from her nearby bag.

“Oh, hold that thought, Steven,” she said as she reached to retrieve the phone. “It’s probably my mom, as ironic as that sounds.” She paused, checking the caller idea before shaking her head.

“Called it.” Connie sat up straight on the bed, putting her frameless glasses back over her eyes as she cleared her throat. However, before she could answer the phone, Mabel abruptly interrupted.

“You know, it’s so crazy that we’ve all known each other for weeks now, and we still haven’t met your mom yet, Connie!” she quipped in realization. “Mind if we give her a quick hello?”

“Oh, well, uh…” Connie frowned, glancing away a bit bashfully. “Well, I feel like my parents are little more… strict than the Gems or Mr. Pines are…”

“What do you mean?” Steven asked inquisitively, though before Connie could answer, her cellphone suddenly rang from her nearby bag.

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“You know, it’s so crazy that we’ve all known each other for weeks now, and we still haven’t met your mom yet, Connie!” she quipped in realization. “Mind if we give her a quick hello?”

“Oh, well, uh…” Connie frowned, glancing over at her still-ringing phone a bit nervously. “I-I don’t know if that’s such a good idea…”

“Why not?” Steven asked. “I know that meeting someone over the phone doesn’t compare to meeting them in real life, but still, I’m sure Dr. Maheswaran would be glad to meet all of us, even if she won’t be able to see any of us!”

“I… uh… We’ll see,” Connie quickly said, knowing she had already put off answering her mother for far too long now. And so, before anyone could say anything else, she flipped her phone open and put on a very professional tone as she addressed her parent. “Hi, Mother. It’s Connie.” She kept
her expression steady as she listened to what her mother had to say before providing affirmative answers. “Mm-hm. Yes, ma’am. I-I’m at the home of Steven Universe, just hanging out with him and Dipper and Mabel Pines.”

“Tell her we said ‘hi’!” Mabel chimed in cheerfully and quite loudly.

“Mabel, shh!” Dipper cut in crossly, respecting Connie’s hesitance, whatever the reason for it was.

“You shh!” Mabel retorted, giving her brother a playful shove, which he was quick to petulantly return.

“Y-yes, ma’am,” Connie continued conversing with her mother, holding a hand over her other ear so she could hear amidst the twins’ lighthearted squabbling. “Oh, you… you want to know if there’s a supervising adult present in the house? Uh, well… Dipper and Mabel’s great uncle isn’t here, but—What? Steven’s parents?” She sucked in a sharp breath, glancing to Steven with sudden panic before providing her mother with a rather thoughtless answer. “They’re, uh… they’re in the other room. You… would like to talk to Steven’s mom? Oh, ok. H-hold on a moment.”

By now, Connie’s growing concern had spread to Steven and the twins, especially as she looked to them for an idea she couldn’t come up with to pacify her mother. “So… I’m guessing us getting to say hi to your mom is out then?” Mabel asked with a small frown.

“You guys! What am we gonna do?!” Connie asked in an anxious whisper, blocking her phone with her hand so her mother couldn’t hear. “It would take way too long for us to go down to the shack so my mom could talk to Mr. Pines, and as for Steven’s mom…”

“She… gave up her physical form to make me,” Steven finished, glancing down a bit.

“I can’t tell her that!” Connie exclaimed, distressed.

“Wait!” Dipper interjected just in time. “I think I have an idea. Who says Connie’s mom needs to talk to Steven’s mom, when she can talk to the next best thing? Know what I mean?”

“Ohhh…” Steven said with a sly smile of understanding as he glanced down to the den below. “I think I do…”

Knowing that they didn’t have much time, especially since Connie’s mother was still on the phone, the kids hurried down from the loft to find Garnet relaxing on the couch below. “Ah, this is perfect!” Dipper exclaimed with relief upon seeing the Gem leader. “Garnet, we’re glad you’re here.”

“Yeah, we need your help!” Steven urged desperately. “You have to pretend to be my mom to Connie’s mom.”

Garnet didn’t disagree with this plan as she simply kept her usual straight face while taking the phone from Connie and addressing Dr. Maheswaran on the other end of the line. “Hello,” she began, her tone not as solid as it usually was. “This… is Mom Universe. Yes,” she paused, adjusting her visor. “The children are playing swords. Sorry, playing with swords. They’re bleeding. Oh no, they are dead. Don’t call again.” At this, the Gem leader abruptly hung up and handed the phone back to Connie, her stoic expression still unchanged. “Sorry, I panicked.”

Needless to say all four of the kids were floored by the overwhelming tactlessness Garnet had just displayed, all of them looking to her in distraught shock while she simply shrugged somewhat apathetically. Out of all the kids, Connie was the one most stunned by what had just happened, especially as she looked to her phone with wide eyes, seeing that, surprisingly enough, her mother
indeed wasn’t calling back, something that could either be very good or very bad.

“O-ok,” she began somewhat shakily as she forced a tentative smile onto her face. “This is ok. This… this is fine! I just need to stay calm. M-maybe my mom won’t freak out that badly over this!”

“Yeah, maybe your mom will think that Garnet was just joking around,” Dipper said reassuringly.

“Heh, yeah, maybe,” Connie chuckled trying to convince herself of this, only for her smile to instantly drop a second later. “Except… my mom doesn’t take jokes very well… Especially ones that involve me messing around with swords and bleeding to death…”

“Again, sorry,” Garnet spoke up from her spot on a couch, her tone still as dry as ever.

“So what should we do now?” Steven asked with a worried frown.

“Well, seeing as how my mom hasn’t called me back yet,” Connie said, glancing to her still-silent phone once more. “That can mean one of two things: either she did take what Garnet said as a joke, or… she’s really angry and on her way over here right now.”

A beat of silence passed between all four of the kids as they exchanged an anxious, almost fearful glance, none of them too keen on being on the receiving end of Dr. Maheswaran’s potential line of fire. “So… all in favor of hiding out down at the Mystery Shack until all this blows over?” Mabel suggested stiffly, to which Steven, Connie, and Dipper all immediately raised their hands.

Not wanting to waste any precious time, the kids took off, hurrying out of the temple and practically running down the hill to the shack. By the time they made it down there, all four of them were breathless, but relieved to see that Dr. Maheswaran hadn’t arrived at up at the temple yet. However, their relief instantly faded as soon as they entered the shack’s den only to walk in on Stan talking to an unknown person on the phone. And based on his irate tone and angry expression, it was easy to tell that the ongoing conversation was anything but a pleasant one.

“Hey, what are you yelling at me for, lady?” the conman asked hotly, not even noticing the kids enter the room. “How am I supposed to know if your kid and my two little runts were whacking each other with swords? It’s not like I actually watch them or anything.”

“Oh no…” Connie whispered, already dreading the thought of who she knew was likely on the other end of the line, given the context of the conversation.

“Oh no…” Stan shrugged indifferently as he continued speaking to Dr. Maheswaran. “I say let ’em nick each other up with those glorified pocket knives for a few rounds, get a few scratches, maybe even a scar or two. Builds character, if you ask me.”

“Well, it’s safe to say my mom’s blood pressure is probably skyrocketing right about now,” Connie
remarked, face palming fretfully.

“He can’t be serious.” Dipper said, shaking his head in disbelief. “I know Grunkle Stan likes to speak his mind, but this is ridiculous.”

“Uh, Grunkle Stan?” Mabel spoke up, tugging on the conman’s sleeve in an attempt to draw him away from the rapidly sinking conversation.

“Not now, kid.” Stan dryly waved her off. “Can’t you see I’m on the phone, having an adult conversation here?” The conman paused for a moment, listening to what Dr. Maheswaran had to say before letting out a harsh scoff. “What? Me? Irresponsible? You don’t know what you’re talking about, lady. I let my niece and nephew run around pretty much wherever they want to, and they’re both still alive and kicking. I mean, sure, there’s been a few close calls, like that time both of them nearly drowned or the time we were all almost eaten by zombies, but still. Point is, I’m as responsible of a caretaker as they come, and I’m not gonna have some prude like you tell me otherwise!” By now, all four of the kids’ mouths had just about hit the floor in shock over just how callous, and careless the conman was being. Fortunately for them though, this vitriolic conversation was about to finally reach its abrupt end. “Oh yeah? Well same to you, lady!”

And at this enraged shout, Stan finally slammed the phone down, still clearly seething with fury over the conversation as he glared down at it. However, that frustration did ebb away, if only a little, into as he turned to group of alarmed, dumbfounded kids standing right behind him. The conman placed his hands on his hips as he looked down at them, an eyebrow raised in innocent confusion, almost as if he hadn’t just completely offended one of their parents. “What?”

The young Gem and the twins had taken to spending the next day up at the temple, mostly because Dipper and Mabel were not very pleased with how Stan had acted on the phone with Dr. Maheswaran the previous day. And so, wanting to see if the whole matter had smoothed itself over, the trio had decided to call Connie up with the phone on speaker so they could all talk to her. However, based on what she was telling them, things were anything but smooth on her parents’ end.

“Aw, what do you mean your mom won’t let you come over?” Steven asked Connie with dismay as him and Mabel worked on their latest culinary creation: a cheese puff cheesecake. “It’s the midseason pre-finale of Under the Knife!”

“Yeah, Connie, you gotta come!” Mabel urged just as insistently. “It won’t be the same if we all can’t enjoy that hunky nurse together!”

“Look, you guys, you know I’d love to come over,” Connie said as she wrapped her phone’s cord around her finger on the other end of the line. “But my parents are really upset about what happened yesterday.”

“Aw, what do you mean your mom won’t let you come over?” Steven asked Connie with dismay as him and Mabel worked on their latest culinary creation: a cheese puff cheesecake. “It’s the midseason pre-finale of Under the Knife!”

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“Look, you guys, you know I’d love to come over,” Connie said as she wrapped her phone’s cord around her finger on the other end of the line. “But my parents are really upset about what happened yesterday.”

“Oh gee, I can’t imagine why they would be,” Dipper deadpanned in exasperation. “You know, after Garnet told your mom we impaled each other with swords and Stan got in a shouting match with her. How could she not be upset over that?”

“Oh, she is,” Connie confirmed, glancing over her shoulder to make sure her mother wasn’t eavesdropping on the call. “In fact, she was more than just upset when I got home yesterday. She was livid. Both her and my dad say that they won’t let me see any of you guys again until they meet Mr. Pines and both of Steven’s parents in person!”
“But that’s impossible!” Steven exclaimed fretfully.

“Yeah, especially after what happened yesterday,” Mabel added with an uncomfortable frown.

“I know,” Connie acknowledged apprehensively. “But they want all three of our families to go out together for dinner.”

“Ooo, that sounds so… adult,” Steven remarked with an intrigued smile as he put a cheese ball onto the cake.

“No, it sounds like a horrible idea,” Dipper remarked, crossing his arms. “Connie, do your parents really think that they’ll be able to have anything remotely close to a peaceful dinner with Stan after the awful first impression he made with your mom yesterday?”

“Apparently, they want to give him the ‘benefit of the doubt’, or something like that,” Connie replied, frowning. “But I could tell from the tone my mom used that she’s really not looking forward to talking to him face-to-face after their… first conversation.”

“Well, like Dipper said, that was only Grunkle Stan’s first impression,” Mabel said with a shrug. “So maybe his second impression will be a lot better!”

“Pfft, I doubt it,” Dipper said sardonically, knowing their uncle far too well.

“Well, I think dinner sounds like a great idea, Connie,” Steven said with a small smile. “It’ll be an awesome way for your parents to get to know Mr. Pines and the Gems! I wonder if Fish Stew Pizza will take reservations for… the four of us, Garnet, Pearl, Dad, Amethyst, Mr. Pines, your parents… all 11 of us!”

“W-what?!” Connie asked in sudden alarm. “Steven, you can’t bring everybody!”

“Why not?”

“Because….” Connie bit her lip anxiously before spitting out the awkward truth. “Because I told my parents you have a nuclear family!”

“Nuclear?!” the young Gem exclaimed, appalled. “Sure, the Gems may blow stuff up sometimes, but that’s because they’re magic, not radioactive!”

“Wait, they’re not?” Mabel asked, surprised as Dipper simply facepalmed over their shared naivete.

Likewise, Connie was also somewhat exasperated by this innocent misunderstanding, but she proceeded to explain the concept nonetheless. “Steven, ‘nuclear’ means two adults and their child and/or children. My parents think you live with your mother and father.”

“But none of that is true!” Steven protested worriedly. “Connie, you’ve never told your mom and dad about the Crystal Gems?”

“No, and I’ve never told them about all of the weird paranormal stuff we’ve ran into either,” Connie admitted, her tone firm and resolved in her choice. “And it has to stay like that. If they find out I lied to them, they’ll never let me hang out with any of you guys again!”

“Don’t worry, Connie, all our super awesome magical-mystery secrets are safe with us!” Mabel assured with a thumbs up. “Uh, you can’t see it since we’re talking on the phone, but I’m giving you a thumbs up.”
“Uh… thanks, Mabel,” Connie replied, even if she was only moderately comforted.

“Um, yeah, I guess I’ll just have to bring one of the Gems to dinner instead of all three of them then,” Steven frowned, already quite uncomfortable with the idea of turning his family situation into nothing more than a ruse. Still, for Connie’s sake, the young Gem was ready to do just about anything, including tell a little white lie. “But I do have one question. Why do I have to bring my dad and a ‘mom’ to dinner when Dipper and Mabel don’t?”

“Because our mom and dad are back home in California, remember?” Dipper informed somewhat dryly.

“Oh yeah,” Steven remembered with a soft gasp. “You know, sometimes I forget that you guys don’t actually live here. Huh, weird.”

“Ok, so it’s settled then,” Connie spoke up with the intent of putting this plan in action. “And just so we’re all clear, Steven, you’re bringing your dad and one of the Gems to dinner, right?”

“Right…” the young Gem tentatively agreed, even if he had no idea which Gem that would be.

“And Dipper and Mabel, are you guys sure you can convince your uncle to come to dinner with my parents, much less get him to be… you know, civil?”

“Well, the most we can do is try,” Dipper said rather dubiously. “And even then, we can’t make any promises that Grunkle Stan won’t end up accidentally offending your parents somehow. Or, knowing him, offending them on purpose.”

“Then we’ll just have to make sure Grunkle Stan is on his best behavior!” Mabel purposed, resolved. “I’m sure that won’t be too hard if we annoy him about it long enough.”

“Yeah, or bribe him,” Dipper added sardonically.

“And you know what?” Mabel continued with an excited smile. “I just had an awesome idea! Why don’t we all have dinner down at the Mystery Shack? Connie, you can tell your parents that Grunkle Stan invited them over to show there’s no hard feelings about all that stuff he said to your mom yesterday!”

“Whoa, that’s… actually a really great idea, Mabel!” Connie exclaimed with allayed surprise. “It’s just the perfect sign of goodwill that will hopefully convince my parents that Mr. Pines is responsible and respectable.”

“Which he’s really not, but eh, we can probably fake it decently enough,” Dipper remarked with a shrug.

“Oh, this is so exciting, you guys!” Steven quipped with a newfound excited smile, throwing his hands down on the counter and ignoring the cheese puff cheese cake as it flung upwards before hitting the floor behind him. “Finally, the Universes, the Pines, and the Maheswarans are all coming together for the first time in history! This is gonna be the best dinner ever!”

“So let me get this straight,” Stan began, dryly looking between his nibblings as they stood before his desk expectantly. “You two want me to all the trouble turning the shack into some kind of ritzy, upscale restaurant for a night and you want me to make nice with that crazy Maheswhatever lady who took the time to ring me up out of nowhere yesterday and nag at me over nothing?”
The twins exchanged a stiff glance at this juncture, both of them unanimously realizing that what they were asking of their uncle was rather awkward considering what happened the previous day. But even so, Dipper nodded a terse confirmation to it. “Uh, yeah, that’s… pretty much the gist of it.”

“Ha!” the conman let out a callous scoff as he crossed his arms. “What do you two take me for, some kind of a spineless sap? If there’s one thing being in the tourist trap business as long as I have has taught me is that apologizing is for chumps. Either people take you the way you are, or they leave you, and if they don’t, then that’s on them.”

“Ok, that’s like, a really good moral and everything, Grunkle Stan,” Mabel said with a worried frown. “But if you don’t let the Maheswarans come over for dinner and say you’re sorry to them, then they won’t let Connie hang out with us ever again!”

“So?” Stan scowled, clearly not concerned. “How is that my problem?”

“It is your problem seeing as how you were the one to insult her mom in the first place!” Dipper huffed in annoyance. “Besides, you only have to act… not like you usually do for just one night. Then you can go back to being as blunt and rude as you want.”

“Yeah, and Steven and his dad and one of the Gems will be here too,” Mabel added. “So it won’t be the most awkward dinner party ever. Just… moderately awkward.”

“Oh yeah, because having one of the Gems here will definitely make things smooth sailing,” Stan deadpanned, rolling his eyes. “Besides, this whole fancy dinner meeting thing sounds like a bunch of newfangled nonsense from the get go. Back when I was your age, you didn’t see anyone’s parents getting all worked up over their kids’ business like this. If one kid decked another kid in the face, they just worked it out between each other. They didn’t get their parents to go down to the nearest diner and have a two hour long ‘civilized debate’ over it.

“Come on, Grunkle Stan,” Mabel pleaded, putting on the most convincing smile she could muster. “Can’t you just open up the shack and your heart for just one night? Connie’s one of our best friends and it would be such a tragedy if we weren’t able to ever see her again!”

“Sounds like it,” the conman remarked, just as sarcastic as ever.

“We’re serious, Grunkle Stan,” Dipper said insistently. “This is really important to us! If for no other reason, then can’t you at least just do this for me and Mabel?”

“Yeah, do it for us!” Mabel adamantly agreed, wrapping an arm around her brother’s shoulder as they both put on the same pleading pout. “Pretty please, Grunkle Stan? We are your favorite niece and nephew, after all…”

Stan’s expression was initially unimpressed as he looked between his nibblings, both of whom were staring up at him beggingly in the hopes that their shared charm would be enough to win him over. At first, it didn’t seem as though this plan was going to be a successful one, as the conman simply rolled his eyes as he met their doleful gazes stoically. However, his cold resolve inevitably began to wear down the longer Dipper and Mabel kept their hopeful, irresistibly adorable vigil up. And after what seemed like ages, it proved to be enough to finally crumble that resolve, much to Stan’s severe annoyance.

“Ugh, fine!” he exclaimed hotly, throwing a hand down on his desk as he abruptly stood. “You two little runts win, what else is new? When are you kids finally gonna get too old to win me over with that dumb old puppy dog eyes trick?”
“We dunno,” Mabel said with a coy grin, both her and Dipper equally happy and relieved to have gotten their way. “Maybe after we all have a lovely dinner tonight with Connie’s family.”

“But that can only happen if you behave yourself, Grunkle Stan,” Dipper reiterated firmly. “Which means no controversial political opinions, no putting your feet up on the table, and no inappropriate jokes. Think you can handle that?”

“Pfft, please, kid, you’re acting like I’m some kind of caveman,” Stan scoffed, feigning offense as he prepared to take his leave. “I can put on a clean tie, fake an inviting smile, and pretend to be ‘polite’ for a few hours. How else do you think I’ve managed to con so many clueless rubes out of their hard-earned cash over the years?”

As the conman left, the only thing the twins could really do was exchanged an extremely worried glance, all of their former relief about Stan agreeing to host dinner at the shack completely gone when they remembered just how poor his social skills were. “This is gonna be a total mess, isn’t it?” Mabel asked Dipper, both of their previously allayed smiles faltering as they overheard Stan angrily grumble about having to be civil for an evening.

“Oh, you know it will be.”

Even though convincing Stan to both open the shack up for dinner as well as show up for the meal had been something of a challenge for the twins, Steven had no trouble getting his father and the Gems in on the plan. Still, that didn’t mean the young Gem was without problems of his own in regards to the quickly upcoming dinner date. With only a few hours to spare, Steven paced around the den, the Gems sitting at the counter before him as Greg struggled to pull an old, but classy sweater on behind him. The magical trio watched their young ward curiously as he mused to himself over the choice he knew he had to make for a few minutes, before finally letting out an exasperated sigh.

“How am I supposed to choose just one of you to bring to dinner?” Steven asked, turning to the Gems with a fretful frown. “You’re all so… cool!”

“Why does it have to be dinner anyway?” Pearl asked cringing in disgust. “We get all the energy we need from our Gems, and while our human constructs are capable of eating, I find the entire process very uncomfortable…”

“Heh, I love eating!” Amethyst chuckled, pulling out a bag of chips before sloppily shoving a handful into her mouth. “Feels weird…”

“Ok, ok, let’s focus,” Steven interjected to get them back on track. “We’ve only got a few hours left before Connie and her family get to the shack for dinner, and we’ve got to be ready! Now, which one of you would make the best and most nuclear mom…?” The young Gem paused, looking between his trio of guardians as they awaited his verdict expectantly. “Garnet!” he began enthusiastically approaching the Gem leader. “You keep us safe by scaring off the bad guys, just like a mom would!” Steven remained confident in the idea that Garnet would be suitable for this task, until, upon receiving only a stoic bout of silence from her and remembering her very brief conversation with Dr. Maheswaran on the phone the previous day, he was quick to change his mind. “But… you’re not the best conversationalist… Amethyst,” he said, stepping over to the purple Gem next. “You would be a super fun mom!”

Amethyst grinned brightly in agreement with this amidst her wildly munching on her snacks, drool
haphazardly falling from her mouth as she picked her nose casually. “You bet I would!”

“Uh…” Steven frowned, aptly uncertain at the purple Gem’s qualification upon seeing this. “Can moms be gross?”

“Why not?” Amethyst shrugged, pulling a long, slimy strand of mucus out of her nose.

Steven stuck his tongue out in slight disgust at this, but all the same, he moved on to the final Gem in the trio. “Pearl!” he exclaimed with a relieved smile. “You’re always worried about me, you teach me lots of stuff, you’re approachable, and you’re like, totally not gross!”

Pearl was just about to proudly agree with all of these claims, but before she could, she happened to glance over and notice Amethyst, snot still streaming from her nose and chip crumbs stuck to her still-full cheeks. “Ugh…” the white Gem gagged, completely repulsed as she forced herself to look away.

“But… you can’t eat dinner…” Steven frowned, realizing he was right back to square one as he sulked over to the couch to take a seat next to his father. “Man, Dipper and Mabel are so lucky. At least they only have one family member they need to bring to dinner. Why did Connie have to say I have one mother instead of zero… or three?”

“Hey, we’ll figure this out, bud,” Greg said, placing an encouraging hand on his son’s shoulder. “We just have to put our heads together.”

At first, Steven wasn’t too consoled by this cliché. That is, until he took another glance over at the Gems and got a miraculous idea. “Why didn’t I think of it before?!” he exclaimed with an excited gasp, hopping to his feet. “It’s so obvious! You can all come to dinner—all three of you, fused into one!” his smile widened as he snapped his finger. “Alexandrite!”

“What?!” Pearl asked, aptly alarmed by such a suggestion.

“Whoa!” Amethyst gasped, stunned.


“Steven, you know we only fuse in deadly situations!” Pearl chastised.

“Yeah, like that time we punched Gideon’s stupid robot in the face,” Amethyst added before smirking in nostalgic amusement. “Heh, that was fun. Would love to do it again sometime. You know, if that robot wasn’t just a bunch of scrap metal now.”

“Oh, come on, you guys!” Steven pleaded to his guardians, desperate. “If Alexandrite comes to dinner, then it’d… it’d be like I’m actually bringing my whole family!”

“That’s ridiculous, Steven,” Pearl scoffed, crossing her arms.

“Fusion is serious magic,” Garnet agreed staunchly. “Not a trick for dinner parties.”

“I… I know…” Steven sighed in disappointment, realizing that the Gems were hard-set on their negative response. “Then I guess this is it… I’ll never get to see Connie again.” Tears were starting to fill the young Gem’s eyes at the thought of never getting to be with one of his dearest friends again, something that took all three of the Gems aback upon seeing them. “Oh, Connie!” Steven lamented dramatically. “I’ll never know a star that shines as bright as you!”

The Gems exchanged a sympathetic glance at this, none of them easily able to resist their young
ward, especially in a matter such as this one. Which was why Garnet let out a long sigh and nodded her hesitant compliance, even if her future vision did grant her a glance at how disastrous this plan might turn out to be. “We have no choice…”

While they had to work on a rather tight schedule, the twins had made relatively quick work on making the shack’s front lawn presentable enough for the dinner party. With Soos’ help, Dipper and Mabel had managed to set up not just a pretty sizable table that Stan had “found”, but they had also set it and put up a vase of wilting flowers and a set of mostly-working Christmas lights to create a loose air of elegance. Helpful as always, Soos had also agreed to be the chef for the evening, even if he lacked any real tactile culinary skills outside of making simple snack foods. But aside from a few minor snags and concerns here and there (most of them relating to how the conman might handle himself), the twins were hopeful and even optimistic that the Maheswarans would, at the very least, be impressed by their efforts, if nothing else.

“Well, I think everything’s just about ready for tonight,” Mabel concluded with a satisfied smile as she looked over their handiwork.

“Well… almost everything…” Dipper remarked with a frown nodding over to Stan as he emerged from the shack.

“I mean it, Soos!” Stan called back into the kitchen, his tone cross and sour. “You better not use any super-fancy, expensive ingredients in whatever you plan on cooking! We’re not trying to impress these people; we’re just trying to get them to shut their yaps!”

“You think we’d be able to get through dinner with Grunkle Stan wearing tape over his mouth?” Mabel muttered to her brother apprehensively.

“Unfortunately, no,” Dipper shook his head, letting out an already tired sigh. “Hey, Grunkle Stan? You… do remember what we told you about being polite and friendly tonight… right?”

“’Course I do, kid,” Stan assured, adjusting his tie. “You want me to smile, shake their hands, and tell them off for being a bunch of annoying prudes.” Needless to say, both of the twins gasped in apt horror at this, eliciting an amused, callous laugh from the conman. “Kidding! I’m just kidding! Sheesh, can’t you kids take a joke?”

Dipper and Mabel shook their heads in disapproval over such a distasteful jab, but even so, they didn’t have much time to complain about it as a car pulled up to park on the other side of the shack.

“Oh my gosh, they’re here already!” Dipper exclaimed in sudden alarm. “Man, Connie wasn’t kidding when she said her parents are always early.”

“Ok, places everyone!” Mabel called, frantically rushing to check over the table one last time. “Dipper, turn on the classy piano music!”

“Right,” Dipper nodded, hurrying over to the radio to do just that.

“Soos!” Mabel shouted into the open door into the shack. “Cook that food!”

“On it, dude!” the handyman confirmed back, accidentally knocking a pile of pans over in the process. “Oops!”

“Grunkle Stan-” Mabel stopped herself short as she turned to the conman, whose expression was stuck in its usual surly scowl. “Turn that frown upside down! We’re having ourselves a dinner
As the Pines made their last-minute preparations, Connie and her parents emerged from their car, the latter already feeling quite anxious about how this night could possibly turn out. Quite a lot was riding on this evening, namely whether or not she would be able to see any of her closest friends again. And while she knew most of the factors that could potentially ruin it were rather out of her control, she was still resolved to do her part to make sure that everything would go off without a hitch.

Unfortunately though, one of those factors Connie had little reign over where just how unimpressed both of her parents were with the Mystery Shack upon a first glance. “So this is where you’ve been spending all your time at?” Mr. Maheswaran asked his daughter dubiously. “The entire place looks like it’s about to fall down at any minute!”

“Oh, uh… that’s just part of the… rustic Oregonian charm?” Connie ventured with a nervous smile.

“So where is this Mr. Pines fellow anyway?” Dr. Maheswaran asked with a controlled scowl. “I have a few choice words I’d like to say to him after our little conversation over the phone yesterday…”

“Mom…” Connie said in soft protest, flushing with slight embarrassment.

“Oh, don’t worry, Connie,” the doctor said, her tone still just as stiff and cold. “I only intend to give him the proper verbal thrashing for his complete and utter lack of decency or manners. That is, unless he can prove he’s capable of the opposite this evening.”

“I hope so…” Connie muttered to herself, though she paused in surprise along with her parents as they rounded the corner to the other side of the shack.

“Hi, Connie!” Mabel greeted boisterously, running up to meet the family. “Hi, Connie’s parents! It’s super great to finally meet you two! I’m Mabel, and that’s my brother, Dipper, and over there is-”

“Ok, Mabel, how about we tone it down, just a little?” Dipper cut in, knowing just from the Maheswaran’s startled expressions that his sister’s bold friendliness was perhaps a bit too much at the moment. “Oh, um… it’s nice to meet you both too,” he quickly said to Connie’s parents, offering them an awkward smile as he gently pushed Mabel away.

“Likewise…” Mr. Maheswaran said rather dryly as the family followed after the twins.

“So, I’m assuming you’re Mr. Pines then?” Dr. Maheswaran asked coldly as she walked up to Stan, who thus far had been standing by with a stoic expression.

“Nah, I’m just the creepy old hobo who shacks up in the storage closet,” Stan remarked callously, eliciting an alarmed, disturbed gasp from the Maheswarans. “Ha! You two are just as gullible as those kids! It was just a joke.” The conman let out another amused chuckle, though he sobered up as his nibblings both elbowed him in the knees, glaring up at him with the same disapproval the Maheswarans were looking to him with. “Ugh, fine,” he rolled his eyes, sighing in exasperation as he held out his hand. “Stan Pines.”

“Priyanka Maheswaran,” the doctor introduced herself, begrudgingly accepting the conman’s handshake. “And this is my husband, Doug.”

“It’s a… pleasure…” Doug nodded, still far from amused with Stan’s rather uncalled-for joke.
“So, about that conversation we had on the phone yesterday…” Priyanka began, giving Stan a critical look as she crossed her arms.

“Oh yeah,” the conman said, rolling his eyes. “So are you gonna apologize for nagging my ear off, or are you—ow!” Stan cut himself off as both of the twins sharply elbowed him once again. “Geez! What’s with you kids tonight? If you keep this up, I’ll be footing you two the bill for my orthopedic surgery!”

“Hey, so um, w-why don’t we all sit down and get ready to eat?” Connie interjected with a nervous smile, already giving her parents a light push over to the table. As the trio of adults stoically headed over to sit down, Connie stopped the twins short, her expression awash with open worry this time. “You guys, where’s Steven at?”

“We have no idea,” Dipper shook his head, also quite confused as he glanced up towards the temple. “It’s weird. He should be here by now…”

“Maybe he’s just having a hard time deciding which Gem he wants to bring to dinner?” Mabel suggested with a shrug. “I know that if I were him, I wouldn’t be able to pick between those three either; they’re all so great!”

“Well, I hope he hurries up and picks one,” Connie said with a diffident sigh. “My parents aren’t going to like that he’s running late. In case you haven’t noticed, they’re really punctual.”

“Well, look on the bright side,” Dipper attempted to encourage as they turned to head towards the table themselves. “At least Stan’s mostly behaving himself.”

“Look, all I was tryin’ to say yesterday was that kids and swords are a good combination,” Stan shrugged amidst his rather stilted conversation with the Maheswarans. “Especially when you need to beat a bunch of muggers back in a knife fight. Just send the kid in for you, and you’re golden. Even if the kid usually isn’t when it’s all said and done.”

“Looks like you spoke too soon,” Connie muttered to Dipper as the two of them and Mabel took their seats at the table.

“Oh, ha! T-that’s our Grunkle Stan!” Mabel attempted to cover for the conman to the appalled Maheswarans with a very forced laugh. “Doesn’t he tell the most hilarious jokes?”

“Hm… I don’t know if ‘hilarious’ would be the word I’d use to describe them…” Priyanka noted with an icy glower. “But, distasteful jokes and questionable child-rearing methods aside, Mr. Pines, our daughter mentioned that you’re in the… tourism business?”

“Uh, duh,” Stan remarked as though it was obvious, his tone already conveying just how bored he was with this conversation already. “What, you didn’t see the giant sigh that reads ‘Mystery Shack’ when you pulled up here?”

“Wha—of course, we-” Priyanka cut herself off with a sullen, frustrated growl. “What I meant to ask was, what exactly is this little… ‘Mystery Shack’ of yours?”

“Eh, its-”

“Oh! Oh! Oh! We got this one covered, Grunkle Stan!” Mabel quickly interjected before the conman could say anything that would further offend the Maheswarans. “The Mystery Shack is a very neat, very fun, and very safe place where people come to see all sorts of amazing stuff that you can’t find anywhere else!”
“Oh really?” Doug asked, genuinely curious. “Like what?”

“Like… uh…” Mabel trailed off, looking to her brother for help. Fortunately, Dipper was quick to take over, paying heed to Connie as she mouthed him a quick warning to leave all mentions of anything actually magical or paranormal out of it.

“L-like… rare indigenous rocks and unusually-shaped leaves,” he quickly ventured, hoping that the mundaneness of what he had just said would be no cause for alarm. And fortunately, it wasn’t.

“Interesting…” Priyanka mused, even if her tone was anything but interested. “So, kids, Connie says that you two are only staying in Gravity Falls for the summer?”

“Uh, yeah, that’s right,” Dipper confirmed with a nod, somewhat confused as to why the doctor was bringing this up.

“Oh, well that’s a relief,” Doug muttered to his wife, though he could still be clearly heard all the same. “At least we probably won’t have to worry about any sort of unwarranted relationship developing between Connie and the boy.”

“Dad!” Connie practically shouted, completely and utterly mortified at this suggestion alone. Likewise, Dipper choked on the water he had been sipping on upon hearing this, knowing that the only person Connie’s dad could have been referring to was him. For a moment, the only thing the two of them could do was exchange a flustered glance, one that was quick to break as they looked away from each other, both of their faces bright red with clear embarrassment.

Despite how alarmed both Dipper and Connie were by this idea, however, Mabel couldn’t hold back a huge burst of laughter, one that elicited unforgiving glares from the pair and surprised the rather confused Maheswarans. “Oh my gosh, I-I can’t believe they thought-” Mabel cut herself off with another loud chuckle as she beat against the table. “They thought you guys have thing for each other! That’s seriously the funniest thing I’ve ever heard! Though now that you mention it, you guys would be pretty cute together.”

“Mabel!” Dipper harshly protested, even if his sister was still completely lost in her hysterical laughing fit.

“Well, thank you for making things awkward, Doug…” Priyanka mumbled, giving her now very embarrassed husband a rather cynical look. “Or rather, even more awkward…”

“How was I supposed to know?” he whispered back with a shrug.

“Wait, you’re telling me you two aren’t an item?” Stan spoke up, looking between Dipper and Connie incredulously. “Huh, you’re kiddin’ me. And here I thought that nerds of a feather flocked together, or some kinda poetic garbage like that.”

As Dipper shot his uncle a fierce, but flustered glare, Connie simply let out a loud, exasperated groan as she facepalmed over just how badly this evening was going so far. “Steven, where are you?” she muttered to herself, hoping that the young Gem’s arrival would even everything out. And ironically enough, he happened to arrive right on cue.

The palpable tension and awkwardness going around the dinner table was abruptly broken as a sudden low rumbling began to sound from not too far away. The Maheswarans gasped in alarm at what they presumed to be an earthquake, and while Stan was only mildly confused, the kids exchanged a bewildered glance, especially as several rows of trees within the nearby woods began to topple over. And when the source of this sudden ruckus finally came into view, emerging from
the tree line to stand tall over the shack, no one could hold back a gasp of complete and utter shock at what they saw.

“Hi, Connie!” Steven called down brightly from his spot upon Alexandrite’s shoulder. The fusion was also toting Greg upon her other shoulder, her expression blank and concealed by her large shades and her towering form just as intimidating as it had been the day she had battled the Gideon-bot. “Hi, Dipper, Mabel, and Mr. Pines! And hello, Mr. and Mrs. Maheswaran!”

Needless to say that the Maheswarans could scarcely believe their eyes upon seeing such a massive, multi-armed woman. And while, Connie, Dipper, and Mabel had seen her before, that hardly changed how stunned the former two were to see her now, even if the latter was completely delighted. “Hi, Alexandrite!” Mabel shouted up to the fusion, cheerfully waving at her.

The fusion simply put a hand up in greeting, not offering much of a verbal response as another pair of her hands reached up to lower Steven and Greg. “Thanks… honeybun?” the former tock star said, still rather uncomfortable with this situation at large.

“You’re welcome… Greg,” Alexandrite responded, her deep voice stoic as always.

Greg offered the fusion a rather awkward smile before turning to the still-awestruck Maheswarans. “I’m Greg Universe,” he greeted amicably. “And this massive drink of water is my wife, Alexandrite.”

“Hiiiiiii….” Alexandrite hissed stiffly, to which both of the Maheswarans simply nodded their own bewildered greetings in return.

“All right, I’m just gonna come right out and ask,” Stan staunchly interrupted this exchange of pleasantries. “Greg, what the heck is that unholy six-armed abomination and what is she doing in my yard!?”

“Oh, uh, well…” Greg began nervously, especially as Steven looked to him in sudden panic. Thankfully though, the twins jumped in to clarify things for their uncle just in time.

“Oh, Grunkle Stan, you’re so silly!” Mabel let out a rather fake laugh. “You remember Alexandrite, right?”

“No,” Stan crossed his arms, reclining back in his seat a bit.

“You know? Alexandrite?” Dipper tried again before lowering his voice down to a whisper. “The Gems?”

Upon hearing this, Stan looked to the massive fusion incredulously, not fully buying this claim, but deciding to comply with it nonetheless. “Eh, whatever you say, kid. I guess I’ll go with it. Mostly because I’m already too done with this whole dinner thing to even care.”

“Heh, yeah, so…” Greg trailed off awkwardly as him and Steven took their seats. Alexandrite also sat, as much as she could, given her incredible height, paying no mind to the odd looks she was getting from the Maheswarans all the while. “Uh, when do we eat? I’m starved.”

“Food will be ready soon, dudes,” Soos reported as he coincidentally stepped out of the shack with a covered basket in hand. “But for now, enjoy these delicious hot breadsticks made by me, Soos.”

“Oh, Soos?” Dipper frowned upon lifting the napkin covering the basket a bit. “I think these breadsticks are burnt…”
“No way, dude,” Soos denied with a confident shake of his head. “The recipe I found online said to bake them until they a crispy, golden brown.”

“Yeah, well they’re crispy alright,” Stan remarked sardonically, pulling one of the charred breadsticks out of the basket and snapping it cleanly in half.

“Well, Alexandrite seems to like them,” Steven said with an optimistic smile as he grinned up at the fusion. She had already grabbed a generous handful of burnt breadsticks and was currently sloppily shoving them into her mouth, creating a rather sizable mess.

“I hope that Soos person can make unlimited breadsticks,” Doug whispered to his wife upon watching this bizarre scene unfold.

“Don’t be rude,” Priyanka chastised stoically.

Of course, seeing as how the pieces that composed Alexandrite were already torn on the matter of eating, it wasn’t long before the fusion gagged on her food. With a groan of protest, she stuck her tongue out, mushed breadsticks covering it and garnishing disgusted looks from almost everyone else sitting around the table. But all the same, Greg attempted to make light of it mostly for his son’s sake as he let out an anxious chuckle.

“Isn’t my wife a riot?” he asked with another nervous laugh after a beat of awkward silence.

“Oh, she’s certainly… something…” Priyanka said somewhat dubiously before addressing both Stan and Greg. “So, how exactly do your two families know each other?”

“Well, I used to work for Mr. Pines here at the shack several years ago—” Greg began before Stan cut him off.

“Yeah, those were the days,” the conman said with a reminiscing smirk. “You know, Greg wasn’t just a decent cashier, he was also a pretty reliable cover man. Like this one time, when I set a bunch of wild racoons loose in city hall, he kept his cool the whole time the police were here interrogating us about it. I got off on the whole thing scott-free, and it was hilarious! Cops, am I right?” he chuckled callously, despite the shared look of alarmed shock from his nibblings and Connie and the very unimpressed glares from the Maheswarans. “It’s so darn easy to pull the wool over their eyes! This guy knows what I’m talking about!” he exclaimed, sending Doug a wry smirk.

“Actually, I don’t,” he scowled dryly, far from amused. “Especially since I’m a member of the local law enforcement myself.”

Stan immediately sobered up upon hearing this, his laughter quickly fading as his expression dropped into an irritable glower. “Great, just what we need around here,” he muttered just to himself. “A cop. As if these two couldn’t get any more boring.”

“Heh, like we said,” Mabel interjected with an awkward laugh. “Our Grunkle Stan loves telling jokes. Especially about cops.”

“But he didn’t mean any of it, of course,” Dipper added just as anxiously, even if he knew it was a blatant lie. “A-and he certainly hasn’t ever done anything e-even remotely illegal!”

Connie breathed a soft sigh of relief upon seeing her parents seemingly buy this, and she didn’t hesitate to mouth a word of thanks to the twins for it. Unfortunately, however, the conversation kept going. “So, tell me, Mr. Universe,” Priyanka began evenly. “How did you and your, uh, wife, meet?”
“Huh? How did we meet?” Greg frowned, knowing Steven hadn’t prepared him for this question. “Well, we, uh…”

“They met on a roller coaster!” the young Gem cut in boisterously jumping out of his seat. Everyone looked to him in slight bewilderment and doubt over this claim, especially as they looked to the massive Alexandrite, who said nothing to confirm or deny it. Connie in particular gave Steven an aptly questioning glance, pressing him for more information, which he gave, albeit off the top of his head. “She… she was too tall to ride!” The young Gem chuckled awkwardly as he took his seat, though his levity was quick to dissipate upon seeing Connie shake her head in disapproval over this poorly-thought out story.

“Uh… yeah…” Greg hesitantly went along with what his son said as the Maheswarans looked to him for confirmation. “I remember it like it was yesterday. Right, h-honey?” He chuckled nervously, placing a hand against Alexandrite’s leg, though she was quick to pull it away. “Er… sorry…” he whispered to the fusion, blushing in embarrassment.

All the same, however, Alexandrite was quick to get even with the former rock star as she abruptly shoved his face into his plate. “Have some more breadsticks… dear.”

“Geez, talk about your dysfunctional relationship,” Stan deadpanned, rolling his eyes over this bizarre display.

“Uh, so…” Doug spoke up, letting out an awkward cough. “What is it you two do for a living, Mr. and Mrs. Universe?”

“Well, you see, I own a local car wash,” Greg began with a more relaxed grin. “And my dear, sweet wife here-”

“My mom works on an apple farm!” Steven exclaimed, putting no thought into his response at all. Upon hearing this response, the only thing Connie could really do was let out a loud, exasperated sigh as she banged her head down onto the table, knowing that this evening was sinking and sinking fast, on all sides. “What did we say about heads on the table?” her mother scolded, prompting her to lift her head up, but only slightly.

At the same time, the twins exchanged an incredulous glance in light of Steven’s strange proclamation, both of them somewhat relieved that their family wasn’t the only one contributing to just how disastrous the night was turning out to be. “An apple farm?” Dipper muttered, shaking his head. “Seriously? That’s the best he could come up with?”

“H-hey, Steven!” Mabel spoke up as cheerfully as she could. “Aren’t you gonna tell them how your, uh… ‘mom’ got hired at that apple farm?”

“Oh yeah!” Steven exclaimed. “Uh, well… they hired her because… because she can use all her arms to pick apples out of the huge trees!”

“Well, you know what they say,” Greg interjected casually. “An apple a day keeps the doctor away.”

“Yes,” Alexandrite said in her low, rumbling voice. “I hate doctors.”


“Steven, Dipper, Mabel, could I talk to you three inside for a second?!” Connie suddenly exclaimed, her head snapping up as she forced a smile onto her face. While the trio was slightly
confused at this abrupt request, they all followed her inside the shack, none of them paying any mind to the questioning looks the adults were giving them as they left the table.

“So,” Steven began with a satisfied smile as they congregated in the den. “Things are going pretty good so far, huh?”

“Steven, please tell me you’re kidding,” Dipper remarked in dry exasperation. “Stan’s been incriminating himself all night and as for Alexandrite-”

“She’s a total mess,” Connie cut in, sending Steven a very annoyed glower. “Steven, what in the world were you thinking, bringing her to dinner?!”

“Well… s-she’s my family,” Steven shrugged innocently. “All of the Gems, fused into a…” he paused, counting on his fingers for a moment. “A six armed… giant woman…”

“Why couldn’t you just bring one of the Gems?” Connie asked, clearly stressed.

“Because that would be a lie,” the young Gem replied with a perplexed frown. “And I couldn’t pick between them. I just thought… I thought this would work out.”

“Well, it’s not,” Connie concluded with an exasperated sigh as she turned to the twins. “And really, Mr. Pines isn’t working out either. What gives, you guys? I thought you said he’d be on his best behavior!”

“Well, can’t you get him to, you know, try and get him to filter himself somehow?” Connie pleaded. “If things keep going the way they are, I’m pretty sure the night will end up with my dad and your uncle getting into a fist fight or something.”

“It’s not like there’s a whole lot we can do, Connie,” Dipper remarked defensively, crossing his arms. “Stan’s just sort of… being himself. And unfortunately for us, that means he’s being rude and completely careless about what he says.”

Yeah, and the Gems are just being themselves too,” Steven added earnestly. “Or… as much of themselves as they can be when they’re all fused together like that…” The young Gem paused to mull over what he really meant by this, but as he did so, he happened to glance over at Connie and notice something he hadn’t really before. “Connie… Your glasses…”

“W-what about them?” she asked somewhat hesitantly, glancing away.

“I healed your eyes,” Steven frowned suspiciously. “You don’t even need to wear those anymore.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right,” Dipper said, just as confused. “Wait… Did you just… pop the frames out of your glasses to make it look like you still needed them?”

“Uh… I-I don’t know what you guys are talking about,” Connie scoffed, awkwardly adjusting the aforementioned empty frames.

“Oh my gosh, you did!” Steven gasped, appalled. “All that stuff you told your parents about my family… about both of our families—you’re just ashamed of us!”

“N-no, I’m not!” Connie protested, clearly flustered. “It… it’s just… Well, what am I supposed to tell my parents, you guys? That we’ve fought Gem monsters, living golf balls, and time travelers?
That we go on wild, life-threatening adventures at least once a week? That Steven’s spit healed my eyes and that we literally fused into the same person for an entire evening? Even if they did believe any of that, they’d go *crazy* if they ever found out about all of the dangerous stuff we’ve done!”

“Yeah, but what’s so bad about all that stuff?” Mabel asked pensively. “We’ve all had so many great times together this summer. Don’t you want your parents to know about at least a few of them?”

“Ugh, you guys just don’t understand!” Connie exclaimed in outright frustration. “My parents ae nowhere near as hands-off as Mr. Pines or the Gems are! If they found out that the Gems were magical aliens or that Mr. Pines is a swindling conman, then they’d never let me hang out with any of you guys ever again!”

“Listen, Connie, I understand that you’re worried,” Steven said, sympathetic and upset all at once. “But… what you’re asking from us, from our families… None of its real. We can’t be perfect or polite or nuclear, because that’s not who we are. Why… why can’t you and your parents just be… ok with that?”

“Because they… they just *can’t*,” Connie huffed tiredly, not wanting to discuss the matter any further. “Look, can you guys just… focus on getting through the evening? It’ll be over soon enough and then everything can go back to the way it usually is.”

“What, you mean wild and out of control?” Dipper asked, just as bitter as Steven and Mabel were over having to keep this unbelievable charade going.

“Exactly,” Connie muttered tightly, abruptly leading the way back outside.

Of course, in their brief absence, the evening had only deteriorated even more as a full on verbal brawl had managed to escalate between Stan and the Maheswarans. None of the kids had any idea what the context was, but by the harsh tones and even harsher words being thrown around, they could tell the argument was anything but light.

“Mr. Pines, *everything* you just said was not just unquestionable immoral, it was all completely *illegal*!” Doug exclaimed in heated disbelief. “How did you manage to pull *any* of that off!?"

“By being smarter than any of the morons who tried to stop me, duh,” Stan shrugged callously.

“But what would even possess you to do any of that nonsense in the first place?” Priyanka asked, not sparing the conman from her disapproving glare. “Certainly you know such an *extensive* criminal record stands as a horrible example for your niece and nephew, right?”

“Pfft, come on,” Stan scoffed with a wave of his hand. “I’m a *great* example for the little runts. Why, if it wasn’t for me, they’d have pretty much *no* important life skills like breaking and entering, forgery, or pick pocketing. And if you don’t take my word for it, just ask old six-arms over there.”

Upon hearing this, Alexandrite looked over to the conman, her expression as stiff and unchanging as ever as she said only one firm, dryly-given word. “Don’t.”

By this juncture, the kids had taken their seats once again, and Connie didn’t hesitate to leap in to detract the conversation away from Stan and his illegal pastimes. “S-so, Steven was just telling us that on his mom’s apple farm, they’re bioengineering a gala-fuji hybrid,” she said as eloquently as she could, sending Steven an imploring glance.

“Yes, that’s… definitely true…” Steven sighed, knowing that he really didn’t have much of a
choice but to keep the lie going.

“Is that right, Mrs. Universe?” Priyanka asked with sparse curiosity. However, before Alexandrite could really reply, Soos emerged from the shack with the long-awaited dinner in tow: a large pan of piping hot spaghetti.

“K, dudes, dinner is served!” the handyman exclaimed with a proud grin as everyone served themselves. “Bon apple pie! Or whatever it is those fancy French chefs say.”

“Oh, Soos? Why does this spaghetti smell so weird?” Mabel asked as she looked to her plate dubiously.

“Oh, well, we were all out of spaghetti sauce,” Soos explained. “So I figured I’d just use the next best thing: ketchup!”

“Ketchup?!” Priyanka asked in alarm as Doug gagged his first mouthful back onto his plate. Stan and Greg both did the same thing as they tried to push the taste of the unflattering combo off of their tongues, and the kids wisely pushed their plates away, much to Soos’ confusion.

“Wait, I don’t get it. Ketchup and spaghetti sauce are both made out of the same stuff, right?” the handyman remarked, grabbing a spoonful of his culinary creation to try a taste test of it, though he was quick to choke on it. “Ugh! Wrong! Wrong! Why did I ever think this was a good idea?! Ack!”

Despite the revulsion for the meal going around the table, Alexandrite piled a heaping spoonful of the ketchup spaghetti for herself, though the moment she took in a whiff of it, one particular part of her let out a groan of protest. “Ugh! What are you doing?!” she asked, Pearl’s voice apparent in her tone as she shoved the pasta against her face. “I’m hungry!” the fusion growled with a touch of Amethyst’s voice, as another hand slapped the fork away. “I don’t think so!” she scolded herself, her second mouth appearing as Garnet took the reins. “Cut it out, you two!” she commanded, though things amongst the fusion only got worse from there. Torn between hunger and a refusal to eat, Alexandrite began essentially fighting herself, her arms slapping at each other as she groaned and growled in growing frustration. At one point, she even uppercut herself, only for her lower mouth to end up chomping down on the offending first.

“Dudes, this is so freaky and so rad,” Soos whispered to the twins as they all watched this madness unfold.

“Stop!” Steven finally shouted to his guardians as the conflict between them only worsened. “You don’t have to eat it!”

Alexandrite barely even heard her young ward as she grew increasingly more unstable, her face starting to crack and melt apart as her form began to dissipate. Everyone let out a startled gasp upon seeing this, though their shock only mounted as the fusion finally snapped apart, all three of her component Gems falling out of her and onto the ground below. Alarmed by this, everyone darted out of their seats and rushed over to try and make sense over what had just happened.

“Oh man, I was worried this might happen…” Greg muttered apprehensively, keeping his distance from the Gems as they recovered.

“Huh, looks like that thing really was the Gems after all,” Stan remarked stoically. “Eh, you know at this point, I can’t even say I’m surprised. I’ve gotten used to weirder from those three honestly.”

“Steven!” Pearl exclaimed after a moment of regathering her bearings. She dragged herself over to
the young Gem, the dramatic desperation on her expression quite clear. “Oh, thank you so much! You don’t know how horrified I was when that foul dreck nearly fell into our mouths—oh, no offense, Soos.”

“None taken,” Soos shrugged amicably.

“But eating food is so disgusting!” Pearl continued, cringing in revulsion as she stood. “You chew it into nasty mush, swallow that goop, and then it comes out of you? What a completely horrid experience!”

“Heh, speak for yourself,” Amethyst said with a rouge grin. “I love it when mush passes through my body!”

“It doesn’t matter what you two think,” Garnet said with an angry scowl as she summoned her gauntlets. “We’re doing this for Steven!” On sheer frustration alone, the Gem leader firmly bonked both of her teammates squarely on the heads as punishment for their petty foolishness.

“So… I guess it’s safe to say dinner’s ruined now, huh?” Mabel asked somewhat awkwardly.

“Was it ever really not ruined?” Dipper retorted sardonically.

“What is going on here?!” Doug finally spoke up amidst his ongoing shock. “Who are they?!”

“I-it’s ok!” Connie interjected anxiously. “I can explain! They’re just-”

“You knew about this?!” Priyanka asked her daughter, completely appalled. “I can’t believe this. What else did you know that you failed to tell us? That the twins’ uncle is actually a renowned criminal? That tonight’s dinner would be nigh inedible?”

“B-but, Mom, I-”

“I knew I should have trusted my bad feelings about these new friends of yours,” the doctor shook her head in severe frustration. “But I never thought I wouldn’t be able to trust my own daughter!”

Connie took in a sharp gasp upon hearing this, her eyes already welling up with oncoming tears. Never before in her life had she disappointed her parents before, but she could tell from just her mother’s outraged tone alone that she had done just that and then some. By trying to win her parent’s approval for the sake of her friends, she had only just ended up garnishing their disapproval onto herself. And amidst all of the stress she had been under over this evening alone, she found that fact alone was more than she could possibly bear. Which was why, instead of trying explain things to her family against her spiking fear, anxiety, and worry, she took off, fleeing from her angry parents to get a moment of much-needed solitude. However, Steven and the twins weren’t about to let her completely slip away, especially as distraught as she was.

“Connie!” the young Gem called worriedly, already running after her with the twins not too far behind. Fortunately, none of the adults followed as the trio pursued her out to the bus stop a ways down the path leading to the shack, all three of them quite concerned for her after everything that had just happened.

“Connie, are you ok?” Steven asked fretfully upon noticing how she was only barely holding back tears.

“You guys, I’m so sorry,” Connie began, her voice wavering as she averted their gazes. “It’s not that I’m ashamed of any of you. I was just so worried that my parents would think all this magic and paranormal stuff is weird. What if… what if they don’t let me hang out with you guys
anymore?” As she voiced this concern, she finally ended up breaking down, the thought of losing her only real friends being completely unbearable to her.

Upon seeing this, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel all exchanged a fretful glance, none of them really sure how to comfort Connie at this juncture, especially since they all felt rather guilty for this disaster of a dinner in the first place. “Oh, Connie…” Steven spoke up first, putting a gentle, consoling hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry. I messed everything up by bringing Alexandrite tonight.”

“Oh, come on, Steven, it wasn’t just your fault,” Dipper cut in empathetically. “To be fair, we probably could have tried a little harder to get Stan to behave himself. So, Connie, we’re sorry too.”

“We’re all sorry!” Mabel exclaimed with a reassuring smile. “Together!”

The kids all shared a brief laugh over this, but after it was over, Steven still let out a small, wistful sigh. “You know… I wish there was a way we could all just… hang out without having to worry about stuff.”

“Wait a second, that’s it!” Connie exclaimed with gasp of realization. “You guys, I know what to do. Let’s just hop on a bus and live somewhere else without telling anyone! That way no one can be mad about all of us being friends!”

A beat of silence passed in the wake of this sudden suggestion, but sure enough, the others were all quick to voice their enthusiastic agreement of it.

“That sounds like a great idea!” Steven grinned brightly.

“I don’t see any problems with it,” Dipper shrugged somewhat obliviously.

“This is gonna be so much fun!” Mabel cheered as a bus, coincidentally enough, pulled up to the stop right on cue. Without any signs of hesitation or further deliberation, all four of the kids boarded it, unanimously resolved and excited as they took the row seat in the back as the bus pulled into motion.

“So, where’s this bus taking us?” Steven asked curiously.

“It doesn’t matter,” Connie said with bold determination. “Wherever we end up, we’ll find a way to survive. I’ve been reading about sustainable living.”

“Yeah! We’ll live off the land!” Mabel exclaimed boisterously. “Just like real hobos do!”

“Or maybe this bus will take us to a real apple farm!” the young Gem grinned excitedly.

“What’s up with you and apples today?” Connie chuckled, sending him a wry grin.

“Wait a second,” Dipper cut in upon actually thinking about the implications of what they were doing. “Guys, did we really just get on a bus heading out of town without telling anyone or without coming up with any sort of plan?”

The others took pause at this, their smiles fading as they began to realize just how impromptu and impulsive their flight really was. However, before they had any chance to discuss it, a sudden distant thumping rattled the entire bus from behind.

“Uh… what was that?” Connie asked with sudden alarm as the rumbling continued, growing louder
and closer with each passing second. As the kids glanced out the back window behind them, they all let out a shared gasp of fear upon seeing Alexandrite running after the bus at a frightening speed.

“Steven!” she shouted fiercely, her lower mouth revealing itself and all of its sharp, deadly teeth. The kids all cried in apt panic over this, knowing that they were in immense trouble for running away if the terrifying fusion herself hotly pursuing them.

“Whoa, you know, being on a bus that’s being chased by a loud, angry giant is like, a total déjà vu moment,” Mabel remarked amidst the others’ fearful screams.

All the same, Alexandrite easily caught up to the bus, her lower arms hoisting it up into the air as she glared down at the kids inside of it. “You four! Come out of that bus this instant!”

“Y-you don’t have to tell us twice!” Dipper exclaimed, aptly frightened.

“Y-yeah, ok!” Steven shakily agreed, knowing they were in no position to argue with the massive fusion. “J-just put the bus down first!”

As soon as the kids sheepishly got off of the bus, Alexandrite unfused, though her three component Gems were still seething as they escorted the group back to the Mystery Shack, where Stan, Greg, and the Maheswarans were worriedly and angrily waiting. Even if the kids had only been gone for roughly about ten minutes, that didn’t mean that they adults were any less angry with them for even entertaining the thought of running away, which was why they didn’t hesitate to give them a proper scolding for it.

“I don’t even begin with you, young lady,” Priyanka scowled disapprovingly at her daughter, who could only stand by in ashamed silence. “You should have known better than to-”

“What the heck is wrong with you two knuckleheads?!” the doctor cut herself off upon hearing Stan firmly ream the twins out. “What, you really thought you’d be able to make it out there on your own? You kids don’t know anything about how dangerous it really is out there, and I should know, seeing as how I’ve been around the block more than a few times! And I don’t care how fun and glamorous I make it seem sometimes, I don’t ever want you two going out and living on the lamb like I did. Seriously, what were you kids thinking?!”

“Uh… I guess we weren’t thinking?” Mabel shrugged apologetically.

“Yeah, in hindsight, just running off like that was kind of a bad idea…” Dipper frowned awkwardly.

“Bad? More like downright stupid!” Stan exclaimed adamantly. “And if I ever catch either of you pulling a cockamamie stunt like this again, then I’ll make sure you both get that bus ride like you tried to go on tonight. Only this time, it’ll be a one-way trip home to your parents, you got it?”

Of course, both of the twins nodded humbly, knowing by the conman’s genuinely irate tone that he was completely serious about this threat to send them home. At the same time, the Gems were also in the middle of chastising Steven over what had just happened, and just like Stan, they weren’t holding back just how upset they were with their young ward over it.

“Steven, we can’t believe this!” Pearl exclaimed incredulously. “What’s gotten into you, running away with Connie and the twins? You could have gotten yourselves hurt!”
“Or gotten mangled in traffic,” Garnet added staunchly.

“Or thrown in prison,” Amethyst finished, exchanging a knowing glance with Stan.

“Steven, you are in very big trouble, and we have no choice but to punish you,” Pearl concluded, crossing her arms.

“But-” Steven attempt to defend himself, but Garnet didn’t give him a chance.

“No dinner for 1,000 years,” the Gem leader ordered firmly.

“1,000 years?!” Steven gasped in apt alarm.

“We would never starve you, Steven,” Pearl shook her head, placing a hand on the young Gem’s shoulder. “But you will lose your TV privileges… for 1,000 years.”

“No!” Steven wailed morosely. “I’ll miss the midseason pre-finale of *Under the Knife*! How could you do this to me!?”

“Because we love you, Steven,” Greg said, his tone a bit gentler than the Gems’ but just as resolved, even despite the young Gem’s miserable groan.

“And as for you two,” Stan said to the twins, his hands on his hips. “Well, if you think I’m such a pushover that I’ll let you get away with something like this scott-free, then you got another thing coming. Consider yourselves grounded from going on any of your little magical, ‘mystery hunts’ until further notice.”

“What?!” Dipper exclaimed, far more upset over this punishment than Mabel was, even if she was far from happy about it herself. “Come on, Grunkle Stan, you can’t just—”

“I can and I am,” the conman remarked coldly. “In case you two have forgotten, *I’m* the boss around here, not you. And it’s about time you runts finally realized that.”

As dejected as both of the twins and Steven were over their respective punishments, this issuing was soon interrupted by a round of pleased applause from the Maheswarans, who had been watching the entire thing. “Wow,” Priyanka remarked, genuinely impressed. “That was a masterful use of both the ‘because we love you’ and the ‘I’m the boss’ shutdowns. I’m quite partial to ‘it’s for your own good’ myself.”

“Yeah, well it may not have been pretty,” Stan remarked with a shrug. “But sometimes these little munchkins gotta learn the hard way.”

“More like the lame way,” Mabel pouted, crossing her arms bitterly.

“Oh, I completely agree,” Priyanka nodded with a satisfied smile. “You know, I think I might have been a bit too quick to misjudge you, Mr. Pines. Despite your shady history and your… rough around the edges personality, it’s clear to see that you really do care about your niece and nephew. So I suppose… I owe you an apology. Or rather, we both do,” she said, elbowing her husband as he nodded in somewhat hesitant agreement.

“Yeah, well… I guess I kinda owe you one too,” Stan said tersely, finally swallowing his pride as he took the doctor’s extended hand for a shake. “Ya’ know, just as long as you don’t call me up anymore to fuss at me over being a ‘responsible parent’ or anything like that.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem in the future,” Priyanka chuckled casually. At the same time,
the kids all exchanged somewhat confused glances, none of them entirely sure what was going on, but realizing all the same that things were suddenly starting to smooth themselves over, against all odds.

“I gotta say,” Doug spoke up, turning to the Gems with an amused smirk. “That ‘1,000 years of no dinner bit’ was pretty funny.”

“All comedy is derived from fear,” Garnet said, her tone completely stiff and serious as always, even despite the laughter this response elicited from the Maheswarans.

“I didn’t know what to make of the two—excuse me—four of you, at first,” Priyanka began, looking to the Gems herself. “But I see that you are all responsible parents—uh, caregivers? Guardians?”

“Heh, thanks,” Greg grinned humbly, scratching the back of his neck. “Hey, you know, since dinner here turned out to be a bit of a, uh… bust, why don’t we all just go out for pizza instead? My treat!”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea,” Doug nodded solidly.

“Now we’re talking!” Stan exclaimed, mostly happy about not having to pay for the meal.

“Did somebody say pizza?” Soos asked, poking his head out of the shack. “Dudes, wait up! I’m coming too!”

“Wait!” Connie cut in before everyone could take off, addressing her parents. “There’s just one more thing I need to know. Can… can I still hang out with Steven, Dipper, and Mabel?”

The Maheswarans exchanged a brief glance at this, both of them seemingly skeptical as the kids all looked to them pleadingly. But in the end, neither of them could really say no to such hopeful faces, especially after the hectic night they had just had. “Sure,” Priyanka conceded. “But only if you’re not keeping anymore bewildering secrets from us.”

“O-oh… well… uh…” Connie trailed off, looking to the others somewhat nervously, especially as she remembered there was still so much she hadn’t told her parents about their summer adventures. But all the same, she kept it cool, knowing that if the time ever came for her to reveal such information to them, then she would. Maybe. “No. No, ma’am, there… there’s nothing else.”

“Hm,” the doctor nodded, buying this for the time being. “Very good then.”

“Alright!” Steven cheered, happy to know that their friendship could continue just as strong as ever. “The Mystery Kids are here to stay!” Unable to contain his excitement, the young Gem pulled both of the twins and Connie into a tight, celebratory hug. Dipper and Mabel laughingly reciprocated it, but Connie was a bit more hesitant to, especially upon glancing over and seeing her parents’ disapproving scowls.

And sure enough, Doug was quick to step in, largely since his daughter was currently hugging two boys more than anything else. The kids were caught off guard as he abruptly separated the four of them, pulling Connie away a bit and grinning in satisfaction over the distance he had put between them. But all the same, the kids simply shared a shrug and a laugh, all of them more than relieved that, even after the disastrous evening that had just unfolded, their friendship could continue to go on. And for the sake of that friendship, it made harsh parental scolding, losing TV privileges, and a firm grounding, more than worth it.
Chapter 39: Dipper and Lapis

Chapter Summary

In which Dipper and Lapis bond and I cry because their dynamic is the most beautiful thing to ever happen to me

Chapter Notes

AHHHHH I'M SO EXCITED ABOUT THIS CHAPTER! Seriously this is some of my best work for this story yet, a completely original chapter that deviates the story a little bit and makes things even better if you ask me! So I really hope you all enjoy this one, let's just say I put my all into it! Enjoy!

Summer evenings in Gravity Falls were known for being picturesque, with warm, crisp air, gently-chirping crickets in the distance, and deep, dusky skies dotted with arriving stars. As peacefully perfect as this particular evening was, both the Pines and the Gems had no qualms about enjoying it. At the behest of the kids, everyone had casually gathered down at the shack to simply hang out and relax without real worries or pressure whatsoever. Stan and Amethyst reclined on the couch on the porch, knocking back cans of Pitt Cola (with Stan drinking the cola and Amethyst devouring the cans) as Pearl sat by them, mildly amused by their antics. Garnet opted to stand, leaning against
one of the porch’s posts as she stargazed with a soft smile on her face. The kids were largely doing
the same thing, with Steven and Mabel propped against Lion, the former loosely strumming on his
ukulele while the other cuddled Waddles against her sweater. Dipper sat a short distance away
from them, not particularly keen on cozying up to the intimidating pink beast, but taking in the
calm beauty of the evening all the same.

As Steven finished strumming through another gentle tune, he decided to give both his instrument
and his fingers a rest as he let out a contented sigh. “This is so nice,” he said to the collective
group. “All of us, just hanging out and relaxing, without having to worry about any Gem monsters
or paranormal creatures.”

“Yeah, like crazy golf ball people,” Mabel noted with a reminiscing grin.

“Or brain-hungry zombies,” Stan interjected dryly, passing another empty can over to Amethyst.

“Or jerky shapeshifters,” the purple Gem said with apt disdain as she swallowed the can whole.

“Or rampaging Gem robots,” Pearl added, cringing in slight revulsion at Amethyst’s odd appetite.

“Or awkward dinner parties,” Garnet finished stoically.

“Yes, I think it’s safe to say that things can get pretty intense around here…” Dipper remarked
with something of a wry smirk. “But hey, at least we only have to deal with that sort of stuff some
of the time, instead of all the time.”

“For now,” Garnet muttered before she could really stop herself.

Of course, the vagueness of her statement was more than enough to peak Dipper’s interest,
especially since the Gem leader was quick to glance away almost anxiously as soon as she said it.
“What do you mean ‘for now’?” he asked with a curious frown.

“I-I… I just-” Garnet stammered with rare uncertainty, though she was quick to catch herself, her
usually cool manner returning as she adjusted her shades. “Nothing. It… it’s nothing.”

By now, both Steven and Mabel were almost as intrigued by the Gem leader’s newfound
apprehension as Dipper was, and while all three of them wanted to press her for more information,
Stan spoke up first. “What’s the matter, shades?” he asked Garnet sardonically. “Does your ‘future
sight’ thing see some sort of monster attack or alien invasion coming up or something? Ha!”

As the conman let out an amused chuckle, Garnet took in a sharp breath, one that only her
teammates noticed as they exchanged a confused and worried glance. “Hey, uh, G?” Amethyst
asked a bit anxiously. “You… you don’t actually see either of those things actually happening,
right?”

Garnet still looked somewhat taken aback, but all the same, she was quick to play it off. “No,” she
said firmly, not bothering to say another word on the matter.

“Oh, t-thank goodness!” Pearl exclaimed, allayed. “It’s certainly a relief to know that we won’t be
beset by a monster anytime soon, or that Homeworld might-” The white Gem abruptly cut herself
off, slapping a hand over her own mouth as she briefly looked over at the kids with wide eyes.


“Nothing,” Garnet readily asserted. “Just like I said.”
“Well you guys sure aren’t making it seem like it’s nothing,” Dipper said somewhat suspiciously. “What would happen if Homeworld invaded Earth anyway? You know, just… hypothetically speaking?”

“Ooo, would we get to meet a bunch of cool new Gems?” Mabel chimed in enthusiastically. “Oh, but then again, the last new Gem we met was Peridot, and she’s kind of a jerk so… yeah, maybe all those new Gems wouldn’t be so cool if they’re anything like her…”

“It wouldn’t be cool at all,” Pearl said, clearly unnerved by the thought alone. “If Homeworld Gems were to come back to Earth… they would—”


“Ok…” Dipper said, not entirely convinced as he leaned forward a bit. “But what if they do come back someday?”

“They’re not,” Garnet reiterated unflinchingly.

“But what if—”

“They’re not coming back,” the Gem leader repeated, her tone turning a bit more rigid this time. “We don’t need to think in terms of what ifs, because it’s not going to happen.”

“But how do you know that?” Dipper asked persistently, starting to get frustrated with the Gems’ continued refusal to be honest about such serious matters. “Garnet, I know you can kind of see the future, but what if this is something beyond what your future vision can see? Shouldn’t we at least try to be prepared for it?”

“Dipper, we don’t need to be prepared for a possible Homeworld invasion, because something like that is not going to happen again,” Pearl insisted rather stubbornly, failing to mention the true reason why the idea of Homeworld returning was so abhorrent to all three of the Gems. “They have absolutely no reason to ever come to this planet again. So that means we don’t have to talk about that possibility anymore, hypothetical or otherwise.”

“But—” Dipper tried to protest once more, only to be cut off by Stan this time.

“Geez, kid, can’t you take a hint?” the conman asked, exasperated. “Whoever these ‘Homeworld’ people are, it’s pretty clear they’re not coming around these parts again, so can’t you just shut your trap about it already?”

“Seriously, dude,” Amethyst added, reclining back in her seat. “You worry too much. No Homeworld chumps are gonna step up on our terf as long as we’re around.”

“Sounds like you guys are just in denial if you ask me…” Dipper muttered petulantly, crossing his arms as he glared away from the Gems.

“Nah, bro-bro, it sounds to me like you’re just being paranoid, as usual,” Mabel interjected, rolling her eyes. “You know, I thought you got all of that junk out of your system a few days ago. Maybe you and Steven need to fuse again to give you a refresher course in how to chill out.”

“Yeah!” Steven agreed enthusiastically. “I’m up for giving Stepper another go if you are, Dipper. It’ll be fun!”

“Steven, we don’t need Stepper,” Dipper said, shaking his head dismissively. “What we need is to
take this whole Homeworld thing seriously for once! And as usual, it seems like I’m the only person who’s doing that.”

“We are taking this seriously,” Garnet said stiffly. “And we’re serious about the fact that no Homeworld Gems are coming to Earth. We have nothing to worry about.”

“Yeah, Garnet’s right,” Amethyst concluded casually. “Now can we finally drop all this Homeworld junk and just chill like we were before? All this arguing and drama is starting to bum me out.”

“Ditto,” Stan agreed with a shrug.

“For once, I agree with you both,” Pearl said, more than eager to leave this tense discussion behind. “After all, there’s no need to ruin such a lovely evening with such troublesome thoughts, right?”

Everyone else nodded in soft agreement with this, save for Dipper, who simply let out a disgruntled sigh as he stood and turned to head inside without trying to argue with the Gems any further, knowing that, like always, it would be a futile battle. “Hey, where are you going?” Mabel asked her brother as he wordlessly bypassed the Gems on his way to the door.

“To bed,” Dipper replied tersely, not even bothering to glance back.


“Oh well,” Dipper shrugged somewhat crossly as he reached the door. “Guess I’m just really tired all of the sudden…” He sighed as he went inside, not adding that what he was really tired of went far beyond mere physical exhaustion.

Steven and Mabel exchanged a rather worried glance as they watched Dipper leave, both of them partially wanting to follow him and make sure he was alright, but at the same time, knowing that doing so would get them nowhere. At the same time, even the Gems themselves looked a bit guilty, Garnet in particular feeling as though she had been a bit too dismissive towards Dipper over the Homeworld issue. But at the same time, the trio had their reasons for being so dodgy on the subject, most of them pertaining to saving the kids from fear and worry that was simply not theirs to bear. And perhaps, also pertaining to their own fears and worries over what might unfold if their Homeworld ever truly did decide to interfere with the planet Earth once again.

Despite going inside for the night, the last thing Dipper did was sleep, though not for a lack of trying. Too irked to really dive into the journal for what would no doubt be a futile search for clues, he instead opted to lie down, though his abundance of perplexed thoughts allowed him very little rest. Even as the group outside disbanded for the night hours later and Mabel came in to go to bed herself, Dipper was still wide awake, even if he pretended that he was so he wouldn’t have to discuss what had happened with the Gems earlier.

Still, that didn’t change the fact that he was frustrated. Beyond frustrated, really. He was angry. Once again, the Gems were choosing to ignore what was right in front of them, just as they had when Peridot’s robinoids first started appearing. However, this time, it was even more infuriating, largely because the issue was much more serious and grave. Dipper couldn’t exactly profess that he knew a lot about Homeworld; mostly all the information he had about it was composed of what few bits and pieces the Gems and the journal provided, which admittedly wasn’t that much. But the
huge gaps in his knowledge really gave him all the more reason to worry. What if Peridot, who had more than enough reason to be provoked after Stepper took out her attack robinoids, decided to act on her anger and actually come to Earth herself, just as she had hinted at upon her latest defeat? There would be no telling what kind of technology or weaponry they be up against if she did, and chances were that she likely wouldn’t come alone either. No doubt the threat such an invasion might introduce would be massive, but the only ones who had any chance of standing up to it were in staunch denial over it ever happening. While Dipper knew that Homeworld in general was a touchy subject for the Gems, what he couldn’t understand was why they refused to even talk about it at all. In a strange way, it almost seemed as though they were afraid, afraid of Homeworld, afraid of Gems from it coming to Earth, and afraid of even facing the possibility of such a thing happening, no matter how large or small that possibility might be.

But even despite their apparent fear, the Gems still knew about the danger Homeworld could potentially pose. And even with that knowledge in hand, they refused to impart it, still clinging onto their secrets as tightly as ever, despite their promise to be more open. While Dipper had gotten more than used to their secrecy by now, that didn’t mean it still didn’t immensely aggravate him. Even after everything that had happened this summer, the Gems still viewed him and Steven and Mabel as too innocent and naive to know the truth, whatever that truth was. They thought they couldn’t handle it, but Dipper knew he could handle it, no matter how dark and sinister it might be. He wanted to know, needed to know, for more than just his insatiable curiosity. If a powerful extraterrestrial threat really was coming, then he wanted to be ready for it, or at least as ready as he could be. And he figured that the only way to be prepared for it would be to arm himself with the knowledge of exactly what they might be dealing with.

At this thought, Dipper found his gaze slowly turn towards the journal sitting on the nearby nightstand, the six-fingered hand on its cover dully shining in the moonlight coming in through the upper window. There was no question that the unknown author had a vast knowledge of the Gems and Gemkind, and while there was little in the third journal pertaining to Homeworld, perhaps the other two missing books would contain such coveted information. Of course, Dipper didn’t have the faintest idea about where the first two journals might be hidden, and while the best source of information would be the author himself, both his identity and whereabouts where still a complete and utter mystery. But all the same, that didn’t mean that Dipper couldn’t continue searching for the answers for those mysteries until he finally found them.

Even though Stan had grounded both him and Mabel from mystery hunting, he didn’t ground them from mystery researching, which was why Dipper figured he wouldn’t get in too much trouble for feeding his boundless curiosity. Moving quietly as not to wake Mabel up, he slid out of bed and grabbed the journal, quickly putting his hat, jacket, and shoes on before slipping out of the attic and onto the platform on the roof. The nearly full moon outside provided ample light for him to read by, both normally and via black light, and Dipper fully intended to utilize both kinds of light to conduct his investigation with.

“Ok, journal,” he said to the book with unshakable resolve. “If the Gems won’t talk about Homeworld, then maybe you can point me to someone who will.”

Fully prepared to spend the entire night reading between the journal’s lines, Dipper pulled the book open. However, before he could even tell what page he was on, a sudden roar afar in the distance, one that grew louder with each passing second caught his attention. Confused, he looked up towards the sky, easily spotting what, upon a first glance appeared to be a shooting star, soaring rapidly through the night. And yet, several things were off about this supposed star, from its mild brightness, to its odd speed, to its increasing size, to its downward descent, to the continued noise as it drew closer and closer. Dipper gasped in alarm, hopping to his feet as the ‘star’ got even brighter, briefly lighting up the sky before it finally crashed down to the Earth several miles away,
but still close enough to create a noticeable, audible explosion.

“Whoa…” Dipper breathed, his eyes wide as the light from the blast faded back into nighttime darkness, even as a stream of smoke began rising from wherever the ‘star’ had landed. From where he was standing, he guessed that wherever was somewhere near the lake, maybe even around the waterfall. A good distance away, but not so far that he couldn’t go check it out without being back by sunrise, something that he was more than ready to do, especially seeing as how the mystery object had come from space. For all he knew, it could have very well been another one of Peridot’s robots, or maybe even something else from Homeworld altogether. But regardless of what it was, Dipper knew that it was worth looking into, and that he was going to be the one to do just that.

Acting quickly, Dipper gathered the journal and hurried back into the attic, putting the book back in its spot before hurrying over to try and rouse Mabel from her slumber. “Mabel,” he shook her, keeping his voice in a whisper so Stan wouldn’t hear. After all, they were still grounded from doing things like this, but at the moment, Dipper could hardly care, especially considering just how big this could be. “Mabel, wake up. I just saw something come from space and crash down near the lake. We’ve gotta go check it out!”

Of course, Mabel was still mostly asleep, and even despite her brother’s insistent urging, that was something that likely wasn’t going to change anytime soon. “Mm… cake…” she muttered with a groggy smile, having only partially heard Dipper.

“Ugh, Mabel, come on!” Dipper exclaimed a bit louder, shaking her by the shoulder again. “We have to hurry before whatever that thing is disappears or runs away or-”

“I’ll be right over, brooo,” Mabel mumbled somewhat incoherently, eyes still closed as she rolled over. “Just give me a… hour… or two… or ten…”

“Mabel!” Dipper groaned in exasperation, not too keen on having to wait for Mabel to genuinely wake up. “Fine. I guess I’m on my own then. What else is new?”

As annoyed as he was, Dipper didn’t waste any more time in hurrying out of the attic and downstairs. Fortunately, Stan was nowhere to be found, but seeing as how he was likely fast asleep himself, Dipper made sure to take the upmost care to be as discreet and quiet as possible in slipping out of the shack and back outside. Of course, he didn’t really get very far down the path that led towards the lake before coming to an abrupt realization. The lake was all the way on the other end of town, meaning that it was a relatively short trip by car, but a rather lengthy and exhausting one on foot. Seeing as how time was always on the essence when it came to things like this, Dipper knew that he’d have to find a faster method of getting there, and as he happened to glance over to the temple, he came up with the perfect idea for such a method.

On nice nights like tonight, Lion had the tendency to sleep outside, right under the house’s porch. And fortunately enough, the pink beast was peacefully snoozing right in his favorite spot, or at least he was until he picked up on someone quietly approaching him. In a flash, Lion was on his feet, his sharp teeth bared and a threatening growl rumbling from him as he glared sharply at Dipper, who stepped back a bit fearfully upon getting such a harsh reception.

“Uh… h-hey, Lion,” Dipper began with a rather forced grin of greeting, even as the pink beast continued to growl at him. “So, um… I know you and me aren’t exactly the best of friends-” Lion cut him off with a hostile snarl, prompting him to put his hands up defensively, lest the pink beast suddenly lunge at him without warning. “Ok, so we aren’t really friends at all, but how about we just forget about that for a minute? I need you to give me a ride over to the lake, alright?”

Of course, Lion was quick to stubbornly turn his nose up at this request, letting out a gruff snort as
he swiftly turned back to his sleeping spot. “Ok, that’s fine,” Dipper shrugged, feigning apathy. “I figured you’d say no, so I went back to the shack before coming up here and brought you a little… incentive…” He smirked as he reached into his jacket and pulled out a still mostly frozen Lion Licker, something that immediately caught the pink beast’s interest. “Aha! Steven mentioned that these are your favorite and it looks like he was right,” Dipper smirked in satisfaction, though he was quick to pull the treat back before Lion could snatch it out of his hand. “Whoa, hold on a second. You want this? Then you give me a ride to the lake, got it?”

While it was clear that he wasn’t pleased with this condition, Lion begrudgingly complied, lowering himself to allow Dipper to climb onto his back and scowling all the while. Of course, just because the pink beast was being agreeable didn’t mean he had any intentions of being amicable, which was why he suddenly took off running without giving Dipper much warning at all. Though he nearly fell off of his ride’s back, he managed to get a firm hold, steadying himself well enough as Lion rushed through the darkened woods as something of a shortcut to the lake.

“Ok,” Dipper said with resolve, talking more to himself than Lion as they drew ever closer to the lake. “So we’re just gonna go see what that thing that fell from the sky was, and if it seems dangerous, then we’ll go get the Gems.” He paused for a moment, looking to the smoke still rising from the supposed crash site a bit apprehensively, realizing the potential problems with this plan. “But… knowing them… they probably won’t believe me again…” He sighed, disgruntled, as he recalled the robinoids situation and noted that the plume of smoke wasn’t coming from the lake itself. It was coming from the top of the waterfall. “W-well, maybe… maybe I won’t need the Gems at all. I mean, I’ve dealt with stuff like this before. I can totally handle whatever this thing is. Right?” He glanced down at Lion, who offered no response as he began running up the steep hill that lead to the top of the falls, his expression still set in a gruff, frustrated glare. “…Right…” Dipper concluded somewhat diffidently, tightening his hold on the pink beast’s mane just a bit. “Good talk, Lion. Good talk.”

Upon finally reaching their destination, Lion came to an abrupt halt, one that essentially threw Dipper off his back and roughly landed him a few feet away. “Ow! Lion, what-” he quickly cut himself off upon turning to see the pink beast staring down at him with a demanding growl, only really caring about one thing at the conclusion of their bargain. “Ok, ok, here! Take it!” Dipper pulled the Lion Licker out of his pocket once more and tossed it over to the pink beast, who was more than happy to pounce for it and devour it aggressively. Dipper simply rolled his eyes at Lion’s wild behavior before turning towards the crash site and instantly being set on edge even more upon what lay before him.

Whatever had crashed to earth had done so hard, hard enough to knock down several trees in the vicinity and to create a rather sizable crater in the ground just a few feet away from both the river and the cliff’s edge. The round hole’s edges were still steaming, though they also seemed to be somehow oddly wet, based on the sheen they put off in the still potent moonlight. The unknown projectile was seemingly nowhere to be found, something that alarmed Dipper even more and prompted him to grab a nearby stick to defend himself as he slowly approached the crater. Upon a closer look, he realized that the crash had created not just an indentation, but an opening that likely lead down into the waterfall cave down below. Thinking that whatever had fallen from the sky was currently down there, Dipper leaned in a bit closer to the hole in an attempt to get a better look, only for his foot to slip up on the wet edge of the opening. Unable to catch himself in time, he lurched forward on accident, inadvertently falling into the hole and plummeting down into the cave far below with a fearful cry. However, before he could make a no-doubt very painful impact with the ground cave’s hard ground, something happened to catch him instead, that something being, conveniently enough, water.

As Dipper opened his eyes and gasped in surprise over being unharmed from his fall, his relief
instantly turned to panic as he took in a mouthful of water instead of air. Not knowing what else to do, he immediately swam upward, breaching the surface of the water in seconds, only to realize something was wrong as he caught his breath. Instead of landing in the waterfall pool like he initially thought he had, he was suspended in what appeared to be a small, contained bubble of water, one that was just large enough to accommodate him as it hovered just a few feet above the stony ground. Confused and unnerved by this apparent trap, Dipper began struggling to release himself from it, though his attempts were soon halted as an oddly familiar voice spoke out from the shadows of the cave.

“Dipper?”

“Huh?” Dipper froze in alarm, looking for the source of this feminine voice, who sounded to be just as startled as he was. “W-who’s there?! Show yourself! I’m warning you, I have a—well, I had a stick…” He frowned, glancing to the ground here his rather weak weapon of defense had fallen. However, he quickly realized he didn’t need it at all as a blue, bare foot slowly stepped into the moonlight pouring into the cave from above. The concealed figure seemed to hesitate a bit, almost as if they didn’t want to reveal themselves, but sure enough, they emerged from the shadows, revealing a Gem that Dipper thought he’d never really see again.

“Lapis?!” he exclaimed, his jaw dropping in shock at the sight of the equally stunned blue Gem. Lapis Lazuli stood, her eyes wide and her expression awash in immense surprise. She looked exactly the same as she had when she had departed Earth for Homeworld weeks ago, though something about her seemed different, even upon a first glance, though exactly what that something was, it was hard to tell.

For a moment, the only thing either of them could do was stare at each other incredulously, almost as if neither of them could believe such a strange and sudden meeting was taking place. And all things considered, it really was quite hard to believe, which was why neither of them really knew what to say or how to react at first. But all the same, when this stilted, almost awkward silence was finally broken, Dipper was the one to do so, though mostly in reference to how he was still trapped in the cushion of water Lapis had apparently caught him in.

“Uh… do you mind…?”

“Oh, right,” Lapis was quick to comply, lowering her lifted hand as the water bubble lowered and disbanded along with it, leaving Dipper not just free to move his limbs again but also soaking wet. “S-sorry. I thought you were… never mind…” Dipper frowned in confusion at this, and while he had countless questions he wanted to pose to Lapis in the wake of her mysterious appearance, he decided to work his way into them gradually, not wanting to overwhelm the apparently startled blue Gem. “So, um… long time, no see, huh?” he asked with something of an awkward, but still inviting smile.

“It hasn’t been a long time since the last time we saw each other,” Lapis shook her head, not understanding the common phrase. “It was just a few weeks ago, remember?”

“Uh… right…” Dipper raised an eyebrow, remembering that the blue Gem had a tendency to be rather literal. He was prepared to cut to the chase and ask her about her unexpected arrival, she beat him to it.

“Dipper, what are you doing here?” she asked, her tone rather unreadable as she looked to him intently.
“What am I-” Dipper cut himself off, bewildered as he met the blue Gem’s questioning gaze evenly. “No offense, Lapis, but I think the better question would be what are you doing here? I thought you flew back to Homeworld after Steven healed your gem.”

Lapis flinched at this, her eyes growing even wider as she took in a soft, but sharp breath before quickly glancing away. “I… I did,” she began, shakily at first, though she quickly steeled herself a moment later. “I did go back. But… let’s just say that Homeworld… wasn’t like I remember it being…”

“What do you mean?” Dipper asked, his interest peaking as his preexisting curiosity about Homeworld took over. However, it seemed as though the blue Gem had no intentions of discussing the matter further as she folded her arms and turned away from him. “Lapis?”

“Dipper… you should go…” she said with an anxious sigh, not even bothering to glance back at him.

“No!” Dipper protested, frustrated at the idea that Lapis, much like the Crystal Gems, might deny him the truth as well. He was quick to retract his bold manner, however, as the blue Gem looked back to him with apt surprise. “I-I mean… I thought you wanted to go back to Homeworld more than anything else. Heck, you even stole the lake just so you could get there. So… I just want to know what happened when you got back to Homeworld that would make you want to leave it so quickly.”

By now, Lapis had turned to face him, clearly taken aback by his insistence over the matter but still not providing much of an answer. Instead, she let out a small, almost sad sigh as she walked past him to take a seat on the edge of the outcropping overlooking the waterfall pool. Not really knowing what else to do, Dipper followed suit, sitting down beside her and listening both curiously and somewhat worriedly as she provided him with a few more details.

“You’re right. I wanted to go back, more than anything… I just…” Lapis paused, sighing again as she looked down into the water below. “W-when I got back to Homeworld… I-I realized that I just… didn’t belong there anymore. I was trapped in that mirror for thousands of years, and so many things changed while I was gone. It was like… it was like it wasn’t even the same planet anymore. It didn’t even feel like I was home…”

Upon hearing all this, all of Dipper’s inquiries concerning Homeworld were instantly put aside in favor of deep, genuine sympathy for Lapis. After all, he couldn’t even begin to imagine what it must have been like, to have one’s expectations and hopes set so high, only for them to so completely and utterly crushed. And while the blue Gem seemed to be holding back just how upset over the matter she really was, the melancholy and dejection that she was showing was more than enough to convey it. “Oh man… Lapis… I-I’m so sorry things didn’t work out…” he said with sincere condolence.

“It… it’s fine…” Lapis shook her head, her eyes shut in morose contemplation. “It’s not like it’s really your fault anyway. And despite… everything that happened, I’m still really grateful to you, Steven, and Mabel. If it wasn’t for you guys… well, I’d probably still be stuck in that mirror right now.”

The blue Gem let out a small, somewhat bitter laugh at this, one that Dipper didn’t join in on as he continued to look to her, concerned. “So, uh… if you don’t mind me asking…” he began tentatively. “Why did you decide to come back to Earth?”

“I couldn’t think of anywhere else to go,” Lapis shrugged, a hint of disdain for the planet in her tone. “But believe me, I don’t plan on staying here for too long. I just needed a place to… to, uh…
clear my head for a few hours. And when I’m done, then… I guess I’ll just go and keep on flying until I can’t anymore.”

“A few hours?” Dipper repeated, somewhat dismayed at this news. “Are you sure you don’t want to stick around just a little longer than that?”

“Why would I want to be here any longer?” the blue Gem asked tiredly. “It’s not like I’ve had too many happy memories on this planet, after all…”

“R-right…” Dipper frowned, looking away awkwardly. “Well, it’s just… the last time any of us saw you, you were trapped in a mirror or trying to make off with the waterfall. So it’s not like we really got to hang out or anything between us trying to hide you from the Gems and you almost drowning us.”

“Oh yeah…” Lapis said somewhat guiltily. “Sorry about that… But… y-you’d really want me to stay, even after… you know?”

“Well, yeah,” Dipper shrugged with a small smile. “I mean, you came all the way back here, so why not relax at least for a few days? If Homeworld was really as bad as you said it was, then I’d say you deserve a chance to take your mind off it. And if nothing else, then it’ll give you some time to figure out what you’re going to do from here, right?”

Lapis hesitated at this, conflict filling her features as she met Dipper’s hopeful, almost imploring gaze. And while she might have originally inclined to say no, there was really no way she could do so after seeing that. “Ok…” she sighed relentingly, though there was the faintest hint of a smile on her face as she did so. “I… I’ll stay. B-but only for a few days. And… and I’m just going to stay right here in this cave, i-if that’s ok.”

“Lapis, that’s fine,” Dipper said with something of an amused chuckle. “You can totally hang out here if you want to. It’s not really like anyone’s gonna bother you if you’re hiding out behind a giant wall of water,” he smirked, nodding to the backside of the falls pouring over the cave opening.

“Well, that’s a relief…” Lapis noted, still somewhat apprehensive with her choice. “I guess I’ll have to do something about that other hole though…” She frowned as she glanced up to the gaping opening high above them.

“Well, don’t close it up too quickly,” Dipper remarked, still grinning slightly. “You’ll need it open for when I bring Steven and Mabel down here tomorrow. Knowing those two, they’ll probably lose it with excitement over seeing you again and-”

“Whoa, hold on,” Lapis interjected, alarm flashing over her expression as she quickly rose to stand. “Dipper, listen to me. You can’t tell anyone else I’m here on Earth. Not Steven, not Mabel, and especially not those Crystal Gems.”

Needless to say that Dipper was somewhat surprised by the severely serious insistence in the blue Gem’s tone, and while he understood her reasoning for not wanting the Crystal Gems to know about her return, the other half of her request was rather confusing. “W-why not?” he asked tentatively, standing as well.

“Oh… w-well… I… I just want to law low for a while, you know?” Lapis ventured with a shrug, trying her best to be as convincing as possible. “A-and… you said so yourself: Steven and Mabel would be pretty excited to see me again, right? If that’s true, then… then I don’t want them to be disappointed when they find out I’m leaving in a few days…”
“Yeah, I’m sure they’d be the only ones disappointed by that…” Dipper said, crossing his arms as he sent the blue Gem a somewhat crestfallen glance.

“A-and you too, Dipper!” Lapis exclaimed, suddenly flustered by her own tactlessness. “I don’t want you to be disappointed either. To be honest, I was kind of hoping that no one would find out I was here at all…”

“Well, I’m sorry for finding you on accident then?”

“N-no! That’s not what I-” the blue Gem cut herself off, letting out a sigh to steady herself. “Look,” she said, her tone imploring and sincere as she placed a hand on Dipper’s shoulder. “I just… don’t want anyone else knowing I’m here, ok? I’m hoping that all this can stay between the two of us. “You can do that for me… can’t you, Dipper?”

Dipper didn’t answer right away, but instead looked to Lapis in apt disbelief over the fact that she was deciding to entrust him, and him alone, with such a massive secret. After all, the fact that Lapis had returned to Earth, not just from anywhere, but from Homeworld of all places, was not only monumental, but exceedingly relevant given recent events. He was already quite beside himself that he had been the one to stumble upon her alone, without Steven, Mabel, the Gems, or anyone else. But the fact that she wanted him to remain silent about such an incredible, serendipitous discovery was rather disappointing to Dipper, especially since Lapis could finally lead to some tangible answers about Homeworld and what it was up to. Yet at the same time, he realized that, perhaps hiding the blue Gem’s return from everyone, especially the Gems, could be, in a strange way, cathartic. After all, the Gems kept so many secrets, even still, from him, Steven, and Mabel. Perhaps, Dipper reasoned, it was time he started keeping a secret of his own.

“Yes,” he finally said after a prolonged silence, his tone confident and assuring. “Yes, I can.”

“Do you promise?” Lapis asked, wanting to make sure he was sincere.

“Lapis, why-”

“Dipper, do you promise?” the blue Gem repeated, much more adamantly this time.

“I-I promise,” he affirmed, knowing it was the least he could do for Lapis after everything she had apparently been through.

Lapis finally genuinely smiled upon hearing this, her hand slipping off Dipper’s shoulder as she breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you,” she said, truly grateful. “I knew I could count on you, Dipper.”

“Oh, of course,” Dipper nodded, still a bit on edge from Lapis’ heavy insistence on him swearing to secrecy. While he wanted to press her for more details on that, as well as her journey to Homeworld and back again, his curious questions were instantly forgotten as he happened to glance up at the opening over the cave, only to see the first hints of dawn lighting up the sky. “Oh, man, the sun’s rising already!” he exclaimed in sudden alarm. “I gotta get back to the shack before Mabel and Grunkle Stan realize I’m gone! Lapis, do you mind maybe giving me a lift back up?”

“Oh, sure,” Lapis complied, easily creating a platform of solid water, one that started rising upward the moment Dipper tentatively stepped onto it. “Bye, Dipper,” she called out after him with a small, cordial smile and wave as she watched him leave.

“Bye, Lapis!” Dipper shouted back more enthusiastically as the water platform lifted him up
through the way he had fallen. “I’ll be back to see you again later, I promise!”

Lapis said something in response to this, but Dipper wasn’t able to clearly make it up as the platform landed him safely on top of the cliff once more. But all the same, he couldn’t help but smile a bit as he began to make the long trek back towards the shack, strangely excited about getting to see the mysterious, yet amicable blue Gem again as well as being the only one she trusted with the knowledge of her return. And as far as Dipper was concerned, that was a trust that he had no intentions of betraying.

Fortunately, Dipper managed to make it back to the shack just as the sun finished rising, though no thanks to Lion, who had left the waterfall cliff almost as soon as he finished devouring his Lion Licker. But all the same, he managed to sneak back into the house undetected, knowing that Stan wouldn’t be up for another hour or so, and crept upstairs to the attic without being heard or spotted. The only thing he hadn’t accounted for in his stealthy return became apparent as soon as he shut the attic door behind him only to find Mabel, already up, fully-dressed, and staring at him incredulously as he walked into the room.

“M-Mabel!” Dipper exclaimed in surprise, pressing his back against the door he had just come in through. “Um, w-what are you doing up this early?”

“Uh, news flash, I’m always up this early, bro-bro,” Mabel remarked, raising an eyebrow as she walked over to him, Waddles trotting not too far behind after her. “Right after sunrise is the best time to work on knitting new sweaters, since pretty much nobody else is awake. But…” a sly smile crossed her face, her tone growing suspicious as she leaned in a bit closer to Dipper. “I think the better question, dear brother of mine, is why are you up so early? And more importantly, where did you run off to last night? What, did you have a hot, midnight date or something? Ha!”

“W-wha—no!” Dipper quickly protested, already quite nervous under his sister’s scrutiny, no matter how insincere it was. “I-I didn’t go anywhere last night, I swear! I was just… I was just getting back from a- an… early morning run! Y-yeah, uh… just a plain-old, totally normal, morning run. There’s nothing weird or suspicious about that at all, r-right?”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Dipper!” Mabel proclaimed with a wry, knowing smirk. “You? Going on a ‘morning run’? That’s super suspicious if you ask me. Even if you are sweaty enough to look like you’ve been out running, if I know anything about you, it’s that you hate anything that has to do with physical exercise because you’re a nerd who would rather spend time with books then spend time outside.”

“Hey!” Dipper objected, offended by this claim, though Mabel promptly ignored him.

“So spill it, brother!” she demanded overdramatically. “What kind of sneaky shenanigans were you getting up to last night?”

“U-uh… well, I… I was… it…” Dipper stammered aimlessly, already internally panicking over the fact that Mabel was onto him and panicking even more that he couldn’t come up with anything clever enough to appease her curiosity. Thankfully, however, before he really had to come up with an impromptu lie concerning his whereabouts the previous night, the conversation was abruptly interrupted as Steven poked his head into the attic just at the right time.

“Did somebody say sneaky shenanigans?” he asked with an eager grin. “I didn’t know it was already time for us to get started so early. Usually we wait for some magical Gem thing or
paranormal weirdness to kick things off, don’t we?”

“We do, but it seems like Dipper's way ahead of us on that, seeing as how snuck out super late last night,” Mabel informed, sending her anxious brother a coy grin.

“Whoa, really?” Steven asked, impressed and intrigued. “Dipper, that's so awesome! And potentially dangerous, but in a really cool way! Where did you sneak off to?”

“Ugh, nowhere, Steven,” Dipper said, glaring over at Mabel as he did so. “Like I keep telling Mabel, I didn't go anywhere last night. She's just overexaggerating, as usual.”

“No, I'm not!” Mabel insisted adamantly. “I remember you trying to wake me up last night to get me to come along with you to check out some kind of cake or something.” She paused for a moment, briefly pondering what she had just said. “Or maybe you said lake instead... I dunno, the details are kinda hazy since I was mostly asleep and everything.”

“The lake?” Steven repeated in confusion as Dipper froze up in alarm. “What was over at the lake?”

“It... it was... uh... nothing!” Dipper quickly filled in, playing the matter off with false disappointment. “I thought I saw something out that way, so I decided to go check it out. Turned out it was just... it was... uh...” He hesitated, not even wanting to imply that Lapis was in the vicinity whatsoever, even if he did think that Steven and Mabel deserved to know, at the very least. But regardless, he had promised the blue Gem that he wouldn't say anything, and he was going to keep that promise, no matter what. “I-it was just a bunch of tourists setting off some illegal fireworks! Heh, yeah... that works...”

“Fireworks, huh?” Mabel frowned skeptically, not fully convinced of this claim but buying it for the moment as she began to make her way to the door along with Steven. “Whatever you say, bro-bro. But you better hope that Grunkle Stan doesn't find out about your little midnight run over to the lake since we're still grounded from mystery hunting.”

“You better not tell him, Mabel!” Dipper exclaimed hotly, knowing that the last thing he wanted was to have to worry about Stan in all this.

“Don't worry, Dippin-Dots,” Mabel assured with a sly wink as she led the way out of the room. “Your super sneaky secret is safe with me.”

“Well, we're off to go make some pancake omelets!” Steven proclaimed cheerfully. “Since you're already up, Dipper, you're more than welcome to join us!”

“Uh... I think I'll pass,” Dipper said, heading over to the nightstand to reclaim the journal. “I have some, uh... stuff I need to take care of.”

“What kind of stuff?” Mabel asked dubiously.

“Just... stuff-stuff, ok?!” Dipper exclaimed, exasperated. “Can you guys cut it out with the third degree already? It's not like me sneaking out last night is even that big of a deal, so let's just drop it, ok?”

“Yeesh, ok, Mr. Grumpy-Pants,” Mabel scoffed, crossing her arms. “We're just gonna go have fun, like normal people who aren't acting like suspicious weirdos. See you when you decide to stop being all mysterious or whatever.”

Without any further ado, Mabel and Steven finally took their leave, allowing Dipper to let out a
long-held back sigh of relief over not having to keep up appearances in front of them any longer. But what he didn't know was that the pair was still discussing the matter as they made their way downstairs.

“Steven, please tell me I'm not the only one who noticed how weird Dipper was acting back there,” Mabel implored, both worried and annoyed with her brother's odd behavior. “And by that I mean weirder than he usually acts.”

“Yeah, he did seem a little... on edge, now that you mention it...” Steven frowned, more genuinely concerned. “Do you think something’s wrong?”

“Maybe…” Mabel noted pensively as they arrived in the kitchen and began setting out their cooking supplies. “But then again, it’s not like Dipper’s never acted all skittish and nervous like this before. Still... I kinda can’t help but think there’s something he’s not telling us…”

“Really?” the young Gem wondered. “Like what?”

Mabel was more than ready to rattle off a lengthy list of possible ideas, but before she could, both her and Steven were caught off guard upon hearing the shack’s front door creak open. Seeing as how it was still too early for either Soos or Wendy to be coming in for their shifts, both of them were rather confused at this, and so they unanimously decided to go check it out, only to find Dipper trying to slip outside once again.

“Where are you going?” Mabel asked, startling Dipper as he hadn’t noticed them come in to see him. He let out a frightened gasp, instantly shutting the door as he spun around to face the curious pair.

“N-nowhere!” he exclaimed, quite panicked over being found out once again. He was quickly starting to realize that if he intended keeping this secret, he would have to start being more careful, especially around Mabel and Steven, seeing as how they were already onto him.

“Uh, it kinda looks like you were heading somewhere…” the young Gem mused, somewhat bewildered as he nodded to the backpack Dipper was wearing.

“Oh... uh... I-I was... I was just going into town to run some errands for Grunkle Stan!” Dipper came up with something off the top of his head, knowing that he couldn’t very well just tell them he was heading back to the lake to check in on Lapis.

“Oh, well can we come with you?” Steven offered with a newfound smile.

“No!” Dipper protested far too adamantly, though he was quick to reign it back in. “I-I mean... I’m just gonna be running around town for a few hours, doing um... errand-type stuff... nothing special. It’ll probably be really boring, so you guys probably wouldn’t want to come along anyway.”

“Are you sure?” Mabel asked, a little more concerned as she took a step closer to him.

“Positive,” Dipper nodded with complete certainty. “Well, uh, I guess I better get going then. See you guys later!” Not wasting anymore time, he hurried out the door, hardly sparing a second glance back at the very confused and troubled pair he had left behind.

“Well, I think that proves it,” Mabel concluded, folding her arms as soon as Dipper was gone. “Something is definitely up with him. And it’s up to us to figure out what that something is!”

“Ok, but... how are we gonna do that?” Steven asked curiously.
“By playing Dipper at his own super-secret sneaky game,” Mabel proclaimed with confidence in her newfound plan. “Just you wait, Steven, in a few days, we’ll have this case cracked wide open!”

“Like an egg!” Steven added enthusiastically before taking a tentative glance behind him to see smoke pouring out of the kitchen. “Uh, speaking of eggs, I think ours are burning!” The pair gasped in shared alarm as they rushed to take care of their cooking disaster, though as soon as they were finished, they already began plotting out their course of action. Regardless of whatever unknown, mysterious secret Dipper seemed to be keeping from them, they were both resolved to get to the bottom of it, no matter what they had to do.

While Dipper had originally intended to make his second trip to go see Lapis later in the day, he had figured he would try to slip out while Steven and Mabel were distracted, a plan that had clearly backfired as they had blatantly noticed him leave. Still, he was resolved to keep the truth under wraps, as much as he did want to reveal it to the two of them, if no one else. But regardless of what he wanted, he knew that he couldn’t let the blue Gem down in this matter, especially after she had put her trust in him to safeguard her secret in the first place.

Speaking of Lapis, the first thing Dipper noticed upon making it back to the top of the waterfall cliff was that the blue Gem had kept to her word in covering the hole she had created the previous night. A rather sizable bolder lay over it, making it look like nothing had ever been there, but still, a very small gap in the ground was still visible, one that was just enough for Dipper to use to get Lapis’ attention.

“Lapis!” he called, directly into the gap as not to garnish too much attention if there were indeed any prying eyes nearby. “It’s me: Dipper! Can I come down?”

Lapis didn’t respond verbally, but a moment or two later, the boulder did move aside, a long, strong arm composed of water holding it up just long enough to allow Dipper to slip underneath it and into the opening. While he was in a freefall for a moment or two, the blue Gem caught him with a snort, literal waterslide this time, landing him safely on the cave floor. It wasn’t much of a smooth landing however, as he ended up slipping off of the slide and hitting the floor back first, though he fortunately wasn’t hurt from the rather rough fall, even if Lapis thought otherwise as she hurried over to him.

“Oh! Sorry!” she apologized, flustered as she reached out a hand to help him up. “I didn’t know you were going to just… jump in like that, so… um… yeah… s-sorry…”

“Next time…” Lapis repeated, her brow furrowing as she looked to him intently. “You… weren’t kidding about coming back…”

“Uh, no, I wasn’t,” Dipper confirmed, somewhat confused as to why the blue Gem seemed to be taken aback by this. “You seemed… kind of shaken up last night, so I just wanted to check in and make sure you’re alright. I-if that’s ok…”

“Y-you… you wanted to…” Lapis trailed off, pausing for a moment, almost as if she was having a hard time processing such an idea. However, she didn’t let her apparent surprise show for too long as she quickly regained her composure. “You didn’t have to do that. I’m fine, really.”
“Are you sure?” Dipper asked, not entirely convinced. “Because I feel like it would get at least a little lonely hiding out in a cave all by yourself like this.”

The blue Gem finally cracked a smile, albeit a somewhat bitter one at this. “I’m used to being alone. And to be honest… I don’t mind it. Everything’s less distracting when there’s nobody else around.”

“I… sorta know what you mean by that,” Dipper admitted with a small, somewhat embarrassed grin. “Steven and Mabel are always talking about how I should ‘get out more’ and ‘meet new people’. but… that’s just not me, you know?”

“I kind of do, actually,” Lapis nodded in understanding, her smile taking on a hint of amusement. “That’s actually one of the first things I noticed about you when I was still trapped in the mirror. Steven and Mabel were so excited to talk to me and make jokes and everything, but you, Dipper… you weren’t so into it… And, after going so long without anyone to really talk to… well, that sort of bothered me, I guess…”

“So is that why you basically kept mocking me while you were in there?” Dipper asked with something of a knowing smirk.

“Yeah, kinda,” Lapis said, chuckling a bit. “Give me a break. When you’ve spent centuries trapped inside mirror, you have to find ways to entertain yourself somehow. And believe me, seeing you get so worked up over nothing gave me plenty of entertainment.”

Both of them let out a shared, genuine laugh over this, making it clear that neither of them bore any hard feelings over the matter whatsoever. “So, I know you just said you like being alone,” Dipper began after the bout of levity had faded. “But do you mind if I hang out here for a few hours? Mabel and Steven got on my case when I left earlier and I don’t really feel like going back right now and having them hound me with a ton of questions I don’t really have answers for.”

“You know what?” Lapis asked, still grinning gently as she placed her hands on her hips. “I don’t think I’d mind that at all.”

From that point onward, the ongoing conversation between the two continued, though it remained on a mostly casual level, with Dipper detailing to Lapis how Steven, Mabel, and himself had been during her absence. He did notice that the blue Gem was rather hesitant to talk much about her own wellbeing, and that she was even more hesitant to mention Homeworld in anything but a cursory manner. And while he was still hoping that Lapis could provide him with at least a few answers concerning the planet he knew so little about, he figured he could gradually ease into the topic later, whenever the blue Gem seemed a bit more comfortable with discussing it. But for now, Dipper was content with sitting at the edge of the waterfall pool as Lapis stood upon its surface below the outcropping, her hands outstretched as she made good on her promise to give him a proper demonstration of her aquatic abilities. As curious about Gem powers as ever, Dipper leaned forward a bit, watching with apt fascination as Lapis gracefully manipulated the water around her with mastery and ease. Unable to resist the urge to document something new, he eventually found himself pulling the journal out of his backpack, and as the blue Gem continued displaying her impressive power, he began carving out an entirely new entry on her, just as the mysterious author likely would have done before him.

Meanwhile, Lapis let out a contented sigh as she essentially turned the waterfall pool into a small, elegant fountain. Simply making use of her hydrokinesis in such a peaceful, simplistic way was rather therapeutic for her, especially considering all she had been through lately. As she glanced back up at Dipper, however, her light smile faded into a confused frown as she saw that his attention was less devoted to her demonstration, and more to the unknown book he seemed to be
intently writing in. Curious, Lapis called upon her aquatic wings, only needing them for a single flap to get her back up to the outcropping. Dipper was so engrossed in jotting down notes about the blue Gem, that he didn't even notice her step up behind him and watch over his shoulder for a moment before making her interest known.

“What are you doing?”

“L-Lapis!” Dipper gasped, startled by the interruption enough to nearly drop the journal into the waterfall pool on accident, though he managed to catch it and hide it behind his back just in time. “I-I wasn't doing anything! I was just, uh... watching you use your powers! Like I said I wanted to!”

Lapis raised a dubious eyebrow at this rather lame excuse, before discreetly creating a tendril of water from the pool to snatch the mysterious book away from Dipper, much to his protest. All the same, the blue Gem was far too intrigued now to really listen as she pulled the journal over to herself and began to curiously flip through its pages. “What's all this?”

“I-it... it's...” Dipper stammered, unsure of how to really explain the journal to the blue Gem. However, he was quick to remember that Lapis wasn't one of the Crystal Gems, which meant that she wouldn’t have any real reason to be upset with its contents as they had been and still somewhat seemed to be. Or at least he hoped she wouldn’t be. “It's... a journal I found in the woods a while back. It’s filled with a bunch of notes on all of the weird, supernatural things that live here in Gravity Falls.”

“I've never seen creatures like these before...” Lapis noted, intrigued as she flipped between pages of gnomes and ghosts and leprecorns. “Are all of these real?”

“Oh, yeah, all of them,” Dipper nodded, rather relieved that the blue Gem was more interested than offended by the book. “In fact, we've even ran into a few of them this summer.”

“So you wrote all this then?” Lapis asked, looking to him with a small, impressed smile.

“Me? Oh, no, of course not!” Dipper said with a slight, incredulous laugh, almost flattered by the thought, as impossible as it was. “Well, at least not most of it. I still don't know who wrote the first half, but, um... I have been keeping a few pages of my own in the back, j-just for fun. But you probably wouldn't want to see any of-” He cut himself off as he noticed the blue Gem eagerly flip directly towards the end of the book. “And... you're going to look at them anyway...” He sighed, glancing away in apprehension as Lapis began leafing through his pages. As he had feared, the blue Gem let out a small chuckle a moment later, though to his surprise, it wasn't one of mockery, but rather of genuine enjoyment.

“Dipper, these are really good!” she exclaimed warmly, holding up the page he had written on the dinosaur cavern. “You must have worked pretty hard on them.”

“I-I... uh... it... it was no big deal...” Dipper shrugged rather humbly, even if he was glad for the compliment. “But thanks.”

“I can't believe you've actually seen all of these things...” Lapis mused, clearly fascinated by the journal's content. “I don't even know what most of them are, much less all of this stuff you've written about them all.”

“Well... I could tell more about them...” Dipper offered, surprised, but elated that the blue Gem seemed to be so invested in all this. “I-I mean, if you wanted me to, that is...”

“Sure, why not?” Lapis grinned, taking a seat on the outcropping beside him. However, before she
handed the journal back, she happened to turn it to one more page, the one that Dipper had been working on moments ago. And of course, the sight of a sketch depicting herself was more than enough to peak the blue Gem's interest even more. “Is that... me?”

“No!” Dipper quickly denied, grabbing the journal back from her and slamming it shut. Of course, he only became more flustered as he glanced over at Lapis, who met his embarrassed gaze with surprise and inquiry that he couldn't really ignore. “Yes...” He relented with a sigh, turning to the half-finished entry again. “There's a lot of Gem stuff in here, so I just thought it'd be cool if there was a page on you too... I'm sorry I didn't ask you first. I can just tear if out if you-”

“No,” Lapis stopped him before his hand could even touch the page. “You should keep it.”

“R-really?”

“Yeah,” the blue Gem nodded with a smile. “I'm glad you thought I was important enough to have a page in there too.” A beat of silence passed at this, one that made Dipper want to question Lapis on what exactly she meant by that vague, almost depreciating statement, but before he could, she continued. “Now, are you gonna show me what else is in this journal, or not?”

Excited for the opportunity Lapis was giving him, Dipper didn't hesitate to comply, flipping open to the beginning of his pages, as those seemed to be the ones the blue Gem had the most interest in. Hours passed as he detailed the summer escapades the journal detailed to her, using the book only as base guide as he told her the stories he had lived through, of the Gobblewonker, the light cannons, the Summerween Trickster, the Gideon-bot, the zombie outbreak, the bunker, and more. Lapis showed her genuine intrigue by asking questions at all the right intervals, questions that Dipper was more than happy to answer. After all, it wasn't that often that he came across someone who would actually listen to him when it came to his paranormal findings, much less take what he had to say about them seriously.

But Lapis seemed to not only show interest in it all; she showed support for Dipper being so passionate about it. In a way, his excitement over the mysteries he had solved thus far fascinated the blue Gem even more than the mysteries themselves. His enthusiasm for what he loved made her begin to care for it too, even if she knew only a fraction of what he did about any of it. But all the same, she was perfectly content to listen to him fervently reveal his riveting findings to her for as long as he could. After all, the further her thoughts drifted away from her own pressing problems, the better off she would be.

Of course, considering how much there was just so tell and the fact that Dipper had to head back to the shack eventually, he wasn’t able to finish recounting everything from the journal to Lapis. However, before he left the cave, they both decided that the only thing better than talking about mysteries was to find one for themselves, which was why they began planning out a mystery hunt of their own for the next day. Sneaking under Mabel and Steven’s radar was a fair bit easier for Dipper this time, largely since the young Gem was away on a mission with his guardians and he only had his sister’s probing questions to contend with. Still, he managed to slip past her sturdy wall of suspicion without tipping her off, and sure enough, he made it back to the waterfall cave undetected for the third time. Lapis seemed a touch more upbeat upon Dipper’s arrival today as opposed to their previous two meetings, even if her usual pensive manner still largely remained. However, she still refused to leave the hidden sanctuary that was her cave, for reasons she refused to really disclose, even for the sake of a mystery hunt. But, as luck would have it, the journal detailed that the cave contained a hidden tunnel that led all the way through the mountainside, a tunnel that they easily rooted out thanks to Lapis’ water powers. And so, without any further delay
or hesitation, the pair set off, more than ready to spend the day sharing their very first mystery together.

“So, what exactly are we looking for again?” Lapis asked as they began to make their way through the tunnel system. The passage was narrow and damp, but most of all, it was pitch dark, meaning that the only light they had to go by was from Dipper’s flashlight, which was really only adequate at best, but still just enough to guide them through the caves.

“I don’t really know,” Dipper shrugged as he led the way. “I’ve never really explored these caves before. I guess we should just keep an eye open for anything that’s weird or out of the ordinary. Which probably shouldn’t be that hard since that sort of stuff usually runs into us first.”

“Oh,” Lapis nodded, not entirely sure how this whole mystery hunt thing was supposed to work, but willing to try it for Dipper’s sake all the same.

“To be honest, I’m actually not supposed to be doing this,” Dipper admitted somewhat sheepishly. “Me and Mabel are grounded from mystery hunting, so if anyone found out about this, I’d probably get in a ton of trouble.”

“Well, don’t worry,” the blue Gem assured playfully. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

“Thanks,” Dipper said with an amused smile, one that soon turned to a thoughtful frown. “Uh… speaking of secrets… I’ve been wondering… The other night, when you made me promise not to tell anyone you were here, you seemed really serious about it… And I just wanted to know what was up with that.”

“Nothing,” Lapis answered tersely, averting his gaze. “Nothing was up with that. I already told you, I’m fine.”

Based on the blue Gem’s overtly anxious tone, Dipper could tell that she was anything but fine, and this time, he wasn’t about to drop the matter so easily. “Does it have to do with why you left Homeworld?” he asked, hoping to finally get the answers that had been evading him for so long.

“No,” Lapis shook her head adamantly as she pressed on ahead. “Dipper, I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“Why not?!” Dipper exclaimed in sudden frustration, frustration that went beyond just the blue Gem’s refusal to be honest with him. “All I want, all I’ve ever wanted is to know the truth, which is something that nobody wants to give me, not even you! What happened really on Homeworld that made you want to leave it so badly?!”

“I can’t tell you…” the blue Gem muttered, holding her arms almost morosely.

“Why? Because you think I’m ‘too young’ to handle it?” Dipper asked rather bitterly. “Because I’ve heard that one too many times to count.”

“No,” Lapis clarified, finally turning back around to face him. Her expression was shaken, nervous, and fearful, but above all else, it was completely sincere. “Dipper, I want to tell you what happened, I do, but… It was just… I’m not… I-”

The blue Gem cut herself off with a startled gasp as something suddenly bumped into her leg from behind. Their argument halted, both Dipper and Lapis turned to see hundreds of small, spherical lights beginning to glow amidst the darkness of the tunnel, lights that seemed to skitter across the walls and the floor as a chorus of gentle, chirping sounds began to echo through the cave. After exchanging a bewildered glance with Lapis, Dipper shined his flashlight over at the wall to see
what the source of this strange, otherworldly light really was. Amazingly, the glow seemed to be coming from the wide, watching eyes of a massive horde of odd, round, rock-like creatures. Their hardened bodies were small, just a little over the size of a hand, but smooth, save for the array of iridescent crystals that seemed to jut out of each of their bodies. They emitted a pitchy, yet harmonious tune as the light they were emitting grew stronger, every single one of them looking curiously to the pair that had intruded upon their territory.

“What are these things?” Lapis asked in quiet awe, picking the petite creature that had bumped into her leg up to get a closer look at it.

“I think I’ve seen these things in the journal before…” Dipper noted, his frustration replaced with fascination as he pulled the book out and flipped it open. “Oh, here they are. ‘Geodites: These creatures resemble living geodes. They make high-pitched chirping and humming sounds, and amble about on clanking crystal legs. Considering their odd, pack-mentality and their aforementioned crystalline appendages, I'm inclined to believe that these Geodites are Gem in origin.’”

“Wait, these things are Gems?” Lapis frowned in confusion as she looked to the Geodite in her hand, knowing it looked nothing like the rest of her kind. “But how?”

“They must be more of those corrupted Gem monsters,” Dipper concluded, putting the journal away.

“Corrupted?” the blue Gem repeated, not knowing what he meant by that until she happened to recall one of the few very significant things she had borne witness to during her time trapped in the mirror. “The light…” she gasped almost inaudibly, her eyes wide with alarm as she started putting the pieces together after centuries of wondering. Fortunately though, her shock was just quiet enough that Dipper didn't really hear her as he stepped forward to get a better look at the collection of Geodites before them.

“It's weird though...” he mused, picking one of the tiny creatures up, noticing how it didn't struggle against him and instead only continued to chirpy almost happily. “Usually whenever any of us run into things like these, they try to attack us the minute they see us. But these guys seem totally harmless.”

Still bewildered by the concept of corruption alone, Lapis didn't really have much to say to this as she looked back to the Geodite she was holding again almost sympathetically, despite the cheerful tune the creature was singing. However, she only had a moment to mull over its disturbing fate before a low rumbling began to rattle the tunnel, one that only grew louder and closer with each passing second. The Geodites' bright song seemed to grow even moreso, its volume rising as something drew nearer, though exactly what that something was, neither Dipper nor Lapis had any clue. It soon showed itself however, as the crystals on its orb-like body lit up, revealing that it was yet another Geodite, only this one was massive compared to all the others as it towered even over the pair invading its territory. Its manner was much or aggressive and violent when compared to the other Geodites as well, as it let out a low, irate roar, one that the other rock-like creatures sang along with merrily as it began to attack.

“There's a bigger one?!” Dipper asked in apt surprise, already more than eager to update the author's notes in the journal on the Geodites with this new information. However, before he could even get his camera out of his bag to snap a photo of it, the oversized Geodite reared up on its crystal legs before coming down with the intention of crushing him.

“Look out!” Lapis warned, acting quickly and pushing both Dipper and herself out of the way just before the large Geodite slammed down. Neither of them had much time to catch their breath,
however, as the creature swiveled around, glaring at them both viciously before mindlessly charging at them. “Come on!” the blue Gem urged, grabbing Dipper by the wrist and pulling him to his feet before taking off in the other direction. This tactic quickly proved to be a bust, however, as the smaller Geodites hurried to congregate around their only real method of escape, essentially trapping them in with the largest rock creature.

“O-ok, I take back what I said about these things being harmless,” Dipper remarked somewhat fearfully, especially as they both turned to see the large Geodite race towards them again. This time, however, Lapis managed to hold it back, making use of the water clinging to the walls of the cave to create a liquid barrier that the Geodite ran smack into. Still, as it got back up and regathered its bearings, it became clear that this wall of water wouldn't hold for too long as it charged into it over and over again in the hopes of breaking it.

“How do we stop it?!” Lapis asked, struggling to maintain her aquatic barrier, which was quickly starting to wear thin against the monster's persistence.

“I don't know!” Dipper professed, anxiously flipping through the journal. “There's nothing in here about big Geodites; just the tiny ones!”

Before Lapis could even respond to this, the Geodite suddenly crashed through her wall of water, completely dispelling it, but it didn't stop there. The creature kept going, running at an alarming speed, until it plowed right into the blue Gem, knocking her back into the nearby wall hard enough to send her into a daze.

“Lapis!” Dipper exclaimed in worried alarm, ready to run over to her to see if she was alright, but the Geodite was intent on reaching her first to finish what it had started. As out of it as she was from the harsh blow she had suffered, the blue Gem was really in no position to defend herself from the furious creature, which was why Dipper decided to do that for her.

“Hey!” he shouted to the large Geodite, picking up one of the smaller ones straggling nearby. “Leave her alone!” Without any sort of fear or hesitation, he threw the miniature Geodite at its massive counterpart, watching with both satisfaction and alarm as it hit its mark and created a large, powerful spark. This was enough to not just send a good portion of the nearby Geodites skittering away in fear at the sudden, bright light, but it also shattered the projectile rock entirely and created a rather sizable chip in the larger creature's side. “Oh my gosh! That's it!” Dipper exclaimed in surprised realization over this discover. “Lapis, I know how to beat this thing! We need to-” He was abruptly cut off before he could finish, as the outraged large Geodite retaliated for the injury it had received by lashing out at Dipper, kicking him down hard with one of its crystalline appendages. Lapis, who had just finished recovering from her own listlessness, let out a frightened gasp at this, her fear rising as the Geodite pinned Dipper down by his vest, its massive, much stronger form standing over him threateningly.

“Dipper!” the blue Gem cried, still struggling to pull herself up and stand steady amidst her ongoing dizziness. Still, she was already commanding the water around her to form into a large hand, one that was more than ready to brutalize the Geodite aside in an instant until it was halted right before she could bring it down.

“Lapis, wait!” Dipper called, trying and failing to wrest himself free from the crystal arm holding him down. Despite the Geodite hitting him rather hard, he seemed mostly unharmed, aside from a few scrapes and bruises, but all the same, he knew he wouldn't remain largely uninjured if Lapis launched her proposed attack. “Hit it with the smaller Geodites! They're the only things that'll put a dent in it!”

Lapis complied with a terse nod, her water hand already moving to implement this plan by
scooping up as many of the tiny Geodites as it could hold. The larger creature didn't seem to take notice of this as it hissed savagely at Dipper, holding up a longer, very sharp crystal leg up and taking aim right at him. He let out a fearful gasp as he closed his eyes and braced himself for a no-doubt incredibly painful blow, but miraculously enough, it never came. Instead, a fierce shout rose up from the blue Gem as she thrust her arms forward, her hand of water turning into a canon that fired the smaller Geodites off at the larger one at a rapid rate. As the massive Geodite reared back in a roar of pain, Lapis took the opportunity to rescue Dipper from its grip with another aquatic tendril, one that gently yet securely pulled him safely over to her. Even as the Geodite turned to face its attacker with an intense, furious screech, the blue Gem did not relent, aggressively launching the smaller creatures at the monster until it finally imploded from its severe injuries. Lapis created a veil of water over herself and Dipper to shield them from the resulting raining shrapnel, and with their leader destroyed, the remaining Geodites quickly scurried off deeper into the cave, leaving the pair relative darkness, but peaceful safety, once more.

“Whoa, Lapis, that was amazing!” Dipper exclaimed, aptly impressed by blue Gem’s incredible show of power. “You completely destroyed that thing! I’ve never seen anything like that before!”

“Heh, yeah, well…” Lapis trailed off with a small humble smile. “I couldn’t have done it without you figuring out how to beat it. Guess I wasn’t wrong when I was still in the mirror and I told you that you were clever.”

The pair shared a warm laugh over this, but as it eventually died out, it was replaced with something of an awkward silence the excitement from their victory faded and the recollection of their argument before it returned. And while neither of them really wanted to address it after the mortal danger they had both just been in together, but all the same, Dipper stepped up to speak up about it first.

“Um… Lapis?” he began rather tentatively, hoping not to reopen any wounds. “I… I’m sorry about earlier. It’s just… I’m so tired of nobody being honest with me. But, you’ve been through so much and I guess I just sort of… forgot about that. If you don’t want to talk about Homeworld, then… then that’s fine with me.”

Lapis took pause upon hearing this, her expression surprised at first, then almost slightly ashamed as she averted his comforting smile. “Dipper, I… Y-you need to…” she trailed off, clearly wanting to say more, but lacking the courage to say it. “Thank you…” she said, her gaze drifting downward dejectedly. Dipper frowned as he noticed her clear melancholy, realizing that it was an emotion Lapis was probably well acquainted with, even if she didn’t really deserve to be. Which was why he wanted to show her something a little lighter for a change.

“Hey, uh, you know, we did just beat back a huge, rampaging Gem monster,” Dipper said casually enough. “We should celebrate.”

“Celebrate?” Lapis raised an eyebrow. “How?”

“Well, we could… um… hm…” he paused, unsure of what they could really do considering the blue Gem’s refusal to leave the cave. “Oh wait! I know!” Lapis watched curiously as Dipper reached into his backpack, pulling out his camera, an object that blue Gem was completely unfamiliar with. “So, it’s not much, but we could take a few photos to sort of commemorate our first mystery hunt, I guess.”

“Photos?” Lapis frowned, clearly confused by the foreign concept.

“Yeah, you know, like a picture,” Dipper clarified.
“Uh… why?”

“Um… just so we can look back at them and remember what happened. Here, I’ll show you,” Dipper turned the camera on, getting it ready as he motioned for Lapis to come in closer. The blue Gem did so, looking to the camera inquisitively, especially as Dipper turned the lens around to face them. “Ok, so all you have to do is look here, and smile, and in 3, 2, 1…” He snapped the photo before Lapis was really ready for it, and as the flash lit up, the blue Gem let out a startled gasp, blinded by the light for a moment or two as she hurriedly stumbled back, much to Dipper’s surprise.

“Lapis, are you ok?!” he asked with concern as he hurried over to her.

“W-what was that?!” she exclaimed in alarm, rubbing her eyes to clear them.

“It was just the flash,” Dipper said with a small, somewhat amused laugh as he pulled the developed picture out of the camera. “It just makes sure there’s enough light for us to take the picture by. See?” He held the photo up for Lapis to see, only for her to let out a shocked, horrified gasp.

“No,” she shook her head, taking the photo for herself and looking over it frantically. “No, not again!”

“Lapis?” Dipper spoke up, confused by her sudden panic.

“Dipper, that… that machine of yours, it trapped us inside this piece of paper!” Lapis exclaimed, completely distressed. “I don’t know how it did it, but here we are, stuck inside of this thing with no way of getting out, just like the mirror!”

“…What?”

“I can’t do this again!” Lapis shouted, gripping the picture tightly. “And I can’t let you be trapped like I was either! Maybe if I tear it, then we’ll-”

“Whoa, Lapis, wait!” Dipper interjected, taking the picture away from the distraught blue Gem. “We’re not trapped inside this thing. It’s just a picture of us from a few minutes ago. It’s ok.”

“B-but…” Lapis trailed off, looking to the photo again as her dread began to die down and understanding filling in for it. “I-it… its ok…”

“Um… you can have this if you want,” Dipper offered, holding the photo out to her. “Then again… we might wanna take a better one…” He frowned, nodding to the blue Gem’s look of terrified surprise in the picture.

A bit more at ease, but still hesitant, Lapis agreed, though she still kept a wary eye on the camera as they took another picture. The second one turned out a little better, though the blue Gem still flinched at the flash, leading to them taking a third one. Even still, it took a few more tries after that for Lapis to so much as smile, but when she finally did, their photos turned out far better. In fact, the longer their impromptu photo session went, the brighter both of their smiles became, to the point that by the time they were done, they had taken an abundance of genuinely warm, cheerful photos. Dipper ended up taking most of them with him at the end of the day, with Lapis only keeping one of the best ones in the set, with both of them smiling lightly as they squeezed into the frame together. But even without the pictures to serve as physical proof as the time they had spent together, the memories they had inadvertently made were more than enough to suffice.
“Ok, everyone.” Mabel began as she paced before her audience consisting of Steven, Soos, and Wendy. “I’ve gathered you all here today to solve a mystery of mysterious proportions.”

“Oooo, mystery…” Steven echoed for the purpose of adding dramatic effect.

“And that mystery is…” Mabel trailed off, flipping over the chalkboard filled with notes that her and Steven had gathered over the past few days. “Where does Dipper keep disappearing to every day?”

“We’ve been doing a bunch of really scientific research the past few days,” the young Gem continued, joining Mabel in front of the couch. “And by research, I mean we’ve mostly just keeping an eye on Dipper when he is around, which, to be honest, isn’t really that often lately.”

“So have you dudes figured anything out from all that?” Soos asked curiously.

“Not… really…” Mabel admitted. “But we’re getting closer! The other day when he got back, he was all bruised and banged up, which made me think maybe he had joined an underground wrestling league-”

“Just like Amethyst!” Steven chimed in brightly.

“-But then I realized that if Dipper tried wrestling, he’d probably end up in a hospital instead of just a little beaten up, so that idea was out. Which is why we asked you guys to help us. We need some fresh ideas about how to finally uncover his deep, dark secret!”

"I don't know, you guys..." Wendy interjected with a frown. "Maybe Dipper hasn't told us what's up for a reason. We should probably just respect his privacy, you know?"

"Hm... yeah, maybe..." Steven mused, not having really considered that before.

"Or..." Mabel cut in, still wanting to continue their mission. "We could figure out what's up with him, and then we can all move on with our lives. Besides, it's not like Dipper to keep secrets like this, especially from me! I just wanna know what it is and why he thinks he can't tell me about it..."

"Aw, don't worry, dude," Soos said with sympathy upon seeing how much the matter apparently upset Mabel. "We'll help you out. I mean, knowing Dipper, he probably just found an alien and he's trying to keep it hidden from the government. Just like in that old movie!"

The others all looked to the handyman incredulously at this, none of them really believing such a spacey suggestion to be anywhere close to accurate. "Uh, well, it’s a good thing we've come up with a plan to follow Dipper the next time he heads out," Steven said a moment later. "Which should probably be pretty soon, according to our calculations." The young Gem grinned as he held up a clipboard filled with random, messy doodles that were all rather unrelated to the matter at hand.

"Which is why we need to be prepared," Mabel said with bold determination. "Dipper's going to be leaving through that door any minute now, and as soon as he goes, we're all gonna go too. We'll have to be super stealthy so he won't know we're onto him, but I think, between the four of us, we can pull this off and figure out what Dipper's been hiding from everyone!"

"Uh, I'm still not sure this is such a good idea, Mabel," Wendy remarked, concerned.

"Oh, it’s a great idea," Mabel assured with a confident grin. "Now, let's watch that door!"
The group did so, turning to the front door of the shack and training their focus upon it intently. However, it wasn't very long into their vigil that they happened to hear the gift shop door open and close, even though the shack was currently closed. "Uh, dudes?" Soos spoke up. "What if Dipper overheard us and decided to go through the gift shop instead?"

"To the gift shop!" Steven exclaimed, already hopping off of the couch along with Soos and Mabel as they hurried into the shop. Wendy followed a bit behind them, and she couldn't help but let out a small, ironic chuckle upon seeing how their stealth mission had backfired on them before it could even really begin.

"Uh, yeah..." The cashier laughed to the trio, who had managed to trap themselves in the doorway as they all tried to squeeze out of it at once. "No offense, but you guys might wanna rework that 'plan' of yours..."

It had been several days since Lapis' return to earth, and for every single one of those days, Dipper had made sure to stop by the waterfall cave and visit her for at least an hour, though usually, his stays were much longer. And over the course of those visits, it was clear to see that a deep bond had started to develop between the pair, one that was quite unlikely, but completely genuine all the same. As it turned out, they both actually had a lot to bond over too, perhaps not in origins or experiences, but in personalities and worldviews. Despite her occasional bouts of despondency, Lapis actually had a rather sarcastic sense of humor, something that Dipper could certainly relate to given his own tendency to be a bit sardonic. It was also quite apparent that they were both more on the introverted side, with neither of them needing much company to get by, but still enjoying the companionship they gave each other nonetheless.

After the danger they faced in their first mystery hunt, Dipper and Lapis had unanimously decided to keep the adventures during their visits to a minimum, in favor of simply hanging out and chatting instead. The blue Gem wasn't too keen on talking about herself or her past, seeing as how a good portion of her past had been spent within the confines of a mirror. So instead, she let Dipper do most of the talking as he told her more about Gravity Falls and the Earth in general, seeing as how she didn't really seem to know much about it at all. Every time he came to see her, he would bring what Lapis had dubbed "human things", such as books, magazines, odd souvenirs from the shack, and more, all of which the blue Gem showed a sincere interest in. As a whole, her curiosity and fascination towards humans in general seemed to grow thanks to Dipper, even if she did still harbor a good deal of resentment towards the planet that had kept her prisoner for so long. Still, she let him tell her about it, glad for his company and for how he managed to keep her mind off of what she couldn't bear to think about.

As undiscovered and peaceful the waterfall cave was, it wasn't long before they both started to grow a bit tired of spending all their time in it. When Dipper suggested a change in venue one evening, Lapis was initially against the idea, still wanting to stay out of sight. However, the longer he implored her to simply go outside, the weaker her resolve became, until it, until she finally agreed. With the blue Gem not wanting to stray too far from the safety of the cave, they only ventured up to the top of the cliff, not too far away from the waterfall as they sat together on its high edge and simply passed the time by stargazing.

"Wow...." Lapis mused in genuine awe as she took in the sight of the immensely starry skies above. "It's amazing that you can see all these stars from here... Back on—uh, b-back home, we'd be lucky to see even half as many stars as this."

Dipper frowned upon hearing this, his curiosity to know more about the mysterious Homeworld returning until he remembered that he was supposed to be letting that go for the blue Gem's sake.
"Well, uh, I bet you got to see even more stars when you were flying back there, huh?"

"To be honest, I wasn't really paying much attention to them..." Lapis shrugged. "I think this is the first time I've really ever taken the chance to just sit down and look at them. It's... kind of nice, actually..."

"Yeah... I guess it is..." Dipper said with a small, contented smile, knowing that this was the first time in a while that he had simply just let himself truly relax instead of worrying over mysteries or Gem matters.

A bout of comfortable silence passed between the pair, the nighttime crickets and nearby waterfall filling in for it until Lapis broke it a moment later with a curious inquiry. "How do you map them out here on Earth?"

"Huh?" Dipper looked to her, confused.

"The stars," the blue Gem chuckled. "How do you humans tell them apart? Back home, we used to make these really complex, overcomplicated maps of the stars that were basically impossible to read. But everything here on Earth seems so much simpler, so I just want to know if star reading is simpler here too."

"Oh, well, uh... I don't really know a ton about star charts and astronomy and stuff like that..." Dipper admitted somewhat bashfully. "But... I do know a little about constellations..."

"Constellations? What are those?"

"They're basically like pictures made out of stars," Dipper exclaimed succinctly, even if he knew there was a bit more to it than that. "In a way, they're sorta how we tell the stars apart. Like that one for instance," he pointed one of the more recognizable constellations he knew of out. "See how those stars that are kind of arranged into a question mark with a little triangle behind it? That one's called Leo."

"I... don't see anything like that..." Lapis said, straining her eyes to even come close to spotting what he was talking about.

"Ok, well that one might be a little hard to find at first..." Dipper conceded, quickly searching the skies for another one. "Oh, I know! Look right over there, to where those stars line up to look like a guy holding a bow and arrow. That's Orion."

"I still don't see it..." Lapis frowned. "Is there something I'm just not getting here?"

"No, it's just that they're-" Dipper cut himself off, wanting to make the concept clearer to the blue Gem but not really knowing how. That is, until he happened to spot the constellation that was most familiar to him by far amidst the starry skies. "Uh, w-well, there is one that's usually pretty easy to find..." he began tentatively, already blushing a bit out of embarrassment. "See those stars that are arranged to kind of look a little like a pan?"

"Wait!" Lapis gasped, her eyes widening with realization as an excited smile crossed her features. "I do see that one! What's it called?"

"That one...?" Dipper sighed hesitantly, hoping she wouldn't ask but deciding to answer her all the same. "That one's called the... the Big Dipper..."

"Oh! Just like you!" Lapis exclaimed, immensely curious now. "Then again, you're not very big, no offense," she said with a sly smirk and a wink.
"Heh, yeah, kinda..." Dipper laughed rather awkwardly, glancing away. "Honestly though, it's more like this." Hoping that the blue Gem wouldn't laugh, he slowly took his hat off and lifted his bangs up, revealing the constellation's smaller double on his forehead.

Lapis let out a soft gasp of amazement at this, her intrigued smile widening as she looked between the birthmark and the constellation. "Whoa, they really are the same! How did you end up with that—what did you call it again, constellation?—on your forehead like that?"

"Well, since it’s a birthmark, it's pretty much always been there," Dipper remarked, still a little flustered as he put his hat back on. "It's really not that much of a big deal. And besides, it's kind of embarrassing..."

"Well, I don't think it's embarrassing," Lapis said, completely sincere. "I think it's really special, sort of... well, sort of like you." She paused, sending him a warm, somewhat awkward smile, one that he slowly returned. "So you were named after that constellation then?"

"Uh... not really..." Dipper admitted, rubbing his arm apprehensively. "It's more of a nickname than anything else..."

"So... what's your real name then?"

"O-oh, well, uh... its... it's, um..." Dipper trailed off, not really wanting to share his most well-guarded secret. Then again, Lapis had entrusted him with her own secret, one that was likely even more momentous than his. So, it was only fair that he returned the favor. Still, he made sure to do so discreetly, only whispering his given name to her quietly before looking away in mortification.

"Really?" Lapis asked upon hearing the name, thankfully not repeating it out loud.

"Yeah..." Dipper nodded tersely, still averting her gaze as he looked down to the waterfall instead. "B-but I'm not really a huge fan of being called that, so I don't really tell it to too many people. S-so if you don't mind keeping it between us, then-"

"Don't worry," Lapis assured, placing a hand on his shoulder. "I won't tell anyone. I promise."

Dipper let out a sigh of relief at this, nodding a silent thanks to the blue Gem as she moved her hand and looked back up to the sky again. Another beat of silence came, but once again, Lapis broke through it as a sudden idea came to her. "Do you want to see it?"

"See what?"

"That constellation," she nodded up to it. "The Big Dipper."

"Lapis, I can see it," Dipper said, not fully understanding what she meant.

"No, I mean do you really want to see it?" Lapis asked with a growing grin as she rose to stand, her aquatic wings springing out of the gem on her back.

"Uh... as cool as that sounds, Lapis, I... can't really go up into space to look at stars firsthand," Dipper remarked, still rather confused. "I kind of need air to breathe, you know."

The blue Gem let out a small snort of a laugh at this. "I wasn't talking about taking you all the way up into space! I just thought I'd fly you a little closer to it so you could get a better look."

"Oh, well I guess that'd be ok," Dipper shrugged as he stood as well. "Should I just...?"
"Yeah," Lapis nodded, kneeling down a bit to accommodate him. "Climb on."

Dipper did so, boarding the blue Gem's back somewhat awkwardly. "Ready?" Lapis asked, poised for flight as she looked back to her passenger with a smile. Dipper nodded, not entirely sure what to expect, though unable to let out a fearful cry as Lapis suddenly took off without warning, a single flap of her powerful water wings being more than enough to propel them both upward. His alarm grew even more as he made the mistake of looking back down to the cliff, only to see it grow smaller and smaller as Lapis rocketed straight up with incredible speed. The blue Gem couldn't help but laugh as she glanced back at Dipper, who was gripping her shoulder for dear life with one hand and struggling to keep his hat on amidst the rushing winds with the other. But even so, she kept soaring higher, only slowing her pace as they broke through the clouds and into the open air, miles above the ground.

“Dipper?” Lapis said, still grinning in amusement as she looked up at him again.

“Y-yeah?” Dipper asked shakily, his eyes tightly shut out of fear.

“You can open your eyes now.”

Dipper complied, albeit a bit hesitantly, though as he got his first glimpse of the endless star scape around them, his terror was instantly replaced with complete and absolute amazement. With the cover of clouds obscuring any trace of the earth below them, it was as though the ground itself didn’t even exist, as if nothing at all existed really but the countless stars and sky above them. Lapis’ smile widened as she noticed just how awestruck Dipper was by all of this, but even so, she kept in mind the reason they were up there in the first place.

“Well, there it is,” she said, nodding towards the constellation to point Dipper’s attention over to it. It was still incredibly far away, of course, but despite the fact that they had only gotten a little closer to it respectively, it still seemed so much larger as the stars that composed it stretch across the vast sky ahead.

“Whoa…” Dipper breathed, still completely wonderstruck as he leaned forward a bit. “I… I never realized just how big it was before…”

“Well, I guess that’s why it’s called the ‘Big’ Dipper then, huh?” Lapis smirked, eliciting a small laugh from them both. “Hey, Dipper,” the blue Gem said after the levity had passed, her grin turning wry and daring.

“Yeah, Lapis?” Dipper replied, smiling down at her unsuspectingly.

“Are you ready?”

“…Ready for what?”

“For this!” Without any warning, Lapis shot forward, her wings blowing back swiftly as she covered a long distance in mere seconds. At first, the only thing Dipper could really do as he struggled to hold on was let out another frightened scream, though it didn’t take long for it to turn into a cheer of exhilaration as he cut loose, just as the blue Gem already had. After soaring across a wide stretch of sky, Lapis decided to spice their flight up even more by preforming an impromptu flip, one that she failed to tell Dipper about before trying it. Of course, while his grip on the blue Gem was tight, it wasn’t enough to keep him from falling off her back as she reached the crest of her flip. His excitement quickly switched back into panic as soon as he realized he was essentially in a complete freefall, but fortunately, Lapis managed to catch him again, this time by his hands, far before he could even come close to hitting the ground. After the initial bout of shock over this
near-death experience passed, he glanced up to the blue Gem incredulously, only to find that she was laughing hysterically.

“Oh, that was great!” Lapis practically howled with laughter as she flew at a slower pace. “I can’t believe you actually thought I would drop you! The look on your face was hilarious!”

For a moment, Dipper simply stared up at the blue Gem in faux offended disbelief before breaking down into a round of uncontrollable laughter himself, realizing that, in retrospect, it was pretty funny. In fact, the two of them continued to laugh as they glided through the open sky, not just about what had just happened, but in general. Neither of them knew themselves to be very cheerful or jubilant, but at the moment, those things described them both perfectly. In the beauty and simple complexity of the starry night, both of them were having nothing less than the time of their lives without even really meaning to at all.

The pair continued hovering through the night for a while after that, until they eventually found themselves back over the waterfall cliff, which was where they landed once again. Both of them were still in very high spirits as they touched down, it not a little breathless from all of the deep, hearty laughter they had just let out.

As they both sat down on the cliff’s edge once more, Lapis let out a loud, content sigh as she loosely flopped down to lie on her back, her legs still dangling off the edge as she released another small chuckle. “Wow, I can’t even remember the last time I’ve laughed this much,” she paused, her smile fading, but only someone. “Or the last time I’ve laughed in general, really…”

“Honestly, same here,” Dipper remarked with the same sardonic grin as he also laid back. “I guess it’s been a while since I let myself really just relax and have some fun.”

For a moment or two, neither of them said anything as they both directed their gaze back to the skies they had just returned from. Really, there wasn’t a lot either of them needed to say in the aftermath of the incredible time they had just had together, but even so, Lapis spoke up, voicing something that she had been thinking about for quite some time now. “You know, it’s so funny,” she said, her smile turning almost bittersweet. “I’ve met humans before, but I’ve never actually gotten to know one until now… If all of them are like you… well, then I guess I can finally see why those Crystal Gems wanted to save this place so badly…”

“Whoa… Lapis, that… that really means a lot…” Dipper smiled, genuinely touched by the sentiment. “You know, since we’re being real with each other, I… I’m really glad I saw you crash into this cliff the other night. These past few days have so great.”

“Yeah… They have been…” Lapis mused, her smile finally fading entirely. “It’s a shame they’re almost over…”

“What do you mean?” Dipper asked, looking over at her in worried confusion.

“Dipper, I already told you,” the blue Gem sighed, sitting up. “I’m not staying here on Earth forever. In a few days, I’m going to leave, probably sooner rather than later. And… and I know you don’t want to hear this, but… I’m probably not coming back, ever.”

“Wait, you’re still planning on leaving?” Dipper asked, suddenly dismayed as he did the same. “But… but I thought… we… I thought you just said you were having a great time…”

“I am,” Lapis acknowledged rather morosely. “But I can’t stay here, Dipper, you know I can’t. I was trapped on this planet for thousands of years, I don’t want to be here anymore.”
“…Not even for me?”

The blue Gem took pause at this, her eyes widening a bit as she looked to him, regret and concern washing over her expression. “Dipper…”

“Look, this is probably gonna sound really dumb but…” Dipper trailed off, glancing down apprehensively. “It’s been a really long time since I’ve felt like I’ve had someone to just… talk to, you know? I mean, yeah, there’s Steven, and Mabel, and Stan, and the Gems, but… none of them ever seem to really listen like you do, Lapis. When I first showed you the journal, I thought you were just going to laugh at it or shrug it off like everyone else does, but… you didn’t. You actually took it seriously. You took me seriously…”

“W-well, of course I take you seriously…” Lapis remarked, her voice still rather soft and sad. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“See, that’s just it,” Dipper said diffidently. “You actually care about what I have to say, without even having to think twice about it. And… considering that’s something nobody else really does, it’s something I appreciate, a lot… It’s crazy, but I feel like I can talk to you about almost anything, which is something I can’t really say for too many other people. So, I guess I-I just don’t want to go back to keeping it all to myself…”

Lapis’ already guilty frowned deepened upon hearing all this, knowing that Dipper was being completely honest with her about this, and that honesty only making her feel even worse. Her remorse only skyrocketed, however, upon seeing him rub his eyes a bit, almost as if he was struggling to fight back tears, which he admittedly was. “Dipper, I’m sorry…” she sighed, her voice barely even a wavering whisper. “But I can’t stay…”

“But you could,” Dipper persisted, more upset than angry. “Lapis, I know you don’t want to feel trapped here, but you don’t have to be! If you just gave the Earth a chance, then maybe you might even end up liking it someday!”

“I… don’t think that’s possible…” the blue Gem glowered, wrapping her arms around herself as she looked down. “I just don’t belong here… Or anywhere, really…”

“But you could belong here if you just tried to make it work!” Dipper urged, his tone earnest, almost pleading as he felt the tears start to come again, though he managed to suppress them once more. “I could help you! So could Steven and Mabel! We could-”

“Dipper,” Lapis finally cut him off, her tone more hardened and stern this time as she stood up. “Like I said, I’m sorry, but my answer is no. I’m not staying on Earth, and that’s final. And that’s all I’m going to say about it.”

Dipper fell into silence upon hearing this, one of his pressing tears finally falling, though he was quick to wipe it away. The blue Gem met his dejected gaze with faltering resolve, but all the same she maintained her answer, knowing that she couldn’t really stay on Earth, even if she wanted to. And while it took Dipper a moment to come to terms with this, he knew he really had no choice but to accept it, as unhappy as it made him. “Ok…” he finally said, his tone a bit unsteady as he stood as well. “If that’s what you really want, then… then I guess I can’t really change your mind about it, can I?”

Lapis hesitated for a moment, her expression still awash in sorrow and guilt, but all the same, she nodded silently, rubbing her arm as she averted his hurt gaze. Seeing as how there wasn’t much left to say at this point, Dipper started to turn to head home, knowing that morning would likely be coming soon. Still, he refused to leave the blue Gem on such a bitter note. “Um… you’re still
“Y-yes…” Lapis muttered softly, not wanting to tell him that tomorrow would likely be her last day on the planet. “I will be.”

“So, c-can I stop by again tomorrow?”

“Of… of course,” the blue Gem nodded immediately, knowing that she would forever regret it if she wasn’t able to see him one last time.

“Ok, great,” Dipper said with a forced smile and a thumbs up as he began to take his leave. “See you tomorrow then.”

“Yeah,” Lapis waved him off with a weak smile before turning her gaze back up to the stars. Or more specifically, to the star that represented her former home. “S-see you…” Even so, she ripped her sights away from Homeworld, grief and regret filling her as she watched Dipper leave instead. And as she watched the only thing that really mattered to her on the planet she hated so deeply, the only thing that was making it really, really difficult for her to actually leave it, she realized that perhaps it was finally time she started being honest with him, just as he had been honest with her.

As much as Dipper was discouraged by Lapis’ choice to leave and as much as he dreaded her eventual, inevitable departure, he knew he still had to make good on her promise to go see her the next day, even if he was well aware that it might be the last time he ever would. And because of that possibility, he wasn’t as enthusiastic about heading over to the waterfall cave as he usually was, as the dejected sigh he let out as he made his way to the gift shop’s door inadvertently betrayed. However, his melancholy was abruptly replaced with surprise as he opened the door.

“Gotcha!” Mabel exclaimed as she stood right outside the door, lowering the sunglasses she had put on in an attempt to look more serious. “Looks like you’re busted, bro-bro.”

“Busted!” Steven echoed as he jumped in to stand behind Dipper, blocking any attempts he might make to escape.

“Mabel? Steven?” Dipper flinched, genuinely startled seeing as how their previous attempts to find him out had been the last thing on his mind. “What are you guys doing?”

“We’re finally getting the dirt on you, Dipper!” Steven proclaimed boldly, though he was quick to lower his own shades a moment later. “Don’t worry; we’re not actually gonna throw dirt on you or anything. It’s just an expression I heard on TV once.”

“…What?”

“What Steven means is that we’re finally getting to the bottom of your sneaky shenanigans,” Mabel said, her arms crossed and her expression cold. “No more games, no more excuses, and no more running. You’re not leaving until you tell us where you keep running off to everyday!”

“Wha—n-nowhere!” Dipper quickly exclaimed, still devout about keeping Lapis’ presence unknown. “And even if I was going somewhere, I don’t know why either of you guys care so much anyway. After all, it’s not like I’m constantly on either of you about your business.”

“Dipper, we’re not trying to get into your business,” Steven clarified with a frown. “We’re just starting to worry about you. You’ve barely been around all week-”
“You keep sneaking out super late at night,” Mabel added somewhat petulantly.

“And you won’t even talk to us about what’s going on,” the young Gem finished, genuinely concerned. “All we wanna do is make sure you’re ok.”

Upon hearing all this, Dipper couldn’t help but feel somewhat bad for being so curt with the two of them the past few days, knowing that even despite their persistence and annoyance, it all did come from a place of sincere caring. But no matter how pure their intentions were, he had still made a promise, and that was a promise he was going to do everything in his power to keep. “Look, you guys, I’m… flattered, but you really don’t have any reason to be worried about me,” he reassured as evenly as he could. “Everything is fine, I promise.”

“But it’s not!” Mabel exclaimed, suddenly quite upset. “It’s not fine that you keep running off without telling anybody! It’s not fine that I saw you come home this morning all sad and depressed! It’s not fine that nobody knows what’s going on with you! And it’s especially not fine that you’re lying to us, to me!”

“Oh, Mabel…” Dipper sighed guiltily, knowing the last thing he had wanted was to upset her.

“You’ve never kept secrets from me before, Dipper!” Mabel continued, nearly in tears by now. “So what made you start now?! What could be so big and so important to you that you can’t even tell your own sister about it?!”

“Mabel, I-I want to tell you about it…” Dipper trailed off, clueless about what to even say at this juncture.

“Then why don’t you?!” Mabel challenged bitterly, her tears finally falling.

“B-because…” Dipper began both anxiously and remorsefully, hating that he was the one who had made his usually cherry sister so upset. But still, he couldn’t tell her the truth, especially since the truth was beyond what he could really explain properly. “Because… I… I just can’t!”

Mabel let out a gasp at this, almost as if his response had stung her in some way, and in a sense, that’s exactly what it did, something that distressed Dipper even more as he saw her almost pained expression. And, unable to bear that hurt that he had caused her, he did the only thing he could really think of at such an intense juncture; he ran.

Steven was so caught up in the emotional tension of the moment that he didn’t even think to stop Dipper as he rushed past him, hurrying out of the gift shop and out of the shack entirely. Still, when he did realize what was happening, he was quick to run after him, Mabel not too far behind, despite the tears still falling down her cheeks. By the time they had made it out of the house, Dipper had already managed to climb onto Lion and appease him with the offering of another Lion Licker, this time dangled by a stick to motivate the pink beast to move.

“Dipper!” Steven called fretfully as he began running over. “Wait!”

“Sorry, Steven!” Dipper shouted back as Lion lurched forward, taking him with him. “I’ll bring Lion back later, I promise!”

“Dipper!” Mabel cried, running forward almost desperately before she finally came to a stop, a small, miserable sob escaping her. “Please… don’t go…”

As Lion neared the edge of the tree line, Dipper glanced back, ashamed and conflicted as he met Mabel’s pleading, disappointed gaze. He hadn’t been lying when he said he wanted to tell her the truth, he wanted to let her in on everything that had been happened and why he was so adamant
about staying silent about it all in the first place. But as much as he wanted to, he couldn’t. He couldn’t let Lapis down like that, especially considering the deep bond of trust and solidarity they had formed over the past several days. What he hadn’t anticipated, however, was that he would end up letting Mabel down instead.

But even so, he said nothing, letting his apologetic silence speak volumes as he rode off, leaving her behind just as Lapis intended on doing to him in the very near future.

For the duration of the ride over to the waterfall cave, Dipper kept up his solemn silence, his guilt over what had just happened between him and Mabel weighing heavy on his heart. He figured that he would get a chance to tell her and Steven about Lapis’ return eventually, probably after the blue Gem was long gone. Hopefully, once she had the whole picture, she would understand exactly why he had been so insistent on keeping it all under wraps and forgive him for his recent evasiveness and duplicity. But for now, Lapis took precedent, especially since her time on Earth and with him was very quickly coming to an end.

However, as Dipper arrived at the top of the cliff, he was quick to notice that something was wrong, even from a distance. Namely, that the boulder Lapis usually had securely covering up the entry hole into the cave was nowhere to be found. And considering how adamant the blue Gem usually was about keeping her hiding place hidden, that gave Dipper more than enough reasons to be alarmed.

“Lapis!” he exclaimed, somewhat panicking as he hopped off Lion and hurried over to the hole. His initial thought was that perhaps she really had left Earth after all, even after promising that she would still be there today. But he knew she wouldn’t have told him that she would still be around, only for her to go without saying a word about it. Would she? “Lapis, are you down there?!” Dipper tried again, peering down into the hole, only to get no response from the blue Gem. He knew it was a risky idea to just dive right into the cave, especially if Lapis was not in fact there after all, but he had to know. And so, he did.

And fortunately, much to his immense relief, an orb of contained water managed to catch him just in time, just as it had the very first night. He was released from it a moment later, and while it took him a moment, he did manage finally spot the blue Gem, standing at the edge of the outcropping overlooking the pool.

“Lapis!” Dipper exclaimed, allayed as he started to run over to her. “I’m so glad you’re still here! I thought you-”

“Dipper,” she abruptly cut him off, her tense, tight tone more than enough to stop him dead in his tracks right behind her. Her back was to him, her hands clenched into tight, anxious fists at her sides as she spoke again, her voice still rife with dread. “There’s something I need to tell you…”

Unsure of what to make of Lapis’ shaken, yet resolved manner, Dipper took a small step forward, saying nothing as he instead listened to what she had to say. “Last night, you said that you felt like you could be completely honest with me, about anything,” she began, letting out a small, sad sigh as she looked over her shoulder at him. “Well… I realized that maybe it’s time I was completely honest with you… You wanted to know what really made me leave Homeworld, didn’t you?”

Dipper let out a small gasp at this, his eyes widening in surprise that Lapis even wanted to talk about this at all. But even so, he simply nodded silently, curiosity and worry filling him all at once as the blue Gem continued. “The truth is… I didn’t leave Homeworld… I escaped.”
“What?” Dipper finally spoke up, his voice even softer than Lapis’ as he took another step to stand beside her. The blue Gem didn’t reply immediately however, as she turned back to the pool, her eyes closing and her arms raising as a large wall of water rose up along with them. When Lapis opened her eyes once more, they were like mirrors, reflective and empty, as she used the aquatic screen she had created to project her memories in a visible form.

“When I first got back to Homeworld, I was so excited to be there,” the blue Gem began, her silhouette touching down in a rather obscured, yet ominous landscape upon the water screen. “I was home. After years and years of waiting and hoping, I was finally back where I really belonged… Or so I thought…”

Several other vague figures walked into the image, all of them in different colors and shapes as they surrounded Lapis, looking to her questioningly. “All the Gems I used to know and work with, my friends… I couldn’t find any of them. And to make matters worse, word soon began to spread about my return. A Lapis Lazuli, who had been reported as missing centuries ago, suddenly showing up back on Homeworld completely out of the blue, and coming from Earth, of all places? It was more than enough to cause plenty of suspicion among the more elite Gems.”

Dipper watched, completely captivated by this tale so far, as the silhouettes of several large, muscular-looking Gems roughly apprehended Lapis. “It wasn’t long before I was apprehended, even though I hadn’t done anything wrong. Still, I was brought in to be interrogated by a technician Gem, one who claimed she had been to Earth recently too…”

“Peridot?!” Dipper exclaimed in sudden shock as he instantly recognized the green, triangular-headed silhouette that was angrily interrogating Lapis on the water screen.

“Wait, you know her?” Lapis asked, her eyes returning to normal for a moment as she looked to him in equal surprise.

“Yeah, she showed up at the Galaxy Warp a few weeks ago,” Dipper informed, still quite bewildered by the coincidence. “She keeps sending these… machines here to do… well, we don’t really know yet, but she’s made it pretty clear that she's no fan of the Crystal Gems, or of me, Steven, and Mabel.”

“Then it’s true… she really does know you guys…” Lapis muttered, taken aback by this news as her story continued on the water screen. “S-she mentioned you three. She even knew your all names and demanded that I give her more information on you. I swear I didn’t tell her anything, no matter how much she threatened to have me shattered! But then…” the blue Gem hesitated as the profile of a large, ominous orange Gem stepped into view. “She told me that I was going to be her informant, and go with her and her terrible escort back here to Earth, to deal with you three and the Crystal Gems, once and for all.”

The scene changed as Peridot and the orange Gem disappeared, transitioning to Lapis sitting alone in what looked like small jail cell. “I was detained until the mission was ready to leave, locked away as a prisoner once again. I was starting to lose hope, of escaping, of you guys surviving… of everything… Until I realized… I wasn’t alone…” Another obscured silhouette appeared in the empty cell adjacent to the blue Gem, a figure that seemingly bore very little similarities to any of the other Gems seen prior. “It turned out that someone else was being kept in the cell right across from mine. And it wasn’t just another imprisoned Gem either. It was a human.”

“A-a human?!” Dipper cut in, even more surprised by this information than he was with Peridot’s involvement. “What was a human doing on Homeworld?”

“I still don’t know…” Lapis shook her head almost sadly. “I don’t even know how he got there, but
what I did know was that he was in just as much trouble as I was, through no fault of his own. Since neither of us really much else to do with our time, we started talking and I guess, in a weird way, became friends. I never really got his name, but… now that I look back… he reminded me a lot of you, Dipper…”

Hearing this only made Dipper’s immense desire to know who this mysterious human, who had somehow managed to make it to the distant, unknown Homeworld, even greater. But all the same, he offered the blue Gem a small, sympathetic smile, one that was quick to fade as her tale of woe continued. “The human was smart, very smart, and he was determined to break out of detainment. And I guess some of that determination rubbed off on me. So, thing led to another, and before we knew it, we were starting to plan our escape, from both imprisonment and from Homeworld altogether. We were going to steal a ship and fly it as far away as possible, though I did promise to drop the human off back here on Earth before we went separate ways. We figured out every little detail and we knew exactly what we were going to do and how. But when the time came for us to put our plan into action… everything went wrong…”

The water screen showed Lapis and her human friend fleeing from a massive horde of outraged Gems, a horde that was quickly starting to catch up with them. “We were discovered almost as soon as we broke ourselves out, and even though we tried to fight back, it was clear that we were going to be overpowered. As clever as the human was, he was no match for the army of warrior Gems that had been sent after us and he was easily captured. And that was when I was forced to choose between risking it all to rescue him… or taking my one final, fleeting chance at freedom…” A look of deep regret washed over the blue Gem’s face as the screen showed her wings sprouting as she flew away, leaving the human to an unknown fate as image abruptly disappeared. “I think you can guess what I chose…”

The wall of water fell slowly as Lapis shut her eyes, her head hanging in shame as she completed her story. “The rest is pretty easy to figure out too. I flew away from Homeworld, and came back here, but not because I wanted to hide. It was because I wanted to warn you.”

“A-about what?” Dipper asked, already quite unnerved after everything he had just heard, though he was caught even more off guard as Lapis knelt down to his level and placed a firm hand on his shoulder.

“Dipper, listen to me,” she said, her tone intense and shaken all at once as she looked him dead in the eyes. “Peridot is coming to Earth. She’s probably on her way here even as we speak. And she’s not alone. They’re coming, and they’re coming for you, for Steven, and for Mabel. And if they find you… I don’t even know what they might do…”

For a moment, all Dipper could really do was stare at Lapis in complete, dumbfounded disbelief upon hearing this, simply trying to come to grips with what she had just told him. If what she said was true, and she had no reason to lie about this, then a Homeworld invasion, the very thing that he had been fearing for weeks now, was imminent. On one hand, he realized he had been right about the matter all along, but he could hardly come close to celebrating that fact now, especially considering they very real danger they were all soon about to face with this incoming threat. “W-wow…” Dipper finally said after what seemed like ages of silence. “Lapis, that… that’s a lot to take in…”

“I know…” Lapis admitted, standing as she looked away from him guiltily. “I’m sorry I didn’t just tell you the night I got here. I was just… scared… and ashamed… When I saw you, all I could think about was that human I just… left behind… And I didn’t want you to think that I… that I was a coward…”
“A coward? Lapis, are you kidding me?” Dipper asked incredulously. “You broke out of prison and escaped a ton of powerful, violent Gem warriors! That’s anything but cowardly, if you ask me.”

“But it was,” Lapis insisted remorsefully. “I couldn’t save him! I left him to be locked away again, maybe even worse! I left him behind, all because I was too afraid to take him with me! But… that’s a mistake I’m not going to make again. I thought that by coming here, by telling you about all this… I could make up for that… And now I know for sure I can…”

“W-what do you mean?” Dipper asked in confusion as a somewhat odd, almost broken grin crossed the blue Gem’s features.

“I mean that I can save you, Dipper!” Lapis exclaimed boldly, gripping him by the shoulders tightly. “I can take you somewhere safe, way before Peridot even gets here! Somewhere where I can keep you safe from her, or from anyone who might want to hurt you! I-I don’t really know where yet, but we’ll find a place, I promise! Whatever planet we go to, I can keep you fully supplied with as much water as you need, and as far as the air thing goes, well… well I’ll figure something out, but what’s important is that we-”

“Whoa, Lapis, slow down!” Dipper cut in, quite alarmed by what she was implying. “We can’t just leave Earth!”

“W-why not?”

“Well, aside from the whole, me not being able to survive in space thing,” Dipper began somewhat pointedly. “We can’t just leave everybody behind while Peridot comes and does who knows what! What about Steven and Mabel?”

“Oh, they can come too!” Lapis offered earnestly. “All four of us, we can-”

“Lapis, we can’t leave,” Dipper insisted rationally. “We have to stay and tell the Crystal Gems about this. If there’s anyone here on Earth that’s even remotely capable of dealing with whatever Homeworld can dish out, its them. A-and they won’t listen if it’s just me telling them about all this, but I know they’d hear another Gem like you out about it.”

“No,” Lapis refused immediately, her manner turning quite cold. “No, we’re not telling them! Dipper, you don’t understand! Homeworld is so advanced now, much more advanced than it used to be back during the war! I wasn’t able to understand any of it when I was there! There’s no way anything on Earth, not even those Crystal Gems, can stand up to it! Putting up a fight will only lead to devastation!”

“But we have to fight!” Dipper retorted firmly. “Lapis, I know you don’t care about the Earth, but I do! This is my home! It’s where my friends, my family, everything I’ve ever cared about is! And I’m not going to leave it behind just because a bunch of Homeworld Gems are threatening it!”

“But… but if you stay…” Lapis began, almost on the verge of fearful tears. “T-then you might… you… They could…”

“That’s just it: there’s no telling what could happen,” Dipper said, resolved. “But whatever does happen, we can’t just run away from it out of fear. We have to stay and face this, no matter how bad it might be!”

“W-why…?” the blue Gem asked, shaking her head incredulously. “How could you be so… so ready to put yourself through something that might… that might end up…?” Lapis trailed off,
unable to even finish such a horrible thought.

“Because I want to protect what’s important. A-and there’s so much here that’s important to me. Mabel, Steven, Grunkle Stan, the Gems, everyone else… They’re all worth staying behind and fighting for!”

“Worth fighting for…” Lapis repeated softly. “B-but… you’re just a human! What could you possibly hope to do against something as powerful and relentless as Homeworld?”

“I-I haven’t really figured that out yet,” Dipper admitted. “But still, I’m still going to do whatever I can. And the good news is, I won’t have to do it alone. O-or, at least I hope I won’t…” he said, looking to Lapis hopefully.

The blue Gem paused at this, looking to him with immense worry and uncertainty before she took a glance up to the dusky skies above through the cave’s hole. “D-Dipper, I…” she sighed, clearly conflicted and not having the faintest idea about how to say or do.

“Lapis, I know you’ve already been through so much because of Homeworld,” Dipper began sympathetically. “And I know you’re afraid of what they might do if they find you again. So I’d totally understand if you wanted to leave, but—and this is probably gonna sound really selfish, but—I really hope you stay, if for nothing else, then… then at least for me…”

Lapis said nothing to this at first, unable to rip her gaze away from Dipper as she tried to reconcile all of the countless emotions she was feeling at the moment. Fear, dread, guilt, anger, devotion, attachment, and strangely enough, hope. Hope seemed the oddest one to her though, especially given the incredibly hopeless situation they were currently facing. But if there was one thing she didn’t question about that hope, it was where it had come from. She was so impressed and also somewhat proud of that fact that Dipper could speak of standing in the face of such adversity so unflinchingly, almost as if he had no fear towards it at all, even if the hints of terror in his eyes and the anxiety in his voice revealed that he did. But somehow, in a way that Lapis could barely even begin to understand, he was pushing his way past that fear, turning it into something else, something else, something stronger, something that the blue Gem desperately wanted to have too.

Her thoughts went back to what he had said, about wanting to protect what was important, what was worth fighting for. Admittedly, there were very few things on or about Earth, the planet that had trapped her for so long, that she saw as worth protecting. But there was indeed one thing on Earth that she had recently come to value as incredibly important, perhaps the only thing on the entire planet, or any planet really, that would convince her to stay behind and risk life and limb for the sole purpose of protecting that thing. And, conveniently enough, that thing was standing right in front of her.

“O-ok…” she whispered quietly, scarcely able to believe that she was agreeing to this. Still, she wasn’t going to back down from this choice; she couldn’t, not in front of him. “I… I’ll stay…”

“W-what?” Dipper asked, rather taken aback by her sudden relenting.

“I said I’m going to stay,” Lapis clarified, a bit louder and more confident this time. “If you’re going to stay here and fight, then I’m going to stay here too, and do whatever I can to protect you. No matter what happens.”

“Lapis, you don’t have to stay,” Dipper shook his head, suddenly feeling bad about how he had pressured her. “I don’t want you to feel like I’m forcing you to-”

“You’re not,” the blue Gem assured, putting a hand on his shoulder. “I’m doing this because I want to. This is my problem, and I can’t keep running away from it anymore. And because, it’s like
you said,” she paused, finally offering him a small, warm smile, one that he slowly returned. “Sometimes you just have to stay and stand up for what’s worth fighting for… And for me, Dipper, you’re definitely something that’s worth fighting for.”

Needless to say that Dipper was quite stunned, but deeply touched upon hearing this moving proclamation. In fact, he was so moved by it that he didn’t even think twice about suddenly embracing the blue Gem, immediately taking her by surprise, as she certainly wasn’t used to such open affection. “Thank you, Lapis,” Dipper said with immense gratitude, knowing just how hard this choice likely was for her.

It took Lapis a moment, but she did eventually return the hug, placing a caring hand on top of Dipper’s head as she gave him a fond, gentle smile. “No…” she whispered, knowing that despite all of her fears and worries about what was soon to come, she was making the right choice. “Thank you…”

As the sun sank over Gravity Falls, Steven and Mabel sat on the shack’s porch, equally dejected and discouraged about what had happened earlier with Dipper. Lion had come back some time ago, and despite Steven’s pleading, the pink beast was too tired to take them to where Dipper had ridden him to. And so, the pair had largely given up on ever figuring out what the truth really was, knowing that if Dipper himself wouldn’t tell them, then they likely would never know what it was.

“Don’t worry, Mabel,” Steven attempted to reassure upon hearing her let out another sad sigh. “I’m sure he’ll be back soon.”

“Of course, he’ll be back, Steven,” Mabel remarked morosely. “But I’m just worried that when he does come back, he’ll just keep hiding things from us until it gets to the point that we won’t even know anything about him anymore. And I really don’t want that to happen…”

The young Gem sighed himself at this, feeling quite bad himself but still wanting to do what he could to help Mabel feel better, even if he really didn’t have a clue about what to do. “Well, maybe he’s just not ready to tell us his secret yet.”

“Yeah, sure…” Mabel mused, not really buying this suggestion. “You know, it seems like everybody’s keeping secrets around here anymore. Dipper, the Gems… Who’s next, Grunkle Stan?”

Steven was about to reply to this, but before he could, he just so happened to glance over at the tree line to see the subject of their conversation emerge. “Dipper!” he exclaimed, hopping to his feet and running over. Mabel was a bit more hesitant to after their earlier falling out, but she did the same, walking over to meet her brother, but averting his gaze all the while.

“Uh… hey, guys…” Dipper began rather sheepishly, still quite ashamed over what had happened between them. “Look, I’m really sorry about earlier. I didn’t want either of you to think that I was shutting you out or locking you out of the loop or anything like that, especially not you, Mabel.”

Mabel’s rather bitter expression softened a little upon hearing this as she finally did look to him, but she still didn’t say anything as she let him continue. “It’s just… I found something really important the other night, and it was something I couldn’t really tell you guys about. Until… until now.” Dipper paused, tentatively glancing back at the forest behind him before calling over to it. “It’s ok! You can come out now!”
Steven and Mabel both frowned in confusion at this, neither of them having the faintest idea about who he was talking to until a very familiar figure hesitantly stepped out of the woods and into full view. “Lapis?!?” they both exclaimed in shocked unison, especially since the blue Gem’s appearance had been the very last thing either of them expecting.

“Um… hi, Steven. Hi, Mabel,” Lapis greeted awkwardly as Dipper gave her a reassuring nod. “L-long time, no-” The blue Gem was abruptly cut off as both Steven and Mabel ran forward, both of them wrapping her in an unexpected, but overjoyed hug.

“Lapis, it’s so good to see you again!” Steven exclaimed brightly. “And… also kind of confusing. I thought you went back to Homeworld. How’d you end up back here on earth?”

“I-it’s… a long story…” the blue Gem remarked diffidently, knowing she would explain it to them soon enough.

“Wait a second!” Mabel gasped in realization as the hug disbanded. “Dipper! Was this your big huge secret? The fact that Lapis came back and you’ve been going off to hang out with her all by yourself?”

Dipper nodded relentingly, smiling somewhat bashfully as he realized just how ridiculous it all sounded when spoken out loud. Fortunately though, he didn’t have to explain himself as Lapis did that for him. “I-I told him not to tell anyone!” she interjected, flustered.

“Huh? But why?” Steven asked, confused.

“I…. I’ll tell you soon…” the blue Gem said, glancing down nervously.

“We need to go talk to the Gems,” Dipper cut in, knowing they couldn’t really afford to waste a lot of time now. “It’s really serious.”

Steven and Mabel’s shared levity over Lapis’ return was quick to fade into concern upon hearing this, but all the same, the group began to make their way up to the temple. All the while, it was clear that the blue Gem was dreading what would no doubt be an incredible awkward confrontation, but all three of the kids did their part in reassuring her that they would support her throughout it. Needless to say that when the kids showed up at the temple with none other than Lapis Lazuli, of all Gems, the Crystal Gems were completely taken aback with shock and alarm. In fact, a fight nearly broke out as soon as they saw here, but the kids were quick to intervene and confirm that the blue Gem was there to speak with them on even grounds. While the Gems were still clearly distrustful, they relented and decided to listen to what Lapis had to say, even if they kept their guard up all the while.

Lapis managed to keep her manner as cold and unflinching as possible as she explained only half of what she had told Dipper, leaving out most of the details on her captivity and her unknown human ally. But all the same, she told the Gems about Peridot’s plans, sparing no practical point as she revealed that the green Gem intended on coming to Earth any time now, with a full battleship and escort. The lingering tension in the room was instantly broken as the Gems heard this, a collective gasp of shock escaping them as they realized that their worst fears, fears they had tried so hard to push away to even the point of denial, were about to come true. Still, they let Lapis finish, listening intently to everything she said and committing it all to memory, knowing that it would be important information to have in the inevitable, upcoming confrontation.

“And… that’s all I know,” the blue Gem remarked stiffly, bringing her long story to a close. She spared no other words for the Crystal Gems, her disdain for them all still quite clear as she crossed her arms and looked down to her feet, barely even listening as the first round of reactions rose up.
“S-so it’s true…” Pearl muttered, covering her mouth with a trembling hand. “They really are coming… E-even after everything we’ve done, it still wasn’t enough to keep them away…”

“Well, that’s it then!” Amethyst exclaimed hotly, throwing her arms up in bitter defeat. “We’re screwed! We’re completely and totally screwed! What the heck are we gonna do?!”

“I don’t know!” Pearl exclaimed, starting to panic. “It’s been thousands of years since we’ve dealt with something like this, and we don’t even have Rose with us anymore! There’s no way we’ll be able to–”

“That’s enough,” Garnet cut in, clearly shaken herself but still managing to mostly keep her cool. “We’ll deal with this as it comes.”

“What?!” Pearl asked in dumbfounded surprise at how calm their leader was over this. “Garnet, we have to–”

“I said,” Garnet growled between clenched teeth as she nodded over to the kids, who were all looking to the Gems in apt concern and alarm. “We’ll deal with it.”

Amethyst and Pearl instantly silenced themselves at this, even if their expressions alone were more than enough to convey their rising terror. At the same time, Garnet stepped over to Lapis, who was still lost in her own thoughts until the Gem leader spoke up and gained her attention. “Lapis,” she began, her tone even, but genuine. “We know you still have hard feelings towards us about your time trapped in the mirror. But still, we thank you for giving us this information, even when you didn’t have to.”

Lapis was clearly somewhat taken aback by this show of gratitude, but she was quick to shrug it off as she looked away bitterly. “Whatever,” she remarked crossly. “I didn’t do it for you.”

“I know,” Garnet acknowledged as she glanced over to Dipper next. For the duration of the meeting, he had only really stood silently alongside Steven and Mabel, watching the blue Gem rather worriedly as she relayed her intel. However, his concern was interrupted as Garnet approached him, putting a steady hand on his shoulder. “Dipper, thank you for making sure this information got to us,” she said, adjusting her shades. “It turns out, you were right all along. We’re sorry for not taking your concerns about Homeworld seriously. That’s a mistake we’ll try our hardest not to make again.”

“Y-you’re welcome…” Dipper nodded, his voice rather small as he realized that he had finally earned the Gems’ respect. Only it had happened in the last way he ever could have wanted it to.

“Well, I think it’s time we called it a night,” Garnet announced as she put her hands on her hips. “Steven, it’s time for you to go to bed. Amethyst, Pearl… I-I need to talk to you inside the temple.”

The other Gems nodded quickly, already on their feet and rushing for the temple gate. Garnet followed after, not saying anything else as her hands clenched into tight, very lightly shaking fists at her sides. But even so, the Gems departed, all three of them knowing they had much to do and so very little time to do any of it.

“Lapis, you’re welcome to stay here at the temple for the night if you want to,” Steven offered the blue Gem with an inviting smile.

“Uh… thank you, Steven, but… I’d rather not…” Lapis frowned, not really wanting to be in such a close vicinity to the Crystal Gems.

“Well, hey, why don’t you stay down at the shack with us instead!?” Mabel exclaimed brightly. “It
could be like a really cool, magical Gem sleepover! I could make cookies and we could sing karaoke, and-

“Mabel, I-I don’t really know if Lapis is up for all that…” Dipper cut in, glancing worriedly at the blue Gem.

“I-its ok,” Lapis assured with a small, somewhat forced smile. “Mabel, I think I’ll take you up on that offer to stay with you guys… just because…”

“Alright!” Mabel cheered excitedly, already grabbing the blue Gem by the hand and pulling her out the door. “This is gonna be so much fun!”

“Y-yeah…” Lapis said halfheartedly, glancing back at Dipper who only gave her a somewhat amused shrug as Steven cheerfully waved them all off for the night. “Fun…”

Fortunately when the trio arrived at the shack, Stan was nowhere to be found, as had become somewhat customary at night anymore. Still, the twins didn’t think much of it as they showed Lapis around, with Mabel being much more enthusiastic over her presence, while Dipper remained rather solemn as he kept in mind the reason why the blue Gem was there in general.

Still, Lapis tried her best to remain as upbeat as she could, not really wanting to upset either of the twins, especially not Dipper, in light of what was coming. Which was why it wasn’t too long before the blue Gem slipped away as soon as the twins went to bed, flying up to the roof, where she perched to find a moment’s peace. She paid the natural beauty of the evening no mind as she shut her eyes and let out a long sigh, hugging her knees to her chest as she forced her thoughts to be silent for a change. After all, there would be plenty of time to worry over what was coming in the next few days. For now, she just wanted to let her mind finally have some much-deserved rest, something that it admittedly hadn’t seen in years.

Her mediation was soon broken, however, as she heard soft footsteps approach her from behind. She didn’t even have to open her eyes to know that Dipper had taken a seat down beside her, but oddly he didn’t say anything, instead only letting out a soft, tired sigh instead. The two of them sat in silence like that for a while, neither of them really sure of what to say at this point, as there was just so much that really could be said. Still, when this silence was broken, Dipper was the one to do it.

“I know none of this is easy for you,” he began rather tentatively. “But for what it’s worth, I’m really glad you decided to stay.”

“I had to,” Lapis said, her tone sad and small. “I couldn’t just leave you behind like… like I did with him…”

“You did what you had to,” Dipper concluded, glancing over at her. “Just think, if you hadn’t escaped from Homeworld, none of us would have any idea about what’s coming.”

Lapis finally opened her eyes at this as she looked at him with dread and concern. “How are you so calm about all this?” she asked intently. “All I can think about is how terrified I am about what’s about to happen. So… why aren’t you?”

“To tell you the truth, I-I am pretty terrified…” Dipper admitted, rubbing his arm. “I mean, this is a full-on alien invasion we’re talking about here. It’s probably going to be the most dangerous thing we’ve had around here yet. But… I know it’s coming and that we have to face it, no matter how
dangerous it is. And I guess, in a weird way, that’s sorta what’s getting me through it all…”

Lapis couldn’t help but frown at this answer, her former guilt returning as she realized that the only reason he really had to face any of this was because of her. Perhaps if she had been more insistent with him on taking him off planet, then they could be galaxies away from this oncoming threat by now. But then she remembered what he had told her, about fighting for what mattered. She had promised him that she was going to stay, that she was going to stand by him no matter what happened. A promise, that by all accounts, she refused to let herself break. “You know, if there’s one good thing to come out of any of this… it’s that I got to spend more time with you. I think that’s what I’m going to miss the most if… if, well, something happens…”

“Don’t worry,” Dipper said with a small, warm smile. “Once all of this blows over—and it will, I know it—then we’ll even more time to hang out together. But since we won’t have to worry about Homeworld invasions or anything like that, then it’ll be even better.”

Lapis hesitated in answering this, knowing that his optimism about the situation was much too hopeful, almost to the point of being unrealistic. Still, if he believed that there was even the smallest change that they would get through this alive and unscathed, then she was inclined to believe it too. “Yeah… Even better…” she said, finally smiling as she looked to the starry sky once more. Lapis knew well that the danger they were about to face was severe, even life-threatening, but even so, she was resolved to face it, just as Dipper was. She would face it, stand up to it, fight back against it, regardless of how hard or perilous it might be, if for nothing else than the young human sitting by her side. For him, she would risk whatever she had to give, stand against whoever she had to, and put herself through anything at all, no matter what the cost to herself might be. Because she knew that, perhaps above anything else she had seen on planet Earth, he was, without question worth protecting.
Chapter 40, Part 1: The Return

Chapter Summary

In which everyone freaks out of a giant hand in the sky and the kids refuse to run away, even though they all get their asses handed to them by Jasper

Chapter Notes

YES HERE WE GO THE END OF ARC 4 IS FINALLY UPON US AND WHAT A WAY TO KICK IT OFF! Seriously though this chapter is great in my opinion, so I won't keep you from it! Enjoy my take on The Return!

Another day was drawing to a close in Gravity Falls, and with its end, the shops and businesses on main street began to close their doors for the night, just as they always did. In fact, everything about this warm, pleasant summer evening felt completely normal, almost mundane even, from the darkening peach skies, to the slowly appearing fireflies and cricket chirps, to the street lights flickering on casually. Everything was as it should be, with nothing odd, out of the ordinary, or potentially dangerous in sight. In a way, it was almost as if the entire foundations of the town and all its residents weren’t about to be completely and utterly shaken in just a few hours’ time.

Almost.

For while most of the town was wrested in blissful ignorance, there were a select few who did know about the danger that was soon to come, about the intergalactic threat that was most likely already making its steady approach to Earth. However, all those who had been warned of it, and even the messenger herself, knew nothing of when that threat would finally arrive, when it would strike or even really how. All they knew was that it was coming.

It was coming, and none of them were really ready for it.

Still, despite the palpable dread that hung over all of their heads, the Gems were still trying to maintain a semblance of normality, mostly for the kids’ sakes than anyone else’s. Lapis had only just delivered her warning about Peridot’s soon-coming arrival to them the previous night, and seeing as how the blue Gem herself had arrived on Earth almost a week prior to that, chances were they didn’t really have too much time left to prepare for it. Not that there was really much they could do to prepare about a threat they admittedly knew so little about, but they couldn’t really tell that to Steven, Dipper, or Mabel, especially since they fully believed they would be able to handle it just fine. So instead, they had decided to bide their time, assuring the kids that they had plenty of time to put a plan of action together, one that would work and chase Peridot away from Earth once and for all. And for the most part, this convenient, but necessary lie was working well to their
advantage.

The Gems’ greatest relief at the moment, of course, was that Steven was innocent and unsuspecting of just how bad this invasion could really be. In order to give themselves more time to focus and plan, they had sent their young ward off for most of the day, none of them wanting him to see just how frazzled and frightened they were under their quickly-crumbling calm facades. And so, Steven had spent the first half of the day down at the shack with the twins and Lapis, who seemed to constantly hover close to Dipper in particular, almost as if she was afraid that he would disappear or break if she left his side for even a moment. But all the same, the kids put forth a joint effort into showing the rather stressed blue Gem a much-needed good time, one that consisted of taking her on a tour of the museum and giving her a ride around the nearby woods on the mystery kart. Lapis halfheartedly participated in these activities with the kids, putting on a somewhat fake smile for them, one that they believed well enough.

All the same, the casual fun continued until Steven eventually left to make good on his promise to hang out with his father later that afternoon. They had spent most of their time relaxing at the car wash, having something of an impromptu jam session, before heading over to Gravity Fries right before they could close, so Steven could get his favorite fried treat.

The young Gem sucked in a deep breath as he slammed his fist down on the counter, ready to boldly proclaim his order. “Give me the-” He was cut off, however, as Peedee knowingly slid a bag of fry bits over to him, much to the young Gem’s delight. “Oh, thanks!”

“Oh, I saw you guys coming,” Peedee shrugged casually, leaning against the other side of the counter.

“Are you closing up all by yourself?” Greg asked curiously as Steven began munching on his bits.

“Yeah, it’s just me tonight,” Peedee nodded, glancing to the interior of the shop, which was bereft of both his father and his brother.

“Wow, that’s a lot of responsibility for a kid your age,” Greg noted with a smile. “Your dad must really trust you.”

“…Don’t patronize me, sir,” Peedee deadpanned, preparing to close the order window for the night.

“See you, Peedee!” Steven called brightly as him and Greg took their leave, heading down the street towards the direction of the shack and the temple. “So, like I was saying,” the young Gem continued recapping recent events to his father amidst snacking on his fry bits. “Peridot’s been shooting these huge robots here from space, and when you smash them, they explode into goo! But even crazier than that is that Lapis came back to earth a few days ago, and Dipper found her hiding out in the cave behind the waterfall! She… she told us that Peridot’s on her way here to Earth, a-and that she’ll probably be here any day now…” Steven let out a small, apprehensive sigh. “The Gems say that they’ll be able to fight her off, but… I don’t know… Lapis seemed really scared when she was telling them about it… And, in a way, it kinda is pretty scary to think about…”

“Yeah, it is,” Greg nodded, masking his own fear over this information well, especially when he saw that Steven only seemed to be slightly unnerved about it. “You know, I’m not sure if… Do… do you ever feel like all this Gem stuff is too much for you?”

Steven frowned, looking to his father in slight confusion. “What are you-” Before the young Gem could even finish, a deafening explosion roared across the skies, one that was loud and powerful enough to rattle the very earth below, shattering every window and pane of glass within a ten mile radius. All of the townsfolk who happened to be out and about barely managed to maintain their
footing amidst the rumbling ground, but in time they found their gazes being directed upwards, to the source of this sudden blast.

“What the hey was that?!?” Greg asked in alarm, steadying his footing as the ground became still and the noise died out. He paused, however as he glanced over at his son, who’s wide-eyed gaze was also focused on the sunset skies above. “…Steven?”

The young Gem’s expression was awash in worried curiosity as he strained his eyes to make out the odd, greenish, foreign object hanging in distant sky, but when he was finally able to make it out, he was only confused by it and its appearance further. “Is that… a hand?”

“And this is the time we fell into the Bottomless Pit,” Mabel grinned as she recounted past summer adventures to Lapis while showing off her scrapbook. The blue Gem listened, somewhat amused by the colorful photos (and allayed as she remembered that they weren’t the same thing as mirrors) while Dipper sat on the couch next to her, clearly bored as his sister continued rattling off their prior escapades. “Oh, and this is from when we tried to build a spaceship! And this is—”

“Mabel, do we really have to do this?” Dipper finally spoke up, exasperated. “Lapis already knows about all this; I told her about most of what happened this summer when I showed her the journal a few days ago, so she probably doesn’t want to hear it all over again.”

“Actually, Dipper, its ok,” Lapis assured with a small smile, glad for any distraction that took her mind off of what she knew was coming. “I really don’t mind hearing about all of the crazy stuff you guys have done again. Besides, Mabel’s take on all of it is... pretty unique.”

Mabel flashed her brother a somewhat smug, triumphant smile at this. “Well, at least somebody appreciates creative storytelling,” she remarked, satisfied as she looked back to her scrapbook. “Now where were we…?”

“Uh, actually, before we got back to... that...” Dipper frowned as he nodded to the scrapbook before looking to Lapis. “Can I ask you something?”

“O-of course,” the blue Gem nodded as she turned to him as Mabel let out an aggravated sigh over the interruption of her scrapbook session. “What is it?”

“Well, I was just wondering...” Dipper began, glancing away somewhat apprehensively. “After all this stuff with Peridot coming here to Earth is all said and done... what are you planning on doing next?”

Lapis let out a long sigh upon hearing this, especially since she knew that Dipper would likely pose this question to her but she had hoped that he wouldn't all the same. “Dipper, I already told you what I plan on doing...” She said quietly, averting his gaze all the while.

“So... you're still planning on leaving Earth?” Dipper asked, not even needing her to elaborate as he remembered their conversation on the clifftop just the other night. “Even after everything that's happened and everything that's about to happen? But... I thought... haven't you...”

“Wait, Lapis, you're not gonna stay here?” Mabel spoke up as Dipper trailed off, suddenly distraught. “But you only just got back! And we're all having such a great time hanging out with you. Why would you wanna leave so soon?”

“It's... complicated...” Lapis sighed again, folding her hands in her lap. She was silent for a moment
or two, her gaze fixated downward until she happened to glance over at Dipper once more, easily noticing the look of worry and disappointment on his face. Which of course, were two things the blue Gem couldn't stand seeing there. “Dipper... I-”

“Kids!” Before Lapis could even get another word out, Stan's loud, gruff call rang out from the gift shop, with the conman himself arriving in the den just a moment later. The twins hadn't really seen their great uncle since yesterday, so they had just assumed he was feeling under the weather, but given his current usual surliness, they were quick to realize their theory was more than likely wrong. “I thought I told you both to clean the gift shop, but it's still just as messy as it was the other day when that day care came here for a field trip! What have you two runts been doing all day?!” The twins paused at this, only having a moment to exchange a brief glance before the conman finally noticed they weren't the only ones in the room. “And who's Princess Bluebird over there?”

“Oh! Grunkle Stan, this is... Lapis?” Mabel’s excitement faded into a confused frown as Lapis suddenly stood, her eyes wide as she stared at Stan with nothing short of absolute awe.

“Uh... Lapis?” Dipper asked, just as disconcerted as the blue Gem slowly walked over to the conman, who only crossed his arms as she approached him, her mouth hanging agape in disbelief.

“Uh, you got a problem with me or something, frills?” Stan asked, raising a caustic eyebrow as he glowered down at her. “Cause if you do, then I got a problem with weird blue women loafing around on my couch with my niece and nephew.”

“I... I can’t believe it...” Lapis breathed, her voice barely even a whisper as she refused to take her eyes off the conman. “It... it’s you!”

“...Huh?”

“It’s you!” Lapis repeated, a huge smile of relief spreading across her face. “I... H-how did you even get here?! I thought... y-you were... The last time I saw you, you were... they... they were-”

“Oh great, just what we need around here,” Stan deadpanned, rolling his eyes. “Listen, frills,” he began just as dryly as he looked to Lapis. “I don’t care if you are the psychopath who stole the waterfall and nearly put me out of business, as long as you stay outta my way, then
you and me won’t have any issues, you got it?”

“Um… ok?” Lapis shrugged, not entirely sure what he meant by all that.

“And as for you two,” Stan said to the twins as he prepared to take his leave. “Could you maybe go one day without bringing some weird Gem thing or supernatural creature home for a change? Please and thank you.”

Without sparing another word, the conman turned and headed off to his office as Mabel called out after him. “Just for the record, Dipper was the one who brought Lapis home, so if you’re gonna yell at anyone, yell at him!”

“Lapis, are you ok?” Dipper asked the blue Gem once Stan was out of earshot. “You seemed kinda shaken up when you first saw Stan a minute ago…”

“Yeah, what’s up with that?” Mabel wondered, just as curious. “Have you guys met or something before?”

Lapis was quiet for a moment, shaking her head incredulously before responding. “It’s so weird…”

“N-no... not now...” she whispered, her tone easily conveying just how shaken she was. “It's way too soon...”

“Lapis, what's-” Dipper attempted to ask, but the blue Gem was quick to cut him off.

“Come on!” she exclaimed frantically, grabbing both of the twins by the wrists and yanking them off the ground, not wasting a second as she practically flew out of the shack, water wings and all. The minute they burst outside, Lapis was quick to come to a grinding halt, the twins falling to the ground beside her as she froze, her wings still keeping her hovering a bit above the ground as her gaze fixated itself on the sunset skies above.

“Woo!” Mabel exclaimed somewhat winded as she picked herself up from their very short flight. “That was such a rush! Can we do it again?”

Dipper ignored his sister's enthusiasm as he also stood, noticing just how alarmed Lapis seemed to be as he hesitantly placed a hand on her arm to break her out of her apparent reverie. “Lapis? What's going on?” he asked, not hiding his apt concern.

Instead of answering, the blue Gem simply pointed to the sky, her hand shaking as she did so and her eyes never moving off of she was looking at as the twins finally looked up to it as well.

It couldn't have been described as anything else but a hand, ominous and massive as it hung in the atmosphere far away from the ground, but still close enough to be clearly seen. It had an odd, unnatural green tint to it, with thin, white glowing “veins” running across its bright, metallic surface. While most of the hand's fingers were curled into a lose fist, its index seemed to be pointing straight towards Gravity Falls as it very slowly inched its way downward in a gentle, gradual slope. Still, there was no question that it was approaching the unknowing town all the same.
“Whoa! Look at that giant hand!” Mabel exclaimed, amazed. “It's so weird and disembodied and green! I wonder where it came from?”

“I-it's from Homeworld,” Lapis informed, everything about her manner incredibly tense, especially her voice. “That's her ship... Peridot... s-she... she's here...”

“Wait, that's Peridot's ship?” Dipper asked, looking back to the hand in the sky rather incredulously. “Huh. I thought it would have been a bit more... I don't know, intimidating?”

“Guys!” Steven called as he ran up to the group rather breathlessly. Greg had let him run on ahead while he went back to the car wash to get his van, promising to meet him up at the temple later to see if the Gems could make any sense of what was going on. Still, the young Gem figured he’d stop by the shack first to check in with Lapis and the twins first, especially as he noticed that the hand was slowly drawing closer as he hurried over from town. “Have you seen the-”

“The freaky giant hand in the sky?” Mabel guessed. “Yeah, we have. To be honest, it's kinda hard to miss...”

“It's Peridot!” Lapis exclaimed, suddenly frantic as she looked to the kids. “I-I knew she was coming but I didn't know it would be this soon! We didn't even have time to prepare o-or plan or anything! And it's all my fault because I wasted all that time and waited too long to say anything about it!”

“Well, to be fair...” Dipper began, somewhat guiltily scratching the back of his neck. “It's sort of my fault too, seeing as how I was the one you were wasting all that time with...”

Lapis took pause at this, her dread faltering into remorse as she looked to Dipper, wanting to assure him that nothing about this was anywhere near his fault. But before she could, Mabel interjected. “So, uh... what are we gonna do about...?” She trailed off, mimicking the hand ship with her own hand as she brought it down with a “Boosh!”

“The Gems!” Steven exclaimed, seeing as how his intent was to find them anyway. “They'll know what to do! Come on!”

Knowing the Gems were indeed their best bet for a solution at the moment, the twins readily followed Steven as he began to hurry up the hill towards the temple. And while Lapis was much more skeptical on their ability to ward such a dangerous threat off, she begrudgingly followed, but not before casting another fearful glance to the hand in the sky, the hand that was edging ever closer with each passing moment. The hand that could very well be the harbinger of doom and destruction for them all.

“The light cannons should be ready,” Pearl reported, retracting her telescope as she came to stand beside Garnet. The Gem leader nodded tersely, her manner as steady as it could be considering what they were up against. Still, with an enemy ship hovering just a few thousand feet above them, it was hard for any of the Gems to really keep a level head amidst the unshakable fear that had been pouring into them ever since the previous evening.

“Hey!” Greg shouted as he pulled his van up to the temple, hastily climbing out and running over to the Gems. “You guys have seen that... that thing in sky?!”

“No, Greg, we didn't,” Amethyst deadpanned, knowing that a guard of sarcasm and humor was the only thing keeping her true terror from breaking through at the moment. “We're just setting up all these light cannons up because we wanna have a killer light show later on.”
“Of course, we saw it, Greg,” Pearl remarked coldly, rolling her eyes at both the purple Gem and the former rock star. “And... we're almost positive of what it is... A Homeworld ship...”

Greg flinched at this, his eyes wide as he stole another anxious glance up at the hand. “So... I-it's happening then?” he asked, his voice soft as he remembered everything Rose had told him about her former home. “Oh man... this... this is everything she was ever afraid of... well, this, and one other thing...”

The Gems couldn't help but look to Greg rather curiously upon hearing this, none of them sure of what he really meant by that last statement. But before they could question him on this, the kids arrived, running up to the group with Lapis following much more hesitantly after them. “You guys!” Steven shouted as he reached his guardians.

“Oh geez,” Amethyst sighed, exasperated. “Here we go again. Before you say anything else, Steven, yeah, we saw the giant hand in the sky.”

“It's a ship,” Garnet informed solidly. “We have to assume its Peridot.”

“Assume?!” Lapis scoffed hotly. “You assume it’s Peridot? Are you kidding me?! Of course, its Peridot! I've seen that ship before! I was almost forced onto it before I escaped! And now it's almost here, with all of its advanced weapons and whatever reinforcements they decided to give her! And let me guess: you three have no idea what to do about this, do you?!”

Needless to say that the Crystal Gems were rather taken aback by the blue Gem's harsh accusation, mostly because it was admittedly true. The idea to take the hand ship on with the five light cannons, the most powerful auxiliary weapons at their disposal, was just that—an idea. An idea that none of them truthfully even thought would work but the only idea they had that might have the slightest chance at working all the same. Which was why they had to show confidence in this idea, if not for their own sake, then for the sake of the trio of kids who were looking to them for answers and protection.

“W-we have a plan!” Pearl asserted defensively, though her flustered tone was still quite clear.

“Really? That’s great!” Mabel chimed with a relieved grin. “What is it?”

The Gems exchanged a tight glance before Amethyst shrugged and blurted it right out. “We’re just gonna shoot it.”

“Seriously?!” Lapis asked, folding her arms in cross disbelief. “That’s your brilliant ‘plan’? It’s never going to work.”

“Well,” Pearl began, rather frustrated at the blue Gem’s interference in the matter in general. “If you can think you can come up with something better, then by all means! Use your water wings and your water towers and your water... water and save the day!”

“I already did save you all just by coming here to warn you about this!” Lapis shouted, filled with fury that went far beyond her annoyance at the Gems’ weak, impromptu plan. “And the only reason I’m still here at all is because of them!” She threw her arm towards the kids, who were all rather alarmed by this fierce, sudden argument. “And if you’re not going to take protecting them from this seriously, then I guess I’ll just have to-”

“Whoa, hold on!” Dipper suddenly interjected, rushing to stand in between the quarreling Gems. “Look, I know you guys don’t have like, any reason to get along with each other-”

“They kept me trapped in a mirror for thousands of years,” Lapis remarked coldly, glaring at the
“Well, she tried to destroy us with her dumb old water clones,” Amethyst countered, crossing her arms petulantly.

“…O-ok, both of you have valid points,” Dipper continued as evenly as he could, though he did drop his voice down to a mutter for a brief moment. “Though Lapis’ point is probably just a bit more valid… But don’t you think we should be spending our time trying to get rid of that giant hand in the sky instead of arguing?”

“Dipper’s right!” Steven jumped in just as earnestly. “We should be working together, not fighting! We all have things that we wanna protect, things that might be in trouble if we don’t do something soon. I-I know you guys are scared, and… we’re scared too,” he motioned to Dipper and Mabel, who both nodded their solemn agreement. “But we’ve been scared before, right? None of us know what’s going to happen, but… that’s ok. We can figure this out. Together.”

Upon hearing the young Gems’ inspiring words, all four of the present Gems were stunned into amazed silence, all of them somewhat ashamed of their previous behavior. After all, he was right; a massive threat was only hours away from touching down, which meant this was this time for action and cooperation, not fear and separation.

“You heard him,” Garnet said, her tone resolved and firm as her hands clenched into determined fists. “Ready the light cannons.”

Amethyst and Pearl wasted no time in doing as their leader commanded, racing up to the porch and pushing the dual light cannons into position. The Quartizine Trio from Rose’s armory was already in place, and soon enough all five cannons were set to aim directly at the steadily approaching hand ship. Seeing as how the blast from even one of these weapons was immense, the Gems made sure to put plenty of distance between the cannons and themselves and the kids before they were activated.

“Steven,” Garnet said, nodding to her young ward. “Light them up.”

The young Gem nodded boldly before speaking into his walkie talkie, knowing that the other end was taped to the bottom of the porch, in even range of all five light cannons. “If every pork chop were perfect, we wouldn’t have hot dogs.”

As soon as Steven said this iconic phrase, all of the light cannons reacted accordingly, their barrels opening up as their tips began to glow with emerging power. In perfect unison, all five cannons fired, their radiant, beautiful beams bursting from the weapons and dancing between each other as they soared, all the way up towards the hand ship in a powerful, concentrated stream of light. However, as it neared the ship, the hand suddenly shifted from its constant pointing position, opening up to meet the beam with an open palm. The moment the blast hit the ship’s smooth, marble-like surface, it dissipated completely as the hand easily blocked it, leaving not even a scratch or crack behind.

“No effect…” Garnet reported as she lowered the telescope, her expression unmoved as she met the fearful, disappointed glances of the others.

“Told you,” Lapis spoke up, still rather bitter towards the Crystal Gems over what happened earlier.

“So… what now?” Greg asked anxiously.
Garnet paused, looking to her teammates and getting small, still somewhat uncertain nods from them. With the light cannons having proved themselves to be failures in taking out the hand ship, the Gems all knew that they didn’t really have much of a plan B, aside from throwing themselves directly into the line of fire. They also knew that they would be incredibly out of their league in doing so, to the point that this incoming encounter could be their most deadly in centuries. But as much as the threat they were facing unanimously terrified them, they knew they couldn’t back down from it now. Not while their vow to protect the Earth and its citizens still stood, which it did. For as long as they stayed together and unbroken, it would always remain. Even in the face of untold peril and possible devastation such as this. “We’ll have to take them head on,” the Gem leader finally proclaimed, steadfast as ever. “The whole town might be in danger.”

“Well, this wouldn’t be the first time…” Dipper remarked somewhat sardonically, knowing well that Gravity Falls was no stranger to dangerous happenings.

“If all those people are in trouble, then we should do something to make sure they'll stay safe!” Steven insisted worriedly, not wanting to see anyone, especially innocent civilians, get hurt in this encounter.

“Uh, looks like they're already ahead of us on that for a change,” Amethyst noted, nodding towards town. Even from the temple, the group was able to hear the telltale wail of Mayor Dewey’s campaign van speeding through the streets. However, instead of merely proclaiming the mayor’s name, the intercom obnoxiously heralded another message to the nervous townsfolk instead.

“Eva-cuate! Eva-cuate!” the van blared as Dewey careened down main street, catching the attention of everyone in the vicinity, attention that had previously been devoted to the ominous hand descending from the sky. Needless to say that the concerned citizens were quick to look to their mayor in this uncertain time, especially as he parked his van in the town square, climbed on top of it, and began to address them in an impromptu speech.

“People of Gravity Falls!” Dewey began, boldly speaking through his megaphone, even if it was clear he was in a nervous sweat. “I need everyone to consider evacuation! Evacuation is something we all depend on in times of—”

“E-evacuate?” Thompson spoke up, alarmed as the other teens in the crowd exchanged dumbfounded glances.

“You mean you want us to leave?!” Mr. Smiley asked in apt disbelief.

“Er-uh... Yes,” Dewey nodded as firmly as he could. “That is, by definition, what evacuation mean, after all.”

“Why do we have to leave?! What's that giant hand even gonna do?” Kiki asked, crossing her arms.

“It’s the snake people! The Sneople!” Ronaldo cried amidst snapping photos of the hand ship for his blog. “They’re finally coming to turn our planet into a ticking time bomb of doom with the help of a magical talking parallelogram!”

“What'll happen once we're gone!? When will we be able to come back?!” Toby Determined wailed awkwardly. “All these questions and more probably won’t be answered in the next edition of the Gravity Falls Gossiper!”

“Hey! Hey, uh, attention! Attention, everyone! Eyes back on me!” Dewey called amidst the mild outbreak of panic, pulling at his collar anxiously before continuing. “I-I understand that you all...
might be a little... er—nervous, in this... uncertain situation—"

"WE’RE ALL GONNA DIE!" someone in the crowd screamed and the others began to mirror this frenzy as the mayor tried to continue his speech over it.

"A-and I understand your concern! After all, as a politician, pointing fingers makes me very nervous myself, but rest assured that I have everything under-"

"I'm not running away from any weird, giant, green hands in the sky!” Grenda roared as Candy cheered in support of staying to fight. “I’m gonna punch it!”

“I’m not running either! I say, we pelt that thing with packages until it goes back to wherever it came from!” Barb proclaimed fiercely.

“Or we could build a giant robot of another giant hand, take it up there, and give it a friendly ol’ handshake!” McGucket suggested wildly, his grin fading as he noticed the odd looks several nearby people gave him. “Anybody? No? Aw, hornswaggle!”

“N-now, now!” Dewey desperately tried to reason with the frantic citizens. “Let's all calm down here! Remember, things could always be worse! F-for instance, we could be in Velocity Springs!”

“Too soon!” Fryman cried accusingly over the mention of the notoriously doomed nearby town.

“Please!” the mayor exclaimed, fearfully crawling back into his van as the townsfolk began panicking even more aggressively. “Consider the state of—”

“Tip the truck!” Nanefua shouted and several people rallied forward to do just that.

By the time the Gems, Steven, and the twins made it the center of town where this escalating riot was unfolding, Dewey's van had already been pushed onto its side, with the mayor trapped inside, clearly frightened out of his wits as he held a clipboard over his face. Most of the townsfolk were in nothing less than an absolute uproar as they clamored around the square, some ready to flee as Dewey had suggested, while others were preparing themselves to fight off the hand in the sky themselves, while still others were taking advantage of the madness by looting and pickpocketing. Needless to say it was a frightening, downright chaotic scene, with fear and panic overriding any inkling of common sense and community there was to be found, which was admittedly very little to begin with.

“Yeesh, this is a total mess!” Mabel remarked over the din of the unfolding disarray.

“You know, considering how often Gravity Falls is almost destroyed, I gotta admit, I'm pretty surprised this is the first time we've seen an actual riot break out over it...” Dipper mused, just as surprised by how fast things were unraveling into madness, especially as an empty car somehow managed to catch fire just a few feet away.

“They all look so scared...” Steven muttered, gripping his arms with sympathetic concern as the uproarious, terrified cries and shouts of the townsfolk all seemed to mesh and mingle together.

“They won't be for long,” Garnet said stoically before leaping high, Pearl and Amethyst joining her as they squarely landed on top of Dewey's downed van. Most of the townsfolk were completely unaware of their presence, until the Gem leader summoned her gauntlets and slammed them together, the resounding bam being enough to still the ongoing frenzy completely. “You all need to leave Gravity Falls as soon as possible!” Garnet announced authoritatively. “No more questions, and no more riots.”
“B-but what about that scary hand in the sky?!” Lazy Susan asked fearfully.

“We’ll take care of that!” Pearl proclaimed, trying her hardest to emanate bravery though she felt very little at the moment. “You can rest assured that Gravity Falls will be safe and secure under our watch while you’re all away.”

“If it’s going to be so ‘safe’, then why do we need to leave in the first place?!” Kofi shouted as several others echoed the sentiment in angry agreement.

“W-well... you have to leave because... b-because we... hm...” Pearl trailed off, neither her, Garnet, nor Amethyst sure of what to tell the frantic people at the moment. They couldn't very well reveal that violent, human-hating Homeworld Gems were about to arrive, ones that might very well have the intent of wiping Gravity Falls off the map entirely. Still, considering all three of them were rather socially graceless when it came to interacting with so many humans at once, they were all clueless of how to calm them and get them to listen. Fortunately though, their young ward had enough skill in this area of all of them.

“Everyone, please!” Steven exclaimed as he climbed onto the van alongside his guardians. “I know none of you want to leave your homes. But I also know that you’re all going to be ok because I know each and every one of you! You’re smart, tough, brave, and resourceful. And you all care more about each other than you do a giant green hand that came from outer space! I know it hurts to leave the place you care about, and I know it hurts to have to face the unknown. But are we really going to hurt each other?”

The crowd had already calmed down quite a bit as the young Gem gave this earnest speech, but at this juncture, they soon began to murmur amongst themselves, seemingly reconsidering their earlier hysteria. But even so, Steven continued, just as boldly as before. “Of course not! We’ll face this evacuation together and we’ll survive because we can hold each other’s hands through this until it’s all over and we’re all safely back here again! Metaphorically speaking, of course.”

Needless to say that this bout of genuine hope and inspiration was just what the townsfolk needed in the midst of their fear and dread. Encouraged by the young Gem’s words, a supportive cheer rose up from the crowd, one that started with the twins, of course, before surely enough spreading to everyone else gathered in the square. The Gems themselves also joined in, clearly proud of their young ward for being so strong and steady in the face of such adversity and peril.

“Hmph, way to steal my mayoral thunder, kid…” Dewey muttered disgruntledly before putting his usual professionalism back on and emerging from his tipped over van. “Er—what the Universe kid said!” he exclaimed through his megaphone, addressing the townsfolk once again. “Now, everyone, let’s…” The mayor trailed off with a wry grin, pushing a button inside his van as the telltale wail rang out from its intercoms, loud enough that the entire town could hear it.

“Eva-cuate! Eva-cuate!”

“Eva-cuate! Eva-cuate!”

Wendy was standing outside her house when she first heard the alarm, but she largely ignored it as she instead tensely spun the handle of her axe in her hand, glaring up at the approaching hand ship all the while. While she didn’t know exactly what it was (to be fair, no one really seemed to), she was able to guess from its alien appearance that it was likely Gem-related, but given the sudden apparent call for a full-town evacuation, it probably wasn’t anything friendly. Still, the cashier
could really care less for the evacuation order in the first place, knowing that simply running and hiding from such a potentially monumental threat was nothing short of pathetic and cowardly. Even if she had no idea what was really coming, Wendy wanted to stay and defend her home from it, no matter how daunting it might be.

A feat that would have been much more feasible if she didn’t have her father and brothers to contend with.

“Wendy!” Manly Dan shouted, bursting out of the house just as boisterously as ever. “Get in here and help me round up your brothers! We gotta hightail it outta here before that hand pokes us all into a bunch of flannel-wearing pulps!”

“I’m not going,” Wendy said, her tone stern as she refused to even turn to face her father.

“What did you just say?” Dan asked, narrowing his eyes as his temper started to rise.

“I said, I’m not going, Dad,” the cashier gripped her axe tighter, her glare deepening as she kept her focus on the hand ship. “I’m gonna stay here and help fight that… that thing off before it can destroy Gravity Falls, or worse!”

“No, you’re not!” the lumberjack practically roared, infuriated upon hearing his daughter even entertain such a dangerous thought. “You’re gonna get in the car with me and your brothers, and we’re all gonna hit the road with everyone else, and you’re not gonna stay here all by yourself!”

“Yes, I am!” Wendy protested, finally glaring over her shoulder at him. “And if you were really as ‘manly’ as everybody says you are, then you’d stay and fight too instead of running away like you did when Mom died!”

Dan sucked in a sharp, angry breath upon hearing this, but instead of hotly reaming his daughter out for this as he normally would have, the lumberjack somehow managed to control his infamously uncontrollable temper for a change. “Wendy,” he began, his tone even enough, even if his expression was set in a scowl, albeit a somewhat softer one. “Wendy, listen to me,” the lumberjack insisted firmer as he grabbed his daughter by the shoulder, ignoring her upset, frustrated glare as he turned her around to face him. “I may have taught you to be a fighter, but even I know there are some fights you just can’t win. And this is one of them fights. Now I’m not about to lose you like I lost—” Dan trailed off, clenching his large fists tightly as he glanced away, almost as if he was trying to fight back tears, an odd sight for such a burly, intimidating man.

“Look,” he started over, nodding back towards the house. Wendy’s intense scowl lightened a bit as she noticed all three of her brothers peeking out of the doorframe, quietly watching the unfolding exchange with both interest and concern. “You know you’re the only thing still keepin’ this ragtag group of lumberjacks and lumberjuniors together. We depend on you, just like we did your… your mom. So you gotta come along with us and book it outta here until this whole ‘evacuation’ thing is done. After all, without you, we’d be like a tree without roots: ready to topple over without even takin’ a swing.”

“You know I never get your weird lumberjack analogies, Dad,” Wendy remarked, finally cracking a small, bittersweet smile as she shook her head. “But… I think I get this one…” She looked to her brothers once more, all of them meeting her gaze just as pleadingly as her own father was. And as much as she didn’t want to abandon her home for the sake of fear and panic, she knew that she couldn’t very well abandon her family either, especially not now. Or for that matter, ever. “Ok…” Wendy sighed relentedly, strapping her axe back into its hoister on her belt before pulling her father into a tight embrace, her brothers not hesitating to run out of the house to join in on the family hug. “I’ll go…”
“Eva-cuate! Eva-cuate!”

“An evacuation, huh?” Vidalia paused, her paintbrush lifting off the canvas she had been working on as she heard the distant, but still distinct alarm blare out from town. “We’ve had pretty much everything else in this town, but I don’t think we’ve ever had one of those... Aw, well.” The artist shrugged, rising from her stool as she brushed her apron off before heading over to the stairs. “Boys, get down here! We gotta go!”

Vidalia found herself waiting at least five minutes for either of her sons to come down, but all the same, she knew she wouldn’t have to ask twice. And sure enough, Sour Cream happened to wander down first, his hands shoved into his pockets and his headphones on as he nodded his head to the beat he was listening to.

“Sour Cream,” Vidalia began, though her son didn’t hear her as he instead headed for the kitchen, still lost in his music. “Sour Cream,” the artist tried again, coming to stand beside the fridge as he opened it. “Sour Cream!” Vidalia finally managed to get his attention by lifting one side of his headphones up, startling him quite a bit, though he was quick to revert to his usual cool manner.

“Oh, hey, Mom,” Sour Cream said as he pulled a soda out of the fridge. “What’s up?”

“You hear that?” Vidalia asked, pausing to allow the ongoing evacuation alarm to be heard. “It means it’s time for us to go.”

“Wait, you mean the whole ‘evacuation’ thing?” Sour Cream asked, using air quotes to punctuate his point. “Yeah, Tambry already texted me about it. But I didn’t think we had to, you know, actually leave.”

“Uh, that’s sorta the whole point of an evacuation, son,” Vidalia remarked, crossing her arms. “To get people to leave.”

“But I was gonna rave to the weird hand in the sky later!” Sour Cream protested with a frown. “That thing’s totally sick. It’s already inspired me to mix out a ton of new beats and-”

“Well, you can mix them all out in the car on the way to the hotel.”

“It won’t be the same...” Sour Cream pouted softly, though he quickly got over it. “Hey, what about Yellowtail? Isn’t he supposed to get back from that fishing trip of his tomorrow? What’s he gonna think of us just running off like this?”

“I’ll be sure to call him once we’re settled in for the night,” Vidalia assured as she watched her son start to head back upstairs to gather his things. “And Sour Cream, would it kill you to call him ‘dad’ for once?”

“Meh,” Sour Cream simply shrugged dryly as he disappeared into his room as his mother called out to him one last time.

“Hey, while you’re up there, tell Onion to-” Vidalia found herself cut off as she suddenly felt her smock rustle a bit behind her. The artist grinned as she turned to find her younger son tucked underneath it, playing an unspoken game of hide-and-seek until his mother unveiled him. “Boo! Found ya!” Vidalia chuckled, pulling her smock aside. As was usual, Onion said nothing and his expression was unchanged, even as his mother rustled his hair. “You ready to deal with a weird alien hand in the sky, my little troublemaker?”
In response to this, Onion simply pulled a baseball bat out of nowhere, a small scowl forming on his face as he tapped its end into his free hand. “No, not like that.” Vidalia shook her head, laughing once more as she took the weapon away from her young son as she hoisted him up into her arms. “We’re gonna take a… bit of less hands-on approach, ironically enough. Still, if we ever need to take on a burglar or a little league team, we’ll keep that plan in mind.”

“Eva-cuate! Eva-cuate!”

Pacifica’s eyes were wide as she placed a hand against the large library window, her usual aristocratic confidence replaced with genuine, unnerved fear. Northwest Manor was far enough away from town itself that the mayor’s evacuation call could only barely be heard, but it was discernable nonetheless. The massive hand, however, was easily visible from the mansion as its alien, metallic surface began to paint the once-sunset skies a sickly shade of dull green. The heiress hadn’t the faintest clue about what any of this meant or just how dangerous it might be, but she figured it was likely a pretty big deal if Mayor Dewey had gone to all the trouble for calling for a complete evacuation of Gravity Falls.

It wasn’t very long, however, before Pacifica found her thoughts being interrupted by her parents, both of whom burst into the otherwise empty library and neither of whom were very pleased to find her there.

“Oh, Pacifica, there you are!” Priscilla exclaimed with little in her tone that sounded like genuine relief. “What do you think you’re doing in here?”

“I-I was just looking at… at that…” Pacifica replied almost hesitantly, pointing to the hand ship out the window, which almost seemed to be pointing right back at her. “You know, the giant green hand in the sky? The one that really looks like it’s getting closer by the minute?”

“Yes, Pacifica, we’re all well aware of the ‘hand’,” Preston remarked rather dryly, rolling his eyes. “But, of course, it’s none of our concern. Now, come along. It’s time to bunker down inside the panic room until all this nonsense blows over.”

“Wait, what?” Pacifica frowned as she rose to stand from her window seat. “We’re not going to evacuate like everyone else?”

“‘Everyone else’ doesn’t have the luxury of a steel-doored, double-enforced panic room like we do,” Preston assured coldly. “And besides, it’s not like we can very well just leave and risk losing our mansion, our factory, our titan’s ore mine, every piece of the proud Northwest empire that stands here in Gravity Falls! That would be absurd!”

“But Mayor Dewey said-”

“Mayor Dewey can barely even be considered competent in the midst of this catastrophe, what with him entrusting the safety of the town with those unkempt Crystal Gems instead of actually taking charge of things himself for a change.”

“Ugh,” Priscilla spoke up, mirroring her husband’s disgust for the Gems. “They’re so tacky.”

“But…” Pacifica began, still conflicted with her parents’ rather ill-advised plan to stay as she looked back to the hand ship again. “Shouldn’t we-“

“Pacifica,” Preston cut her off once more, making it clear that he was starting to lose his patience.
“We are going to the panic room, whether you want to go or not. And I’m only going to tell you to come along one more time…” he trailed off rather grimly, reaching his hand into his suit pocket, almost as if he was fishing around for something inside. Pacifica took in a soft, almost inaudible gasp at this, panic washing over her expression for just a split second before she quickly complied.

“R-right,” she nodded tersely, hurrying over to the other side of the room to meet them. “I… I’m coming…”

Both of the parental Northwests merely nodded their stoic approval at this, not sparing another word to their daughter as she fell in step behind them. However, before they left the library entirely, she did happen to take one last glance over her shoulder at the approaching hand, her dread and fear towards whatever it was just as present in her mind as it was before.

But at the same time, for as weird and alarming as it all was, Pacifica couldn’t help but let her mind wander to the ones she knew usually followed right behind such alarming weirdness: the Pines twins and the youngest Crystal Gem. She couldn’t profess to really knowing Dipper, Mabel, or Steven that well. But what she saw during the fiasco they all went through at the mini-golf course, she had gained the realization that they were well equipped to handle whatever oddities this town had to throw at them, no matter how daunting or deadly they might be.

Still, Pacifica couldn’t help but wonder, maybe even worry, if even they were up to the task of dealing with something as frightening or as bewildering as this.

“Eva-cuate! Eva-cuate!”

Not long after the crowd in the square had come to a consensus on the evacuation, they disbanded, everyone hurrying back to their homes and businesses to gather what they could and prepare to leave. For some families, this was a calm, orderly, easy process. But for some, it couldn’t be any more disastrous or hectic.

“Peedee!” Fryman grunted as he tried to pull his panicking son away from the counter of Gravity Fries. “Come on! We gotta go!”

“But are we coming back?!” Peedee cried, struggling to remain anchored to the fry shop.

“I don’t know, maybe!” Fryman retorted, far too frustrated to offer any genuine reassurance, which of course, only freaked his son out even more. “Ow!” the restaurant operator hissed in pain as Peedee accidentally kicked him in the face. “Peedee, seriously! This is ridiculous! The shop will still be here when we get back, I promise!”

“But you don’t know that!” Peedee wailed frantically, still clinging to the counter. “For all we know that hand could come down here and smash the entire town! Then how are we gonna make an honest living, Dad? How?!”

Fryman offered his son no real answer aside from an exasperated sigh, one that showed just how tired he was starting to get with his son’s frenzied resistance. “Ronaldo!” he shouted to his older son, who was standing right outside the fry shop, both his gaze and his phone fixated on the green-tinted sky. “Get in here and help me with your brother!”

“Dad! I can’t!” Ronaldo retorted, hardly turning his sights away from his phone. “I gotta vlog this invasion for my blog! Keep Gravity Falls Weird is gonna explode in followers after I post this! I might even start trending! This is gonna be huge!”
“Ronaldo!” Fryman snapped again, only to no avail. The restaurant operator let out another frustrated growl as he finally relinquished his hold on Peedee, deciding that there would always be time to pry his sons away from both the shop and Gravity Falls as a whole after he finished packing for the trip. “I can’t believe this,” he muttered to himself crossly as he haphazardly threw his belongings into a duffle bag. “I spend all these years, trying to run a profitable business, trying to raise my boys in a safe, stress-free environment, and what do I get in return for it? A giant hand in the sky, an evacuation, and two sons who don’t even have enough common sense to wanna leave during all of it! I swear, if this the last time some dangerous, bizarre thing happens in happens in this crazy town, it’ll be too soon…”

As Fryman continued to grumble to himself over the current state of things, he failed to notice the pair of figures standing in the shadows right behind his restaurant, both of them in the midst of what was nothing less than a full stakeout.

“Powers, these readings are incredible!” Agent Trigger exclaimed, baffled as he looked over his satellite monitor. “I—I’ve never seen anything like this before! It’s almost like that… that thing is extraterrestrial or something!”

“Of course it’s extraterrestrial, Trigger,” Powers stoically replied, his hands on his hips as he scowled up at the hand in the sky. “Frankly, it could be considered a UFO if we weren’t, in fact, able to identify that it’s a hand.”

“So… technically it’s an IFO, then? An Identified Flying Object?”

“Exactly.”

“Shouldn’t we report this to the higher-ups?” Trigger asked pragmatically. “If aliens really are on that thing, then this could very well be a matter of not just national, but worldwide security!”

“Not yet,” the senior agent shook his head. “Remember, this isn’t what we were sent here to investigate. So for now, we’ll just bide our time and see where this so-called ‘invasion’ goes, but we’ll add it to our general report nonetheless. And if this gets out of hand, then we’ll call for backup.”

“Heh, out of hand,” Trigger smirked in slight amusement. “Good one, sir.”

“Good what?” Powers asked dryly, his complete lack of a sense of humor just as apparent as ever.

“Er, uh—never mind.”

“Eva-cuate! Eva-cuate!”

“Whoa…” Soos breathed somewhat tensely, peeking out at the approaching hand ship through the front window of his house. “Abuelita, I think that freaky green hand in the sky is getting bigger… Or closer. If it’s that second one, then I guess that’s why that evacuation alarm keeps going off, huh?”

“Si,” Abuelita tersely nodded, though it was clear that she was rather distracted with packing for the aforementioned evacuation. “Soos, mio, come help me with this trunk. We must go before the giant sky hand comes and flattens us into human tortillas.”

“Coming, Abuelita!” Soos called as he hurried to go help, though before he could make it, the
phone happened to ring. “Oh, wait! Hold on a sec!” the handyman exclaimed, spinning on his heel and accidentally knocking the nearby lamp off the table. He managed to catch it before it could shatter on the rug, only to end up getting caught up in its chord. The phone continued to ring on the other side of the room, and with his limbs as tangled as they were, Soos found himself having a good deal of difficulty getting to it. Still, he tried his best to wriggle himself free, inadvertently falling onto the floor with his other arm still wrapped in the lamp cable. But all the same, eventually managed to make it to the phone while it was still ringing, having essentially crawled over to it before propping himself up to finally answer it. “Hello?”

“Soos!” Stan’s abrupt, gruff shout startled the handyman enough to make him drop the phone. However, in the scramble to pick it up, he accidently lifted the lower end of the phone to his ear and spoke into the speaker.

“Yeah, Mr. Pines?” Soos asked, though upon not hearing anything, he tried again. “Uh… Mr. Pines? …Mr. Pines?!”

“Soos!” Stan shouted loud enough that the handyman could hear him. “Turn the phone the right way!”

“Oh, right!” the handyman exclaimed as he did so. “What’s up, Mr. Pines?”

“Soos, I need you to get over here as soon as you can.”

“Uh… are you sure about that, Mr. Pines?” Soos asked with a frown as he took another glance out the window. “I don’t think there’s enough time for me to make it all the way over there. I’m pretty sure we’re all supposed to leaving town because of-”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, the giant green hand,” Stan deadpanned, clearly not wanting to waste any time. “Listen, all I need you to do is pick the twins up, take them with you, and keep ‘em outta town until this whole ‘evacuation’ thing is over, you got it? I’ll even give you the money to put them up in a motel for the night and everything, just make sure they’re gone by the time that hand hits the ground.”

“Wait…” the handyman paused, concern washing over his expression. “You mean… you’re not going?”

There was a long pause on the other end, one that made Soos worry even more before the conman finally let out along sigh and answered. “No. No, I’m not.”

“W-why not?” the handyman asked, finally pulling himself free from the lamp chord. “I mean, I dunno what this hand thing is, but it’s gotta be pretty dangerous if we all gotta leave because of it. Don’t you think you should go too, just to be, you know, safe and stuff?”

Stan sighed once more, though his manner was both resolved and also somewhat uneasy all at once. “Listen, Soos, it’s… complicated… I-I’ll tell you more when all this hand business is said and done, but for now, the only thing I care about is keeping those kids safe from whatever this… thing is. Can I count on you to help me with that?”

Soos hesitated in answering, still quite concerned for his boss’ wellbeing in the midst of this frightening situation. Still, if there was one thing the handyman agreed with him on, it was that Dipper and Mabel’s safety took precedence above largely everything else. Which was why he was completely affirmative in offering a solid response. “You know you can, dude.”
After nearly an hour, Mayor Dewey’s evacuation alarm finally went silent as the first few families began to trickle out of town. While things were in a much more orderly state now than they had been, the initial flight of many of the townsfolk was still rather hectic, which was Dipper and Mabel found themselves separated from Steven and the Gems, including Lapis, rather quickly. When their efforts to reunite with them proved to be in vain, the twins begrudgingly decided to head back to the shack for the time being, knowing that there would be plenty of time to regroup with them later before the hand ship actually touched down. Still, the last thing either of them expected to find upon their return was Stan already waiting for them in the living room, his hands on his hips as he offered them an impatient scowl upon their arrival.

“There you two are!” he exclaimed hotly. “At this rate, I thought you kids had already made good on this evacuation mess and hitched a ride with somebody outta town.”

“Wait, you thought we left?” Mabel asked with a genuinely surprised frown.

“Uh, yeah?” Stan shrugged. “And to be honest, I kinda wish you had; it would have made things way easier for me.”

“Well, uh… actually, Grunkle Stan,” Dipper spoke up, realizing that both him and Mabel were now facing an obstacle they hadn’t really accounted for. “We’re not-”

“Eh, I know you’re probably not ready to leave, so I figured I’d care of that for you,” the conman interrupted, picking up the two suitcases on the ground beside him. “Since you two were taking your sweet time, I already went to the trouble of packing your bags for you. You can thank me later, or better yet, tip me. I’d appreciate that even more.”

“Grunkle Stan-” Mabel tried again, only to also be cut off.

“Now, come on,” Stan said, heading for the door. “That creepy alien hand thing is getting closer and closer by the second. Soos will be here any minute now to-”

“Grunkle Stan!” Dipper finally broke through, more than prepared to lay the truth out into the open. “Um… Mabel and I were talking and… we’re, uh… we’re actually thinking of… of skipping out on the whole evacuation thing…”

“…What?” Stan asked flatly, the first signs of disapproval already showing up in his expression.

“What Dipper means is… we’re… actually just gonna... stay here…” Mabel ventured with as charming of a smile as she could muster. “To be fair, we kinda thought that you would have already guessed that, seeing as how we always stay whenever anything super dangerous like this shows up.”

Stan was silent for a moment upon hearing this, his disbelief turning into indignation as he looked between his two intent nibblings. “Oh, you’re not staying.”

“Uh… yes, we are,” Dipper countered, surprised that Stan, of all people, wanted to actually go through the trouble of an evacuation.

“No, you’re not,” Stan retorted just as evenly, crossing his arms. “I know you kids think I’m irresponsible, which to be fair is probably true, but I’m not negligent. This is a full-on alien invasion we’re talking about here, not some weird magic spell or monster of the week. I’ve let you two get caught up in all this crazy Gem business so far this summer, but I’m not about to let you get yourselves killed over it!”

“But Grunkle Stan!” Mabel protested pleadingly. “We have to stay and help Steven and the Gems
fight Peridot off!”

“I don’t care about who you think you have to fight off,” Stan remarked staunchly, firm in his refusal. “Someday you kids need to learn that not every tiny little thing that comes your way is your problem.”

“But this is our problem!” Dipper insisted, thoroughly frustrated. “It’s our problem, just as much as it is the Gems’ problem, and it’s been that way since this whole thing started! We’ve fought Peridot before, more than once actually. We’ve beaten her more than once, and we can do it again! When are you and the Gems finally gonna realize that we can actually handle this stuff and let us help?!?”

“When are you finally gonna realize that you’re in way over your head?!” Stan argued back fiercely. “If you kids knew even half of how dangerous all this Gem stuff really was, then you’d—”

“Mr. Pines! I’m here!” Soos exclaimed blithely as he entered, though he was quick to notice the palpable tension between the conman and the twins. “Uh… Am I interrupting something?”

“No, Soos,” Stan deadpanned, calming down as he crossed his arms. “You made it just in time.” The conman paused, his manner still quite cold as he addressed the twins. “We’re done arguing about this. Stop whining, grab your things, and go with Soos. I’ll see you when I see you.”

Both of the twins pouted petulantly, knowing that as much as they wanted to stay behind, this was a battle they simply weren’t going to win. Yet at the same time, they were both rather taken off guard by the conman’s last statement as he began to push them out the door. “Wait… Grunkle Stan, you’re not coming with us?” Mabel asked, raising a bewildered eyebrow.

“Er—uh…” Stan trailed off, quickly glancing away from the kids rather nervously. After all, he couldn’t very well tell them the full truth of the matter, especially not in the prelude of a possible catastrophe like this. Still, he decided that giving them a fractured version of the truth was better than given them no truth at all. “N-not right now, no.”

“You can’t be serious!” Dipper scoffed, blatantly outraged by this apparent hypocrisy. “How can you make such a big deal about us leaving if you’re not even gonna leave yourself!? If you get to stay here, Grunkle Stan, then so do we!”

“I’m not staying!” Stan snapped, ignoring the fact that this was a complete and total lie. “I just… I’m just gonna be little bit behind you kids is all. I gotta make sure the shack’s all locked up and secure, you know? Just ‘cause the Gems have some weird giant hand coming down to beat the stuffing outta them doesn’t mean my business should have to suffer for it.”

“But Mr. Pines,” Soos interjected, confused. “I thought you said you weren’t—”

“T-that I wasn’t going to tell you to wait up for me or anything!” Stan quickly cut his handyman off, knowing he didn’t need the twins on his case anymore than they already were. “So… yeah, there ya have it. You kids are leaving, a-and so am I. End of story.”

While both Dipper and Mabel wanted to continue arguing with their uncle over this, they both decided to finally relent, knowing that, in a way, he was actually right. They had no idea what was really about to beset the town; even Lapis’ intel gave them relatively little to go off of. So perhaps it was time to step away and focus on their own safety for a change, letting whatever happened happen, as shameful and cowardly as that was. So, without really sparing another word to the conman, the twins grabbed their bags and began heading outside behind Soos, but not before Stan stopped them one last time.
“Uh, kids! Wait!” he exclaimed, a sudden, rare fear overtaking him. The fear that, as ridiculous as it might be and for whatever reason, he might not see either of them again. “I… I just wanted to…” Stan trailed off, wanting to tell his nibblings so much and having no time or courage to say any of it. So instead, he let his usual dry sarcasm speak for him. “Never mind. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Bye, Grunkle Stan,” Mabel bid the conman farewell with a small, halfhearted smile and wave, a sentiment that Dipper didn’t bother sharing amidst his ongoing frustration. Still, he said nothing on it at the moment, even if his crossed arms and scowl conveyed it very well as Soos hoisted the twins’ luggage up into the back of his truck. Even Mabel seemed more accepting of their upcoming departure, but the thought was beyond irksome and disappointing to Dipper. After putting so much effort into fending off Peridot before, even after he miraculously managed to convince Lapis to relay what she knew of this invasion to the Crystal Gems, he was completely baffled as to why he wasn’t allowed to stay and fight when it mattered most. He understood that whatever was coming would be dangerous, yes, and while he did fear it, the last thing he wanted to do was run from it, especially if it could end up harming Gravity Falls, or worse yet, the entire world as a result. Still, Stan had made it clear that there would be no arguing with him on the matter, and chances were that the Gems would likely side with him too. However, Dipper wasn’t going to give up hope in staying to face this scourge just yet, especially as he happened to notice the Gem who had already professed that she was on his side land in the yard not too far away.

“Lapis!” Dipper called as he started running over to her. Mabel was tempted to join him, but she refrained, mostly since she had already noticed the close bond her brother had formed with the blue Gem over the past few days they had spent together.

“Dipper, what’s going on?” Lapis asked curiously, looking between him and the truck across the yard. “Where are you going?”

“Lapis, you’re never gonna believe this,” Dipper remarked, clearly disgruntled. “Grunkle Stan is making me and Mabel evacuate town along with everyone else, which is just… just crazy considering all the stuff we’ve been through this summer, and—”

“Wait, y-you’re leaving?” Lapis questioned before a letting out an allayed sigh. “Oh, that’s such a relief! If I knew that ‘Grunkle Stan’ person could actually convince you to escape, even when I couldn’t, then I would have asked him to do it from the start!”

“Wait… what?”

“Dipper, listen,” Lapis began earnestly, placing a hand on his shoulder as she knelt down to his level. “I know you said you told me you don’t want to leave, but… you really should. Whatever’s coming… It’s… Peridot could… I-I don’t want you to be around for this. I want you to be safe, really more than I want anything else right now. You know that, right?”

“Y-yeah…” Dipper admitted hesitantly, his anger starting to ebb away into slight acceptance, though it still wasn’t enough to get him to relent. “But… but I just want to—”

“Help, I know,” Lapis nodded with a small, sad smile. “But you already did help. You helped as much as you could, and that’s honestly more than enough. Dipper, if you’ve shown me anything these past few days, then you’ve shown me that you’re brave and that you’re stubborn, probably more than any human really has the right to be…” She let out a small, sardonic laugh at this, one that Dipper couldn’t help but crack a slight smile over. “But bravery and stubbornness aren’t going to get Peridot and whoever else is with her to turn around now. Which is why you need to go, Dipper. Please. For me… and for yourself…”

Needless to say that Dipper’s hardened resolve to stay quickly faltered upon hearing all this,
though it didn’t completely crumble until he noticed the almost desperate sense of pleading in the blue Gem’s eyes. The thought of disappointing her suddenly seemed far more appalling and off-putting than the thought of evacuating, which was why, as much as he really didn’t want to, he had no choice but to comply. “Ok…” he sighed, glancing down in slight shame. “I… I’ll go. But… what about you, Lapis? What are you going to do?”

The blue Gem rose to her full height at this, looking up towards the still-descending hand ship with mingled fear and determination. “I’m going to stay.”

“R-really?” Dipper asked, quite surprised by this.

“I said I’m staying,” Lapis repeated, somewhat trying to solidify this risky plan to herself as well. “I can’t keep running from this. I have to face it head on. Besides,” she playfully ruffled his hair a bit as she sent him a small, reassuring wink. “Somebody once told me that it’s important to fight for what’s worth protecting. And who would I be if I let that ‘somebody’ down?”

Dipper was helpless to hold back a genuine, warm laugh over this, one that Lapis shared as he suddenly embraced her, though this time, she was more than ready for it. She kept a gentle hand on top of his head for a moment, beaming down at him with almost motherly affection as she began to whisper her farewells. “I don’t know what I’d do if… if something were to happen to you…” she began, fear creeping into her tone as her smile slowly faded and her eyes slipped shut. “So… stay safe…”

“What course?” Dipper assured, his smile turning somewhat bittersweet as their hug disbanded. “But only if you do too.”

Lapis hesitated at this, another burst of terror for the unknown filling her, but all the same, she gave him a small, affirmative nod, even if she wasn’t sure this was a promise she could really keep. “Right…”

“Well, I-I guess I should get going then,” Dipper nodded back towards the truck, were Soos and Mabel were still waiting for him. “I’ll see you soon, Lapis, ok?”

“O-ok…” Lapis said with an unsteady, almost pained smile, fighting back tears as she watched him run off before looking to the ominous hand ship once again and knowing that one could count down the hours until its arrival on one hand now. “S-see… see you… soon…”

The hand ship was likely only about two hours away from touching down to Earth now. Most of the citizens of Gravity Falls had already departed, leaving a strange, ominous sort of silence in their place. Still, Steven and the Gems had made it back to the temple some time ago, with Greg following not too far behind them in his van. The young Gem found himself being left out of much of the whispered discussion amongst his guardians, and while he wanted to know what they were talking about, he figured that it all focused on the hand ship and Peridot’s impending arrival. The Gems masked their terror towards the frightening situation well, but Steven could still see it in their eyes, hear it in their voices. And while he wanted nothing more than to comfort them, reassure them that they’d get through this and that everything would be alright, but he knew he couldn’t easily do that while he was becoming steadily more afraid of it all himself.

In fact, his fear seemed to spike as he took another peek through the telescope at the approaching ship, its metallic green finger pointing almost directly at him, making it quite clear that its destination was the temple. Steven figured the Gems already knew this, but he figured he’d give
them the warning anyway. Though as he turned to do so, he noticed his father and the Gems hurrying to pack the van up, something that filled the young Gem with palpable relief.

“Hey! That’s a great idea, Dad!” he called over to them, stopping Greg and the Gems in their tracks. “You should leave with the rest of…” Steven trailed off, confusion washing over his expression as he spotted his own cheeseburger backpack and hot dog duffle bag in Pearl’s arms. “Is that… my luggage?”

The Gems and the former rock star exchanged an uneasy glance at this, their eyes all wide as they met Steven’s question with a momentary bout of awkward silence. “…Who wants to tell him?” Greg spoke up begrudgingly, glancing to the Gems as he rubbed the back of his neck.

Pearl shook her head, her shoulders tensing up as she glanced over to Amethyst rather desperately. “Hey, you know I’m not good with this stuff!” the purple Gem exclaimed bitterly, crossing her arms as she looked away.

“W-what do you… need to tell me?” Steven asked apprehensively, even though he had already begun to figure out what it was.

While Pearl, Amethyst, and Greg were still utterly clueless about how to relay the truth to the young Gem, Garnet fortunately stepped up to the daunting task, her expression and tone both solemn as she knelt down to his level. “Steven,” she began evenly, placing a firm hand on his shoulder. “I know you don’t think we trust you. I know more often than not we treat you like a human child. But the truth is… we rely on you. Your voice inspires us, binds us, reminds us of why we promised to protect the planet. You must be that voice now, for them,” the Gem leader nodded to the road leading out of town, jammed with the noisy, chaotic traffic of the evacuees. Steven looked that way as well, conflict and dread written all over his expression as Garnet continued. “If anything happens, you need to be there to protect them. Just like your mother once did. It’s your destiny.”

Tears were just starting to well up in the young Gem’s eyes as he looked back to the Gem leader, who’s expression also seemed to falter just the slightest bit. Every single part of him wanted to stay, wanted to stand beside his guardians and face whatever was about to happen, no matter how big or dangerous it might be. At the same time, he wanted to protect his home, his planet, his friends, everything he held dear. And while Steven believed that staying and fending off the threat all of those things were now facing was the most direct way of doing this, perhaps there other ways of accomplishing the same exact thing. Perhaps instead of following his guardians’ resolve, he could lead the people they were all devoted to protecting. Instead of fighting back, he could defend and safeguard. Instead of being plucky, but afraid, he could be brave, but accepting.

Which meant that, instead of staying, he would go. And he would protect them, just as his mother did before him.

“I won’t disappoint you,” Steven vowed, taking in a deep breath as he steeled himself for the monumental task ahead. “I promise.”

“I know,” Garnet nodded, pulling him into a sudden, but tight hug. Amethyst and Pearl were quick to give the young Gem their farewells shortly after, all of them sad, but sweet and short. Their words carried the promise that they’d see each other again soon, a promise filled with an almost hollow reassurance that never filled their tones or met their eyes. Still, even if his guardians didn’t quite believe that they would be reunited again soon, Steven dared to hope and believe in it all the same, knowing that after everything they’d been through, this wasn’t the end.

It couldn’t be the end.
But would it be the end, regardless?

With tight, fake smiles and weak, halfhearted waves, the Gems saw their young ward off as Greg drove the van away from the temple. The continued watching it, waving after Steven as he waved back at them, even as the vehicle veered onto the dirt road, with Soos’ truck falling in line a short distance behind it only a few moments later. The Gems managed to catch sight of Mabel waving to them from the truck, Dipper sitting beside her and not bothering to do the same as he only cast an anxious glance up to the temple and the Gems before tersely looking away. As soon as both vehicles were gone out of sight, the Gems finally fell apart, their unexpected final glimpse of the twins only reminding them of how much they really did stand to lose. Amethyst and Pearl both found themselves leaning against Garnet for support, tears in their eyes and their forms trembling uncontrollably with almost visible fear of what was nearly upon them. Still, the Gem leader didn’t let their grief and dread last long. After all, they had still had a job to do.

“We did everything we could…” she assured them, placing a gentle hand on each of their shoulders before taking in a deep, resolved, but still rather unsteady breath. “Alright. Let’s pull it together!”

The other two Gems could only nod in silent agreement, knowing that they had to be strong now, even if that was the last thing they felt. Yet as they began to ready themselves for the upcoming battle, no one noticed the lone blue figure gently fly up, her water wings reflecting the darkened green aura the ship had cast upon everything below it, and take up a perch on the very top of the temple hill. And as she sat, her knees pulled to her chest and her arms wrapped around them, she looked not to the massive, menacing hand ship, only about an hour away from the surface of the planet now, the very symbol of all her fears and guilt. Instead, she looked down to the old, beaten pickup truck that was driving out of town, the truck that was currently taking the young, precocious, surprisingly, but effortlessly endearing human who had inspired her to hope again, who had given her a reason to stay and face her fears, who was her reason for staying to fight them with everything she had in the first place, safely out of harm’s way.

And… she smiled.

Both Dipper and Mabel felt an odd sense of déjà vu upon passing by the “Now leaving Gravity Falls” sign, knowing that it had only been a few weeks since they had last time they had seen it, albeit under much less dire circumstances than these. Still, they were both just as upset about it as they had been during that ill-fated bus ride back home, even with the assurance that they would be able to come back to Gravity Falls in just a few days time.

That is, if there would even be a Gravity Falls to come back to.

“So…” Mabel began as casually as she could, noticing just how quiet and contemplative Dipper had been ever since they left the shack. She figured it probably had something to do with the bittersweet farewell he had exchanged with Lapis, but she didn’t bother asking him about it, at least not yet. “I wonder what Grunkle Stan’s doing back at the shack right now. Heh, knowing him, he’s probably shoving all his money into that wall safe of his in the living room, don’t ya think?”

Dipper didn’t respond right away, his sights still fixated out the window, or more specifically, on the hand ship, even as they drove further and further away from it. Mabel bit her lip as she realized that perhaps his thoughts weren’t entirely on Lapis at the moment, but rather on the immense severity of the situation as a whole. “Uh… bro-bro… are you-”

“Mabel,” Dipper finally spoke, his voice rather tense as he still didn’t look away from the hand. “I
just… I-I was thinking…”

“O-ok, well, what else is new?” Mabel shrugged, trying to apply some levity to things. “You never seem to stop thinking, bro-bro!” She let out a small, somewhat forced laugh at this, one that she was quick to notice her brother not join in on or even react to it as he instead let out a small, almost shaky sigh, much to Mabel’s sudden concern. “D-Dipper?”

“Mabel, what if…” Dipper paused, shaking his head as if to clear it as he tried to make sense of what he wanted to say. “What if the Gems aren’t enough to stop Peridot? What if she has a whole army of other Gems on that ship with her? An army that could totally wipe Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl, and even Lapis out with just a few hits?! For all we know, that hand could have some kind of insane alien superweapon on there that could destroy Gravity Falls in seconds! What happens then?!”

“Whoa, Dipper, slow down!” Mabel exclaimed, alarmed by her brother’s sudden show of fear, fear that had probably been accumulating for quite some time now. “None of that crazy junk is gonna happen, ok? The Gems have got this covered. After all, they always save the day!”

“But what if they don’t this time, Mabel?!” Dipper demanded, quickly growing frantic. “What if this is more than they can handle, than any of us can handle?! What if something happens, and we’re not there to do anything about it?! That hand ship is gonna land any minute now, and for all we know, Grunkle Stan might still be at the shack. What if he doesn’t get away in time?! What if Peridot and whoever else is with her finds him, and what if they-”

“Dipper!” Mabel cut him off, firmly placing both of her hands on his shoulders. “You need to stop thinking about all these ‘what ifs’. They’re majorly stressing you out, and they’re starting to get to me too! You don’t know if any of that stuff is gonna happen; no one does! Well… except maybe Garnet. But the point is, you shouldn’t think about the bad stuff that might go down, and instead think about how good it’ll feel when all of this is over and we’re all back in Gravity Falls, safe and sound, with Steven, and the Gems, and Stan! Just like how it always is. Just like how it should be…”

Dipper finally looked to Mabel upon hearing all this, noticing by just her expression alone that she was both earnest in what she was saying, and just as terrified of what could happen as he was. But at the same time, he couldn’t help but realize just how hypocritical he was being by thinking in terms of horrific absolutes like this, especially after he had just professed to Lapis his belief that they would safely see each other again soon. Perhaps that was a belief that he really needed to believe in for himself for a chance, instead of seeing it as an empty promise that might never come true. “Mabel… you’re so right…” Dipper sighed, calming down as he leaned back in his seat. “I guess I was just so caught up in thinking about how badly this could all turn out that I wouldn’t let myself think about the possibility that it might turn out ok instead. I mean, the Gems said so themselves: they’ve fought Homeworld off before. I guess the only thing we can really do is trust that they’ll do it again, right?”

“That’s the spirit, bro-bro,” Mabel grinned warmly, giving her brother a light, playful punch on the arm. “And until they do, we’ll deal with this whole crazy invasion thing just like we do whenever something super nuts happens around here: by sticking together.”

“Yeah,” Dipper agreed with a solid, assured smile, not even bothering to take another look back at the hand ship as it grew smaller and smaller in the distance behind them. “Together.”
Steven let out a small, somewhat worried sigh as he looked up to the hand ship himself for what seemed like the hundredth time, its green glow enveloping the world below in eerie, darkened shades. Gravity Falls was now miles behind them, still not that far, but far enough that the young Gem had already started to miss it along with his guardians that were still there. What did relieve Steven amidst these uncertain times was that he had caught sight of the twins riding along in Soos’ truck behind his father’s van, assuring the young Gem that his friends would be safe amidst the unfolding evacuation. Still, even with his own fears towards the impending future lingering in the back of his mind, Steven tried his best to look on the bright side of the situation, just as he always did.

“Maybe when Peridot gets to Earth,” Steven began with a small hopeful smile as he addressed his father. “She’ll see how nice all the people are and she won’t wanna hurt anyone.”

Greg glanced over at his son upon hearing this, a bittersweet, wistful grin crossing his features as he let out a quiet sigh. “Just like your mother…”

“Yeah?” Steven asked, his smile widening a bit as he looked over to the former rock star.

“Yeah…” Greg’s own smile slowly faded though, replaced with hints of dread. “But these other Gems aren’t like your mother. They aren’t like Garnet, Amethyst, or Pearl. They aren’t gonna start caring about people now. They didn’t the first time they—” the former rock star cut himself off, his eyes suddenly wide as he took in an anxious breath, knowing that he couldn’t tell his son about this. Not now, at least.

Still, that didn’t stop Steven from being curious about it anyway. “T-the first time they what?”

Greg sighed again, his stomach sinking as he realized that there would be no dancing around the truth any longer. He could tell, just by looking in his son’s eyes, just how hungry he was for answers, answers that the Gems had been denying him all his life. Answers that even the former rock star believed were long past due to him. “I-I mean… it was thousands of years ago! It’s—it’s not like I was there!” he remarked with a terse, uneasy laugh that quickly died out. “Look, the Gems should be telling you all this stuff, but I get it. They… they don’t want you thinking of them like that.”

“Like w-what?” Steven asked, his confusion and worry both starting to rise, especially as his father hesitated in responding. “Dad, like what?!”

“Like aliens, Steven!” Greg burst out, unable to keep the truth contained any longer. “Aliens who invaded Earth!”

“W-what?” Steven asked softly, his voice barely even a whisper. He had known for quite some time that the Gems were aliens; really, that revelation had been apparent ever since him and the twins first met Lapis. But the fact that Gems had come to Earth, uninvited and unwelcome, like this before… it was startling, to say the least.

“All they do is try to make up for it,” Greg continued, gripping the steering wheel tightly. “But they just can’t forgive themselves, you understand? Gems were doing something awful to the planet a-and your mother couldn’t stand it anymore.”

Steven gasped, breaking into a cold sweat as he remembered the Kindergarten, remembered the countless other holes surrounding the ones Amethyst had come out of. Remembered how the purple Gem had even called herself a parasite because of her place of origin. That horrible thing that Homeworld Gems had been trying to do to the Earth… had all of that really been a part of it?
“She told me that’s why she had to turn on her own kind. She gave up everything just to stop what they started here and drive the invading Gems off of Earth.”

In that instant, Steven also remembered the conversation Pearl had reenacted between her and Rose in the strawberry battlefield, where she had vowed to do whatever it took to ensure the safety of the Earth. The words his mother had spoken all those thousands of years ago rung heavy on his mind now: “You know, just as much as I do, that the things that live here, as precious and special as they are, deserve to survive and be free. And so, I’m ready to do what I must to give them that freedom” Needless to say that these words that seemed to take on a whole new meaning now that the young Gem knew the meaning behind them. “So, s-she saved the world!” Steven exclaimed, still trying to convince himself that this story had a happy ending. “That’s good!”

“No such thing as a good war, kiddo,” Greg shook his head sadly. “A lot of Gems were destroyed, people too… In the end, your mother could only save a handful of her closest friends. If it weren’t for her shield… man, I don’t know…” The former rock star paused to take a glance over at his son, easily taking note of just how wide and distraught his eyes were as he absently held a hand over his stomach, or rather, his gem. Whatever thoughts were going through the young Gem’s head at the moment were lost on Greg, but he could tell by the fear in his expression that they were probably too many to count. “B-but hey! Let’s look on the bright side! We’re gonna drive past that waffle place in a couple miles! M-maybe we could see if the twins and Soos are up for-”

“We gotta go back,” Steven suddenly spoke up, his voice tight and filled with growing alarm. “Dad, we gotta go back! Turn the van around!”

“W-what?!?” Greg gasped, completely shocked. “No way! The Gems don’t want you going back!”

“I know they’re just trying to protect me,” Steven urged, distressed and desperate. “But I have to protect them! I have Mom’s shield!” he cried, pulling his jacket up to show his gemstone, the gemstone that housed the only weapon that could possibly rescue his guardians now. “They need me!”

“I need you too!” Greg retorted fiercely, unable to even grapple with the thought of letting his young son go off to face such overwhelming danger.

“Please, Dad, what if they get hurt?!” Steven cried, fearful tears welling up in his eyes. However, Greg said nothing, his eyes wide and glued to the road ahead as his hands trembled while gripping the steering wheel like a vice. Still, Steven refused to give up. The Gems’ lives were at stake, and that was something he wasn’t about to take lightly. “Dad, turn around!” he pleaded, implored, begged, anything to get his father to heed and help him, his silence refusal sufficiently outraging him, given the dire circumstances. “Dad! Turn the van around, please!” On this final word, the young Gem made his building frustration known as he slammed his fist into the glove compartment, somehow breaking it completely. Mere seconds later, the airbag exploded from it as a response to the sudden blow, ramming into Steven as Greg let out a startled gasp. The van swerved to the side as the airbag launched Steven through the roof, his protective bubble fortunately forming around him as he soared upward before gravity brought him back down. He landed in the ditch just off the road, his bubble rolling down it before coming to a stop not too far away. Despite its protection though, the landing was still rather rough, to the point that he was out of it even as Greg’s van screeched to a stop back on the road, abruptly halting the flow of evacuation traffic behind him.

“Steven!” Greg cried, bursting out of his van and running down into the ditch to make sure his son was unharmed. Fortunately, the young Gem seemed no worse for wear as he lifted his head, but all the same, tears were still streaming down his cheeks, though it was clear they were a result of a
pain that was anything but physical.

“D-dad…” Steven choked out a sob, grabbing his father’s hand as he looked to him pleadingly once more. However, he didn’t have much time to say anything else considering how half of the fleeing townsfolk had just paid witness to what had happened.

“Steven!” Dipper and Mabel called in concerned unison as they rushed down into the ditch, both of them having jumped out of Soos’ truck the moment they spotted the pink bubble flying through the air. The handyman himself wasn’t too far behind, also quite worried for the young Gem’s wellbeing as they all helped Greg in getting Steven back on his feet.

“That was totally crazy, Steven!” Mabel exclaimed, both impressed and alarmed. “You were all like ‘crash!’ and then ‘whoosh!’ and finally ‘boom!’ Are you ok?”

“Y-yeah,” the young Gem nodded, though it was clear he was still shaken “I…I’m ok…”

“Steven, what happened?” Dipper asked, rather confused. “Why did you just, you know, crash through the van’s roof like that?”

“I-I… I-it’s the Gems!” Steven exclaimed, getting right to the point. “They need my help! I gotta go back to Gravity Falls and help them! Or else they-”

“Yo, Greg!” the young Gem was cut off as the group in the ditch noticed the group of townsfolk gathering along the edge of the road, all of their faces showing their immense concern for the one who had inspired them to evacuate in the first place. “Are you and your kid ok?!”

“Yes, yeah!” Greg assured, placing a secure hand on Steven’s shoulders. “We’re fine!”

“But it’s not fine!” Steven countered, earnestly and tearfully looking to his father. “Dad, please. I-I have to go back. I have to! They don’t have my shield. They need it! You… you understand?”

Greg let out a long sigh at this, knowing that his son was determined to follow through on his brazen resolve no matter what. And while it was going to be one of the hardest things he ever had to do as a father, the former rock star knew that this was something he just couldn’t hold his son back from. “Yeah, ok…” he nodded with a sad, solemn smile, wiping one of the young Gems’ tears away. “Just… be careful, or I’m gonna run fresh out of family.”

Steven smiled at this, truly grateful but at the same time. “Stay with everyone and keep them safe,” he instructed, squaring his shoulders as he prepared to leave. “I’ll figure out some way back to Gravity Falls.” Of course, as if right on cue, a large pink paw happened to plot down upon the young Gem’s head, startling him but reliving him as he turned to see that Lion had miraculously and conveniently appeared out of nowhere. “Oh, this’ll work!”

Steven jolted a bit at this, having not expected it at all. “Y-you guys…” he began anxiously, not wanting to tell them no, but fearing just what could happen if they did accompany him. “I-I can’t ask you to do that. This isn’t like Lapis and her water clones, or Gideon and his giant robot… this… this is something huge, something really bad, and-”

“So?” Mabel interjected boldly. “We’ve faced huge, really bad things before and made it out ok
“Besides,” Dipper added, just as resolved. “All of us are responsible for Peridot wanting to come here and take on the Gems in the first place, remember? So it’s only fair that we all help fix this mess we caused, even if we did cause it on accident.”

“But…” Steven sucked in another tearful breath. “You guys don’t understand. D-Dad told me… a lot of people—humans—they… I’m… I’m supposed to protect you. It’s my job, my… my destiny…” The young Gem paused, remembering Garnet’s words well. “So… so you can’t… you… you need to-”

“Steven,” Dipper cut the young Gem’s stammering off evenly. “Over the course of this summer, we’ve faced feral Gem monsters, warring living golf balls-”

“Vengeful time travelers,” Mabel continued on with a growing, determined smile. “Dinosaur infested caves, obsessive child psychics-”

“Weird robotic orbs, hordes of brain-eating zombies, crazy dream demons-”

“Heck, both of us have even fused with you!”

“But for all of the incredible, terrifying, and amazing things we’ve gone through this summer, the three of us went through it all together,” Dipper finished firmly, smiling to the young Gem with unshaken confidence. “So what makes you think that some dumb old hand in the sky is going to change that?”

For a long moment, Steven was silent as he instead simply looked between the twins incredulously, completely at a loss for words. While the last thing he wanted was for either of his closest friends to get hurt in this impending assault, he also knew they were exactly right. They had been through much during this summer, through so many daunting, disastrous, even downright deadly adventures and escapades, and somehow, through luck, or fate, or something even stronger than those two, they had made it through it all by sticking together, no matter what. And despite the new danger they were now facing, that was a tired and true pattern the young Gem couldn’t possibly stray away from.

“R-right,” he said, finally smiling himself. “Then let’s do this. Together. Mystery Kids?”

The twins nodded their unswerving support as they placed their hands down upon Steven’s outstretched one, all three of them voicing their collective title boldly. “Mystery Kids!”

It had taken some doing for the twins to manage to convince Soos to let them accompany Steven, especially since the handyman was insistent on following his boss’ instructions to keep them safe to the letter. Still, after enough begging and cajoling, Soos eventually caved, but not before making both Dipper and Mabel promise that they would be as careful as they could be, a promise that neither twin was sure they could really keep, but one they agreed to nonetheless.

And so, with no further delay, all three of the kids set off on Lion, who was already making a determined beeline back towards Gravity Falls. Along the way, Steven made sure to fill the twins in on everything his father had told him back in the van, of the previous Homeworld invasion, of the intent of these sinister Gems, of how Rose had stood up to them despite the great cost, and most importantly, of how her shield was the only line of defense against them. And needless to say that after hearing all of this mind-blowing information at once, both Dipper and Mabel were both aptly
shocked.

“So… let me get this straight…” Dipper began rather incredulously, still trying to take it all in. “Homeworld Gems were trying to destroy the Earth thousands of years ago, but your mom started a rebellion to stop them and won, but only after most of her friends died. Did… did I get all that right?”

“Y-yeah, that’s pretty much the gist of it,” Steven nodded anxiously as he pulled out his phone. “And what we’re trying to do is make sure all that doesn’t happen again.”

“How are we gonna do that?” Mabel asked, somewhat wary of this idea.

“Um… with my shield, I guess,” Steven ventured as he dialed up a number. “To be honest, I… I haven’t really had time to come up with a… plan or anything like that…”

The twins looked to the young Gem with apt alarm at this, both of them having thought that he knew exactly what he was doing in running back to the epicenter of danger. “Well, that’s… reassuring…” Dipper remarked somewhat dryly.

“W-well figure something out, I’m sure!” Steven hastily reassured before focusing his attention back on his ringing phone. “Come on… pick up…”

“Who ya calling?” Mabel asked curiously.

“I’m calling-” Steven quickly found himself cut off as the call went to voicemail, much to his simultaneous frustration and distress.

“You’ve reached the Maheswaran residence,” Dr. Maheswaran’s recorded voice spoke as Steven put the phone on speaker for himself and the twins. “Please leave a message after the beep. And keep it short.”

“Hey, Connie,” Steven began his message, trying not to let his fear show as he recorded it. “It’s Steven-”

“And Mabel!” Mabel added as the young Gem paused.

“And Dipper,” Dipper finished, completely agreeing with Steven on this being a necessary call, given what they were up against.

“Uh… we were just… seeing what you were up to…” the young Gem continued apprehensively, forcing a smile onto his face. “Don’t know if you knew, but, uh, there’s some crazy stuff going on with a giant space hand and we all might die, so, uh… I guess, call me back when you get this and talk to you soon! Bye!”

Not knowing what else to say, Steven hung up, his expression quite tight with dread as he noticed the odd looks the twins were giving him for being so blunt about it all. “What can I say? I panicked,” he said defensively, putting his phone away as he focused on the path ahead.

After all, he knew he couldn’t look back now, not even for a moment.
about that later. For now, Stan tried his best to distract himself from the danger going on outside by continuing work on the danger that lied right underneath his very home, in the hopes that devoting his time to it would ease just a little of the guilt he felt towards lying to the twins about evacuating.

Then again, this was hardly the first time he had lied to them. In fact the very machine standing on the other side of the glass before him, monumental, massive and illuminated in its mysterious, ominous light was just about the biggest lie he had ever told anyone. And sure enough, it played a part in his most recent lie.

The evacuation order had been absolute, but even so, Stan knew that Mayor Dewey and his cronies wouldn’t bother to check and see if everyone had made it out; there simply wasn’t enough time for that. So really, the hardest part of staying behind really had been lying to Dipper, Mabel, and Soos about it, a lie that, all things considered, ended up working better than he had expected it too and a necessary one at that. After all, how could he really tell the twins about his hidden, ongoing, bewildering project at a time like this, when literal aliens were descending upon the town with unquestionably malicious intent?

At the same time though, there was no way he could leave it behind at a time like this. The conman figured that those so called “Homeworld” Gems would probably love to get their hands on something like this for the mere energy it put off alone. And if they really did pick upon that energy, really did decide to come after it, then there would be no doubt that, if left defenseless, all of the years of hard work Stan had put into it would be for nothing. Which was why, as soon as it had become clear that this invasion was going to be a threat, he had resolved to stay by it, had refused to leave it and vowed protect this project, no matter how arduous or daunting that might be.

And really, if those other Gems really wanted it so badly, then let them come. He’d be ready for them. For as long as Dipper and Mabel were safe and free and out of harm’s way, then Stan didn’t really have too much else to lose.

The hand ship hovered, enormous and encroaching and just a few hundred feet from touching the ground as the kids rode Lion back into Gravity Falls. The entire now-empty town seemed to be bathed in its bright immense, sinister green glow and the winds were high and fast in response to its immediate approach, but that still hardly deterred the trio as they raced past the Mystery Shack and up to the temple. And what they found as they passed through the tree line and arrived at the base of the temple was more than enough to get them to stop for a moment to take it all in.

Seeing as how this could certainly be classified as a “deadly situation”, Amethyst and Pearl had apparently fused, calling upon Opal’s steadfast might and power as a last resort to help them fend of this threat. The fusion’s low bow was already summoned and poised, a light arrow forming in its string as Opal kept her sights set intently on the ship, awaiting Garnet’s command as she stood by.

“Fire!” the Gem leader shouted as soon as the arrow was ready. Opal didn’t hesitate, her single arrow flying from her bow and splitting into a barrage as it darted towards the ship at a frightening speed. However, even this attack had no effect upon its sturdy, nigh impenetrable hull, as every arrow hit it without so much as even slowing the ship down at all.

The kids exchanged a frighten glance upon witnessing this, knowing that if even the powerful Opal could do nothing to stop this scourge, then there would likely be little they could do to end it either. Still, that didn’t mean they couldn’t at the very least try.

“Stay here!” Steven ordered Lion as him and twins dismounted. “If something happens, Dad will
need a new son."

“S—so do we have a plan yet?” Mabel asked, not needing to hide how afraid she was as the feeling as mutual among all three of them.

“No, and at this rate, we’re probably not going to have one, period,” Dipper remarked somewhat sardonically, though still clearly on edge.

All the same, the kids rushed forward to meet the Gems, who had failed to notice their arrival thus far due to their dismayed focus on the intensely descending hand ship. “At least Steven is safe…” Garnet muttered, the slightest hint of defeat in her tone, even if she was proven wrong almost the moment after she said it.

“Hey, guys!”

Garnet and Opal both gasped, their shock instantly apparent as they turned to see the kids running towards them. In fact, they were so startled by their sudden arrival that the fusion instantly split apart, Amethyst and Pearl falling away from each other and roughly onto the ground before looking to the trio in disbelief.

“Steven! Dipper! Mabel!” Garnet snapped, her voice tight and her hands clenched into tight fists.

“You came back!” Amethyst cried, almost relieved as she looked to the startled trio.

“What are you three doing?!” Pearl wailed, her eyes wide as she scrambled to pick herself up off the ground. “Get out of here, all three of you!”

The kids exchanged a rushed glance, all of them understanding the Gems’ alarm but refusing to heed them at such an integral moment, their shared resolve just as strong as ever. Still, before they could protest, Garnet cut in.

“It’s too late! Just stay behind us!” the Gem leader ordered, summoning her gauntlets. The kids didn’t hesitate to do so, especially as the hand ship’s rapid descent finally came to a gradual halt upon landing. Several of the nearby trees easily toppled over, creating an entirely new clearing as the hand easily maneuvered itself over, its fist opening, its palm flattening out and its massive, extended fingers slamming to the ground before the Gems, destroying even more trees in their wake.

The group guarding the temple had almost no time to recover from the miniature earthquake this landing had created, however, as a comparably small, green, marble-like orb emerged from the ship’s open palm. The kids and the Gems all waited and watched, tense and anxious as this orb rolled forward, always hovering just a few inches above the surface of the ship, before reaching the tip of its index finger, which hit the ground as it opened up, revealing two figures. One of them, was undoubtedly Peridot, a cross scowl on her face as she stepped forward and glared down at the Crystal Gems.

“That’s them alright,” the green Gem reported, turning to her still obscured escort. “They’re the ones who keep breaking my machines!”

The second figure, much larger and more intimidating than even Peridot, stepped forward just a bit, her tone gruff and stoic as she took in her first cursory glance at the group below. “This is it?”

“Jasper!” Peridot huffed, quite vexed. “They keep interfering with my work!”

The larger Gem, Jasper, sighed, exasperated and annoyed, but all the same she took a few more
steps forward, allowing the group on the ground to get a better view of her. She was massive, taller than even Garnet by at least a head, with muscles and girth to spare, all adding to her imposing appearance. If not for the ship’s green light enveloping everything, one would have been able to see that her predominant color scheme was orange, a trait shared by her skin and the bold, pronounced stripes upon it, as well as her pale tangerine hair, which ran long, loose and wild down her back. A short crimson cape hung from her broad shoulders, and her outfit was a simple sleeveless bodysuit, a mix of reds and darker reds that contrasted with the light yellow diamond symbol on her chest, the very same on Peridot bore on hers. Oddly enough, her gem was in the place where her nose should have been, small, pointed, and expectantly orange, and her already sharp, angry features seemed even more intense and tempered as she glowered down at the Crystal Gems, who were already on high alert against this new foe. “Looks like another waste of my time…” she grumbled before addressing Peridot. “You sure this is their base?”

“Affirmative,” Peridot nodded, her fingers forming into another screen. “These are the exact coordinates that Yellow Diamond’s still unknown ‘informant’ wanted to pass along to us…”

“Hmph,” Jasper dully noted, still clearly not invested in their mission. “I thought you said there was one more of them.”

“T-there was!” the green Gem exclaimed hotly. “It was some kind of four armed… abomination! It used some kind of odd human information dispenser to generate projectiles that took out my attack robinoids! It referred to itself as a ‘Stepper’, whatever that is!”

Upon hearing this, Steven and Dipper exchanged a very short, very alarmed glance, both of them reaching the same, horrific realization at once: sure enough, the thing that had provoked Peridot into making this trip to Earth in the first place had been them teaming up to take her robinoids down. Which meant that, no matter how much anyone else might try to convince them otherwise, this invasion could very much be attributed to the two of them alone, something that completely drained any remaining sense of triumph they had in what Stepper had accomplished during that arduous fight.

“A ‘Stepper’, sure…” Jasper deadpanned, rolling her eyes at this claim. However, before she could say anything else, the Crystal Gems finally stepped forward themselves, their weapons drawn and ready to do whatever they could to drive their enemies away.

“You need to leave immediately!” Garnet demanded fiercely.

“Yeah, step off!” Amethyst growled, gripping her whip tighter.

“This is not a Gem-controlled planet!” Pearl exclaimed fretfully, unable to mask her terror behind anger like the others.

All the same, Jasper and Peridot simply ignored their orders and threats, jumping down from the hand ship and onto the ground to meet their foes face to face. “And you didn’t see Rose Quartz?” the orange Gem asked her disgruntled charge coldly. “Oh, what a shame. I’d hoped to meet her. I was looking forward to beating her into the ground!”

Steven couldn’t help but cringe in slight fear upon hearing this, surprised at just how gleefully Jasper could talk about brutalizing his own mother like that. But nonetheless, the orange Gem continued, making it quite clear that she was far from impressed with the motley crew standing before her. “But this is all that’s left of her army? Some lost, defective Pearl? A puny, overcooked runt? And this shameless display?” Jasper paused momentarily, slight confusion washing over her still indignant expression as she noticed the kids crowded behind the Gems. “What are they?”
Before Peridot could even supply an answer or before the Gems could even take up further defense to protect the kids, something quite unexpected happened instead. Before the kids even knew what was happening, Lapis descended from her spot atop the temple in a flash, her arms spread wide before the group as she glared at both Jasper and Peridot with palpable fury.

“Don’t touch them!” she warned viciously, already regretting that she had waited so long to act in the first place. In reality, she had wanted to intervene the moment she saw the kids return, but her own nerves and fears had held her back. But only upon seeing the prospect of them getting directly hurt, of him getting directly hurt by these invading Gems, she knew she could not sit by as a silent spectator any longer. “They’re only humans! They aren’t threats at all! They aren’t part of them, so leave them alone!”

“Well, well, well…” Jasper cracked a dark smirk upon seeing the blue Gem. “Look who it is. Our little runaway Lapis Lazuli…”

“Lapis!” Dipper exclaimed with immense concern, knowing well that an encounter like this was everything the blue Gem feared and then some.

“Dipper!” Lapis countered, her eyes wide with resolved terror as she spun around to face the kids. “Steven! Mabel! You three need to-”

Lapis was abruptly cut off as Jasper suddenly grabbed onto her arm, yanking her over to her and keeping her in a tight grip that she was powerless to pull herself out of. “You made a mistake in coming back to this worthless planet,” the orange Gem growled, hosting Lapis up so she was on eye level with her. “But honestly, I’m not surprised. You seem to have a weakness for these pathetic humans. Well, except for that one you left behind back on Homeworld.”

The blue Gem gasped, appalled but clearly ashamed by what Jasper had just said, to the point that she did nothing to argue against it, even as she was thrown onto the ground roughly. For a moment as she struggled to pick herself up, she glanced over at the kids again, sending all three of them a silent, pleading expression to flee, to save themselves before it was too late. But she knew for a fact that if the Gems hadn’t been able to convince them to abandon their daring presence here, then she would very likely be just as hopeless in it too.

“I’ve seen enough,” Jasper concluded to Peridot, her tone just as callous as ever as she turned to leave. “You don’t need me for this. Just blast them with the ship.”

“Ugh, fine…” Peridot muttered sullenly, recalibrating her screen as the ship lifted off the ground a bit as a response. The hand reformed back into its usual pointing shape, though this time, a bright light began to form around the index, a clear sign that it was charging up for what would have been a devastating attack.

“Kids! Get out of here!” Garnet shouted over the building noise, glancing back at the frightened trio.

“W-we can’t!” Dipper exclaimed, shaky at first, though he forced himself to be steady as he stole another glance over at Lapis. “We won’t.”

“Yeah! We have to help you guys!” Mabel added, just as insistently.

“I won’t let any of you risk your lives!” the Gem leader argued back hotly.

“But this is our home!” Steven cried, tears starting to form in his eyes from the immense stress and tension of the moment. “And you’re all my family!” By now, the Gems themselves were on the
 verge of tears, their attention devoted away from the oncoming blast and instead focused on their
distraught young ward. Still, they failed to notice the radiant pink glow that had begun to spill out
from his Gem, one that only spread wider and further as the ship finally fired its attack. “I—I’m a
Crystal Gem too!” Steven shouted, rushing forward with courageous resolve. The twins and the
Gems were far to shocked to even do anything as the young Gem pressed past them, rushing for the
blast and meeting it squarely.

The explosion was immense, stirring quite a bit of dust and rattling the ground even more.
However, when it all settled and everything went quiet again, Jasper turned, her eyes widening in
disbelief, not at the fact that the Gems and the kids were all still alive. But rather, at the massive,
unmistakably pink shield that had formed before the young Gem, the shield that had protected them
all from what would have been certain destruction.

“That shield!” Jasper gasped, visibly shocked as she spun around fully. “That symbol!”

Despite his best efforts, Steven wasn’t able to uphold a shield so large for very long and soon
enough, it began to collapse, just as the young Gem did the moment it completely dropped. Yet as
exhausted as he was from pouring out so much energy, he had no time to recover as Jasper
hurriedly stepped to stand before him, her expression locked into an appalled scowl. "You!" she
barked in angry disbelief. "You have the power of Rose Quartz!"

"Now do you believe I needed an escort?!” Peridot interjected matter-of-factly.

"Fire a barrage!” Jasper ordered, apparently frenzied and outraged all at once. "Widespread! Now!"

Startled by this sudden command, Peridot rushed to comply, fumbling with her screen for a
moment before finally swiping her finger across it broadly. In response, another laser blast fired
from the hand ship, this one cutting a line across the ground that nearly struck Steven, but
fortunately Garnet managed to push him out of the way just in time. The twins, Amethyst, and
Pearl, on the other hand, weren’t able to clear out of its path fast enough, though they were only
knocked back a good bit by the residual explosion, and for the most part, all of them were rather
unharmed from it. Still, as the dust cleared once more, Steven didn’t even have a moment to pick
himself up off the ground as he saw Jasper standing over him, her form tall and powerful and
menacing.

“Rose, why do you look like that?” the orange Gem asked, the disdain in her tone clear. “Why are
you so weak?”

“Don’t hurt him!” Lapis interjected, rushing forward to do what she had to to protect the young
Gem.

“You knew about this!” Jasper accused, glaring down at her. “And you didn’t say anything about it
when we interrogated you?!”

“I-it wasn’t relevant to the mission!” the blue Gem protested, her voice much smaller than the
orange Gem’s by comparison.

“Forget about the mission!”

“What?!” Peridot exclaimed, looking to her escort in shocked outrage.

“I said, forget it!” Jasper growled, scowling back down at Steven. “Yellow Diamond needs to see
this… thing…”

By now, Steven had startled crawling away from the orange Gem, still too petrified with fear to
even pick himself up off the ground and run. His heart was hammering in his chest as he locked eyes with the fearsome Gem warrior, her violent, hate-fueled intent as clear as the gemstone replacing the nose on her face. However, before Jasper could act on that intent, Garnet rushed to his rescue yet again.

The Gem leader rose up from the ground behind him, having recovered from the explosion and ready to fight. However, Jasper was every bit as ready to brawl as well, a cold, aggressive grin crossing her features as she summoned her weapon: a thick, incredibly sturdy battle helmet. Before Steven even knew what was happening, Garnet launched herself at Jasper, only for her gauntleted fist to collide evenly with the orange Gem’s helmet, creating a force powerful to roughly knock the young Gem back quite a bit. Likewise, Garnet also slid backwards, but somehow she maintained her footing, refusing to let herself be taken down at a moment like this.

“Steven, run!” Garnet shouted fiercely, not even stopping a second as she began running back towards Jasper. At the same time, the twins made it back over to Steven, both of them having just regathered their bearings after the last explosion, even if they were still a little worse for wear after it.

“Steven! Are you ok?” Mabel asked worriedly, noticing that the young Gem seemed much worse off compared to either her or Dipper.

“Y-yeah,” Steven weakly nodded, even if he knew he really wasn’t. “I-I-” Before he could even get another word out, he instead took in a sharp gasp as he looked back to Garnet, who was still rushing for the orange Gem without a moment’s hesitation.

Jasper’s vicious smirk only deepened upon seeing this resolve, especially as she pulled a long, thin, metallic, fork-like object out, one that was rippling with what seemed like electronic energy.

“Priming Gem destabilizer,” she remarked, not paying Lapis or Peridot any mind as they both fearfully backed away from the weapon, knowing exactly what it was for.

Garnet, on the other hand, didn’t have such knowledge as she pounced towards Jasper, who eagerly ran forward to meet her. However, instead of landing any sort of blow on the orange Gem, a blow was landed upon her instead, one that even her future vision couldn’t have seen coming from a mile away.

The electrified tip of the destabilizer hit Garnet squarely in the chest, freezing her in midair as it lit up her entire body in its blinding yellow jolting glow. And then, after what seemed like agonizing ages of Garnet being held in its thrall, the light abruptly stopped. Thin lines, almost akin to scattered circuitry, slowly crawled over the Gem leader’s entire form, almost seeming to split her cleanly in half. Alarmingly enough, as they spread further along her body, her limbs started to fall off, slipping off of her body almost as if they had been sliced clean from her joints. Amethyst and Pearl gasped in shared horror upon seeing this, both of them having realized what was happening to their leader, but the kids were still completely in the dark as Garnet began to fall backwards towards them, her form breaking apart more and more by the second. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as Garnet looked to them, her shades gone and clear agony written all over her face as she gave them a glance that was filled with countless unspoken apologies for failing to protect them.

And then, all at once, she was gone.

Garnet’s form dissipated in a bright flash, the two gemstones that usually rested on her palms falling apart from each other and into the dirt, one red and one blue. All three of the kids stared at them in shaken disbelief, reaching the terrifying realization that the unfillable Gem leader had just fallen apart right in front of them.
“O-ok, that was seriously messed up!” Dipper exclaimed in apt panic, noticing the clear, deep indents Garnet’s fallen pieces had left in the soil where her gems now rested.

“Steven! I-is Garnet going to be…?” Mabel trailed off, too distraught to even finish the thought.

However, Steven himself was far too stunned to even try to form a response, his entire body trembling in fear as he stared at Garnet’s component gemstones in paralyzed shock. And his fear only increased as the Gem who had defeated her with just a single blow finally stepped up to bridge the gap between them.

“I was there, you know,” Jasper began, completely ignoring the twins as she stood over Steven, meeting his frightened gaze with a bitter scowl. “At the first war for this garbage planet. I fought against your armies, respected your tactics. But this?!” She scoffed, roughly grabbing the young Gem by his shirt and hoisting him up, despite his struggling and the twins’ futile attempts to keep him down. “This is sick!”

“Unhand him!” Pearl shouted as her and Amethyst rushed forward, their weapons drawn in an attempt to do whatever they could to save their young ward in their leader’s absence.

“Steven!” Dipper and Mabel exclaimed in shared alarm, both of them trying their best to reach for the young Gem, only for Jasper to intentionally pull him away from them.

“I don’t get what you’re planning, Rose,” the orange Gem hissed, still holding Steven at face level with her as he continued uselessly thrashing about in her grip. “But look! Your base is taken. Your armies are ruined! You have failed!” As Jasper said this, her helmet disappeared, though Steven only had a moment to be surprised about this as the orange Gem abruptly rammed her head against his, knocking the young Gem out instantly. “And now…” Jasper smirked triumphantly as Steven finally went limp in her grasp. “You’re my prisoner.”

“No!” the orange Gem’s attention was finally caught by Amethyst and Pearl as they launched themselves at her with everything they had. However, before they could land so much as a single hit, both Gems were halted in midair, helplessly frozen in a pale green tractor beam ejected from Peridot’s “palm”.

“Grr, Crystal Nuisances…” she grumbled, still quite upset that her intended mission was being put on hold for this.

“Make sure you pick these two up too,” Jasper ordered, nodding to Garnet’s gems as she carelessly slung Steven over her shoulder. “Looks like we’ll be returning home with a whole ship full of traitors.”

As orange Gem began to turn around to take her captive back to the ship, both Dipper and Mabel abruptly snapped out of their shared petrified shock over what they had just witnessed. They only needed a minute to exchange a fearful glance before both of them rushed forward, acting on adrenaline, terror, and desperation to save their friends in any way possible.

“Hey!” Dipper shouted to the orange Gem as brazenly as he could, even if his distress was still quite clear in his tone. “Let him go!”

Surprisingly enough, Jasper stopped at this, glaring over her shoulder at the twins as they stood boldly behind her, ready to challenge her. “Ugh… humans…” she groaned in disgust, turning to take care of them properly.

“N-no!” Lapis gasped as she flung herself forward, already ashamed that she had been unable to do
anything to save Steven, but she wasn’t about to let either of the twins meet a similar fate, especially not Dipper. “No! Leave them alone! They’re not-”

The blue Gem was cut off mid-sentence, frozen in outstretched alarm thanks to another one of Peridot’s tractor beams. “Can you hurry it up already?” the green Gem glowered, still holding Pearl and Amethyst up. “I’m running out of limb enhancers over here!”

Of course, Jasper simply ignored Peridot as she instead focused her attention down at the twins, who both met her unamused scowl as evenly as they could, all things considered. “Figures Rose would keep a bunch of pathetic organics like you around,” she remarked crossly. “But the fact that you two would defend her, even after everything she’s done? Hmph, I guess you humans really are as dumb as you look.”

“H-his name is Steven,” Mabel corrected, her hands clenched into shaking fists at her sides. “And he didn’t do anything! So put him down!”

“Oh really?” Jasper asked, willingly slipping Steven off her shoulder and letting him fall unconsciously to the ground behind her. Of course, before the twins could even hope to get to him, the orange Gem grabbed them both, Dipper by the arm and Mabel by the leg, and pulled them both up to her level, ignoring their struggling to break free from her practically crushing grip. “You two actually think Rose Quartz did nothing?! Maybe I should remind you that she ‘saved’ this measly hunk of rock you call home! Oh, but of course, you humans wouldn’t be able to forget about that would you. It’s what you don’t know that makes her so ‘innocent’ and ‘perfect’ in your eyes. And what you don’t know is that Rose didn’t save the Earth; she doomed it! She doomed you!”

“W-what do you-” Dipper didn’t get a chance to finish this question before Jasper flung both twins out of her grip. They both landed against the rocks near the temple, hard enough to easily knock the wind out of both of them and send them plummeting to the ground, sustaining more than a few painful injuries in the process. Jasper rolled her eyes as she watched them struggle in vain to pick themselves up, as hurt and dazed as they were from their brutal landing, all in a futile, last-ditch effort to come to “Rose’s” rescue.

“You know what?” the orange Gem asked bitterly as she roughly picked Steven up again and turned to join Peridot in boarding the ship. “If you still care so much about defending her, then you both deserve to die along with this ruined waste of a planet. Just like Rose here will the minute the Diamonds get their hands on her…”

Jasper let out a triumphant sneer as she turned her back on the barely-conscious twins, walking back to the ship with a relaxed, victorious pace, Steven still in her grasp and all of the other Gems still in Peridot’s. While both of them had suffered palpable damage from the orange Gem’s assault, Mabel had already started to slip into a stupor from the head injury first, though Dipper forced himself to remain conscious just a bit longer, especially as he watched Peridot pull Lapis into the ship first.

“N-no…” he protested weakly, trying his best to pull himself forward, to do something, anything, to stop this. “L-Lapis… Steven… Mabel, we… w-we have to-” He ended up cutting himself off as his arms gave out on him, resulting in him collapsing listlessly back into the dirt, just as he caught his last wavering glimpse of Jasper dragging the still-unconscious Steven onto the hand ship, perhaps the last glimpse of the young Gem he would ever get to see period.

And then, everything went black.

To be continued…
Chapter 40, Part 2: Jailbreak

Chapter Summary

In which the twins sneak onto a spaceship, Ruby and Sapphire are hella gay, Garnet lays down some sick beats, and Lapis breaks all of our hearts into thousands of tiny pieces.

Chapter Notes

Oh god so here we finally are at the end of arc 4. Its been... quite a ride, I gotta say. And what a way for us to go out on! This chapter is a complete and total roller coaster and I'm super proud of it. So I won't say a ton about it so you can all go enjoy it for yourselves! So with that outta the way, enjoy!

There were three things Mabel was acutely aware of as consciousness slowly returned to her.

The first thing was pain, thumping dully throughout most of her body, her head in particular, though its apex was clearly her right ankle. Before she could even open her eyes, she made the mistake of attempting to move it, only for a sharp, stinging wave of agony to go spiraling through her leg as a result. It was more than enough to get her to open her eyes and let out a soft hiss of pain, though she was still a little too out of it to pick herself up off the ground immediately.

The next thing was her brother, lying prone and motionless in the dirt just a small distance ahead of her, his arm outstretched, almost as if he had been reaching towards something. Even as unconscious as he was, his expression was clearly awash in worry and woe, something that Mabel didn’t quite understand at first as she looked to him through initially blurry vision.

She understood it though the moment she picked up on the third thing: the emerging sound of a nearby, unearthly engine roaring to life.

With a loud gasp, Mabel bolted upright, ignoring the burst of pain and dizziness that filled her head as all of the memories prior to her blackout came rushing back to her in full force. The hand ship, the evacuation, their rushed return to Gravity Falls, Peridot, Jasper, Garnet’s defeat, Lapis and the other Gems’ capture, Steven being knocked out and dragged onto—

“The ship!” she exclaimed, eyes wide as she looked to said ship, which, miraculously enough, was still somehow positioned only a few feet away from the twins. They must not have been unconscious for very long, Mabel figured, seeing as how the ship was still there and not already afar in the depths of space by now. But given the fact that its engines were growing louder and louder and the circuitry on the ship itself was shining brighter and brighter were both good
indications that it wouldn’t be on Earth for much longer.

“Dipper!” Mabel lunged forward, still a little too dazed to stand, especially with her leg in the condition that it was. Still, she managed to pull herself over to her brother, reaching for his shoulder to shake him awake, only to hesitate upon noticing how bruised and battered it was, no doubt a result of how roughly and tightly Jasper had grabbed both of them earlier, just as her leg was. So instead, she grabbed him by the shoulders, trying her best not to lose her nerve as she watched his unconsciously loll forward, his body much too limp in her grasp as she began to carefully jostle him. “Dipper, come on! That freaky hand ship is about to leave and Steven and the Gems are on it! We gotta stop it before it can take off which means you gotta wake up!”

Unfortunately, Dipper didn’t really heed her seeing as he was still mostly out of it, though a small, short groan did escape him, filling Mabel with relief over the fact that he hadn’t been hurt too badly. “Ugh, bro-bro!” she shouted, starting to lose her patience, especially as a loud whoosh sounded from the ship. “Snap out of it! If we don’t hurry, then we’ll never see Steven again! O-or Garnet, or Amethyst, or Lapis, or—”

“…L-Lapis?” Dipper finally muttered, his eyes slowly starting to open, though he was clearly still dazed and unfocused.

“Y-yeah! Lapis!” Mabel nodded vigorously. “And Steven and the Gems too! Peridot and that big mean cheese puff she was with are about to take them into space and w-we have to figure out some way to save them, before it’s too late!”

“S-space…?” Dipper repeated, disoriented and confused. “But… w-what… when did…” He trailed off weakly, before abruptly being jolted back into full cognizance by a sharp burst of recollection and realization. “Oh my gosh! The ship!” he gasped in alarm, pulling himself up and out of his sister’s grip on his own accord. “Mabel, we have to stop—”

“I know!” Mabel cut him off, knowing there was no time for this. “And uh… I-I think we better do it fast! Look!” She pointed over to the hand ship, now fully functional as its lowered fingers began to slowly rise up off the ground. The twins shared a horrified gasp, knowing that their incredibly brief window of opportunity to do something about the situation was quickly starting to disappear. And at that moment, all thoughts of logic or plausibility about whether or not they even could do something about it couldn’t have been further from either of their minds. Their friends were in danger, to an incredibly life-threatening degree. And if they didn’t help them, then who else would?

“W-what do we do?! What do we do?!” Mabel asked anxiously as she watched Dipper unsteadily stand before he extended a hand out to help her up. She accepted it, though she found she largely had to lean against him for support because of her injured leg.

“We… w-we, uh…” Dipper trailed off, just as panicked and distraught. The hand ship was slowly but surely starting to depart, taking Steven, the Gems, and Lapis with it, and leaving them with essentially no way to reach it. Or there wouldn’t have a way to reach it if Lion wasn’t fortunately still waiting right beside the temple, just as Steven had instructed him to earlier. “I have an idea,” Dipper finally said with as much resolve as he could muster. “Come on!” Taking care to mind Mabel’s hurt leg, they hurried over to the pink beast, whose sights were already set on the hand ship in a fierce, blatantly outraged glare. In fact, Lion was so focused on the retreating vessel that he hardly even noticed the twins hurriedly climb onto his back. “Ok, Lion,” Dipper began firmly, hoping that the often finnicky pink cat would cooperate with them in this crisis. “We need you to—whaat!”

Without warning, Lion suddenly bolted forward, rushing towards the hand ship as soon as both of
the twins were securely on his back. Dipper and Mabel both held on tightly as the pink beast rushed forward, a piercing, savage roar pouring out of his maw, easily tearing open a temporal portal that he charged into without delay. In fact, Lion only came to a stop when they arrived on the other side of the portal, which, fortunately enough, was right at the top of the high temple hill. From this vantage point, the hand ship was still below them, but just barely. For a moment, both the twins and the pink beast froze paused as the ship became almost level with them, dwarfing all three of them and casting its eerie green light upon them as it suddenly stopped in midair, its fingers lose and sprawling. And then, in a painfully slow, articulated movement, it swiveled to turn around, gracefully repositioning itself so that its fingertips were aimed towards the sky. Or, more appropriately, towards space.

“I-it’s about to leave!” Mabel cried, her heart breaking at the thought of never seeing Steven or the Gems ever again. “Dipper, we have to do something!”

“I’m working on it!” Dipper retorted, frustrated under fire as he gave Lion a nudging kick in the side in an attempt to get him to move. “Ugh, come on, Lion! Jump onto it or roar at it or do something to help us reach that thing!” Of course, the pink beast refused to heed such harsh commands as he instead refused to take his sights off the ship that he knew his true master was on. “Seriously?!” Dipper exclaimed, irate at Lion’s passiveness. “Now is when you go back to being as annoyingly stubborn as you usually are?!”

“Dipper, wait!” Mabel gasped, her eyes widening in realization, especially as she took another look at the hand ship and noticed something quite fortuitous about it. “Maybe we don’t need Lion’s help after all!”

“What are you talking about?” Dipper scoffed, beyond aggravated and distressed by this point. “There’s no way we can get to the ship on our own, it’s way too far!”

“Maybe it’s too far for us…” Mabel agreed with a growing smirk as she reached into her sweater. “But it’s not too far for… the grappling hook!”

“The grappling hook?” Dipper repeated incredulously as he looked to the tool his sister was proudly brandishing. “Mabel, how in the world is that thing supposed to-”

“There’s no time to explain!” Mabel cut him off, her manner quite tense as she gripped her grappling hook tighter. “You just need to trust me on this one! You do trust me, don’t you, Dipper?”

Dipper hesitated, his expression tight as he looked between his sister and the massive hand ship before them, its engines revving up to go soaring through the sky very soon. Somewhere in the back of his mind, the journal’s timeless mantra of “trust no one” found purchase, reminding him that trust was a dangerous thing to give away, especially in dire straits like these. And yes, while Mabel was his own sister, the fact that they could very well die if even just one thing in her unknown plan went wrong made him even more wary of bestowing that trust upon her. But the journal’s warning fell away as he looked to the ship, his heart aching as he thought of Steven being locked away on it, hurt and confused and more than likely alone. Of the Gems, all separated from each other, desperately and futilely trying to break free from captors who wanted them dead. Of Lapis, who hated the feeling of being trapped so much, who fought so fiercely to escape, who had risked so much to stay to protect them, to protect him, reduced to nothing more than a mere prisoner once again. And it was because of them and because of the pleading, desperate, earnest look his sister was giving him, that Dipper knew he had no choice but to give that trust away in full.

“Of course, I trust you, Mabel,” he said with a small smile, one that was filled in the upmost
confidence in whatever her no doubt arcane, reckless plan was. “Probably more than I trust anyone else. Especially right now.”

“Great,” Mabel grinned warmly, reaching her hand out to him and letting her nerves cool off as she watched him accept it. “Then let’s do this crazy thing. Together!”

Without any further deliberation, Mabel took aim, pointing the tip of the hook right at the tail end of the ship, or rather, right underneath it, at the base of the wrist. Dipper quickly glanced over that way, still somewhat confused by what his sister intended on doing until he finally saw it for himself: a small, cracked panel in the otherwise smooth green surface, likely created by the light cannons or Opal’s arrows during the ship’s descent. It wasn’t much of a target really, but it was an opening all the same, one that Mabel knew she’d only get one shot at. Still, it was a shot she took all the same, for after she steadied her shaking hands, she boldly pulled the trigger, keeping her aim true as the hook flew towards the breech in the hull. And, by either fate, luck, a miracle, or something else entirely, it hit its mark, latching onto the edge of the opening just in time.

“Hold on tight!” Mabel commanded, her tone and expression surprisingly serious as she kept a steady grip on the grappling hook while Dipper rushed to latch onto her. The twins had readied themselves not a moment too soon however, for before Mabel could even retract the hook, the ship suddenly lurched forward, instantly pulling both of them right off of Lion’s back and into the air behind it. The ship gained momentum at an alarming rate, with the force and speed of their ascent forcing the twins to hold onto both each other and the grappling hook for dear life, lest they lose their hold and fall to what would without question be their demise. Still, that didn’t keep them from letting out unified cries of terror as they haphazardly dangled behind the ship as it continued to steadily soar upwards towards the upper layers of atmosphere. The only time Dipper even thought to glance at the ground below was when he felt his hat go flying off his head, though as soon as he looked down he quickly wished he hadn’t seeing as how Gravity Falls couldn’t even be made out now amidst the blurry sea of trees that they were leaving behind far too fast. At the same time, Mabel was struggling against the rapidly rushing winds to even get her finger to move, to simply release the trigger so they could pull themselves into the opening, but her reflexes were unfortunately acting against her amidst her paralyzed fear, which was forcing her hand to remain frozen in place. Still, she knew she had to force herself out of it, because if she didn’t, then not only would they not be able to save Steven and the Gems. They wouldn’t be able to save themselves either.

With a determined shout, Mabel finally pried her finger off of the trigger, and Dipper echoed her cry much more fearfully as the hook retracted, pulling them both forward to its resting place. The speed of the ship itself did little to keep the barrel from snapping back to the hook, positioning the twins directly underneath the opening that, fortunately enough, was just large enough for both of them to slip into. And, just before the ship could leave the Earth’s atmosphere entirely, they both clamored through the crack and into the ship itself.

They were in. Which meant that, unbelievably enough, the easy part was over. The hard part, however, was just about to begin.

“Ah-ah-ah-ahhh, ah-ah-ah-ahh…”

This odd, distant, yet melodious song was what startled Steven awake, a sharp gasp escaping him as his eyes flew open. Well, mostly flew open. His left eye was awash in pain, and young Gem didn’t even have to put a hand up to it to know that it was probably bruised and blackened. The rest of his head did feel much better, a dull but persistent ache pounding through it even as he slowly
started to sit up and take in his surroundings. He vaguely remembered being in front of the temple last, but where he was now couldn’t have been any further from the deep pine forests he was used to. Ironically enough, however, green was still the dominant color surrounding him, the metallic, with the sturdy walls surrounding him in whatever small enclosure he was in being enveloped different shades of the color he had been seeing so much of in the past several hours alone.

Still, Steven was rather disoriented as he gingerly rubbed his sore eye, trying his best to make sense of the situation. He remembered the hand ship, and how him and the twins had hurried back to the temple to help the Gems counteract it. He remembered Peridot, as well as the buff but hateful and terrifying Gem who had accompanied her, Jasper, as well as Lapis rushing in to try in vain to save them. He remembered the lasers, his shield going up to protect them all before it collapsed just as he did. But what he remembered most was fear, a blind sense of completely paralyzing and crushing terror, unlike any he had ever felt before, as their entire defensive fell apart, as Jasper called him by his mother’s name, as she easily knocked him unconscious with just a single, incredibly painful blow.

Which, of course, provided a pretty good explanation as to where he was now.

“Amethyst!? Pearl?!” Steven called out, knowing that if he had been taken captive on the hand ship, that probably meant there was a very high chance the Gems were there too. However, as he considered this, a sharp burst of alarm filled him as he wondered if perhaps Dipper and Mabel had been captured too, an idea that simultaneously terrified him and filled him with immense guilt. After all, if they had indeed been seized along with the rest of them and dragged off to Homeworld as prisoners as well, then it would certainly be all his fault for letting them come back to Gravity Falls with him in the first place. And certainly, if they all did make it to Homeworld, then there would be no telling what kind of dark, no doubt deadly fate awaited them all there.

But they couldn’t make it there. They couldn’t go to Homeworld. They had to make it back to Earth, defeat these cruel, powerful Gems, and most of all survive.

Which meant that escape was their only option.

But even despite this new resolve, Steven couldn’t help but think he was forgetting something incredibly important. And as his head finally cleared up completely, he remembered what that something was as clear as the memory of a pair of gemstones delicately bouncing off the ground flashed across his mind. “Garnet!” he gasped, the scarring image of the Gem leader’s form being violently ripped apart right in front of him rushing back to him in full force. “W-where are they?!” he exclaimed, pushing himself to his feet and running to the other end of the cell he was being kept him. He paused, however, upon noticing what was keeping him trapped inside: some kind of thin yellow barrier, humming with electricity, just as the rest of the cells lining the rest of the prison block hall beyond it were. Though behind the humming, he happened to catch onto the sound of what sounded like incoherent shouting, clearly angry and clearly struggling, if the fierce grunts and bitter cries were anything to go off of. Steven’s brow furrowed in confusion at this, but he figured that there would be time to help whoever the indigent noise was coming from soon enough. If he hoped to save anyone else, then he had to save himself first.

The young Gem hesitated as he reached towards the yellow barrier, but as he touched it, he only felt a small, painless spark burst through his fingertips. His hands flew away from it regardless, surprise filling his features before he tried again, though this time, with just a single finger. And, much to his surprise, he found that his hand didn’t bounce back towards him, nor was he even shocked by the electrical field at all. Instead, his entire hand seemed to clip through it, almost as if it was nothing more than a sheet of running water. Intrigued, Steven looked to his hand, noticing a visible yellow current running through it, like the field was lighting up his veins somehow.
“Ew…” the young Gem chuckled, pushing his hand out further. The current ran down his arm as a result and the field opened up even wider as his entire appendage began to tingle with its strange, warm, but seemingly harmless energy. “Cool!”

Seeing that there was no apparent ill effect from touching the barrier, Steven decided to try something risky. The ongoing tingling sensation intensified as he shoved both of his hands through the field, the odd yellow current flowing across his body as he forced himself through the disrupted barrier. The feeling continued for as long as the young Gem was in contact with the field, but the moment he finally stepped out of it and emerged into the open hallway on the other side, it came to an abrupt end. All the same, Steven shook himself out, releasing himself from the odd sensation as he reached the realization that he was indeed free.

“Oh! I’m out!” he cheered, spinning around to look at the now empty cell behind him. “Ok, now… where is everybody?” Not wasting any time, the young Gem ran forward, looking back and forth between the empty cells on both sides of the hall. “Gotta find them, gotta find them, gotta find-”

Steven stopped in his tracks as he passed by a cell that was actually occupied, though not by Amethyst, Pearl, Garnet, or even one of the twins. Rather, its prisoner was someone he had never seen before, clearly a Gem given her odd coloration, which was predominantly red. She was rather small in stature, just about Steven’s height, but stoutly and firmly built, with bright crimson skin and short, thick burgundy hair, arranged into a shape that almost reminded the young Gem of Garnet, though the headband tied around it clearly set it apart. He couldn’t really get a good view of her outfit or face, however, seeing as how she was hunched over against the wall, her head buried in her hands as she trembled and let out a low, almost agonized groan.

“Uh… hello?” Steven addressed this new Gem, concern washing over his expression as he took a step closer. “Are… are you ok?”

The Gem flinched at this, bolting upright as she looked to the young Gem in startled alarm. Now he could see that her outfit was rather simplistic: just a maroon tank top, darker shorts, and short boots. He was also able to notice her gemstone, which was a vibrant shade of red and fixed to her left palm. Her eyes were wide and frantic as she pressed herself against the wall, panting anxiously for a moment before a look of almost burning rage flashed across her features.

“Ugh!” she shouted hotly, slamming her fist into the wall beside her hard, the residual force being more than enough to knock Steven to the ground. “Great! This is just perfect!”

Slowly, Steven stood, confused and worried as he tried to reach out to the red Gem once more. “Uh… do you need any help?”

“No!” the Gem protested with an indignant scowl, though she was quick to retract her refusal. “I-I mean—I… You shouldn’t—Augh! Don’t look at me! Just… just go away!” With another audible shudder, she curled up in on herself and turned away, her hands pressed to her head as a further sign of her apparent distress.

“But… wha…?” Steven frowned, wanting to help this trapped Gem, though given the dubious situation he was in, as well as her rather cross behavior, he wasn’t entirely sure if that would be such a wise course of action. However, before he could step away from the cell completely, the red Gem quickly sat up, her eyes still wide and her manner still stressed as she looked to the young Gem again, this time in stark realization.

“Hey, wait!” she called, hopping to her feet and stopping him before he could get too far. “You’re out! How did you get past the field?”
“Oh, I just kind of…” Steven trailed off, reaching his hand out towards the barrier, much to the red Gem’s alarm.

“Wait!” she gasped in a sudden panic. “No, no, no, no, no, wait! You-” She cut herself off as his hand seamlessly phased through it, yellow lines of circuitry pouring down from his fingertips once more. “It’s… ok…?” she questioned as Steven pulled his hand out before putting her own up to it. She was quick to realize this was a mistake, however, as the field zapped her hand, letting nothing go through and instead partially destabilizing it until she rushed to pull it away. “Augh!” she cried in pain as she shook her hand out before looking to Steven suspiciously. “What’s going on…?”

“Ah-ah-ah-ahhh, ah-ah-ahhh…”

The red Gem gasped upon hearing the same distant, almost haunting melody that Steven recalled being his wakeup call just a few moments ago. “Somebody’s singing…” he mused curiously, figuring that the source of this song was likely somewhere else on the ship.

“Sapphire…” the red Gem whispered, her hands clenched close to her heart as the singing continued. “Let me out of here!” she demanded as she turned to Steven, clearly desperate. “Please! You have to help me! I need to find Sapphire!”

“Sapphire? Is she your friend?” Steven asked worriedly. “I’m looking for my friends too.”

The red Gem largely ignored this statement, far too wrapped up in her own panic at the moment to care about much else. “She’s all alone! I need to find her!”

“Don’t worry!” Steven assured with a daring, reassuring smile, more than convinced by the red Gem’s touching resolve to help her companion that assisting her was the right thing to do. “We’ll find our friends!” Without wasting any more time, the young Gem stepped into the barrier, his arms held out wide as the tingling current coursed through him once more. “A-and we’ll d-do it t-together!” he stuttered, smirking as he nodded down to the opening in the barrier he had created.

The red Gem didn’t hesitate to smoothly slide underneath his arm, her expression hardened as she began to race down the hall, though Steven wasn’t too far behind. “Hey! Wait for me!” he called after her, catching up with her quickly as she stopped to scope things out at the end of the hall. A beat of somewhat stilted silence passed as the red Gem glanced down the next corridor, signaling to Steven to remain still and silent, which he did for the most part.

“Ah-ah-ah-ahhh, ah-ahh, ah-ah-ahhh…”

“Coast looks like it’s clear…” the Gem mused, her brow knitted into a tight, scrutinizing scowl. “Come on!”

“Wait!” Steven interrupted once more, much to the red Gem’s immense frustration.

“What now?!?” she snapped, spinning around to face him fiercely.

“Uh… I-I just… Um, M-my name’s Steven, by the way,” he introduced rather awkwardly, smiling slightly as he extended a friendly hand out to her. “What’s yours?”

The red Gem paused, her expression softening somewhat as she looked between the young Gem and the hand he was offering, though she didn’t really take it. “It’s Ruby,” she muttered, glaring to the ground as she crossed her arms.

“Ruby,” Steven repeated with an affirmative smile. “Well, it’s very nice to meet you, Ruby.”
“Hm,” Ruby simply nodded tersely, still quite surly as she hurried on ahead.

“Oh-ah-ah-ahhh, ah-ah-ah, ah-ah-ah-ahhh…”

“So… were you and Sapphire captured by Peridot and Jasper too?” Steven asked curiously, trailing just behind the red Gem.

Ruby didn’t respond to this question with anything more than another nod and a bitter, petulant growl, her hands clenched into tight fists as she raced out of the prison block and into a connecting hall. She stopped short upon emerging into it, her hands flying to her head as she closed her eyes, seemingly trying to concentrate as Steven began asking her another question.

“What did you guys do to get-”

“Quiet!” Ruby sharply cut him off with a loud, almost pained groan. “Ugh! I can’t see!” she exclaimed after a moment of trying and failing to focus.

“Oh-ah-ah-ah, ah-ah-ah-ah…”

She stopped, glancing around for a moment as the song continued to ring out from no direction in particular, but even so, she forced herself to choose a path regardless. “This way!”

Not wanting to get separated from his only ally at the moment, Steven ran after the red Gem, noting the ship’s winding, green-tinted hallways and the strange yellow tubes running parallel along the ceiling as they rushed through them. Somewhere amidst this labyrinth of doors and passageways, the young Gem figured, the Crystal Gems were trapped, maybe Dipper and Mabel too, but he sincerely hoped that wasn’t so. After all, if Homeworld Gems showed no mercy to their own kind, then certainly they would show even less to a pair of humans, given the opportunity.

“H-how many more Gems are trapped here?” Steven asked Ruby, hoping that she could at least provide him with some kind of lead on where he could tangibly begin his own search.

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Ruby replied shortly, still running as intently as ever. She slid to a stop, however, as the ongoing singing abruptly went silent, something that alarmed the red Gem quite a bit. “She stopped singing…” she murmured, her eyes wide with concern. “Sapphire!”

As Ruby continued calling for her missing companion, Steven happened to notice the wide window behind them, one that gave the young Gem his first clear view of where they were. On the other side of the glass, the endless, inky expanse that was space stretched out before him, innumerable stars filling in every direction. However, despite this, they still weren’t very far from Earth, as the blue and green planet rested a short distance underneath the orbiting hand ship, the moon rising over its distant edge from afar. For a moment, Steven paused to look out over the planet he called home, simultaneously amazed and frightened that he wasn’t on it any longer. Still, the young Gem hoped to get back to it as soon as possible, knowing that there was no place in the entire universe he’d rather be than on Earth, with his friends and his family by his side.

Which was why Steven staunchly continued on his way, determined to turn his hope into a reality.

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Considering their perilous, death-defying flight through the Earth’s atmosphere, both Dipper and Mabel considered it perfectly within reason to allow themselves a chance to recover from the harrowing experience. As soon as they made it safely on board the hand ship and put enough distance between themselves and the vacuum that was now the hole they climbed in through, both twins flopped onto the floor, breathless, but mostly unharmed, save for the injuries Jasper had
inflicted upon them earlier. Fortunately, neither the orange nor the green Gems were in sight as they found themselves in what appeared to be an engine room, based on the plethora of noisy machinery and tubes that all seemed to lead up a room somewhere above it. Still, they didn’t pay their surroundings much attention at the moment as they instead focused on regathering their bearings so they could begin their self-imposed mission in earnest.

“W-who!” Mabel cheered as she finally caught her breath, pulling herself up into a sitting position. “We’re in! My plan worked, just like they always do! You gotta admit, bro-bro, it was pretty genius of me to come up with something like that on the spot, huh?”

“Mabel, are you kidding me?!” Dipper exclaimed caustically, looking to his sister in disbelief as he also sat up. “That was seriously the most dangerous thing we’ve ever done, even on top of fighting killer water clones and a giant robot! Do you realize just how close we were to dying back there?!”

“Yeah, but we didn’t die!” Mabel pointed out triumphantly. “Which means, my plan worked, like I just said it did! But just for the record, as fun as that kinda was, I gotta rank it a 0/10, would not do again. Mostly because of that whole ‘almost dying’ thing you just mentioned.”

Dipper rolled his eyes at this, knowing that now was certainly not the time for his sister’s usual antics. “Ok, fine,” he begrudgingly admitted as he stood up. “Your plan worked. Now we just have to sneak all over this ship, find Steven, Lapis, and the other Gems and set them free, all while making sure we aren’t discovered.”

“Sounds easy enough,” Mabel shrugged somewhat obviously as her brother helped her onto her feet.

“Sure, ‘easy’,” Dipper deadpanned, using sarcasm to mask his anxiety towards the situation as a whole. “Because if we are caught, then I’m sure that Peridot and Jasper would just love that two human kids snuck onto their massive alien war ship, and that they totally wouldn’t just toss us out into the deadly cold void of space without a second thought!”

“You really think so?”

“Mabel,” Dipper let out an exasperated sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Could you please at least try to keep up with me here?”

Finally picking up on her brother’s usual cynicism, Mabel stuck her tongue out at him, though she did find herself needing his help in getting out of the engine room since she was still rather unsteady on her injured leg. Likewise, Dipper kept his own bruised arm close to his chest, cringing every time he accidentally bumped or jostled it as they began making their way down the lengthy corridor ahead. The twins both figured that their injuries needn’t be a priority at the moment, especially since they could be easily healed once they found Steven. That is, if they found him at all.

“So what do you think these guys wanna do with Steven and the Gems anyway?” Mabel asked somewhat fretfully as she glanced around the intimidating metallic hallway.

“Well, you heard what Jasper said,” Dipper noted with a frown. “She wants to haul Steven off to Homeworld and show him to ‘Yellow Diamond’, whoever that is.”

“You think she’s bad news?”

“Seeing as how pretty much anything connected to Homeworld is bad news, I’d say more than likely she is.”
Mabel nodded, absently grabbing her hair was a sign of her growing dread. Unable to keep her growing concerns to herself for very long, she spoke up again a moment later, even if she wasn’t entirely sure what she wanted to say yet. “Uh… Dipper?” she began tentatively, stopping in her tracks and prompting her brother to do the same. “I… I, um… Y-you… I just… Oh gosh, why am I so bad at these kinds of dramatic speech-type things?”

“Oh… Mabel, what are you talking about?” Dipper asked, completely confused as to where she was going.

“Augh! I wish I knew!” Mabel groaned, frustrated and unnerved all at once. “Just… Dipper, listen. I know and you know that we’re gonna make it off of this ship with Steven and the Gems as total heroes and we’re all gonna get back to Gravity Falls safe and sound. But… just in case something goes wrong a-and… and that doesn’t end up happening… I-I just want you to know that I-”

“Wait!” Dipper cut her off, his eyes wide as he put up a hand to silence her. “…Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Mabel pouted, annoyed that her moment had been cut short. “The sound of you interrupting my heartfelt possible farewell? Cause that’s all I hear.”

“No, no,” Dipper shook his head, far too invested in the soft, almost inaudible noise he had managed to pick upon on to pay Mabel too much mind at the moment. “Just listen for a second. It’s coming from down there.”

As he pointed to the hallway ahead, Mabel begrudgingly decided to poise her ear to listen, at first not hearing anything but the static hum that rumbled throughout most of the ship. However, after a moment of otherwise complete silence, she finally managed to catch onto it, as distant and gentle as it was.

“Ah-ah-ah-ah-ahhh, ah-ah-ah-ah-ah, ah-ah-ah-ah-ahhh…”

“Is that… singing?” Mabel asked, bewildered as she looked back to Dipper.

“I think so…” he mused, just as lost. “But who could possibly singing in a place like this?”

“Maybe it’s one of the Gems? You know how much they love to sing, after all.”

“But it doesn’t sound like any of them,” Dipper countered thoughtfully. “And it doesn’t sound like Peridot or Jasper either, not that I could peg either of them as the kind to burst out into song in the first place.”

“What about Lapis?” Mabel suggested with a shrug.

Dipper paused at this, a deep look of worry for the blue Gem crossing his expression as he listened to the song once more, a part of him hoping that it really was her, even if he didn’t know her to be much of a singer either.

“Ah-ah-ahh, ahh-ah-ah-ah…”

“It’s not her either,” he concluded with a sigh of disappointment, knowing that the distance voice was too deep and too refined to belong to the blue Gem.

“Well… maybe we should follow it and find out who it is!” Mabel quipped with newfound verve. “It might be someone who could help us find Steven and the others!”

“Yeah, or it could be another Homeworld Gem who wouldn’t waste any time in getting rid of us,”
Dipper remarked sardonically.

“Well, I guess there’s only one way to find out,” Mabel shrugged, pressing on ahead. “Let’s go!”

Dipper nodded, deciding that some plan was better than no plan at all, though he did pause another moment before moving on in earnest. “Wait a second, Mabel. What was that thing you were trying to tell me a minute ago?”

Mabel flinched, her former nervousness returning as a part of her prepared to say what she knew she’d regret never telling him if something did indeed happen, but the other part of her not having anywhere near enough courage to face such a horrific possibility at all. “Uh… i-it was nothing,” she assured with a small, forced smile, one that Dipper thankfully bought for now. “Now, come on! We got ourselves a super mysterious singer to find!”

The twins set out to do just that, quickening their pace as they hurried down the hallway, to the point where it branched out into what were likely the fingers of the ship. They paused, only for a moment, to listen for the voice once more, before pinpointing the direction they believed its source to be. And sure enough, as they began hurrying their way through another prison block, the melodic song became louder and louder, until they were certain they were right on top of it.

However, before they could catch sight of who it belonged to, the sound of two sets of thumping, storming footsteps drowned out the melody as two dangerously familiar figures headed for the same place that the twins here.

“Hide!” Dipper exclaimed with a gasp as he managed to overhear Jasper and Peridot arguing from a nearby corridor. Him and Mabel were quick to pull themselves into another hall, staying just out of the Homeworld Gems’ detection as they passed right by them, bickering all the while.

“But we can’t leave yet!” Peridot protested crossly as she trailed just a bit behind Jasper, who had come to stand before the sealed-off cell that the ongoing song was coming from. “The whole point of coming here was to check on the Cluster!”

Jasper didn’t respond to the green Gem’s complaints at first as she instead rammed her fist into the wall near the cell, abruptly silencing the song. “Stop singing!” she ordered fiercely, clearly annoyed as she turned around to address the now-frightened Peridot. “Rose Quartz takes priority, above everything else!”

“B-but… but I also picked up on a strange, unknown energy spike that somewhere close to where we landed!” Peridot countered, forcing herself to be brazen before the intimidating Gem warrior. The twins exchanged a glance upon hearing this, neither of them having the faintest clue about what she could be referring to, but even so, they continued to tentatively eavesdrop all the same. “It was more powerful than anything our sensors have ever found on Earth before! We need to go find it, to investigate it and if it can be an asset to our Diamo-”

“I don’t care!” Jasper growled, her hands curled into tight fists as Peridot fearfully backed down. “I’m in charge of this mission, remember? Not you. Now, get back to the bridge and set a course for Homeworld!”

The green Gem let out a disgruntled sigh as her apparent superior abruptly turned and walked off before she began to do the same. The twins pushed themselves back against the corridor they were hiding in as Peridot sulked by it, grumbling to herself all the while. “‘Go to Earth,’ they said,” she huffed sarcastically, beyond exasperated with the end of her mission. “‘It’ll be easy,’ they said…”

As soon as they were sure Peridot and Jasper were both well out of earshot, both of the twins let
out a shared sigh of relief over miraculously avoiding detection. “Yikes! That was way too close,” Mabel remarked fretfully, carefully peering down the hall that the green Gem had just gone down.

“Tell me about it,” Dipper diffidently agreed. “By the way, what do you think that ‘unknown energy spike’ Peridot mentioned was?”

“Who cares?!” Mabel exclaimed with a delighted grin as she glanced down the other end of the hall. “Look!”

Dipper did so, peeking out from behind the wall to where his sister was pointing, only to let out a surprised gasp of his own at what he saw. Trapped behind the yellow electric fields of one of the otherwise empty cells was what was unquestionably a Gem, though she was easily the smallest one either of the twins had ever seen seeing as how she was likely about their height. Her coloration was generally a mix of gentle, pale blues, from her skin, to her thick, long, poufy hair, some of which draped over her eyes, covering them completely. She was clad in an elegant, yet simple gown, which was also predominantly blue, with rounded sleeves and a billowing, flowing floor-length skirt with a neat, folded pinafore over top of it. Overall, this Gem carried an air of regality and mystery about her, especially as she folded her opera gloved hands, the right one housing the gemstone on her palm, and resumed her hauntingly beautiful song.

“Ah-ah-ah-ah-ahhhh, ah-ah-ah-ah-ahhh...”

“Who is that?” Dipper asked in a tentative whisper as he raised a curious eyebrow.

“I dunno, but she’s so pretty!” Mabel quipped brightly, quite intrigued as they continued to spy on this new Gem. “And what do you know? She was the one singing this whole time! We should go say hi!”

“Mabel, you can’t be serious,” Dipper scoffed, pulling her back into the corridor before she could go rushing out into the open. “We can’t just run up to some strange Gem we don’t know and expect her to be friendly!”

“Mabel, you can’t be serious,” Dipper scoffed, pulling her back into the corridor before she could go rushing out into the open. “We can’t just run up to some strange Gem we don’t know and expect her to be friendly!”

“Says the guy who became besties with some ‘strange’ Gem he found behind a waterfall,” Mabel countered, rolling her eyes.

“B-but Lapis was completely different!” Dipper exclaimed defensively. “What if that Gem out there isn’t like her or any of the Crystal Gems? What if she’s like Peridot and Jasper instead?”

“What, you mean a bully?” Mabel remarked, clearly doubtful. “Come on, bro-bro, stop being so suspicious all the time! Why would she be locked in a cell like that if she was one of them? Plus, from the way it sounded, Jasper really didn’t like her pretty song! So there’s no way she could be on their side!”

“Ok, fine, I’ll give you that,” Dipper relented, annoyed. “But she’s not who we’re looking for, remember? We need to find Steven, Lapis, and the other Gems, and get out of here as soon as possible! We don’t have time for any side rescue missions!”

“Aw, but she’s just one Gem, Dipper!” Mabel pleaded. “It’ll only take a second to get her out of there! And besides, maybe she might be able to help us look for them!”

“I doubt it,” Dipper crossed his arms, still staunch in his refusal. “We’re not saving her, Mabel. And that’s final.”

“Uh, yeah we are saving her, bro-bro,” Mabel argued crossly.
“No, we’re not.”

“Yes, we are!”

“No, we’re not!”

“Yes, we are!”

“No, we’re-”

“You both know I can hear you, right?”

The twins froze, their argument completely broken as the blue Gem addressed them from her cell. Hesitantly, they both peeked out from behind the wall, only to find that she was looking directly at them, her hands still folded and her expression (what little of it they could observe just from her uncovered mouth alone) expectant. Needless to say that there would be no hiding and debating over the matter now, which was why Mabel was the first to gleefully emerge from their hiding spot and run over, while Dipper did so much more begrudgingly and hesitantly.

“Hi!” Mabel greeted cheerfully as she came to stand before the blue Gem. “I love your song! And your dress! And your hair! Are you some kind of Gem princess?”

“No,” the blue Gem answered, her voice rather flat and unmoved. She did pause however, looking between both twins for a moment before letting out a small, almost worried sigh. “You two aren’t supposed to be here… And to be honest, I had hoped that neither of you would come. But… I suppose it was inevitable…”

“Uh… what’s that supposed to mean?” Dipper asked, still quite wary of this unknown Gem as he gave her a rather suspicious glance.

“It’s… complicated,” the blue Gem noted thoughtfully. “But don’t worry. All will be revealed in due time, Dipper.”

“W-wait, wha-” Dipper balked, clearly startled. “How… how did you know my name?”

“She probably just overheard the rest of our argument a minute ago, dummy,” Mabel remarked teasingly before blithely addressing the blue Gem once more. “But if you wanna hear my name again, its Mabel! What’s yours?”

The Gem paused, tilting her head somewhat, almost as if she didn’t really know how to react to Mabel’s boundless enthusiasm before she answered, just as calmly as ever. “I’m Sapphire,” she said, adding a small, but graceful curtsey to her introduction.

“Yes!” Mabel squealed in absolute delight. “I was hoping you’d do a curtsey and you did! How did you know?”

“It was… a lucky guess,” Sapphire said, somewhat hesitantly, though she was smiling coyly all the same.

“Well, uh, it was… nice meeting you,” Dipper interjected as he began pushing Mabel away from the cell. “But we really should get going. We have people to find, places to be, you know how it is. So, we’ll just, uh, s-see you around and-”

“Wait!” the blue Gem called after them. “I need your help!”
“Oh, of course we’ll help you, Sapphire!” Mabel exclaimed, running back over to the cell and ignoring Dipper’s groan of protest. “What’s up?”

“Well, first, I need you to help me out of here,” Sapphire began evenly. “And then I need you to help me find another Gem who’s also trapped on this ship. Her name is Ruby.”

“Ooo! Two new Gems in one day!” Mabel grinned excitedly. “Well, technically three if you count Jasper, but she’s kind of a jerk, so we won’t include her. So this Ruby, is she a friend of yours?”

“She’s… a bit more than that,” Sapphire said, her tone turning somewhat wistful as she glanced down at her empty left palm. “In fact, she’s much more than that… So much more…”

The twins exchanged a confused glance at this, neither of them sure of what she meant, but all the same, Mabel was quick to perk up and step forward. “Well then, by all means, let’s get you out of there so you can go find her!”

“Mabel, wait,” Dipper interjected, eyeing the field keeping Sapphire trapped in the cell cautiously. “Don’t touch—”

“Whoa!” Mabel gasped as her hand slipped right through the barrier, almost as if it wasn’t even there. Sapphire also seemed somewhat surprised by this as she took a short step back, though she still made no attempt to touch the field herself. “This is so cool! My hand just goes right through it!” Mabel grinned as she kept sliding her hand in and out of the barrier. “Oh my gosh! Have I somehow gained the power to walk through walls!?”

“Uh, sorry to burst your bubble, Mabel, but no,” Dipper pointed out as he easily shoved his own hand through the field, just as seamlessly as she had. “Still, this… doesn’t really seem like a very effective prison cell if you can literally just walk through it. Why haven’t you tried to escape?” he asked dubiously.

“Oh… of course!” the blue Gem exclaimed in newfound realization. “That’s why you both phase through it. This energy field destabilizes the physical form of Gems, but it doesn’t detect humans at all. It’s just like…” She trailed off, glancing down apprehensively before continuing. “There should be a panel on the outer wall that can disable it.”

“Oh, found it!” Mabel announced, looking over the aforementioned panel, though she was instantly intimidated by how technologically complex it looked. “Uh… you mind giving this a go, bro-bro? You’re way better at this techy nerdy science junk than I am.”

“Uh, I’m not so sure… that’s a good idea,” Dipper remarked, crossing his arms as he tried his best to avoid mentioning how he still wasn’t too keen on the idea of letting Sapphire out, based on how little they knew about it. However, the blue Gem picked up on his hesitance and skepticism all the same, and she was quick to attempt to set it to ease.

“I know you don’t believe you have any reason to trust me right now, Dipper,” she began placidly. “But I can promise you that you will not regret helping me, especially if you want to save Steven and the others.”

“W-wha—How did you know—” Dipper cut himself off, annoyance flashing over his expression as he realized this was a futile question. “Let me guess; it’ll all be ‘revealed in due time’, right?”

Sapphire simply nodded, knowing that nothing else needed to really be said. Dipper let out an exasperated sigh as he looked over to Mabel again, who was giving him a rather pleading look, one that he eventually ended up folding to, even if he didn’t really want to. “Fine,” he grumbled,
stepping up to the security panel as he got to work. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Mabel grinned in bright satisfaction over her brother’s agreement to help, though Sapphire’s expression remained as calm and unreadable as ever. While it took some doing and quite a few failed attempts, Dipper eventually managed to figure out the basics behind the complicated security system keeping the energy field up. And, sure enough, he was able to disable it, all without setting off any kind of alarm that would otherwise tip the Homeworld Gems off.

“Thank you both,” Sapphire said as she stepped out of her how unbarred cell.

“You’re welcome!” Mabel exclaimed blithely, even if Dipper was still somewhat petulant and distrustful.

“Yeah, sure, whatever,” he huffed impatiently. “Can we finally get going now? Each minute we waste standing around here talking is probably another lightyear we get away from Earth, which is really scary to think about, to be perfectly honest. So let’s just get moving already, ok?”

“Of course,” Sapphire firmly agreed, already heading off down the hall at a steady pace. “This way. Hurry!”

While Mabel readily and eagerly followed after the blue Gem, Dipper did so much more hesitantly, still not entirely sure if trusting her was a good idea or not. But still, he knew they didn’t really have much of a choice. After all, they were largely alone on a massive alien war ship, where their foes could be lurking around literally any corner, just waiting for them to happen across them. Any ally, even one as mysterious and puzzling as Sapphire, was a welcome one at a moment like this. Though still, only time could tell if her and her aforementioned companion Ruby, would end up being a help or a hindrance to them all.

It didn’t take Steven too long to discover that Ruby wasn’t much of a conversationalist. As they continued searching the halls of the hand ship for the elusive Sapphire, the young Gem had made something of a habit of asking the red Gem whatever curious questions popped into his mind, most of them pertaining to her and the situation as a whole. Of course, as hard focused on her mission as she was, Ruby mostly ignored his inquiries, and whatever questions she did choose to answer were usually just in the form of terse nods or unceremonious yes’ or no’s. Steven could tell from her tense, tenacious manner alone that the red Gem was not going to rest, even for a moment, until her companion was found. A motivation the young could certainly relate to, seeing as how he wanted nothing more than to finally find his own friends somewhere on this labyrinthine ship.

In fact, it seemed as though he had finally found at least one of them as the pair hurried their way down to a cell in an otherwise dead-end hall. Ruby came to a grinding halt, letting out a relieved gasp upon seeing the blue coloration of the Gem trapped inside the cell up ahead. Her excitement was quick to diminish completely however, upon seeing who it really was.

“Oh… It’s just you…” she grumbled, clearly disappointed. Steven, on the other hand was anything but disappointed upon seeing the tear-drop shaped gemstone on the back of figure sitting dejectedly before them.

“Lapis!” he exclaimed with a bright smile, startling the blue Gem as she turned to face him.

“S-Steven?” she asked, both surprised and rather dismayed to see him.

“Lapis, I can get you out!” Steven proclaimed, not paying much mind to Ruby as she anxiously
paced around behind him. However, as he reached out towards the field trapping Lapis in, she abruptly halted him.

“Stop!” she exclaimed, fearfully backing away from the field.

“No, it’s ok,” Steven assured. “I can-”

“No!” Lapis insisted once more, obviously distraught. “I don’t want your help! Things are bad enough as it is. I’ve already made too much trouble. The only bright side in all this is that Dipper and Mabel are still safe back on Earth, but you… Steven, I-I…” The blue Gem choked up, unable to even meet Steven’s concerned gaze out of an immense amount of guilt. At the same time, the young Gem couldn’t help but feel somewhat relieved upon hearing that the twins were indeed still on Earth and not on board the ship. In the event that him and the Gems didn’t actually escape and make it back, at least he could be assured that two of his friends would continue to live on in safety and freedom, even if they might not.

After a moment of fighting back tears, Lapis finally continued, her tone betraying her terror well. “Once we get back to Homeworld, they’re going to decide what to do with us,” she theorized, though she was cut off before she could say anything else.

“Augh! I don’t have time for this!” Ruby growled angrily, not hesitating in running off to continue her search.

“Ruby, wait!” Steven called after her, but Lapis was quick to stop him before he could follow her.

“Steven, whatever you’re doing, just stop,” she cautioned fretfully. “If we do everything they say, then they might go easy on us.”

“But… but they’re mean!” Steven protested fervently, refusing to give up so easily. “They hurt my friends! They hurt my face! They’ve got you here in prison!”

“That’s why we can’t fight them.” Lapis insisted glumly.

“That’s why we have to fight them,” Steven reasoned with bold resolve.

“I already tried that, Steven!” the blue Gem argued bitterly. “I tried fighting back. I tried escaping them! I tried to prevent all of this from happening! And look at where it’s gotten me. I’m right back to where I started: trapped, just like I always have been. Just like I always will be…”

Steven paused, deep sympathy for Lapis filling him as he watched her turn away and pull her legs to her chest morosely. He desperately wanted to do something to help her, to reassure her, to give her hope that they would all get out of this alive and unscathed. But after all the blue Gem had already gone through, he figured she likely wouldn’t accept such sentiments. So instead, he settled on offering her the next best kind of hope.

“I’ll come back for you, Lapis,” he assured, knowing that he had to catch up with Ruby before she could get too far ahead. Still, his tone was completely sincere as he turned to leave, but not before offering the blue Gem one last kindly smile. “I promise.”

Lapis said nothing as Steven ran off, leaving her alone once more in her dark, suffocating cell with her dark, suffocating thoughts. She knew well what would happen once they got to Homeworld, how her time was more than likely growing short, for certainly there would be no chance that an escaped prisoner like her would be allowed to live after essentially making fools with the Gem elites, as well as conspiring with the Crystal Gems and humans. But even if she knew she knew she was likely not to last for much longer, at least she could take solace in knowing that the prelude to
her final moments were certainly a bright spot in her otherwise largely bleak existence. And, she knew she had Dipper to thank for much of that, though her heart did ache a bit upon realizing that she’d really never get the chance to give him that thank you. Still, she couldn’t feel too miserable over the matter as she realized that, against all odds, she had fulfilled the unspoken promise she had made to protect him all the same. Dipper was still on Earth, where he belonged, alive, mostly unharmed, and free, that she was certain of. And as long as she kept that comforting thought in mind, then Lapis could hardly care about what Homeworld did to her. Let them imprison her, injure her, even shatter her if they wanted to.

For as long as the young human she had come to care so about was safe as a result of her suffering, then she was completely willing to suffer as much as she had to, and then some, all for his sake.

While Sapphire wasn’t exactly running through the halls of the hand ship, she was moving at a surprisingly fast pace, one that both of the twins had to essentially jog to keep up with her as she seemed to glide down the lengthy corridors. And of course, all the while, Mabel blithely kept up conversation with the blue Gem, asking her a seemingly endless barrage of curious questions.

“So how did you get your hair to look so perfect? Do you maybe have any other pretty ball gowns like that one that you’d be willing to lend out for a while? I know you said you aren’t a Gem princess, but do Gem princesses actually exist? And if so, do you know any? Do you think—”

“Ok, Mabel, can you cut it out with all the questions already?!” Dipper interjected, clearly annoyed, even more than he already was. “We’re trying to sneak around this ship, remember? If you keep this up, then Peridot or Jasper will hear you for sure!”

“Aw, but I can’t help it!” Mabel exclaimed. “It’s not every day that we get to meet a new Gem, especially one who’s actually nice and friendly and doesn’t wanna kill us for a change!”

“…Well, I can’t really argue with you there…” Dipper noted with a somewhat caustic frown.

“I appreciate your enthusiasm, Mabel,” Sapphire finally spoke up, her sights still set on the path ahead. “But the best answer I can give to any of your questions is that you’ll find out all of the answers you’re looking for soon.”

“All of them?” Dipper asked, knowing that several of his sister’s questions had been rather out there, something that the blue Gem acknowledged as well.

“Alright, well most of them will be answered soon.”

“How soon?” Mabel asked eagerly, hating the idea of having to wait.

“Very soon,” Sapphire replied, finally glancing over her shoulder. “In fact—”

“Sapphire!” a distant call stopped the blue Gem in her tracks, a gentle gasp escaping her. At the same time, the twins also paused, neither of them entirely sure of who this shout had come from, but based on Sapphire’s reaction to it, they could both take a pretty good guess.

“In fact, you’re about to find out right now,” the blue Gem quickly finished before grabbing both of the twins’ hands. “Come on!”

Before either Dipper or Mabel could think to question her, Sapphire suddenly bolted forward, confident of her path this time as she ran at an alarming speed. In fact, she was going so fast that
she was essentially dragging the surprised twins behind her as the halls of the ship flew by in an intangible blur. After mere seconds of this, however, Sapphire came to a grinding halt near an open entryway, the twins stopping along with her, though it was clear they were rather disoriented from having traveled so fast.

“W-what was that?” Dipper asked, grabbing his head to try and ease the lingering dizziness away.

“A-awesome is what it was!” Mabel exclaimed with an exhilarated smile. “Sapphire, can we do that again?”

Sapphire didn’t answer, her focus instead devoted to the doorway opposite of the one they were standing in. Or rather, on the red Gem who had just happened to step into it.

“There you are!” Steven exclaimed somewhat breathlessly as he arrived just seconds after Ruby. “Y-you know, you were running so fast, I thought I-”

Ruby cut him off with a loud gasp, her eyes wide as she noticed the blue Gem, the very one she had been searching for all this time, standing afar, but in plain sight at last. “Sapphire!” she shouted, a huge smile of relief spreading across her features as she ran forward into the large atrium ahead.

“Ruby!” Sapphire exclaimed, just as allayed as she hurried to meet her, finally allowing the kids a clear view of each other.

“Steven!” Dipper and Mabel exclaimed in elated unison upon noticing the young Gem.

“Dipper?! Mabel?!” Steven gasped in surprise, rushing into the atrium just as the twins did. The kids ended up ramming into each other in a haphazard three-way hug, one that was filled with plenty of warm, relieved laughter. “I-I can’t believe you guys are here!” the young Gem exclaimed with an incredulous chuckle as the hug broke apart a bit. “Lapis told me you were still back on Earth.”

“We were,” Mabel said with a bold grin. “Jasper beat us up and left us behind after saying a whole bunch of really mean stuff about your mom. But we snuck onto the ship like a pair of expert stowaways just to save you and the Gems! So yeah, we’re pretty much the most hardcore people ever.”

“R-really?” Steven asked as his smile faded somewhat. “You guys… you snuck on here… just to save us? T-to… to save me?” He paused, worry and slight guilt washing over his expression, especially as he noticed Dipper’s bruised arm and Mabel’s injured leg. “That… sounds like a really dangerous thing to do…”

“Well, yeah it was dangerous,” Dipper shrugged, as though it was obvious. “I mean, we were basically just dangling hundreds of feet above the ground behind the ship with Mabel’s grappling hook as it took off. But we couldn’t just let them take you, Steven. Who knows what they’d do to you guys back on Homeworld?”

“Yeah! We had to do something to save you after all the times you’ve bailed us out of tight spots before!” Mabel readily agreed. “So, here we are! Pulling off the coolest jail break of all time! Pretty impressive, huh?”

“Y-yeah…” Steven said with a faltering smile, unable to shake his dread and guilt away as tried to imagine just how close the twins must have been to death trying to get onto the ship. All for his sake. “I-it… it’s pretty impressive…”

“So, uh… what’s going on with… that…” Dipper interjected, nodding towards Ruby and
Sapphire. The pair had long since embraced from the moment they made contact with each other, their arms wrapped around each other tightly in a desperate hug that they refused to break and their faces pressed intimately close together as they whispered sweet nothings to each other.

“Ugh, I hated being split up,” Ruby whined, absentmindedly running her hand through Sapphire’s hair. “It’s like torture…”

“Ruby…” the blue Gem chuckled softly, giving her partner a small kiss on the cheek. “We were only apart for a few hours.”

“Every second I’m away from you feels like years to me…” the red Gem sighed contentedly under her lover’s feather-light touch.

“Oh my gosh!” Mabel exclaimed in a whispered gasp as her and the boys watched this blatantly romantic exchange. “I get it now! Ruby and Sapphire really are more than just friends. They’re a couple! And a really adorable one too!”

“…Well, I gotta admit,” Dipper remarked, rather surprised by this revelation, especially as the Gem couple nuzzled even closer. “This… really wasn’t what I was expecting to see on a deadly alien war ship…”

“They look so happy to see each other again…” Steven muttered with a warm smile, his guilt dissipating into satisfaction upon seeing the pair harmoniously reunite. “They must have really missed each other…”

Ruby and Sapphire remained close as their hug finally broke apart, but they didn’t dare break physical contact with each other, out of fear that if they did, they’d be separated once again. “Did they hurt you?” Ruby asked intently, gently caressing the blue Gem’s cheek.

“No, no, I’m ok,” she assured, placing her hand overtop her lover’s. “Did they hurt you?”

“Who cares?!” Ruby laughed mirthfully, her eyes filling up with joyful tears. “I do!” Sapphire exclaimed with a bright smile, leaning forward to playfully kiss the red Gem’s tears away. These peppered kisses soon turned into a full-on one, as Ruby pulled her lips to Sapphire’s, catching the blue Gem off guard. Still, she happily accepted it as they drew their arms around each other once more as their kiss grew even deeper and more affectionate. It didn’t last for too long, however, before Ruby surprised Sapphire once again, breaking the kiss off as she easily hoisted the blue Gem up, both of them laughing brightly as she began to spin her around.

Their loose, ecstatic, love-fueled dance continued, their warm, united laughter continuing as they spun in wide, uncalculated circles, paying no mind to the trio of kids still watching them curiously. In fact, they paid nothing but each other any mind, even as their gems began to glow in bright harmony and as their forms began to merge together. The emerging fusion continued laughing as the two halves meshed with each other, their laughter starting to become singular as they rose higher and higher into the air before the immensely intrigued trio. And, as the light from the fusion abruptly cleared and the couple’s affectionate giggles turned into the triumphant laughter of one, the trio was met with an unquestionably familiar figure.

Garnet.

A stunned, unified gasp escaped all three of the kids as the Gem leader herself emerged from the light of the fusion, still laughing jubilantly, clearly delighted to be herself again. As she remained hovering for a moment or two, the kids were able to see that her appearance had changed as part of
her regeneration. Her afro seemed tighter, neater, and more cubical, her skin taking on a bit more of a pinkish violet tint. Her body suit was also different, with smaller puffed sleeves and vibrant shades of pinks, purples, and blues replacing the old maroons and blacks. In fact, her entire manner seemed more vibrant and vivacious, clearly a sign of her elation at being reunited, as she landed before the kids, her uncovered trio of eyes sparkling with excitement just as much as her huge smile was.

“Steven! Dipper! Mabel!” she exclaimed, her laughter still apparent in her tone as she remained on their level for a moment. “Thank you!”

“Garnet!” Steven gasped, stars in his eyes as he looked to his guardian. “Y-you’re a fusion!?”

Garnet nodded with a small, somewhat awkward chuckle. “Aw, sorry! We didn’t want you meeting us here like this.”

“Oh my gosh!” Dipper exclaimed incredulously, clearly beside himself with this revelation. “T-this is incredible! How did we seriously never figure out that you were a fusion this whole time?! Everything makes so much more sense now! L-like your three eyes, and your two gemstones, and-”

“And you being such an awesome relationship expert!” Mabel cut in excitedly. “It’s because you are a relationship! Literally!”

“And the fact that you give out such great advice about fusion!” Steven added as Garnet let out another small, amused laugh. “You probably know more about it than anyone else since you’re fused all the time!”

“And this explains how Sapphire already knew who we were!” Dipper continued, though he paused for a moment as he looked away apprehensively. “Oh, uh… By the way, sorry for, y-you know, not really trusting her—er, uh, you? Whichever one of those applies here?”

“It’s alright, Dipper,” Garnet assured with a knowing smirk. “You had your reasons for wanting to be careful. Besides, I told you that you wouldn’t regret helping Sapphire.”

“Heh, yeah…” Dipper grinned, scratching the back of his neck somewhat depreciatingly. “I’m really not regretting it now that we know the truth.”

“And the truth is so amazing!” Steven exclaimed brightly. “So, um… did we make a good first impression? On Ruby and Sapphire, I mean?”

“Oh, Steven…” Garnet said with a warm, affectionate smile as she placed a hand against the side of her young ward’s face. “We already love you. All three of you.” The Gem leader’s smile widened as she embraced the trio, the kids more than happy to return it as their excitement turned to relief upon having Garnet back after how she had so viciously been torn apart back on Earth.

Ironically enough, however, this tender moment was cut all too short as a gruff, outraged shout echoed through the nearby halls. “Where is she?!”

“It’s Jasper,” Garnet reported, her manner turning as serious as it usually was as she turned back to the kids. “Steven, Dipper, Mabel, find the others and get to the control bridge.”

“But we don’t know where they are,” Steven shook his head, knowing that Lapis had been the only other Gem he had found earlier. Garnet was quick to rectify this however, by leaning forward and giving the young Gem a quick, gentle kiss on the forehead, seemingly out of nowhere. Though initially confused by this, Steven let out a sharp gasp as a quick image flashed through his mind,
guiding him down the halls of the hand ship and to the pair of cells that Amethyst and Pearl were being contained in. “W-whoa!” the young Gem exclaimed as his thoughts returned to the present. “I-I just saw where they are! How did you do that?”

“Future vision,” Garnet winked slyly, knowing there would be more time to explain later.

“So you’re really gonna stay and fight Jasper?” Mabel asked, somewhat worried. “Even though she has that weird zappy thing that broke you guys up last time?”

“Yes,” the Gem leader nodded, resolved as she rose to her full height.

“Are you sure you’ll be able to beat her on your own?” Dipper asked, still rather uncertain of her odds in such an arduous fight.

“It’s ok,” Garnet assured with a strong, confident smile. “I’m never alone.”

All three of the kids smiled, allayed upon hearing this as they realized she was right. With the two halves of her whole together once again, then certainly the Gem leader would be just as unstoppable as she always was. And perhaps, even then some.

Without wasting any more time, the kids departed to take on the mission Garnet had just imparted them with, the twins following Steven’s lead as he already knew where to go. They left just in time too, for right as they ran through the door, Jasper rushed in through the opposite one as Garnet turned to face her unflinchingly.

“Oh great…” the orange Gem grumbled in clear disgust and disdain. “You’re both out? And you’re fused again? Why? Fusion is just a cheap tactic to make weak Gems stronger. Quit embarrassing yourselves! I’ve seen what you really are.”

Garnet simply chuckled at this, knowing from experience and beyond a shadow of a doubt that everything Jasper had said was a lie. “No, you haven’t.”

And then, the Gem leader did something that the orange Gem had not been expecting. She began to sing.

“This is Garnet,” she began in something of a bold, proclaiming rap. “Back together. And I’m never going down at the hands of the likes of you, because I’m so much better. And every part of me is saying ‘go get her’.”

Jasper scowled, clearly not amused by this boast as her and Garnet began to circle each other, both of them clearly ready to fight. “The two of us ain’t gonna follow your rules,” the Gem leader continued, taking up a defensive stance as Jasper pulled out her Gem destabilizer. “Come at me without any of your fancy tools. Let’s go, just me and you.” Jasper brazenly rushed forward at this challenge, all while Garnet smirked, flicking her fingers over her eyes as her iconic visor materialized once more. “Let’s go, just one on two.”

“Go ahead and try and hit me if you’re able,” Garnet sang properly now, her melody swift and bold as she easily jumped out of the path of Jasper’s first punch. “Can’t you see that my relationship is stable?” She gracefully flipped out of the path of each of the orange Gem’s swipes, staying clear of the destabilizer all the while. “I can see you hate the way we intermingle.” As Jasper kept throwing wild, angry, uncalculated punches, Garnet continued to avoid them, all while keeping in the succinct, catchy beat of her song. “But I think you’re just mad ‘cause you’re single!”

“And you’re not gonna stop what we made together,” Garnet got low as Jasper swung for her
again, surprising her by kicking the destabilizer cleanly out of the orange Gem’s hand and inter her own. “We are gonna stay like this forever.” With a triumphant smirk, the Gem leader snapped the weapon that had defeated her before cleanly in half, easily leveling the playing field, much to Jasper’s fury. “If you break us apart, we’ll just come back newer.” Garnet smoothly slid her hands over her body, proud of her form and everything it represented as she summoned her gauntlets, paying Jasper no mind as she summoned her helmet in response. “And we’ll always be twice the Gem that you are!”

The two Gems lunged for each other, ready to attack each other with everything they had as Garnet continued her daring, heroic song all the while.

“I am made o-o-o-o-of lo-o-o-o-ove, oh-oh-oh-oh-ohhh…”

Amethyst and Pearl sat, their backs against the walls of the walls of their adjacent cells, both of them dejected and resigned to their no doubt bleak fates. However, amidst all the ways they had anticipated their captivity ending, the last one they could have expected was Steven, Dipper, and Mabel suddenly arriving out of nowhere to rescue them. While the pair of Gems immediately fretted over the kids and their apparent injuries, and expressed their fearful disbelief at the twins being on the ship at all, the trio was quick to not only reassure them, but also set them free. Fortunately, Steven’s odd ability to clip through the energy field made easy work of the jail break, and while Pearl in particular wanted to voice her distress over the kids doing something so risky, Amethyst was quick to remind her that there was no time.

“Lo-o-o-o-ove…”

So instead, the collective group followed what Garnet had ordered, rushing for the bridge and knowing that taking control of it was the only way they would ever be able to get back to Earth. Of course, upon arriving there, they were quick to discover that it was anything but abandoned, as Peridot sat in the control seat, intent on guiding her ship back to Homeworld. The green Gem let out an appalled gasp as the unexpected intruders arrived, but even despite her surprise, she was quick to grab the closest Gem destabilizer she could find, ready to put an end to this nuisance.

What she didn’t know, however, that the weapon was essentially useless against Steven, brazenly rushed forward to counteract it. The only oddity he suffered was the usual yellow current as he fiercely grabbed the tips of the weapon, prying it right out of the shocked green Gem’s grasp and sending her reeling backward. Fortunately, Dipper and Mabel had made sure to position themselves appropriately beforehand, which was how they were able to easily trip her up and send her falling to the floor as Amethyst and Pearl rushed forward to subdue her.

“Lo-o-o-o-ove…”

At the same time, the brawl between Garnet and Jasper continued, both of them throwing blows back and forth at an incredible speed. Amidst singing her chorus, the Gem leader outmaneuvered the orange Gem most of the time, her smaller size and higher speed proving themselves to be an advantage over Jasper’s ferocity and muscle. She even managed to get a few sings in herself, including a particularly nasty uppercut to Jasper’s jaw, one that she retaliated against by catching Garnet’s wrist as she readied another punch. Enraged, the orange Gem threw her opponent down hard, creating a sizable dent in the floor of the atrium, but even so, Garnet only stayed down for mere seconds, her melody continuing as she picked herself up to face the charging Jasper once more.

“Lo-o-o-o-ove…”
“Don’t touch that!” Peridot ordered hotly, struggling to wriggle free from the whip that was restraining her, as well as the purple Gem keeping a heavy foot planted on her. She scowled up at Pearl, who had already hurried for the ship’s control panel, outraged with both her enemies as well as herself for being defeated by them so easily. “You clods don’t know what you’re doing!”

“Oh, we know exactly what we’re doing,” Mabel said with a triumphant smirk as her and the boys stood over the downed green Gem. “We’re beating you!”

“And what do you know?” Dipper added, his tone just as righteously smug. “Looks like we didn’t even need four arms and a shield-producing journal to do it this time either, huh, Steven?”

“Nope,” Steven grinned as he exchanged a triumphant high five with Dipper. “I guess we didn’t.”

“Grr! You’ll pay for this, you… you filthy traitors!” Peridot threatened, even if she was really in no position to make good on such a threat.

“Yeah, yeah, keep on yelling about getting your revenge or whatever,” Amethyst rolled her eyes, tightening her whip somewhat before turning to the white Gem. “You got this, Pearl!”

“Okay, ship,” Pearl took in a deep breath as she took a seat, not quite familiar with such advanced technology, though she was more than willing to give it a try to get them home. “Turn us around!”

The Gem leader had given her song a momentary break as she struggled to hold Jasper back, the orange Gem pushing her across the floor using her battle helmet. Garnet broke this tension by delivering a heavy punch to Jasper’s stomach, sending her flying upward into the glass dome of the atrium. The orange Gem didn’t miss a beat, however, as her body instantly charged with electrifying energy, curling up into a rapidly spinning ball for a moment before she threw herself down at Garnet hard. While the Gem leader blocked the blunt of this attack with her gauntlets, the immense force of it was more than enough to send both Gems crashing in through the floor of the atrium. They fell, hard and heavy, through several layers of the ship’s infrastructure, before finally plowing into the large engine room towards the base of the vessel, sending them both flying to opposite ends of it amidst the resulting rain of wreckage. And, as damaged and battered as she was from that last attack, Garnet was clearly not beaten yet as she picked herself up, her confident ballad continuing as the smoke cleared.

“This is who we are, this is who I am,” she sang, ignoring Jasper’s cruel smirk as she hardened her resolve once more. “And if you think you can stop me, then you need to think again.” She rose to stand, both of her halves brimming with bravery, determination, and love that filled every harmonious word of her song. “Because I am a feeling, and I will never end.” Her gauntlets formed over her hands once again as she prepared to finish this fight, once and for all. “And I won’t let you hurt my planet, and I won’t let you hurt my friends!”

“Go ahead and try and hit me if you’re able,” the chorus began again as Garnet beat back Jasper’s thrusts, only to get caught with a brutal left hook that sent her flying to the ground. “Can’t you see that my relationship is stable?” The Gem leader jumped to her feet, sending a fast kick Jasper’s way that she only barely dodged. “I know you think I’m not something you’re afraid of.” Garnet saw her opportunity and took it, jumping in and bashing both of her fists against the sides of Jasper’s helmet, breaking her visor easily. “Cause you think that you’ve see what I’m made of.” She leapt back, amused by Jasper’s blatant fury as she recovered from the assault and madly charged at her with another spin dash.
“But I am even more than the two of them,” Garnet jumped out of Jasper’s path, steering clear of the resulting explosion as she collided with the wall before throwing herself at her again. “Everything they care about is what I am.” The Gem leader paused as she watched Jasper zip around the room wildly, giving both of her halves an idea about how to claim victory against the orange Gem. “I am their fury, I am their patience,” she paused, just for a second as she caught Jasper squarely by the helmet, stopping her assault right in its tracks. “I am a conversation.”

“I am made-” she threw the orange Gem hard over her head, flinging her right into the central core of the ship. “O-o-o- of lo-o-o-ove, oh-o-o-o-oh.”

The resulting explosion was immense, painfully zapping Jasper and even sending Garnet flying as a massive hole tore itself through the hull of the hand ship. This eruption was easily felt throughout the rest of the ship, even up to the bridge, where it roughly knocked the kids and the Gems forward, releasing Peridot from under Amethyst’s foot, despite her attempts to keep her held down.

“L-o-o-o-o-ove,” Garnet sang victoriously as she dashed away from the blast, leaving Jasper behind as she hurried to rejoin her team. “And its stronger than you.”

No longer trapped by the purple Gem, Peridot inched forward, still tied by whip as she flung her head against the deck of the ship. A strange green orb formed around her, one that sunk into the floor before Amethyst could leap onto it and stop it. The rapidly descending hand ship curled up at this, the green Gem’s escape pod launching out of it and jettisoning back towards Earth, letting Peridot get a rather haphazard getaway, but a getaway all the same.

Still, there would be time to worry about the green Gem later. Instead, Amethyst, Pearl, and the kids all gathered around the front window, watching in fearful dismay as the Earth grew larger and larger by the second as the ship they were on hurtled towards it. With the vessel as damaged as it was, there would be no slowing its descent, meaning that a crash, and a likely deadly one, was inevitable.

“L-o-o-o-o-ove, o-o-o-o- of l-o-o-o-ove... And its stronger than you.”

The entire group gasped as the bridge doors flew open, revealing the Gem leader, looking worse for wear after her intense fight, but still standing strong and in once piece. “Garnet!” they all gasped in surprised relief, though she allowed them no time to celebrate.

“This ship is going down!” she announced, confirming what they were all afraid of.

“But what about Lapis?” Steven asked, remembering his promise to return to rescue the blue Gem.

“There’s no time!” Garnet staunchly insisted, but the kids, Dipper in particular, refused to simply leave it at that.

“What? No!” he exclaimed fervently, trying to push past Garnet in an attempt to searching for her. “We can’t just leave her behind! We have to-”

“There’s no time,” the Gem leader repeated firmly, gently pushing Dipper back. “I’m sorry, Dipper, but it’s too dangerous.”

Of course, Dipper resiliently wanted to argue against this for the sake of the blue Gem certainly deserved to be saved just as much as anyone else did. However, before he could really protest, the ship violently lurched once more as it reentered Earth’s atmosphere. Flames had surrounded its prone form as it plunged towards the ground in a rapid freefall, shaking its structure violently all the while.
Lapis could feel this steady quaking from her cell, and though she was momentarily startled by it, she still made no effort to try and escape. After all, she knew that whatever was about to happen, she was more than likely powerless to stop it anyway, just as she always was whenever something disastrous happened. So instead, she remained curled up in her cell, forlorn and dejected as she tried to give herself some semblance of solace, only to find none at all.

The hand ship plowed down through the dawn skies over Gravity Falls, the entire town still completely dark and abandoned as the hand ship appeared again. Only this time, its time in the sky was incredibly short lived as inevitably crashed into the base of the cliff near the lake, its thumb sliding off and into the water upon impact.

And then, mere seconds after it landed, the entire ship exploded.

The blast was incredible, one that could have easily been seen from anywhere in Gravity Falls if any of its residents were still there. Pieces of broken metal and debris of all shapes and sizes poured over the surrounding area, many of which splashed into the lake itself as green flames scored the darkened shore. The only one who had arrived on the dangerous scene was Lion, who had seen the ship’s descent from the temple and wasted no time in dutifully rushing over to search for his master. And, after only a moment or two of glancing around the wreckage, the pink beast managed to pick up on the young Gem’s presence, running over to a cluster of debris before unleashing a powerful sonic roar upon it, blowing it back to reveal a sturdy pink bubble and the six figures huddled together inside it.

As soon as Lion had released them from the rubble, Steven dropped his bubble with tired sigh, strained from having to keep such a large one up for so long. Likewise, Garnet also released her protective hold on everyone, allowing them all to collapse onto the lake shore in relative safety. “Nice one,” the Gem leader congratulated her young ward with a small smile.

Steven returned that smile, though it only grew wider as he remembered what had happened on the ship earlier. “Oh my gosh!” he exclaimed excitedly. “Garnet! I still can’t believe you’re a fusion all the time!”

“Wait, you guys met Ruby and Sapphire?” Amethyst interjected, surprised.

“Heck yeah we did!” Mabel quipped zealously. “And they were adorable!”

“Thank you,” Garnet remarked with an amused, gracious nod.

“Oh no!” Pearl exclaimed, slightly disappointed. “We were going to introduce you. Garnet, your plan!”

“We were waiting for your birthday, Steven,” Garnet shrugged, not too upset over her plan being accidentally ruined.

“We can still do it!” Steven reassured brightly as they all rose to stand. “I’ll just pretend I didn’t know! We can all act surprised!”

The Gems shared a warm laugh over this, one that they were certainly glad to have after all they had just been through. Still, it didn’t go on for too long before Garnet’s manner turned a bit more serious, especially as she placed a hand on each of the twins’ shoulders. “Dipper, Mabel,” she began, her tone gentle but also somewhat disapproving. “What you two did was very dangerous.”
“I’ll say it was!” Pearl cut in sharply. “Sneaking onto a highly advanced Homeworld ship in mid-flight using a grappling hook of all things?! You two could have been killed!”

“Yeah, you guys are totally nuts!” Amethyst added just as incredulously. “What if Jasper or Peridot had found you? They would have beaten you into squishy human pulps!”

“But… but we just wanted to-” Dipper’s attempt at defending their choice was cut off by Garnet, who’s grip had not left their shoulders the entire time.

“But…” she began with a growing smile. “I was also going to say that it was very brave too. You risked your lives to help all of us, even though you didn’t have to. And for that, we all owe you both our deepest thanks.”

Amethyst and Pearl both hesitated somewhat to agree with their leader, neither of them really wanting to condone such dangerous, reckless actions. Steven remained oddly silent, averting eye contact with the twins as his former guilt over the entire situation as a whole returned, even despite how things had turned out. But all the same, the white Gem and the purple Gem couldn’t help but eventually smile and nod in firm confirmation that they were indeed grateful for what all three of the kids, really, had done to turn these disastrous circumstances around.

However, the disaster wasn’t over quite yet.

Before either Dipper or Mabel could humbly accept the Gems’ shared adulation, a hand abruptly shot up through a large pile of smoldering rubble a few feet down the shore from them. The entire group gasped in alarm as Jasper emerged from the rubble, disheveled and injured from her duel with Garnet as she stumbled forward before breathlessly collapsing to her knees with a loud, pained groan. Yet even still, the orange Gem’s brutish, irate manner was as present as always as she glared up at the Gems and the kids, her immense hatred for them all clear by burning expression alone.

“But you’ve won…” she growled threateningly, scowling at Garnet in particular. “You only beat me ‘cause you’re a fusion! If I had someone to fuse with, I’d-”

Jasper paused as another pile of rubble close to her began to shift, a familiar blue figure lifting a heavy piece of rock off of herself before collapsing to the ground, exhausted.

“Lapis!” Dipper exclaimed, both alarmed and also somewhat relieved to see that the blue Gem was mostly unharmed.

“D-Dipper?!” Lapis gasped, her eyes wide as she glanced over to him, though her fear only grew as she noticed Jasper rushing over to her. In that moment, her flight instinct overrode everything else as her aquatic wings unfurled, but before she could even get a few feet off the ground, the orange Gem seized her by the ankle.

“Come here, brat!” Jasper snarled, roughly pulling Lapis back down and keeping her in a tight grip. “Aw, don’t fly off so soon!”

“Hey! Let her go!” Steven exclaimed fretfully, cringing at brutally the orange Gem was handling the blue Gem.

But all the same, Jasper ignored the young Gem as she instead held Lapis up to her face, a sinister sneer crossing her features as the blue Gem shuddered away. “Laps, listen! Fuse with me!”

“W-what?!” Lapis asked, completely taken off guard by such an unsavory, out of nowhere request.

“How long did they keep you trapped here on this miserable hunk of rock?” Jasper coldly began
her appeal, letting Lapis slip out of her grip and onto the ground at her feet. “These Gems, they’re traitors to their Homeworld. And those humans aren’t much better. They kept you prisoner. They used you! This is your chance to take revenge!”

Lapis slowly rose to stand, not sparing Jasper, or even the Crystal Gems a glance at all as she instead looked solely to the kids, all three of them meeting her gaze with looks of desperation and despair. While Steven and Mabel’s expression were awash in apt terror and dread, Lapis noticed something else in Dipper’s: desperation. The very same kind of desperation that had been in his eyes just the other night, when he had begged her to stay on Earth, begged her to not leave him without the close-knit bond they had managed to form over just a few mere days alone. A bond that she didn’t regret forming, a bond that she would never regret forming. A bond that she also didn’t want to lose, but knew she was ultimately going to, no matter what choice she made.

“Come on,” Jasper purred with a leering, sensual smirk, her voice almost gentle and patronizing, though still dripping with malice. “Just say yes…”

“Lapis, don’t do it!” Steven shouted fearfully, Amethyst essentially having to hold him back from running to her.

“Y-yeah! It’s not worth it!” Mabel added, just as terrified as she tucked herself safely behind Garnet.

Both of their pleas seemed blurred together to Lapis as she instead kept her sights mostly on Dipper, who was much too stunned and distraught to say much of anything at the moment. His eyes were wide and fearful as they met hers, and she noticed that he was trembling ever so slightly as he simply shook his head softly, his silent plea quite clear. Lapis knew well that he wouldn’t want her to go through with something like this, that he likely believed she deserved better, but she knew the truth, and the truth was that she didn’t. She deserved this, just as much as she deserved to suffer, to be a prisoner, to go through such torture. She had deserved all that and more ever since she had abandoned that innocent human back on Homeworld, likely leaving him to die, or worse. The Crystal Gems had kept her trapped, yes, but in a way she had always trapped herself, and in a prison that lied far beyond that mirror or any Homeworld prison cell. She trapped herself in fear, in lies, in empty-soul crushing loneliness. In fact, the only time she had really felt some meager semblance of freedom had been during the few, all too brief days she had spent with Dipper. Because of those days, for the first time in her lengthy, lonely existence, Lapis had finally felt like she had connected with someone who didn’t remind her of her time as a prisoner, who didn’t make her feel like she was anything less than cared for and important, who gave her a genuine reason to smile and laugh and hope again, even after centuries of not doing any of those things.

And at that moment, the blue Gem remembered her resolve, her willingness to put herself through whatever suffering she had to, if only to keep him from having to suffer. To do whatever she had to to keep him alive, to keep him safe, and free. To protect the one who had saved her in so many different ways, regardless of the cost to herself might be. And while she knew that what she was about to do would be nothing but endless suffering, she prepared to put herself through it without question, no matter how bad it might be or how long it might last. She was going to do this, to put herself through untold suffering and torture and agony for as long as she had to.

And she was going to do it all for him.

Lapis took in a deep, steadying breath, finally closing her eyes for a moment as she hardened her resolve. When she opened them again, she refused to look at Dipper this time, knowing that doing so would make her want to turn back and refuse, if just to remain with him a little longer. So instead, she turned to Jasper slowly, her expression cold and unreadable as she began to extend her
hand out to her, only for the exchange to be abruptly interrupted before it could even begin.

“W-wait!” Dipper suddenly exclaimed, finally breaking out of his lingering shock as he watched Lapis extend her hand. “Wait, no!” Without thinking, he rushed forward, ignoring both Pearl and Mabel as they tried to reach out to stop him as he instead ran towards Lapis as fast as he could possibly manage. “Lapis, stop! You don’t have to do this! You can’t just—”

Dipper was quickly cut off courtesy of Jasper, who abruptly and harshly silenced him with a brutal backhand swipe, one that was more than enough to send him flying backwards several feet. “Stay out of this!” she hissed fiercely, sending him a sharp warning glare that was more than enough to keep him away.

Lapis flinched, fear washing over her expression first as she watched Dipper land roughly, though upon seeing that he was indeed harmed by the attack, his arm bruised even more than it had been before and a small trickle of blood pouring from his mouth as he clutched his chest in apparent agony, rage filled her features instead. She would make the orange Gem pay dearly for the grave mistake she had just made, just as she would anything that dared to hurt him in any way. But for the moment, she forced herself to hide her fury under a mask of apathy, knowing that the time for that would come soon enough.

“Stupid, useless humans. They just don’t know when to quit,” Jasper grumbled disdainfully as she turned her attention back to Lapis, her malicious smirk returning. “Now… where were we?”

“L-Lapis…” Dipper choked weakly, coughing up a small bit of blood as he struggled to sit up. “Please…” By now, Steven and Mabel had rushed to his side, both of them quite concerned for him considering his new injuries, though he hardly paid them any mind as he instead looked to the blue Gem desperately. Lapis finally glanced over at him, hearing the desperation and despair in his tone as she simply returned it with a tense, pleading look at that told him to stay down, to not make this any worse than it already was, to let her throw herself into this purposed torture willingly. And while Dipper wanted to do the exact opposite of all of that, he froze as he noticed her subtly mouth only two words to him, two words that filled him with far too many emotions than he really knew how to handle at a moment like this.

“I’m sorry…"

Once again, Lapis held her hand out to Jasper, finally forcing her gaze away from all three of the kids as they looked to her in shocked disbelief. And this time, the orange Gem wasted no time in taking it, gasping the blue Gem by the wrist tightly and refusing to let go for anything.

“No!” Steven and Mabel shouted in horrified unison upon seeing this, but Dipper was silent. In fact, at that moment, he was so silent and so still that he practically could have stopped breathing and not even noticed. Some part of his mind, a part that was being overrun by fear and grief and a million other things at once, screamed at him to get up, to run forward again, to do something, anything to stop this from happening. But instead, he remained exactly where he was, almost as if he was stuck to that spot on the shore, as he watched Lapis and Jasper begin their treacherous dance.

It was surprisingly graceful, given the circumstances, as Jasper led, spinning Lapis elegantly before gently dipping her. Both of their gemstones instantly started to glow with the light of an oncoming fusion, but before that light could over take them completely, the orange Gem glanced over to her adversaries again, with a cruel, sadistic, smirk that showed her confidence in her apparent triumph over them all.

As the glow of fusion poured over both Gems, they meshed together into an amorphous mass of
light, one that quickly began to grow to massive proportions as limbs began pouring out of it. The Gems were quick to pull the kids out of the fusion’s immediate range, as stunned and terrified as they were, but even still, they all watched growing alarm and panic as the fusion rose to tower over them all before its true appearance finally emerged.

The fusion was monstrous, to say the least, her immense size alone making her a terrifyingly imposing sight. But even beyond that, she looked completely twisted and sinister as she stood on four legs instead of two, all of them bearing much more of a semblance to arms rather than legs as their hands slammed down onto the shore. Her coloration was an almost sickly kind of green, her outfit mixing Lapis’ top with Jasper’s now legless leggings and her skin bearing darker stripes akin to orange Gem’s, though more rounded in shape. Her hair was a white, wild mess, short like Lapis’, though thick and wav like Jasper’s. But by far her most frightening feature was her face; four eyes, all of them sharp, green, and crazed as she looked down to the horrified party before her, her lips curled into a wicked smirk. She let out a ferocious cackle, her voice coming out as both Lapis’ and Jasper’s, as she rose to her full, massive height.

“Yes!” she cheered, her voice taking a bit more of Jasper’s edge to it as she watched her foes cower before her in deep satisfaction. “This is it! Try and beat me now, you pathetic traitors! You’re no match… for Malachite!”

The fusion, Malachite’s, sadistic laughter continued as she prepared to bring her deadly aquatic attack down upon the Gems and the kids. However, right before she could, she managed to bring the attack down upon herself instead.

“Huh?!” Malachite exclaimed in apt surprise as the water stretching out from the lake suddenly latched onto her arm, suddenly forming a sturdy shackle and chain around her wrist. Before she even had time to really react, another burst of water rushed out of the lake, grabbing her other wrist and doing the exact same thing. “What?!” Malachite gasped, her lower eyes wide with alarm, especially as a set of aquatic chains shot out of the water, enclosing themselves around the fusion’s torso tightly.

Needless to say that the kids and the Gems were taken aback just as much as Malachite was by this sudden turn of events, none of them having any clue about what was really happening, especially as the water-based restraints began pulling the fusion towards the lake. Malachite struggled hard against their hold, growling and groaning all the while as she tried to pry herself free from the chains she had created herself and ultimately failing. “What are you doing?!” she asked herself hotly, her voice carrying Jasper’s intense growl before switching more into Lapis’ lighter tone, though she was still just as fierce. “I’m done being everyone’s prisoner. Now you’re my prisoner! And I’m never letting you go!”

The fusion’s voice rose into a powerful shout as a pair of aquatic arms rose out of the lake, grabbing her by her lower arm-legs and pulling her down to the ground roughly. Malachite let out a distressed cry as she was dragged across the shore, her chains unbreakable despite all of her desperate struggling as she began to be pulled into the shallows of the lake. “No!” she cried as she rapidly descended into the water, clearly trying to pull herself apart as her face split grotesquely, only for her to converge and keep herself together all the same. “R-release me! I already told you, I’m won’t! Not now, not ever! And especially not after what you just did! What are you even talking about?! You know what I’m talking about! No, I don’t!”

“Lapis!” Steven called after the unstable fusion as the group ran to the edge of the shore, all of them shocked by what they were seeing. The Gems were completely dumbfounded, while Steven shakily reached out to the fusion, even though she was far beyond his reach by now. Mabel simply
stood, gasping in complete shock at every surprising interval as Dipper remained just as stiff and frozen as he had been since Lapis and Jasper fused, unable to even believe what he was seeing at all.

Malachite paid her audience no mind, however, as she pulled herself out into the depths of the lake, still fiercely trying to resist all the while. “If you don’t know, then you will by the time I’m through with you!” she began, her disjointed voices rising in both resolve and panic before making one final proclamation. “Let’s stay on this miserable planet… Together!”

And just like that, she was gone, the last of her form slipping down past the surface of the water and disappearing into the murky depths below.

A long beat of silence passed as the lake waters began to still themselves, lapping onto the shore heavily at first before calming back into their usual gentle motion, almost as if nothing had happened at all. The wreckage from the hand ship was stick aglow in green flames all around the group standing at the edge of the shore, all of them completely stunned and petrified by what they had just witnessed. When this silence finally was broken, however, Garnet was the one to do it, making a rather blunt statement in spite of it all.

“Yikes,” she said, adjusting her shades. “They are really bad for each other…”

No one said anything to disagree with this, largely because it was true though mostly because they were all far too shell shocked to. After a moment or two, Pearl grabbed onto Garnet’s arm gently, her expression downcast as Amethyst kept her sights on the lake, clearly unsure of how to even react to what had happened. Mabel noticed as Dipper let out a small, shuddering breath, his eyes still wide as he looked out over the lake as well, almost as if he was trying to catch one last glimpse of Lapis, or Malachite, rather, that would never come. Frowning sympathetically, she did her best to provide her clearly distraught brother some sense of comfort by placing a consoling hand on his shoulder, realizing that he was still shaking just as much as he had been before, if not even more so.

At the same time, Steven’s jaw was dropped in complete and utter shock as he tried to come to terms with everything that had just happened over the past few hours alone. He didn’t have very long to do so, however, before he suddenly felt his phone buzz in his pocket, his unfittingly cheerful ringtone echoing across the otherwise silent shore as he fished it out of his pocket. “Uh… hello?” he answered, his tone small and wavering as he looked to the lake again.

“Steven?!” Connie’s voice sounded frantic and confused on the other line. “I got your message. Are you guys ok?! What’s going on?”

Steven didn’t respond, largely because he had no idea where to even begin in telling everything that had just happened. In just a few hours’ time, it seemed as though everything he had ever known had changed, from the unsettling outset of this invasion to its horrific, dramatic end. And the young Gem had a feeling that even now, in the uncertain aftermath of it all, nothing would ever really feel the same again, even as Connie worriedly tried to get his attention over the phone once more.

“…Steven?”
Chapter 41: Full Disclosure

Chapter Summary

In which Steven is melodramatic, Connie wants answers, Mabel is depressed, Dipper's in denial, and Stan and Soos bake stuff.

Chapter Notes

Ahhh here we are, at the long awaited beginning of arc 5! I'm so excited for this arc, since so much dramatic, HUGE stuff is going down here! But for now, we start with some (and by some I mean A LOT) of angst! Enjoy! (the codeword is TRUTH)

The small strip of shore that rested beside Lake Gravity Falls was burning, still awash in the unnaturally bright green flames of the hand ship’s broken, scattered wreckage. The lake waters reflected this verdant glow as they calmly lapped onto the beach, almost as if a monstrous, disjointed fusion hadn’t forcibly dragged herself into them. For what seemed like years, the only sounds that could be heard across the area were those small, gentle waves and the distant crackling of the surrounding flames. Everything else was practically drowning in silence, including the stunned group gathered at the edge of the water, none of them really able to believe or even comprehend the intense catastrophe they had all just paid witness to.
The Gems were the first ones to sober up from their abashed shock, though only really for the sake of the overtly distraught kids. Amethyst let out a long, somewhat awkward sigh as she glanced away from the lake, unsure of what to say. Pearl kept her arm tightly linked with Garnet’s, following after the Gem leader as she took in a deep, steadying breath, chasing away any lingering surprise or bewilderment. At least for now.

After what seemed like an appropriate buffer of time, Pearl forced a tight, anxious grin as she spoke up. “That could have gone… a lot worse!”

“Could have gone a lot better too…” Garnet remarked, casting a glance over at the nearby cliff base, against which the majority of the hand ship’s mangled hull lay burning.

“W-well, look on the bright side!” the white Gem quipped, still trying to stay positive. “At least the kids are safe!” Her smile faltered, however, as she glanced over at the dumbfounded trio, all three of them unable to tear their wide-eyed sights away from the lake for even an instant. “Well… mostly safe…”

Regardless of their shared sense of consternation, Mabel was the first to finally look away from the lake as she instead found herself slowly glancing over at Dipper, her heart sinking almost instantly as she did. His injured arm, as blackened and bruised as it was, seemed to pale in comparison to everything else. A sparse bit of blood was still streaming down from the corner of his mouth, which hung agape in awe as his breathing came out in sharp, wavering bursts. His eyes by far were the most telling of just how shell shocked he was, however, as they were huge and haunted and completely fixated on the lake, almost as if he thought that staring at it hard enough would result in Lapis walking out of it safe and sound and free. Mabel found herself shuddering as she kept her hand firmly on Dipper’s shoulder, only to feel his ongoing shaking, making it seem like he was in a frigid snowstorm, even though the early morning air was quite warm, especially with the nearby fires.

“D-Dipper…?” she finally managed to speak up, her voice little more than a whisper that failed to get her brother’s attention. Her grip on his shoulder tightened somewhat as she tried again. “Dipper, are… are you…?” she trailed off, already knowing the answer to the question she wanted to pose. Of course he wasn’t ok. He had just watched a Gem whom he had recently formed a close, genuine friendship with sacrifice herself to a torturous, waterlogged existence, all for their sakes. Honestly, Mabel could hardly blame him for his frozen dismay. After all, she was hardly anywhere near ok with it either.

“S-Steven?” she turned to the young Gem seeing as how her brother was largely unresponsive at the moment. Though much like with Dipper, she was met with silence from Steven, who was also looking to the lake in complete horrified bewilderment. He did, however, break out of this overwhelmed state as he remembered that Connie was still on the other end of his phone, still trying to get more than just a terse, anxious hello out of him.


The young Gem forcibly shook himself out of his shock as he lifted the phone to his ear, knowing that he couldn’t just leave Connie in the dark about everything that had just happened. However, before he could even get a single word out, Amethyst cut in with a sudden, wild cheer.

“We WON!” she shouted jubilantly, a wide grin spread across her face as she caught Steven off guard, spinning him around in excitement. “We won, we won, we WON!” She continued celebrating, pulling Lion into an ecstatic hug before the pink beast stoically pawed her away.
“Is that… Amethyst?” Connie asked, having clearly heard the purple Gem’s noisy revelry. “What’s going on? You said that there’s some kind of giant space hand and you all might die?”

Steven took in a breath to answer this, but once again, Amethyst cut him off with a rowdy, elated scream, laughing as she pulled both Steven and Mabel into a tight hug. While the young Gem didn’t quite join in on her rapturous laugher, Mabel did, letting out a much-needed chuckle as she allowed herself to easily get caught up in the purple Gem’s euphoria.

“We won!” she echoed Amethyst’s cheer as she jumped up and down brightly, tagging along behind the purple Gem as she ran about the shore in frenzied celebration. “We brought that freaky hand down to high five with the cliff and we won!”

“Heck yeah we did!” Amethyst quipped, exchanging a solid high five with Mabel before running off to scoop the unwitting Pearl into a sloppy embrace.

Mabel on the other hand, ran over to Dipper, who was still essentially stuck in place, looking over the lake without any signs of breaking away at all, even as his sister began to excitedly shake him. “Dipper! Dipper! Dipper!” she shouted fervently, beaming brightly as she continued to jostle him in the hopes of finally breaking him out of his shock and cheering him up a bit. “Did you hear? We won!”

Apparently, something Mabel said was somehow enough to finally enough to get Dipper to flinch, his brow furrowing as he slowly glanced over at her in unknown confusion. “What?” he asked, his voice strangely and unnervingly quiet.

“I, uh… I said we won, bro-bro!” Mabel repeated, calming down a bit but still offering him a warm smile. “As in… everything’s ok now, just like it’s supposed to be!”

Dipper’s look of confusion gradually turned into one of appalled disbelief upon hearing this, immense hurt filling his features as he slowly glanced over at her in unknown confusion. “What?” he asked, his voice strangely and unnervingly quiet.

Now it was Mabel’s turn to be confused as her smile faded entirely. “But we-”

“We didn’t win,” Dipper said once more, much more firmly as he refused to spare her another word or another glance. Instead, he opted to keep his sights solely set on the lake that was now yet another prison for the eternally trapped blue Gem.

A prison that she was only in because of him.

Meanwhile, Steven had finally moved past his own initial shock as he managed to find words again, even if they were rather rushed and frantic as he finally addressed Connie on the other line. “Connie! You’re not going to believe what happened! Where do I even start?” he paused, glancing behind him at Amethyst, who had just locked Pearl into a haphazard hug, much to her flustered protest. “It’s been a madhouse over here! We have so much to tell you! Right, you guys?” he turned to Dipper and Mabel, his incredulous expression filling in with immediate concern as he did. While Dipper still refused to look at anything else other than the lake, Mabel glanced over to the young Gem, her manner tense and almost distraught as she silently pleaded with Steven for help that he wouldn’t really be able to provide.

The young Gem slowly lowered the phone from his ear upon seeing this, even as Connie continued trying to get him to divulge his retelling of recent events. While Steven’s first instinct was to help the twins amidst their apparent emotional fallouts, he found that he didn’t have much time to as a familiar van suddenly sped onto the shore, heedless of the flames or the gaping hole torn through
its roof mere hours ago.

“Steven!” Greg cried, both distressed and overwhelmingly relieved as he caught sight of his son.

“Dad!” Steven shouted back with an excited smile, glad to see that his father was alright, which very well meant that all the other evacuees were too. “Connie, I-I have to go. I promise I’ll call you back!” The young Gem hung his phone up before Connie could even say a proper goodbye as he instead ran over to greet his father as he hurriedly emerged from the van. “Dad’s back! Dad’s back!”

“Oh, thank goodness you’re ok!” Greg exclaimed, rushing to meet his son before pulling him into a tight, protective hug. “I saw the spaceship start to leave and then it crashed so I came back and—oh… your eye…” The former rock star cringed sympathetically as he noticed the young Gem’s black eye, which was still just as swollen as ever, despite his bright, allayed smile. “But you’re ok! I guess those jerks were no match for the Crystal Gems!”

“No way, they were super strong!” Steven corrected, remembering just how close they had all been to total defeat.

“But… you were able to beat them back?” Greg ventured, his smile faltering.

“No, they totally stomped us!” Steven exclaimed truthfully, not noticing his father’s eyes grow wide with fear upon hearing this. “This warrior Jasper was super beefy and knocked me unconscious. Then they abducted me onto the ship because they wanted to take me away forever. And then we crashed the ship and we almost died!”

As Greg heard this alarming tale, his worry visibly shifted into immense distress. The former rock star slammed a hand against his chest, trying his best to calm his pounding heart as he looked to his son, who had apparently only barely managed to evade death, with wide, startled eyes. “What did they want with you?!” he asked, trying to make sense of this perilous situation.

“They think I’m Mom,” Steven said plainly, though he shuddered somewhat as he remembered the hints of absolute hatred in Jasper’s tone as she called him by his mother’s name.

“T-they think you’re…” Greg trailed off, shaking his head incredulously as he shakily continued. “Are more Homeworld Gems gonna come after you?”

“I… I, uh… I don’t know…” the young Gem frowned thoughtfully, having not considered that possibility before. “Maybe?”

Greg let out what sounded like a tight, distraught wheeze, trembling at the thought of his son’s life being in so much potential danger. “Steven, I—I’m supportive, and very proud of you,” he began fretfully, though he found he wasn’t able to finish without going into a full-on panic attack. “A—and I’ll be right back.” Without another word, the former rock star rushed back to his van, slamming the door shut as he desperately tried to catch his breath. “O-ok, ok! Gotta calm down!” he commanded himself as he began frantically rifling through his extensive CD collection. “W-where’s my relaxing music CD?! This one?” Greg pulled out a CD at random, shoving it into the player and expecting a calm, quiet melody, only to be met with incredibly loud, wild metal music instead. “Ah! Wrong one!” the former rock star exclaimed, slamming the button to get the CD out. “Stop! Eject!” He was beyond stressed by this point as he began banging on the player, feverishly punching it in the hopes that it would spit the noisy disc out so he could truly calm his frayed nerves.

By now, Mabel had taken notice of Greg’s breakdown just as much as Steven had, and as she put a
hand on Dipper’s shoulder once again, she somehow managed to direct his attention over to it. All three of the kids were rather taken aback by the sight of the usually calm and collected former rock star being in such an outright panic, thought they were unnerved by it for different reasons.

As Mabel and Dipper exchanged a small, concerned glance, both of them couldn’t help but let their minds wander to largely the same thing: Stan. They hadn’t really spared the conman much of a second thought until now, but thinking about him was suddenly quite alarming to them both now. He likely had no idea that they had raced back to Gravity Falls after the evacuation in the first place, much less that they perilously stowed away on a dangerous Gem ship that had indeed been en route to an alien planet. Who was to say that if they told Stan about all they had just been through, he would react similarly to Greg, if not worse? After all, they were still technically grounded, which meant that even if the conman didn’t suffer from an outright heart attack upon hearing their latest misadventure, there would be a very high likelihood that he would make good on his promise to send them home to California. A thought which, after all they had just risked and all they had just been through, was nigh unbearable for both of the twins.

Conversely, Steven’s worries were largely with his distraught father, especially as the van’s wheels abruptly gave out underneath him thanks to the maddening bass violently thumping the vehicle. However, his apprehension shifted somewhat as his phone rang once again with another call from Connie. He almost answered it, but he stayed his hand as he glanced over at Greg once more, frowning as he watched his father desperately trying and failing to attain any semblance of calm and composure. While he didn’t anticipate Connie having a complete panic attack, the thought of her being anywhere near alarmed as Greg was over the situation suddenly seemed incredibly unsavory to Steven. It was bad enough that he had inadvertently dragged Dipper and Mabel into this disaster; how in the world could he possibly do the same to someone who hadn’t even been remotely involved in it like Connie?

Which was why, as the young Gem glanced down to his phone once more, he found that his thumb wouldn’t move to answer it. Instead he just stared at it until the screen eventually went black, not sure if he would even be able to bring himself to answer if and when she called again.

After the Gems managed to help Greg get his busted van back to the car wash, they unanimously decided that kids deserved a chance to rest after the ceaseless action of the past several hours. Knowing that there would be time to clean up the hand ship’s wreckage after the fires burned themselves out, the collective group made the long trek over to the temple and the shack. The walk was largely uneventful, with the Gems consenting to allow the kids to remain in a solemn silence. Admittedly, none of them, not even the Gems, knew what to say or what could really be said in the aftermath of rather traumatizing events they had all just been through. When they got to the crossroad connecting the shack and the temple, the most any of them exchanged with each other were just a few sparse words of farewell before parting ways.

Yet as they did, Steven couldn’t help but steal a glance back at the twins as he began following the Gems up to the temple. He couldn’t help but notice the slow, almost hesitant pace they were walking in, the way Mabel had an arm securely slung over Dipper’s shoulder, despite the fact that his own arms hung listlessly at his sides and his gaze was apparently cast solely on the ground in front of him. Once again, that same guilt that the young Gem had felt on the hand ship started to return, only now it was much more like a massive wave than a mere inkling. While the twins had stowed away on the hand ship on their own volition, Steven knew that the only reason they had been present to do so in the first place was because he had allowed them to accompany him back to town in the first place. He should have been more resolute, more firm in his initial refusal to let
them come with him; maybe if he had, then they wouldn’t have gotten hurt, they wouldn’t have nearly died, and they wouldn’t just as bad off emotionally as he currently was, if not worse.

But they had gotten hurt. They had nearly died. And while he they hadn’t really conveyed their emotions to him in words, Steven could tell, just from their disheartened expressions and tense body language alone, that they were deeply affected by what they had just been through. And while he wanted to comfort them, to reassure them and help them come to terms with it all, he was hardly in any place to even try seeing as how he was still trying to comprehend all of it himself.

Which was exactly why he realized he couldn’t tell Connie, or at least he couldn’t tell her as bluntly as he had told Greg. The fact that two of his closest friends already had to deal with a problem that wasn’t even theirs already filled Steven with immense amounts of remorse and shame. But if he could spare his other best friend from the same kind of pain and shock that the twins were so clearly going through, then maybe, just maybe, that would be able to ease just a little of that crushing guilt off the young Gem’s shoulders.

Silence still lingered between Dipper and Mabel as they approached the Mystery Shack, which only looked a little worse than it usually did in wake of the invasion. Mabel bit her lip worriedly as she glanced over at Dipper, knowing that the only thing he had been focusing his dejected gaze on the ground and little else the entire walk back. She had seen him upset before, many times before, actually, but she couldn’t recall the last time he had been this despondent. But if she knew Dipper, then Mabel knew that he wasn’t the kind to bounce back from something like this as easily as she believed she would have. Still, that didn’t mean that she wasn’t going to try her best to help him do so.

“So, uh… I-I bet Grunkle Stan’s probably still out of town like everyone else, huh? Heck, he probably stayed the night in one of those super cheap budget motels with cracks in the walls, and only two channels on the TV, and a friendly hobo sleeping in the bathtub!” Mabel theorized, forcing a hint of levity into her tone, though it was quick to pass. “Y-you know, I was thinking that maybe… maybe we shouldn’t tell him about… all this. I mean, Mr. Universe totally flipped out when Steven told him. Grunkle Stan’s like, really old; I don’t think his poor elderly heart could take that kind of stress! So… like I said, maybe we should just keep all this crazy stuff to ourselves, you know?”

Dipper let out a rather long, tired sigh at this, one that was far too melancholy for Mabel’s liking. “Fine, whatever…” he mumbled, his tone alone showing just how unengaged he was with what she had just said.

Mabel sighed too, but more out of apprehension than anything else as she continued her shaky attempt to lighten the dreary mood. “Well, uh, you know, we’ll probably have the shack to ourselves for a few hours until Stan gets back,” she remarked, playfully elbowing her brother as they stepped onto the porch. “Why don’t we raid the gift shop for free snacks since nobody is around to stop us? Grunkle Stan would never have to know… And it would be a lot of fun!”

“…No, thanks. I’m not in the mood…” Dipper replied absently but honestly as he opened the door to head inside.

“Dipper…” Mabel’s frown deepened as she followed him in, fully intending to try and comfort him head on this time. However, before she could, the twins were both met with an interruption they certainly had not been expecting.

No mere than mere seconds after they walked into the den, the door to the gift shop burst open, revealing Stan wielding a favored baseball bat like a weapon as he glared around the room suspiciously. “Alright, you “Homeworld” freaks, or whatever you are,” he began boldly, his
resolved glare tightly set. “You found it! But you’re as cracked as Amethyst was that one time if you think I’ll let you get any closer to it! Don’t think I didn’t hear you barge in here! I’ll give you one warning to get out before things get ugly! Because I’m not about to stand by while you creeps come in here and try to take away everything I’ve-” The conman abruptly cut himself off as he finally caught sight of the twins, both of them staring at him in both alarm and immense confusion at his bizarre outburst. Stan instinctually jolted a bit upon seeing them, especially as he realized just how close he had just been to spilling the truth about everything prematurely. Still, he was quick to regain his composure, which was only punctuated by his own sudden confusion.

“Kids?” Stan lowered his bat as he looked between them with genuine bewilderment. “What you two doing back here so early? And yeesh,” he cringed as he noticed their various bumps and bruises. “What the heck happened to you? You look like you’ve been in some kind of street brawl. And I should know, seeing as how I’ve been in plenty of those myself.”

“Uh, w-well, you see, Grunkle Stan,” Mabel began nervously. After all, her and Dipper hadn’t even been allotted any time to come up with a cover story to explain their injuries to the conman, largely because they hadn’t expected him to beat them back home like this. “I-I’ll explain later! It’s really a funny story. Y-you’re gonna laugh so hard when you hear it! In fact, m-maybe you don’t wanna hear it after all; you might just pass out from laughing from how hilarious it is!”

As Mabel tried to play the whole thing off with an awkward laugh, Stan crossed his arms and raised a suspicious eyebrow at the pair. “I think I’ll live,” he assented, making it quite clear that he still wanted answers.

Mabel’s halfhearted grin faltered at this, realizing that they’d have to come up with a spur of the moment story, and fast. “Oh, well, uh… we… we, um…”

“Grunkle Stan,” Dipper cut in just in time, mirroring the conman’s wariness well. “What are you doing here? Didn’t you evacuate right after we did? How’d you get back to town so soon?”

Stan froze at this, his eyes widening with subtle surprise at this. Sometimes he really did hate just how perceptive and astute his nephew was, qualities that, for all he knew, could end up jeopardizing the secret he was keeping hidden right under their feet. But speaking of said secret, the conman realized that he couldn’t very well expect the twins to be completely honest with him if he wasn’t going to be completely honest with them himself. Whatever had happened to them, they seemed to be mostly alright on the outside, save for a few bruises and cuts. Still, he could tell that something was off from the way they shifted uncomfortably, the way Mabel bit her lip apprehensively, the way Dipper kept looking down dejectedly. Something had happened to his nibblings, something that had shaken them up, something that had hurt them, in a way that was clearly more than just physical.

And if they weren’t going to tell him what that something was, then he would just have to figure out what it was on his own.

So instead of asking the twins anymore questions, Stan decided to simply give an answer, albeit a false one, to their question instead. “Eh, I just came back early to make sure the shack was still standing,” he shrugged casually. “Looks like the old place mostly held up during that big ‘alien invasion’ or whatever it was. Still, I guess I’ll have to get Soos to fix all these broken windows. Speaking of which, where is he? He did bring you runts back here, didn’t he?”

“Yes!” Mabel exclaimed almost immediately, her tone far more frantic than she had wanted it to be. But all the same, she was quick to come up with what would hopefully be a convincing enough story as to the handyman’s whereabouts, even if she knew he was likely still out of town with everyone else. “Yeah, h-he totally brought us back! A-and after he dropped us off, he went home
to, uh… eat breakfast…?”

Fortunately enough, Stan seemed to buy this as he nodded tersely. “Hm, can’t say I really blame him. All this evacuation nonsense has me starving. What about you kids? You, uh… you want me to cook us all up some breakfast or something?”

Despite the conman’s awkwardly amicable offer, neither of the twins were too inclined to accept it, especially not Dipper. “I’m not hungry…” he said, heaving yet another heavy sigh as he turned to head upstairs.

“Y-yeah… me neither…” Mabel agreed fretfully, both out of honesty and out of wanting to stay out of Stan’s scrutiny. “I, uh… I think we’re just gonna… rest for a while… But, um… thanks anyway, Grunkle Stan!”

“Oh… yeah, uh, sure, kid…” Stan frowned, both disappointed and somewhat concerned as he watched the twins retreat to the attic. He couldn’t recall a single time over the course of this summer that he had seen both of them so mutually downcast and borderline depressed. Even when they had seemingly lost the shack to Gideon and he almost had to send them home, they had still had that bright, resilient spark in their eyes, a spark that seemed all but gone now. In its place, there seemed to be defeat, fear, grief, and several other things that the conman couldn’t even properly discern. And while he’d likely never admit it to the twins themselves, he was deeply bothered by their seemingly shared despondency. Oddly enough, he already found himself missing Mabel’s excitable cheerfulness and Dipper’s enthusiastic curiosity. Which of course, gave him all the more reason to figure out what had driven those qualities away and had instead replaced them with so much apparent sadness.

“Oh, geez…” Stan muttered to himself, worriedly scratching the back of his neck as he realized he had no idea where to even start with such a daunting task. “What am I gonna do with those two…?”

“Waddles!” Mabel exclaimed happily as she burst into the attic to find her beloved pig peacefully snoozing on her bed. She admittedly hadn’t thought too much about him in the midst of the hurried evacuation and subsequent race back to Gravity Falls, but she could hardly suppress her relief upon seeing that he was safe and sound in the aftermath of it all. “Oh, my sweet little angel!” she cried dramatically as she pulled Waddles into a tight embrace. “I’m so sorry for leaving you behind! Everything happened so fast a-and I didn’t have time to come back up here and get you, but it was probably for the best since we ended up riding Lion back and everything and that’s when things got crazy. You wouldn’t believe what we-”

Mabel cut her excitement off sharply as she noticed Dipper slowly step up to the nightstand out of the corner of her eye. Her smile faded entirely as she watched him almost hesitantly pick up the handful of photos he had left on it, namely the pictures he had taken with Lapis only two mere days ago, before she had locked herself into a hostile fusion and plunged herself into the murky depths of the lake.

“D-Dipper?” Mabel asked worriedly as she put Waddles down. She paused, however, having no idea what to really say next. While she was quite upset over Lapis’ grim fate, she couldn’t even imagine what her brother might be feeling over all this, especially given the close bond he had just formed with her. The look of suppressed anguish on his face alone was enough to convey that he was hurting in ways that Mabel couldn’t even understand, even if she desperately wanted to. “Bro-bro, I… I’m so sorry about… w-what happened to Lapis…” she hesitated as she heard him draw in
a sharp, sudden breath, one that almost made her think that it would come out in a sob, though it somehow didn’t. “But… t-think of it this way! She totally saved all of our butts from Jasper! She’s a hero!”

“Yeah, she is a hero,” Dipper agreed, his tone somewhat bitter as his grip on the photos tightened a bit. “But she’s also trapped again. And she’s only trapped because… b-because…” he trailed off, suddenly looking to the ceiling as he closed his eyes tightly, desperately trying to fight back tears and only barely winning as he let out a defeated sigh. “Because of me…”

“Oh, Dipper…” Mabel put a sympathetic, comforting hand on his shoulder. “You… you know that’s not true. None of this is your fault!”

“You’re wrong,” Dipper countered with a hint of anger, anger that was meant for himself more than anyone else. “It is my fault.”

“But-”

“I don’t wanna talk about this anymore, Mabel,” Dipper cut her off, both exasperated and morose. “Let’s just… try to get some rest, ok?”

“Y-yeah…” Mabel smiled weakly. “I mean, we did technically just pull an all nightery. M-maybe we’ll both feel a little better after a good nap.”

Dipper simply nodded, making it very clear that he really didn’t feel like discussing the matter or anything relating to it any further. Even as Waddles hopped up onto the bed to cuddle up next to her, Mabel couldn’t help but frown, knowing that she should have been happy to be safe and home again, but realizing that she was anything but. So much had happened and so much had changed in just the course of a few mere hours alone, that she was finding it rather hard to keep up with it all. But even despite how overwhelmed she was, she couldn’t deny just how worried she was for her brother in this oppressive aftermath. Dipper had hardly spoken too many words since their return, but what words he had spoken had been filled with remorse and despair. She wanted to help him, to give him the solidarity and support that he truly needed right now, but she also knew him all too well. She knew just how much he often shouldered burdens that weren’t his, how he took guilt hard and heavy whenever it came to him, and, just like what he was doing now, how he blamed himself for things that he was in no way responsible for. And she also knew that he wouldn’t accept any help offered to him, that he’d insist on dealing with this and struggling with this all on his own, no matter how hard it might be. Which was why, as much as Mabel wanted to reach out and comfort him, she knew that any attempts at doing so would ultimately be useless, nothing more than a waste of time and energy.

So instead, she simply curled up on her bed and closed her eyes, hoping that when she opened them, the events of the last few hours would turn out to be nothing more than a bad dream.

But all too quickly, she was reminded that it wasn’t a dream, when only about an hour after she fell asleep, she was awakened by the sound of the attic door softly open and close. And when she turned over to see what was happening, the only thing of note she found was her brother’s glaringly vacant bed. She didn’t really have any questions about where he might be going, since the answer was largely obvious in context. Which was why she decided to simply let him go, thinking that maybe something like that was just what he needed.

Even though, in reality, she had no idea what either one of them needed to fix this.
“Now, Connie, please don’t freak out, but a giant laser hand tried to steal me into space. But it didn’t, it didn’t! We’re back and everything is… fine now…” Steven trailed off, frowning at his phone as he stared down at his phone. For the past hour or so, he had been trying his hardest to think of something, anything to tell Connie about what just happened in these past few hours. After the confines of the house became stifling, the young Gem decided to venture out into the town, in the hopes that the fresh air would help him clear his jumbling thoughts. However, as he quickly realized, the familiar, usually comforting locales of Gravity Falls were anything but in the aftermath of the invasion. The windows of nearly every building were shattered, glass and other various debris lay scattered in the abandoned streets, and the closer he got towards the lake, the more broken bits and pieces of the hand ship he came across, serving as a constant reminder of what just unfurled. While Steven did his best to ignore them as he meandered about, he found them harder and harder to overlook as he continued trying to think of a way to explain it all to Connie.

“Um, Connie?” he began with yet another purposed rehearsal of what he might say. “F-funny story! As it turns out, there’s a lot more Gems out there than we thought. And I think they wanna… kill me?”

Steven shook his head, knowing that he had to be tactful about this, or at least much more careful than he had been when he told Greg. After all, this news was momentous, immense, possibly life changing; he couldn’t just tell Connie about all of it bluntly and expect her reaction to be anything less than complete panic or shock. As much as he wanted to tell her everything, he couldn’t very well subject her to either of those things since she hadn’t even been involved in the first place. She hadn’t lived through it like he had or the twins had. As far as Steven was concerned, Connie was really the only one of them who had been completely unharmed and unscathed by all this. And as far as he was concerned, he was going to make sure it stayed like that.

“Uh, h-hey, Connie,” Steven tried again with a forced laugh. “T-that message I left you was… it was just a dream!” He laughed once more before easing into an awkward sigh. “Eh, she’s too smart for that…”

As the young Gem continued trying to formulate his response to Connie’s curiosity, he couldn’t help but let his mind wander towards his own thoughts on the situation, something he hadn’t really done since it ended, really. But now that he did let himself focus on it, he found that he wasn’t really sure how to feel about any of it. Over the past several hours, he had gone through such a wide array of emotions: dread, terror, dismay, resolve, relief, joy, grief, guilt, confusion, hope, and the list went on and on. But while several of those emotions were still lying under the surface, the strongest thing the young Gem felt in the aftermath of everything was apprehension. The invasion threat was gone and passed, yes; Jasper was subdued and out of the way thanks to Lapis, a sacrifice that only filled Steven with even more remorse every time he thought about it, but Peridot had escaped and was still out there somewhere, still ready to pose a threat to them all. But even with the green Gem still at large, Steven still couldn’t help but wonder what came next. Apprehending her would probably be at the top of the Gems’ do-to list, right under cleaning the debris from the hand ship before too many humans could come in contact with it. But after those two goals were met, then what? What if more Homeworld Gems really did come to Earth? What if they came, looking for him with the intent of taking him back with them, just like Jasper had? They had barely managed to neutralize such a threat once; how could they possibly even hope to do it again?

By all accounts, the future seemed so worrisome and uncertain to the young Gem, in more ways than one. His fears about both what Homeworld might do, as well as how he was going to tell Connie about any of it were only added onto by his concerns for Dipper and Mabel in all this. He didn’t really know how they were coping from everything, but if they were feeling anything like he currently was, then chances were they weren’t doing so well themselves. And while Steven wanted to help them work through whatever struggles they might be going through, the thought of facing
either them now seemed incredibly daunting. Really, how could he face two of his closest friends after letting them walk into what had seemed like certain doom with him? How could he face them after failing to protect them from harm, despite his firm resolve to do just that? How could he face them after they threw themselves into mortal danger, how they had snuck into what could have been their ultimate demise, just to save him, all because he had been too weak and afraid to save himself?

The truth was, Steven knew he couldn’t face the twins, at least not anytime soon. He harbored far too much shame and guilt for to even try. But of course, even if he particularly didn’t want to encounter either of them at the moment, that didn’t mean he was going to be so lucky as to avoid them entirely. For as he continued walking through town, his sights were still fixated on his phone to the point that he didn’t even notice Dipper heading in his direction until he accidently bumped right into him.

“Wha—Dipper?” Steven jolted, quite surprised to see him in the middle of the otherwise empty town.

“Steven?” Dipper asked, just as confused and somewhat alarmed by the young Gem’s presence. “W-what are you doing here?”

“I was just… you know, checking out the town, making sure everything’s ok after… what just happened,” Steven explained, knowing that it wasn’t a total lie. After all, he really had wanted to see if Gravity Falls had held up during the hand ship’s intense crash, and as far as he had seen, the damage done to the town was unfortunately plentiful. “What are you doing here? I thought you and Mabel went back to the shack.”

“W-we did,” Dipper quickly replied, not too keen on revealing exactly why he was out and about or where he was heading, since he didn’t particularly want to garnish the young Gem’s worry. “But Stan was there and he started asking us a bunch of questions that we don’t really know how to answer yet so, uh… I just… d-decided to step out for a while, just… just cause…”

“Oh,” Steven mused with a thoughtful frown, sensing that something was off about how Dipper was acting, though he couldn’t quite place what. “Well… what about Mabel?”

“She’s still at the shack, getting some rest,” Dipper said honestly, relieved that there was at least one thing he didn’t have to fabricate.

“Um, don’t you think you should be doing the same thing, Dipper?” Steven asked worriedly. “We just had a really long night… Aren’t you tired after… well, everything?”

“Uh, no, not really,” Dipper shook his head, trying his best to make his tone come across as calm and unmoved. “I just… need some time to clear my head, I guess.”

“I know what you mean.” Steven remarked with something of a small smile. “These past few hours were… pretty intense.”

“Y-yeah…” Dipper’s even manner finally faltered as he found himself glancing over in the direction of the lake rather sadly. “They were…”

Of course, Steven was quick to notice this, and yet again, another pang of guilt hit him. He was ashamed to admit that he hadn’t really thought about this yet, but now he certainly realized that Lapis’ selfless sacrifice was probably hitting Dipper the hardest out of all of them, given how much time they had spent together just prior to it. And while Steven hadn’t really been involved in the formation of their close bond, he had been directly involved in the series of events that led to
Lapis fusing with Jasper at the end of them all. Which of course, was yet another thing on the seemingly endless list of things he blamed himself for. “Dipper…” the young Gem began, glancing down remorsefully. “W-what happened to Lapis… it… i-it was-”

Steven was abruptly cut off as his phone suddenly rung right at that moment, its upbeat ringtone serving as a sudden, somewhat obnoxious reminder of his other pressing concern. “Let me guess…” Dipper began as he took a glance at the young Gem’s phone. “Connie?”

“Yeah,” Steven nodded fretfully, not making a move to answer it. “I-I still haven’t told her about the whole hand ship thing yet. And after how my dad reacted to it… I’m not so sure if I even want to…”

“Mabel pretty much feels the same way about telling Grunkle Stan,” Dipper noted. “But I really don’t think we’ll be able to keep it a secret from him for too long. There was just… so much that happened… I just can’t imagine keeping it all to ourselves forever, you know?”

“Y-yeah…” Steven sucked in an apprehensive breath, looking down at his phone again. “K-keep… keeping it to… ourselves…”

“Anyway, I-I should probably get going,” Dipper concluded, subtly shifting his gaze over to the lake once more. “See you around, Steven.”

“Yeah, I’ll-” Steven cut himself off as he looked up from his phone, his thoughts diverted away from one of his problems and towards another as he watched Dipper began to walk off. “Dipper, wait!” he called, prompting him to briefly stop and turn around expectantly. Steven hesitated, however, knowing that he had far too much he wanted to say to really make sense of any of it. He wanted to apologize, to both him and Mabel really, for putting them so far into harm’s way like he had. He wanted to reassure him that Lapis wasn’t gone forever, that they’d be able to find some way to help free her from her self-imposed prison. But most of all he wanted to tell him that they could work through all of these complicated, difficult, downright painful feelings together, that they could provide support, solace, and sympathy for each other as they moved forward into the unsteady, uncertain future.

The young Gem wanted to do all of those things, but he couldn’t. Because every single one of them was a crushing, suffocating reinforcement of his own struggles, his own mistakes, his own unbearable guilt, all things he had no idea how to deal with whatsoever. So instead, he continued avoiding them altogether. “I-I… n-never mind…” he sighed remorsefully, looking away. “S-see you around…”

While Dipper normally would have questioned Steven’s noticeably odd behavior, he didn’t bother to this time, largely since he had his own destination in mind, one that he had already wasted far too much time in getting to. So instead, he simply nodded curtly and went on his way, leaving the young Gem to let out yet another dejected sigh as his phone started to ring once more.

Despite her rather lengthy nap, Mabel found that she was hardly anywhere close to well-rested once she woke up. In fact, she was still just as exhausted as she groggily trudged downstairs, Waddles trailing not too far behind her. Her lack of sleep was largely attributable to her massive array of thoughts, all of which refused to be silent and give her any peace. Still, there was just so much to think about now that everything was said and done and annoyingly enough, her mind seemed to continually switch from one thought or feeling to another. From relief to confusion to dread and everything in between, all of her emotions seemed to be in constant flux, something that
was quickly starting to frustrate Mabel. After all, she was usually so certain about her feelings; but now, the only thing she was certain of was just how overwhelmed she really was.

In fact, she was so caught up in her jumbled thoughts that she didn’t even notice that Stan was relaxing in the den until he addressed her. “Hey, kiddo,” he greeted with something of a small, genuine smile as he turned away from the TV a bit. “Did you have a nice nap?”

“Oh!” Mabel gasped, startled out of her musing. “Uh, y-yeah, it was… it was really, uh… nappy…?”

“Well… that’s good,” Stan frowned in slight confusion before perking up again. “Anyway, you hungry yet? Because that breakfast deal is still on the table, even if it is kinda late. Still, I don’t think any breakfast police will barge in here and arrest us for making pancakes at 1 in the afternoon, do you?”

While such a corny joke would have usually elicited at pretty hearty chuckle from Mabel, she barely even cracked a smile as she instead only glanced away awkwardly. “Uh, no thanks, Grunkle Stan,” she declined pensively. “I-I’m still not that hungry.”

For a moment, Stan simply looked to her with slight concern before casually shrugging it off. “Eh, whatever floats your boat then. What about your brother? Is he still conked out?”

“Uh… y-yeah, yeah he is,” Mabel nodded hesitantly, realizing that the conman must not have heard Dipper leave earlier.

“Hm, well that’s good, I guess. The kid seemed pretty mopey earlier,” Stan noted caustically. “Not that that’s anything new. Seems like every other day he’s whining about something. ‘Oh, Wendy won’t date me!’, ‘Oh, I can’t figure out why Gravity Falls is so weird!’, ‘Oh, a bunch of evil Gems are gonna sack the planet!’” the conman mimicked his nephew somewhat playfully, not noticing the building appalment in his niece’s expression. “And the list goes on. Wonder what’s got him all down in the dumps this time. Probably just another one of his ‘nerd’ problems, huh?”

“For me, you’re my one.” Mabel suddenly snapped, quite irritated with her uncle for making light of her brother’s current emotional low. However, she was quick to remember her embargo on the truth as Stan looked to her in alarmed confusion, clearly taken aback by her unexpected outburst. “Uh, I-I mean… I’m not saying that is what happened. B-but if it was… then, I think he’d have a pretty good reason to be so upset…”

“…Yeesh, sorry for hitting a nerve, I guess…” Stan remarked after a moment of stilted silence before wisely changing the topic. “So, uh, that’s some bruise you got on your leg there. What, did you bust it up climbing into Soos’ truck or something?”

“Uh, I-I guess you could say that…” Mabel lied, glancing down to her injured leg apprehensively. Despite the rather ugly purple and blue mark marring it, it largely had stopped hurting unless something touched it. But that didn’t mean that it still wasn’t a glaring reminder of just how brutal the previous night had been. “I mean, i-it’s not like I hurt it doing something super dangerous that could have killed me and Dipper! That would just be crazy! I-I don’t know why you would even think that, since it’s pretty much the complete opposite of the truth!”

As Mabel attempted to play off her near accidental reveal with a bout of very forced laughter, which only made the conman’s brow furrow with deeper worry. While he had been trying his best to get his niece back to her usually cheery self, or at the very least, get her to open up to him, he was starting to realize he was getting nowhere with either of those goals fast. Which was why he
begrudgingly decided to try a more direct approach, even if he anticipated that going over even worse. “Uh, look, Mabel,” Stan began rather tentatively, not entirely sure how he wanted to phrase this. “I’m not the best at this… sentimental stuff, and this is kinda gonna come out of left field but… if anything is bothering you or your brother, and I mean anything at all, no matter how big or how small it might be… you know you can always come and talk to me about it… right?”

Mabel flinched upon hearing this question, her expression falling and her eyes widening as she took in the conman’s rare, sincere, warm smile, one that offered her support, comfort, maybe even a shoulder to cry on. And while she desperately wanted to accept all of those things, to finally spill everything and let the truth flow out of her instead of remaining tightly locked inside, she knew that she couldn’t. There was just too much to say and too much at stake for her to tell her uncle so much as a single detail about what had really happened to her and Dipper only a few hours ago. No, instead, Mabel knew that keeping it all hidden, maintaining her silence, no matter how hard or painful it might be, would be the best for everyone in the long run. Or at least she hoped it would be.

“Uh, y-yeah!” she exclaimed with faux brightness in her tone, not wanting to tip Stan off any more than she already head. “But, um, for now, I-I think I’ll finally take you up on that whole breakfast thing.”

“Wait, really?” Stan frowned, somewhat surprised. “Uh, are…. Are you sure there isn’t anything you wanna, ya know, t-talk about or something?”

“Nope! Nothing at all!” Mabel hurriedly said, her fake smile widening to an almost painful degree. Still, she didn’t dare let it drop, knowing that it was the only safeguard she had keeping her true emotions from rushing forth. “So I guess we better get to making those pancakes before those, uh, breakfast police bust as and haul us off to, um… pancake prison?”

“Eh, I was thinkin’ flapjack jail, but that works too,” Stan shrugged as he rose from his chair. “Still, it’s about time you put some grub in that empty gut of yours,” he paused as he walked past his niece, playfully ruffling her hair before heading into the kitchen. “Now, let’s get cooking! Who knows? Maybe I won’t even burn the pancakes this time!”

“Heh, yeah…” Mabel’s smile fell somewhat as she hesitantly followed him, her gaze drifting to the ground out of guilt, sadness, and a million other feelings she couldn’t even begin to describe. “That… that sounds… great…”

The flames marring the lake shore had largely burned themselves out, to the point that the scattered pieces of the hand ship were only smoldering at best as they glistened in the early afternoon sun. Dipper didn’t pay any of them so much as a glance, however, as he instead intently approached the lake, only coming to a stop right before reaching the point where the shore met the water. Yet another wave of sadness hit him, something he had grown quite accustomed to in the past several hours. However, this one was by far the most agonizing yet as he looked over the deceptively calm, quiet waters of the lake, its surface pristine and sparkling and completely concealing the monstrous fusion buried just underneath it.

As much as it pained Dipper to think about, he couldn’t help but wonder how Lapis was faring at that exact moment. More than likely, she was fighting, struggling to keep Jasper fused with her, struggling to keep their fusion chained to the bottom of the lake, struggling for more than she ever deserved to, all because of him.
If there had been any way he could have remotely anticipated something as disastrous as this happening, then Dipper knew he would have never gone to see what had crashed into the waterfall cave the other night. He would have never convinced Lapis to stay on Earth as long as she had. He would have never conceded to her sticking around for the invasion, to her racing in to try and protect them from Jasper only for her to get captured herself. Really, if it had come right down to it, he would have even given up the close, genuine friendship he had formed with her if it meant she could be free from the grisly fate she had condemned herself to now. But of course, Dipper also knew that there was no going back to undo his unwitting mistakes that had inevitably lead to the harsh reality of the present. He had gone to investigate that crash. He had convinced Lapis to stay in harm’s way on Earth. He had let her stay for the invasion, and he had even willingly thrown himself into danger, which no doubt prompted Lapis into emerging from hiding to protect him. And while yes, him persuading her to tell the Crystal Gems about the invasion had given them proper forewarning and some time to prepare and evacuate the town, that one upside was far outweighed by all of the seemingly countless downsides. The main and worst one being what all of this had ended up culminating into, namely Lapis sacrificing herself to a vicious, hate-fueled fusion and a dark, watery prison.

And as he had told Mabel, Dipper knew that he only had himself to blame for that.

Because perhaps Lapis wouldn’t have agreed to fusing with Jasper if the two of them hadn’t bonded like they had. Perhaps she would have cast the kids a sympathetic glance, a terse apology maybe, before flying off, before escaping her treacherous captor and taking off towards the stars, towards the freedom she would now never know again. And honestly, Dipper probably wouldn’t have blamed her for fleeing if she had done that; true, it would have left them all at Jasper’s mercy, or lack thereof. But at least then, the wounds the orange Gem would have inflicted upon them would have been solely physical, unlike the immense emotional ones he was suffering from instead.

Still, despite how horrible it all felt, Dipper had resolved himself not to shed a tear over it, especially not in front of Mabel. The last thing he wanted in the wake of such an immense fallout was for her to worry over him, to try and put his emotional wellbeing over his own when she would be far better off taking care of herself. And even beyond that, allowing himself come across as deeply and visibly upset over something like this would only be a sign of weakness and immaturity. Yes, what happened to Lapis was terrible, and how he felt about it all was terrible, but he could handle those feelings. Even if he never really managed to move past them, the very least he could do was keep them securely out of sight, in a place where only he would have to deal with them. He knew it would be hard and it would hurt, but if someone like Lapis was strong enough to hold both herself and someone she absolutely hated down at the bottom of the lake, then he was strong enough to hold his guilt and grief just under the surface in the exact same way.

However, as Dipper continued staring out over the expanse of the lake, he failed to notice the usually barely apparent waves start to press forward just the slightest bit. He did take notice though as they started to dampen his shoes a bit, though as he glanced down, he was met with a sight he hadn’t really been expecting. The lake waters seemed to be gradually pulling something to sure, or rather, to him, and as it got closer, Dipper was quick to realize exactly what that something was: his hat, which he had lost in the chaos of his and Mabel’s perilous break-in on the hand ship. He practically froze as the waves carried it all the way to the shore, to the point that it ended up bumping right into his feet, as mangled and waterlogged as it was, but miraculously enough still in once piece. However, he didn’t pick it up right away, instead looking between the hat and the lake for a moment or two as confusion, disbelief, and the smallest, slightest inkling of relief started to fill him. The fact that his hat had ended up landing in the lake after it flew off his head was one thing; but the fact that it had managed to find its way to shore, or more specifically to him, at that exact moment was far too serendipitous to be a mere coincidence or accident. No, instead, it was
almost like something or someone, specifically someone with the ability to control and manipulate water, had guided it to him, in perhaps a gentle, yet subtle way of giving back something he had lost. Which was why, with wide eyes and trembling hands, Dipper hurriedly snatched it out of the water, wringing it out but not putting it on as he looked out to the lake again with newfound hope as he suddenly spoke up.

“L-Lapis?” he wondered aloud, his voice quiet and incredulous at first as he patiently awaited another perceived sign that she knew he was there. When none came, however, he opted to try again, only a bit louder this time. “Lapis, I… I don’t know if you can hear me or anything d-down there, but… if you can, then… then I need you to know that I am so, so sorry. I-I didn’t… You… you didn’t have to…” he trailed off, not having the faintest idea of what to say, for if the blue Gem really was there, then there would be just so much he’d want to say to her. So instead, he decided to go with the only thing he could think of, despite how absurd it was to even try it: an appeal. “Y-you know you don’t have to stay down there. You didn’t even really have to fuse with her in the first place. We would have been just fine if you had…” He cut himself off again, clenching his hat tightly in his hands as he tried to suppress his building emotions. “I-I guess what I’m trying to say is… you… you don’t have to do this for me… You can come back a-and we can figure out some other way to deal with her! You don’t have to do this all by yourself! Remember what we talked about? About how things were supposed to be even better after all this?! Well they’re not!” He didn’t even realize he was shouting by now out of both frustration and anguish and honestly, he didn’t even care. After all, he was alone; he really had no one to hide how he really felt at the moment, not even Lapis, if she could indeed somehow hear him. “They’re not better! In fact, literally everything is so much worse now, and it’s all because I wouldn’t just let you leave Earth like you wanted to! Because I was feeling lonely and wanted someone to hang out with and talk to! And it looks like I’m right back to square one with that, because you’re gone and I’m-” he sharply silenced himself yet again, his hands shaking as he looked to the completely still, silent lake once more. Tears had finally started to well up in his eyes as he released the tension in his shoulders, a brutal realization striking him as he glanced at his still soaking wet hat in his hands. “I’m… just… talking to myself…”

He let out a defeated sigh as he wiped his oncoming tears away, closing his eyes as he loosened his tight grip on his hat somewhat. By now, he had realized that the idea that Lapis, in the chaotic state she was currently in, could actually hear and communicate with him was ludicrous. Still, that brief, bittersweet burst of hope had given him a much-needed reminder. The blue Gem wasn’t gone forever. In fact, she was only really a few hundred feet out from where he currently stood. Which meant that there was always a chance, no matter how slim or nonsensical, that she could come back, that she could be free again, that they could be reunited once more. And despite how distant or improbable something like that was, Dipper was resolved to be there when it happened. He was going to be the first person Lapis saw upon her return, even if only to remind her that she wasn’t a prisoner, but rather, a hero, just like Mabel had said.

Which was why, with no more shouting and no more tears, Dipper took a seat on the lake shore, only a short distance away from the water, his hat still in his hands rather than on his head as he set his sights on the lake and nothing else. If Lapis was going to be diligent in her vigil to protect him, then he was going to be every bit as diligent in awaiting her return, regardless of how long it might take.

Steven groaned in exasperation as his phone rung for what seemed like the hundredth time in the past few hours, the caller ID once again showing Connie trying to get in touch with him. While he certainly did understand her concern based on what little information on the situation he had been
able to provide her with, a part of him wished that she didn’t care so much. It would certainly make things much easier for him if she didn’t.

After his brief encounter with Dipper, the young Gem had continued his walk about town, knowing that the Gems would be preoccupied with debriefing from last night’s upheaval. His thoughts were still largely a stressed, worried, scattered mess, a mess that was only occasionally punctuated whenever he nearly tripped on a stray piece of hand ship debris or when his phone rang, which of course, was rather frequently. But all the same, Steven hadn’t been paying much attention as to where he was going, which was why he wasn’t too surprised to find that his wandering had somehow led him to the top of one of Gravity Falls’ famous floating cliffs, more specifically, the one that was closest to the temple and the shack. From this perspective, the young Gem was able to get a bird’s-eye-view of the town, or rather, a bird’s-eye-view of the damage the invasion had done to it. He could see almost every broken window, from humble panes of the Big Donut, to the immaculate glass of Northwest Manor. He could see every empty, evacuated area that was usually so full of life and activity, from the town square to the mall. And of course, he could see every broken piece of the hand ship, strewn about the streets all the way to its largest remnant, which lay compromised and crumbled against the cliff opposite to the one he was standing on, yet another inescapable reminder to the young Gem that he was on that very vessel only a few hours prior.

Upon seeing all this, Steven’s thoughts briefly turned away from himself, the twins, or even Connie, and instead to Gravity Falls as a whole. With the town still mostly bereft of its residents, he hadn’t really stopped to consider what they might think about what had happened to their home upon their inevitable return. More than likely they’d be shocked and alarmed by the ship’s wreckage filling their streets, by the damage done to their homes and businesses. After all, even if Gravity Falls was a town that was no stranger to strange happenings, something like a legitimate alien invasion was something on an entirely different level. What if this was something that the townsfolk wouldn’t be able to easily bounce back from? What if they were left living in fear over the possibility of another invasion, something that, by all accounts, could very well happen? What if this left Gravity Falls just as deeply scarred as it was leaving the young Gem and his friends?

Of course, Steven knew that if any of those things really happened, he would ultimately be at fault for them too. The way he saw it, everything seemed to connect right back into itself. This whole thing had started because he had been too curious, to eager and anxious to learn more about what the Gems had been keeping from him. So, him and Mabel had thoughtlessly made themselves known to Peridot in the Kindergarten, not even bothering to consider what that encounter alone might lead to. So, him and Dipper had destroyed her robinoids, with her threat to come to Earth herself hardly even registering in Stepper’s shared mind at the time. And so, he had come back amidst the invasion, allowing the twins to accompany him and essentially allowing them to get hurt, allowing himself to get captured, allowing the town to be damaged in the ship’s crash, allowing Lapis to fuse with Jasper, allowing everything, all because he couldn’t see the end from the beginning. He never had been able to. He had always just lived solely in the moment, never considering the consequences and fallouts of his actions. He had been foolish, stupid even, to think that things would stay peaceful and perfect as he had always known them to be forever. He had completely overlooked the possibility of change, especially on a catastrophic level such as this.

But regardless of whether or not he had anticipated it, change had come. And it had left almost no stone unturned in its devastating wake.

“Yo!” a sudden approaching shout snapped Steven out of his deep musing. Startled, the young Gem turned around and was surprised to find that he wasn’t alone on the cliff as a familiar, albeit unexpected face came to join him on the precipice.

“Oh, hey, Ronaldo,” Steven greeted the teen somewhat cheerlessly, shoving his phone away into
his pocket as it thankfully didn’t ring for a change.

“Didn’t you hear?” Ronaldo asked, his usually conspiracy theorist manner toned down a bit. “Mayor Dewey is calling everyone back into the town. We can go home now.”

Steven didn’t really say anything to this, still awash in his worries for the town as a whole as he instead shoved his hands into his pockets and looked away morosely. Upon noticing the young Gem’s lack of a response, Ronaldo glanced over at him, noticing his clear melancholy before letting out a sharp gasp of realization. “Oh, I see! You come up here to brood too!”

“Brood?” Steven frowned in confusion.

“Yes, Steven,” Ronaldo’s expression darkened as his tone became more serious. “That’s just what people like us do. Suffer quietly, shouldering the knowledge no one else can bear.”

Steven simply nodded in agreement with this, knowing that he had been doing that exact thing all day by simply avoiding telling Connie about what had happened. And indeed, he was suffering for his silence, to the point that it was quickly starting to become more than he could bear.

“As an aficionado of the weird yourself, you’ve probably noticed ordinary people fear the cold, leaded anchor of the truth,” Ronaldo continued, his hands held behind his back as he spoke solemnly, if not somewhat overdramatically. “The abyss is no Sunday swan dive.”

“I know!” Steven exclaimed fervently. “My dad flipped out when I told him, and Dipper and Mabel still seem really torn up over all of it!”

“Sounds typical,” Ronaldo nodded sternly. “But it’s a good reminder. This is no easy path we’ve chosen here. There are… sacrifices. Look at them all down there, Steven.” He paused, waving a slow hand out towards the town below them. “It’s our duty to let those simple people live out their simple lives, without ever knowing the burden of being friends with us.”

As Steven wanted to protest against the idea of such a lonely existence, he couldn’t help but internally realize that Ronaldo was completely correct. He had always thought that, having lived in Gravity Falls all his life, its residents were usually a pretty happy, upbeat bunch, save for a few exceptions of course. But only now did he realize why that was; it was because they were innocent, naïve, unknowing, completely blind to the danger that lurked all around them, both internally with all of the town’s supernatural facets and externally with the threat that Homeworld now posed. No wonder they were all so content and blissful; Steven likely would have been that cheerful too if he didn’t have to worry about everything that was currently plaguing his thoughts with stress and dread.

“A-at least we can still be there for each other,” Steven said to Ronaldo with a small smile, though the teen’s grim manner was all but gone as he let out a dumbfounded gasp.

“Is that giant hand from the sky sitting right beside the lake?!” he exclaimed in stunned disbelief, looking to the ship’s remains. “I gotta get some pics of that for my blog!” Without another word, Ronaldo ran off, phone in hand as he hurried down the hill, leaving Steven alone with his thoughts once more. The young Gem let out a small sigh as he looked out towards the town once again, his emotions steadily starting to build as he thought of just how wide this disaster had reached. Yet still, he couldn’t help but think the most about those closest to him amidst it all, namely Dipper, Mabel, and Connie.

True, they had playfully deemed themselves as the Mystery Kids, but that was just a name that ultimately didn’t mean anything. Perhaps they had all once thought that, through their friendship,
they could triumph over anything, that they would always emerge from any situation the victors and go on to have more fun and whacky adventures no matter what they were put up against. But that had been before the game had suddenly changed, or rather, before it had suddenly ceased to be a game entirely. Now, things weren’t just a matter of fun and games and magic and mystery. Now there were stakes. Now there was true danger.

Now, they could stand to lose more than any of them had ever thought possible.

And as Steven remembered the true severity of it all, he found that he was unable to keep all of those building emotions inside any longer. However, instead of letting them out through tears, he ended up letting them out in an entirely different way: through song.

“Everybody told me Gem stuff’s dangerous,” he began, his tune relaxed but also somewhat melancholy. “I guess I didn’t believe it until now. Dad always seemed apprehensive… and now he’s really freaking out. What do I do? I don’t want that for you…”

No sooner had Steven finished this first verse than his phone started ringing once more, its vibration catching him off guard as he pulled it out of his pocket. Of course, it was still Connie, still trying to get in touch with him, something he did his best to ignore as he put it on the ground and shoved it aside, covering his ears to block out the bouncy ringtone until it mercifully went silent.

“Everybody tells me life is precious,” Steven continued, flopping onto the grass with a sigh. “On the planet Earth.” Unable to keep his phone out of reach for too long, the young Gem grabbed it, absentely scrolling through his most recent photos, most of which were cheerful images of him, Connie, and the twins. All brief, bygone snapshots of much happier times than now. “And that means you, and I have to protect you. What if somehow you get hurt, what do I do? I don’t want that for you…” The young Gem’s small smile faded as he paused on a photo of Connie, her tongue sticking out in a silly, playful expression, reminding Steven of just how much he didn’t want to rob her of the innocence he no longer had anymore.

He didn’t get to appreciate the photo for long, however before the phone rang once more, only this time, instead of Connie, the caller ID showed a name that alarmed Steven just as much at the moment: Mabel. In retrospect, he should have figured that she would want to get in touch with him, seeing as how he had already run into Dipper earlier, but still, he had hoped he could have some form of a buffer to allow himself to figure out how to voice his apology to both of the twins. So instead of answering, the young Gem dropped his phone again, ignoring the call much like he had with Connie’s as he instead dejectedly sung along with his ringtone. “Oooooooo, ooooooo, oooooo, ooooooo…”

“Everybody told us to run and stay safe,” Steven began on another verse, this time glancing over at the lake. “But we didn’t listen. And look at us now. Beaten and bruised, inside and out… I didn’t want this to happen. What do I do? I don’t want that for you…”

The young Gem paused as his ringtone finally went silent, burying his head into his knees for a moment as he tried to chase away the mental image of the twins’ respective injuries, of the distraught, shaken expressions on both of their faces in the aftermath of it all. Of course, he was able to do anything but as his mind only reached back further, his recent memories of the invasion all seeming to slam together all at once as he continued singing pensively. “What am I going to tell you? You’re better off not knowing the trouble I’m in. I don’t want you to worry, about what I’ve just seen, about where I’ve just been.” Steven’s breath hitched somewhat as he heard the hand ship’s fingers crash down only a few feet away from them again, saw the look of rare fear in Garnet’s eyes as she was viciously torn apart again in front of him again, felt the lingering pain in
his eye as he woke up alone and confused in a small cell again. Once more, he could envision himself freeing Ruby, trying to coax Lapis into escaping, reuniting with Dipper and Mabel. “How am I going to save you? My problems shouldn’t be yours anymore. I know you just want to help me, but this is more than everything we’ve faced before.” He could feel the explosions rattle the hand ship, feel his bones rattling as he shielded everyone inside a bubble to protect them from the impending fallout, feel the malice in Jasper’s tone and the fear in Lapis’ eyes right before they fused, before they dragged themselves into the lake, before everything turned itself upside down in a mere matter of seconds with hardly any warning at all. “You don’t have to be a part of this, I don’t think I want you to be. You don’t need this. You don’t need me…”

“Oooooooo, oooooooo, oooooooo, ooooooo…” Steven sang to his ringtone again, his eyes flying open and his stream of memories ending as it vibrated against his leg aggressively. “Oooooooo, oooooooo…” By now, he had built up so much stress for himself that he could barely even take it anymore. He was walking a dangerously thin line towards a panic attack, especially as he gripped his phone tightly, his eyes wide as he read over Connie’s name once more. “Oooooooo, oooooooo, oooooooo…”

Breathlessly, the young Gem looked over at the hand ship wreckage again, remembering that all of this, every single part of it from beginning to end, was not Connie’s problem. It wasn’t Dipper or Mabel’s problem either. It was his problem, one that he had to deal with. And as far as he was concerned, he was determined to do that in a way that would protect them, that would keep all three of them getting hurt because of him ever again. Even if that meant…

Even if that meant cutting all three of them out completely.

“Oooooooo, oooooooo-” So, with just a simple swipe of his finger, Steven rejected the incoming call, his fretful song coming to an end just as suddenly as his new, lonely resolve began.

While Mabel hadn’t quite gone to sweatershirtown yet, she couldn’t deny that she was very close to heading there for what would likely be an extended trip. The initial 24 hours after the hand ship’s crash had finally passed and a new day had dawned, but the relative distance between the event itself and the present hardly did anything to ease the pain it had caused. And while it hadn’t been that bad for her at first, the more time passed, the more Mabel realized just how pain it was causing her in particular.

While she had actually managed to get some sleep, however fitful, the previous night, she had still noticed as Dipper came in excessively late and left excessively early, all without even sparing her so much as a single word of greeting or farewell. She wasn’t about to try and stop him from going, however; she knew where he had headed to, respected that he needed his time and space to do whatever he had to to try and cope with it all. The only problem with it was that now she was left without anyone to help her coping process.

After growing weary of Stan’s futile attempts to cheer her up during their late breakfast, Mabel had retreated to the attic again, with the intent of calling Steven really only for the sake of talking and little else. After all, he had been one of the only other people, aside from her, Dipper, and the Gems, who had been through this catastrophe too. At the very least she had hoped that they could lend each other some form of solidarity or even just a venting mechanism after everything that had happened. However, the first time she had tried calling the young Gem, she was met with no answer. Even stranger, the second time she called him, she was sent straight to his voicemail. A part of her was tempted to go up to the temple and see what was going on with him herself, but every other part of her could barely even work up willingness to so much as hop off her bed and
walk downstairs.

When it came right down to it, she was listless, something that was so strange for someone who was usually so full of energy and enthusiasm like she was. But still, regardless of how hard she tried, she just couldn’t manage to summon her usual cheerfulness and pep. Even cuddling with Waddles or leafing through happier times in her scrapbook did little to ease her mind away from all of her seemingly endless worries. Worries about Dipper, about Steven, about Stan, and yes, even about herself. No matter how much she tried to escape them, they always kept coming back, pulling at her and dragging her down to the point that she was starting to feel like she was drowning in them. And really, how could anyone find any reason to truly smile while drowning in so much stress?

Of course, Mabel was so awash in her own melancholy that she didn’t even notice Stan peeking into the attic through the barely cracked-open door. The conman couldn’t help but frown as he watched his niece let out another sad sigh, her knees pulled to her chest as she stared absently at the bare bed in front of her. He had partially been expecting both of his nibblings to be largely fine and back to their usual selves now that a day had passed, but of course, things only seemed to be worse on the second day. Stan was admittedly concerned with the fact that he hadn’t even seen Dipper since yesterday, though Mabel had assured him that he had simply gone into town to survey the damage. While the conman was still rather concerned for his nephew, his main worries at the moment rested on the twin that was still around, in other words, Mabel.

The fact that his usually very upbeat, very social niece was isolating herself like this was more than enough to confirm Stan’s suspicions that something was very wrong. And while he didn’t like to admit that he actually cared so much, he was starting to get increasingly worried for her. After all, Mabel’s cheerfulness was always a breath of fresh air, the perfect counter to Stan and Dipper’s shared sense of cynicism. Without it, everything felt stagnant, almost bitter. And the more he thought about it, the more the conman couldn’t simply allow it to continue indefinitely like it seemed to be. He didn’t know what had gotten either of the twins so shaken and upset, and at this rate he might not ever find out, but that didn’t matter to him anymore. What mattered was getting the both of the kids back to their usual, cheerful, curious, excitable, sarcastic, creative, clever selves.

And even if that might be a challenge in and of itself, Stan resolved to do it all the same. After all, the least he could do for his nibblings was give them back some semblance of fun and normality. Especially considering the fact that the secret he kept buried under the shack could very well endangering more than just that by time it was all said and done.

“Yo, Mr. Pines!” Soos called out from downstairs as he entered the shack, jolting the conman out of his thoughts. Taking care not to make his presence upstairs known to Mabel, Stan hurried downstairs a growing grin of bold determination spreading across his features as he went to meet his handyman in the gift shop.

“Mr. Pines!” Soos shouted again before the conman arrived. “Are you back from that evacuation thing yet? Or did you just not go like you told me you weren’t-”

“Soos!” Stan cut him off sharply as he burst into the shop, not really wanting Mabel to overhear that last statement.

“Oh, Mr. Pines! Thank goodness you’re ok!” Soos breathed a sigh of relief. “I didn’t know if you stayed or left after all, but that giant hand thing was totally bonkers crazy! Did you see it crash back into town? It was-”

“Yeah, yeah, giant hand, who cares?” Stan remarked with a wave of his hand, intent on getting
back to the matter at hand. “Listen, Soos, I’m glad you’re here. I need your help with something.”

“You mean fixing all these broken windows?” Soos nodded to the nearest empty window. “Cause you probably don’t want all this broken glass lying around everywhere, even if it is kinda pretty when the light hits it the right way, see?” The handyman smiled as he picked up a small piece of colored glass and held it up to the light, chuckling as it reflected across his face. “Aw, dude, this is like, the easily most magical thing I’ve ever seen, hands down.”

“Forget about the glass, Soos,” Stan huffed somewhat impatiently. “What we’re gonna be tackling is way more important than that.”

“Oh yeah?” Soos asked, thoroughly intrigued. “What is it?”

Stan smirked brazenly, his gaze shifting a bit towards the ceiling as he thought of Mabel, and Dipper too, and hoped that, despite his lack of experience with things like this, his effort would still be worth it in the end. “We’re gonna cheer up some kids.”

“Oh, come on!” Amethyst groaned in exasperation, scowling petulantly as she leaned against the fridge. While the kids were all effectively emotional messes in the aftermath of what had happened the previous day, the Gems had apparently gotten over whatever qualms they had about the whole situation and were largely back to their usual selves, arguments and all. And that was never made clearer to Steven than when he absently sat in on their debate about what to do with the hand ship’s remains.

“No whining,” Garnet remarked evenly, her arms crossed. “We need to start cleaning up the debris sooner rather than later.”

“Garnet’s right,” Pearl firmly agreed, though her expression was marred with worry. “It’s only been one day and people are already starting to come back into town.”

“We need to keep them away from the lake,” Steven suddenly spoke up, his tone as cold as his expression as he stood facing the front window. “If any humans got access to Gem technology, they could really hurt themselves.” As he spoke, he pulled the window blinds down, something he rarely ever did as it darkened the room up quite a bit, essentially drenching him in shadow. “Maybe we should shut them out, and not just out of the lake either, but out of the temple too. Maybe that’ll keep finally keep them all safe.”

While Amethyst looked to the young Gem in clear bewilderment by his odd manner, Pearl didn’t seem to notice as she continued strategizing. “Hm, closing off the temple…” she mused thoughtfully. “You know, we did once have a fence… Let’s get a new one! With barbed wire!”

“This time, let’s build a moat,” Amethyst suggested with a wry smirk. “I could be…” she trailed off mischievously as she shapeshifted her head only. “The crocodile!” She sang boisterously with her now elongated jaw as she held her hands up dramatically, much to Pearl’s annoyance. “Jazz hands!”

“No,” Garnet cut in tersely.

“Aw, why not?”

“Because you always say you’ll be the crocodile, but you never commit!” Pearl scolded as Amethyst sourly shifted her head back to normal.
“Hmph, you wouldn’t be saying that if you knew about the time I had to be a crocodile pretty much the entire time during one of me and Stan’s Revenge Trips,” the purple Gem remarked, crossing her arms.

“And why, pray tell, would you have ever needed to be a crocodile for one of your nights of debauchery?” the white Gem asked, raising an eyebrow.

“That’s for me to know, and for that lake full of endangered fish we ransacked to never find out.”

“No fence around the temple either,” Garnet interjected rationally, getting back to the topic at hand.

“Garnet!” both of the other Gems exclaimed in shared disappointment.

“We can’t close the temple off again,” the Gem leader asserted. “Steven needs to be able to see his father and his friends.”

“No, I don’t!” Steven protested, moving away from the window. “I can’t keep clinging to the vestiges of my humanity. It’s time I got serious.” Of course, the young Gem’s attempt at being serious was succinctly interrupted as his phone rang again, something it had been doing constantly since that morning as Connie continued her effortless attempts to contact him.

“Steven?” Pearl frowned as she noticed her young ward cringe uncomfortably as his phone continued to buzz. “Why is your communication device making that sound?”

“I-it’s Connie,” Steven replied with a sigh. “She’s been trying to call me. But I can’t face her anymore. And I can’t face Dipper or Mabel anymore either.”

“Uh, why not?” Amethyst asked, confused by this reasoning.

“B-because!” the young Gem exclaimed, distraught. “I have to protect them! But I can’t do that if they’re just gonna face Homeworld invasions and sneak onto giant hand-shaped spaceships just to try and help me! So the way I see it, the only way I can keep all three of them safe and keep them from getting hurt anymore is if... if we just... don’t hang out anymore...”

“Steven, that... line of reasoning... doesn’t really make much sense...” Pearl pointed out with a concerned frown.

“Pearl’s right,” Garnet affirmed. “Steven, you can’t shun yourself away from your friends or your culture. You may be a Gem, but you’re also a human. And you can’t allow yourself to lose touch with that side of yourself just because of what just happened.”

“But I have to focus!” Steven insisted adamantly. “If this whole invasion thing showed me anything, it’s that all this Gem stuff is serious business! It’s not just fun and games and I can’t treat it like it is anymore! I have to help you guys keep the planet safe, just like Mom did, which means I can’t let myself get distracted anymore. It’s a lonely road, but somebody has to walk it. And that somebody is gonna be me.”

“So... you’re just going to avoid Connie, Dipper, and Mabel forever then?” Pearl asked, somewhat doubtful of the young Gem’s overdramatic resolve.

“Yes,” Steven nodded firmly. “It’s the responsible thing to do.”

“Eh, that’s gonna be kinda hard seeing as how Connie’s coming up the steps right now,” Amethyst duly noted as she peered out the window through the blinds.
“What?!” the young Gem gasped in apt alarm, which only grew as he heard a knock at the door. After signaling to the other Gems to play it cool, Steven hurried over to the window himself, peeking out to see that Connie had indeed arrived, a fretful expression on her face as she held onto her phone tightly. The young Gem made sure to keep himself tucked away out of sight as Pearl want to answer the door.

“Oh! Hello… Connie…” the white Gem greeted with a rather awkward smile that Connie was fortunately far too distracted to notice.

“Is Steven home?” she asked fervently, getting right to point. However, as she asked this, she failed to notice Steven haphazardly climb out the window only a few feet away, taking care to be as discreet as possible so she wouldn’t notice him.

“Uh, no…” Pearl replied, trying her best to keep her gaze away from Steven as he vaulted over the deck railing in his hurried escape.

“I-Is he ok?” Connie asked, deeply concerned. “I’m just really worried about him, a-and Dipper and Mabel too. I haven’t heard from any of them since yesterday morning! What’s going on?”

“Oh…” the white Gem answered honestly as Garnet came to stand beside her silently. “I… don’t understand your human relationships. So, uh… goodbye!” Without another word, Pearl abruptly swung the screen door shut, though her and Garnet still remained standing by it as Connie turned away with an exasperated groan. For the past two days, she had been trying in vain to get in touch with Steven, in the hopes that he could explain at least something about the ominous message he had left her the other night. But after what seemed like hundreds of ignored calls, she had finally decided enough was enough. She had hoped that coming to see him for herself would finally answer some of her questions, but of course, she was left with yet another dead end, which was starting to frustrate her more than anything else.

Of course, what Connie hadn’t seen was the flash of pink before it disappeared into the woods heading towards town, for if she had she would have been able to see Steven getting away on Lion, hoping to get enough distance away from his pressing problem. But all the same, Connie descended the house stairs dejectedly, her phone already set to dial the young Gem again as she held it up to her ear and was only met with the usual, prolonged dial tone and nothing else. There was no denying that she was deeply worried, for both Steven and the twins really, seeing as how all three of them had been in on that message, which she had listened to countless times over in the hopes of gleaning any hints or clues behind its true meaning. Yet it had been so rushed and so strangely casual that there wasn’t much she had been able to get out of it, aside from the concept of a giant hand and the possibility they could have all died somehow. But apparently, they hadn’t, given the fact that Steven had indeed responded to her first call yesterday morning, though nothing he had said had told her anything new at all. And after that, he had proceeded to start ignoring her calls, over and over again, despite her persistence and the no doubt huge stack of voicemails she had been leaving him, begging him to answer, to just talk to her and let her know he was alright. Which, really, was what she wanted most, even more than the story behind what had happened. She wanted to know that he was ok, unharmed, safe. She wanted to know that all three of her friends were fine in the aftermath of whatever it was they had just been through. But as in the dark about everything as she was, there was really no way for her to know anything at all.

By all accounts, Connie was baffled by Steven’s prolonged silence. It wasn’t like him to not answer her calls, and it really wasn’t like him to leave her without some kind of explanation whatsoever. Something strange, something very concerning, was going on, and whether or not that something had to do with that message, she really didn’t care. What she did care about was getting to the bottom of this, getting answers, learning the truth of it all out of the mouth of the young Gem
himself. And, she figured, as she made it down to the crossroads between the temple and the shack, that if she couldn’t accomplish such a daunting task on her own, then there would be no shame in getting some much-needed help with it.

Mabel had never noticed just how slowly time passed when it was spent doing nothing but lying in the same spot and staring up at the ceiling like she had been doing pretty much all day. She knew that she would have been far better off trying to do something constructive to take her mind off of all her countless fretful thoughts, but she still felt far too passive to even try doing something like knitting a sweater, or scrapbooking, or even fawning over Waddles. And the more she thought about it, the more she realized she wasn’t just listless either; she was lonely. For someone as sociable as her, this kind of isolation was practically unbearable. But still, as much as she did want to talk to someone, or even just be in the company of someone else, she hadn’t been able to reach Steven at all, and she figured the Gems were likely busy preparing their next move. As for Dipper, while Mabel did have a pretty good idea about where he was spending the day, she wasn’t about to go all the way over there and bother him when she knew it wouldn’t do either of them any good anyway. And yes, she was aware that Stan was right downstairs, but having to struggle so hard to reciprocate his smiles, having to fight to keep the massive weight of the truth on her shoulders and her shoulders alone was completely exhausting. Which was why she had largely been avoiding the conman for the most part, thanking her lucky stars that he wasn’t the kind to pry too much, even if the questions he had asked her yesterday were casually intrusive.

Mabel knew that it wasn’t exactly fair, to her or Stan, to keep the true story of the invasion hidden from him. And if she was perfectly honest with herself, she really didn’t want to. In fact, the only thing she really wanted was to finally, finally talk to someone about all of this. She desperately wanted to rush downstairs, throw herself into her uncle’s unsuspecting embrace, and let her countless emotions finally fly out as she told him everything she had been holding onto so tightly for the past two days. She wanted to do that, more than she wanted pretty much anything at the moment. But… she couldn’t. No matter how much she wanted to tell him everything, she knew she couldn’t. Because if she did, then there would be no telling what would happen. Stan could be outraged, infuriated that they had disobeyed his wishes for them to leave town and that they had instead thrown themselves into mortal danger. He could be so mad, in fact, that he ended up sending them home, effectively curtailing their summer in Gravity Falls far too early and most likely guaranteeing that they would never return. On the other hand, he could be so shocked that he could end up being thrown into a complete and utter panic, much like what had happened to Greg. He could stress himself out to the point of incoherency, something that was likely incredibly unhealthy for someone of his age, as he desperately gasped for air and calm that would not come. And all the while, Mabel would watch on guiltily, unable to do anything but apologize for their disobedience, their brashness, their complete and utter foolishness to think that there would be no consequences for what they had done. But in the end, neither option seemed like even a remotely good one to her, which was why she had decided to take the third option, which was to keep hiding it all under a mask of false complacency. To keep pretending like everything was fine, when, in reality, that couldn’t have been any further from the truth.

“Mabel! Get down here! Now!” Stan’s abrupt shout from downstairs practically shattered Mabel out of her thoughts as she bolted upright, a startled gasp escaping her. Her eyes were wide as she mostly remained frozen for a moment, her mind and heart both racing once more as she realized just how oddly angry Stan had sounded. Then again, it did make sense for him to be upset, seeing as how she had been essentially hiding from him all day. “Come on, kid!” the conman called again as Mabel let out a small, anxious whine. “Don’t make me come up there myself! I’m too old to be climbing up stairs all the time and you’ve got two legs that aren’t broken, so hurry it up!”
“C-coming!” Mabel shouted back before she could really stop herself. Of course, while she didn’t really want to go face Stan feeling as low as she did, she pushed herself off the bed anyway, her feet almost dragging languidly across the floor as she slowly but surely made her way downstairs. Stan was waiting for her at the bottom, his arms crossed and his expression as dour as usual as he let out an impatient huff.

“It’s about time. I was starting to think you were playing dead up there,” the conman remarked sardonically. “By the way, where’s your brother?”

“Oh, I-I… h-he…” Mabel bit her lip, knowing that being honest about Dipper’s current location would require her to reveal at least some of the truth about what happened the other night. “I-I guess he’s still in town? O-or he might be hanging out with Steven, I… I really don’t know. Sorry…”

Stan raised a somewhat suspicious eyebrow at this, though fortunately he didn’t question her any further on the matter. “Oh well,” he shrugged nonchalantly as he began heading for the kitchen. “I guess he’s just gonna miss out then.”

“M-miss out on what?” Mabel asked, confused, as she hesitantly followed him.

The conman cracked a sly smirk as he stopped at the kitchen entrance, blocking Mabel’s view of what lay beyond it. “Oh this,” he said smoothly as he stepped forward, allowing his niece to see exactly what he had set up for her.

“Surprise!” Soos exclaimed brightly as he blew on a party horn, throwing his hands out at the rather large array of snacks and treats laid out on the kitchen table. Cupcakes, cookies, punch, even a small cake, all apparently homemade based on how humble and sloppy they all were all sat on display, while the kitchen itself had been dressed up in colorful balloons and streamers hung in rather copious amounts. Stan smiled in undeniable satisfaction as he came to stand alongside Soos, admiring their handiwork that had taken them the better half of the morning to accomplish. Still, he tried his best to play it off as if it hadn’t really been too big of a deal, knowing that he had to save face with his niece somehow.

“Eh, we had a few supplies left over from that party we had here the other week,” he began casually enough, though he gradually became more flustered. “And since I noticed you’ve been down in the dumps for whatever reason, I just figured we’d put a little something together to try and perk you up already. Y-ya know, not cause, I-I care or anything. But because I can’t have two mopey, depressed kids hanging around here. It’s bad for business, o-or something like that.”

“Wait, Mr. Pines,” Soos cut in, somewhat confused. “Didn’t you say we baked all this stuff and decorated the kitchen to try and cheer Mabel and Dipper up because you were worried about them and wanted them to feel better? Cause I thought all that stuff was pretty sweet, to be honest.”

“C-can it, Soos!” Stan exclaimed, clearly embarrassed by having his sentimentality exposed like this. “So, uh, yeah,” he said as he turned back to Mabel. “You into all this, kid, or not? Cause if not, then I can always just sell all this stuff for way more than it took me to make any of it. Because inflation, or some other kinda economical nonsense, I-I don’t know.”

For a long moment, Mabel offered no real response to what was going on, instead simply glancing between the “party” and Stan with a somewhat blank expression. As her silence went on for an uncomfortable amount of time with still no reaction to any of it, the conman frowned, waving a hand in front of her face in an attempt to coax something out of there. “Uh? Mabel? You in there, kid?” he asked, though his concerned worry only grew as he noticed her bottom lip start to tremble softly. “K-kid, what’s-”
Stan was abruptly cut off as Mabel finally let out a loud, agonized wail, one that startled both the conman and the handyman quite a bit. All at once and without any warning at all, it seemed as though the lock she had put on her emotions had somehow broken, and, unable to keep any of them inside any longer, they all rushed out of her in a sudden, raging torrent. With the initial piercing cry out of the way, she was unable to keep several more from coming, her screams frustrated, heartbroken, and most of all, tearful. For a moment, the only thing either Stan or Soos could do was watch this heavy outpouring of anguish with wide eyes, neither of them having the faintest clue about what was happening. However, as the conman watched his immensely distraught niece collapse to her knees, objectively overwhelmed by everything she was apparently feeling, he found that he couldn’t just stand aside and spectate any longer.

“Oh! Oh, Mabel, sweetie-” Stan hurried to comfort her, dropping down to her level instantly and pulling her into a tight embrace, all thoughts of trying to act distant and aloof completely gone from his mind now. Mabel weakly returned his hug, even as she continued sobbing miserably, but at least now she had a shoulder to actually do it on. “Pumpkin, w-what the matter?! Don’t you like the party? Ugh, I knew we should have just gone and raided a store for some real cupcakes instead just trying to do it ourselves like a bunch of clueless bozos! Soos! Why didn’t you-”

“N-no!” Mabel suddenly choked, her voice still racked with sobs as she tried to be as coherent as possible. “G-Grunkle Stan, I love the party! I-I love all the streamers and the b-balloons and h-how you tried to put l-little smiley faces on the c-cupcakes even if they all look sorta gross and m-melty and I j-just… I love how much work you put into all this, a-and that you cared enough to do it in the first place, a-and Dipper would love it too if he was-” She cut herself off with another loud cry as another heavy wave of emotions hit her, to the point that she found it a completely futile effort to even try and hold them in anymore. Her face was a red, teary mess as she buried it into Stan’s shoulder, though all the while, the conman kept a steady hand on her back, moving it up and down ever so slightly in a slow, comforting gesture.

“Shh, it’s ok, sweetie,” he assured, his tone rarely gentle and soft as he tried his best to console her, despite how admittedly awkward his attempt was. “I-I got ya. It’s all gonna be alright. Just let it all out.”

“L-let it all out…” Mabel repeated in a quiet whimper as she released another tight sob, knowing that if she was letting all of her emotions out, then she might as well let the truth out too. No matter what the consequences might be. “G-Grunkle Stan? Can… can I tell you something?”

“Uh, of course,” Stan said, caught somewhat off guard at first. “Like I said, if something’s bothering you, I want you to tell me about it. Especially if whatever it is is makin’ you bawl your eyes out like this.”

Mabel sniffled as she nodded, still keeping her head rested against her uncle’s shoulder as she began slowly. “Grunkle Stan, I-I… I didn’t really hurt my leg getting into Soos’ truck.”

“O-oh?” Stan asked, exchanging a brief, knowing glance with the concerned handyman.

“No… I, uh… we… we, um…” Mabel paused, taking in a deep breath to steady herself before she decided to just unleash it upon him all at once, knowing that she wouldn’t be able to get through it any other way. “We were leaving town, j-just like you wanted us to, but then Steven crashed out of Mr. Universe’s van and said he was coming back here to help the Gems and me and Dipper talked him into taking us back with him, so we came back and the giant green hand got here and these two really mean Gems named Peridot and Jasper got off of it and Jasper split Garnet in half with this weird zappy want thing and she captured Pearl, and Amethyst, and Lapis, and Steven too, but when me and Dipper tried to stop her, she beat us up and that’s why my leg is all messed up, but
then the ship started to leave so we used my grappling hook to sneak onto it to save Steven and the others and it was really cool but also really scary, and then we found really nice, really pretty Gem named Sapphire, whose girlfriend is another Gem named Ruby, and they fused and it turns out there were really Garnet all along, which was awesome, but then Garnet fought Jasper and broke the ship and it crashed near the lake, but Steven kept all of us safe in a bubble, but then Jasper popped up out of the broken hand ship bits and she convinced Lapis to fuse with her into this really scary Gem called Malachite, but before she could totally destroy all of us with water, Lapis dragged both of them into the lake and she’s keeping them trapped down there and that’s why Dipper hasn’t been around, he’s been at the lake because he blames himself for what happened to her, and the reason I didn’t wanna tell you about any of this is because when Steven told his dad, he totally freaked out and I didn’t want you to freak out too and I’m sorry Grunkle Stan! I’m so, so, so, so, so, so sorry for not telling you, because trying to hide all of this stuff from you has been the worst and I was scared you’d send me and Dipper home because we didn’t listen to you, and I-I didn’t know what else to do, and I’m sorry! I feel like I can’t say it enough because all this was so bad and it feels so bad and what I did was so bad and I-I just… I…"

Unable to keep going any longer, she finally broke down again, her incredibly rushed explanation dying out into a broken sob. For what seemed like ages, Stan didn’t respond to anything Mabel had just told him, seeing as how he was stunned into silent shock as he tried to make sense of it all. His eyes were rather wide with controlled alarm as he glanced over to Soos for a confirmation of all of this, but the most the equally surprised handyman could give him was a clueless shrug. However, after what seemed like an appropriate amount of silence only punctuated with sobbing, the conman finally decided to speak up, even if he really had no idea what to say. “W-whoa, uh… t-that… that’s kind of a big load you just dropped on me there, kid…”

“I-I know…” Mabel muttered, ashamed that it had taken so long for her to tell him all of this in the first place. “I’m sorry…”

“Aw, geez, will you stop apologizing already?” Stan asked, trying to lighten the mood a bit, even if he was in quite a disarray internally. “I get it: you’re sorry. You don’t have to keep harping on about it, especially when you don’t really have anything to be sorry about.”

“Huh?” Mabel frowned in confusion, pulling away from the conman, even if her cheeks were still damp with tears. “But… but aren’t you mad?”

“Mad? About what?”

“A-about how we didn’t listen to you!” Mabel exclaimed fretfully. “You wanted us to leave with everyone else, but we came back and we nearly died doing it! Y-you were right, Grunkle Stan. We really were in over our heads with all this Gem stuff… I-I… I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to send us home… W-we’re causing you more trouble than you deserve…”

Stan let out a long, somewhat tired sigh as he heard this, but all the same, he still put both hands on his niece’s shoulders in an act of sympathy and steadying. “Kid, I already have so much trouble in my life that a little more isn’t really gonna make things much worse,” he remarked with something of a wry smirk. “So calm down and quit worrying. I’m not going to send either of you runts home.”

“R-really?”

“Really,” Stan assured, his smile widening a bit. “And no, I’m not mad about all this either. Mostly, I’m just kinda shocked. You two really snuck onto an alien spaceship? All by yourselves?”

Mabel nodded, pouting as she did so, though she was rather surprised when the conman let out a short snicker in spite of himself. “Wow. I thought I was the master of breaking and entering, but that’s something on a whole other level,” he chuckled, his tone emanating with what almost
sounded like pride. “You kids really showed those Homeworld chumps who’s boss, huh?”

“Well, I don’t know if I’d say that…” Mabel rubbed her arm, though she did finally crack a very small smile a moment later. “But Peridot was really mad when we tied her up and took over her ship… So, I guess that was pretty cool…”

“Ha! Sounds like it!” Stan let out a triumphant laugh as he playfully ruffled his niece’s hair, finally eliciting a small giggle from her. “I wish I could’ve been there to see it! You kids gotta bring me along with you the next time something like that happens so I can get in on the action too! Those punks would have been no match for my brass knuckles.”

Mabel let out a genuine laugh at this, her tears essentially gone as she smiled truly for the first time in days. “Heck no, they wouldn’t have!” she exclaimed boisterously. “I bet if you had bopped Jasper right in the face, she would have gone down, just like that!” Another bout of laughter passed, one that Soos joined in on too as all of the former gloominess and dejection seemed to fade from the room entirely, replaced with a much-needed sense of lightness and goodwill. Still, Mabel couldn’t help but address the regret still weighing rather heavy on her as she let out a small, guilty sigh, even if she did feel immensely better after finally letting most of the truth out. It was almost as if a massive weight had been lifted off her shoulders, one that allowed her to finally breathe easy and really be herself again, which, for her, was more than worth the dread and grief it had taken to get her to this new, brighter point. “Grunkle Stan, I’m really sorry about trying to hide all this stuff from you. I was just worried about how you’d react and—”

“Kid, what did I tell you about saying sorry so much?” Stan asked, almost admitting that he was hiding plenty of things from her himself. Still, he decided to refrain on divulging that little tidbit. For now.

“Oh, right! Sorry!” Mabel gasped, covering her mouth in embarrassment. “Oh, there I go again! Sorry! Aw, dangit! I just can’t stop!”

Everyone let out another shared laugh at this slip, though the levity still lasted as Stan rose to stand with a broad smirk. “Well, we got all this junk food laid out, so we might as well go ahead and—” he remarked, glancing back at the table.

“Aw, yes!” Soos exclaimed, eagerly taking a cupcake. “Standing here looking at all this food has made me so hungry, dude! I don’t care if these cupcakes are sloppy and lame, they seriously look like the best things ever right now!”

“Not so fast, Soos,” Stan cut in before the handyman could take even a bite. “We’re still one short. Mabel, go down to the lake and get your brother. Oh, and while you’re at it, tell him you two are ungrounded from all that mystery hunting junk. I’m sure he’ll be happy to hear that.”

“Hopefully…” Mabel said somewhat apprehensively. Some of her worry returned as she thought of what Dipper might be going through and hoped that it didn’t compare to what she had just went through, though at the same time, she realized his emotional distress was probably much, much worse. However, right as she turned to begin heading out on her way, a sudden knock at the door caught her off guard. Still, she hurried to answer it, letting out a gasp of excited surprise upon seeing who had come by. “Connie!” she exclaimed brightly, pulling the other girl into a cheerful embrace. “I’m so glad you’re here! It feels like it’s been forever since the last time I saw you!”

“T-the four of us just hung out the other day, Mabel,” Connie remarked, somewhat surprised by this unexpected hug.

“Yeah, well…” Mabel smiled somewhat pensively as the hug broke apart. “Let’s just say a lot’s
been going on around here lately…”

“I… gathered…” Connie frowned, her former worry still as apparent as ever. “Mabel, when’s the last time you heard from Steven? I keep trying to call him, but he just… won’t answer his phone! I’m really starting to get scared that something might have happened to him.”

“No way! I’ve been trying to call him too!” Mabel exclaimed, suddenly quite concerned herself. “I saw him yesterday, after—well, it’s a long story, but I haven’t heard anything from him since then.”

“I went up to the temple and asked the Gems about him, but they didn’t know where he was!” Connie huffed fretfully, looking at her phone again. “It’s like he just disappeared!”

“Disappeared…” Mabel mused thoughtfully before letting out a sharp gasp of realization. “Wait, that’s it! Connie, I know where Steven is! In fact, if I’m right, then he’s pretty much at the exact same place Dipper is!”

“Well then, what are we waiting for?” Connie asked, more than eager to finally get some much-sought after answers. “Let’s go!”

The waters of the lake were just as still and calm as they had been yesterday, with no sign of change or even the most subtle of shifts in sight as Dipper sat before them, stone-faced and silent. A part of him knew that what he was doing was foolish and futile; after all, there was no way just sitting by the lake day in and day out would do anything to bring Lapis back. But every other part of him refused to let him tear himself away from the wreckage-strewn shore, knowing that there was always a chance, no matter how slim, that him simply being there might be enough to get the blue Gem to emerge from her new aquatic prison. Which was why he had every intention of staying right there, doing nothing but waiting, watching, and most of all hoping, for however long he had to.

After all, if Lapis had put herself out there for him, then Dipper was more than willing to do the same for her, in any way he could.

Of course, amidst his diligent vigil, he barely even noticed as Soos’ truck pulled up near the shore as the handyman dropped Mabel and Connie off before leaving them to their “mission” at their behest. On the way there, Mabel had tried her best to fill Connie in on as many details about the most recent happenings as possible, though she only got about as far as the hand ship’s landing before they arrived at the lake. From there, Connie decided that she wanted to hear the rest of it from Steven, seeing as how he had apparently been trying so hard to avoid telling her about all of it. It was a line of reasoning that Mabel somewhat understood, though she didn’t quite understand why Steven might be utilizing it with Connie, of all people. Still, now both girls were determined to get to the bottom of the young Gem’s odd avoidance, though of course, that wasn’t their only reason in coming all the way here.

“Whoa…” Connie breathed as she got her first good look at the disaster that was the lake shore, and from that look alone she was easily bewildered by what she saw. “W-what is all this stuff?”

“It’s the hand ship,” Mabel replied, though she was rather distracted as she scanned the length of the shore worriedly. “Or… at least what’s left of it…”

Connie was silent for a moment upon hearing this, her eyes wide as she tried to take the scattered
mechanical pieces all around her and what they might mean in. She had anticipated that whatever had happened to Steven and the twins had been intense based on their sparse message, but she could have never imagined something like this.

Still, she didn’t have much time to muse over it before Mabel let out a loud gasp as she finally spotted one of the boys they had come here searching for. “Dipper!” she cried, not hesitating to run down the shore to him. However, even as she got closer to him, Dipper didn’t even bother to so much as glance over at her, his gaze instead diligently focused on the lake alone, just as it had been for the past several hours. Mabel slowed her pace a bit as she noticed this, causing Connie to come to a stop just behind her too as they both exchanged a concerned glance over his rather intent strain of focus on the water before him. “Uh… Dipper?” Mabel tried again, only to get no response this time either.

“I—is… is he ok?” Connie asked apprehensively, knowing that it wasn’t anything like Dipper to just ignore them both like this for no reason.

“I… I don’t…” Mabel trailed off, confusion furrowing her brow. Her already worried frown deepened as she noticed just how still her brother was, sitting in the coarse sand almost like a statue as he looked over the lake with a lack of any emotion in his expression whatsoever, his hat not on his head but in his hands as he held it out in front of him, almost like it as an invitation. And, as Mabel realized this, all at once, everything clicked right into place.

“Oh, Dipper…” she whispered, her heart filling with immense sympathy for her brother as she sank down onto the shore beside him. He didn’t even move a muscle as she placed a steadying hand on his shoulder, desperately hoping that he wasn’t too far out of her reach yet. “H-have you… Is… is this what you’ve been doing all this time? Just sitting here, w-waiting for… for Lapis to come back?”

Dipper finally decided to gratify her with a small, very terse nod, one that still showed no feeling whatsoever as he still kept his sights trained on the lake and nothing else. Mabel bit her lip, unable to feel anything but remorse for how long it had taken her to get past her own problems. For while she had wasted so much time stewing in her own dread and sadness, her own brother had been withering away in the throes of guilt, anguish, and denial, to the point that he had almost shut down completely. And Mabel feared that if she didn’t break him out of this hallow revere soon, she might just end up losing him entirely.

“Aw, bro-bro, you… you gotta know that Lapis… S-she… I… I don’t…” she hesitated, knowing how delicate of a subject this was and having absolutely no idea how to navigate it. “I-I don’t think she’s coming back any time soon… She made it sound like she was gonna keep Jasper trapped down there for a really long time… So, I don’t see what sitting around here and staring at the lake is gonna do to—”

“Mabel,” Dipper suddenly cut her off, much to her surprise. She paused, looking to him with wide eyes as she awaited whatever it was he had to say, only for him to give her something that completely crushed whatever new hope had just sprung up in her. “Go back to the shack.”

For a moment, all Mabel could do was look to her brother in appalled disbelief, completely outraged by the idea of him trying to simply push her away like this when he was so clearly suffering. And, after having just learned about the follies of keeping one’s painful feelings solely inside herself, she wasn’t about to walk away without teaching Dipper the exact same lesson. “No!” she exclaimed hotly, jumping to her feet and positioning herself between her brother and the lake. As she did this, Dipper finally tore his gaze away from it, instead opting to glare harshly at the ground as he continued blocking her out, refusing to let anything distract him from his self-imposed
vigil, including his own sister. “Dipper, I’m sorry but this… this is just… it’s just stupid! Do you really think you sitting here alone near the lake single day is gonna do anything to bring Lapis back?! News flash, bro-bro: it’s not! The only thing its gonna do is make you miss her even more and make you feel ten times worse every time you think about it!”

“You don’t think I know that?!” Dipper snapped, unable to contain his mounting frustration any longer as he sent his sister an unforgivingly harsh look. “You really think I want to spend the rest of my summer just sitting here looking at nothing?! I don’t! But what you don’t get is that I have to, Mabel! Lapis didn’t want to fuse with Jasper, but she did it anyway and she did it for us, for me! And now she’s stuck down there and this is like, the only thing I can think of to help her, and the worst part is, I know it’s never going to work! I know it’s stupid and I know I’m just wasting my time out here! But… I-I… I just… it’s…”

“It’s what?” Mabel asked, her tone a bit softer as she knelt down to her brother’s level, only to be met with his resumed, bitter silence as he looked away from her. “It’s what, Dipper? Come on, you gotta tell me.”

“I-it’s… Oh, just forget it…” Dipper sighed, his grip on his hat tightening somewhat as he looked down at it morosely.

Mabel sighed herself upon hearing this, though more out of empathy more than anything else. After all, it had been only a few hours ago that she had been in the exact same place he had: forlorn, dejected, completely and utterly hopeless in every sense of the word. And since she had moved past most of her painful emotions about the situation, she was resolved to do whatever she had to do to help her brother do the very same. “Dipper, I… I told Grunkle Stan about everything that happened…”

“Y-you what?” Dipper looked to her, quite surprised to hear this. “Why’d you do that?! I bet after hearing about how we nearly died a number of times, he’s probably already bought us bus tickets home, which is seriously the last thing we need right now.”

“Relax, bro-bro, our summer’s nowhere close to over yet!” Mabel reassured with a small laugh. “Actually, Stan took it a lot better than I ever thought he would. Heck, he even decided to unground us from mystery hunting. But the reason why I finally told him was because it just felt so bad keeping all of that heavy junk inside of me. I didn’t have you or Steven to talk to about any of it, a-and so I just kept thinking about it and thinking about it and it hurt. It hurt so bad that I couldn’t take it anymore so I just… let it all out. And I think that’s what you need to do too, Dipper. Just let everything you’re feeling out, no matter how bad it might be. You’ll feel so much better once you do, trust me.”

“Mabel, I-I-…” Dipper began, his tone rather unsteady as he finally fully met his sister’s almost pleading gaze. He paused however, his words caught in his throat as he shifted his sights over to the lake once more, still unable to completely get his thoughts off of Lapis. For the first time, he wondered what she might think about him essentially subjugating himself to spending his foreseeable future simply sitting by and waiting for her and nothing else. He had a strong feeling that she likely wouldn’t approve, that she would insist on him moving on, that she would tell him to keep on living in the freedom and safety she had just bought for him at the cost of her own. He knew that what he was doing, what he was feeling, would probably only serve to disappoint the blue Gem if she was there to see him like this. And the crushing thought of disappointing her, on top of the pain of losing her, one of the few people he had ever met, Gem or otherwise, who he felt truly understood him, was almost enough to get Dipper to break down right then and there.

Almost.
Because while he had heard Mabel’s advice and even found truth in it, he couldn’t just let it all out. He couldn’t just forget about how much it all hurt and put on a happy face, all while Lapis remained suffering at the bottom of the lake. It would feel wrong, disrespectful even, to just go on and pretend like everything was alright when it so clearly wasn’t. Which was why Dipper forced his oncoming tears away yet again, though he was still honest enough with his sister as to why he intended on holding them back. “Mabel, I… I can’t. At least not yet… I’m sorry…”

“But-” Mabel cut her initial protest off, her frown slowly turning into a small, understanding smile as she rose to stand. “You know what? That’s ok. I know that it’s a lot to deal with, so you can talk about it whenever you’re ready. And whenever you are ready, you know that I’ll be right here to listen, bro-bro.”

“Thanks, Mabel,” Dipper said with a small, genuine smile as he accepted his sister’s extended hand and stood himself. He did look to the lake once again, his smile fading as he pictured the blue Gem one last time, struggling, fighting, straining herself to keep him safe. The thought that there was so little he could do to help her still filled him with immense guilt and remorse. But the thought that perhaps there was some way he could eventually see her again, the hope that she might not be gone forever was something that he refused to let go of, even despite the bleak, depressing odds against it. And, as Dipper finally put his hat, which Lapis had more than likely indirectly returned to him, back on, he figured that was more than enough.

“So… is everything ok between you guys now?” Connie asked the twins, concerned. For the most part, she had opted to stay out of the conversation as they worked things out, largely since she knew so little of the surrounding context. Still, as far as she could see, it seemed as though they had reached a better place at the end of it all based on the small, yet warm smiles they were both wearing.

“Yeah,” Mabel nodded, throwing an arm around her brother’s shoulder. “We’re all good.”

“Whoa, wait a second,” Dipper cut in as a burst of realization struck him. “I think we’re still missing someone here. Where’s Steven?”

“We have no idea,” Connie shook her head fretfully. “That’s kind of why we came all the way down here. To look for both of you guys.”

“Well, I haven’t seen him anywhere around here,” Dipper remarked, growing slightly worried. “Then again, the only thing I’ve been looking at for the past several hours is the lake, so…”

“Steven!” Mabel suddenly called out, still willing to believe that her hunch on the young Gem’s location was correct. “Steven, are you out here!? You’re like, the only one of us who hasn’t had a satisfying emotional resolution yet!”

Upon receiving no response from the young Gem, Connie let out another frustrated sigh as she pulled out her phone. “I guess he wants to do this the hard way, then…” she muttered, not wasting any time in dialing his number. The trio paused, poising their ears to listen for the sound of a telltale ringtone, and, sure enough, it sounded out from the otherwise empty shore from not too far away. As soon as it blared out, however, a sudden thud cut through it, alerting Connie to Steven’s presence as he hurried in between larger pieces of rubble, trying his best to not be seen and failing completely. “There he is!” she exclaimed to the twins, already running after him before they followed suit. “Steven! Steven, wait up!”

Of course, the young Gem did anything but that as he fled from his friends, of all people, breathlessly panting all the while. He had hoped that isolating himself at the place where everything had reached its height would send the message to at least the twins that he intended on
putting necessary distance between himself and them. But of course, that plan had apparently failed as Dipper had already been there when he arrived, though as preoccupied with the lake as he had been, Steven had found it not very hard to stay out of his notice. What the young Gem hadn’t anticipated however, was for Mabel and Connie to team up in their resolve to reach him, which gave him all the more reason to hurry and slip away from them before they had a chance to confront him. Needless to say that Steven didn’t really want to run and hide from his own friends, but he knew that he had to. It was for their own good, after all.

“Steven!” Connie shouted after him once more, with her and the twins essentially chasing him through the wreckage by this point. She was admittedly taken aback as they followed him through a large, still somewhat intact corridor that had broken off from the hand ship, her immense curiosity towards the situation only growing all the while. And yes, while she knew she could have easily asked the twins about it all, she was determined to hear it from Steven first, as well as the reason why he seemed so adamant to hide both the truth and himself from her.

As they made it out of the stretch of corridor, the young Gem’s trail ran cold seeing as how he had apparently tucked himself away behind a larger piece of rubble again. The trio stopped short, none of them sure as to where he might be hiding, but all of them just as eager to find him and make sense of his odd behavior.

“Ok, this is starting to get weird…” Dipper noted with a confused frown. “Steven seemed mostly ok yesterday morning. So why is he just running and hiding from us now?”

“M-maybe he’s not running from us,” Mabel theorized. “Maybe he’s just trying to run from his feelings instead, just like I was trying to do. Only he’s doing that… literally, for some reason… Steven!” she exclaimed, loud enough for him to hopefully hear her. “It’s ok! You don’t have to keep all of that heavy junk inside! You can totally come out and talk to us about it! We know exactly how you feel, trust me!”

Upon hearing this, Steven pushed himself even harder against the broken piece of the ship’s thumb he was hiding behind, letting out a small, almost inaudible groan as he did. He understood that the twins just wanted to help him, but that wasn’t their job anymore, especially since they had both gotten so hurt the last time they had tried to help him. From now on, he had to help himself, even if he had no idea how.

“Steven, this is ridiculous!” Connie called intently, gripping her phone tightly as she glanced around for even a sign of him. “Why are you avoiding us?! Are you in trouble? Is something wrong? D-did… did I do something wrong?”

The young Gem buried his face into his hands at this, knowing that the last thing he ever wanted was for Connie to blame herself for something she had no part in whatsoever. Still, he couldn’t tell her the truth. The most he could do was hope that she’d give up and walk away, realizing that she would be far better off without him. No matter how much he might miss her once she did.

“Steven, come on!” Mabel urged just as fervently as Connie attempted to call him once more. “You can’t keep hiding from us forever! You have to come out and tell us what’s wrong!”

The young Gem buried his face into his hands at this, knowing that the last thing he ever wanted was for Connie to blame herself for something she had no part in whatsoever. Still, he couldn’t tell her the truth. The most he could do was hope that she’d give up and walk away, realizing that she would be far better off without him. No matter how much he might miss her once she did.

“Steven, come on!” Mabel urged just as fervently as Connie attempted to call him once more. “You can’t keep hiding from us forever! You have to come out and tell us what’s wrong!”

“M-Mabel’s right!” Dipper added somewhat hesitantly. “I mean, there’s really not a whole lot running and hiding from everything that happened is going to do, right?”

Steven knew well that there was nothing that it would do, nothing except put a rift between him and his friends, something he knew had to happen if he ever wanted to truly protect them. However, as his phone blared ringing once again, he realized that their incredible persistence would make opening that rift quite a challenging feat. He panicked as he rushed to reject Connie’s
call, holding his phone close to his chest as he tried to calm his own racing heart, especially as she shouted for him once more.

“Steven, we know you’re here!” she shouted, steadily growing more and more upset by his complete lack of response, to the point that tears were starting to well up in her eyes from it. “Why are you hiding from us?! From me?!”

The young Gem shuddered at this accusation, wishing so, so much that things didn’t have to be like this, but knowing that there was no other way. And so, with a deep breath, and a heavy heart, he gripped his phone and typed out a short, brief message and sent it before he could change his mind, even if he instantly regretted it the moment he did.

Connie jolted as her phone buzzed with a new message from Steven, one that she didn’t hesitate to read aloud to the twins as soon as she saw it. “‘I don’t want to be friends anymore’.”

“What?” Dipper and Mabel both asked in distressed, dumbfounded confusion at this, knowing it had been the last thing they could have ever expected. Connie, on the other hand, barely managed to hold back a sharp sob as she hurriedly dialed the young Gem’s number once more, putting it on speaker so the twins could hear whatever he might have to say. And this time, miraculously enough, he finally answered.

“S-Steven?” Connie asked as she was met with only silence on the other end of the line as the dial tone cut off.

“I can’t be with you anymore,” Steven said solemnly, his expression as cold as he could make it. “Any of you. I have a destiny, and its one that none of you can be a part of.”

“…Steven, that makes like, no sense…” Dipper remarked, somewhat alarmed by just how serious the young Gem seemed to be about this. “Since when have you ever cared about ‘destiny’ and all that stuff? It seems a little melodramatic for you, no offense.”

However, before Steven could even attempt to explain, Connie interjected, her emotions having finally reached their boiling point as her tears finally started to fall. “Come out here and say that to my face, to all our faces!” she shouted at the phone, her hand shaking heavily as she gripped it like a vice. “Say you don’t want to be friends anymore! If you can do that… If you can do that, then I’ll leave you alone. All three of us will! But we won’t believe it until you say it to our faces!”

“Look!” Mabel suddenly gasped, pointing up to the top of the nearby thumb. Atop it stood none other than the young Gem himself, his face concealed in shadows cast by the blinding sun overhead as he looked straight down, his phone held tightly in his hand. For a brief-tension filled moment, everyone stood frozen in place, all four of the Mystery Kids finally reunited despite everything that had happened, but in a way that none of them could have ever wanted.

Then, deciding that enough was enough, Steven leapt from his perch, landing squarely before the trio as he still hid his expression from them all, keeping up almost an air of ominous mystery, one that only infuriated Connie even more as she noticed it. “Well?” she demanded, knowing that the moment of truth, the moment that could make or break their friendship forever, had arrived.

And yet, while she had been expecting him to snap his gaze up with a harsh, firm glare and repeat his coldhearted message to them all, he instead did the exact opposite. He started to cry.

Steven finally looked up, his face awash with tears and grief as he let out a choked, distraught sob as he told them all the undeniable truth, his former resolve completely forgotten. “I still wanna be friends with you guys!” he whined almost pitifully, instantly eliciting sympathy from all three of
them as they rushed to comfort him.

“Steven, your eye!” Connie gasped in surprise upon seeing his black eye. “What happened to you?!”

“And why were you trying to run away from us?” Mabel asked, just as concerned as they crowded around the upset young Gem. “On a side note, I was totally right about where you might be! Looks like I know both of you boys better than you know yourselves,” she remarked with a jokingly smug smile as she elbowed Dipper playfully, to which he simply rolled his eyes with a small, but genuine smirk.

“M-my eye… it… it’s nothing,” Steven glanced away guiltily, tears still streaming down his cheeks. “I didn’t want you guys to worry about it.”

“Steven, I’ve been worried sick about you for the past two days,” Connie said, somewhat exasperated. “What do you think I’m doing here?”

“Honestly, we were all pretty worried about you,” Dipper said, crossing his arms. “You know, what with you trying to flat out ignore us and everything.”

“I-I’m sorry…” the young Gem muttered repentantly, sniffling a bit. “I just… I just wanted to protect you guys, and-”

“Stop,” Connie cut him off, shaking her head as she rested her hands on his shoulders and offered him a calm, supporting smile. “Just tell me everything.”

And so, he did.

Really, Steven and the twins did, as the kids all sat together on the shore and they started from the beginning, detailing to Connie exactly what had happened and leaving no details out, even the more horrific ones. They told her of the hand ship, of the evacuation, and of their return. They told her of Jasper, of Peridot, of Lapis and the Gems’ defeat and capture. They told her of their escapades on the ship, of Ruby and Sapphire’s reunion and Garnet’s reformation. They told her of the crash, of Malachite, and of the immense emotional fallout they had all gone through after it was all said and done. During all of this, Steven finally managed to remember to heal the twins’ respective injuries, being sure to offer them copious apologies for nearly forgetting to do so amidst being so caught up in his own problems and completely neglecting to consider theirs. Still, by the end of this lengthy truth session, all four of the kids were more than a bit shaken by the weight of all that had happened only a few mere hours ago. Yet at the same time, there was no denying that it was rather cathartic, almost as if nearly everything that had been suppressed and hidden was now free. And with its release, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel felt calmer and more relaxed than they had been since the hand ship first appeared in the skies above Gravity Falls.

“So, let me get this straight…” Connie mused after they had finished their tale, still trying to make sense of everything she had just been told. “Lapis and Jasper are somewhere underwater…”

“Yeah,” Steven nodded somewhat sadly. Mabel noticed as Dipper looked away at the mention of this, but all the same, she made sure to put a steadying, comforting hand on his shoulder, one that he acknowledged with a small, but thankful smile. “A-and Peridot escaped while the ship was coming down. She could be anywhere…”

“That is a lot to take in…” Connie breathed, her eyes rather wide as she looked out to the lake.

“Tell us about it…” Mabel remarked with a knowing sigh.
“There’s still one thing I don’t get though…” Dipper frowned as he looked over at the young Gem.

“Steven, I kinda get why you were hiding from Connie, but why were you hiding from me and Mabel? We already knew about all of this stuff; heck, we lived through it. So, why were you trying to shut us out too?”

“Oh, well, I… I, uh…” Steven sighed, knowing that he really couldn’t keep his now former resolve from them anymore. A resolve that, in retrospect, seemed so foolish and silly from the start. “You guys could have really gotten hurt in all this stuff. I mean, you did get hurt in it, but you could have… I could have lost-” The young Gem paused, letting out a shaky breath before continuing.

“You two put yourselves in so much danger to try and help me. A-and if something had happened to either of you, I… I wouldn’t have been able to forgive myself… So, I guess I was just trying to keep you from feeling like you ever had to do something like that again. I didn’t really do a very good job of it though, seeing as how I kinda just ended up hurting you guys even more myself, huh?”

“Aww, Steven! You didn’t hurt us!” Mabel exclaimed sincerely. “Jasper did, remember?”

“Yeah, and as far as that whole ‘putting ourselves in danger thing’, we did that because we wanted to, Steven, not because we felt like we had to,” Dipper clarified just as intently. “Plus, in case you haven’t noticed, all four of us kind of have a bad habit of getting ourselves into dangerous situations a lot.”

“And while this one was probably the craziest one of those we’ve been in yet,” Mabel continued. “That doesn’t mean we wanna stop hanging out with you, Steven! Could you imagine how boring things would be if the four of us weren’t friends? That’d be way worse than nearly dying on an alien spaceship, for sure!”

All four of the kids let out a shared laugh at this, all of them realizing just how much they needed something like this all along. They needed each other, to help them get through the past and face the future. And as long as they did have each other, then certainly, there was nothing they couldn’t overcome. “Thanks, you guys,” Steven smiled happily, feeling immensely better. “I… I guess I never thought of things like that before…”

“Well, you should from now on,” Connie encouraged, looking to the young Gem warmly. “Because no matter what comes next, we can all face it together.”

“Yeah! Together!” Mabel cheered brightly, throwing her hand out as both Dipper and Connie joined her in starting a pile up.

“I can’t ask you guys to do that…” Steven said, still somewhat apprehensive as he looked to their outstretched hands.

“We want to, Steven,” Connie assured, blushing softly as she smiled at the young Gem. “I—I mean, we want to be part of your universe!”

The twins nodded their firm agreement to this as Steven took pause, taken aback but completely warmed by their kind words and resolved promises. Which was why, with all of his former worries and fears forgotten, the young Gem didn’t put his hand on top of the pile, but instead threw himself at his three friends, surprising them all with an unexpected, but very welcome group hug, one that they were all quick to laughingly and happily return.

The embrace didn’t go on for too long however, before a familiar van arrived at the lake, its horn honking as its driver caught sight of the group on the shore. “Kiddo! There you are!” Greg exclaimed as he pulled up to the kids, his wide, blithe smile a stark contrast to the mask of panic
his face was the last time Steven had seen him. “Oh, and hey, Connie, Dipper, Mabel. Do you kids need a ride back to the shack? Stan actually just called me a little while ago; he said something about some cupcakes and cookies he made for you two going to waste?”

“Oh man, I totally forgot about that party Grunkle Stan set up for us!” Mabel gasped. “Dipper, you should have seen it! He put up streamers and balloons and tried to put little faces on the cupcakes even though it didn’t really work out, but it was so sweet!”


“Well what he did totally was sweet, which is something you’ll see when we get back,” Mabel said just as pointedly. “Steven, Connie, you guys come too! I’m sure there’s plenty of junk food to go around!”

“Heh, sure, sounds like fun,” Connie chuckled, amused.

“Yeah,” Steven nodded in agreement before turning back to his father, somewhat confused. “Dad, are you doing ok? You seem a lot calmer than… well, yesterday…”

“Eh, I got it out of my system,” Greg shrugged with a casual grin. “Now I’m back to being your cool dad!”

The kids all got a good laugh out of this as they accepted the former rock star’s offer, all of them piling into the van before it took off, leaving the battered lake shore behind. As they rode through town, they were able to see that the majority of the townsfolk had already returned and were well on their way to picking things exactly where they had left off. Mr. Smiley grinned as brightly as usual as he swept up the broken glass in front of Funland Arcade, while just across the street, Toby Determined was trying and failing to sell the latest edition of the Gravity Falls Gossiper. Lazy Susan had already reopened Greasy’s Dinner, where several folks had already turned up for a late lunch, while Fryman recruited both of his sons’ help in fixing the broken letters of his shop’s sign. McGucket wildly chased his raccoon wife down the street as he often did as several of the teens coolly cruised through town in Jenny’s car. At the Big Donut, Lars and Sadie were readjusting the outside seating, though it was clear they’d be back to business as usual soon as Blubbs and Durland pulled into the parking lot to get some coffee and pastries.

And as the kids watched all of the sights they were so used to seeing out of the windows of the van, they all couldn’t help but exchange relieved, hopeful smiles. The invasion had come, yes, and it had struck great fear into the hearts of nearly every citizen in town. But for as disastrous as things had nearly been, there were clear signs of recovery, of things returning to normal, or at least as close to normal as things got in a town like Gravity Falls. And yes, while there really wasn’t any chance of the invasion and evacuation being widely forgotten any time soon, people were starting to move past it, giving the kids an encouraging reminder that they could do the exact same thing too.

In just a few hours alone, nearly everything had seemed to change in ways that Steven, Dipper, Mabel, and even Connie still didn’t fully comprehend yet. And really, maybe there were parts of it that they would never be able to completely grasp or understand or cope with. Yet, despite all of the dramatic, drastic shifts that had occurred, despite how different everything seemed to be now, and whatever the future might hold as a result of all these changes, in a comforting, reassuring way, it was almost as if nothing had changed at all.
Chapter 42: Joy Ride

Chapter Summary

In which Steven is responsible, Dipper is broody, Mabel plays matchmaker, the teens are cool, and Stan and Amethyst cause immense property damage.

Chapter Notes

Meh. So this chapter's sorta all over the place, mostly since I kinda rushed to get it done but whatever. The next chapter is gonna be like the jewel of this arc so far so I'm not really that concerned. As for this one, its... ok. *shrug* Anyway, I hope you enjoy it all the same! (Keyword: ESCAPE)

XZGY'GI JST TDS CGWNV XS TGAG XLAU WTMKZV
OU WYUJ A SEYVFICK GZCRVI SX HAI
XZGY SMHF'V AHO, XZGY SMHF'V KCSA
BSW I SO FETT XZG DPRKWT WDYPV IO

Three days had passed since the invasion, and over the course of those days, all of the citizens of Gravity Falls had steadily steamed back into town and resumed their normal, everyday routines. And with the town fully populated once more, the Gems had quickly reached the conclusion that the wreckage near the lake could no longer remain where it was. After all, the last thing they wanted was for any of the less sensible townsfolk to stumble upon the broken, potentially dangerous tech and injure themselves or others somehow. So they had taken to the crash site, with Steven and the twins volunteering to come along and help in their efforts, seeing as how they had all been equally as involved in the disaster, to begin what would no doubt be a lengthy, arduous clean-up. Yet despite how tedious and time-consuming it would be, it a clean-up that had to happen as soon as possible; after all, the sooner Gravity Falls could heal from the scars the invasion had left behind, both physical and otherwise, the sooner things could finally go back to normal.

Or at least relatively normal, in the case usually was in Gravity Falls.

Thankfully, the ruins of the hand ship were finally safe enough to touch, no longer burning or even smoking as they had been three days prior. Its pieces were widespread all over the shore, and most of its hull still lay prone against the base of the nearby cliff, though the Gems had decided to take care of that last. The more readily accessible pieces were of their more immediate concern, which was why they wasted no time in starting to dig up whatever pieces they could with the intent of hauling everything away in successive loads. A task that, given the daunting size of some of the pieces, would be easier said than done.

“Do we really have to get every last piece?” Steven asked as he picked up a smaller piece of debris, one that easily fit in the palm of his hand. He was quickly distracted from it however, as Amethyst dug into the sand near him, pulling out a much larger chunk of metal and letting out a rowdy cheer of success as it plopped down heavily next to her.
“Yes,” Garnet confirmed, easily pulling a piece of debris that was even larger than she was out of the shore. “Having a wrecked ship lying around is too much of a risk. We’ve got to take care of it. All of it.”

“Aw, even these little itty-bitty baby pieces?” Mabel asked, nodding to the armful of very small debris she had collected. “But they’re so cute! I was thinking about stringing them all together to make a super-pretty, super-far out necklace! It would be the coolest souvenir ever!”

“Mabel, those are literally the remains of a dangerous Homeworld war ship that we all almost died on,” Dipper pointed out rather dryly as he passed by, toting a shovel. “Why in the world would you ever want a souvenir from that?”

“...You... might have a point...” Mabel frowned, remembering just how heavy her own initial emotional fallout following the invasion. With a wistful sigh, she dumped her handful of ship pieces into the pile of debris the Gems had already started. “They still would have made an adorable necklace though...”

“You know,” Pearl spoke up as she hauled a medium-sized scrap of metal over to the pile. “We really should start looking for Peridot’s escape pod too, assuming she even made it to Earth.”

“Maybe we got lucky and she didn’t make it...” Dipper muttered crossly as he began digging a piece of the ship out of the sand. The only one who had actually heard this dour, sullen comment was Steven, and while he was somewhat concerned and wanted to question Dipper’s meaning behind it, Garnet calmly interjected.

“Either way, we can’t let her wander around the Earth freely, especially if she intends on trying to start the Kindergarten up again,” the Gem leader mused, her tone firm and determined as she scanned the lay of the shore. “We have a lot of work ahead of us...”

As Garnet said this, Steven was in the midst of picking up a rather heavy chunk of the ship, though he did pause to affirm her resolve. He didn’t do so right away, however, as he glanced over at both of the twins; Dipper was still clearly sulking, not putting too much of an actual effort into retrieving any pieces of the hand ship, while Mabel absently fiddled with a smaller shard she had found, her expression seemingly lost in what looked like dissatisfied thought. For a moment, worry started to fill the young Gem once more as he wondered if they were both still having trouble coping with everything, which was a problem he wasn’t entirely sure he could relate to anymore. True, Steven did still have some lingering dread in light of it all, but for the most part, he largely felt fine. More than fine really; he felt ready to tackle any task that his guardians might entrust him with, no matter how big or how small. Including ridding the lake shore of the extensive collection of scattered debris currently marring it.

“Don’t worry, you guys,” Steven assured to the Gems, catching both Dipper and Mabel off guard by throwing an arm around both of their shoulders supportively. “We’re on it!”

“Uh... sure...” Mabel agreed with a halfhearted grin.

“Whatever...” Dipper sighed, crossing his arms as he glanced away bitterly.

“On it!” Steven cheered once more, ignoring their relative lack of enthusiasm. After all, this mess was partially his fault; which was why he was completely determined to take responsibility for it and make things right. Even if that meant hours of copious, intensive labor under the hot, early morning sun.

Which, as it turned out, was exactly what it meant, as the kids and the Gems all got to work in
The Gems were able to do most of the really heavy lifting on their own, though the kids contributed quite a bit by gathering up the smaller pieces, of which there were plenty. After clearing up most of the central shore, the group split up, with the Gems taking the majority of what they had collected so far away from the shore while the kids stayed and continued working. Or they mostly continued working. For while Steven and Mabel continued digging up all of the ship pieces they could find at a steady rate, it wasn’t long after the Gems had departed that Dipper gradually slowed his pace until he stopped working entirely. Instead, he opted to simply stand nearby, leaning against his shovel as it dug into the sand as he looked out towards the lake boredly and somewhat despondently. Of course, it didn’t take very long for Steven and Mabel to take notice of this as they worked hard to seek out and sort ship pieces, all while Dipper seemed to be declining to help them whatsoever.

“Uh… bro-bro?” Mabel spoke up with a slightly concerned frown. “Are you… gonna get back over here and help us clean this mess up?”

“Or are you just taking a quick breather?” Steven asked, wiping the sweat from his brow. “Cause if you are, t-that’s totally ok! Just as long as it’s not too long; some of these pieces are k-kinda heavy!” he groaned, pulling a rather large chunk of metal out of the sand, one that knocked him to the ground as it fell backwards towards him. “Whoa, that’s a big one!”

“Huh?” Dipper glanced over briefly, still rather disinterested before he dully turned his attention back to the lake. “Oh yeah, uh, sure, whatever you guys say.”

“Um, did you actually hear what we just asked?” Steven asked with a confused frown.

“I don’t know, something about taking a break?” Dipper shrugged, waving his hand dismissively and still not glancing back at either of them. “Either way, I honestly don’t really care.”

“Oh, for crying out loud…” Mabel sighed in exasperation as she put her shovel aside. “Dipper, please don’t tell me you’re still being all mopey and broody over what happened to-” She abruptly cut herself off as Dipper suddenly shot her a somewhat harsh look, largely knowing what she was about to say, which was why she wisely decided to rephrase things. “O-over what happened the other day. I thought you were finally starting to move past all that and feel better, just like I did!”

Dipper’s already unamused glower turned even more sullen and bitter as he largely scoffed his sister off. “I’m not moping or brooding,” he asserted pointedly. “I’m fine. I’m totally over—w-what happened.” He paused, letting out a terse, discouraged sigh as he glanced over the lake and muttered something else that Steven and Mabel didn’t quite catch. “It’s not like I can do anything about it anyway…”

“So… why do you seem so angry then?” Steven asked, concerned.

“I-I’m not angry!” Dipper snapped, almost proving himself wrong. “I just think that what we’re doing out here is kind of pointless.”

“Pointless?” the young Gem frowned in confusion. “But we’re helping the town by cleaning all this stuff away from the lake. Like Garnet said, all these ship pieces could be really dangerous, and people could really hurt themselves if they got near any of it. What we’re doing here is important!”

“It’s busywork, Steven,” Dipper deadpanned, rolling his eyes.

“Busywork?” both Steven and Mabel asked in unison, neither of them quiet understanding what he meant.
“All this stuff is busted,” Dipper explained, absently giving a nearby piece of rubble a light kick. “It’s not going to hurt anyone just by sitting here. And I’m pretty sure the only reason why the Gems are so insistent on us picking it all up is because they have no idea about what to do next. They don’t know how to track Peridot down, much less what to do with her if they even find her at all. And I bet they really don’t know what to do to save Lap-” He sharply cut himself off, his shoulders tensing as he noticed how the others looked to him with sympathy and understanding as he even partially mentioned the blue Gem’s name, sympathy and understanding he didn’t think he needed. “I-I mean… they don’t know what to do about Malachite…” There was an edge of controlled hostility in his tone as he brought up the toxic fusion, not hiding how much he resented the fact that she even currently existed as such at all.

A beat of somewhat awkward silence passed at this, in which Steven and Mabel exchanged a somewhat concerned glance, neither of them sure of what to say to this cynical line of reasoning. Still, if there was anything that was able to counter Dipper’s usual pessimism, it was Mabel’s boundless optimism. “Um, well… even if they don’t know what to do about all that stuff right now, I’m sure they’re working hard to come up with something!”

“Which is why we should work hard too!” Steven chimed in with an agreeing grin. “In fact, I bet if we work really hard, then the Gems will notice and be super impressed with how responsible we all are!”

Mabel gasped in excitement over the prospect of such an idea. “Oh! And maybe they might even take us out for ice cream as a reward! Or take a bunch of celebratory selfies with us!”

“Yeah!” Steven cheered brightly, exchanging a spirited high five with Mabel, much to Dipper’s apparent exasperation.

“Good to see nothing’s changed with you two…” he sighed, looking over to the lake once more and wishing, just as intently and fruitlessly as always, that the blue Gem wasn’t trapped beneath it.

Despite this brief diversion, the trio continued working as the hours went by, with the Gems only returning every now and then and only staying long enough to collect another load of scrap before leaving them alone once more. At first, the only one of them who seemed to be slacking off at all was Dipper, though he still did occasionally help the others in pulling up larger pieces of debris out of the sand. At first, Mabel and Steven were on the same level as each other with their work ethics, until the former gradually started to grow somewhat bored with their task and ended up mostly distracting herself by using smaller ship pieces to construct makeshift mosaics in the sand. That largely left the young Gem to toil away on his own, but he hardly seemed to notice this as he continued dutifully digging, not minding the heat of the summer sun or the fact that he was largely working alone. In fact, his thoughts were so caught up in his work to the point that it pushed almost everything else out, including where the wreckage he was cleaning up had even originated from in the first place. Which, Steven reasoned, was mostly a good thing; after all, he wasn’t too keen on thinking about the past few days in the first place.

Still, the young Gem was so engrossed in his work that he barely even noticed the group that had arrived at the lake until one of their number finally managed to literally snap him out of it. “Steven..? Steven!”

“Huh?!” Steven blinked, startled away from the piece he had been digging up as he looked in confusion. Much to his surprise, it wasn’t either of the twins who had gotten his attention, but rather Jenny, who was accompanied by most of the other teens: Wendy, Sour Cream, Buck, Nate, Lee, Tambry, and Thompson. “Oh! Uh, hi, you guys!”

“Yo,” Buck greeted with a cool nod, his hands in his jacket pockets.
“What’s up, dude?” Nate asked with a friendly grin.

“Welcome back to Earth, Steven,” Jenny chuckled jokingly, though the young Gem certainly didn’t take it that way.

“What? Who told you?!” Steven gasped in alarm, gripping his shovel in surprise over the fact that anyone save for the Gems, the twins, Connie, and his father, knew about his most recent extraterrestrial escapades.

“Whoa, calm down, man,” Wendy smirked casually. “You just looked like you were totally spacing out there.”

“Oh… uh… heh, yeah…” the young Gem glanced away rather bashfully. “I guess I was kinda zoning out a bit.”

“So, what’s with the shovel?” Sour Cream asked, curious. “Were you digging for buried treasure or a dead body or something?”

“Oh… uh… heh, yeah…” the young Gem glanced away rather bashfully. “I guess I was kinda zoning out a bit.”

“So, what’s with the shovel?” Sour Cream asked, curious. “Were you digging for buried treasure or a dead body or something?”

“Um… no?” Steven frowned. “It’s for-”

“Wendy!” Mabel suddenly broke through the conversation as she returned to that section of the shore, dropping all of the tiny shards she had collected upon seeing the group. “Dipper! Wendy and Jenny and Sour Cream and Lee and Nate and Buck and Tambry and Thompson are all here! Woo, that was a mouthful!” she chuckled as she bounded over to the teens. “You guys should really come up with a group name just to make things easier!”

“Oh, I know!” Thompson exclaimed ambitiously. “What if we called ourselves ‘the Super Neat Wonderfully Living Just Totally Bodacious Teens’! I’ve been coming up with that one for forever now! I-it even incorporates the first letter of all our names in it a-and-”

“Boo!” Lee cut in, rolling his eyes as Nate soon playfully joined in on the jeer.

“I’m not feelin’ it,” Buck shook his head. “That’s one too many names for a nickname.”

“Status update: Thompson is the worst at everything,” Tambry reported dully as she tapped away at her phone.

“Aw… sorry, guys…” Thompson sighed in disappointment as he hung his head.

“Hey! Look who finally made it,” Wendy remarked with a wry grin as Dipper finally made his way over, albeit nowhere near as excitable as Mabel had, seeing as how he was still somewhat sulky. “Good to see you’re still alive and kicking after that whole invasion thing. That goes for all three of you dorks.”

“W-why wouldn’t we be?” Dipper asked somewhat hesitantly, resisting the urge to take a fretful glance back at the lake at this.

“Uh… cause that evacuation biz was totally intense, duh,” Nate said somewhat dramatically.

“Tell me about it,” Jenny huffed. “My dad was flipping out while we were leaving town. I thought he was gonna have a heart attack or somethin’, until Gunga finally managed to get him to settle down.”

“If you think that’s bad, then you should have seen my dad,” Wendy crossed her arms. “I was completely ready to stay here and bash some alien heads in, but then he got all sentimental on me
and convinced me to leave…” The cashier grabbed her arm as she glanced away, admittedly flustered as she recalled the experience, though she still managed to mostly play it cool. “But if he hadn’t, then believe me, I totally would have been here, making those intergalactic creeps wish they’d never messed with our turf.”

“Yeah!” the other teens cheered in support of this bold proclamation, while the kids simply exchanged a rather uneasy glance. Fortunately though, Mabel was the first among them to speak up, her tone as blithe as ever, if not just a little bit shaken.

“So, uh… what brings you guys all the way out here?” she asked, giving the teens a wide, rather forced smile.

“We were just about to go chill in a parking lot and freak out some squares,” Buck began.

“But then we saw you guys wandering around out here and we figured we’d come by and say ‘hey’,” Sour Cream added with a shrug.

“But now that we’re here, you guys should totally come with us!” Jenny exclaimed to the kids with an inviting smile.

“Y-yeah!” Thompson agreed, albeit a bit nervously.

“Totally,” Nate and Lee nodded in unison.

“Meh,” Tambry consented, her attention still consumed with her phone.

“Oh, w-well…” Steven frowned, not really wanting to turn such a kind offer down. “I-I personally don’t have anything against squares. I like all basic shapes.”

“So do I! Circles are my favorite!” Mabel chimed in effervescently. “Oh, but octagons are really cool too! And so are parallelograms! Ooo, you know what, I think that one might be my new favorite since it’s so much fun to say: parallelogram. Parallele-ogram! Par-”

“So do I!” Mabel exclaimed, even if she didn’t really know what that meant. “Let’s go! Those old squares will wish they were parallelograms when we’re through with them!”

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“Ok, Mabel, we get it,” Dipper cut her off, rolling his eyes in slight annoyance.

“Heh, yeah, that’s what we’re talking about,” Buck said with a small chuckle. “You three got that much-needed counterpart to our cynical world view. You have to come.”

“It’s good energy flow,” Sour Cream nodded just as evenly.

“Sounds like it!” Mabel exclaimed, even if she didn’t really know what that meant. “Let’s go! Those old squares will wish they were parallelograms when we’re through with them!”

“Actually… we can’t,” Steven interjected with an apologetic frown. “Sorry, guys, but we’ve got a lot of important stuff to do here. Maybe later.”

“Aww…” all of the teens and Mabel moaned in disappointed unison.

“Come on, you guys,” Wendy said with an encouraging grin. “It’ll be fun. At least it’s bound to beat hanging around here doing whatever all day. Are you sure none of you are not up for it?”

“Mm…” Mabel frowned indecisively, exchanging a glance with Steven who shook his head, reminding her of their shared responsibility. “Nah… I don’t think we should.”

“Yeah, I’m up for it,” Dipper suddenly cut in, his manner casual as he stepped over to join the teens. Steven and Mabel were both quite taken aback by his unexpected choice, as well as the fact
that he showed no apparent signs of apologizing to either of them for essentially ditching them both. The teens, on the other hand, were quite excited over having recruited at least one of the kids to join them along on whatever escapades they had planned.

“All right! Dr. Funtimes is back!” Lee cheered as both him and Nate gave Dipper a hearty pat on the back.

“Looks like we’ll have to make room for one more in the car then,” Jenny chuckled.

“We can just make Thompson run along beside it,” Tambry suggested boredly.

“Aw man, not again…” Thompson pouted fretfully.

“Wha—But bro-bro, what about the ship?” Mabel asked. “We still have a lot of pieces we need to clean up!”

“So what?” Dipper asked rather callously. “Mabel, it’s not like any of this junk is going anywhere without us. And honestly, if it did, then it would just save us the trouble of having to pick all of it up.”

“B-but… this is our responsibility!” Steven argued earnestly. “The Gems are trusting us to—”

“To what? Clean up a bunch of garbage off the shore?” Dipper asked, his tone still somewhat harsh and sardonic, something that Wendy in particular took notice of as she looked to him with sudden concern, knowing that such rude behavior wasn’t really like him. “Oh wow, what a huge responsibility! Remind me to thank them for forcing us to do it when I get back.”

“Wait a sec, guys,” Wendy interjected, stopping the group before they could set out. “Uh, maybe we should just hang out here for a while…” she purposed, sparing a rather sympathetic glance Steven and Mabel’s way.

“Aw, what?” Sour Cream frowned. “But Wendy, this place is a total drag. The vibes here are completely cramping my rhythm.”

“Yeah, it’s like some kind of creepy alien junkyard,” Nate agreed staunchly. “And not the cool kind either.”

“Maybe,” Wendy shrugged coolly. “But think of it this way; all this stuff is trashed anyway, which means there’s nothing stopping us from having a little fun and trashing it up even more…”

“Wha—No fair!” Lee scoffed. “You know how we can’t resist letting out all our pent-up teen aggression through breaking stuff!”

“Let’s throw rocks at it,” Buck suggested, just as monotone as ever. “It’ll show the man who’s boss.”

“Yeah!” the other teens cheered, easily on board with this impromptu plan as Steven and Mabel started to perk up a bit, even if Dipper was rather perturbed that they were staying by the lake at all.

“You guys really wanna hang out here with us?” Steven asked with a small smile, though a part of him was a bit irritated at the lengthy interruption the teens had caused in the first place.

“Sure,” Jenny replied with a warm smile. “Who knows? Breaking up all this weird alien junk might be kinda fun.”
“Heck yeah it will be!” Mabel exclaimed excitedly. “And all the extra hands will make things go by…” she paused, quickly counting out how many teens there were. “Seven times as fast! Oh! And I wonder if we could get the people up there in that pretty heart shaped balloon to help us out too!”

“Balloon?” Dipper raised a confused eyebrow at this. “Mabel, what are you-”

“Whoa, she’s right!” Steven exclaimed, pointing up to the sky. “Look!”

The others all turned their glances upward to see what was unquestionably a flock of hot air balloons, coming in all shapes and colors, gently cascading high over Gravity Falls. All of them seemed to be gracefully gliding in the same direction, towards the wide open fairgrounds on the far end of town, as the kids and teens watched the procession in apt wonder and curiosity.

“Oh dude! It’s the Woodstick Festival!” Wendy exclaimed with a newfound grin as the other teens murmured amongst themselves in excitement.

“Wait, the Wood—what?” Dipper asked, unfamiliar with the event.

“It’s this annual outdoor concert featuring Oregon’s up and coming Indie bands,” Wendy explained, snatching Tambry’s phone away from her, much to her protest, as she pulled up a promotion for the concert. “They’re all coming! Scarves Indoors, Wood Grain on Everything, Love God, and a ton of others! It’s like, one of the only actually fun things that happens around here.”

“Looks like that evacuation thing ended just in time,” Nate commented, still looking up to the balloons. “Still, no stupid aliens can stop the WOODSTICK FESTIVAL!” he cheered as Lee loudly joined him while Thompson falteringly attempted to join in.

“Meh, it’d be better if they had some DJs to come in and play too…” Sour Cream remarked somewhat wistfully.

“Maybe this year, SC,” Jenny said, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Maybe this year.”

“Anyway, if the balloons are already coming in, then that means the festival probably starts tonight,” Wendy continued, looking to the kids as she handed Tambry back her phone. “You guys should totally go with us! No offense, but you guys seem pretty tense; so maybe a wild night of fun with an awesome crew like us is exactly what you need to loosen up and kick back!”

“Aw, that does sound like a lot of fun, Wendy…” Steven glanced away fretfully. “But… we really shouldn’t. Like I said before, we still have a lot of work to do around here, and-”

“Even tonight?” Jenny asked, somewhat concerned. “Shouldn’t you be done for the day by then?”

“Seems to me like you guys would be all freed up to hang out,” Buck nodded. “When the sun goes to bed is when we wake up. Even if we’re awake right now while the sun is out. It’s like, irony or something.”

“Er—w-well, we can’t hang out at night!” the young Gem hastily exclaimed, not really wanting to turn the teens’ friendly offer down. Still, he knew he couldn’t let himself get carried away with trivial distractions. After all, that was what he felt had largely lent to his complete unpreparedness for the invasion and its aftermath; he couldn’t let himself be caught off guard like that again. “Night is for dreaming.”

“Night is whatever you want it to be,” Sour Cream shrugged nonchalantly. “Time is an illusion.”
“Well then, you can count all three of us in!” Mabel grinned, throwing an arm around Dipper and Steven’s shoulders. “Oh, we’re gonna have so much fun! Gathering around campfires, sleeping in teepees, listening to those old drums made out of animal skins—”

“It’s an indie concert, Mabel,” Dipper pointed out dryly. “Not an Indian concert.”

“Indie, Indian,” Mabel shrugged, mostly just excited at the prospect of finally getting to do something out of sheer, genuine fun again after the intensity of the past few days. And, she also hoped that perhaps that fun would carry over to both Steven and Dipper, neither of whom seemed fully back to their usual selves, even three days after it was all said and done. Certainly a fun evening was good friends was exactly what they all needed to get things back to the way they were supposed to be. “Same difference.”

The teens let out a shared, warm laugh over Mabel’s refreshing enthusiasm, though it didn’t last too long before a low, almost pained groaning rose up over the shore. The group shared a startled gasp at this, all of them surprised at the fact that they apparently weren’t the only ones here in this otherwise abandoned locale.

“W-what was that?” Steven asked nervously, gripping his shovel tightly as he glanced around.

“Shh!” Wendy quieted the anxious murmurs of her friends as she paused for a moment to listen to the ongoing moan. “It’s coming from over there.”

She nodded to a somewhat deep ditch a ways down the shore, left behind by a larger piece of rubble that the Gems had already taken away quite some time ago. The group approached the hole warily, none of them entirely sure what they’d find, especially amidst the wreckage of the ship that had nearly destroyed the entire town.

“Well, it’s definitely not a ghost,” Jenny remarked dryly, her hands on her hips. “But it might as well be one…”

The others all nodded in agreement as they looked into the pit on Robbie, who lay within it, completely unaware of their presence as he clung onto a picture of Wendy, morosely groaning in emotional agony all the while. “Oh, why did she leave me…?” he asked himself, his tone rife with
sorrow and remorse.

“Uh… Robbie?”

The angsty teen perked up instantly, startled by the sound of his ex-girlfriend’s crush as he bolted upright, hurriedly hiding his picture of her out of view. “W-Wendy!” he exclaimed before letting out a forced, nervous chuckle. “Oh, uh… W-what’s up? I’m just hanging out in this ditch, you know. R-regular… regular day for me…”

“Whoa, dude, we haven’t seen you in like, a million years,” Lee remarked, somewhat confused.

“Yeah, we were starting to think that you had like, died, or something,” Sour Cream added, raising an eyebrow. “Where have you been?”

“Wait. You’re not still mourning our breakup, are you?” Wendy asked, rather surprised by such an idea seeing as how she had gotten over it weeks ago.

“What? No way!” Robbie exclaimed defensively, pushing his picture of the cashier even further behind him, even if it was clear he wasn’t really fooling anyone.

“Robbie, look,” Wendy began, glancing away awkwardly. “We split up forever ago. It’s really sweet that you would throw yourself into a ditch created by weird alien scrap metal for me, but man, time to move on.”

“Huh, what? I-I’ve totally moved on!” Robbie protested, though he was quickly proven wrong as his cell phone began to ring with a song he had written and recorded, one that clearly indicated the contrary: “Wendy, I miss you so much! I’ll never move on. Never, ever!” Robbie froze at this, realizing he had been outed in front of all of his friends before he quickly threw his cell phone out of the ditch, not even noticing as it broke against a nearby piece of rubble. “T-that was a different, unrelated Wendy! I swear!”

“Dude, this is getting really awkward…” Lee whispered to Nate, aside, even if all of the other teens, and even the kids, were thinking the exact same thing.

“Seriously,” Tambry remarked, glancing up from her phone. For a moment, it looked as though she was going to say more, but apparently let it go as she glanced down into the ditch at Robbie, glancing away from him while pushing a stray piece of hair behind her ear, apparently flustered.

“Good luck with your bizarre coping mechanism, Robbie,” Buck said as casually as ever as all of the teens began to take their leave. “We’re gonna go somewhere where the mood is less…”

“Depressing?” Tambry suggested, seemingly adamantly refusing to glance back at Robbie.

“I was gonna say melancholy, but that works too.”

Robbie simply sighed dejectedly as his friends left, opting to grab a nearby shovel and start pouring sand on his head dejectedly in a false attempt at burying himself. The only one who stayed by and watched this was Mabel, who couldn’t deny that, despite all of the angsty teen’s many, many flaws, she was rather worried for him. While she hadn’t been present to see Robbie and Wendy’s breakup, she had heard from both Steven and Dipper that it had been rather hard on both of them, though clearly Robbie was still taking the brunt of it even weeks later. And while Mabel had started to grow somewhat accustomed to seeing mourning and moping over the past several days, in both herself and her brother and best friend, that didn’t mean she wanted to see anyone else suffer through any such emotional anguish, for whatever reason. Even for something as largely minor and insignificant as this.
“Guys, wait up!” she called after the teens and the boys before they could get too far away from the pit. “Robbie’s in pain. We can’t just ditch him here. And I mean that both literally and figuratively, since he’s in an actual ditch.”

“Come on, Mabel,” Dipper scoffed, rolling his eyes as the teens simply continued on, though him and Steven lingered back a bit. “This is Robbie we’re talking about here.”

“But he’s suffering!” Mabel argued earnestly. “How can I be happy if I know someone else is sad? Steven, you agree with me that we need to help him, don’t you?”

“Uh, well… normally I would…” Steven scratched the back of his neck as he glanced away guiltily. “But we still have so much left to do before that concert thing tonight. I just don’t think we have the time to help him right now. Sorry, Mabel.”

“Yeah, and besides,” Dipper added succinctly. “We’re finally in good with Wendy’s friends. I mean, they even want to take us to a concert tonight and everything! With Robbie gone, there’s a good social balance. Maybe we should just let a good thing be and use this as a chance to just forget about everything and relax, you know? I think we’ve earned that much after everything we’ve just been through…”

Mabel pouted in disappointment as both of the boys headed off to rejoin the teens and get back to work on cleaning up. For as complacent as they seemed to be, she was nowhere close to that level when it came to this situation; her inner altruist was beckoning her, urging her to help mend Robbie’s clearly broken heart in any way that she could. After all, it had been quite some time since she had concentrated her efforts into helping someone other than herself, as the emotional upheaval of the past several days didn’t help much with that. Perhaps working hard to aid a poor soul in need was exactly what she needed to get back to her back to her usual pep and verve. Or, at the very least, hopefully busying herself with something as down to Earth as this could help her finally take her mind off of her last few lingering woes and worries concerning the invasion and it’s still ongoing fallout.

And so, despite the fact that she was utterly alone in her resolve, Mabel glanced back to Robbie with a smile of determination, knowing that she would do whatever she had to in order to help him finally move on.

“Just eat me already, man…” the teen muttered to a vulture that had landed near him, only for the bird of prey to start viciously attacking him. “Ah! I was just being dramatic! Quit it! Ow!” He shrieked as the vulture kept pecking at him relentlessly, despite his efforts to beat it away with his shovel. “Ow! My face! Vulture!”

Of course, Mabel’s resolved grin slowly faded upon seeing this disastrous display, knowing that she certainly had her work cut out for her here.

With the evacuation over and the threat of any immediate danger lifted, Stan was anticipating an upcoming influx of customers coming to the Mystery Shack over the next several days. After all, he knew from experience that in the aftermath of highly stressful situations, that people often tended to flock towards mindless amusement to distract themselves from their lingering worries and fears. And if there was one thing that the conman prided himself on being able to provide, it was mindless amusement. Which was why he was hard at work putting together his latest exhibit, something he was actually rather glad to do after the upheaval of the past several days.
“Puttin’ a rainbow wig on a big fat white gorilla…” Stan sang along as he did just that, sewing a rainbow afro onto a taxidermized albino gorilla. He was soon cut off, however, as the supposedly dead gorilla he was working on gruffly grunted, completely out of nowhere.

“Hey! Who you callin’ fat? You’re one to talk with that man girdle of yours!” the “gorilla” exclaimed curtly, startling the conman quite a bit. He let out a startled cry as he haphazardly fell off his short stepladder fearfully, before he was met with a rouge laugh of triumph, one that he recognized as soon as he heard it.

“Amethyst!” Stan growled, glancing up to the roof above the porch, where the purple Gem had decided to perch herself to carry out her impromptu prank.

“Heh, sorry, Stan!” Amethyst smirked as she leapt down to the ground and casually leaned against the gorilla. “But the minute I saw you working on this big ol’ lug, I knew I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to use it to get a good laugh. And seeing as how boring of a day I’ve been having, I really needed it.”

“Boring?” Stan raised an eyebrow as he crossed his arms. “Didn’t you three and the kids just bring that giant green space hand down? After something like that, I’d think that you’d have your fill of excitement and thrills for a while.”

“Well yeah, that was fun,” Amethyst agreed. “But now we gotta clean all that junk by the lake up before people can ‘hurt themselves’ on it or whatever. Heck, I bet Garnet and Pearl are gonna show up here any minute now to-”

“Amethyst! There you are!” the white Gem interjected right on cue as her and Garnet arrived from the temple.

“Pfft, speak of the devil,” Stan deadpanned to Amethyst, who simply let out a brief, amused chuckle.

“What do you think you’re doing down here?” Pearl asked her teammate hotly. “Just because we’ve disposed of another load doesn’t mean that our work is anywhere close to done yet! The kids are still down at the lake working and we should be too!”

“Let me get this straight,” Stan interjected caustically. “First you three let my niece and nephew sneak onto an actual alien war ship, then you crash that ship into the lake with them on it, then you get them do community service for you by forcing them to clean up the mess that you made? Does that sound about right?”

“We didn’t let them sneak onto the ship,” Garnet corrected evenly. “They did that on their own.”

“And we’re also not forcing them to help us clean everything up,” Pearl pointed out. “They volunteered to help. Really, they’re free to leave for the day any time they want.”

“Man, I wish I was that lucky…” Amethyst remarked with a tired pout.

“Yeah, well, just as long as you keep the kids from getting tangled up in any more of your ‘intergalactic adventures’, then we won’t have any problems,” Stan said, feigning a lack of concern for his nibblings, even if he did still very much remember Mabel’s absolute breakdown over the whole situation yesterday. “I’ve got a hard enough time trying to keep tabs on those two without having to worry about them getting themselves into all your crazy space operas.”

“No promises,” Garnet replied, adjusting her shades.
Pearl prepared to elaborate on this, but before she could, an abrupt, harsh breeze whipped through the trees, catching everyone off guard. “What the…?” Stan frowned in confusion, trailing off as the wig he had attached to the gorilla went flying off in the wind. However, as he stole a glance up at the sky, he let out an alarmed gasp upon seeing the cascade of colorful balloons peacefully gliding overhead. “Oh no! Hot air balloons?!” The conman’s newfound dread grew even more as a group of teens riding mountain bikes rode by blithely. “Six gear bikes?!”

As the Gems exchanged an admittedly confused glance over Stan’s apparent panic, a colorful, albeit beaten up van pulled up to the shack, another teen sitting atop of it, clad in very casual clothes as he loosely strummed his guitar and sang along. “Singing by the open road! My shoes are so open toed!”

“Folk music!” Stan exclaimed, aptly horrified. “No! It can’t be!”

“Stan, what in the world are you on abo-” Pearl was cut off as the conman suddenly grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her frantically amidst his hysteria. “It’s the Woodstick Festival!” he cried, distraught as he hurried over a nearby box of various supplies. “Sooos!” The handyman poked his head out of the shack at his employer’s hasty prompting. “Lock down the shack and hide my shirts before anyone tie-dies them!”

“Aw geez, not that dumb old Woodstick thing again,” Amethyst rolled her eyes. “None of the bands that play there are ever any good. They should get some real music to really pump the joint up instead of all that bogus hipster junk.”

“Hm, I’m surprised they’re still holding that festival this year at all, considering the evacuation…” Pearl mused, looking up to the balloons. “Still, I suppose it gives us all the more reason to hurry up and finish cleaning all that debris off the shore, especially since there’s going to be so many extra people in town…”

“You’re right,” Garnet nodded in even agreement as her and Pearl turned to leave. “Come on, Amethyst.”

“Aw, but I wanna watch Stan knock some pretentious teens outta the sky!” the purple Gem protested, standing beside Stan as he aimed a crossbow up at the flock of balloons

“They’re slow,” the conman commented tensely as he set his sights on the closest one. “I could probably take a few down if I-”

“Wait, Mr. Pines!” Soos interjected, hurrying to push the conman’s crossbow out of the way right as he fired it. Fortunately, it only managed to strike a stray bird, but even so, the handyman began his earnest appeal. “I’ve been thinking. Every year this festival comes by and every year you shun what could be potential customers.”

“You really think I could make money off these free-loading, kale-munching freak shows?” Stan asked, lowering his crossbow in slight intrigue.

“You just gotta figure out what appeals to them,” Soos shrugged, figuring it was worth a try at least.

“Hm…” the conman mused thoughtfully, glancing up at the hot air balloons again and seeing a newfound opportunity instead of an unwanted nuisance. “How do I appeal to young people…?”

“Oh! Oh! Lemme help!” Amethyst exclaimed to Stan with a daring grin. “I may be hundreds of years old, but I’m like, super in the know about what all the really cool kids are into nowadays. Or
at least I know more than you do, old man.”

“Hey!” Stan protested crossly. “I know plenty about what’s ‘hip’ and ‘whack’ with the kids!”

“Nobody says either of those words anymore,” Garnet remarked bluntly, hands on her hips.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” Pearl cut in, crossing her arms in disapproval. “We don’t have time to waste around here indulging in yet another one of your hairbrained schemes, Stan. We have important business to attend to!”

“What, you mean like picking up a bunch of garbage?” Stan asked with a wry smirk.

“A-and like finding Peridot’s missing escape pod!” the white Gem huffed defensively.

“Who’s what-now?”

“Ugh, it’s this whole dumb thing from a few days ago,” Amethyst groaned with a wave of her hand. “Either way, you guys can go on ahead without me. I’ll catch up in a bit.”

“You better!” Pearl exclaimed warningly. “Because we all need to—”

Garnet cut her off by placing a hand on her shoulder as she started to lead her away, but not before imparting one final word of advice to the conman. “Young people like hot air balloons,” she said, the faintest hint of preceptive amusement in her tone. “Just roll with that.”

Stan and Amethyst exchanged a knowing grin as the pair departed, both of them already starting to conceive largely the same ambitious idea. “So…” the conman remarked, dollar signs practically in his eyes as he glanced up at the incoming balloons once more. “They’re into hot air balloons, are they…?”

Fittingly enough for a teen with a style and attitude as dour and gothic as Robbie, his house was nestled in the town graveyard. More specifically, it was the funeral home, which was where Mabel had decided her first stop should be in trying to lift the teen out of his funk and get him back on track to a proper, healthy romance once more.

“Alright, Mabel,” she said to herself with apt resolve as she approached the funeral parlor’s front door. “Robbie’s a broken teacup, but you’re going to piece him back together! And then he’ll feel great, and I’ll feel great, and everyone will feel great! Great!” With a bright smile, she rang the doorbell, only for her grin to fade as it sounded out as funeral chimes as opposed to an actual bell. “Ok, this could get intense…” she muttered somewhat anxiously, realizing that she had literally no idea as to what Robbie’s family might be like. Though as the door opened, she was unable to hold back a surprised gasp as she quickly found out.

“Howdy do!” Mr. and Mrs. Valentino greeted in bright, cheerful unison, huge smiles on both of their faces as they stood with their arms wrapped around each other affectionately. As opposed to the dark, gloomy manner of their teenage son, the couple seemed fairly normal, if not a bit overly upbeat and folksy. All the same, they both greeted their young visitor with an air of welcoming exuberance, which had honestly been the last thing Mabel had been expecting, though she was delighted it nonetheless.

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“Oh, well he doesn’t like to talk about us,” Mr. Valentino chuckled. “He always says we’re ‘too cheerful’ for funeral directors.” Mrs. Valentino joined him in a bright bout of laughter over this before they opened the door wider for Mabel to enter. “Come in! Come in!”

She gladly did so, charmed by the Valentino’s hospitality as they lead her into the den, which, appropriately enough for a funeral parlor, was adorned with plenty of surprisingly decorative urns, headstones, and coffins, a few of which even held actual corpses within them. “Cracker platter?” Mrs. Valentino offered, grabbing a tray off of the coffin-made-table.

“Oh, no time for crackers, sorry,” Mabel declined politely. “I’m here to cheer Robbie up. Cannot have a dry cracker mouth for that.”

“Oh, well then allow me to get him for you!” Mrs. Valentino quipped enthusiastically before calling upstairs. “Robbie Stacey Valentino! There’s a little girl here to see you!” Upon receiving no response from her son, Mr. Valentino simply smiled blithely once more while turning to Mabel. “I’m sure he’s busy brooding again. It’s his favorite past time, you know! You can go on up. And could you bring him his lunch?” she handed Mabel a plate of spaghetti with meatballs arranged into the shape of a wide smiley face.

“Lady, I like your style,” Mabel smirked in approval at this culinary choice before departing to head upstairs.

“You know who would look good in a sweater like that?” Mrs. Valentino remarked to her husband as their guest left. “Mrs. Grabelson’s remains!”

“Oh absolutely!” Mr. Valentino heartily agreed.

Meanwhile, Mabel continued making her way upstairs, her eager smile still apparent as she passed by a row of photos, one that showed Robbie’s apparent gradual progression from a cheerful child to the angsty teen he was now. Regardless of how hard this task might be because of that fact, Mabel was still determined to carry out her self-imposed mission, for more reasons than just the obvious.

“Robbie!” she called brightly as she reached the teen’s bedroom door and knocked. “It’s Mabel!”

“Who?” Robbie asked from inside.

“Remember me? I’m like girl-Dipper!”

“Ugh, go away!” the teen growled crossly.

“I heard a come in!” Mabel quipped as she opened the door, flipping the lights on in the otherwise completely black room as she did so.

“Hey!” Robbie shot upright on his bed, recoiling from the sudden light as he shot his visitor a bitter glare. “Listen, kid. Nobody in the Pines family is welcome here. In case you forgot, your stupid brother is the one who ruined my life!”

“And Mabel’s the one who’s gonna fix it!” Mabel contested, pulling up a chair after sitting Robbie’s lunch down. “Listen, Robbie, I always used to see you as a creepy jerk, like the human version of rat poison.”

“Ugh, go on,” Robbie rolled his eyes, sitting up on his bed as he realized she wasn’t going to leave so easily.
“But when I saw you at the lake today, I realized: Robbie’s not a bad guy. He’s just a heartbroken soul who needs love and gloves with fingers.”

“Hey! Fingerless gloves look awesome!” Robbie protested defensively.

“No, they don’t,” Mabel shook her head, still smiling. “Robbie, you just need a good matchmaker. I guarantee I’ll find you true love, or twice your sadness back!”

The teen let out an exasperated sigh, clearly far from enthused by this plan, though he found himself agreeing with it nonetheless. “Fine, whatever,” he scoffed, though his disinterested did waver a bit as he gave his new matchmaker a somewhat intrigued glance. “But uh, just out of curiosity… d-did you have anyone special in mind?”

“Well, let’s just consider your pool of available romantic options here,” Mabel hopped to her feet as she began to pace around and rattle off names. “There’s… Lazy Susan? No, she’s too old… Grenda? No, too young… Sadie? Nah, her and Lars are clearly already an item… Pearl? No, she still has a huge crush on Rose… Multi-Bear? Hm… We’ll put him in the maybe pile… Who could it be…? Who could possibly be superficial and gothy enough for-” She cut herself off with a sharp gasp of realization, turning back to Robbie with a huge, excited grin. “I got it! Robbie, the girl of your dreams is none other than… Tambry!”


“I can’t believe I’ve never realized it before!” Mabel quipped, clearly caught up in revelry over her idea. “You two are perfect for each other! You’re both so sulky and checked out from reality! You’ll go great together!”

“Whoa, kid, what makes you think I’m even interested in Tambry?” Robbie asked, scoffing. “I mean, dating somebody I already know? It’s kinda like admitting defeat. Besides, if I had wanted to date her, I would have done it by now. She’s a little out of my league.” He paused, glancing down to the corner of his hoodie and noticing a yellow stain. “Whoa, is that mustard? Don’t wanna waste that bad boy.”

Mabel frowned as she watched him haphazardly lick said stain, still determined to meet her goal, even if her initial suggestion didn’t go over as well as she had hoped. “Oh, well, uh… I-I guess you didn’t see the way Tambry looked at your earlier when we were all at the lake.”

“What, you mean with disgust?”

“No, silly! I mean completely lovestruck!” Mabel pointed out, remembering the flustered glances Tambry had stolen in Robbie’s direction. “She’s totally got a thing for you, believe me.”

“Y-you really think so?” Robbie asked somewhat hesitantly, though there were hints of newfound hope in his tone.

“Think so? I know so!” Mabel nodded firmly. “She so wants you! Which means you should at least meet her halfway and give her a chance! Who knows? Maybe she’ll help you finally get over W-E-N-D-Y…”

“…Who?” Robbie blinked blankly, not understanding her pointed spelling out of his ex’s name.

“You know what, forget it,” Mabel smiled with a wave of her hand. “Because tonight, the only thing you’ll need to think about is romance!” Of course, no more than a moment after her bold proclamation, she happened to notice that the teen was still licking away at the stain on his hoodie. “Ok, seriously, Robbie, that’s disgusting.”
True to their word, the teens stayed by the shore to keep the kids company while they worked, even if Mabel had managed to discreetly slip away without telling anyone quite some time ago. Still, despite their former excitement to help break the larger pieces of the ship apart, they soon derailed from this task upon realizing just how sturdy and durable the lingering pieces of its hull were. And so in time, they had pressed back to simply hang out near the edge of the shore, all of them far too excited for the Woodstick Festival that evening to really focus on working. Soon enough, Dipper joined them in relaxing, still not too keen on putting too much of an effort into cleaning up, which left Steven to work largely on his own. Still, the young Gem didn’t complain as he dutifully continued shoveling away at the sand for any stray ship pieces he could find, knowing that it would be worth it when the Gems saw all of his hard work.

“So…” Wendy began as her and Dipper leaned against a larger piece of debris not too far away from where Steven was working. The other teens were also close by, though most of them were engaged in watching Nate and Lee dare Thompson to lick a piece of the hand ship, which he hesitantly did. “How’d that freaky hand ship crash all the way out here anyway? What, did it like, blow itself up or something? Because that’s what it should have done in the first place if you ask me.”

“It’s… a long story…” Dipper said hesitantly, shoving his hands into his vest pockets as he glanced away. “You probably wouldn’t believe it even if we told you.”

“Whoa, wait,” Nate cut in, suddenly intrigued as he looked between Dipper and Steven. “You mean you dudes were actually there when this thing went down?”

“Well… we weren’t exactly here when the ship crashed… as much as we were… on it…” Steven paused from his work, albeit briefly.

 Needless to say that the teens all gasped in apt amazement at this, all of them gathering around to hear more. “No way!” Sour Cream exclaimed in awe.

“You guys gotta tell us more! What happened?!?” Jenny pressed eagerly.

“Yeah, h-how’d you even get on that scary ship in the first place?” Thompson asked apprehensively.

“And how’d you even survive it blowing up like this?” Lee asked, puzzled.

“Spare no details,” Buck urged coolly. “I have a feeling this is gonna be legendary.”

At all of this prompting, Steven and Dipper exchanged a rather uneasy glance, neither of them even sure about where to start, much less if they even wanted to talk about any of this at all. After all, the wounds they had garnered from the invasion, while all purely emotional now, were still quite fresh; neither of them were really ready to reopen those wounds just for the sake of recounting their intense, rather traumatic experience so soon. But even so, Steven began to explain, hoping that he could get away with only summarizing the less daunting parts at best.

“Um… Well, we came back in the middle of the evacuation,” he began tentatively, glancing down anxiously. “A-and then the ship landed and these really mean Gems got out and they beat the Crystal Gems up and then they, uh, basically captured us and took us into space.”

“So me and Mabel snuck onto the ship to rescue them,” Dipper continued, his tone detached as he left out the part that was still haunting him the most. “Then we took control of it and it crashed into
the cliff. And… that’s pretty much everything that happened.”

“Y-yeah…” Steven nodded in hesitant agreement. “That… that’s about it…”

“Whoa, so… you guys fought a bunch of evil aliens and won?” Wendy asked, quite impressed as the other teens muttered their additional amazement. “That’s like, seriously the most hardcore thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Oh, w-well, I dunno if ‘win’ would be the right word for it…” Steven frowned, glancing out towards the lake. “But nobody died or got seriously hurt so… I guess that’s a plus.”

“So is that why you guys are here cleaning all this far out junk up?” Sour Cream asked.

“Yeah, I guess,” Dipper shrugged, still largely unenthused with the task in general.

“The way I see it, we kind of helped make this mess, so it’s our job to clean it,” Steven said firmly as he got back to digging. “It may be a lot of work, but somebody has to do it.”

“Wow, that’s pretty responsible of you, Steven,” Jenny remarked with a soft grin. “But are you sure you’re not working yourself too hard out here?”

“W-what do you mean?”

“Dude, you’re like, drenched in sweat,” Nate pointed out truthfully. “You kinda look like you’re about to K.O. from exhaustion, no offense.”

“Seriously, Steven, you should probably step away and take a break for a while,” Wendy suggested earnestly. “We don’t want you clonking out on us during the concert tonight.”

“Oh, no, I’ll be fine!” the young Gem reassured, putting on a fake smile and laugh. “After all, the more I stop working, the longer it takes to get it all done! So, uh… yeah…” Steven trailed off awkwardly, subtly putting some distance between himself and the teens so he could continue working without any further distractions. While he appreciated their concern, he admittedly thought that their assumption on his work ethic wasn’t quite accurate; while they believed he was working hard, the young Gem didn’t think he was working hard enough. By even taking the short breaks that he had to stop and converse, Steven knew he wasn’t being anywhere near as efficient or vigilant as he should be. He was there to work, and nothing else; that was what the Gems were expecting of him and that was what he was expecting of him too. The time for fun and games and all of the thing he used to take for granted prior to the invasion were over; now was the time for him to truly be a serious, committed, steadfast member of the Crystal Gems.

Still, despite Steven’s apparent resolve, that didn’t mean that the teens weren’t still concerned for their young friend. For a moment or two, they stood by, muttering their worries and sympathies for him before they unceremoniously split up to help clean up debris wherever they could, hoping that they could alleviate the young Gem’s self-imposed burden at least somewhat. As Wendy moved to help with the clean-up effort, she paused however, upon noticing that Dipper didn’t join her, as he instead remained leaning against the ship piece, staring out at the lake almost wistfully, letting out a small, melancholy sigh as he did so. “Uh… Dipper?” Wendy frowned in slight concern as she turned back to face him fully. “Aren’t you gonna help Steven clean all this junk up?”

“Eh, he’s got it covered,” Dipper replied rather absently, his attention still focused entirely on the lake.

Upon hearing this rather hallow response, Wendy figured that she had more than enough reason to be fully concerned by just how dour and apathetic he seemed to be acting as of late. “Hey, are…
are you ok, man?” she asked, taking a step back towards him. “You seem kind of... out of it, and
not in the good way.”

“Huh?” Dipper flinched at this, finally glancing over at the cashier with apparent alarm. He was
quick to regain his composure, however, upon noticing the worried look she was giving him,
almost as if he had been noticeably wounded, which, in a way he had been. But that wasn’t
something that he thought anyone, including his former crush, really needed to know. “Uh, no,
don’t... don’t worry, I’m ok,” he assured as he hurried to follow after her to go help the others.

“Are you sure?” Wendy asked, not entirely convinced.

“Yeah,” Dipper nodded insistently as he pressed on ahead, but not before sparing yet another brief,
longing look towards the lake, silently reminding himself for what felt like the hundredth time now
that there was nothing he could do. “I-I... I’m sure...”

As the sun started to sink into dusk, the teens reached the unanimous conclusion that the workday
was done for both them and the kids. With the Woodstick Festival kicking off in just a few hours,
the collective group prepared to set out from the lake shore and head over to the concert in Jenny’s
car, even if it was a bit of a cramped ride for everyone to squeeze into. It wasn’t too long before
they left that Mabel finally returned, dragging a somewhat unenthused Robbie behind her,
something none of the teens really minded seeing as how they hadn’t hung out with him in quite
some time. Still, Mabel made sure to subtly remind the angsty teen about all of the romance advice
she had given him on the way there as she ensured that he secured a spot in the car next to Tambry,
who was still just as distracted by her phone as always. All the same, after they were all pressed
together into the vehicle, the group set out as Jenny took the scenic route on purpose, seeing as
how it was such a pleasant summer evening.

Spirits were mostly high amongst the group as they started on their way, with Lee and Nate
continually elbowing Thompson for fun as he was sandwiched tightly between them. Sour Cream
controlled the radio up front, already not too excited about having to listen to an evening of indie
music as he instead turned some more timely beats on amidst conversing with Jenny, Buck, and
Wendy. Dipper and Steven were both rather quiet, with the latter only listening in on all of the fun
with a small, albeit disingenuous smile, while the former simply stared out the window languidly.
Meanwhile, Mabel discreetly supervised as Robbie began chatting Tambry up, or at least as much
as he could since her attention was almost entirely devoted to her phone.

“So, uh… T-Tambers…” the teen began as casually as he could, despite the fact that he was
admittedly nervous. “How... h-how you been?”

Tambry didn’t really offer much of a response, even though she had heard him, as she simply
pushed her phone closer to her face, her shoulders tensing up just slightly.

“Um... y-yeah! Same here,” Robbie chuckled awkwardly, glancing over to Mabel for a cue of
advice. She gave him one in the form of motioning to her face, reminding the angsty teen of what
they had discussed about compliments. “Oh, yeah! So... um, is it just me, o-or did your whole, uh,
thing get a whole lot more l-likable since the last time we saw each other?”

“Huh?” Tambry finally glanced up at this, briefly turning to him with a quizzical expression.
“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Wha—N-nothing!” Robbie shook his head defensively. “I-I was just saying that I might think
you’re kind of attractive now.”

“Oh, so I wasn’t attractive before, then?” Tambry asked, both flustered and offended by this.

“N-no! That’s not what I-” Robbie cut himself off with a frustrated groan, one that alarmed Mabel quite a bit as she realized her matchmaking skills were failing. “You know what? Just forget it.”

“Glad to,” Tambry remarked coldly as she resumed her rapid texting as Robbie crossed his arms and turned away from her. Disheartened by this, Mabel sank back into her seat in front of them, knowing that she would have to come up with another strategy to get them together somehow. After all, the night was still young, and as far as she was concerned, it wasn’t going to end until she had finally accomplished her romantically inclined mission once and for all.

“Whoo!” Jenny exclaimed as she picked up speed on one of the emptier roads, one that was lined by wheat fields on either side. “Wind in your face, that’s what I’m taking about!”

“Ah, this is the life…” Wendy sighed contentedly as she propped her feet up on the dashboard.

“Guys! Cut it out!” Thompson whined further back as Lee and Nate kept playfully prodding him. “I bruise easily!”

“Breath deep, Steven,” Buck grinned to the boy sitting beside him. “This is the smell of freedom.”

“Freedom smells like pepperoni,” Steven noted after taking in a large inhale.

“That’s just the car,” Jenny chuckled. “My dad lets me drive it only if I use it to make deliveries too. It’s kind of a drag, but its whatever, I guess.”

“You know what else is a drag?” Sour Cream spoke up with an exasperated frown. “Fish.”

“Why fish?” Steven asked, confused.

“Oh boy, here we go again…” Wendy rolled her eyes good-naturedly, already knowing where Sour Cream was going with this, as all the other teens did.

“Preach it, SC!” Nate called encouragingly.

“Tell your life story!” Lee added just as fervently.

“Ugh, my step-dad was all on my case yesterday;” Sour Cream began, crossing his arms. “Saying ‘ma-ma! Ma-ma-ma-ma!’ And I’m just like, ‘I don’t wanna be a fisherman! Everyone knows you can’t rave in a raincoat, step-dad!’

“At least he only bugs you about one thing,” Buck said, adjusting his shades. “My dad’s gotta say something about everything I do, ‘cause I’m the mayor’s son. And I’m like, ‘you can’t tell me what to do, I’m the mayor’s…’ Oh… wait…”

“Pfft, if you guys think all that’s bad, then consider yourselves lucky that you don’t have to deal with my family,” Wendy remarked wryly. “My house is pretty much a madhouse, what with Dad breaking pretty much everything he touches, and my brothers bringing home random wild animals every other day. They’d basically be living like cavemen if I wasn’t around to keep them in check.”

“S-sometimes, my mom gets on my case about leaving the back door unlocked,” Thompson said fretfully. “I-I try really hard to remember to lock it, I really do! But… s-sometimes I just forget, you know?”
“Ohhhh! Mama’s boy alert!” Lee cheered as him and Nate exchanged an amused high five over Thompson’s head.

“Aw, come on, you guys!” he exclaimed, blushing red in embarrassment.

“Puh-lease,” Jenny cut in with a challenging chuckle. “You guys are walking in cake with that talk. You don’t even know what bad is until you have a sister. Look, I don’t know why I have to spell it out that I’m the evil twin and she’s the good one! Don’t ask me to help you with your homework, I’m at some metal concert.”

“Ha! I know how that goes!” Mabel exclaimed in a knowing smirk as she poked Dipper on the cheek as he sat next to her. “Twins, am I right?”

“Mabel, cut that out!” Dipper snapped, roughly pushing her hand away as he resumed looking out the window.

“Yeesh, well with that attitude, I guess we know which one of us is the ‘evil’ twin here, Mr. Pouty-Pants” Mabel remarked rather jokingly, even though Dipper showed no signs of lightening up over her humor whatsoever.

“Family stuff can be tricky…” Steven spoke up somewhat apprehensively. Needless to say that all of the teens expressed their complete agreement with this statement before the young Gem went on with his own familial woes. “About a week ago, my dad and the Gems grounded me from TV.”

“That’s the worst,” Buck said sympathetically.

“Dude, that sucks,” Nate added just as sincerely.

“What a bummer,” Sour Cream finished with a pitied frown.

“A-and then I found out that the Gems are alien rebels,” Steven went on, glancing downward as he decided to just explain it all, knowing he had no one to hide from anymore. “And that there are other Gems out there that want us dead because they think we’re traitors.”

“Seriously, those Gems were the worst,” Mabel added with a dramatic flair, even if she wasn’t too keen on talking too much about the dreadful situation anymore. “Just take our word for it.”

“The worst?” Dipper spoke up with an appalled scoff. “That’s a huge understatement for how awful Jasper was! She forced-” He stopped short as he realized that all of the teens were looking to him in apt curiosity over his sudden angry outburst, which was why he was quick to retract it back into his former controlled bitterness instead. “I-I mean… yeah, they were pretty bad…”

A beat of somewhat stilted silence lingered after this, one that Steven soon bridged as he continued right where he had left off. “A-and they tried to take me hostage because they think I’m my mom. And maybe I kinda am?” he sighed, still truly wondering about that himself. After all, he did have his mother’s gem, and as far as Jasper had been concerned, that had been enough to make her think that him and Rose were one and the same. And maybe in some sense they were; after all, the pink Gem had said so herself in the tape she had left him that she became half of him. So perhaps he was her, in more than just the merit of having her gem alone. But as for exactly how and what that really meant, Steven couldn’t even really begin to understand. In fact, he wasn’t even sure if he really wanted to understand that at all. “I wish I could talk to Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl about it, but I think they kinda blame me for my mom not being around anymore…”

In the wake of the young Gem detailing his apparent existential crisis, a deep, rather stunned silence had fallen over the entire car. While both Dipper and Mabel looked to Steven with genuine
concern over what he had just admitted, none of the teens knew what to make of it at all as they all simply sat in frozen silence for a while, unsure of how to even approach something so deep and complex. When the ongoing bout of awkward quiet was finally broken, Jenny was the one to do it as she abruptly turned the radio off, knowing that the frantic beats were rather inappropriate at a moment like this.

“That’s heavy…” she breathed, her eyes wide as she started at the road ahead.

“I guess,” Steven shrugged, rubbing his arm.

“But you always seem so upbeat,” Buck noted, impressed. “You’re a real champ, Steven Universe.”

“Seriously, dude, and I thought all of us had baggage,” Wendy commented sympathetically. “But that’s nothing compared to what you’re going through.”

“Yeah, I’d turn to fishing in a heartbeat if meant not dealing with thaaaaat!” Sour Cream’s statement turned into a shocked gasp as he rose up out of his seat a bit, pointing towards something outside of the car in apparent alarm. Startled by this, Jenny pulled the car to a screeching halt, lurching all of its passengers forward as Sour Cream stood up fully.

“Look at that!” he exclaimed, still pointing out towards one of the surrounding fields.

“What?! What’d I hit?! What is it?!” Jenny asked, glancing out of the vehicle frantically.

“Seriously, SC, what the hey?” Lee groaned, both him and Nate having fallen out of their seats with Thompson having haphazardly landed on top of them.

“Thompson, dude, get off us already!” Nate protested impatiently. “You’re like, crushing every bone in my body, man.”

“Oh! S-sorry, guys!” Thompson panicked, trying to pull himself back up into his seat, only to end up slipping and falling back down onto the pair again, much to their noisy dismay. “Oops! S-sorry again!”

“Everyone, shh!” Sour Cream quieted before looking to the field again intently. “Glowing…”

The others finally looked to where he was pointing, all of them instantly spotting what he was talking about from the moment they glanced in that direction. An odd, unknown green aura rose up over the tall wheat, glowing ominously against the natural evening sky. It didn’t seem to move or change as the group stared at it for a moment or two, none of them having even the faintest clue about what they could possibly be looking at, though their curiosity towards it was immense all the same.

“We gotta check it out,” Sour Cream purposed, thoroughly intrigued.

“I’m down,” Buck agreed, leaning back in his seat.

“But what about the festival?” Mabel asked, suddenly worried as she took another glance back at Robbie and Tambry, who were still bitterly refusing to make eye contact with each other. She had hoped that the concert would provide an ideal venue to inspire true sparks of romance between the pair, and she was none too fond of the idea of diverting away from their destination like this, lest her plans be ruined completely.

“Pfft, the Woodstick Festival happens literally every year,” Lee said with an unconcerned wave of
his hand. “But when else are we ever gonna have the chance to check out some weird glowy thing in the middle of a field again?”

“Uh, probably never, duh!” Nate exclaimed, punching him in the arm before leaping into an excitable chant. “Weird glowy field thing! Weird glowy field thing!”

Before too long, the other teens joined in on this cheer, even if none of the kids were as enthused. Still, it was enough to convince Jenny as she let out a small laugh, shifting her car back into gear. “Alright, hold on,” she said as she drove into the field, her car peeling through the wheat as it steadily approached the light. As they reached a spot in the middle of the field where the wheat seemed to flatten out entirely, everyone got out of the vehicle to get a closer look as the green light grew stronger and more encompassing.

“That’s as bright as like, 600 glow sticks…” Sour Cream remarked, impressed as they approached the ditch that the source of the light lay within.

“Status update: checking out weird, otherworldly light in middle of creepy field,” Tambry read aloud as she typed, much to Robbie’s annoyance.

“Oh sure, bring out the phone,” he remarked crossly, ignoring the glare she sent his way. “Classic Tambers.”

“What,” Tambry scoffed, pressing past him bitterly. At the same time, Mabel shook her head at Robbie disapprovingly as she passed him as well, knowing that he wasn’t following any of the advice she had given him earlier.

“What? What did I say?” Robbie asked in disgruntled confusion, oblivious as to where he had went wrong.

By now, the group had gathered at the edge of the wide crater, all of them tentatively peering down into it to see exactly where the light had come from. Its source was a rather large, rather beaten spherical object, one with a radiant green, heavily dented metallic surface and short stubby legs jutting out of it. And, as it lay prone and decrepit in the center of a pile of rubble in the ditch, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel all instantly recognized it the moment that they saw it.

“Peridot’s escape pod…” the young Gem whispered, his eyes wide as he realized he had accomplished the Gems’ secondary mission in finding it all on his own. But even so, he couldn’t well do anything about it with such a large group of defenseless humans present, lest they all get injured or worse in whatever confrontation with the green Gem that might be in the offing. “Ok, everybody step back,” he ordered firmly, pushing a few of the teens away from the edge of the hole. “This is a Gem machine and it could be extremely dangerous. We need to-

“We need to get rid of it,” Dipper suddenly cut in, his hands clenched into tight fists at his sides as he glared down at the pod unrelentingly.

“W-what?”

“You heard me,” Dipper turned to Steven, his expression still unflinchingly cold and harsh. “We need to destroy that… that thing, especially if Peridot’s still inside of it!”

“Uh, wouldn’t we wanna get her out of there first before we blow that thing to bits?” Mabel asked with a somewhat concerned frown.

“I don’t see why we’d have to,” Dipper simply shrugged, a complete lack of concern in his tone. After all, it was indirectly Peridot’s fault, in expediting her flight back to Earth and taking her
captive on her ship, that Lapis had ended up in the horrible situation she currently was in; as far as Dipper was concerned, then the green Gem deserved far worse than simply having her ship crash into the cliff. Still, upon hearing this rather disconcerting sentiment, Steven and Mabel weren’t the only ones to give him a rather worried look, as Wendy did the same thing, knowing that this instance only added onto how noticeably strange he had been acting all day. And while she almost spoke up and said something about it, she was interrupted by Sour Cream as he came running towards the pit with a sizable rock he had found nearby.

“Check it out!” he exclaimed as he threw the stone down into the ditch, cheering as it landed a direct hit on the escape pod. “Boom!”

“Whoa, stop!” Steven exclaimed, his alarm only growing as the teens began to descend into the ditch to take an even closer look at the pod. “Peridot might still be in there!”

“Peri-what?” Buck asked unwittingly as he climbed into the hole.

“This biz is empty!” Jenny announced as a few of the boys turned the pod over to its front side.

“Ugh, it’s just a bunch of broken garbage, just like all that stuff near the lake,” Robbie remarked, rolling his eyes boredly.

“Thompson! I dare you to kiss it!” Nate challenged boldly.


“So we can take embarrassing videos of it and post them online, duh,” Lee shrugged truthfully. Even, so Thompson was always up for whatever dare was posed to him as he anxiously approached the pod, only to be stopped before he could get too close.

“No! You guys need to get away from there!” Steven begged fretfully as him and the twins climbed down to join the teens.

“You need to relax,” Jenny urged patiently. “It’s not doing anything.”

“She’s right, you guys,” Wendy said to all three of the kids, noticing just how on edge they all seemed to be concerning the pod. “Nobody’s in that thing. We’re safe.”

“Y-yeah,” Mabel tentatively agreed, forcing a small smile onto her face, one that Steven and Dipper refused to share. “We’re safe.”

“No, we’re not!” Steven protested adamantly. “It’s not just the pod. This means that Peridot is just out there somewhere, trying to hurt the Earth!”

“Not cool, Earth forever!” Buck said disapprovingly upon hearing this, making sure to give the pod a kick for good measure.

“Here come the rocks!” Sour Cream proclaimed, dumping an armful of rocks on top of the pod right as Thompson knelt down to make good on his dare and kiss it.

“No, Sour Cream, wait! I-” Thompson let out a panicked cry as he was pelted by several of the rocks on accident, easily knocking him to the ground.

“Oops,” Sour Cream said stiffly upon watching him fall. “Sorry, Thompson!”

“Oh my gosh, dude!” Lee exclaimed as him and Nate laughed uncontrollably over this. “Tambry,
“You know I did,” Tambry grinned lightly as she uploaded the video she had taken of Thompson’s accident online.

“Ok, so are we finally done messing around with this thing already?” Dipper asked rather impatiently, rolling his eyes as Mabel hurried to join in on excitedly investigating the pod. “Because if we are, then we should really start thinking of a way to getting rid of this thing once and for all.”

“Dude, calm down,” Wendy said with a concerned frown. “We’re just having a little fun. What’s your beef with that thing anyway?”

“I-I don’t have a beef with it!” Dipper protested defensively, even if he knew that was something of a lie. After all, at that moment, that escape pod served as only another reminder of all of the things that had happened over the past several days that he honestly wished he could just forget. “I just don’t think we should be playing on what’s essentially a potentially dangerous alien escape pod.”

“...Well, what about taking selfies with it?” Jenny asked tentatively, pulling out her phone as she stood near the pod. “There can’t be anything too dangerous about that. Come on, you three!” she urged the kids brightly. “Get over here and get some shots with me and this thing.”

“Yay! Selfies!” Mabel readily cheered, rushing over and taking the first playful selfie with Jenny and the pod.

“Jenny, I agree with Dipper,” Steven said earnestly as he headed over to her. “This thing is serious.”

“So am I,” Jenny reiterated, crossing her arms as Wendy headed over to join her. “Sour Cream, Nate, Lee, what about you guys?”

“Sure, I’m down for whatever,” Sour Cream shrugged nonchalantly.

“Only if we get to have Thompson covered in rocks in the background!” Nate chuckled, playfully tossing another pebble Thompson’s way.

“Aw, come on, guys, I seriously might have a concussion from earlier!” he protested, rubbing his sore head.

“Robbie?”

“Pfft, whatever,” the angsty teen rolled his eyes as he headed over. “Just as long as I don’t have to stand next to Tambry.”

“Ditto for Robbie,” Tambry coldly as she joined the group.

“Buck?”

“Nah,” Buck said as he reclined in the pile of rocks near the pod. “I like to just experience the moment for what it is sometimes. Plus, the lighting is weird.”

“Ugh, ok,” Jenny rolled her eyes before turning back to Steven and Dipper. “Ok, boys, last call!”

“No, thanks,” Dipper refused, crossing his arms stoically.
“Uh, yeah, I still don’t think-”

“I got funny stickers…” Jenny cut Steven’s rejection off with what was by and large a very
tantalizing offer, one that the young Gem found he just couldn’t refuse. And so a barrage of selfies
began, with Jenny being the main photographer as the others all crowded around her and the pod.
At first, Steven hung back from the others, only barely consenting to appear in the pictures as he
remained stiff and uneasy. Though as time went on and with a little encouragement from Mabel,
the young Gem soon found himself joining in on the fun as he gradually started to forget about the
nature of the escape pod and instead immerse himself in enjoying himself with his friends. Which,
considering the stress he had been under as of late, was a very, very welcome change of pace.

“Oh! These are all so good!” Jenny exclaimed after the selfie round was over as everyone gathered
to look.

“Told you the thing with Thompson and the rocks would be hilarious,” Nate chuckled as him and
Lee exchanged a high five.

“How do I look?” Steven asked eagerly.

“You look great,” Jenny assured warmly as she stepped back to take another picture. “Ok, stay
right there, I’m gonna take one more, and-” She stopped short with a gasp upon seeing the young
Gem standing next to the open pod, a sudden, very intriguing idea coming to her. “Steven, you
should get in there!”

“W-what?” Steven asked, quite surprised by such a suggestion.

“You look great,” Jenny assured warmly as she stepped back to take another picture. “Ok, stay
right there, I’m gonna take one more, and-” She stopped short with a gasp upon seeing the young
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should get in there!”

“W-what?” Steven asked, quite surprised by such a suggestion.

“Just for a second,” Jenny clarified pleadingly. “One picture, that’s all.”

“Go for it, Steven!” Wendy encouraged with a bemused grin. “It’ll be so awesome!”

“Yeah!” the other teens cheered in rapturous agreement, though Mabel seemed to be the most
enthused out of all of them.

“Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!” she exclaimed excitedly, rushing towards the pod herself. “You gotta try it,
Steven! Heck, I’ll even get in there with you! That way we can have twice as much fun!”

“You guys can’t be serious,” Dipper spoke up, frowning disapprovingly at the pair upon hearing
this. “You’re not really about to get into another Gem death trap after we literally just escaped
from one, are you?”

Steven and Mabel exchanged a terse glance at this, a part of both of them knowing that it was a
rather ill advised idea, but none of them really caring too much. After all, the escape pod was
clearly broken beyond repair; what’s the worst that could happen?

And so, without any further hesitation, the pair climbed into the open pod, both of them playfully
posing for a picture as Jenny positioned herself to take it. However, as she snapped a few and
Steven spread his hands out for another pose, something in the pod shifted as its interior suddenly
lit up and an array of transparent, indecipherable monitors appeared in front of the startled pair.

“Whoa!” several of the teens exclaimed at once, all of them completely dumbfounded by this
incredible change. Even Dipper seemed a bit more interested upon seeing the pod reactivate,
though hardly out of excitement as much out of frustration, wishing that Steven and Mabel would
just listen to him and leave it alone before things got out of hand. Which, considering how things
usually turned out, was more than likely to happen sooner rather than later.
“Wow! Forget what I said about this being twice as fun!” Mabel quipped as she shoved her hand through one of the intangible monitors. “This just got one billion times as fun!”

“Tell us about it!” Wendy remarked, amazed. “This is so cool! Tambry, make sure you’re recording this.”

“On it,” Tambry dully agreed as her phone started capturing the moment.

“Hm…” Steven mused as he glanced around the pod, interested in seeing how it worked. He noticed that the spaces around his outstretched hands were glowing somewhat, and so he decided to work with that as he tentatively pressed them forward. Incredibly enough, the pod followed this command, its stubbed legs moving as it lurched forward unsteadily, much to Steven and Mabel’s simultaneous surprise and excitement.

“No way!” Jenny gasped in awe at this as the other teens watched on in immense fascination. “Steven, how are you doing that?!”

“It just sort of—” Steven cut himself off as he moved his hand to the side, the pod doing the exact same thing at the exact same time. “I think it listens to what my hands do.”

“Neat!” Mabel exclaimed brightly, putting a hand forward herself. “I wanna try!”

“Uh, hold on a second, Mabel,” Steven stopped her. “We really shouldn’t be playing with this. We have to take it back to the temple immediately.”

“Or better yet,” Dipper interjected, still rather sullen. “We could just take it up to one of the cliffs and push it off, because that thing has no business staying in one piece! What, do you guys really want Peridot to come back and use it to attack all of us?”

“No…” Steven and Mabel admitted in hesitant unison.

“Aw, but come on!” Jenny whined, the other teens voicing their disappointment as well. “You just got it working!”

“Yeah, Steven, didn’t you say you’re technically your own mom?” Wendy asked with a broad smirk. “Seems to me like you can do whatever you want.”

“For real, you gotta do some donuts in that thing,” Nate encouraged boldly.

“Donuts! Donuts!” Lee cheered in equal rowdy support, coaxing Thompson into joining him.

“At least a dozen,” Buck nodded in agreement. “Baker’s dozen.”

“Seriously, Steven, its sounds like you’ve been under a lot of pressure lately,” Jenny said, her tone earnest and sympathetic. “Don’t you think you deserve to take you mind off things and have a little fun?”

Steven took a moment of pause at this, his expression clearly conflicted as he looked between the teens and the glow the escape pod cast around his hands. He knew full well that if the pod was anything like the ship it originated from, then it was likely very dangerous, meaning that it was far from something that should be taken on a mere frivolous joy ride. And yet… despite his resolve of responsibility, he couldn’t deny that keeping up such a heavy burden was exhausting, to the point of being nigh overwhelming. Perhaps just a touch of levity, however brief and however risky, would serve as a chance to lighten his immense load and lowered spirits if only just a bit. And as he met the pleading expressions of all of the teens, as well as Mabel, the young Gem found that he
could no longer deny himself that chance.

So, he took it.

Without any further deliberation, Steven commanded the pod to move with a bold laugh, one that all of the teens cheered on as they began having fun with it. Placing all of his former worries aside, the young Gem blithely directed the pod to perform an array of twists and spins on its short, but surprisingly deft feet. He more than frequently let Mabel take over the controls, such as when she guided it to jump over Thompson at Lee and Nate’s behest. The pair worked together on winning a race against Jenny’s car in it, and they even gave the teens haphazard rides on top of it throughout the field. Needless to say that all the while, they were so caught up in all of the fun they were having that they barely even noticed the irritated glances Dipper was sending their way as he merely stood on the sidelines, the only one out of the entire group to outright refuse to join in on the merriment. Even Robbie and Tambry, as indignant towards each other as they had been all evening, couldn’t hold back a few shared bouts of genuine laughter as they begrudgingly shared a ride on top of the pod together. But by far, the one who was enjoying themselves the most in all this was Steven, as anyone could tell from his loud, enthusiastic, unabashed laughter as he steered the escape pod cheerfully and daringly. By embracing the kind of free, boundless fun he was so used to, the young Gem found himself feeling more relaxed and content than he had felt in a long time, which, all things considered, was more than a welcome change. One that he wasn’t sure he wanted to give up for the sake of his former hardened, accountable mindset anytime soon.

“You two are really getting the hang of that thing, huh?” Wendy asked Steven and Mabel as they both attempted to control the pod at the same time, to surprisingly successful results.

“You bet we are!” Mabel quipped, swerving her hand out as the pod followed along. “I bet even Peridot couldn’t drive this thing as good as we can!”

“Yeah,” Steven chuckled, amused. “It always hooks to the left. Still, we should really be getting this to the Gems at some point, though…”

Upon hearing this, all of the teens immediately voiced their protest, none of them wanting the fun they were having with the pod to come to an end. And seeing as how the young Gem didn’t really want that either, he easily caved in to their pleas. “…Right after we jump that haystack!” he exclaimed boldly, pointing to said stack, which wasn’t too far away from where Dipper had staunchly positioned himself. Needless to say that the teens were all for watching the pod pull off another zany stunt, which was why Steven and Mabel wasted no time in propelling the pod forward towards the haystack. However, instead of clearing over top it, the pod crashed clumsily into it instead, completely stirring up the hay up as most of it ended up landing Dipper as he stood nearby, far from pleased. And while Steven and Mabel let out a hearty laugh over their miscalculated jump, for him, this was, in a rather literal sense, the straw that broke the camel’s back.

“Ok, seriously, you guys, enough is enough!” Dipper exclaimed hotly as he brushed the hay off of himself. “You need to stop playing around in that thing! You might think you know how to work it, but what if something haywire and you both lose control of it?”

“Pfft, please, bro-bro, as if that’s ever gonna happen,” Mabel scoffed, clearly not worried.

“Mabel’s right, Dipper,” Steven said, his tone a good bit gentler. “We’ve got this thing completely under control. How else do you think we’re able to have so much fun with it?”

“Then again,” Mabel cut in before her brother could get a word in edgewise. “It’s not like you would know anything about that fun since you’ve just been standing over here being all broody and
“I’m not broody or angsty!” Dipper protested, incensed by such an accusation.

“Then why don’t you join us in here for a quick ride around the field?” Steven offered brightly. “That way you can get a taste of all the fun you’ve been missing out on!”

“Are you kidding me? I’m not about to-” Dipper cut himself off as a burst of realization struck him, one that gave him an idea to use this opportunity to his advantage for disposing of the loathed pod once and for all. “Actually, you know what? Sure, what the heck. It could be fun.”

At this apparent concession, Steven and Mabel, as well as all of the teens, cheered in excitement as Dipper squeezed his way into the pod alongside them. It was something of a tight fit between all three of the kids, but they managed to make it work well enough as Steven began explaining the pod’s controls to Dipper. “Ok, so to get it to move, you just need to-”

“I got it, Steven,” Dipper stoically interrupted, even if he largely had no idea how to operate the pod. “And now that I’m in here, I’m going to take the chance to do what we should have done when we first found this thing and find the perfect place to trash it once and for all!”

“What?!” Steven exclaimed as the teens voiced their own opposition over this idea. “You can’t do that! We’re having so much fun with it!”

“Oh, yeah, you’re having so much ‘fun’ with a pod that belongs to one of the Gems who just tried to kill all of us!” Dipper deadpanned harshly as he put his hands down into the control space. “How can you not see the huge problem with that?!”

“Because Peridot’s not even here!” Mabel argued as she attempted to steal control of the pod away from her brother. “What are you so angry about anyway? It’s not like this pod even did anything to anyone!”

“That’s not the point, Mabel!” Dipper protested back just as adamantly, trying and failing to shove his sister’s hands away. “The point is that we took our chances with all this Gem stuff before and look at where it got us! Do you really want something like that to happen again?”

“No, but this is nowhere near as big of a deal as that was and you know it’s not, Dipper!” Mabel retorted as they essentially grappled for control of the pod. “You’re just being cranky and stubborn, like always!”

“No, I’m not!”

“Yes, you are!”

“Guys, stop it!” Steven finally cut into their heated argument as he joined in the struggle over the pod. All the while, the teens stood by awkwardly, none of them really sure what to do to intervene in this rather intense conflict as they all simply watched and waited curiously to see where it might go. “I-I know we all have pretty strong feelings about the pod, but we should just-” The young Gem’s appeal was abruptly cut off as he tried to physically break through the twins’ fighting, only for his hand to be roughly knocked back into the dented wall of the pod. The force of the impact was actually enough to beat the dent out entirely, the result of which was something that nobody had been expecting.

Dipper and Mabel’s bitter argument was succinctly cut short as the pod whirled with sudden energy, its wide open front slamming shut on all three of the kids, essentially trapping them inside. Of course, all three of them were aptly startled by this, even as the pod’s interior lit up with a sickly
green glow. All the same, none of the equally surprised teens could hear their shared frighten cry as they remained on the outside, none of them having the faintest clue about what was happening.

“Uh… Steven? Dipper? Mabel?” Wendy called, somewhat concerned as she took a small step closer to the pod while the other teens anxiously hung back. However, no more than a second later, the vessel emitted a sharp burst of supersonic energy, one that was enough to knock the group back quite a bit, even if the trio inside of continued bickering.

“Oh, this is just great!” Dipper exclaimed crossly, glaring at Mabel and Steven accusingly. “We’re trapped in this stupid thing, and all because you couldn’t just listen to me about getting rid of it! Now it’s probably gonna haul us off to Homeworld, or do who knows what to us?!”

“Whoa, hold on, are you seriously blaming us for this?” Mabel asked with an appalled scoff, not even noticing as the pod began filling up with an odd, pale green liquid. In fact, neither of the twins paid this any mind amidst their mutual anger, but Steven gasped in alarm as he saw it, recognizing it as the same liquid Peridot’s robinoids made use of. Still, even as the young Gem sucked in a deep breath and held it, he soon found that this wasn’t necessary as the twins were somehow able to continue bickering within it, meaning that he could also miraculously enough breathe it in too.

“Of course, I’m blaming you!” Dipper shot back at Mabel, infuriated. “You guys were the ones who were all gung-ho about using this thing like it’s some kind of toy!”

“Oh yeah?” Mabel challenged bitterly. “Well everything was going just fine until you had to come along with all your pouting and pessimism and tried to take it and push it off a cliff somewhere!”

“You guys, please!” Steven interjected fretfully, pushing himself between the twins as the pod began to rattle violently. “We don’t have time for this! We have to look for a way out-”

The young Gem was cut off as the pod suddenly jerked upward, roughly shoving all three of them against the wall hard. What they weren’t able to see was what was happening outside; namely, that the pod had just released a massive energy flare, one that shot upward into the sky and burst across it brightly. At the same time, a barrage of lasers began shooting out from the craft, much to the alarm of the nearby teens as they wasted no time in fleeing from it to take cover from the deadly, uncontrolled blasts.

“Lasers! W-why are lasers happening?!” Thompson cried fearfully as he ran away into the wheat.

“Thompson! Get back here and be our human shield!” Nate exclaimed, just as frightened as him and Lee also ran away.

“Oh, this would be so awesome to rave to if it wasn’t so terrifying!” Sour Cream shouted as him and Buck took cover behind Jenny’s car.

“Aw, man, I knew I shouldn’t have let that stupid kid talk me into this!” Robbie exclaimed to himself crossly as he narrowly avoided a laser blast. “Now, not only am I single and miserable, but I’m about to be fried by a—Tambry! Look out!”

“Huh?” Tambry glanced away from her phone as she attempted to record the disarray, only to notice one of the pod’s lasers shooting right at her. While she didn’t have any time to hurry out of its path, she was rescued from it just in the nick of time by none other than Robbie as he barreled into her, pushing both of them safely out of its path. For a moment, the two of them remained together on the ground, staring at each other rather breathlessly and blushingly before they rushed to pick themselves back up, all while glancing away from each other in newfound flusterment.
“You guys!” Jenny called up to the frantic pod, both her and Wendy remaining standing by to ensure that the kids were alright, even if they couldn’t see them at all. “What’s going on?!”

Needless to say that none of the kids were able to respond to this as they simply tried to remain steady amidst the heavily shaking pod as they crashed into each other haphazardly. None of them had any sort of control over the pod anymore whatsoever, and with no clear way out, the most any of them could do was hold on tight and hope that this incredibly dangerous disaster they had gotten themselves into would end sooner rather than later.

Even though the kids and the teens hadn’t actually made it to the Woodstick Festival, the concert itself was still very packed and very lively. With a wide host of various indie bands and plenty of stalls and vendors, the festival was more than equipped to keep its many young attendees entertained for an evening of fringe music and fun.

Even though they had spent all day hauling away loads of scrap from the lake, upon Garnet’s insistence, her and Pearl made their way over to the festival themselves after most of their work was done. While they didn’t really enter the concert, they ventured onto the hills overlooking it, much to the white Gem’s confusion as she didn’t really understand why they had come all this way in the first place. “Garnet, what exactly are we doing here?” Pearl asked with a befuddled frown. “Shouldn’t we be cleaning up the last few pieces of debris off the shore? Or be searching for Peridot’s escape pod? Or finding Amethyst and telling her to stop lazing around with Stan and actually help us for a change?”

“There will be plenty of time for that later,” the Gem leader remarked, a small smirk crossing her features. “For now, I didn’t want to miss the show.”

“Show? What show? You mean the concert?”

“No,” Garnet shook her head, her smile widening as she adjusted her shades. “You’ll see….” She trailed off mysteriously but nodded up ahead to Amethyst, Stan, and Soos as they worked just up ahead. The trio had been spending all day formulating an advertising scheme that would be sure to bring new, young customers to the Mystery Shack, and by now, their master plan was just about ready to be unveiled to the unwitting masses.

“Balloon faster, Soos,” Stan commanded to his handyman, who was busy stitching together the last few pieces of the hot air balloon. “We need this thing up in the air before the festival ends.”

“All those losers won’t know what hit ‘em when we crash our totally awesome balloon down right on top of them!” Amethyst quipped with a confident, daring grin.

“What?” Stan looked to her, slightly concerned. “Amethyst, we don’t want this thing going down. I paid good money to scrounge up all the materials to put it together and I don’t want all of it going to waste!”

“Uh, didn’t you just steal all the stuff to build this thing from that abandoned fabric store in town?” Amethyst asked knowingly.

“…Maybe…”

“Um, Mr. Pines?” Soos interjected with newfound worry as he looked over their handiwork thus far. “Are you sure that open flame should be that close to that dangling rope and cloth?”
“I’m sure about everything!” Stan remarked bluntly. “Now lube up those engine gears with some kerosene! More kerosene!”

“Oh for crying out loud!” Pearl huffed as her and Garnet made it over to the group. “You three are still working on this ridiculous balloon scheme? Amethyst, you’ve been shirking your responsibilities as a Crystal Gem all day, and for what? To help Stan with that’s bound to be yet another outlandish disaster?”

“Hey!” Stan protested hotly upon hearing this. “I’ll have you know that we’ve been working very hard putting this whole shebang together!”

“Yeah, you’ll see, P!” Amethyst challenged boldly. “Our balloon is gonna make all those other balloons feel like chumps for even being in the sky with it!”

“And once those idiots down there see it, they’ll understand that I love young people!” the conman continued, brandishing his blueprints for the balloon so the two other Gems could see it. By all accounts, it didn’t look too bad on paper; the balloon was meant to be a massive effigy of Stan’s head, smiling warmly and brightly as a banner with the words ‘I heart kids!’ hung overtop it.

“Just you guys wait,” Amethyst assured wryly. “This thing is gonna blow some minds.”

“Either that or it’ll blow its own mind,” Garnet remarked rather vaguely. However, before the conman or the purple Gem could question her on her meaning, Soos spoke up as he stood and stepped away from the balloon.

“Ok, dudes, I think it’s ready,” he reported, giving his boss a confident grin.

“Great! Then let her rip!” Stan exclaimed, sending a smug smirk to the white Gem as Soos rushed to do so. “Prepare to eat your words, Pearl.”

Of course, Pearl merely rolled her eyes at this, but even so, her and Garnet stood by to watch as the handyman turned the balloon loose, allowing it to begin its upward ascent. However, mere moments after he had done so, a sickening tear was heard from the balloon, much to the surprise of the trio who had spent all day working on it.

“Oh no! A letter ripped!” Soos cried, diving out of the way as the r from the banner came crashing down.

“What the H?!” Stan exclaimed in alarm as the h fell too, right on top of him as it easily knocked him to the ground. By now, Garnet had already started chuckling, but it soon turned into full on laughter as the balloon rose to its full height, allowing the crowds attending the festival to see it for the unintentional horror that it actually was.

“’I eat kids?!’” one teen asked his companion in outright panic as they watched the hideous balloon hover overhead. “But we’re kids!”

“It’s the heavens punishment for our terrible taste in everything!” the other teen cried as they ran to find cover.
Meanwhile, back up on the hill, Pearl had joined Garnet in taking enjoyment in watching just how much of a disaster Stan’s balloon had turned out to be. Even Amethyst, upon hearing the aghast screams coming from the concert, couldn’t hold back a howl of excitement of her own as she misinterpreted the frightened cries completely. “Woo! Yeah! Go, baby, go!” she cheered rowdily, not noticing the frustrated glare Stan sent her as he picked himself up off the ground. “What do you know, Stan? Looks like those teens are eating our balloon right up!”

“I have to hand it to you, Stan!” Pearl laughed uncontrollably at this sudden turn of events. “It really was worth it to come all the way out here to see how this little project of yours would turn out. This is priceless! Still, we probably should do something about that disaster of a balloon before someone gets hurt…”

“Don’t worry,” Garnet assured with a bemused chuckle. “It’s not going to hurt anybody.”

“Wha—wait! You knew about this, didn’t you!?” Stan asked the Gem leader harshly. “With that… that future sight or whatever it is! You knew this was gonna happen and you didn’t tell us about it!?”

“Course I didn’t,” Garnet shrugged, still grinning wryly.

“Why not!?”

“Because I thought it would be funny,” the Gem leader shrugged. “And believe me, it was.”

Stan continued seething with rage over this as Pearl and Garnet both broke down into a bout of heavy laughter over his amusing misfortune. However, their levity was short lived as a sudden burst of green light shot through the sky in a precise ray, one that managed to strike the hot air balloon right in its engine, resulting in an immense explosion. The crowds below only freaked out even more as the frightening effigy burst into flames as it began to descend down upon them at an alarming rate.

“Mommy, i-is the floating head going to eat us?” a young boy asked his mother as the balloon started plummeting towards them.

“Yes, Charlie! Yes, he will!” the mother cried, holding onto her son for dear life as the other festival attendees ran about in a complete and utter panic.

“Whoa, now we got lasers!?” Amethyst asked, awestruck by what she had just witnessed. “Huh, I guess this festival is cooler than I thought.”

“B-but that blast didn’t look like it came from inside the festival…” Pearl noted with newfound concern. “In fact, it almost looked like it might have come from…”

“Peridot’s escape pod!” Garnet growled, her hands clenching into fists and her former levity completely gone as her future vision filled in the gaps for her. “It’s in the field nearby! Gems, let’s go!”

Both Pearl and Amethyst nodded staunchly at this, knowing that with the threat Peridot might pose, that she had to be taken care of as soon as possible. Without another word, the Gems leapt off, their mission in mind as they left Stan and Soos to watch as the hot air balloon finally came crashing down right into the middle of the festival, thankfully injuring nothing and no one save for the balloon itself.

“Aw, Mr. Pines, I’m sorry your whole balloon thing didn’t work out,” Soos placed a sympathetic hand on his boss’ shoulder.
“Eh, whatever,” Stan shrugged apathetically. “You win some, you lose some. Besides, I don’t know what everyone down there is crying about. In my day, zeppelins fell from the sky like raindrops!”

“It’s him!” a teen down in the festival shrieked upon spotting the conman standing atop the nearby hill. “It’s the horrible old man from the sky!” Upon seeing the balloon’s inspiration in the flesh, a large group of people fled, trying to get as far away from him as possible, even as a beat of rather awkward silence passed between the conman and the handyman in light of this.

“You know what?” Stan remarked a moment later, his hands on his hips as he took this reaction in stride. “Being loved by the youth is overrated. Being feared, now that’s priceless!”

For all the chaos that had just unfolded at the Woodstick Festival, it really couldn’t compare to the pandemonium that was going on back in the field. With the kids still trapped inside the escape pod, the teens had no idea about how to help them get out of it, mostly since they couldn’t get anywhere close to it amidst the barrage of lasers it was still frantically firing off. This was the disastrous scene that the Gems arrived to, their weapons already drawn as they jumped onto the scene, spotting the escape pod first and the frightened group of teens hiding from it second.

“You were right, Garnet!” Pearl exclaimed, gripping her spear tightly. “That laser really did come from the escape pod!”

“What’s goin’ on here?!” Amethyst asked amidst all the disarray. The teens were quick to fill them in with their desperate cries for help as they continued cowering in the wheat and behind the car. At the same time, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel finally noticed the Gems’ arrival from inside the pod amidst their feverish attempts to break out of it, and needless to say that, at least at a hectic moment like this, it was more than a welcome surprise.

“You were right, Garnet!” Mabel exclaimed with immense relief. “They’ll bust us out of this thing!”

“Garnet! Amethyst! Pearl!” Steven called to his guardians as loud as he could. “Help us! We’re in here!”

Unfortunately, the Gems weren’t able to hear their young wards’ cries for help as they instead still believed that the one operating the pod was none other than the green Gem herself. “We’ll save you, humans!” Pearl proclaimed, deftly tossing her spear right at the pod. It was a direct hit, cutting through its hull and only narrowly missing Dipper and Steven as it cleanly sliced through the sparse space between them.

“Yikes!” Mabel gasped, her eyes wide with sudden fear.

“What are they trying to do, kill us?!” Dipper asked with apt alarm, eyeing the spear with concerned disbelief.

“M-maybe Pearl was just trying to break us out!” Steven offered hopefully, even if, in reality, that was far from the case.

“I can’t believe it!” Pearl exclaimed to her teammates, appalled as she summoned another spear. “Peridot’s still inside!”

“She’s probably weak from the landing,” Garnet mused coldly, her gauntlets tightly clenched. “Don’t hold back!”
“Got it!” Amethyst shouted tossing her whip out at the pod. The weapon wrapped around its spherical hull tightly, giving Garnet just the leverage she needed to begin pulling it down towards her. The kids inside all lurched forward at this, none of them knowing how to reach the Gems in their currently trapped state whatsoever. Upon seeing the Gems outright attack the pod however, the teens found that they could no longer remain hiding silently on the sidelines, especially if their intent was to destroy the pod without even knowing that the kids were still in it.

“Wait! No!”

“Stop! Don’t hit it!”

“You don’t understand! It’s not-”

The teens’ fearful protests fell on deaf ears however, as the Gems were far too caught up in their shared fury towards their enemy to even listen to reason. “You’ve got a lot of nerve taking refuge here, of all places!” Garnet began hotly as she started pulling the pod down. As far as she knew, she was addressing Peridot, even though the trio of kids who were actually inside of the pod let out a shared gasp of fear as the Gem leader continued pulling them closer to her deadly gauntlets. “But I don’t know here you get off attacking defenseless humans in your dead-beat escape pod!”

“Garnet!” Steven cried from inside the pod, joining the twins in anxiously beating against its side. “Garnet, it’s us! Steven, Dipper, and Mabel! Can you hear us!? Please!”

“And if you think you’re safe here,” Garnet continued her incensed speech to ‘Peridot’. “Well, I got news for you. You lost! Now!” The Gem leader let out a fierce shot as she reeled her fist back and prepared to deliver a devastating blow to the pod, much to the kids’ shared terror.

“Garnet!” All three of them shouted desperately, but even still, she didn’t seem to hear them.

“Stay off my planet!” Garnet shouted fiercely, finally throwing her fist at the pod. However, her hand stopped short mere seconds before hitting it as she noticed that both Wendy and Jenny had suddenly thrown themselves between her and the vessel.

“Stop!” Wendy exclaimed, her arms held out wide as her and Jenny both flinched away from the near impact. “Peridot’s not in there!”

“Yeah! Steven, Dipper, and Mabel are!” Jenny added just as intently, if not somewhat breathlessly. Garnet gasped in genuine surprise upon hearing this, but as she looked to the pod again, her future vision provided her with the confirmation that this was indeed true. And so, the Gem leader wasted no time in gently lowering the pod and easily cracking it open over her knee, allowing all three of the kids to come spilling out of it and onto the ground, breathless and distraught.

“Kids!” Amethyst and Pearl shouted in shared shock as they hurried over to the trio as they slowly picked themselves up, all three of them still reeling from their latest near-death experience.

“What were you guys doing?!” Amethyst questioned the kids incredulously.

“You found Peridot’s escape pod and you didn’t come get us immediately?!” Pearl asked, appalled.

“Hey, don’t yell at me about this!” Dipper protested angrily, pointing to Steven and Mabel. “Yell at them! They’re the ones who wanted to play around with it! I just wanted to get rid of it from the get-go!”

“Yeah…” Mabel frowned, rubbing her arm apprehensively. “You know, in retrospect, maybe
messing with a dangerous Gem escape pod wasn’t… the smartest thing to do…”

“You think?” Amethyst raised an eyebrow. “Dudes, we nearly wrecked you!”

“Steven, Dipper, Mabel,” Garnet spoke up, her tone cold and firm. “This is unacceptable. I’m very disappointed in all three of you. Especially you, Steven. You knew better than this.”

All three of the kids reacted differently to hearing this, with Mabel just glancing down guiltily and silently, not really having anything to say to defend them. Dipper, on the other hand, was more than prepared to retort back, but he was quick to realize that it would be futile, so instead, he merely crossed his arms and glared away bitterly. Steven was by far the most affected by hearing his guardian profess her discontent with them, but even so, he knew he deserved it for straying so far from his duties as a Crystal Gem. Instead of proving to them that he could handle any responsibility or task he was given, he had done just the opposite by indirectly disobeying them and thinking only of fun instead of his obligations, which were by far more important. Which was why all the young Gem could do was hang his head in shame, unable to meet any of the Gems’ gazes as he muttered apologetically: “You’re right…”

“Whoa, ok, hold on just a second,” Wendy interjected as her and all of the other teens stepped forward to set the Gems straight, none of them able to see the kids so downcast like this. “No offense, but you guys are being way too hard on them.”

“Wendy’s right,” Jenny staunchly agreed. “Cut them some slack, especially poor Steven!”

“The poor kid’s been like, stressing himself to the max,” Lee added sympathetically.

“Yeah, he was even more jumpy than Thompson usually is,” Nate remarked dryly.

“Hey!” Thompson protested, embarrassed.

“Either way, it’s not his fault,” Buck said firmly.

“Just let him be a DJ!” Sour Cream cried passionately.

“What…?” Pearl trailed off, not understand this line of reasoning.

“Look,” Wendy said with a resolved sigh. “We just wanted to take Steven, Dipper, and Mabel out and let them have a little fun, to help them clear their heads after everything they’ve been through.”

“Yeah,” Sour Cream nodded in sincere agreement. “I don’t know what’s going on with aliens trying to abduct them, or Steven being his own mom, but it sounds like all three of these guys got a lot on their minds.”

“I’m sure whatever stuff they do with you guys is important,” Jenny said earnestly. “But everyone needs a break once in a while.”

“They’re just kids,” Buck added, not really needing to say anything more.

While the kids looked to the teens in both surprise and gratitude for the defense they had just provided them with, the Gems exchanged something of a guilty glance, realizing that, perhaps, they were right. After all, amidst all of the chaos that had been unfurling over the past several days, the one thing they always seemed to factor out was that, the kids were just that: kids. They didn’t ask to be thrust into the stressful situations they were in and it was clear that they didn’t deserve to bear the burden of its aftermath. And what the Gems had clearly failed to notice, much less do anything about, was try to help them work through it all, something that they were unanimously
ready to change in any way that they could.

“Mm… maybe we have been a little hard on them…” Pearl admitted bashfully.

“They did just break us out of space jail,” Amethyst remarked, crossing her arms.

“Kids,” Garnet said, her tone much gentler as the trio looked to her questioningly. “We’re sorry. For everything. Oh, and Steven? You’re ungrounded from television.”

Steven let out an overjoyed gasp at this, not hesitating to rush to the Gem leader and embrace her legs happily. The others all laughed warmly at the endearing sight, all of them more than glad that the drama had passed and that levity and peace had finally arrived in its place. However, as the teens gathered around to take a few more celebratory selfies around downed pod, Mabel realized that the evening was becoming even better as she took a glance over to Robbie and Tambry, who hung back away from the rest of the group. The angsty teen seemed rather apprehensive as he stepped up to Tambry, who did glance up from her phone upon seeing him near her, a light blush filling her cheeks, one that she didn’t try to suppress.

“So, uh… pretty intense night, huh?” Robbie asked, shoving his hands into the pocket of his hoodie as he looked up at the night sky.

“Yeah…” Tambry said, brushing a stray piece of hair aside as she glanced down. A beat of silence passed before either of them spoke up, but when they did, they did so simultaneously, both of them saying each other’s name at the exact same time. They both blushed at this, embarrassed, though they were quick to regain their composure as much as they could.

“Uh, s-sorry,” Robbie chuckled awkwardly. “You go ahead.”

“Oh, well, uh… I- I just wanted to say, uh, thanks, I guess,” Tambry shrugged, though there was a hint of a smile on her face. “You know, for saving my life earlier and all that junk?”

“Oh, yeah, w-well… I just… yeah…” Robbie trailed off, not really sure of what to say until he let out a small, relenting sigh. “Tambry, look, I’m sorry about what happened in the car. It’s just that stupid kid,” he nodded over to Mabel, who by now had hidden herself discreetly behind Garnet as everyone continued conversing, even if she was clearly still spying on them from afar. “Came up with the bright idea to try and set me up with you and she gave me a bunch of dumb dating advice which didn’t work at all. Crazy, right?”

“Hm… maybe not so crazy…” Tambry smirked, slowly reaching over to pull one of Robbie’s hands out of his hoodie. Both of their faces were bright red as they looked into each other’s eyes intently, the first few sparks of romance starting to light up between them as they exchanged a genuine smile, something that was a rare sight on either one of them.

“Hey, so, uh… you wanna maybe… I dunno, hang out sometime?” Robbie asked tentatively. “Just you and me? On like, a date or something?”

“Sure, whatever.” Tambry chuckled, pulling her phone out. “Status update-” She paused, glancing between Robbie and her phone before she ultimately shrugged and put it away, reaching to take his hand once more. “You know what? Forget it. Maybe I should stare at something other than my phone for a while…”

Mabel could barely hold back a delighted squeal as she watched Robbie and Tambry draw closer to each other, hands still intertwined as they gazed up at the stars together. “Yes!” she exclaimed in satisfied whisper. “Match made!”
“Hm… It’s a start…”

“Wha?! Oh, Garnet!” Mabel exclaimed, surprised to see that the Gem leader was standing beside her and watching as well as the teens began their latest selfie barrage behind them. “Can you believe it? I managed to get Robbie and Tambry together all on my own! Pretty impressive, huh?”

“Perhaps,” Garnet said, her expression unreadable as she glanced down. “Though I can’t help but wonder if you did this to help Robbie, or to help yourself…”

“W-what do you mean?” Mabel asked, her smile faltering as nervousness filled her instead.

“Mabel,” Garnet began, lowering herself down to her level as she placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “I know that what happened a few days ago has been hard on you and your brother and Steven. And I can tell that you’re all trying to deal with it in different ways. Steven by trying to take responsibility for it all, Dipper by lashing out in anger and frustration, and you by trying to compensate for it all by helping others. And while yours is probably the healthiest method of coping out of those, there does come a point where you have to help yourself too. Do you understand?”

“I… think so…” Mabel nodded, even if she was still a little confused. Still, she couldn’t deny that the Gem leader was right in her original motivation for playing matchmaker between Robbie and Tambry. She wanted to have that success so that it would help her feel better in the face of how badly she had been feeling lately. And by all accounts, it had helped her, at least somewhat, by giving her something to distance her mind away from all of her stress. But even so, she also felt like there was still a part of her that felt… empty in light of it all, in a way that she couldn’t really explain. And while she wanted to fill that emptiness up in somewhat, she hadn’t the faintest idea about how to even go about doing that, at least not yet. “But, uh… Robbie and Tambry are still pretty cute together, in like a creepy gothic way, right? I mean, they’re not as cute as a couple as you are, Garnet, but still.”

Garnet chuckled warmly at this as she rose to stand, nodding in agreement. “Why, thank you,” she grinned, her shades sparkling a bit as she adjusted them.

As the teens hoisted Steven up onto Buck and Sour Cream’s shoulders to take another fun, cheerful photo, Dipper returned to his former brooding spot, hardly even allayed or brightened by their reconciliation with the Gems. Not that his frustration even really lied with them, or even with Steven or Mabel over what had happened with the escape pod in the first place. Instead, his ongoing anger ran so much deeper than that, tied to something that he knew he couldn’t do anything about, which only served to upset him even more.

In fact, he was so caught up in thinking about it that he barely even noticed Wendy walk up to him until she placed a hand on his shoulder, startling him out of it. “Hey, man, can we talk for a second?” she asked, her tone and expression genuinely concerned as she looked down at him.

“Uh… sure…” Dipper frowned. “What’s up?”

“I was just about to ask you the same thing,” the cashier said, crossing her arms. “What’s been going on with you lately, dude? Why are you acting all bitter and angry over everything? Only teens have earned the right to angst and brood like this, and last time I checked, you’re technically not a teen.”

“I-I… It’s nothing…” Dipper sighed, not really wanting to discuss the matter in any way.

“Come on, Dipper,” Wendy urged sincerely. “Whatever it is, you know you can trust me. I just
wanna see if there’s something I can do to help.”

“I’m pretty sure there’s nothing anybody can do… but… ok…” And with that, Dipper finally caved, detailing as calmly as he could about Lapis’ return to Earth and the all too brief time they had spent together. He reiterated the details of the invasion, only this time, he did add what came in the aftermath of the crash, namely Malachite and her new waterlogged prison, and how horrible he had been feeling in the wake of all of it. And by the time he was done, Wendy was rather taken aback by all of it, especially as she noticed that Dipper was essentially fighting back tears as he finished recounting such a tale of immense woe and anguish.

“Oh, dude…” she breathed, her expression awash in deepest sympathy. “I’m so sorry. That really sucks…”

“Yes, it does…” Dipper shuddered, gripping his arm tightly to keep his tears in. “And the worst part about it is that not only is it all my fault, but I can’t do anything about it! Lapis is just… stuck down there at the bottom of the lake with Jasper, and not a single thing I can do to help her! It’s not fair!”

Wendy paused upon hearing this passionate, infuriated, distraught outburst, unsure of what to really say to comfort him without making him feel worse. However, when she did manage to come up with something a moment later, she decided to roll with it, hoping that at the very least it could lift Dipper’s spirits in some small way. “Look…” she began with a small sigh, keeping her hand firmly placed on his shoulder. “I don’t really know Lapis, but to me, it sounds like she really cares about you, Dipper, if she’s willing to put herself through… well, that, to keep you safe. So—and again, I don’t know for sure, but—I feel like, if I were her, then I wouldn’t want you to be so torn up over this. I’d want you to keep on going with your head held high, even if it is really hard to deal with, instead of sulking around and lashing out at everyone. And I don’t think she’d want you to totally lose hope either. After all, from the way it sounds, it’s not like she’s totally gone forever, right?”

“R-right…” Dipper hesitantly agreed, even if he was reeling from a rather stark realization amidst all this. Wendy was right, in practically every sense; if Lapis were here, then certainly, the last thing she’d want is to see him so bitter and upset over her sacrifice. True, it was horrible that it was a sacrifice that she had to make in the first place, but even so it still meant something. It showed just how much she did care for him, just how far she was willing to go to ensure that he remained safe and free. But from the way he had been acting lately, he had been far from embracing either of those things like she would have wanted him to. And indeed, she wasn’t gone at all really; rather she was trapped, albeit in a horrible situation, but merely trapped all the same. And as far as Dipper was concerned, then anything that was trapped could certainly be set free in some way, which was the piece in all of this that he realized he had been missing all along. “Oh my gosh, what have I been doing all this time?” he asked himself, face palming as his eyes lit up with newfound resolve. “I’ve been wasting all this time sitting around and moping when I could have used it to come up with a way to help Lapis! Well, that’s about to change right now! I’m done sulking about this; from now own, I’m gonna do everything I can to figure out a way to save her!”

“Now, that’s the Dipper we all know and love!” Wendy exclaimed with a proud grin, glad for his returned verve and vigor as he met her excitement with a thankful smile. “And don’t worry. You’re a smart kid; you’ll figure something out, I’m sure. Now come on! We’re missing out on that selfie party!”

The pair shared a laugh as they hurried over to join in on the fun everyone else was having. With the escape pod no longer posing any kind of threat, the teens and the kids gladly clamed all over it, posing with it and even tossing more rocks onto it to show their boldened defiance towards anyone who might try to threaten their planet. The Gems themselves even got in on the action as
they popped up in several of the pictures, waving around the glow sticks that Sour Cream had handed out. Several photos were also taken of the kids, who had all easily reconciled over the escape pod fiasco as everything between them returned to normal. After all, for all of the danger and disasters and drama they had faced in the past several days and for whatever chaos might soon come, none of them could deny that they needed something like this. A bit of levity, a bit of fun, and a bit of laughs, all with the intent of chasing away the stress, pain, and fear. There would be time to deal with all of those things later. For now, this was their break. And even if it was just for one night and amidst the backdrop of a battered, deadly escape pod, it was a break that everyone, teens, kids, and Gems included made sure to enjoy to the fullest.
Chapter 43: Sock Opera, Part 1

Chapter Summary

In which Mabel and Steven make sock puppets and Dipper doesn't sleep and makes a REALLY bad choice in retrospect. Also Bill. Bill's somewhere in here too, I guess.

Chapter Notes

So I usually don't do this, but seeing as how this first half was getting really long as it was, I decided to split Sock Opera here into two chapters, which I'm honestly not too upset about seeing as how its such a HUGE immensely important chapter (and also based on my personal favorite GF episode). And so here it is! Enjoy... ;) (code is SOCK)

With all of the recent chaos and upheaval brought on by the invasion and everything that sprung out of it afterwards, it had been quite some time since the Mystery Kids had come together to solve a genuine mystery, Gem, paranormal, or otherwise. But that was about to change as the four of them gathered at the Gravity Falls library, all of them acutely mindful of the momentous task that lay before them. Or rather, mostly mindful.

“Alright, you guys,” Dipper began with firm resolve as they claimed a table near the back of the library to themselves. “Today’s the big day.”

“Big day!” Mabel chimed in with blithe excitement.

“Super big!” Steven added enthusiastically, though his expression fell into confusion a beat later. “Uh… what’s so big about it again?”

“Come on, Steven,” Connie said with a small, good natured chuckle. “We’ve been over this several times today alone!”

“Yeah, well… one more refresher couldn’t hurt, could it?” the young Gem blushed in slight embarrassment over his own apparent obliviousness.

“No, it couldn’t,” Dipper interjected as he carefully lifted the old laptop they had found in the bunker a few weeks ago up for everyone to see. “Soos finally finished fixing up the laptop. If this thing works, we could learn the identity of the author and unravel the greatest mysteries of Gravity Falls, and then some!”
“Oh, that’s right!” Steven face palmed with a small laugh. “The laptop! You know, it’s been so long since that whole bunker thing that I nearly forgot all about it!”

“Same here,” Mabel agreed just as brightly. “But I guess there won’t be any forgetting about this nut if we manage to finally crack it! And I mean that figuratively, since the laptop’s not a nut, it’s a laptop! But you know what I mean.”

“I can’t believe it!” Connie exclaimed zealously. “After all this time, the answers to all of the questions we’ve been asking this entire summer could be sitting right in front of us! This could be our biggest break yet!”

“That’s what I’m counting on,” Dipper nodded fervently as he opened the dented, patched-up laptop up. “Especially since the author seemed to know so much about Gem stuff. Now, there isn’t a whole lot in journal 3 about fusions, but I’m willing to bet he might have kept some research about them here on the laptop, maybe even something about how to split them up. And if he did…”

Steven filled in for where Dipper had left off with a sudden gasp, his eyes lighting up with newfound hope as he gathered what he was implying. “Dipper… you don’t think…?”

“I do,” Dipper nodded with just the hint of an assured smile. After all, from the moment he remembered the laptop the other day, he couldn’t shake the thought that, perhaps, this could finally be the chance to help the blue Gem he had been looking for. And that alone was more than enough to get him to pursue that chance as soon as possible. “I think this laptop could be the key to helping us separate Malachite and save Lapis.”

“Well, then what are we waiting for?!” Mabel grinned eagerly at such good news. “Let’s get this baby going!” To punctuate her point, she held up a popup book she had found about where babies come from, her smile widening as she opened it up to a colorful picture of a baby.

“Yes! It works!” Dipper groaned in frustration over this newfound roadblock.

“I guess we should have seen this coming,” Connie mused. “After all, if the author really did keep all of his deepest secrets on the laptop, then it only make sense that he’d take every measure he
could to protect them.”

“I wonder what that password could be…” Steven said curiously as he looked over the password screen. “Hm… eight letters, huh? What words have eight letters…? Oh, I know! ‘Password’! Bam, eight letters! Mystery solved!”

A beat of stilted silence passed as Dipper and Connie both looked to Steven incredulously at this suggestion, while Mabel nodded her silent but cheerful agreement over it. “Uh… Steven? That’s… not a very secure password…” Connie noted with a frown.

“…Well, at least it’s easy to remember!” the young Gem pointed out blithely.

“But I seriously doubt it’s the kind of password someone like the author would use,” Dipper remarked dryly as he began flipping through the journal in search of some kind of clue. “I mean, for all we know, the password might not even be a word at all. It could be some kind of code or a series of numbers or literally anything else! Where do we even start?!”

“Don’t worry, bro-bro,” Mabel reassured with a broad grin as she put a supporting hand on her brother’s shoulder. “With you and Connie’s brains, Steven’s enthusiasm, and my laser focus, there is nothing that can distract us from… Do you hear that?”

Ironically enough, everyone’s attention was diverted away from the laptop as the sound of light piano music wafting through the library from nearby. The source of the gentle melody came from a blonde pony-tailed young man who was entertaining a group of spectating small children with a cheery puppet show musical, one that he smoothly yet passionately sang all of the lyrics to. “All my life I’ve been dreamin’ of a love that’s right for me, and now I finally know her name and its… sing it with me kids:”

“Literacy!” the crowd of children chimed in enthusiastically as the boy continued his show, this time speaking through his book and bee puppets.

“I finally understand what all the buzz is about!” the bee puppet quipped. “Reading!”

“Give me some of that honey!” the book puppet exclaimed before the two puppets smashed into each other into something of a “kiss” as the boy laughed warmly at this odd display he was creating.

“Uh… is it really ok for him to be making those puppets, um… kiss like that in front of all those little kids?” Connie asked, somewhat disturbed as her and the others observed the show from afar.

“Yeah, now that you mention it… that is kinda weird…” Steven frowned rather uncomfortably. “I mean, puppets are neat and everything, but maybe he should sorta, I dunno, tone it down? Just a bit?”

“Ugh, who cares?” Dipper rolled his eyes, already tired of this diversion as he turned his attention back to the laptop. “We have way more important things to do right now than watch some weirdo’s dumb puppet show, right, Mabel?” Upon receiving no response from his sister, Dipper did briefly glance away from the laptop and over at her, only to find that she was already completely enamored by the young puppeteer, stars in her eyes as she stared at him, completely lovestruck. To hammer in her newfound crush, she opened up the baby book again, only this time to a popup of a large romantic heart, a huge, infatuated smile spreading across her face. “Oh boy…” Dipper sighed, already knowing exactly where this was going.

“Uh, Mabel?” Steven asked, concerned as he noticed how visibly besotted she was. “Are you ok?”
“Oh, I’m better than ok, Steven,” Mabel sighed contentedly as she continued looking to nothing else but the newest object of her affections as he continued his puppet show afar. “I’m amazing! Just when I was getting over Mermando, of course, that dreamboat shows up at my doorstep!”

“Oh yeah, I forgot about Mermando,” Dipper remarked, completely unenthused as he retrieved a book on codes from the nearby shelf. “Did not care for Mermando.”

“That wouldn’t be because of that little CPR incident, would it, Dipper?” Connie asked with a wry, knowing smirk.

“Pfft, no,” Dipper countered defensively, even if it was clear that he was rather embarrassed by the recollection of it as he sat down again. “Besides, none of that matters right now. We have to get back on track with this laptop! According to this cryptology book, there are approximately 7.2 million eight letter words, so we’re going to have to work together to get through them all. Now, let’s see here…”

Mabel rolled her eyes impatiently as Dipper began to detail his complex password decryption strategy, one that she hardly listened to as she glanced over to the handsome puppeteer on the other side of the library once more. Overwhelmed with excitement over her newfound infatuation, she decided that she might as well act on it as soon as she could, lest he slip away from her like all of her other summer romances had so far. “Steven,” she whispered, discreetly pulling on the young Gem’s arm as her brother continued detailing his plan. “I need you to come with me and be my wingman while I flirt with that cute puppet guy.”

“Ok, but what’s a wingma—whoa!” Before Steven could even finish his question, Mabel whisked him away just as Dipper wrapped up his lengthy explanation.

“Ok, so I’ll type, Connie, you keep track of the words we’ve already tried, and Steven and Mabel, you guys can take turns listing off words from the—” Dipper cut himself off as he looked over to where the pair was sitting, or rather, where they had been sitting. They had both taken off, rushing to the other side of the library with Mabel brazenly leading the way towards her newest crush, leaving only Dipper and Connie behind to continue with their original mission. “Ok, seriously?!” Dipper groaned in frustration at this, knowing that Mabel was wasting their valuable time on mere frivolities. Time that, as far as he was concerned, would be put to much better use in trying to unlock the laptop and the secrets that it contained, especially if such secrets could potentially lead the way to freeing a certain self-imprisoned blue Gem.

Still, for as resolved as Dipper was to reach his goal, Mabel was just as resolved with accomplishing hers. Before they had even made it over to the puppeteer, she had already made sure to fill her “wingman” in on exactly what he was supposed to do and say to help her impress her new crush from afar. Steven agreed, even if he was still rather confused and oblivious as to what this was supposed to accomplish, though Mabel assured him that it would all turn out according to plan as they finished discreetly making their way over to the puppet show, which was just about reaching its conclusion.

“And that’s why we don’t stick our hands in…” the puppeteer trailed his song off as the chorus of kids gathered in front of him joined him.

“Other people’s mouths!”

“Hey, I’m Gabe Benson, ya’ll, good night!” the puppeteer coolly bid his young audience farewell as their parents came to collect them. “Hey, good job today, you guys,” he remarked to the pair of puppets on his hands with a proud smile. “You were late on your cue!” the book puppet accused its partner harshly. “What?!” the bee scoffed before Gabe quieted them both down. “Hey, hey, be
good to each other. We’re all stars.”

“Whoa! Oh my gosh, Mabel!” Steven suddenly spoke up rather overtly as him and Mabel still stood apace away from Gabe, just close enough so he could easily overhear them. “You sure do know a whole lot about puppets!”

“Oh you know I do, Steven!” Mabel placed her hands on her hips as she shot him a triumphant wink upon seeing that she had garnished her crush’s attention. “In fact, you might even say I have a passion for them!”

“Oh really?” Gabe interjected at this, looking to Mabel with an intrigued smile. “Sorry, I couldn’t help but overhear your zeal for the fine art of puppetry. Is it true?”

“You could say that,” Mabel shrugged with a nonchalant, flirtatious smirk. “I’m Mabel. Care to know more? I bet you do. You like to learn.”

“I’m Gabe,” the puppeteer introduced himself casually. “Master of puppets. Nice to meet you.”

“Your puppets are really cool,” Steven remarked with a smile. “Mind if I see one for a-”

“No!” Gabe cried, pulling his puppets close to him in a protective embrace. “These puppets are made with the best fabrics and googly eyes available! Only professionals like me can handle them without sullying their perfect forms!”

“Uh…. Ok then….” the young Gem frowned, backing off as he was rather weirded out by such an unexpectedly panicked response.

“You’re amazing with them…” Mabel mused, her tone dreamy as she looked more to Gabe than his puppets.

“Really?” Gabe asked, still clinging onto his puppets carefully. “A lot of people think puppets are dumb, o-or just for kids, or something.”

“Well, I don’t!” Mabel quipped boldly. “I’m puppet crazy! People call me Puppet-Crazy-Mabel!”

“Wait, they do?” Steven asked.

“Yes!” Mabel quickly snapped, her smile ridiculously wide by now in an attempt to keep her ruse up.

“Oh, no way, people used to call me Puppet-Crazy-Gabe!” the puppeteer exclaimed. “So, when’s your next puppet show?”

“My… huh?”

“Well, you can’t truly love puppets if you’re not throwing puppet shows, right?” Gabe asked as though it were obvious.

“O-oh, yeah! I-I mean, I’m totally working on a puppet show!” Mabel professed, hardly even thinking at all about what she was saying. Something that would more than likely come back to bite her before it was all said and done.

“Wait, you are?” Steven questioned, more confused than ever now.

“Yes, I am, Steven!” Mabel replied sharply, her smile so huge now to the point that it almost hurt. “I’ve just been keeping it a secret until now!”
“Ooo, keeping things under wraps, I like it,” Gabe nodded, impressed as he sent her a rather coy look. “Still, you wouldn’t mind sharing a few details with me… would you?”

Mabel couldn’t repress an absolutely lovestruck blush at this, one that she forced away with a small, thoughtless wave of her hand. After all, if a puppet show was what it took to land her that long-awaited summer romance, then she was more than willing to put forth the effort. “There are so many details…” she replied, albeit quite nervously. Still, she was prepared to fabricate whatever she had to for now, in the hopes that it could become a reality that was sure to win her new crush’s heart some way or another. And as far as she was concerned, there was nothing in the world that could stop her from doing just that.

While Mabel and Steven continued chatting the puppeteer up, Dipper and Connie unanimously decided to get started on the laptop without them, though making any real progress took a good deal longer since it was just the two of them working on it. So far, none of the words that Dipper inputted as Connie read them aloud showed any signs of even come close to being correct, but even so they kept going, knowing that they had literally millions of unused possibilities to sift through and so little time in which to do it.

“Ok, so the next word, ironically enough, is ‘password’,” Connie reported, going through the seemingly endless list.

“Seriously?” Dipper asked incredulously before shrugging in defeat. “Eh, it’s worth a try, I guess, considering nothing else has worked yet.” Of course, the moment he typed the literal password in, the laptop beeped in rejection over it once more, just as it had with every other word they had tried thus far. “Called it.”

“Well, Steven might be a little disappointed then…” Connie remarked with a small, bemused grin. “Disappointed with what?” the young Gem asked as him and Mabel returned to the table as if on cue.

“The password, ironically enough, wasn’t ‘password’.”

“Aw, man!” Steven frowned. “And I thought that was a really good guess too!”

“So, how’d it go with puppet guy?” Dipper asked the pair dully, not really paying too much attention to anything other than the laptop as he continued trying other passwords.

“Dipper…” Mabel began, biting her lip anxiously as she prepared to lay all her cards out on the table at once. “How hard do you think it would be to write and compose a sock puppet rock opera with lights, original music, and live pyrotechnics by Friday?”

Dipper aptly froze upon hearing all this, the laptop buzzing with yet another failed password guess as he looked to his sister in startled disbelief. “What? Mabel, are you serious?!”

“Yeah, she kinda is…” Steven admitted, scratching the back of his neck awkwardly. “It’s a long story…”

“I don’t know what happened!” Mabel groaned, pressing back into her seat as she covered her eyes with her sweater sleeve. “I got lost in his eyes and his ponytail and I’m gonna be so embarrassed on Friday if I don’t have *anything* to show for it, which is why I need both of you guys’ help!” she implored Dipper and Connie. “Steven’s already on board, right, Steven?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess so,” Steven shrugged, though this was really the first he had heard on the matter of him volunteering for this endeavor. “I mean, puppet shows are already a lot of fun to watch, so
I’m sure putting one together will be even more fun, especially if we all work on it together!”

“Well… I suppose making a few sock puppets shouldn’t be *too* hard, right?” Connie asked effectually signing herself onto the project as well.

“A few?” Mabel asked, shaking her head. “Oh, no, no, no! This *can’t* be just some plain old sideshow puppet show. This is gonna be *epic*, with huge, elaborate sets and a whole menagerie of puppets acting every single, heartfelt, suspenseful scene out! If I really wanna impress Gabe with this, then we can’t spare *any* expense, and that includes time.”

“But what about cracking this password?” Dipper interjected, knowing that it was by far a much higher priority than trying to appease his sister’s latest crush. “We have to figure this thing out, especially if it could end up helping us save Lapis!”

“I know, that’s really important to you, Dipper,” Mabel agreed earnestly. “A-and it’s important to me too! But if you help me with this for just a couple of days, then I promise we’ll all pitch in with the password! Please! Pretty please! It’s for *love*, Dipper!”

Dipper took pause for a moment at this, initially ready to adamantly say no seeing as how this entire puppet show fiasco was likely going to all be for naught anyway. Still, as he looked to the pleading, almost desperate expression on his sister’s face, echoed, albeit less so in Steven and Connie’s expressions, he found that there was really no way he could say no. Even if he largely wanted to. “All right, fine—”

“Oh!” Mabel cheered before he even had a chance to finish, pulling him into a tight hug that she soon extended to Steven and Connie as well. “Thank you guys so much! Everyone hear that!” she shouted to the rest of the library. “These three! They’re all the best!”

“The best?” Steven gasped with a delighted smile. “Aw, thanks so much Mabel! You’re the best too!”

“No, you’re the best!” Mabel countered just as cheerfully.

“No, you are!”

“No, you!”

“Oh, guys, shh!” Connie cut in, quite embarrassed over how everyone nearby was staring at their loud, happy display. “We’re still in a library, remember?”

“Not for long!” Mabel hopped out of her seat as she prepared to take her leave. “We gotta go get some socks, and a ton of them!”

“Oh! I think Amethyst has a bunch of old socks in her room that she’d let us borrow!” Steven suggested. “She always keeps stuff like that around, though I’m not really sure why… Still, we should go ask her for some.”

“Then let’s get going,” Dipper said, letting out a small sigh of disappointment as he closed the laptop and headed out after the others. “After all, the sooner we get this whole puppet show over with, the sooner we can all focus our attention on the laptop full time. We’re close to discovering something big here, I can feel it…”

And so the group left the library with two missions in mind now as opposed to just one. And yet, as caught up in both thoughts of password decoding and sock puppeteering as they all were, none of them caught sight of the ominous, triangular shadow that slowly and silently drifted along the wall.
right behind them, a shadow that had intentions all its own…

Needless to say that, amidst relaxing in the living room, none of the Gems were expecting to see the kids suddenly burst into the temple, Steven and Mabel quite frantically as they rushed in with Dipper and Connie trailing after them much more calmly.

“Hi, guys! Can’t talk! Gotta get craft supplies!” Steven called to his startled guardians as he hurried up to the loft to do just that.

“Amethyst!” Mabel rushed over the purple Gem without hesitation. “Do you have a whole bunch of socks I can borrow? And by borrow, I mean have since I’m gonna glue hair and googly eyes onto them?”

Amethyst only paused for a moment, briefly taken aback by the strangeness of this question before she simply shrugged nonchalantly. “Sure. How many you need?”

“As many as you got!”

“On it,” Amethyst simply complied, hopping off the couch and making her way towards the temple gate.

“You’re not even going to ask what she needs so many socks for?” Pearl asked, raising an eyebrow at this.

“Meh, whatever,” the purple Gem shrugged once more. “I just like to roll with stuff like this, P. Besides, it’s not like I’m ever gonna wear any of them anyway.”

“Well,” Pearl remarked as Amethyst entered the temple. “If she’s not going to ask, then I will. Mabel, what in the world could you possibly need so many socks for? In case you don’t know, Amethyst has hundreds of them in that disaster of a room of hers. And the last time I checked, you only have two feet.”

“Oh, the socks aren’t for my feet, Pearl!” Mabel replied with a small chuckle. “They’re for this huge sock puppet show I plan on producing so I can impress this guy I just met like an hour ago! His name is Gabe and he’s a total hunk who’s totally into puppets, so I figured I might as well give him what he likes, you know?”

“You might want to consider another option,” Garnet spoke up rationally.

“Oh… uh, why? Do you see a future where this turns out… I dunno, badly?” Mabel asked rather hesitantly.

“No, actually,” the Gem leader said, her frown deepening as she realized she actually couldn’t see too many possibilities for this scenario at all. And the few that she could see were all muddled and blurry, a phenomenon that she certainly wasn’t used to and found very odd. Still, she decided to keep this bizarre anomaly to herself, at least for now. “But I do know that trying to win someone’s affections by trying to impress them isn’t always the wisest idea, especially if you want to form a genuine connection with them.”

“Oh, but I already did form a connection with him back at the library when we talked about puppets and I stared at his beautiful ponytail!” Mabel nodded vigorously. “I’m just trying to make that connection with him a little… deeper… if ya know what I mean…”
“And you intend to do that with… socks?” Pearl asked, still quite confused. “I’m not sure if I understand how that’s going to work…”

“Don’t worry, Pearl, you’re not the only one,” Dipper interjected rather dryly, rolling his eyes as Mabel playfully stuck her tongue out at him in retaliation.

“You guys should definitely come see the show on Friday!” Steven exclaimed as he hurried back downstairs with a large box of various art supplies, from glue to glitter and everything in between. “It’s gonna be great! Especially since all four of us are gonna be working on making it happen!”

“Then we’ll be there,” Garnet confirmed with a small smile that was quick to fade. “But just remember, Mabel: going all in for someone you barely know isn’t as important as going all in for someone you do.”

“Uh… ok, thanks?” Mabel frowned, somewhat bewildered by this cryptic advice. Still, she didn’t have much time to ponder over it before Amethyst emerged from the temple, toting a pile of socks that was larger than she was, with several of them falling out of her grip the moment she attempted to pull the load through the temple door. “Oh my gosh, yes! Those are perfect! Steven, help me pick out the best, most puppetey ones!”

“Ok!” the young Gem chuckled, already having fun with this project as him, Mabel, and Amethyst essentially leapt into the massive sock pile, spreading them out even more.

“Oh, for crying out loud, you three!” Pearl huffed in disapproval. “You’re making a mess!”

“I really hope we don’t have to make puppets out of all of those socks…” Connie remarked, her eyes wide with amazement over just how many of them there were. At the same time, however, Dipper turned his attention away from the socks and back towards his overall goal, which was of course, the laptop tucked under his arm.

“Uh, so…” he addressed Garnet and Pearl somewhat hesitantly, knowing how talking to them about things like this usually went. Still, the Gem leader had been there when they had first found the laptop, so he hoped that would make this a little less difficult than something like the journal had been. “Garnet, you remember the laptop we found in the author’s bunker, right?” Garnet simply nodded in response to this, not offering much more of an answer as she silently prompted Dipper to continue. “Well, I’ve been trying to see what’s on it, but all of its information is blocked off with a password. And while you guys apparently didn’t know the author per se… he did know a lot about Gem stuff, so… I was wondering if maybe you guys might have an idea about what it could be?”

“A password?” Pearl asked, curiously looking over the laptop as Dipper opened it up for her to see. “Well, given the author’s apparent comradery with Rose,” the white Gem let out a rather harsh scoff at this before continuing. “I would suggest it possibly being ‘Rose Quartz’, but that has ten letters, not eight.”

“Yo, what if he made the password my name?” Amethyst called, poking her head out of the sock pile. “Ya know, cause I’m so awesome and everything.” Seeing this as a viable possibility given it appropriate number of letters, Dipper input the purple Gem’s name, only for the laptop to reject it, just like everything else. “Aw, boo!” Amethyst jeered upon hearing the machine’s denying beep. “Author guy totally missed out on a great opportunity there.”

“Do you have any guesses, Garnet?” Dipper asked, hoping that the Gem leader’s clairvoyance might provide some much-needed assistance in the matter.
“Hm…” Garnet mused thoughtfully for a moment before shaking her head, her future vision still rather foggy as she tried to find the password with it. “Sorry, but no. Still, that doesn’t mean you should stop looking for it, Dipper. Especially if whatever’s on that laptop can finally provide all of us with some answers.”

“Yes, like who that mysterious author is,” Pearl nodded in firm agreement.

“Or how he was so tight with Rose and not with us,” Amethyst added.

“Huh, you guys are being… surprisingly supportive of this whole laptop thing,” Dipper noted, somewhat taken aback considering how harshly they usually received anything having to do with the author or the journal.

“Well, of course, why wouldn’t we be?” Pearl asked intrinsically. “This whole journal mystery has been baffling us for weeks now! And with the threat from Homeworld is, er… neutralized for the moment, I’d say there’s no better time to solve that mystery than now!”

“Pearl’s right,” Garnet affirmed, rising to stand. “And Dipper,” she continued as she placed a steady hand on his shoulder. “You’re the closest to solving that mystery out of all of us, so keep at it. But like I told you about the journal, be careful; as you saw in the bunker, looking for these kinds of answers can lead to some dangerous places. And those are the kinds of places that you should never let yourself go into alone.”

“Don’t worry, you guys,” Dipper assured all three of the Gems confidently. “Once we unlock this laptop, the truth behind all that stuff will be as good as revealed. Besides, all we really have to do is figure out this password, which should be easy-”

“Yeah! Just as easy as turning all these groady old socks into puppet superstars!” Mabel interrupted as her and Steven hurried for the door, both of them carrying huge armfuls of socks each. “Now come on!” she called to Dipper and Connie, who could both only shrug in acceptance as they followed after them. “We’re burning good puppet-show-preparation daylight!”

As it turned out, the next several days were spent making very good use of puppet-show-preparation daylight as Mabel began building up her puppet show up from a mere concept into a full-fledged script. The moment she finished laying the treatment for her show out, she had gotten to work on the bulk of the project which, by far, was puppet and set production. Mabel had already recruited Dipper, Steven, and Connie to help her in this regard, true, and while they were sufficient enough at stitching tiny clothes onto the socks and drenching them in copious amounts of glitter, she also managed to rope Soos and Wendy into helping out as well. Their base of operations varied between the shack and the temple, and today it was the former as everyone gathered together in the den, socks and art supplies strewn about everywhere as work steadily continued on the quickly approaching puppet show.

“Alright, everyone!” Mabel chimed, gathering the group’s attention as she played a few loud, random notes on the keyboard Soos was letting her borrow for the show. “This is gonna be called Glove Story: A Sock Opera! Steven came up with the Glove Story part, while yours truly thought up the Sock Opera half.”

“Get it?” Steven whispered to Connie with a wide grin. “Glove story? Cause sock puppets are kinda like gloves? It’s a pun!”
“Heh, yeah, I got it, Steven,” Connie chuckled in amusement as she finished off another puppet.

“Just to warn you all, people’s eyes will get wet,” Mabel warned dramatically. “Cause they’ll be crying. From laughter! At how tragic it is!”

“Ugh,” Dipper groaned in annoyance as he struggled to pull a glue-covered puppet off his face. “Yeah, uh, that… that sounds great…” he remarked, quite unenthused, especially as he inadvertently coughed up a few pom poms. Really, if there was one word that could sum up how he felt about Mabel’s puppet show agenda, it was aggravation, aggravation that he had no qualms about showing every chance he got. Though really, his ongoing surliness could easily be attributed to his ever-growing exhaustion. With so much of the past few days devoted to helping prepare for the show, Dipper found that the only time he really had to dedicate to unlocking the laptop was at night, namely when everyone else had long since gone to sleep. Pulling all-nighters really wasn’t anything new for him; after all, over the course of the summer alone he had already had several sleepless nights with the journal serving as his only companion. But never before had he gone without sleep so consistently, as he was going on four nights now without getting any real form of rest as he tried and continually failed to decrypt the laptop’s password. Still, despite the fact that he was wearing himself out with this endeavor, he knew he couldn’t stop now, not when he was so close to finally obtaining not only the answers he had been seeking for so long now, but when he was on the verge of possibly finding a way to helping Lapis. And really, that alone was reason enough to motivate him to keep pushing forward. Even if it was tiring beyond all reason.


As if to prove that very point, Mabel had already cheerfully launched into a rendition of one of the many songs she had written for her show, a puppet on one hand as she followed along on the keyboard with the other. “Puppet boy, puppet boy, you’re the boy I-

“Looove!” everyone else chimed in, seeing as how they all knew the lyrics to every song in the play front and back thanks to Mabel. Of course, in the midst of this brief rehearsal, Stan happened to pass by the den, though he stopped short upon seeing the noisy, haphazard mess of both puppets and people before him.

“Not even gonna ask,” he remarked dry before tersely moving on, leaving the kids to their puppet pandemonium.

After what seemed like countless hours of hard, colorful work, the big day was almost there. The script was written, the sets built, the theatre booked, and the puppets made. Now all that was left was the long-awaited, much-anticipated “sock opera” itself. And seeing as how her possible future romance hinged on the show’s success, Mabel simply couldn’t wait to see all of her arduous efforts finally come together in an epic display that would certainly impress Gabe, if not then some.

“Good night, my babies,” Mabel grinned blithely as she organized her rather extensive puppet collection around her bed as she settled in for the night. She took a moment to grab the puppets she had made of herself and Gabe, her grin widening as she pulled the two of them together in a kiss as she sighed contentedly. “Soon, Gabe Benson… Anyway, you still there, Steven?” she asked, reclaiming her phone as she continued her last-minute collaboration with the young Gem.

“Yeah, and uh, I’ve been looking over the script again...” Steven replied on the other line, his tone quite bewildered. “I’m just a little confused about this part with the killer whale and the
“Come on, Steven, I need to stay with me here,” Mabel urged. “The fireworks are the water. Only sparkly and fiery instead of wet and watery! That way everybody can be totally amazed by-”

Mabel was abruptly cut off by a familiar blaring beep, followed by a loud, frustrated groan from Dipper as he glared down at the laptop in front of him. His bed as a mess of notes and papers covered with all of the passwords he had tried thus far, all of which had yielded no results whatsoever. “Ugh! That one was wrong too, Connie!” he exclaimed disparagingly as he conversed with her on the phone. “Just like all the rest of them, what else is new?”

“But we’ve already tried hundreds of words and letter combinations,” Connie mused much more calmly. “Maybe there’s something we’re still not seeing here…”

“Yeah, and I know what that something is: the password,” Dipper remarked dryly.

“Well… we can always work on it some more tomorrow after the puppet show,” Connie said reassuringly. “By then, we’ll have Mabel and Steven back to help us, so maybe that’ll make things easier.”

“Sure, it will…” Dipper deadpanned, glancing over to Mabel as she used one of her puppets to bid Steven farewell. “But in the meantime, I think I better keep working on figuring this password out myself.”

“Don’t stay up all night, Dipper!” Mabel cautioned brightly as him and Connie exchanged goodbyes and ended their call. “Last time you got this sleep-deprived, you tried to eat your own shirt.”

Upon realizing that he was absent-mindedly doing just that, Dipper promptly spat his shirt out, letting out another disgruntled sigh as he looked to the laptop and its empty password screen once more. “Ugh, just a few more tries…”

“Come on, bro-bro,” Mabel rolled her eyes as she sunk down into her covers. “You and I both know that ‘a few more tries’ is gonna turn into a lot more tries.”

“Yeah, well maybe one of those tries will actually be the one,” Dipper muttered dourly as he collected the laptop and a few other supplies together. As already aggravated as he was, he didn’t really spare his still quite cheerful sister another word as he took his leave to head up onto the roof, knowing that he had likely another long sleepless night ahead of him.

It was only as Dipper stepped out into the crisp night air on the roof that he realized the last time he had been up there had just a little over a week ago. Despite everything that had happened since then, that really wasn’t a remarkable amount of time, but what was notable was the fact that the last time he had taken up a perch here on the roof he had done so alongside Lapis. In fact, as he quietly took a seat, he couldn’t help but remember that somber, but hopeful conversation they had on the eve of the disaster that had torn them apart. “You know, if there’s one good thing to come out of any of this…” she had begun, her voice soft and bittersweet as she looked to him, uncertain. “It’s that I got to spend more time with you. I think that’s what I’m going to miss most if… if, well, something happens…”

“Don’t worry,” he had naively assured her, completely blind to what could of and what had indeed
happened. “Once all of this blows over—and I know it will—then we’ll have even more time to hang out together. But since we won’t have to about Homeworld invasions or anything like that, then it’ll be even better.”

She offered him a weak smile at this, one that hadn’t reached her eyes, almost as if she had somehow known about what was soon to befall her. “Yeah… even better…”

Except no, things hadn’t gotten even better. They had gotten worse, a fact that Dipper knew all too well. Still, they wouldn’t stay that way for long if he had anything to do about it. Certainly, the laptop would be able to provide him with some inkling about what to do to help the blue Gem. Even if that inkling was just a very small, minute one, it would definitely be better than the nothing he currently had to go on. After all, Lapis had been willing to take a chance for him, a chance that had cost her so very much in the end; which was why Dipper was more than ready to take whatever chance he had to pay her back in full for such a heavy sacrifice. The only thing he had to do was figure out that elusive password, which, as much as he hated to admit it, was starting to become quite a frustratingly difficult task. With no way of gauging how close he was to finding the right password, he only had his own guesswork to rely on, which was getting him nowhere fast. His steadily growing fatigue certainly wasn’t helping things; if anything, it was only adding onto his increasing aggravation over his own inability to solve this mystery, something that rose once again as he tried another failed password attempt.

“Oh, come on!” Dipper shouted at the laptop, glaring fiercely at it as it emitted its jarring rejecting buzz or what seemed like the thousandth time now. And given all of his previous password guesses, it could have very well been. “Give me a break already! I can’t take that sound anymore! I—hate—you—sound!” he growled, punctuating his anger by carelessly beating against the keyboard, not even caring as said sound blared out as if in defiance each time he did.

Given his palpable frustration, Dipper decided to give himself just a brief mental break, knowing that there was absolutely no time at all for a physical one. In something of an attempt to restore his taxed resolve, he found himself pulling out one of the several photos him and Lapis had taken during their painfully brief time together out of his jacket. A small, sad sigh escaped him as he took in their shared, bright, cheerful expressions, captured in a moment of peace and levity that they had both taken for granted as it had happened. As much as Dipper hoped that the laptop could finally provide some much-needed answers about the journal, the author, and Gravity Falls itself, he would be perfectly content to wait on those answers if it got him just a little closer to freeing the blue Gem instead. Which was exactly why he was being so adamant and persistent with this self-imposed mission, to the point that he was denying himself necessities as important as even sleep. He wouldn’t rest, he couldn’t rest until he saved her, just as she had saved him. “Don’t worry, Lapis…” Dipper muttered to the photo, sighing solemnly once more as he put it away. “I’ll figure something out…” He paused, letting out a long, tired yawn as he looked to the laptop and its almost goading password screen again rather bitterly. “Maybe Connie was right…” he noted to himself thoughtfully. “What if I am just missing something? There has to be some kind of shortcut or clue… Who would know about secret codes…?”

Almost as soon as he had voiced this question, Dipper instantly noticed an abrupt breeze start to pick up, one that quickly turned into a full on, admittedly ominous gale as it whipped through the trees. Somewhat unsettled by this, he pulled his jacket tighter around his shoulders as he securely grabbed the laptop and braced himself against the sudden chill, only to realize that the light of the full moon in the skies ahead of him was starting to change as well. Slowly, a long, slitted line began to draw itself over the moon, splitting it cleanly in half as a series of initially transparent, glowing blocks began to gravitate towards it out of seemingly nowhere. Dipper gasped, alarmed by this bewildering phenomenon as he leapt to his feet, taking a nervous step back as he stared towards the moon with wide eyes, only for it to stare right back at him. The bright blocks continued stacking
against the moon, forming a distinct triangular shape as the winds picked up to near hurricane levels. And then, as they finally all joined together in a bright, practically blinding flash of light, the world bled of color instantly, turning into a full, frozen greyscale scape as cause of all this strangeness finally made his appearance:

Bill Cipher.

“I THINK I KNOW A GUY!” he proclaimed boldly, his distinctively pitchy voice echoing harshly throughout the colorless woods. In light of this completely unexpected, unprecedented encounter, Dipper was effectively stunned into frozen silence as he stood in the dream demon’s massive triangular shadow. Still, Bill hardly seemed to notice or care as he drew in closer, his manner just as casual as ever as he circled the dumbfounded human before him. “Well, well, well. I gotta admit, you’re awfully persistent, Pine Tree. Hats off to you!” At this, Bill took his top hat off and tipped it, the entire world seeming to abruptly tilt along with it.

Dipper let out a startled gasp as he struggled to maintain his footing on the roof as it slipped sideways, though fortunately it leveled itself once more moments later. As it did, he was quick to regain his composure for the sake of putting on an air of brazen defiance to the crafty dream demon, remembering well how much trouble he had caused during his last appearance. “You again!” he exclaimed crossly, holding the laptop a bit tighter as Bill calmly glided past him. “What do you think you’re doing here?!”

“Oh, just checking in,” Bill shrugged coyly. “Did ya miss me? Admit it, you missed me.”

“Hardly,” Dipper scoffed, rolling his eyes. “You worked with Gideon! You tried to destroy my uncle’s mind! Oh, and not to mention that you constantly terrorized all of us while we were trying to save him, what with you stealing Steven’s gem and shooting a whole straight through my chest. Need I go on?”

“Geez, it was just a job, kid!” the dream demon countered defensively. “No hard feelings! Besides, since then, I’ve been keeping an EYE on you!” At this, Bill instantly shot up to a massive size, his voice ominously deepening and his eye turning pitch black as he peered at Dipper piercingly. “And even if you are a bit rough around the edges, I must say I’m impressed!”

“Y-you are?” Dipper asked, unsure of what to make of that. After all, he really didn’t see anything particularly good about garnishing the interest of a being like Bill Cipher, especially given the countless warnings the journal gave against him.

“Sure am!” Bill agreed brightly. “In fact, you deserve a prize! Here, have a head that’s always screaming!” With a mere snap of the dream demon’s fingers, a disembodied head appeared, one that, sure enough, was crying out in shrill, endless agony as it fell onto the roof. Dipper gasped in fearful disgust as he flinched away from it, only for the head to begin to peel itself away layer by layer, from skin, to muscle, to bone, before it disappeared entirely as Bill simply laughed in sadistic amusement all the while.

“Augh! What’s wrong with you?!” Dipper exclaimed at this, appalled by such a twisted, demented display.

“Ain’t that the question of the millennia!” Bill chuckled carelessly as he floated down to take a seat on the edge of the roof. “But the point is, I like you, kid! And I couldn’t help but notice that you’ve been having a hard time with that crusty old laptop there, so how’s about you let me give you a hint, huh? I only ask for a small FAVOR in return.” As the dream demon said this, both his hand and his eye lit up with an unnatural strain of blue fire, his manner still incredibly casual, even despite the immediately harsh rejection his offer received.
“Are you kidding me? I’d never do a favor for you!” Dipper exclaimed adamantly, unable to believe that the dream demon would even have the gall to propose something so outlandish. “Don’t forget who defeated you last time!”

“Right, you ‘defeated’ me,” Bill rolled his eye as he disappeared into the roof, only to come rising up out of it behind Dipper just a second later. “Still, seems to me like you’re passing up a great deal like this pretty quickly, Pine Tree. Kinda ironic when you think about how Water Wings didn’t hesitate to take up Stripes’ deal to save you…”

Dipper was completely caught off guard by this, especially as his picture of him and Lapis came flying out of his pocket to hover over the dream demon’s hand. “Hey! Give that back!” he protested, reaching for the photo only for Bill to teasingly pull it out of his reach.

“Whoa, hold your awkward, pre-pubescent horses for a sec, kid, and think about this,” the demon contested coolly. “Do you really think you’re getting anywhere by making all those shots in the dark about that password? You think you’re not just wasting your time out here while Water Wings has a non-stop, all-out brawl with Stripes at the bottom of that lake just so she can keep you ‘safe’?”

“S-stop,” Dipper muttered, his hands clenched tightly at his sides as he tried to block out what Bill was saying, even if he knew it was all true. But of course, the dream demon simply ignored him and kept going with his sly, almost cruel form of manipulation.

“Wouldn’t it just be so much easier to get just a little help, to get just a tiny bit closer?” Bill kept the photo positioned right above Dipper as he talked, deceptively close but still so far out of his reach, much like the blue Gem herself was at the moment. “Wouldn’t that make whatever small thing I want from you worth it just to bail her out?”

“Stop,” Dipper said a bit firmer this time, sending the dream demon a fierce warning glare as he tried to remind himself that he wasn’t going to take this deal, he wasn’t going to give Bill what he wanted, whatever that was. Still, that didn’t mean his appeal wasn’t starting to become the least bit tantalizing.

“After all,” Bill continued callously, clearly taking pleasure in how uncomfortable his truthful words were making Dipper. “Water Wings sure thought it was worth it to bail you out, didn’t she?”

“Stop!” Dipper finally shouted, unable to take any more of this, lest he actually give in under the pressure. A beat of heavy silence passed as he stared the dream demon down, his heated anger cooling just a bit, even if it was still very much on the surface as he offered a firm, but surprisingly tranquil response. “I don’t need your help.”

“Oh, suuuuure you don’t!” Bill deadpanned, rolling his eye once more. “After all, you already have Shooting Star and Rosebud to help you out with this, so why would you need me? Oh, but wait! They’re busy with that little puppet show of theirs, aren’t they? Oh, well, you can always ask those Crystal Chumps for help, right? I’m sure Fuse Box, Half-Baked, and Bird Brain know all there is to know about that laptop, almost is if they didn’t mysteriously lose all their memories on that journal of yours!”

Dipper stilled at this, hating the fact that, once again, the dream demon was right on the mark with such claims. With Steven, Mabel, and even Connie still distracted by the play and the Gems as clueless about who the author could be as they were, he was really the only one who could put the time and effort into this mystery that it truly deserved. And, so far, trying to tackle it completely on his own had gotten him absolutely nowhere at all. Still, to accept help from Bill, of all sources,
would definitely be asking for trouble, trouble that, after all of the disasters of the recent invasion and its brutal aftermath, Dipper certainly didn’t need right now. “I said,” he began again, squaring his shoulders as he glared at the demon unrelentingly. “I don’t need your help!”

“Eh, well, then have it your way,” Bill shrugged, seemingly unconcerned by this refusal. “But if you ever change your mind, I’ll be here for you, ready to make a deal!” To punctuate his point, a slot machine appeared on his flat surface, all three wheels stopping right on the pine tree symbol. “You know, now that I’ve brought it up, maybe I’ll go pay your pal Water Wings a visit down at the bottom of the lake and let her know all about how her precious little Pine Tree doesn’t care enough about her to lend her a hand! I bet that would a lot of fun!”

“W-wha—no!” Dipper exclaimed, his calm manner all but gone at the idea of the dream demon tormenting the blue Gem. As if she wasn’t being tormented enough by being fused with Jasper alone. “Leave Lapis alone!”

“Boy, you sure are easy to rile up, Pine Tree.” Bill laughed twistedly, finally letting the picture fall back into Dipper’s hands. “It’s hilarious, almost as funny as you thinking you can guess that password on your own! Oh, speaking of hilarious, wanna hear my impression of you in about three seconds?” At this, the demon let out a loud, fearful scream, one that Dipper ended up inadvertently echoing only seconds later as he found himself abruptly pulled back into reality. Bill was fortunately, finally gone and color had returned to the world as the skies filled in with the breaking of dawn, a calming sight after the still, lifeless void he had just been in.

Still, Dipper was hardly relieved by any of this as he let out a tight, somewhat shaken breath, unable to deny that he was deeply unsettled by his bizarre, unnerving encounter with the dream demon. While he was still completely resolved to accomplish his goal without accepting any sort of help from him, Dipper still couldn’t help but wonder what Bill could possibly have to gain by offering to assist him with the laptop? What was the demon really after? Why had he decided to make a sudden reappearance now, of all times? And while Dipper didn’t really even want to entertain the thought, what would Bill have even asked of him if he had for some inane reason agreed to collaborate with him?

All the same, he was quick to shake such inconceivable thoughts from his mind as he steadily regained his composure. As he had told Bill himself, he didn’t need his help. Theoretically, he didn’t need anyone’s help, though he still hoped that Mabel, Steven, and Connie would be provide him with a much less dangerous, more reliable kind than whatever kind of assistance the demon had planned on offering. Still, Dipper was certain that he could do this; he could crack the laptop’s password, he could learn all of its likely many secrets, he could discover who and where the author was, and most of all he could save Lapis. And he could do it all without having to make some kind of unknown, ill-conceived deal with Bill Cipher.

Or at least he hoped he could.

“Hey! I’m puppet Stan!” Mabel quipped as she blithely waved the paper bag puppet she had made of her uncle in his face at the breakfast table. Needless to say that her excitement was running as high as her energy was in anticipation of her sock opera that afternoon, which she was confident would be more than enough to make Gabe fall head over heels for her, just as she had already fallen for him.

“Still ignoring this,” Stan remarked, deadpanned as ever as he took a sip of his coffee, not even paying the puppet any mind as Mabel continued playfully parading it about. No more than a
second later, however, a succinct knock on the door sounded out, followed by Steven and Connie’s entrance right after.

“Today’s the big day!” Steven exclaimed cheerfully as he bounded into the kitchen to greet Mabel. “Who’s ready to put on the best puppet show ever?!”

“I am!” Mabel proclaimed, hopping to her feet and bringing several puppets along with her. “But of course, I can’t do it without you guys, which is why I’m super glad you got here early! Thanks so much!”

Unable to contain her elation, she pulled them both into a sudden tight hug, one that Steven readily reciprocated, even if Connie was surprised but amused by it. “Heh, you’re welcome, Mabel,” she chuckled as the hug disbanded, though a look of concern filled her features a moment later. “So is Dipper up yet? Last night he sounded like he was starting to get really frustrated with this whole laptop thing.”

“Frustrated is kind of an understatement…” Dipper remarked dryly as he walked in, letting out a long, exhausted yawn as he did so.

“Yeesh, bag check for Dipper’s eyes!” Stan joked upon noticing how visibly tired his nephew was, letting out a sardonic laugh that no one else joined in on. “Oh come on, nobody?”

“Whoa, Dipper, you look so tired!” Steven exclaimed, both surprised and worried. “And by that I mean even more tired than you usually look, because you usually do look at least a little tired all the time, no offense.”

Of course, Dipper was largely too exhausted to really make much sense of what the young Gem had just said, which was why the most he could do was stare at him blankly for a beat. “…What?”

“Dipper, I told you to get some sleep last night!” Mabel scolded with a fretful frown. “Here, wake up with some Mabel juice!” she held up a pitcher of bright pink liquid with glitter and various small toys floating around in it. “It has plastic dinosaurs in it!”

“Is that stuff even… drinkable?” Connie asked, concerned by this presentation.

“Hardly,” Stan remarked, cringing. “It’s like if coffee and nightmares had a baby.”

“I… think I’ll pass,” Dipper shook his head, his manner suddenly turning serious as he briefly glanced between Stan and the others. “Uh, can I talk to you guys in the living room for a second?”

Steven, Mabel, and Connie all nodded in agreement to this, Stan hardly paying them any mind as they slipped away into the other room. As soon as he was sure they were out of the conman’s earshot, Dipper turned to face them, keeping his voice low as he briefly finding out about what had happened the previous night. “Guys, listen,” he began tersely and anxiously. “Last night I had a dream with Bill in it.”

“Bill?” Connie asked as Steven and Mabel let out a shared surprised gasp, both of them remembering well their first and last encounter with the dream demon. “Wait, isn’t he that triangle guy you guys told me about? The one you fought inside Mr. Pines’ mind?”

“Y-yeah…” Steven nodded somewhat fearfully. “He was really scary. When we were in there, he took my gem and then he made these really mean versions of the Gems appear and say that I wasn’t one of them! B-but still, I thought we beat him last time; what did he want in your dream, Dipper?”
“He said he’d give me the code to the laptop if I gave him something,” Dipper explained, scoffing as he crossed his arms. “Like I’d actually trust Bill, right?”

“Well, don’t worry, bro-bro!” Mabel assured, throwing an arm over his shoulder. “Today’s the day the Mystery Kids are back in action! We’ll all be free to help you crack that code just as soon as I hand off my puppet stuff to my production crew.”

“Production crew?” Dipper asked, almost too afraid to find out what his sister had in mind for this one. Though he was quick to find out just a few minutes later as Candy and Grenda eagerly showed up outside, both of them bright-eyed and covered in socks as Mabel and Steven both happily greeted them.

“We read the script,” Candy reported, adjusting her glasses. “Very emotional.”

“I cried like eight times!” Grenda exclaimed boisterously.

“Well, hopefully the audience will too once they see the emotional passion I’ve poured into this show!” Mabel grinned proudly.

“Oh! Maybe we should hand tissues out to people at the door!” Steven suggested. “That way they’ll all have something to try into!”

“Oh, good idea, Steven!” Mabel nodded in agreement. “See, this is why I named you my co-producer! Because you’re always think of everything!”

“Aw, well I don’t know about everything,” the young Gem blushed in slight embarrassment. “But I try.”

The conversation was soon cut off, however, as none other than Gabe himself pulled up to the group on his roller skates, both of his hands still covered with his puppets from the previous day as he offered a cool greeting. “Hey, ladies.”

“Gabe!” Mabel exclaimed with a delighted gasp as she ran over to him. “What are you doing here?”

“I was just blading by,” Gabe shrugged casually as he removed his helmet and shook his hair out. “Helps me dry out my ponytail after a shower.”

“Hubbity-hubbity,” Grenda remarked, eyes wide with amazement at the sight of the puppeteer. “What a hottie!”

“Maeibeuri hante Gaeibeujeul humchyeohagetda…” Candy muttered in envious Korean, making her affections towards Gabe quite clear as well.

“Ok, am I the only one who doesn’t get what the big deal about that guy is?” Connie whispered to Steven and Dipper, far from impressed.

“Believe me, you’re not,” Dipper remarked, crossing his arms as he rolled his eyes in exasperation.

“It’s so great to see you!” Mabel quipped to Gabe with a wide, charming grin. “I was just working on the world’s greatest puppet show! It has puppets!”

“Your passion is so refreshing, Mabel,” Gabe complimented. “Unlike the girl from last night’s puppet show. Single-stitch on one puppet, cross-stitch on the other? I was like ‘uh-uh’!”
“Cross… huh?” Mabel frowned, not having the faintest idea about what he was talking about.

“Naturally, I couldn’t afford to associate with such an obvious puppet novice, so I deleted her off my cell phone contacts list.”

“Oh! Uh, naturally!” Mabel laughed, trying to play her confusion off, even though her worry was starting to grow in light of this.

“But I know you won’t let me down, Mabel,” Gabe smiled smoothly. “Based on what you said the other day, you must be a puppet expert.”

Mabel froze at this, partially regretting the complete and utter lies she had fed him at the library, lies that had led to the formation of a puppet show that she now feared wouldn’t actually be enough to impress him. Which, considering how gorgeous and charming she found him to be, was quite an unbearable thought.

“You know, Gabe, you look pretty sweaty,” Grenda spoke up with an eager grin. “You should really take your shirt off. Right? Aren’t we all thinking that?”

A beat of awkward silence passed at this, though it wasn’t long before Gabe put his helmet back on and prepared to take his leave. “Later, ladies!” he called as he began to skate off. “See you tonight, Mabel.”

“Y-yeah!” Mabel shouted after him with a forced laugh. “S-see you… t-tonight!” The instant the puppeteer was out of earshot, she spun around to face her motley crew, her eyes wide in absolute panic as she realized just how severe the situation had gotten. “Augh! We gotta up our game, girls! Did you hear that thing he said about the stitches?!”

“Don’t worry, Mabel! Your crew can handle it!” Grenda assured, though she was quick to contradict herself by accidentally ripping the arms off of the puppet she was holding. “…Oops.”

“How many eyes does a face have again?” Candy asked as she held up a puppet she had glued countless googly eyes to.

“Ok,” Steven spoke up, having pulled his ukulele out as he strummed along with several of the complex melodies him and Mabel had written for the show. “So I think I just about have this song memori-” He cut himself off as one of his ukulele strings suddenly snapped at the exact wrong moment, leaving the instrument completely unusable for the time being. “Oh… Well, uh, I guess the ukulele accompaniment is out then, huh?”

Mabel’s jaw dropped in horrified shock over just how much suddenly seemed to be going wrong all at once. Yet still, things got even worse as the mountain of sets and supplies Soos and Wendy were trying to securely tie on top of Stan’s car suddenly fell loose, the bulk of it coming crashing down on top of the handyman, essentially burying him in a scattered mess of props and puppets.

“Ah!” Mabel gasped in apt alarm, realizing that her time to pull all of this together was running dangerously short. “Ok, I’m back on fabrication! Someone get me my lint roller, STAT!”

“Whoa, hold on!” Dipper interjected, grabbing her as she ran past him. “I thought you said you were going to help me!”

“Dipper! This sock crisis just bumped up to code argyle!” Mabel protested hotly. “The laptop can wait!”

“It can wait?” Dipper scoffed in disbelief at how she was simply putting him off yet again. “Mabel,
do you seriously think that your random crush of the week is more important than uncovering the mysteries of this town? You’re obsessed!”

“I’m obsessed?” Mabel countered just as adamantly. “Look at you! You haven’t slept all week! You look like a vampire, and not the hot kind!”

“Guys, come on!” Steven finally cut in as he noticed the quickly building tension between the twins. “Don’t fight! Both the laptop and the puppet show are really important, so we should-”

“Uh, no, Steven,” Dipper cut him off, sending a cross glare Mabel’s way all the while. “The laptop is important, yeah, but this dumb puppet show thing isn’t. I don’t get why you’re going so crazy on this anyway, Mabel. I know how you are; you’ll be into this guy for a week, maybe two, and then you’ll get bored with him and move onto someone else. You’re putting all this time and energy into something that won’t even matter in the long run!”

“It does too matter!” Mabel protested, clearly offended by such a spiteful accusation. “It matters to me! Why can’t you understand that?! Oh yeah, I know why, it’s because you’ve been burying your head into that stupid old laptop all week! Don’t you think it’s time to give it a rest already? Just wait and see, your body’s gonna end up quitting on you if you don’t give it some sleep!”

“I don’t need sleep!” Dipper argued fiercely. “What I need is to figure out this password! And this laptop isn’t stupid! For all we know, it could end up helping us figure out a way to finally save Lapis! Which, in case you’ve forgotten, is way more important than any pointless puppet show is!”

“I-I haven’t forgotten that!” Mabel shook her head. “But that’s just it, Dipper, you don’t know if that laptop will even be able to help Lapis at all. You could be doing all this work for nothing and you wouldn’t even know until you’ve wasted so much time and energy on it that you have nothing left at all!”

“I’m not wasting time! You are, Mabel! Why can’t this puppet show thing just wait?!”

“W-well, why can’t your laptop thing just wait?!”

“Because I’m doing it to help Lapis! Which, like I said, is the most important thing right now!”

“No, it’s not!”

A sharp gasp escaped both of the twins the moment Mabel said this, though she was clearly more horrified by allowing it to slip by as she covered her mouth in immediate regret, knowing that she had crossed the line. For a moment, all Dipper could do was stare at his sister in appalled disbelief over what she had just implied, and even Steven and Connie looked to her in apt surprise for her immense tactlessness. Still, despite her already heavy remorse for what she had just inadvertently said, Mabel still made a meager, hesitant attempt to make things right. “D-Dipper… I… I didn’t mean-"

“No,” Dipper cut her off, both his expression and his tone ice cold. “You know what? Fine. I’ll do it on my own. It’s not like it’ll be any different from how it’s been anyway.”

“Oh, Dipper, wait!” Steven urged earnestly, still wanting for there to be peace between the twins, even if such a thing seemed largely impossible now. “You don’t have to do this by yourself!”

“Yeah,” Connie agreed with a small, reassuring smile. “We’ll all help you just as soon as-”

Dipper put up a hand to interrupt her, his shoulders rigid as he turned to leave. “Like I said, it’s fine. I can handle this by myself. You guys just keep working on the puppet show. I’m sure it’ll be just
Mabel couldn’t even find it in her to be angry over such a callous remark as she instead watched Dipper head inside the shack in guilty silence. She understood well and good exactly why he was so insistent on unlocking the laptop, as well as what end he hoped it could possibly lead to, which was an end that she truly wanted to see herself. And yet in the moment, despite how bad she felt for what she had said, she knew that she couldn’t completely admit that he was right; after all, she had put far too much time and work into this show now to simply curtail everything right before its opening. Still, that didn’t mean that she didn’t want to at the very least try and make peace with her brother in light of the uncalled for slight she had made against both him and the blue Gem.

“Steven?” she hesitantly spoke up, gathering the concerned young Gem’s attention. “I, uh… c-could you maybe go talk to Dipper for me? You know, tell him I’m sorry for, um… well, for what just happened?”

“Sure, but… why can’t you go talk to him yourself?” Steven asked, rather confused.

“’Cause he’s probably in no mood to listen to me right now…” Mabel frowned, glancing down apprehensively. “But maybe he’ll hear you out instead! In fact, Steven, you have my full permission to utilize Stepper if that’s what you need to do to get him out of this salty mood of his.”

“Mabel, for some reason I feel like Steven forcing Dipper to fuse with him isn’t really going to solve this problem…” Connie remarked rather dubiously.

“Oh, sure, it will,” Mabel assured with a wave of her hand as she prepared herself to continue working on fixing the kinks in her show. “After all, it worked last time he got all obsessy like this, so why wouldn’t it work again?”

“Oh, well… I-I’ll see what I can do,” Steven assured, largely agreeing to go in Mabel’s stead for the sake of making peace between her and Dipper more than anything else. “I’ll be back in a bit!”

“Ok, good luck,” Mabel waved him off absently, distracted by fixing a tattered puppet as Connie, Candy, and Grenda lent a hand in helping her reorganize her supplies. At the same time, Steven turned to follow after Dipper inside the shack, more than eager to help foster reconciliation, though completely unaware of the much more serious, daunting task that he’d actually spend the afternoon doing.

A rather bitter scowl rested on Dipper’s face as he continued typing away at the laptop up in the attic, unable to let go of what Mabel had said just a few minutes ago. The fact that she had even so much as dared to imply that her silly puppet show was more important than rescuing Lapis practically infuriated him, to the point that he hadn’t even been able to properly show his anger with her at the moment for such a remark. And even if she hadn’t fully meant it like that, her refusal to help him with the laptop alone was more than enough to show Dipper where he currently stood with Mabel on this, and it was certainly not on the same side.

“Passwords… passwords…” Dipper muttered to himself, still seething with annoyance with each new failed entry. “Mabel—is—useless…” He paused for a moment, only to let out a very long, very exhausted yawn as he tried to rub the sleep out of his eyes. With each passing hour, he was finding that trying to stay awake and active was becoming more and more of a challenge, a challenge that he knew he couldn’t very well overcome forever. But all the same he had to stay awake, he had to keep at it with the laptop until its password was finally found and its secrets were
finally uncovered. To remind himself of this resolve, he had decided to all of the photos he had of him and Lapis on hand, largely out of his lingering frustration over how Bill had used one of them to taunt him last night. The small stack of pictures currently rested right beside the laptop, and while Dipper had hoped that they would fill him with a renewed sense of motivation, the only thing they really did give him at the moment was doubt. He had been working for so long and so hard now at trying to crack that password, and all he had to show for it were heavy bags under his eyes and a severe irritation with his sister.

And really, there was still a pretty good chance that Mabel could be right, as much as he hated to entertain the thought; even if he did manage to unlock the laptop, there was always a chance that its information would be completely useless in helping Lapis out of her current dire plight. He could very well set himself on a fool’s errand, one that might end up meaning nothing at all when everything was said and done. And if that really did happen, what then? He’d be right back to square one, with no leads, no hints, no clues at all about how to rescue the blue Gem.

Perhaps trying to save her was a longshot in general. After all, she had locked herself inside of an intense, monstrous fusion born of nothing but the sheerest hatred and spite, with said fusion itself being literally chained to the lakebed beep below. And really, as much as Dipper wanted to save her, he was just one person, a kid at that, who painfully lacked the strength, resources, or even the information needed to even come close to dealing with something like this. The truth was that, when it came right down to it, he had no idea about what to do to fix this. And to Dipper, that fact as almost as bad as the reality of Lapis being trapped in the first place.

As caught up in his steadily increasing worry as he was, he hardly even noticed as his hands gradually slipped away from the laptop, his head leaning against the side of the window alcove as his eyes began to gradually drift shut. With his lack of sleep finally catching up to him, it took a mere matter of seconds for him to nod off, though his brief bout of sleep was anything but restful when he opened his eyes and found himself standing on the lake shore, of all places.

 Needless to say that, upon seeing the shore surrounding him alight with green fire once again, Dipper was completely taken aback, though nothing could have prepared him for the sight of the familiar figure that stood only a few feet in front of him. “L-Lapis!” he exclaimed, awash in both relief and disbelief as he instantly rushed forward to her. He stopped dead in his tracks, however, as the blue Gem abruptly snapped a partial glance back at him, her expression cold and her gaze piercing as she spoke in a low, almost hollow tone.

“Dipper…” she began, her expression unchanging, even if her voice carried just the smallest hint of hurt betrayal in it. “Why…? Why haven’t you saved me yet?”

“I-I… I’m trying!” Dipper protested, flinching at her icy stare. “I really am, Lapis, you have to believe me! It’s just… taking longer than I thought it would…”

“The only reason I stayed here on this miserable planet was because of you,” Lapis’ shoulders seemed to tense as she said this, a certain harshness entering her tone. “And look at where that’s gotten me. I’m trapped here… with her, and you won’t even do anything to help me!”

“N-no!” Dipper shook his head, not even noticing the tears starting to well up in his eyes at such a brutal accusation. “L-Lapis, you don’t understand! I’ve been doing everything I can and working really hard to help-”

“You’ve been working for nothing,” Lapis sighed sorrowfully as she finally looked away from him. “You can’t help me. No one can.” Without so much as sparing another glance back at him, the blue Gem began to step forward into the lake, only offering him one final, bitter, hopeless farewell as she steadily walked deeper into her watery prison. “Goodbye, Dipper...”
“Lapis, w-wait!” Dipper shouted in a sudden panic, desperate not to lose her again as he ran into the water after her. “Please! Don’t go!” By now, the blue Gem was already quite deep in the water, but Dipper didn’t care. He was going to get to her, he was going to help her, no matter what he had to do. “I can figure out some way to save you, I know I can, I just need more—”

He was sharply cut off as a huge, momentous slash rippled throughout the lake the moment Lapis fully submerged herself. Dipper was knocked back quite a bit by this, giving him no time to react to the imposing Gem who had risen up from the depths to take Lapis’ place.

“Well, well…” Jasper smirked haughtily, her eyes wild with a lust for vengeance as she towered over the small, frightened human before her. “If it isn’t Lazuli’s precious little pet human…” Needless to say that upon being face to face with the fearsome orange Gem once more, Dipper’s flight instinct instantly kicked in as he tried to scramble to his feet and flee. However, Jasper easily stopped him before he could get away, grabbing him by his vest and hoisting him up by the front of his shirt, her twisted grin deepening as she watched his futile attempts to struggle against her firm hold. “Trying to run away, hm? Just like she did…”

“Let me go!” Dipper contested desperately, still thrashing about in the orange Gem’s grip as he was well aware of how incredibly violent she was, especially towards humans.

“Why should I?” Jasper scowled, glaring at him with nothing less than absolute ire. “After all, you’re the reason why she has us both trapped down here! Why every second of our existence together is nothing but a fight neither of us can ever win! And for what? Just so she could keep you safe? What a waste!”

The orange Gem scoffed as she finally let Dipper fall out of her grasp, though she was quick to restrain him before he could slip away by pinning him to the ground with a heavy foot pressed against his chest. “Do you really think you’ll ever be able to ‘save’ her? Because if you do, then that makes you the stupidest human I’ve ever met, and believe me, I’ve met plenty of your kind. You’ll never be able to split us up and free her, and do you know why?” In an act of mere cruelty alone, Jasper pressed her foot down harder, to the point that Dipper essentially had to struggle to even breathe, much less escape as the orange Gem continued, her tone dripping with clear hatred. “Because you’re just a weak, pathetic, little human. That’s all you’ve ever been and that’s all you’ll ever be. You’re not strong enough or smart enough to even come close. You—” Jasper cut herself off as she finally stepped away from him, walking backwards towards the water as a sinister grin spread across her features, the gemstone that was her nose illuminating her face ominously. “Are—” Her voice rose as she prepared to submerge herself, just like Lapis had, though not before finishing off her vicious string of insults. “Nothing!”

As Jasper plunged herself into the darkened depths, Dipper only had time to let out a terrified gasp as a much more massive, monstrous figure pulled herself out of the lake after her: Malachite. The fusion leered high over him, all four of her eyes glaring down at him relentlessly as she raised one of her huge fists up with the intent of crushing him right where he stood. And seeing as how Dipper was far too stunned, distraught, and most of all, guilty to even so much as think about moving, he simply braced himself for what would be an incredibly painful impact. An impact that amazingly never came as he was ripped out of one nightmare—

And dropped right into the middle of another.

“Wakey, wakey, Pine Tree! Time’s ticking away! Not that I care, seeing as how time’s just one big, elaborate hoax anyway!” the shrill, grating voice of none other than Bill Cipher himself was what ended up snapping Dipper awake from the rather horrific dream he had just had. It took him a moment to calm himself down from the rush of intense emotions he had received from it and
regather his bearings, and once he did, the first two things he noticed was that the attic was now completely devoid of color altogether, and that the dream demon was casually hovering just a few feet away. “Yeesh, took you long enough to wake up from that little catnap of yours! Still, I gotta say, that little nightmare you just had cracked me up! Stripes may be just as boring as all those other space rocks out there, but the way she scared the daylights out of you split all three of my sides! Ha! What a riot!”

Upon hearing this continued callousness, all of Dipper’s frightened surprise at Bill’s second unexpected appearance was replaced with all of his former bitter aggregation, largely since the dream demon and his incessant prodding and goading was the last thing he needed at the moment. “Ugh, give it a rest already!” he exclaimed crossly, hating just how constantly calm and composed Bill always seemed to be, even in the face of outright rejection. “I already told you I don’t want your help! Why can’t you just take a hint and leave me alone?!”

“Because you won’t take a hint, kid,” Bill countered easily. “Though you might want to, seeing as how you’re on a bit of a tight schedule now."

“What do you…” Dipper trailed off as he looked over to the laptop again, only to see something that made him gasp in apt alarm. The password screen had been replaced with a warning red message, one that read: “Too many failed entries. Initiate data erase in five minutes”, accompanied by a steadily ticking countdown, one that was getting smaller and smaller with each passing second. “W-what?! No!” Dipper exclaimed in newfound panic as he gripped the laptop tightly, reeling with what this potential erasure could mean. “I’m about to lose everything?! I only have one more try?!”

“Well, well, well…” Bill spoke up in smug satisfaction, floating to the other side of the room. “Someone’s suddenly looking a lot more desperate…"

“Stay out of this!” Dipper snapped, refocusing on the laptop as he tried to force his exhausted mind to come up with something, anything that could work in this moment of truth. And yet, despite the fact that this guess would be all or nothing, he only drew a complete and absolute blank as the countdown continued winding down, reminding him of just how quickly this one lone chance he had was slipping away from him.

“You know…” Bill interjected coyly upon noticing Dipper’s nervous hesitance to make that final guess. “I can help you, kid. You just need to hear out my demands!”

Dipper flinched at this, quickly looking between the laptop and the dream demon and disdainfully realizing that Bill had him exactly where he wanted him: distressed, clueless, and without any other options left to speak of. Of course, his first instinct was to harshly tell the demon off once more, to adamantly refuse to make any sort of deal or contract with him for the sake of solving this mystery on his own. And yet… that didn’t really seem like a luxury he could afford anymore, especially as the laptop steadily continued ticking down. Dipper was all too painfully aware that this laptop was the sole possible lead he had, not just to discovering the author’s identity, but to saving Lapis from her watery prison. Could he bear to let that only lead, that one small but still bright chance, be wiped away forever, all because he refused to swallow his pride and take a chance, no matter how risky and detrimental that chance might be?

“Ugh, what crazy thing do you want anyway?” Dipper finally asked, making sure to keep his guard up. After all, Bill was an absolute wild card, one that couldn’t possibly be genuinely trusted under any means. Still, that didn’t mean that he couldn’t at least offer some form of assistance, for the right price. “To eat my soul? To rip out my teeth? Are you gonna replace my eyes with baby heads or something?”
“Yeesh, kid, relax,” Bill remarked with a hint of amusement in his tone. “All I want is a puppet!”

“A puppet?” Dipper repeated with a confused frown at this surprisingly simple request. “What are you playing at?”

“Everyone loves puppets!” Bill exclaimed brightly before pointing over to the mass pile of sock puppets Mabel had accumulated over the past several days. “And it looks to me like you’ve got a surplus on your hands here! Just one of them isn’t too much to ask for, is it?”

Dipper raised an incredulous eyebrow, still not following the demon’s bizarre logic, or lack thereof. “But what are you going to do with a-”

“Dipper!” the conversation was abruptly interrupted by a sudden knock on the attic door, followed by Steven calling out along with it. “Are you in there?”

“S-Steven!” Dipper gasped in surprise at this unexpected near-intrusion. “Uh… Y-yeah, I’m in here! Give me just a second!”

“Oh, uh, ok,” Steven consented with a frown as he stood on the other side of the door. “It’s just that Mabel wanted me to come up here and check on you. She seemed kinda upset about what happened earlier…”

“Uh hu, y-yeah, sure,” Dipper replied absently, frantically looking to the laptop again as its timer only showed that he had about three minutes left before the dreaded data erase. “Like I said, I’ll be out in just a second!”

Still, as distracted as he was with both Steven and the laptop, Dipper failed to notice Bill himself seize up just the slightest bit over Steven’s unforeseen arrival, his eye widening first before twitching red with a years’ old fury. “Ugh! Darn Rosebud, always sticking his gem in places where it doesn’t belong! Just like his rockheaded mom used to do! Well, not this time, ‘Quartzy’…” The demon petulantly grumbled to himself for a moment, though he was quick to collect himself, calmly readjusting his bowtie as he rushed to regather Dipper’s split attention.

“So, Pine Tree, before we were so rudely interrupted, where were we? Oh, that’s right! You were gonna hand over a puppet while I give you a clue about that laptop! So chop, chop, time’s a-wasting!”

“I-I don’t know, man…” Dipper hesitated, taking a brief anxious glance towards the door in the hopes that Steven couldn’t overhear any of this. “Mabel worked really hard on those puppets… I don’t know how she’d feel about me just giving any of them away…”

“How ‘she’d’ feel?” Bill reiterated with a callous scoff. “That’s what you care about right now, when you’re about to everything you’ve worked so hard for? Wow, kid, you really need to get your priorities straight. Seems to me like one little puppet is a small price to pay to learn all the secrets of the universe!”

“Dipper?” Steven knocked on the door once again, growing somewhat concerned by the wait. “I-is everything ok in there?”

“Yeah, Steven, everything’s fine!” Dipper called back, growing somewhat annoyed by the young Gem’s persistence. Still, he didn’t dare open the door, not with the laptop nearly out of time and the only one who could possibly salvage it giving him an ultimatum like this.

“Besides,” Bill continued, refusing to let the young Gem steal his thunder. “What’s your sister done for you lately? How many times have you sacrificed for her, huh?” The demon glided down to Dipper’s level, several retrospective images of such sacrifices flashed across his flat surface.
“And when has she ever returned the favor…?”

As much as Dipper hated to come anywhere close to admitting it, Bill certainly did have a point with that line of reasoning. So many times, not just in this summer alone but throughout their entire lives, it always seemed like he was the one giving what he wanted up for Mabel’s sake, and never the other way around. For the longest time now, he had always just accepted that as how things were: Mabel always got what she wanted while Dipper rarely ever did. That was just how it worked. But now, with stakes higher than they had ever been before, he was starting to finally realize just how incredibly unfair that was. Why should her puppet show go off without a hitch while his laptop plan fell through completely? Why should she get to impress her frivolous crush while his hopes and aspirations were erased altogether? Why should she always get to win while he always had to lose?

Bill could tell that his crafty manipulation was working perfectly as Dipper stole a glance out the nearby window, his expression darkening as he spotted Mabel out in the yard, still blithely planning her puppet show without a care in the world. But even so, the dream demon decided to take his appeal just a step further, knowing that he had the windup, he just had to go for the pitch. “But you know who has sacrificed pretty much everything for you?” he began, hands held behind his back as his tone remained smooth and level but conniving all the same.

“Don’t…” Dipper muttered morosely, not wanting to hear this agonizing argument again, but even so Bill callously continued.

“Ding! That’s right! Water Wings!” he remarked effervescently, almost teasingly. “After only a week or so of hanging out with you, she was willing to trap herself at the bottom of a lake with a big ol’ brute like Stripes for the rest of eternity! It’s so sweet that I would gag if I actually had a stomach or a mouth! But the point is, she’s locked down there, having just a grand old time duking it out with Stripes and her spending every waking moment in an endless sea of misery and torment, and it’s all—your—fault!”

“I… I know…” Dipper sighed in defeat, unable to even think of any arguments to this because there were none. Lapis had pulled herself and Jasper into that lake for one reason and one reason alone: to protect him. He had been carrying the guilt from that on his shoulders from the moment she first disappeared into the depths, and ever since it had only grown heavier and heavier, to the point that it had finally become more than he could bear. In fact, as he glanced over to the stack of pictures of them once more, he was so weighed down by that guilt that he didn’t even hear Steven pound on the door for him once more.

“Dipper! I-is someone else in there with you?!?” the young Gem exclaimed, his worry rapidly growing. “I thought I heard another voice talking in there!” And it was true, though Steven really couldn’t make out whose voice it was or what they were saying. It couldn’t have been Mabel or Connie, seeing as how they were still outside, and it didn’t sound like Stan, Soos, or Wendy. Rather, there was an ethereal but still rather familiar quality to it, one that set Steven on edge for reasons he really couldn’t explain but ones that brought fear to nearly every fiber of his being all the same.

“A single puppet in exchange for saving one of the only beings in the universe who really listens to you and understands you,” Bill remarked, ignoring the young Gem outside completely now, just as Dipper was. “Sounds like the fairest price you’re gonna get, Pine Tree. Unless you don’t want to ever see Water Wings again and wouldn’t mind if she slept with the fishes until the Earth inevitably burns up someday way after you’re dead and gone! Either way, kid” The dream demon paused, offering his hand out as it lit up with a burst of blue flame. “It’s all up to you.”
That was by far the most correct thing the demon had said thus far and Dipper knew it. It was all up to him. The laptop and its secrets, Lapis’ long-awaited freedom, both of those things rested entirely in his hands now. They both rested on a fine line of finally being in his reach to being lost entirely. The deciding factor was his choice and his choice alone. And, with only thirty short seconds left on the countdown, it was a choice he had to make far too fast.

A puppet for a password. On the surface, it seemed deceptively simple, and in many ways it was. Giving Bill what he wanted would be so easy, so easy in fact that Dipper was admittedly surprised that he was even thinking twice about it. After all, Lapis had given up everything, her form, her freedom, every part of herself, just to ensure his safety. How could he possibly hold back something as wildly pointless in the grand scheme of things has a mere puppet while she struggled and suffered and sacrificed all for his sake? How could he even begin to claim that he cared about her, that she was one of his dearest friends, if he didn’t go through with this, if he didn’t cross this line and make this deal, no matter how it might turn out in the end? When it really came right down to it, he had no choice, not really. Because much like Lapis had known what to do to when Jasper had presented her with a hopeless ultimatum, as Bill offered him a relatively much more hopeful one, Dipper knew what he had to do as well.

Still, before he could even reach his hand up, he was distracted once more by Steven’s almost desperate pounding on the door. “Dipper, come on!” the young Gem cried, his unknown fear starting to overwhelm him as he pushed against the door hard, not noticing as its hinges started to bend against the pressure he was putting on it. “S-something’s wrong! Open the door, please!”

Dipper turned briefly, ready to give the young Gem another brief reassurance, though Bill cut him off before he could. “Tick, tock, kid!” the dream demon reminded, his eye now a steadily rotating clock as his hand continued burning blue. “Rosebud can wait; but you and I both know that Water Wings can’t…”

With the laptop at only ten seconds now, Dipper squared his shoulders, taking just the smallest glance towards the photos once more as he affirmed his resolve. Maybe it was desperation, maybe it was guilt, or maybe it was his own complete and utter exhaustion, but he was going to do this, as absolutely insane and nonsensical as it was. But he had to; for Lapis. “Just one puppet?” he asked, taking in a deep breath as he finally reached his hand up to shake the demon’s, the slightest sense that there was no turning back now coming along with it. “Fine! It’s a deal.”

The very instant their joined hands went down in a solidifying shake of this deal, the attic door came crashing down, Steven falling along with it. The young Gem didn’t have a chance to be surprised at his own strength as his shock was completely reserved for the unbelievable sight in front of him. After all, the last thing he had ever expected to see was Dipper shaking hands with Bill Cipher, with their aforementioned hands both alight with the heatless blue fire that told of a newly-formed agreement. “D-Dipper…” Steven barely breathed in horrified bewilderment, his eyes wide as he absently pulled himself to his feet. “W-what’s-”

“Steven! I-I can explain!” Dipper tried to rationalize, though Bill gleefully cut him off before he had that chance.

“Glad you could join us, Rosebud!” he greeted mirthfully, an edge of twisted triumph in tone over the fact that the young Gem could do nothing to impede his plans now. “You’re just in time to see me pick out my puppet Pine Tree here promised me! Now let’s see here… Eenie, meenie, minie…” He trailed off, his eye turning a dark shade of warning red as he looked back to Dipper. “YOU!”

“Wha-” Dipper cut himself off with a sharp gasp, a painful tug suddenly rippling throughout his entire body. It only seemed to intensify as the abrupt pull soon turned into an agonizing tear,
almost as if something was reaching deep inside of his very being for something, its vicious, greedy search seeming to ensnare violate him completely. And once it found that something it had been looking for, it violently ripped it right out of him, until he could no longer feel anything at all.

“Dipper!” Steven’s absolutely terrified cry was what first tipped Dipper off to the fact that something was gravely wrong. Though as he opened his eyes only to look down and see what was, without a doubt, his own body lying prone and seemingly unconscious against the alcove several feet below him, then there was simply no denying that things had taken a horrific turn for the worst.

“W-what’s going on?!” Dipper exclaimed with an aptly shocked gasp as he looked down at himself as opposed to his now seemingly unoccupied body. His alarm only grew as reached to touch his now apparently transparent form, only for it to pass right through it, confirming that he was indeed somehow both intangible and incorporeal. “What is this?! What did you do to my body?!”

Only now did Dipper realize that Bill, whom he correctly assumed was responsible for all this, was nowhere to be found. Though he soon received an answer as the dream demon’s demented, chilling laughter began to ring out across the attic, and, strangely and frighteningly enough, it was coming out of his mouth, of all places.

Not having the faintest idea about what was going on but immensely concerned and afraid all the same, Steven hurried over to Dipper’s manically laughing body, only to be roughly shoved to the ground as Bill started to pull his newly-stolen body up to stand. When his eyes opened, both Steven and Dipper gasped in shared appallment to see that they were now only long yellow slits against a bright, almost glowing yellow, a further sign that the demon had claimed this vessel as his own.

Bill said nothing at first, but instead only laughed twistedly as he grabbed the nearby laptop, its countdown finally hitting zero as he did. At the same time, he also made sure to grab the photos of Dipper and Lapis sitting right next to it, though he brought the laptop down first, tossing it to the ground hard and cackling wildly as he stomped on it, breaking it into nothing more than scattered bits and burnt out circuits. To add insult to injury, the demon then proceeded to cheerfully rip all of the photos into small, unrecognizable scraps that he let fall onto the laptop’s ruined remains. It was clear from his sickening snickers alone that Bill was taking sadistic delight in seeing the absolutely distraught look on Dipper’s immaterial face as he realized all at once that he had just lost everything: the laptop, its secrets, the pictures, the chance to help Lapis, and now, even his own body. “Sorry, kid!” the demon grinned remorselessly, relishing in his triumph as both reeled in terror over the nightmarish twist that had just unfolded, one that had just changed everything in one horrific instant. “But you’re my puppet now!”
Chapter 43: Sock Opera, part 2

Chapter Summary

In which Bill is a sadistic asshole, Steven has massive anxiety, Connie is a suspicious badass, Dipper has a REALLY bad time, and some stuff with puppets happens, I guess.

Chapter Notes

Woo boy so this is where things get REALLY intense. Like, so intense that I feel a little obligated to give a warning that you might wanna tread with caution if you can't handle reading about blood or physical injury. Other than that its also a TON of angst, angst that I worked REALLY hard on so I hope you enjoy it!

Steven hit the ground only seconds before the laptop did, and as stunned and shocked as he was by what had just happened, there was nothing he could do to stop Bill from slamming it into the ground before gleefully ripping up the stack of photos that had been sitting beside it. Really, the most the young Gem could do was watch in frozen, agape bewilderment as the demon simply laughed wildly over the unabashed destruction he had caused, as well as over the body he had just apparently stolen. And it seemed as though Bill found yet another point of twisted amusement as he happened to glance over at Steven with a wide, maniacal grin, one that looked so incredibly out of place on Dipper’s face, though there it was all the same.

“So, Rosebud, what do ya think of my new digs?” the demon asked, clumsily stumbling forward towards the young Gem, clearly not used to the process of walking. Steven gasped, scrambling to his feet to help before he quickly remembered exactly who he was dealing with here, despite the fact that, at least physically, this was still the body of one of his best friends. “I’m usually not for small, stringy, and sweaty, but it’s been so long since I’ve inhabited a human body, so I’ll take what I can get!”

“I-I don’t understand!” Steven finally spoke up, his eyes still wide with alarm as he shook his head incredulously. “What just happened? What did you do to Dipper?!”

“What’s it look like, kid?” Bill shrugged as he finally gained proper footing. “Me and Pine Tree just struck up the deal of a lifetime! I solved his little laptop problem for him,” he nodded over to the utterly ruined remains of the laptop lying discarded among torn photo scraps on the ground behind him. “And he gave me a puppet, just like I wanted! Isn’t it just great when things work out for everyone like this?”
“W-what? No!” Dipper exclaimed hotly upon hearing this, his ghost or spirit or whatever he was now still hovering anxiously near the ceiling. “You tricked me! This isn’t anything close to what we agreed to!”

“I dunno, Pine Tree, seems pretty on the level if you ask me,” Bill remarked callously. He completely ignored Steven as he glanced around in confusion over who the demon could possibly be talking to, since, as far as he knew, they were the only two people present in the room. “Say, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you don’t look too happy with how our little bargain turned out!”

“Of course, I’m not!” Dipper asserted, absolutely livid. “The deal’s off, Bill! Give me my body back and leave us alone, now!”

“Aw, it’s just plain adorable that you think that’s how this works, Pine Tree!” Bill laughed condescendingly as he nonchalantly headed over to the nearby mirror. “But nah, I think I’m gonna stick around in this meatsack for a while and have a little fun with it, you know? Break a few bones, maybe lose a limb or two, normal stuff you humans do.”

“Whoa, hold on!” Steven finally interjected upon hearing such sadistic plans. “First of all, who do you keep talking to? Dipper’s not… still in there with you… is he?”

“No, Steven, I’m right here!” Dipper exclaimed, haphazardly gliding down to position himself right in front of the young Gem, who seemed to not even register his presence at all. “Steven?” he tried again, frantically waving his hands in front of the young Gem’s response, only for him to continue staring right through him, as if he wasn’t there at all. “Steven! Ugh, why can’t you hear me?!”

“Ha! Welcome to the mindscape, kid!” Bill goaded mirthfully, clearly taking enjoyment in watching Dipper panic over his plight. “Without a vessel to possess, you’re basically a ghost! Fun, huh? Oh, and to answer your question, Rosebud, this isn’t like one of your dumb old fusions. The only one rolling around inside this lump of flesh is me! But don’t worry about your poor Pine Tree, he’s still floating around here, nagging at me to get out of his body, as if that’s ever gonna work!”

Steven took pause at this, gasping softly as he took another tentative look around the attic, the slightest hint of hope entering his tone, despite how disastrous this situation seemed to be.

“Dipper…?”

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“Dipper…?”

“Steven!” Dipper shouted desperately, as loud as he could, even if his voice still seemed to reach no one but himself. Still, as distraught and horrified as he was amidst existing outside of his own body as he currently was, he hardly cared. “I’m literally right in front of you! And even if you can’t hear or see me, which I guess is what’s going on here, then you still need to get help! Find Mabel, or Connie, or the Gems, or someone and-”

“Well, lookie here!” Bill exclaimed with a wide smirk as he stood before the mirror, roughly examining his new vessel. “Two eyes?! This thing’s deluxe!” The demon paused, only for a second to, of all things, slap himself hard across the face, laughing with gleeful sadism all the while, much to Steven and Dipper’s shared appalled shock. “Woo! Ha! Pain is hilarious! I could do this all day!”

“Hey, stop it!” Steven protested, rushing over and stilling Bill’s hand before it could go in for another self-intended strike. “What do you think you’re doing?! If you’re using Dipper’s body for yourself right now, then why do you wanna hurt it?”

“Uh, because like I just said, it’s funny, kid,” Bill rolled his eyes as he pulled his hand away from the young Gem. “Duh.”
Steven paused at this, admittedly taken aback by such a demented, perverse train of thought, but even so, he wasn’t going to let such harm towards his friend go unchecked. “Y-you can’t-” he began rather shakily before cutting himself off and starting again, a bit firmer this time as he squared his shoulders and set the demon a look of hard resolve. “Bill, you need to get out of him, right now. I’m not just going to stand by and let you hurt one of my best friends like this!”

“Oh yeah? And what are you gonna do about it, Rosebud?” Bill challenged haughtily. “Hug me out of him? Sic that cotton candy colored cat of yours on me? Oh, or maybe force me to ‘talk about my feelings’ until I get bored and leave?”

“No,” Steven shook his head, his manner still quite brazen as he turned to leave. “I’m going to tell the Gems. If I can’t stop you and save Dipper all by myself, then maybe they can.”

“Yes!” Dipper cheered, heavily relieved upon hearing this plan. After all, if there was anyone in Gravity Falls who could square off against a foe as crafty and dangerous as Bill, then certainly it was the Crystal Gems. “Good! Hurry up and tell them, Steven! Hopefully they’ll be able to-”

“Oh yeah, sure, go ahead and tell those three Crystal Chumps all about this,” Bill cut in, his tone surprisingly lax as he grinned confidently. “In fact, I want you to!”

“Wait… you do?” Steven’s assured manner was all but gone upon hearing this, replaced with an acute sense of foreboding at how calm the demon seemed to be over his threat in general.

“Sure! It’ll be a blast to see my old pals Fuse Box, Bird Brain, and Half-Baked again after all these years! But, uh… fair warning, kid. By the time you get back, there might not be a Pine Tree left to save, if you catch my drift…” Both Steven and Dipper were left in confused silence at this, neither of them really seeming to gather what the demon had ominously just implied, though neither of them liked the sound of it at all. Still, Bill fortunately decided to explain it to them both, letting out something of an annoyed sigh as he did so. “Yeeesh, you two sure are dense. What I mean, Rosebud, is that you’re more than welcome to go tattle on me to the Gems; but if you do, then I can’t make any promises that my little puppet here will stay alive and in once piece if you do…”

While it took Steven to understand exactly what this meant, Dipper got it almost instantly as he let out a horrified gasp at what this ultimatum could entail for him if Bill actually decided to go through with it. “Oh, no! Absolutely not! You can’t just-”

“No, now, Pine Tree,” Bill cut him off, still grinning incessantly as he pitted Steven in just as impossible position as he had with him. “Those of us here in the physical plane are talking. So, Rosebud, I think I’ve spelled it out for you pretty nicely. You blab, he bleeds. Any questions?”

Steven was stunned into silence for a moment, his gut wrenching at the very thought of Dipper being harmed because of his own attempts to save him. By all accounts, Bill seemed to have all his bases covered with this, but even so, the young Gem didn’t want to believe that there was no hope left. “Y-you wouldn’t…” he trailed off weakly, hoping that he could somehow call the dream demon’s bluff, though of course, this attempt was nothing but an abject failure.

“Oh believe me, I would,” Bill’s smirk seemed to widen manically as he nodded down to his new vessel’s foot. Before Steven could even question his intent, the demon suddenly twisted his ankle sharply, a distinctive snap sounding out along with the unnatural movement as Bill simply let out a delighted, almost euphoric gasp to go along with the boys’ shared aghast one. “Ah, now that’s what I’m taking about! And there’s a lot more where that came from, Rosebud, if you don’t keep your trap shut. So, do you think we’ve reached an understanding yet? ‘Cause I keep this pain train going for as long as I have to until you get the point.”
“I get it! I get it!” Steven instantly nodded in fearful agreement, his eyes wide as he looked down to Bill’s, or rather, Dipper’s now twisted ankle. “I won’t say anything to anyone, I promise! Just… just don’t hurt him anymore, please.”

“What?! No!” Dipper protested, even though he knew Steven couldn’t hear him. But even so, he persisted in the small, almost nonexistent hope that at least something would make it through to him. “This is a horrible idea, Steven! Bill’s just trying to trick you like he tricked me! You have to get help, before he does something-”

“Geez, Pine Tree, would ya quit being so rude up there?” Bill deadpanned, rolling his eyes up at Dipper. “Me and Rosebud are trying to make a deal here. And it’s a deal I think I’m willing to take…” The demon extended a hand out for the young Gem to shake, one that, interestingly enough, didn’t light up with any blue fire this time. Still, knowing that this was the only real way he could keep Dipper safe for the moment, Steven knew he had no choice but to hesitantly comply, at least for now.

“Steven, don’t do this!” Dipper pleaded once more, distraught beyond measure by this point. “He’s blackmailing to you just so he can keep his tracks covered! You have to hear me, please!” In a meager attempt to stop this dangerous deal, he actually rushed down to place himself between Bill and Steven, hoping that he could at least do something. But of course, both of their hands cleanly passed through his incorporeal form and met in a firm, solidifying handshake, one that he was completely powerless to stop, just like this entire waking nightmare he now found himself in as a whole.

“Wow, what do ya know?!” Bill quipped happily, taking clear enjoyment in Steven and Dipper’s shared expressions of pained defeat. “Two deals in one day! I’m on a roll! They should give out prizes for being this good!”

While Steven really had nothing to say in the aftermath of the silence he had just agreed to keep, Dipper was far more vocal about it, absolutely outraged with the dream demon for deceiving not just him, but now the young Gem, who had really nothing to do with any of this, as well. “I don’t get it,” he glared coldly at the dream demon, who simply smirked up at him in smug satisfaction. “Why are you even doing this? What could you possibly have to gain from possessing my body and forcing Steven to keep quiet about it?! It makes no sense!”

“One thing you should learn here and now, kid,” Bill began as casual as ever. “Is that me and ‘sense’ don’t usually see eye-to-eye. But still, you’ve been getting way too close to figuring out some major answers lately. I’ve got big plans and I don’t need either of you getting in my way. Destroying the laptop was a cinch! Now I just need to get rid of that journal of yours and the rest is history!”

“Wait, the journal?” Steven asked, confused. “That… that’s all you want?”

“You bet your gem it is, Rosebud!” Bill quipped, crossing his arms. “You wouldn’t happen to know where I could find it, do ya?”

“No! Steven, you can’t tell him!” Dipper practically screamed, knowing that he couldn’t afford to lose both the journal and the laptop all in one day, especially if he ever hoped to regain his body. “Wait a second… do you even know where-”

“I-I don’t know…” Steven replied truthfully, unknowingly supplying Dipper with the answer he had been hoping for. At the same time, the young Gem realized that he was treading on fragile ground almost constantly now. After all, if he said one wrong word or made one wrong move, then certainly the dream demon could and would gladly mutilate Dipper in any way he pleased. A
thought that made Steven practically nauseous with worry and woe. “But if you do end up finding the journal, then will you let Dipper have his body back?”

“Pfft, sure, I will, kid,” Bill remarked, his tone overtly sarcastic as he headed for the stairs. “I’ll get on that as soon as never!”

“Wha—But you can’t just.”

“But for now,” the demon interrupted with a leering smirk. “Race you boys to the bottom of the stairs!”

Without another word, Bill tipped back, still grinning all the while as he intentionally allowed himself to fall backwards down the attic stairs headfirst. Dipper and Steven both gasped in alarm at this, especially as they heard the demon thump loudly and clumsily down the stairs. And while the young Gem fretfully ran after him, Dipper hastily decided to take advantage of his new intangible form and dove right through the floor, passing through it recklessly as he largely had no idea how to maneuver about like this. He made it to the kitchen just seconds after Bill did, only to find the demon casually pulling a can of Pitt Cola out of the fridge. “Ah, human soda!” he exclaimed cheerfully, cracking it open. “I’m gonna drink it like a person!” He proceeded to do so in an incredibly unorthodox way, pouring the soda directly into his mouth before moving the can upward to pour into his eyes, laughing twistedly all the while.

“Ok, seriously?!” Dipper groaned in frustrated disgust at this. “First you go and twist my ankle, and now this?! Could you maybe just, I dunno, calm down with all this crazy masochism stuff for a minute?!”

“Why don’t you calm down with all that whining, Pine Tree?” Bill countered snidely, his face still dripping wet with soda. “After all, being an incorporeal, immaterial apparition isn’t that bad. And I should know, seeing as how I’ve been one for countless millennia! You might as well get used to it now, kid, ’cause as soon as I get my hands on that journal, you’re gonna be as good as stuck like that. Forever!”

As Bill let out another malicious laugh over this, Dipper stilled, finding that he had nothing to say in light of such a horrific implication. The thought of him being outside of his body while it was battered and abused by an insane demon for even another minute was bad enough on its own, but the idea that he might never get it back? That he would be forced to forever remain as nothing more than an imperceptible, essentially voiceless spirit for the rest of eternity, all because of one single, thoughtless, desperate decision made in the heat of the moment? It was unthinkable, downright unbearable. And yet, as deeply as he feared such a horrendous outcome, Dipper forced himself to remember that hope wasn’t completely gone yet. In fact, he received a much-needed reminder of that hope as Steven finally arrived, breathless as nearly collapsed against the kitchen entryway after having searched the entire house to find Bill and make sure he hadn’t caused any further harm. And while Dipper knew that young Gem couldn’t currently see or hear him and that the demon had blackmailed him into secrecy about the matter, he managed to take a small semblance of solace in the fact that someone knew about his dire plight. And even though he had literally nothing else at the moment, including his own body, at least he had that.

“Wow, Rosebud, you sure are slow!” Bill quipped as Steven tried to catch his breath. “I would’ve thought your space rock half would give you a little more spring in your step, but I guess not. So anyway, speaking of that journal, Pine Tree,” the demon paused only briefly, shoving his hand into the nearby cutlery drawer before brutally slamming it onto his arm repeatedly while he continued, wincing every once in a while from the pain. “Where do you keep it anyway? Seeing as how Rosebud’s clueless—what else is new?—I figure you’d be the best guy to go to, what with you
always shoving your nose into it. So, it’s gotta be around here somewhere, right?”

“Hey, cut that out!” Steven interjected before Dipper had a chance to answer, rushing over to Bill and quickly pulling his arm out of the drawer, only to gasp in alarm as he myriad of forks sticking out of it.

“Boy, these arms sure are durable, huh?!” the demon chuckled zanily, though fortunately he didn’t stop the young Gem from gently pulling the forks out of his stolen flesh.

“Like I’d ever tell you where the journal is!” Dipper exclaimed, his former dread replaced with renewed fury as he glared at Bill defiantly. “I’ve hidden it! Somewhere you’ll never find it in a million years!”

“Dipper! Steven!” Mabel’s cheery call cut through the ongoing tension like a knife as her and Connie made their way into the room. “Oh, there you guys are! We’ve been looking all over for you!”

“Did you guys, you know, work things out yet?” Connie asked tentatively. “Is everything finally ok between all of us again?”

“No, everything’s not ok!” Dipper shouted to the girls, gliding down right in front of them only to find that, much like Steven, they apparently couldn’t see or hear him either.

“Mabel! Connie! Oh, come on! Not you guys too!”

“Yep! Everything’s a-ok here!” Bill replied brightly, keeping one arm held behind his back and one resting on the startled Steven’s shoulder to effectively hide the bleeding puncture wounds the forks had left behind. “Isn’t that right, Steven?”

The young Gem had practically frozen up altogether by this point, his eyes wide as he looked between Bill and the girls, completely unsure of what to say. Of course, he wanted to tell them what was really going on, to warn them about the demon’s outright theft of Dipper’s body and the danger he now posed, not just to his new vessel, but potentially to them all. But as Bill sent him a terse, conniving wink, he was all too quickly reminded that his lips were sealed, lest he inadvertently cause Dipper untold amounts of harm. Still, that didn’t mean Steven couldn’t at the very least try to get the message across somehow. “Uh, r-right! Everything… everything’s completely fine, n-nothing to worry about here!”

“Oh good!” Mabel let out a huge sigh of relief at this. “You know, Dipper, I kinda felt a little… well, terrible about what I said earlier, about Lapis not being as important as my puppet show?”

“Don’t remind me…” Dipper grumbled to himself, crossing his arms as he floated away from the girls in defeat. A part of him wanted to blame Mabel for his current disastrous straits, seeing as how her refusal to help him had, in a way, driven him into accepting Bill’s “help”. But when it came right down to it, he knew the only one he could really blame for all this was himself. And in many ways, that fact only made everything so much worse.

“But I’m so glad to see that you don’t hate me or anything because of it,” Mabel continued with a warm, though somewhat embarrassed grin. “After all, you know I didn’t mean any of that. I just… really want this puppet show to work out, and I—Steven, is something going on with your eye there?”

Steven sucked in a sharp breath, his hands abruptly falling back down to his sides upon being called out. With Bill momentarily distracted, the young Gem had made an attempt to wordlessly signal his presence to the girls by way of using his hands to make a triangle shape around his eye
while subtly nodding over at “Dipper”, a look of muted, anxious desperation written all over his face. Connie had been the first to notice this attempt, but she didn’t bring it up as she had instead merely stared at him in blank confusion, unsure of what to make of his rather odd behavior. Though of course, Mabel curiously addressed it as soon as she saw it and inadvertently diverted Bill’s attention towards it in the process, and the broad, knowing smirk he sent Steven over it was more than enough to frighten the young Gem to his core.

“Steven?” Connie cut in, suddenly concerned by his visibly anxious silence. “Are you ok?”

“Y-yeah! I’m fine!” Steven exclaimed loudly, forcing a huge, albeit fake smile onto his face. “G-great, even! ‘Super great, actually! Couldn’t be better! In fact, I’m so great that they should make a whole new category of great, c-cause that’s how great everything is right now!”

The young Gem let out a small bout of awkward laughter, one that elicited an amused eyeroll from Bill and initially bewildered stares from the girls before Mabel split into a wide, pleased smile. “Great!” she gripped cheerfully, turning to leave. “Well, we should probably get going. The show’s only in a few hours, and there’s still so much to do! Oh, by the way, Dipper, I borrowed your journal to use as a prop in the show! I hope you don’t mind because I’m gonna go before you can finish processing this sentence, ok, bye!” Without another word, Mabel ran off, her excitement steadily building for her long-awaited sock opera as its premiere drew ever nearer.

“Sorry, Dipper,” Connie remarked with a small laugh as she prepared to go herself. “I tried to talk Mabel out of using the journal, but she wouldn’t really listen since she’s so pumped about her play and everything. But hey, look on the bright side; at least once it’s over, we’ll finally have time to sit down and figure out that password.”

“Oh, I’m sure we will…” Bill remarked sardonically as Connie left, sending Dipper in particular a smug grin as if to silently remind him that the laptop was no more. A reminder that he certainly didn’t need as he was still in the process of reeling from it, and everything else, in the first place.

“And don’t worry about the journal! I have a feeling I’ll be seeing it soon enough…”

“No, you won’t! Not if I have anything to do about it!” Dipper protested crossly, more than prepared to do whatever he could to stop the demon’s ambitions. Even if, in his current state, he could do so very little. “Mabel! Connie! Wait!” he called, starting to glide after them as they left. “Don’t listen to him! That’s not me! I’m not-” He stopped short he heard the front door close behind the girls, painfully reiterating for him, once again, that no one could hear him, no one could see him, knew one even knew he was there at all. No one that is, except for Bill, which gave him no consolation at all, and Steven, who was only merely aware of his presence and nothing else, and who was only struggling because of that knowledge.

“You know, Rosebud,” Bill remarked, his tone suddenly cold as he looked over at Steven, crossing his arms disapprovingly. “You’re pretty terrible at this whole keeping quiet thing. I thought you actually ‘cared’ about Pine Tree and wanted to keep him ‘safe’ and everything, but I guess I thought wrong.”

“W-what are you talking about?” Steven asked nervously.

“I’m talking about how you just tried to sell our little secret out to Shooting Star and Sword Swinger!” the demon scowled, frightening the young Gem as he took a sudden, daring step closer to him. “You must’ve thought you were pretty clever by trying to tip them off when I wasn’t looking, but I was, Rosebud, I was! So if you think for one second that you’ll be able to get away with telling anyone while my back is turned, then you’re dead wrong. Because I can see everything…”
Steven swallowed hard, his hands trembling at his sides as he met Bill’s chilling, unnaturally slitted stare. “B-but I… I didn’t tell them!” he squeaked, sounding much more timidly than he would have liked to. “I-I was just trying to—”

“You were just trying to break our deal!” the demon snapped, suddenly outraged for whatever reason. Still, he backed off from the young Gem a bit, letting out an evening breath as he slowly, almost methodically walked back over to the silverware drawer once more. “But that’s fine, it’s perfectly fine…”

By now, Dipper had taken notice of Bill’s outburst and had turned back towards the kitchen, initially more concerned for Steven’s safety than his own. “W-what are you doing…?”

“What… what are you doing?” Steven unknowingly echoed, just as unnerved by the demon’s rather unsteady tone as he reached into the open drawer for something.

“Oh, just keeping things fair…” Bill’s sinister smirk returned as he slowly pulled something out of the drawer that made both boys freeze in unabridged terror. It was a knife, a long, sharp, narrow boning knife, one that glistened in the light coming in through the window as the demon held it up with an admiring grin. “After all, if you can’t keep your end of the bargain, Rosebud, then I don’t see why I have to keep mine!”

Steven gasped sharply, finally understanding exactly what was going on here as Bill coyly lifted the knife up to his left shoulder, its tip dangling dangerously close to digging right in. “No!” the young Gem cried, rushing forward in a sudden, absolute panic.

“W-wait! Don’t!” Dipper exclaimed fearfully, doing the exact same thing, though Bill easily countered him by smoothly stepping out of his path. Unable to really stop himself yet, Dipper accidentally crashed right into the wall behind the demon, or rather he would have if he was physical; instead, he phased cleanly through it and into the next room, leaving only Steven behind to try and fail to stop Bill.

“Oops!” Bill gleefully exclaimed as he roughly shoved the tip of the knife down into his appropriated shoulder, flinching from the pain but clearly reveling in it in the same time. Steven stopped dead in his tracks, his eyes huge with distress as he watched the demon pull the blade down just a bit, creating a rather large cut, one that began to leak with blood the moment it was made. While Bill simply laughed sadistically at this self-inflicted torment, Steven paled at it, his mind going completely blank as he watched the blood from the wound start to pour down his arm. Down Dipper’s arm, Steven had to remind himself, and as he did, instinct abruptly took over.

Acting quickly, the young Gem generously licked his hand, his expression rife with both fear and resolve as he used his free hand to pull the knife out of Bill’s grasp, clearly catching him off guard. Then, without any hesitation, Steven gently placed his spit-covered palm right on top of the bleeding shoulder wound, replacing his fear with bravery as met the demon’s surprised expression with a cold, unflinching one. One that he hoped would let him know that he wouldn’t stand for any of his friends being harmed, especially not like this.

A beat of tenuous silence passed between the dream demon and the young Gem at this, and during it, Dipper managed to phase back into the kitchen, only to freeze in shock at the sight of his own torn-open shoulder. Still, he said nothing as he noticed what he assumed was Steven trying to heal him, only as the seconds went by and the cut showed no signs of closing up whatsoever, he started to doubt if that was really the case.

“I-I don’t understand…” Steven shook his head incredulously as he slowly pulled his hand away, cringing at the resurgent blood now covering the still-open wound. “W-why isn’t this working?!
My spit, i-it’s supposed to be-” The young Gem cut himself off, still rather surprised that Bill hadn’t said anything about this yet as he instead only gave him a dark, knowing grin, one that only told Steven that there was more to this than he thought. Still, he only understood what was happening as he thought about just how cold the demon’s stolen body was, just how pale and colorless his skin seemed to be, just how Bill seemed to be making no effort to even breathe at all. And all at once, every single solitary gruesome piece clicked right into place.

“Well, what do ya know, Rosebud?” the demon smirked, his voice strangely soft and subdued for a change. “Looks like your spit can’t heal everything…”

A tight sob finally escaped Steven at this, tears filling his eyes as he reeled from such a horrific realization, one that likewise nearly sent Dipper into a complete panic attack as he simply looked to his own preoccupied body, completely distraught that it wasn’t his anymore, not really. Instead, he had signed it away with just a mere handshake, to a masochistic demon who had no gripes about damaging and even destroying it in any sick, twisted way he saw fit. And if even Steven, with healing powers and all, couldn’t save him from such a dark, terrible fate, then who could?

“Steven! Dipper!” Connie suddenly called from outside, unfortunately not venturing inside to see the bloody scene in the kitchen. “Come on, you guys! We’re all leaving to go to the theatre!”

“On our way!” Bill called brightly, already heading off to do just that, but not before smirking triumphantly back at Steven. “Oh, quit your crying already, Rosebud! Pine Tree’s arm isn’t gonna fall off… yet!”

The demon simply let out another insane laugh as he went on his way, leaving Steven behind, his hand still covered in blood from a wound that, against all odds, he had been powerless to heal. Dipper, on the other hand, was nowhere near as shell shocked, his invisible hands clenching into tight, angry fists as his despair was replaced with raw, unrestrained fury. Because how dare Bill con him in the name of helping Lapis like this, and then proceed to do anything but. How dare he injure and abuse his body in such a callous, sadistic way. How dare he rope Steven into of this and prey upon his endless selflessness and devotion just to keep him quiet and compliant. The demon had crossed far too many lines, but even as relatively helpless as he currently was, Dipper adamantly refused to let him cross any more.

“I’m gonna stop you, Bill!” he lividly shouted after the demon before he could leave the room.

“I’m going to find that journal before you do, and I’m going to stop you!”

Bill paused at this, but only for a moment, already letting out a dark, demented chuckle as he spoke ominously. “But how can you stop me…” he began, slowly turning to glance back at Dipper with a huge, deranged grin. “If you don’t exist!?”

The demon’s laughter amplified to absolutely psychotic levels as he walked out, leaving both boys stunned and distressed over everything that had just happened. Dipper in particular took Bill’s cruel taunting especially hard as he looked down to his own intangible hands once more, hands that couldn’t touch or feel anything at all. In fact, in his current state, he might as well have just been dead air: incorporeal, invisible, imperceptible, practically nonexistent, just as Bill had said. And as much as he hated to even entertain the thought of the demon being right, in a sense, it was largely true. No one could see him, no one could hear him; to everyone but him, it was like he wasn’t even there. The dreadful thought of Bill possibly winning somehow, of him having to remain as a hallow apparition forever, filled Dipper’s thoughts once more, only now they were more crushing and overwhelming than ever before. He couldn’t even imagine existing in such a cold, lonely state, with no one to talk to and nothing to do but wander aimlessly and formlessly, for the rest of time itself. He couldn’t imagine never being able to so much as even feel even the slightest of physical
sensations ever again, to never feel the sun on his skin or the ground beneath his feet or all of the other things he had always taken for granted when he had his body. And most of all, he couldn’t imagine never being able to apologize to Steven for putting him in such a terrible position, never being able to make things right with Mabel after their bitter argument, never being able to help Lapis, who was still arguably in an even worse state than he was at the moment, all because he had been impulsive, he had been desperate, he had been stupid to think that making a deal with an actual demon would lead to anything other than complete and utter disaster.

Still, for as genuinely possible as all of that was, Dipper was still resolved to do what he could to keep any of it from becoming a reality. There had to be something, anything he could do to stop Bill in his tracks and secure the journal before he could get his hands on it. As far as he was concerned, that was very well the key now, not just to halting the demon’s ambitions, but to getting him back in his own body as well. And as long as Bill didn’t have it, then there was still a chance, no matter how small.

And so, Dipper prepared to go after Bill, largely out of fear of what would else would happen to his body if he left it alone with the demon for too long but also with the determined intent of reaching the journal first. And yet, before he could get too far, he stopped short upon hearing Steven quietly and tentatively speak up to address him.

“D-Dipper…?” he ventured, still rather tearful as he looked up at the seemingly empty space above him. “I… I don’t know if Bill was telling the truth about you still being here but… i-if you are… then I… I’m so sorry. If I had been there just a second sooner, t-then maybe I could have stopped this from ever happening! B-but I was too late… A-and now… you’re… he’s going to… I can’t…” He cut himself off with another small sob as he looked to his still-bloody hand, a heavy wave of shame washing over him, one that he had no idea how to reconcile.

“Oh, Steven…” Dipper sighed, both incredibly touched and incredibly guilty over just how upset the young Gem was over this disaster. Solemnly, he took the time to float down to Steven’s level, wishing that there was something he could do to assure him that he was still indeed there and that he didn’t blame him for his current state at all. After all, the young Gem had been cruelly manipulated and duped by Bill just as much as he had. As far as he was concerned, they were both completely lost in a storm that neither of them had any genuine hope of stopping on their own.

“I-I… I’ll figure out some way to save you, Dipper,” Steven said after a moment of heartbroken silence, his tone a little steadier this time. “I don’t know how, but I-I’ll find a way! I promise.”

Dipper took pause at this, somewhat caught off guard as he realized just how much this resolved promise reminded him of his own vow to rescue Lapis, a goal that seemed even further out of reach now that he was the one who needed rescuing. Still, for as much as he usually preferred to take on insurmountable challenges like this on alone, he couldn’t deny just how grateful he was for the young Gem’s aid now, no matter how small and tenuous it was forced to be. And for the first time since any of this mess had begun, Dipper couldn’t help but smile. “Thank you, Steven,” he said softly before heading off, hoping that very soon, he’d be able to deliver his words of gratitude to the young Gem in person.

Mabel had made sure to spread the word far and wide throughout town about her sock opera, and seeing as how Gravity Falls’ local theatre didn’t often host any actual shows of any note, a surprisingly large turnout showed up for the play, mostly just to see what all the fuss was about. Immediately upon their arrival to the theatre, Mabel had immediately requested Connie and Steven’s presence backstage so they could help her, Candy, and Grenda with last minute
preparations. Which was something that the young Gem didn’t really engage in as he instead anxiously peeked out from behind the curtain, his nerves still frayed as he watched Bill sit down in the audience alongside Soos, Wendy, and Stan. The demon seemed to be fooling just about everyone into thinking that he was actually Dipper, and he had even managed to conceal the shoulder wound he had given himself by partially cleaning it up and haphazardly bandaging it, though that gave Steven on consolation. Especially since he knew that Bill could just as well cause another, even graver injury at any given moment, with or without any kind of provocation on his part.

Even so, the young Gem had gotten the message clearly; he had kept his mouth discreetly shut all the way to the theater, and despite Connie’s show of concern for his apparent tension, he had managed to largely convince her that everything was fine. It was a lie he hated telling, especially given the circumstances, but a necessary one all the same if he ever wanted to help save Dipper. Still, Steven couldn’t suppress a small sigh of relief as he spotted the Gems enter the theater and take a seat up front alongside the aforementioned group, hoping that they, if no one else, could somehow see through Bill’s dangerous ruse.

“Huh, you know I’m surprised you three would turn up for something like this,” Stan remarked to the Gems as they sat down. “Especially you, Pearl. I always thought something like some boring ballet would be more your taste.”

The white Gem scoffed, crossing her arms as she rolled her eyes at the conman. “Oh, please, Stan. We’re obviously here to support Mabel and Steven’s little… what was it called again?” she whispered to Garnet, aside.

“Puppet show,” Garnet replied simply.

“Yes, that,” Pearl nodded affirmatively.

“Well, Mabel mentioned that there’d be fireworks and junk, so I kinda just came to see that,” Amethyst said as she messily munched on a large bag of popcorn.

“Amethyst, where’d you get that popcorn from?” Stan asked, raising an eyebrow. “Last time I checked, this cheapo theater doesn’t even have a concession stand.”

“Found it,” the purple Gem shrugged bluntly, leaving open a question that no one really wanted to ask.

“Ah, there’s nothin’ like the theatre, huh, toots?” Bill quipped casually as he leaned back in his seat between Wendy and Soos. “Hey, Soos, wanna hear the exact time and date of your death?”

“Heh, ok!” the handyman agreed in blithe innocence.

“Whooa, dude!” Amethyst spoke up, leaning forward in surprise as she looked over at “Dipper”. “What happened to your shoulder?”

“Oh, this tiny scratch?” Bill began smoothly, clearly reveling in the fact that even the Gems were blind to his charade. “It’s just from a little fall down the stairs. Nothin’ too serious.”

“Well, it certainly doesn’t look like it’s not serious!” Pearl frowned with concern, noticing the blood starting to soak through the bandages the demon had carelessly wrapped around the wound. “Dipper, you should really ask Steven to heal that for you. Or at the very least, have Stan take you to go get some proper medical attention.”

“Meh, he’ll tough it out,” Stan spoke up, deadpan as he absently glanced through his program, not
even bothering to so much as even glance up. “Besides, a few cuts and bruises here and there never hurt anybody. …Well, I guess they do, technically speaking, but not that much.”

“Yeah, what he said,” Bill remarked to Pearl with a satisfied smirk. “So you and that traffic cone on your face there have nothing to worry about!”

The white Gem gasped in appallment at this, blushing profusely as she covered her nose in disgruntled embarrassment as Amethyst let out a rowdy laugh. “Oh man, nice one, Dipper!” she chuckled, ignoring the harsh look Pearl sent her way. “Who knew you could actually be funny when you’re not busy being a huge nerd like Pearl here?”

“Hey!” the white Gem protested, still quite flustered as Amethyst laughed once more, and this time Bill joined her. The demon cut his levity short, however, upon noticing that Garnet was staring at him, her expression cold and mistrusting as she ignored her teammates’ banter entirely. The Gem leader could sense that something was off, and while she was unable to pinpoint exactly what that something was, she could at the very least detect that “Dipper” seemed to be at the center of this apparent strangeness. And while she didn’t know what it was or why she had suddenly picked up on it, Garnet received an overwhelming sense of foreboding from it, one that was almost seemed almost familiar somehow, especially as she watched his confident grin turn into an annoyed scowl under her scrutiny. But even so, she said nothing on it for the moment, largely because her future vision was cloudier and more muddled than ever before, to the point that she couldn’t even clearly see the end of the upcoming play, much less anything past it. In a way, it was almost like her foresight was blocked off by a wall of static, one that she didn’t know how to get rid of or even why it was there in the first place. Still, that didn’t mean that she didn’t still have access to her natural perceptiveness, which was giving her whispered warnings that something was wrong, even if she what yet.

“Hey, guys!” Mabel chimed as she ran up to the group on the front row, a delighted grin on her face. “So glad you all could make it!”

“Are you kidding me? I’d never miss… whatever this is,” Stan said, somewhat uncertain, though it was clear he was still putting forth an effort to be supportive.

“So when do we get to the part with the fireworks?” Amethyst asked zealously. “Cause I’m ready to see this place get lit up!”

“They’re not till the end of the show, silly!” Mabel chuckled. “But don’t worry; they’re gonna make the super dramatic, epic, romantic climax I wrote the most explosive thing you’ve ever seen! Pa-pow!” To punctuate her point, she mimicked the sound of a firework going off, embellished hand gestures and all, her eyes practically sparkling with excitement over her grand plans finally coming to fruition.

“By the by, Mabel,” Bill spoke up, his chipper manner instantly returning as he averted Garnet’s continued suspicious gaze. At the same time, Dipper finally managed to make it to the theater himself, awkwardly phasing in through the roof after having recklessly glided across town just to get there. Still, he was still determined to figure out a way to stop Bill, though upon overhearing the question he was currently posing to Mabel, he was quick to realize that would be much easier said than done. “Where’d you put my journal again?”

“Oh, I’m using it for the big wedding scene!” Mabel quipped, pointing up to the stage, or rather the catwalk above it where she had positioned the journal in anticipation for its eventual appearance. “I still need a reverend though…”

“Hey, what if I play the reverend?” the demon offered, barely suppressing a greedy smile. “I mean,
“someone’s gotta hold that journal, right?”

“Ooo, great idea!” Mabel readily agreed. “Let’s go!”

Not wasting another second, Mabel began making a beeline for the stage, Bill not hesitating to follow after her all for the intent of getting the journal and nothing else, something that Dipper was acutely aware of, even if his sister wasn’t. “Wait! Mabel!” he called anxiously as he began to race after them backstage. He stopped short however, upon taking a brief glance back towards the front row, or more specifically the Gems, as he heard them talking about him.

“I wonder what’s gotten into Dipper lately…” Pearl mused fretfully, though still rather bitter about Bill’s callous teasing from earlier. “Did you hear what he said about my nose? That was just plain uncalled for!”

“Uh, did ya see those big ol’ bags under his eyes, P?” Amethyst asked casually. “The kid obviously hasn’t been catching any Z’s lately. Probably working on that dumb old laptop all week.”

“Well, I hope he gets some sleep soon,” the white Gem remarked, crossing her arms. “Honestly that laptop can wait if he’s that out of it. Don’t you agree, Garnet?” Pearl paused, noticing that the Gem leader wasn’t answering but was instead staring after where the kids had just ran off to, her expression still set in a tight, dubious frown. “Garnet?”

“Pearl, Amethyst,” she finally spoke, her voice soft, almost tense as her shades seemed to reflect the curtain ahead. “Did you two feel something… familiar just now?”

“Familiar?” the purple Gem asked with a confused frown. “Like what?”

“Like-” Garnet cut herself off upon looking around, clearly uncomfortable with the thought of talking about this with so many people around. After all, for all she knew, it could have been nothing at all, so why raise any alarm until she at least knew at least a little more about what was going on? “I-it… it’s nothing. Forget about it.”

Amethyst and Pearl exchanged a confused look at this, but even so, they decided to let the matter go if that’s what Garnet intended to do as well. At the same time, Steven gasped softly upon noticing Bill approaching, and, out of fear more than anything else, he quickly tucked himself behind the curtain just as Mabel passed by first, followed by the demon. Despite the young Gem’s attempts at making himself scarce, Bill still noticed him and still sent him a sinister, triumphant grin, one that sent shivers down Steven’s spine as he remembered what had happened back at the shack and just how desperate he was to prevent that from ever happening again. As far as the young Gem was concerned, he’d remain as quiet as he had to for as long as he had to just to keep the demon from inflicting any more harm upon Dipper. It was a difficult, almost painful charge, but one that Steven knew that he had to keep up, no matter what; after all, he was the only one who really could.

“Steven?”

“Ah!” Steven gasped, caught completely off guard by Connie as she tapped his shoulder to get his attention. “O-oh, Connie! I-it’s just you…”

“Uh… yeah, it is…” Connie frowned, taking note of just how panicky the young Gem seemed to. “Anyway, I’m glad I found you. We have to que the puppets up before the show starts, remember?”

“Right!” Steven nodded with a nervous laugh, one that was quick to falter back into fear. “P-
“Steven, are you… ok?” Connie asked, concerned as she began to lead the way backstage. “You’ve been acting kind of weird all day. You and Dipper, for that matter. What’s going on with you guys?”

“N-nothing! Nothing’s going on!” Steven protested defensively, breaking out into a cold sweat. “I don’t know why you’d think anything weird is going on, b-because that couldn’t be any further from the truth!”

“Hm…” Connie mused, clearly not fully convinced of this claim. Really, she had picked up on the fact that something seemed off with the boys all the way back at the shack, with Steven’s sudden outright anxiousness and Dipper’s rare bizarre cheerfulness, both things that seemed quite odd considering how they usually acted. Still, with the puppet show about to begin and the young Gem being as tongue tied as he was, Connie knew that getting the answers to her steadily accumulating questions would just have to wait. “Well, if you say so…” she remarked doubtfully, making the resolve to keep her eyes open for any other strange happenings nonetheless.

The ongoing buzz of the awaiting audience quelled itself down into a silence as the house lights flickered on and off, the show’s orchestration tuning itself backstage. At the same time, Mabel stole a quick peek out from behind the curtain, taking in an excited, albeit nervous breath as she spotted Gabe take a seat in the middle of the audience, puppets still on both of his hands. In light of all her hard work, her meticulously planned show was set to turn out perfectly; and when it did, then certainly, Gabe would be enamored with her as much as she was with him, and they would both live happily ever after. And as far as she could see, nothing was going to keep that happy ending from coming true.

“The show is about to begin!” Grenda shouted boisterously over a megaphone backstage as the theater lights dimmed. “Please turn off your cell phones! Unless you’re texting me, cuties!”

With this, the curtain finally pulled open to initial applause, revealing the elaborate, glitter-drenched cardboard set the kids had constructed of the Mystery Shack and the Gem temple, both of them sitting right next to each other. Colorful stage lights illuminated the stage as fog from a pair of smoke machines began to pour in as Candy began the opening narration, playing a mystical keyboard riff all the while. “Gather round, and let us sing, about a girl who had almost everything…”

As she was rolled off the stage, the show began in proper. Mabel got to work, operating all of the sock puppets by herself seeing as how everyone else was regulated to rolls backstage. And as the first number’s upbeat tempo began, she did just that, her voice bright and buoyant as she poised her first two puppets to perform.

“Hey, look, its Mabel!” the puppet Mabel had made of Dipper began before her own puppet jumped in.

“Hi, there!” said puppet chimed brightly.

“Did you say stable?” puppet Soos asked, popping up from below.

“No, he said Mabel!” puppet Stan joined in.

“She has no labels!” Connie’s puppet proclaimed boldly.

“No one’s more able!” puppet Steven announced excitedly.
“Ok, hit it, everyone!” puppet Mabel exclaimed as the song began in earnest, the entire company of puppets singing as puppets of the Gems popped up and joined in as well.

“Who’s that girl, with the pig and braces? She puts smiles on everyone’s faces! When she’s around, you’re never bored!”

“I am a mayor!” a mayor puppet declared, holding up a small trophy. “And here’s an award!”

“I’m so confused about what’s happening right now…” Pearl whispered down in the audience below as the opening number exuberantly continued.

“What did she do to get all those socks to sing like that…?” Amethyst wondered, both impressed and disturbed. “When I had them, all they ever did was just lie around in a boring old pile in my room.”

“What, are you telling me you two have never seen a puppet show before?” Stan asked with a small snicker at their bewilderment. “Yeesh, you guys really need to get out more.”

“Shh!” Garnet cut in, silencing the ongoing banter at once lest they distract Mabel from her performance. “Just sit back and enjoy the show.”

“Thank you, mayor,” Mabel sang through her puppet warmly, having an admittedly wonderful time making her plans come to full fruition. “It’s true, I’m great. But the perfect girl needs the perfect maaaate!”

“Hey, what’s up, I’m Gabe,” a puppet of the puppeteer himself appeared, just as casual as its real-life counterpart always was.

“Bwaaaa?!” puppet Mabel gasped, lovestruck as heart-shaped sunglasses were layered over its eyes.

With the show now in full swing and its audience fully distracted by it, Bill took the opportunity to try and get closer to the journal, all while remaining masterfully and craftily discreet the entire time. True, Steven had found out about his scheme from the get-go, but the dream demon hardly saw that as a hindrance, especially since the young Gem had been so easy to placate and manipulate that he had barely even had to try. As for everyone else, they were completely clueless to what was really going on, including the Crystal Gems, which Bill found to be an absolutely hilarious irony, all things considered. Really, all that was left was for him to get his hands on that journal and his inevitable victory would be ensured, in more ways than one.

“So, hey, Grendo,” Bill addressed the large girl who was currently in the middle of her stage managing tasks. To prepare him for his “role” as the reverend in the play, Mabel had suited him up in a very fitting clergyman costume, something that the dream demon hadn’t minded at all; as far as he was concerned, the only thing missing from the attire was his iconic dashing top hat.

“Where’s that book prop I’m using for the wedding scene?”

“It’s up in the wedding cake,” Grenda replied, nodding up to the large wooden cake hanging up in the stage rafters. “But that doesn’t come down until act 3, so hold your horses!”

“Oh, I’ll hold my horses…” Bill remarked ominously as he backed off into the shadows backstage. “I’ll hold them… you monster.”

No sooner had the dream demon left than Dipper glided by, his frustration with not being able to be perceived by practically anyone quickly starting to mount. He had already perused the entire audience, hoping that someone among them, no matter who, would have been able to see or at least
hear him, but that had been only a complete waste of time at most. Even Garnet, whom he had hoped would have been able to perceive the grave situation through her future vision, seemed to know nothing of it whatsoever. Still, Dipper didn’t stop trying, hoping that he could somehow find a way to communicate his dire plight to someone, before it was too late.

“Hey! Listen! Have you seen Mabel?” he frantically asked Grenda as he flew up to her, only for her to, just like everyone else, not notice him at all. All the same, Dipper knew that above all else, Mabel was the one he needed to warn about Bill’s intentions first, especially considering the access she currently had to the journal. A part of him hoped that Steven would be the one to fill her in on this, any injuries that Bill might inflict upon his body as a result notwithstanding, but of course, the young Gem was far too terrified of the dream demon’s threats to even try to breathe a word about the situation to anyone. Not that Dipper really blamed him though; after all, over the course of today alone, he had managed to form a pretty healthy fear of the blatantly insane, unwaveringly sadistic demon himself. “Ugh, this is pointless!” he grumbled to himself, though he still decided to take a brief pause to try and come up with some kind of strategy. “What did Bill say again? I can’t be heard without a vessel? Where would I find-”

He cut his musings off the moment he glanced over to see the plentiful pile of sock puppets lying just to the side of the stage. And oddly enough, those simple gave him the first concrete idea he had all day, one that he only hoped would end up working.

“Finally, we’re together!” puppet Mabel proclaimed as it and puppet Gabe embraced, embroiled in the romantic tension of the opera.

“I’m sorry, Mabel, but I have to go fight,” puppet Gabe began melodramatically. “In the war!” At this, a helmet and gun landed upon the puppet, the background changing to cardboard flames as a gigantic, sock-tentacled monster rolled into the side of the stage. The fog machines started up again as lasers flickered about and gunshots sounded, all while puppet Gabe went off to valiantly fight while puppet Mabel saw him off.

“I’ll wait for you, Gabe!” she cried tearfully as the curtains began to draw on the first act. “I’ll wait for you!”

“Intermission has begun!” Grenda announced over the intercom as the audience applauded. “Mill about!”

As the house lights came back on, the audience proceeded to do just that, most of them pleasantly surprised at how the puppet show was turning out so far, a sentiment that its ragtag backstage crew carried as well. In fact, the only one who had barely been paying any attention to the show at all was Steven; after the beginning of the show, he had managed to slip away from Connie or anyone else, instead opting to take some time alone so he could try to think of a plan, something that he desperately needed right now. Of course, the young Gem knew that outright telling anyone about what Bill was up to was out of the question; the violent wound he had cheerfully inflicted upon Dipper’s shoulder was warning enough against that. But still, Steven had to do something; he couldn’t just sit by idle and silent while the twisted dream demon used his friend’s body to carry out his own nefarious purposes, whatever they really were beyond just the journal. And so the young Gem paced anxiously near the theater’s back door, occasionally muttering worriedly to himself as he struggled to come up with an idea that would successfully oust Bill while keeping Dipper from further harm. Which, at this rate, seemed like almost a complete and total impossibility, something that, much like everything else about this situation, only made Steven feel so much worse.

“Ugh, this is the worst!” the young Gem groaned morosely to himself, his face in his hands. “I can’t tell the Gems, or Mabel, or Connie, or anyone, o-or else he’ll just keep hurting Dipper! I feel
so useless! There’s gotta be something I can to do—"

“To what, Rosebud?”

Steven froze, his shoulders tensing as he spun around to see none other than Bill, leaning casually against a nearby beam, arms crossed as he gave him a cold, almost vicious smirk. The young Gem had hoped that at the very least he would have been safe in contemplating the matter to himself, without anybody knowing, but even that seemed to be within Bill’s knowledge somehow. After all, the demon had so himself: he saw everything.

“T-to… to…” Steven trailed off, not even realizing that his hands were trembling out of fear. “I-I wasn’t… I was just… I’m not—"

“Oh, I know you’re not planning on trying to stop me,” Bill remarked smoothly, a smug grin still on his face as he brushed past Steven. The young Gem gasped softly, his eyes widening as he looked to the shoulder that had just bumped into him, with blood starting to seep through the darkened fabric now covering it. “Because that would be breaking our little… arrangement. And you wouldn’t wanna do that, would you, Rosebud?”

“N-no! I wasn’t going to—I was only—” Steven cut himself off, forcing himself to calm down as he took in a steadying breath. He knew what he was about to try was a longshot, considering how the dream demon seemed to have no sense of compassion or really anything even remotely related to mercy, but he decided to make this desperate appeal anyway. Just in case it might somehow miraculously work. “Look. All I want is to keep Dipper safe. I don’t know why you want to destroy the journal, b-but… maybe once you do, you could just, I don’t know… give him his body back and leave? The point is, you don’t have to do all of these terrible things to get it!”

“Well, of course I don’t have to any of this, kid,” Bill rolled his eyes sarcastically. “But I think what you’re not getting here is that I want to.”

“W-why?”

“Because it’s hilarious!” the dream demon chuckled twistedly. “Seeing you and Pine Tree get so panicky and riled up over every tiny cut or bruise I land on this boring ol’ fleshsack here is just endless laughs, more than I’ve had in a long time! In fact… lookie what I grabbed from the shack before we made our way over here…"

Steven jolted, his eyes growing wide with stark terror as Bill slowly pulled a knife, smaller than the one he had used to cut his shoulder but still quite sharp all the same, out of his clergymen’s coat, his sinister smirk deepening all the while. “W-wha—no!” the young Gem shook his head, his voice coming out as only a shaky whisper before it exploded in anxious protest. “You can’t! I-I already promised you that I’m not going to tell anybody a-and I haven’t!”

“But you were still thinking about it,” the dream demon pointed out, pulling the knife away from Steven as he tried reaching for it. “Which, if ya ask me, is almost just as bad.”

“But I’m not going to—” Steven grunted as Bill suddenly shoved him away to keep him from prying the knife out of his grip. The young Gem stumbled back, fortunately not falling, but still somewhat stunned, especially as he watched the dream demon begin to lift the blade slowly up towards his face.

“You know, now that I think about it, this whole two eye thing is pretty overrated,” he remarked caustically. “It’s been throwing my depth perception off like you wouldn’t believe! I don’t know how you humans stand it, looking at everything through two of these things instead of just one! So
why don’t I just do Pine Tree a favor and just get rid of one ‘em for him? I’m sure he’d appreciate it, don’t you agree, Rosebud?”

“No! Don’t!” Steven cried frantically, nearly falling ill as he watched Bill draw the tip of the knife dangerously close to one of his eyes, or rather, one of Dipper’s eyes. The young Gem knew that the dream demon was willing to stoop low just for the sake of fulfilling his own sadistic pleasure, but this was going way too far, especially since Steven knew he wouldn’t be able to heal any injuries that Bill might inflict. “I’m serious, Bill! You can’t do that to him!”

“Oh yeah?” the demon challenged smugly, the knife nearly touching his eye. “Why not?”

“B-because… y-you… that’s not… he… I-I…” Steven trailed off, choking on a small, desperate sob as tears began to roll down his cheeks. Once again, he was reminded of how completely helpless he was to stop this; true, he had promised to remain silent, and as far as he was concerned, he had even dutifully kept up his end of the bargain. But that didn’t mean he could force Bill to keep his. “Because… y-you just… can’t… Please… I-I’ll do anything! Just… just don’t do it!”

“Anything, huh?” Bill raised an intrigued eyebrow at this, lowering his knife, but only a bit. “Well, looks like things just got a bit more interesting… Especially since I just so happen to know about a certain… party who’d just love to get their hands on something that only you can give them, Rosebud…”

Steven’s palpable fear turned into uneasy confusion at this, largely since he didn’t have the faintest clue about what the dream demon might be referring to. Still, that didn’t mean he liked the ominous implications of what Bill had just said at all. “W-what are you talking ab-

“Oh, there you guys are!” Connie interrupted, coming around the corner with a clipboard in hand. “Act one just ended, so we need to get ready to-” She abruptly cut herself off as she glanced up at the boys, her eyes wide with surprise as she noticed Steven’s frozen, fearful expression and the sharp knife that “Dipper” was holding alarmingly close to his face as he sent her an almost angry look of surprise. “Uh… what are you doing?

Steven simply sucked in a sharp breath, not daring to say a word or even make a move, lest Bill see that as proper grounds for harming his vessel, even if he clearly intended on doing so anyway. But even so, the dream demon was quick to cool off, his coy, confident facade returning, even if there was a hint of bitter frustration to it as he lowered his knife. “Oh, ya know, I was just telling my good buddy Steven here about how dangerous it is to play around with knives!” he quipped brightly, throwing an arm around the stiff young Gem’s shoulder. “It’s a pretty valuable life lesson, if I do say so myself. Wouldn’t you agree, Steven?”

“Uh, y-yeah!” Steven exclaimed immediately, breaking out into a cold sweat as he tried to force a smile. “I-it… it’s really, um… valuable…”

“Really?” Connie asked dubiously, raising an eyebrow as she crossed her arms. “Call me crazy, but for some reason I feel like a sock puppet show is a really weird place to be talking about knife safety, of all things. Especially since I thought you’ve had other things on your mind lately, Dipper, like, oh I don’t know, the laptop?”

“Oh, well of course, I’ve been thinking about that old laptop!” Bill contested smoothly enough. “In fact, you could almost say that I’ve been making some smashing progress with it!”

“Uh huh…” Connie nodded flatly, her manner turning even colder and more suspicious as she stepped closer to the dream demon. Now more than ever, she could tell that something was off with both boys, and she was determined to get to the bottom of it once and for all. “Say, Dipper…
“Yep! I’m feeling right as rain, Con Con!” Bill assured snappily, not too phased by her suspicious scrutiny. “Why wouldn’t I be?” As this exchange continued, Steven took a small step back, his eyes still wide as he looked to Connie in hopeful amazement as well as growing fear. After all, if she did manage to somehow see through the dream demon’s clever ruse, then who was to say that Bill wouldn’t blackmail her into the same oppressive vow of silence that he had forced the young Gem into? Or, given the dangerous knife still held firmly in his grasp, do something even worse than that?

“Well, I noticed that you haven’t really been acting like yourself lately…” Connie mused, her tone still stoic and unflinching, even as she took a subtle glance down at the knife in the demon’s hand. “And I just wanted to make sure that nothing… weird was going on.”

“Well, I noticed that you haven’t really been acting like yourself lately…” Connie mused, her tone still stoic and unflinching, even as she took a subtle glance down at the knife in the demon’s hand. “And I just wanted to make sure that nothing… weird was going on.”

“ Weird, huh?” Bill asked knowingly, still smirking as calmly as ever. “Like what?”

Connie didn’t answer right away, her expression still incredibly skeptical, to the point of near hostility as she looked back and forth between Steven, wringing his hands anxiously on the sidelines as he intentionally averted her gaze, and Bill, who met her suspicion with an almost smug grin that was just full of untold secrets. Secrets that she knew she was getting so close to uncovering, that she was determined to uncover, because something here was wrong, perhaps even gravely wrong, with two of her closest friends. And she felt compelled, obligated even, to discover what that something was and help fix it as best as she could.

But for now, Connie was prepared to remain levelheaded and inconspicuous, largely since “Dipper” seemed intent on doing the exact same thing. However, she really couldn’t remain completely silent anymore upon noticing the blood on his shoulder starting to seep through his suit coat. But before she could even get a word out, this rigid encounter was abruptly interrupted by Mabel as she hectically hurried by.

“Steven! Connie!” she exclaimed, grabbing the pair by the wrist as she began to pull them away. “Come on! I need your help setting up for the next act! Dipper, you keep getting ready for that wedding scene! It’s coming up sooner than you think!”

“Oh, don’t worry, Mabes!” Bill replied blithely, taking care to hide the knife behind his back as the others left. “I’ll be ready alright! I’ll be ready…” His bright grin darkened as Steven anxiously glanced back at him, his eyes still wide with distraught panic, especially as the dream demon placed a finger over his lips, a sinister reminder to stay silent or have Dipper suffer the unthinkable consequences.

Whatever tension and uncertainty now filled both Steven and Connie, Mabel hardly noticed it as they stepped into her dressing room. Seeing as how the first half of the show had gone off without a hitch, her spirits were running high, just as high as her energy levels currently were. In fact, she was so elated at her success so far that she initially paid no mind to Steven’s ongoing nervousness or Connie’s growing suspicion as she took a short breather to gear up for the next act.

“Ok, you guys,” she began steadily, pacing back and forth between the pair. “The first act was a lot, but I think it turned out pretty amazing, just like I knew it would! And we’re already halfway there! Only 36 more musical numbers, and then it’ll be a wrap, and then Gabe will fall in love with me, and then we’ll get married, and then we’ll have a bunch of beautiful puppet prodigy babies, and it’ll be great!”

“Uh, sure it will, Mabel…” Connie mused, arms crossed as she at least took solace in the fact that nothing seemed out of the ordinary with her when compared to the boys. “But in the meantime,
have you noticed anything... strange about Dipper today?"

“Strange?” Mabel paused, frowning in confusion. “Well, now that you mention it, he has been a lot more cheerful and smiley than he usually is... But I just chalked that up to him finally stepping away from the laptop for a bit to take a nap.”

“Y-yeah! You’re probably right, Mabel!” Steven hastily interjected, shuddering somewhat as Connie sent him a disapproving glance. “I’m sure Dipper’s just feeling better because he got some rest! Which means nothing weird or unnatural or scary is going on at all!”

“Sorry, Steven, but I really don’t think you’re one to talk seeing as how you’ve been acting so nervous and jumpy lately,” Connie shook her head dubiously. “Seriously, what’s been going on with you and Dipper? I’m really starting to worry about you guys...”

“W-worry? Why would you be worried?” Steven asked, playing her concern off with a fake, anxious laugh.

“Oh, well, let’s see,” Connie began pointedly. “There was the fact that, just a few minutes ago, I spotted Dipper talking to you with a knife in his hand!”

“A knife?” Mabel asked in sudden bewildered alarm. “W-what was he doing with a knife?”

“That’s what I’d like to know...” Connie remarked, glancing over at Steven expectantly. The young Gem swallowed hard, his hands clenched into tight fists at his sides as his eyes darted back and forth between Connie and Mabel, both of whom were looking to him as if he had all the answers. And though he did, Steven knew he couldn’t give any of them, even if Bill wasn’t there at the moment. He was playing a dangerous game with the dream demon, one that he couldn’t afford to take chances with, lest he gamble away something that wasn’t even his but was still incredibly valuable to him. But despite his submissive silence, Connie seemed to somehow be onto Bill through her own clever merits, which Steven saw as both a blessing and a curse, given that now, the pressure was all entirely on him to cover the demon’s tracks, as much as he desperately didn’t want to. But even so, he had to, especially since there could be potentially dire circumstances for all of them if he didn’t. “Connie, n-no, you don’t under-” the young Gem cut himself off, clearly struggling to come up with a proper explanation to something that he barely understood himself. “I-I know some weird stuff’s been happening today, but you guys have to trust me when I say that... that y-you have nothing to worry about.”

“Ugh, yes, we do!” Connie protested in apt frustration as Mabel simply looked to him in fretful confusion. “It’s so obvious that something weird is going on here! And it’s something we all deserve to know about! Steven, I thought you said you weren’t going to shut us out anymore, so why are doing that again now?! What are you hiding from us?!”

“I’m not hiding anything!” Steven argued, even though he knew that was a complete and utter lie. “Connie, Mabel, you have to believe me that there’s nothing-”

“I don’t believe you!” Connie practically exploded, absolutely livid by this point that Steven, of all people, would deny her of the truth like this. “Just admit it already, Steven! There’s something wrong with you and Dipper!”

“No, there isn’t!” the young Gem fiercely asserted, desperate, guilt-ridden tears starting to well up in his eyes.

“Yes, there is!” Connie retorted harshly, refusing to let up until she had the answers she was
seeking.

“No, there isn’t!”

“Yes, there is!”

A unified gasp rose up from all three of the kids as Dipper’s voice suddenly cut into the argument completely out of nowhere. Their surprise turned into outright shock, however as they looked over to see that it hadn’t come from him but rather out of his sock puppet duplicate as it hovered in midair, apparently completely its own accord.

“Ah!” Mabel cried in newfound fear at the seemingly conscious puppet, Steven and Connie echoing her sentiment as they took astartled step back. “It’s come to life! The puppet books didn’t warn me about this!”

In an act of self-defense, Mabel grabbed a nearby fork and hurled it at the floating puppet, which hardly even flinched as it struck it squarely in the eye, alarming the trio even more as they huddled together in genuine fear at such an unsettling sight. Their terror was soon allayed however, as the puppet somehow began to explain itself. “Guys, calm down. It’s me: Dipper! You three have to help me!”

“Wait…” Mabel frowned, taken aback with confusion as she looked to the sock puppet iteration of her brother, unable to deny that it was indeed his voice coming out of it. “…Dipper?”

“D-Dipper!” Steven cut in with an incredulous gasp, his eyes already wet with oncoming tears as he took a step forward. “I-is that… is that really you in there?”

Dipper sighed at this, his immense relief at finally being heard thanks to his new “vessel” dissipating back into grief as he remembered just what Bill was putting Steven through in this entire ordeal. “Yes, Steven… It’s really is me.” The young Gem was unable to hold back a tight sob of joy as he rushed forward, ignoring the bewildered looks the girls gave him as he happily embraced the puppet, something Dipper hadn’t been expecting as his still mostly incorporeal form lurched forward a bit as Steven clung onto his covered hand. “Augh! Steven, what-”

“I-I can’t believe it!” Steven cried, overwhelmed with relief as he let out a small laugh amidst his tears. “It’s really you! Bill said you were still around, but I didn’t know what he meant by that o-or if I should really believe him at all, but it’s true! You’re still ok! Well, uh… mostly ok, given the whole, um, no-body thing…”

“Ok, hold up,” Connie interjected, her former shock replaced with apt befuddlement. “Can somebody please explain what in the world is going on here?!”

“Yeah, seriously…” Mabel agreed, just as disconcerted. “Steven, what’s all this about Bill, and Dipper, why are you… so much more of a… sock than usual?”

“Mabel, Connie, listen carefully,” Dipper began solidly, more than ready to fill someone else in on his dire straits after all this time of speaking to essentially no one. “Bill tricked me! He said he was going to help me with the laptop, but instead stole my body and now he’s after the journal! You guys have to get it and keep it away from Bill before he destroys it! It’s the only hope of getting me back into my body!”

“Whoa, what?!” Connie exclaimed, startled by such distressing news. “So… that means… the you that’s been around all day… actually isn’t you?”

“No, that’s Bill!” Dipper clarified adamantly. “Honestly, I’m kinda surprised that no one even
noticed that, what with my eyes looking like his and his voice coming out of my mouth. Like seriously, come on, you guys! Were you just not paying attention or something?"

“Uh, I dunno, bro-bro, your body looked and sounded pretty normal to me,” Mabel shrugged truthfully.

“But I could tell the difference!” Steven contested earnestly. “I wonder why that is… Maybe it’s because I was actually there when Bill took over your body, but no one else was…?”

“That doesn’t matter right now; what matters is that I was right!” Connie cut in, more than a little proud with her accurate deduction skills. “I knew something weird was going on, but even I could have never guessed that it was something this weird! Speaking of which… Steven, if you knew about all this from the beginning, then why didn’t you tell anyone? If you had, then we all could have helped Dipper out a lot sooner!”

“I-I… I really, really wanted to tell you guys…” Steven said, glancing down guiltily. “But I-

“It’s not his fault!” Dipper interjected, firmly intent on setting the record straight and allying the young Gem from his remorse. “Bill blackmailed him into not telling anyone, or else he’d-” He sharply cut himself off at this, not too keen on filling the girls in on the horrendous terms of the deal between the dream demon and the young Gem, a sentiment that Steven shared as he glanced away apprehensively.

“He’d… what?” Mabel asked, growing increasingly more unsettled by the shared, anxious silence between the boys. “Dipper, what would he do?”

“H-he said…” Dipper hesitated, looking over at Steven and faltering upon seeing him start to tear up once more. “He said that if Steven didn’t keep quiet… t-then he… he’d hurt my-

“H-he said he’d hurt Dipper!” Steven finally exclaimed, unable to remain silent about it any longer as morose tears continued streaming down his cheeks. “A-and he did! I tried to stop him, I really did, but I couldn’t… I-Id couldn’t even heal him… And the worst part is he might hurt him even more if we don’t hurry and stop him!”

“Well, then we better get started with coming up with something to do just that,” Connie said with firm resolve, more than ready to help curtail this grave situation before it could get any worse.

“B-but what about the puppet show?” Mabel asked, torn between wanting to assist her brother and completing her elaborate play. “My cue’s coming up any minute now!”

Dipper, Connie, and Steven were all ready to argue against her reasoning, but before they could, they were interrupted by a sudden knock on the dressing room door. “Hey, Mabel?” Gabe asked with a soft smile as he stuck his head in, a flower bouquet in hand. “Do you have a moment?”

“Gabe!” Mabel gasped, hastily grabbing the puppet Dipper had been speaking through and hiding it behind her back so as not to raise alarm.

“Ow! Mabel! Let go!” Dipper protested at the sudden movement, struggling to free his hand from her grip as Steven and Connie looked to the freely twisting puppet curiously.

“How does this even work anyway…?” Connie wondered in a whisper, poking the puppet, which actually flinched as she touched it. “Yeah… this is just gonna keep getting weirder as it goes along, isn’t it?”

“Probably, yeah…” Steven shrugged.
“S-so, Gabe!” Mabel flashed her crush an adoring smile. “How are you liking the show so far?”

“Simply put, it… is… phenomenal!” Gabe praised, raising both of his puppets into the air. “It’s clear to me now that you really love puppets. I mean, you went whole hog! And if you stick the ending, well… maybe later you could join me for a biscotti?”

“You drive a biscotti?” Mabel asked, continually amazed at how sophisticated he was. She didn’t get to ask him more, however, before the house lights began to flicker, a signal that the second act was just about to begin.

“I’ll be waiting for you…” Gabe promised as he began to leave, sending her a wink that left Mabel blushing even after he was gone.

“I—I’ll be there…” she sighed contentedly, though she was quickly brought back to reality by the scrutinizing looks Connie and Steven were sending her. “Did you guys hear that?” she asked, finally letting go of the puppet and allowing Dipper to readjust himself. “He loves it! This play has to be flawless!”

“B-but what about stopping Bill?” Steven asked fretfully.

“Aw, can’t it wait until after the show?”

“No!” all three of the others agreed in adamant unison, surprised that Mabel would even suggest such a thing.

“Mabel, are you serious?!” Dipper exclaimed harshly, not even noticing as his vessels yarn arms flailed about in frustration. “Do you want me to be a sock puppet forever?!”

“Dipper’s right,” Connie staunchly agreed. “We don’t have any time to waste, Mabel! If Bill is really as bad as you guys say he is, then who knows what he’ll do once he gets that journal? He needs to be stopped!”

“H-he really does,” Steven spoke up apprehensively, not as incensed as the other two as much as he was desperate to see this ongoing disaster finally come to an end. “Especially since he might… well, you know…”

Mabel flinched, her hesitation to step away from her show lifting quite quickly as the young Gem reminded her of the heavy threat the dream demon had apparently put upon her brother’s head. And yes, while she still wanted her show to finish off strong, she knew she couldn’t very well completely abandon Dipper when so much was on the line. So instead, she figured she’d just compromise. “Right…” she finally consented, taking in a deep breath of newfound resolve. “Well then, Dipper, I’ll need you to cover for me with the show until we get back. Steven, Connie, you guys are coming with me. We have a journal to get.”

Steven and Connie both nodded in firm agreement with this plan, and while Dipper did partially want to protest taking over Mabel’s zany, outlandish puppet show for her, he found that he was really in no place to, given the circumstances. Still, before they could all completely split up to their respective tasks, he did make sure to stop the young Gem short after the girls were already out of earshot, knowing that he owed him so much more than the mere apology he was about to give him. But for now, it would have to suffice. “Steven, wait.” Dipper began, letting out a small, sad, apprehensive sigh as Steven stopped and turned to him. “I-I don’t know if I’ll ever get this chance again if… if something goes wrong out there, so… I just wanted to let you know that I’m so sorry… This whole mess is my fault, and I should have been the only one to suffer the consequences of that stupid deal! But then you got dragged into all of this, even though you had no parts in it at all!”
Bill’s been making you absolutely miserable all day just because you’re trying to protect me, which is something you shouldn’t even have to worry about in the first place!”

“Why not?” Steven asked earnestly, taking a step back towards the puppet Dipper was speaking through. “Dipper, you’re one of my best friends, of course, I’d want to keep you safe! I wish none of this had ever happened just as much as you do, but I’m glad I was at least there to know about it the moment it happened instead of not knowing how much trouble you’re in at all! And don’t worry; now we have Connie and Mabel to help us! With all of us working together, we’ll have you back in your body in no time, I promise.”

Dipper said nothing for a moment, suddenly feeling quite unworthy of the kindness the young Gem was offering him. After all, he had been the one to make that ill-fated deal with Bill in the first place, the deal that had dragged them both so far down in just a matter of hours. He should have known better, regardless of the pressure he had been under in that moment; but he hadn’t. He had been foolish, hasty, careless. And now, here he was, with nothing more than a sock to speak through as his friends ran off to put themselves in harm’s way in a fight that wasn’t even theirs. A fight that he was painfully powerless to even participate in on his own, much less win. Still, Dipper knew there was no time to contest what Steven had said; after all, the third and final act was about to begin. “R-right…” he said unsteadily, hoping more than anything else that the young Gem’s sincere promise would somehow come true, despite the immense odds against it. “Well then… good luck. I’m sure we’ll all be needing it…”

True to his word, Dipper was there to cover for Mabel as the puppet show opened on its second half. He did so a bit haphazardly, both not as familiar with her messy script as he could have been and also still dealing with the struggle of not currently having a physical form. But he made do with the puppets as best as he could, even if most of his line reads were either awkward or halfhearted at best.

“Gabe! You’re back from the war!” puppet Mabel cried happily as puppet Gabe rolled in on a wheelchair, damaged from battle.

“Yes, I am!” puppet Gabe proclaimed. “Wanna kiss and sing at the same time?”

“Ok!” puppet Mabel readily agreed as they did just that.

“Ugh, seriously, Mabel?” Dipper groaned to himself as he pressed the two puppets together, hardly even surprised by his sister’s shmaltzy storyline.

As the audience applauded over this tender romantic moment, they all failed to notice the trio climbing up onto the catwalk above the stage, an intent, very serious mission on all of their minds as they began their stealthy quest.

“Ok, so the journal should still be in the cake where I left it,” Mabel noted to Steven and Connie as they hurried over to it. “You know, unless Bill already got to it first.”

“Well, it looks like he didn’t!” Steven exclaimed with a sigh of apt relief as they reached the cake to find the journal resting safely inside it. “Thank goodness! We still have a chance to save Dipper!”

“Then let’s hurry up and grab it while we still can,” Connie urged as they all started to lean against the catwalk railing to retrieve it. Unfortunately, the cake was just a bit too far out of their reach,
even as they all strained against the railing to grab it. However, as brittle and old as many things in
the theater were, the railing wasn’t well equipped to handle the weight of all three of them pressed
tightly against it. Which was why it didn’t take very long for it to end up snapping cleanly in half,
abruptly sending the trio falling towards the cake. Somehow, they all managed to land safely inside
of its empty center along with the journal, but as soon as they did, the cake itself began to rapidly
plummet down towards the stage, taking all three of them down with it. Their unified fearful cry
was cut short, however, as the cake suddenly and miraculously stopped its descent and began to be
pulled back up towards the rafters, much to the shared relief of the kids inside of it.

“Phew, that was too close…” Steven sighed, catching his breath from the harrowing experience as
he leaned against the side of the cake.

“Tell me about it,” Mabel remarked, grabbing the journal as she began to flip through it while
Connie and Steven helped her in her search. “Come on… come on… There’s gotta be something in
here that can help Dipper get his body back!”

“Oh, but why would you want to do that?”

All three of the kids froze at the chilling sound of the dream demon’s voice, something that they
were all able to recognize now that they all knew of his presence. A round of startled gasps
escaped them as they glanced up to see that Bill had indeed been the one to stop the cake from
falling, a sight that hardly allayed any of them whatsoever. In fact, he looked absolutely sinister as
he grinned down at them darkly, the bright stage lights behind casting sharp, dramatic shadows
that seemed to illuminate his piercing yellow slitted eyes, which were filled with so much
malicious intent that it struck all three kids to their cores with fear. But when they did shake off the
initial shock, Mabel was the first to speak up, her grip on the journal tightening as she glared up at
the demon currently wearing her brother’s skin. “Bill Dipper! Bipper!”

“Shh!” Bill quieted, still smirking manically. “You wouldn’t wanna ruin the show, would you?”
He nodded down to the crowd below, all of them completely unaware of what was going on just
above the stage, including Gabe, who was still happily enraptured by the parade of puppets going
on upon it.

“Who cares about the show?!” Connie contested brazenly, hardly showing any signs of fear against
the dream demon she had heard so many terrifying things about. “We’re here to stop you and get
Dipper his body back, and that’s exactly what we’re going to do, no matter what!”

“Ah, Sword Swinger, finally we meet face to face!” Bill quipped, amused by her boldness, but
little else. “I gotta admit, I’m impressed with you for nearly figuring things out earlier. You’re a
little more clever than most of the other dolts around here, but not by much!”

“Sword Swinger?” Connie questioned in muted confusion.

“Oh, yeah, he’s got a thing for calling people by these really weird nicknames,” Steven filled her in
in a whisper. “Yours’ doesn’t really make a whole lot of sense though…”

“And Rosebud, I have to say, I’m very disappointed in you,” the demon interjected in faux
displeasure. “I really thought you were trying hard to uphold our little bargain, but then you go and
blab everything to everyone! Then again, I’m hardly surprised; after all, your mom did the exact
same thing way back when before just making everybody forget about it later on!”

“She… wait, huh?” Steven asked, completely caught off guard by this sudden mention of his
mother, even if he didn’t understand the context at all.
“So, since our deal’s clearly off,” Bill continued regardless. “I guess that means that after I get that journal, Pine Tree’s body here will just have to take a little fall right over that railing, all the way down onto the stage way down there. What a grand finale that’ll be, huh?”

“It won’t be any kind of finale, because it’s not happening!” Mabel protested, absolutely livid at the dream demon for even making such a horrific threat against her brother.

“Are you sure about that, Shooting Star?” Bill asked coyly, loosening his grip on the rope holding the kids up, allowing them to fall a bit before he caught it once more. “Oh no, looks like its slipping! How’s about you hand that book over and I can ‘help’ you three out of there?”

“No way!” Mabel harshly refused, holding the journal closer as Steven and Connie both helped cover it as well. “This is Dipper’s! I’d never give it away!”

“Funny, you didn’t seem to have a problem taking it for your own play or ditching him when he needed you,” Bill mused knowingly, more than ready to pull off yet another masterful manipulation to get what he wanted. “Seems to me that’s just what you always do, Shooting Star: let your brother take the brunt of things while you come out on top. It’s safe, its easy, and best of all, profitable! So why let this time be any different? Come to your senses; give me the journal or your show is ruined!”

“Forget it!” Connie staunchly refused as Steven nodded in irresolute agreement. “You’re never getting your hands on this journal as long as we’re around! Right, you guys?”

“Right!” Steven readily agreed, determined to succeed in stopping Bill where he had failed earlier.

Mabel, on the other hand, was somewhat less certain. She said nothing as she glanced down at the journal in her arms before looking down into the audience below, or more specifically, at Gabe. She had put so much time, so much work, so much raw, unabridged effort into making sure everything about her puppet show was as perfect as possible, just to impress him. She had poured her heart and soul into this play, so how could she possibly stand by and watch it all go to waste over a mere journal?

“Uh… Mabel?” Steven frowned in confusion as he noticed her ongoing hesitation. “W-what are you do-”

“Wait!” Connie gasped, appalled as Mabel began slowly offering the journal up to Bill. “Mabel, are you serious right now?! You can’t give the journal to him! He’s just going to-”

“Hey, how about you two just butt out of this, huh?” Bill cut in, gladly grabbing the other end of the journal. “After all, Shooting Star’s making a perfectly reasonable move here. I mean, who would sacrifice everything they’ve worked for just for their dumb sibling?”

Mabel gasped softly at this, her eyes wide as she froze, a heavy wave of realization washing over her. Indeed, who would sacrifice everything they wanted, everything they dreamed of, just for the sake of assisting and appeasing the flighty whims of their sibling? For that matter, who would sacrifice those things time and time again, regardless of the situation, out of their sheer, ceaseless, sometimes even senseless selflessness of his own heart? Who would go even beyond just giving it everything he had for their sibling alone, but would struggle for the sake of so many others as well, from a Gem trapped in a hostile fusion to a friend forced into oppressive silence? Who would think so rarely of himself and so often of others, to the point that it had ultimately ended up costing him a price that was far more than he had been hoping to pay? All of these questions held the same exact answer, an answer that Mabel knew beyond a shadow of doubt, and one she had realized she couldn’t possibly leave hanging at a time like this. “Dipper would,” she finally answered boldly,
taking in a deep breath as she prepared to pay everything he had ever done for her back in full.

“Huh?” Bill’s steady confidence was replaced with confusion, a wrench thrown into his plans as Mabel suddenly turned the tables on him. Making sure he still had a hold on the journal, she suddenly yanked it back hard, sending the dream demon stumbling forward, though somehow, he didn’t fall off of the catwalk entirely. Instead, he let go of the rope holding the cake up altogether in order to secure a firm grip on the journal, as the prop immediately began to sink down towards the stage with all three of the kids in it, Mabel’s hand slipped off of the journal out of panic.

“Jump!” Steven shouted before they could fall too far down, and that’s what they all did. They all leapt at the same time, with the young Gem only barely managing to latch onto the edge of the catwalk before catching Connie, who caught Mabel, who’s heart sank as she glanced up to see that Bill had been the one to catch the journal.

At the same time, the cake continued its rapid, unrestrained plunge towards the stage, initially unbeknownst to the audience and to Dipper as he continued to dully lead out the play, even as its plot began to take a rather ridiculous turn. “I’m giving you away, you are a woman now!” he threw his voice to sound like Stan as he manned a puppet of the conman, rolling his eyes all the while. “Waddles, the rings!” Right on cue, Waddles popped up with a squeak, two rings held in his maw. However, before he could go any further in the scrip, Dipper just so happened to glance up at the sound of a sudden snap from above, only to see the oversized cake plummeting down right towards him. Even though there was no risk of his incorporeal form being harmed by the inevitable crash, he still dove out of the way as it smashed into the stage, its wooden construction shattering to pieces as it essentially destroyed the set. The audience was instantly stirred up and alarmed by this unexpected apparent plot twist, but Dipper paid their confused murmurs no mind as he instead looked up to the catwalk the cake had fallen from, freezing in apt fear at what he saw.

Steven, Connie, and Mabel were all precariously dangling off the edge of the catwalk in a chain they were struggling to maintain, and all the while, Bill stood above them, the journal in his hand and a treacherous, triumphant grin on his face. “Whoo boy, that was a close one!” the demon remarked, smirking down at the trio as Steven struggled to hold onto both of the girls and the catwalk at the same time. “You kids nearly had me going for a minute, especially you, Shooting Star. But in the end, I still win, just like I knew I would! You know, it’s kind of a shame; I was actually thinking about letting you three walk away from this whole thing alive and mostly not dismembered. But since you three seem to have such a death wish, then who am to disappoint?!”

Steven let out a sharp, pained cry as Bill slammed a heavy foot down onto his hand that was clinging desperately onto the edge of the catwalk. But even so, the young Gem refused to relinquish his hold on it, knowing that it was the only thing keeping both him and the girls from plummeting to a rather grisly fate down below. “S-stop!” Steven exclaimed, clearly struggling as the demon pressed down harder on his hand. “Please!”

“Oh, come on, Rosebud,” Bill deadpanned, rolling his eyes as he took sadistic pleasure in the young Gem’s pain and panic. “When are you finally gonna get that the whole begging for mercy thing doesn’t work on me?”

As the dream demon let out a manic, gloating laugh, Mabel glared up at him from the bottom of the chain, her already palpable rage towards him essentially skyrocketing. Already he had the audacity to possess her brother and carelessly injure his body, and threaten the young Gem into silence about it all day, but now he was eagerly poised to send her, Steven, and Connie all plummeting to a harrowing doom. Her now-ruined show was all but forgotten, replaced with a sense of righteous fury and a deep-seated desire to finally cut the maniacal demon down to size as she decided that enough was enough. So instead of simply hanging around waiting for the eventual
fall, she instead used her free hand to fish around inside her sweater, only for her to anxiously
realize she didn’t have her grappling hook on her. What she did have on her was only a bundle of
unused sock puppets, bunched together into a bumpy, but surprisingly weighty ball. And if that was
all she had, then Mabel figured she’d just have to make due and take a chance, no matter how
much of a risk it might be.

“The crowd down there’s already gotten one bang, but it looks like they’re hungry for more,” Bill
commented twistedly, his grin widening as Steven clung onto the platform by just his fingertips
now. “And it’s their lucky day, seeing as how they’re about to get three for the price of one!” The
dream demon broke out into yet another gale of crazed laughter, holding the journal up in triumph
as he practically crushed the young Gem’s fingers, bringing agonized, fearful tears to his eyes as he
realized there was little he could do to save himself or the girls. But where Steven lacked an idea
about what to do, Mabel went ahead and enacted hers’, lobbing her bundle of puppets up towards
Bill with as much force as she could possibly muster. Her aim missed the dream demon, but
miraculously enough, it ended up squarely striking the journal, cutting his laughter off instantly as
flew out of his loose grip and off the edge of the catwalk towards the stage below.

“No!” Bill shouted in blind fury, not even hesitating to dive over the railing after his prize,
something that aptly shocked all three of the kids. And yet, mere seconds after the demon began
taking his deadly plunge, Steven’s grip on the catwalk finally faltered as he was unable to hold on
any longer, sending him, Connie, and Mabel falling right after him. For a brief, breathless,
absolutely terrifying moment, all four of them were in a paralyzing freefall, with their sole
destination being the hard, unforgiving stage far too many feet below them. Dipper could scarcely
believe what he was seeing as he watched them all fall from the sidelines, desperately wanting to
do something to somehow save his own body, as well as his friends, only for him to remember just
how incredibly helpless he was to stop any of this, just as he had been from the very beginning of it
all.

Fortunately, before anyone could hit the ground, Steven abruptly snapped to his senses, his eyes
widening as he watched the stage grow closer and closer, but even so, he did what he had to. The
young Gem threw his arms out wide, his gem sparking with light for an instant as a large pink
bubble blossomed out from it, one that quickly spread to encompass him, Mabel, Connie, and even
Bill, only mere seconds before they all hit the stage. And those seconds proved to be just enough as
the large bubble rammed into the stage hard, providing a mostly suitable cushion for what would
have been an otherwise deadly fall.

But even so, the audience was completely taken aback upon watching four kids brutally crash onto
the stage from above, everyone spectating letting out a collective gasp of alarm. Likewise, the
Gems all darted up in their seats the moment they saw the pink bubble, the fact that Steven would
even need it for something like this catching them all completely off guard.

“Whoa, mama!” Amethyst quipped with an exhilarated smile. “Looks like this show just got a ton
more exciting! Now this is the kinda explosive action I’m here for!”

“W-what’s going on?!” Pearl exclaimed frantically, especially as the lasers and smoke machine
began obscuring the kids from view. “There’s no way this can be part of the show, can it?”

“Who cares?” Stan remarked, just as excited as the purple Gem. “I’m with Amethyst; this is exactly
the kind of unexpected action that lovey-dovey fluff fest needed!”

Of course, the kids paid the audience no attention at all in the immediate aftermath of their hectic
landing, all of them struggling to regain their bearings now that they were on the ground. Given
how they had fallen, Steven, Mabel, and Connie had all landed on one side of the bubble while Bill
landed on the other. Regardless, Mabel was the first to pick herself up, a sharp gasp of stark fear escaping her as she noticed the dream demon listlessly lying face down, a small pool of blood spilling out from his body. From Dipper’s body, Mabel reminded herself, her heart pounding with blind terror as she rushed over to him, hoping that it wasn’t too serious, hoping that perhaps Bill had finally been knocked out of him, hoping that he was somehow ok after—

Her fretful thoughts were abruptly cut short as the dream demon suddenly shot upright right before she could reach him, still very much in control of his stolen vessel and absolutely outraged with all three of the kids. Mabel stumbled back a bit, a gasp of surprise escaping her as the bubble fell, Steven and Connie running over to join her. At the same time, Bill picked himself up off the ground slowly, glaring at the trio with nothing less than complete, livid hatred and allowing them to see that the knife he had earlier had managed to dig itself into his side during the fall. The demon’s hostile expression didn’t change as he swiftly pulled the blade out and tossed it aside, ignoring the alarming amount of blood already pouring from the newly-opened wound as he sulked towards the frightened kids menacingly.

“You three!” he shouted furiously, his violent intent against them all quite clear. “I’m gonna make you wish you were never even brought into existence for getting in my way! You’ll regret so much as even thinking about trying to stop me when I’m through with—”

Bill stopped short, his anger fizzling out just a bit as he happened to glance over and notice the journal lying just a few short feet away, something that all three of the kids spotted at the exact same time. And of course, after both sides exchanged just the briefest of confrontational glances, they all leapt for the book at once.

By now, the fog that had quickly covered the stage had begun to clear somewhat, allowing the audience to see the outright brawl that had just begun. Bill and Mabel had reached the journal simultaneously, and as soon as they had grabbed it, neither one of them refused to relinquish their grip on it as they essentially grappled for it, with Steven and Connie rushing to join in where they could.

“Get out of my brother’s body, you evil triangle!” Mabel ordered fiercely, using her leverage to shove the journal down hard onto Bill’s face, resulting in what already looked like a pretty nasty black eye.

“Ah!” Steven gasped in alarm upon seeing this. “C-could we maybe do this without hurting Dipper?!”

“Whoa, children fighting!” Stan exclaimed down in the audience, immensely intrigued as he pulled his camera out and started recording. “I can sell this!”

“Oh, for crying out loud, Stan!” Pearl scolded harshly, swiftly rising out of her seat. “The kids are up there beating each other senseless for some reason! We have to do something to stop them!”

“Aw, come on, Pearl!” Amethyst protested. “It’s probably just part of the show! Right, Garnet?”

The Gem leader was silent, her manner tense as she watched the disaster unfolding onstage, her future vision giving her no clear answer to that question whatsoever. As the fog started rolling over the kids once again, her foresight seemed to become even more clouded, something that only made her even more indecisive about what to do. “I-I… I don’t know…” she finally answered, her voice just a soft, almost nervous whisper at first.

“What?” Amethyst and Pearl asked in unison, both of them knowing this was a rare thing to hear from Garnet, of all Gems.
“I don’t know!” she exclaimed, clutching the sides of her seat tightly as she tried as hard as she could to peer into the future, only to find absolutely nothing at all.

Meanwhile, back up on stage, the kids had finally managed to pry the journal away from Bill, largely through all three of them pitting their combined strength against his and winning. Still, the dream demon had no plans of giving up so easily.

“You can’t stop me! I’m a being of pure energy with no weaknesses!” Bill boasted angrily, hands clenched into tight fists as he lunged at Mabel, seeing as how she was the one who currently had the journal. She barely managed to use the book as a shield as the demon plowed into her, knocking her to the ground as he tried once more to wrestle the journal back, despite Steven and Connie’s shared attempts at prying him off of her.

“True, but you’re in Dipper’s body,” Mabel pointed out with a confident smirk as she formulated an impromptu plan. One that she desperately hoped would end up working. “And I know all his weaknesses!”

“What do you mean his—” Bill cut himself off with a sudden, involuntary laugh, one that he was powerless to stop as Mabel suddenly reached up to tickle his underarm. The sudden reaction allotted Connie enough time to shove him away from Mabel, who quickly hopped to her feet and began taking off before he could recover.

“Guys, split up!” she called to the other two, the journal still tucked under her arm. “I have an idea!”

Steven and Connie did as she said, neither of them questioning what that plan might be, seeing as how something was better than nothing at a moment like this. However, they were delayed in putting it into action as Bill remained on the floor, still lost in an uncontrollable fit of laughter as he wildly jerked about, struggling to so much as pull himself up into an upright position. “Ah! Body spasms!” he cried in shocked confusion as he weakly rose to stand. “What are these?!”

“Fun fact about the human body,” Mabel began goadingly, not even flinching as Bill finally regathered his bearings and began charging for her. “You haven’t slept in over 24 hours! Meanwhile, I got a full night’s sleep and I’m on four mega-shots of Mabel juice! Connie, catch!”

Right before the demon could make it to her, Mabel tossed the journal right over his head to Connie, who stood on the other side of the stage and caught the book perfectly. A clever smirk crossed her features as she realized exactly what the plan here was, a plan that she was more than ready to go along with, even as the demon hotly spun around to face her.

“Sword Swinger!” Bill growled, rushing at her and wheezing in growing fatigue all the while.

“Oh, what’s the matter, Bill?” Connie deadpanned slyly, holding the journal up teasingly. “Can’t keep up? Maybe you should take a little break!”

At this, Connie threw the journal over to Steven, who jolted somewhat as he caught it, especially when Bill started lividly storming towards him, albeit a bit slower than before as his feet started to drag with increasing tiredness. “H-hand it over, Rosebud,” he warned rather breathlessly, still scowling hatefully all the while. “Or else.”

Steven gripped the journal close for a moment, his eyes wide as he knew he didn’t even have to ask or else what. And yet, for as afraid as he had been all day, and as much as that fear, as well as the dream demon himself had manipulated and controlled him in such unspeakable ways, the young Gem had decided that enough was finally enough. “No,” he said, his tone cold as he stared Bill
down unflinchingly, effectively surprising the demon enough to stop in his tracks. “All you’ve done since this whole thing began is threaten and hurt me and my friends, but no more! I’m done letting you get away with all of these horrible, messed up things! After all, you said so yourself; our deal is over.”

Steven’s expression was still bold with firm resolve as he threw the journal back to Mabel, who was quick to toss it off to Connie once again. From here, things quickly began to boil down into what was essentially a game of keep away with the book, with Bill stuck in the center as he frantically tried and failed to claim it for himself. The audience was still largely unable to see or hear what was happening on stage as fog clouded everything and the puppet shows’ music continued prattling on at full blast. But all the same, the kids kept their fast-paced throws going, laughing in cathartic amusement as the demon began to stumble, panting and sweating out of exhaustion, to the point that it was clear he wouldn’t be able to hold out for much longer.

“Augh! W-what is this feeling?!” Bill shouted, both enraged and weary as he struggled hard to keep going, the journal continually flying right over him as the kids continued throwing it amongst themselves. “My body is burning! I can’t move these stupid noodle legs! Curse you, useless flesh sticks! B-body… shutting down… Must… s-scratch… mosquito bites…”

By now, the kids had put their keep away game on pause, the journal resting in Mabel’s arms as they all waited apprehensively to see what would happen next. Even so, it seemed as though Bill had finally reached the physical limits of the body he had appropriated as he began to sway about, unable to maintain his balance. The demon let out a long, completely depleted groan as he started falling forward, before, with not a single ounce of energy left to spare, he finally collapsed to the ground hard. The very moment he hit the floor, Bill was sent starkly tumbling out of his vessel, back to his usual triangular form and, at last, no longer able to control his “puppet”.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hey!” the demon shouted in protest as he flew backwards, unable to stop the force that had launched him back into the mindscape. At the same time, Dipper, who had been anxiously watching the entire skirmish from above, instantly recognized this as his chance. Not wanting to waste a second, lest Bill somehow reclaim his body before he could, he dove for it, mindless of the fact that it was absolutely still and completely battered in its spot on the ground as he slipped back into it seamlessly.

At the same time, Mabel, Connie, and Steven all took a cautious step forward, none of them wanting to risk the possibility that Bill might still be inhabiting Dipper’s apparently unconscious body. However, their worries were soon allayed as he slowly, almost tentatively opened his eyes a moment later to reveal that they were no longer yellow and slitted, but just as normal as they should have been. Likewise, so was his voice as he let out a soft, barely audible groan, one that elicited a heavy sigh of apt relief from all of the others.

“Dipper!” Steven cried, joyous tears starting to fill his eyes as he realized this ongoing nightmare was finally, finally over. “Y-you’re back! W-well, I mean, you were never really gone, but still, you’re back to the way you’re supposed to be!”

Dipper had hardly heard the young Gem’s proclamation of relief as he remained lying where he was for a moment, staring at his outstretched arm beside him in utter disbelief. The fact that he was back in his own skin hadn’t really seemed to dawn on him yet, as if his previously disembodied spirit was still trying to reacclimate itself to having a physical presence at all. He only barely remembered that he had to breathe again, and as numb as he initially was, even moving seemed like a challenge that was far beyond his current capacity. He had thought that, reclaiming his body would feel natural and welcome, like returning home a long, perilous journey. But instead, it only felt odd, foreign, alien, even somewhat uncomfortable.
Almost as if he didn’t even belong inside his own body anymore at all.

“Uh… Dipper?” Mabel cut in, looking down at him with concern as she took notice of his silence, as well as the shaken expression on his face. “Y—you… you ok, bro-bro?”

“H-huh?” he finally spoke up, flinching somewhat as he found both his voice and his ability to move again. As both Steven and Connie offered hands out to help him up, he accepted them, his movements rather slow and awkward as he struggled to regain proper control over his own limbs. “O-oh… uh, no, I-I’m fine—Ow!” he let out a sharp cry as the first wave of pain washed over him, its epicenter being his twisted ankle as he tried to steady himself on it. “Ok, ouch! No, I take it back, I’m not fine! Ugh, everything hurts…”

Before any of the others could offer him any comfort or support, their reunion was starkly interrupted by a chilling, twisted laugh from none other than Bill himself. Startled, the kids all quickly found its source: the very same sock puppet that Dipper had used to speak through, which the dream demon was now using as his own mouthpiece. “This isn’t the last you’ll see of me!” he warned fiercely, his outraged manner still quite apparent. “If any of you think that this is anywhere close to over, then you can just forget it! Big things are coming, and not just from me either! You can’t stop me! Nobody ca-”

“Ok, ok, we get it!” Connie cut in, exasperated. “You’re gonna try and get your ‘revenge’ or whatever. Can we just speed this along already?”

Mabel nodded in agreement with this sentiment, letting out a long sigh as she pulled out her “big finish” button. “I’m sorry, Gabe…” she muttered remorsefully, closing her eyes and looking away as she pressed it.

Bill was more than ready to continue throwing vicious threats out, but before he could, he just so happen to notice that the puppet he was utilizing was sitting squarely atop a box laden with a huge array of various pyrotechnics. And as soon as Mabel pressed her button, they all immediately started going off at once, the initial explosion shaking the entire theatre as the fireworks went completely haywire. The colorful blasts rocketed themselves in nearly every direction, even out into the audience, who were all aptly shocked and terrified by such an abrupt, wild, admittedly dangerous display. Well, mostly all of them.

“Whoo!” Amethyst cheered, jumping up onto her seat as the fireworks continued going off above her. “Now this is what I’m talking about!”

“I’m still so confused about what’s happening here…” Pearl mused, shaking her head in bewilderment.

“So am I…” Garnet muttered in agreement, though she did let out a small gasp as her future vision finally began to clear itself up. Almost as if the fog, fog that carried an ominous familiarity that she couldn’t even begin to explain, was lifting at last.

As the pyrotechnics continued shooting about at random, it only made sense that one of the blasts would manage to strike the highly flammable crate of sock puppets sitting near the edge of the stage. In another violent explosion, puppets began flying everywhere, and as they rained down in a burning cascade of fiery destruction, Candy began playing a mournful rendition of Ave Maria on her keyboard backstage, to add to drama of it all. Mabel’s shoulders sank in another sigh as she spotted Gabe in the audience, a completely horrified, almost tearful expression on his face as burning puppets rained down all around him.

Not long after this, what little remained of the fireworks soon went off in a massive, cacophonous
explosion, effectively destroying what few puppets were left. One of them, namely the Dipper puppet, happened to, ironically enough, land on the stage right in front of Dipper. And seeing as how Bill had just been using said puppet, he didn't hesitate to slam his uninjured foot down on it as hard as he could, a small, though still somewhat hollow smile of cathartic satisfaction on his face as he realized that the demented dream demon was finally gone. Or at least, he hoped he was.

As the smoke cleared up from the explosions and the audience settled down into a tentative silence, the kids all slowly turned to face them, unsure of what might happen next. The set behind them was smoldering, a piece of scaffolding from above snapping and crashing down onto the stage as they stood in awkward silence before a crowd that was just as initially quiet, a sign which none of the kids really knew what to make of.

“Don’t worry,” Mabel spoke up, putting on an air of hopeful confidence. “I’ve seen enough movies to know that this is the part where the audience thinks it was all just part of the show and loves it. Cue applause!”

Of course, the audience did the exact opposite of applaud as a round of uproarious, disappointed boos rose up, various patrons grumbling about how they nearly died from the fireworks show as they got up and began to file out of the theatre. One of the last to rise was Gabe, who looked anything but pleased as he stared Mabel down with a cold, disapproving glare.

“G-Gabe!” she quipped, still hoping she could somehow salvage this. “Stick around for the wrap party? W-we’ve got mini-quiches!”

“Don’t speak to me, Mabel,” the puppeteer scoffed harshly, turning his nose up at her. “You’ve made a complete mockery of my art form! Let’s go, my loves.” Gabe turned on his heel, affectionally kissing his puppets as he stormed out of the theater and leaving all four the kids rather disturbed as they watched him leave.

“Did he just make out with his puppets?” Dipper asked, raising a bewildered eyebrow.

“I… might have dodged a bullet there…” Mabel noted, scratching the back of her neck.

“Kinda hard to believe that all this craziness sort of started because of him, huh?” Connie remarked with an incredulous smirk.

“Gaeibeui jamkkan! Kaendi na ajikdo neol saranghae!” Candy cried as she ran after the puppeteer, still clearly holding affections for him even if Mabel no longer did.

“So, that was some show, huh?” Amethyst spoke up, plopping back down into her seat. Out of the entire audience, the Gems and Stan were the only ones left, though really only out of obligation to the kids and little else. “Steven, I loved what you did what that whole bubble stunt. That was so hardcore!”

“U-uh, yeah…” Steven chuckled awkwardly, exchanging a nervous glance with the others. “Stunt…”

“Yes, your play was very… interesting, Mabel…” Pearl said with a halfhearted smile. “Though I’m still not sure if I understood the part where you kids started fighting each other…”

“What’s there to understand?” Stan shrugged callously. “It was just a bunch of good, clean, slapstick humor. It’s not like it’s supposed to be ‘high brow’ or anything. Either way, ya did great, pumpkin.”

“Heh, thanks, Grunkle Stan…” Mabel blushed, though as she glanced over at Dipper, she found
she was unable to ignore the growing guilt in her gut any longer. “Uh, actually… Do you guys mind giving the four of us a minute?”

While somewhat confused, the adults all consented to this request, allowing the kids to take a step further back on the stage so they could have some relative privacy. And as soon as they had that privacy, Mabel wasted no time in making an attempt at a much-needed apology, only for Dipper to beat her to it.

“Mabel, I’m sorry about all of this,” he began, glancing away from her remorsefully. “It’s my fault all of your puppets got ruined, and your show… I was just so obsessed with that dumb laptop, that I didn’t even-”

“Dipper, no,” Mabel quickly cut him off, her eyes wide as she looked him over, every single solitary injury out of many reminding her that this was her fault. That he had been robbed of his body and had been hurt so brutally all because she had been blind and selfish and stupid enough to think that her pointless, frivolous crush had outweighed his legitimate fears and goals. “Please, please don’t be sorry. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“B-but… but I made a deal with-”

“I don’t care about that!” Mabel interrupted, fighting back tears as she realized her pent-up remorse was hitting her all at once. “All you were trying to do was find a way to save Lapis, and what did I do to help you? Nothing! If I had given you just a little of my time instead of putting it all into this stupid show, then maybe you would … m-maybe… maybe Bill wouldn’t have… I-I didn’t think that… h-how was I supposed to know that this would…”

She ended up trailing off into a sob, one that only ended up making Dipper feel even worse. He was more than ready to contest that this was indeed his fault, that their lives had all been put in grave danger because of one thoughtless, reckless decision. One that he already knew he’d likely always regret, even now that everything was all supposedly said and done. “Oh, Mabel…” he sighed, reaching out a hand to place on her shoulder, though he stopped it as he felt a heavy ripple of pain go through his own, the feeling finally returning to it in full force.

Mabel flinched as she heard her brother’s sharp hiss of pain, pain that, while it had been inflicted by the dream demon’s hand, she was ultimately responsible for. “I-I guess what I’m trying to say is that… I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry, Dipper. I spent all week obsessing over some dumb guy, when the dumb guy I should have cared about is you.”

“Awww!” Steven chimed in, him and Connie equally charmed by such a heartwarming reconciliation. “When are you two finally just gonna hug it out already? We all know it’s coming!”

“Oh, well, uh, I would, but…” Dipper trailed off with a frown, nodding down to his already aggravated injuries, though he didn’t really feel like detailing the newfound pain pounding through his ribs. A pain that felt nearly startlingly identical to the injury he had sustained from Jasper knocking him back in the moments right before her and Lapis fused.

“How about we settle for a four-way fist bump instead?” Mabel suggested, perking up once more. The others all agreed to this, letting out a triumphant cheer of “Mystery Kids!” as they did so, only for Dipper to immediately pull his hand back with small gasp of pain.

“Ow! Ugh, what’d Bill do to my hand?” he grumbled, noticing that it bore no apparent external injuries. Then again, the demon had managed to inflict more than a fair share of wounds that weren’t just physical, perhaps even a few that he wasn’t even fully aware of yet.
“Nothing that a little sleep can’t fix,” Mabel assured warmly as she began to lead the way offstage.

“Yeah, and maybe a little healing spit too!” Steven added with a tentative smile, hoping that it would actually work this time. Dipper, on the other hand, didn’t seem too keen on the idea.

“Uh, m-maybe we should hold off on that for a while, Steven…” he said hesitantly. Even so, he still cringed a bit as he grabbed his arm and felt the sting from the puncture wounds the forks Bill had indirectly jammed into his skin.

“What? Why?” the young Gem frowned as him and the girls turned to him in concerned confusion.

“B-because… I-I… I don’t think I… I…” Dipper trailed off, his breathing suddenly labored as the full force of his various injuries finally seemed to hit him all at once. It was as though he had finally settled back into his skin, but it was hardly a welcome sensation as it was instead racked with flash after flash of intensive pain, unlike any had ever really felt before. Still, he didn’t really cry out in response to it as much as he froze, his hands shaking as he slowly reached up to feel out the sharpest of these agonies, one that was accompanied by a rush of unexpected, wet warmth at his side. He hardly even heard the round of suddenly distressed gasps from Mabel, Steven, and Connie as he pulled his hand away from the wound, more confused than alarmed upon seeing that it, as well as at least half of his torso was covered with blood from an injury he hadn’t even seen the demon inflict upon him.

“Dipper!” Mabel’s fearful cry barely registered to Dipper as his vision started to blur, the world suddenly tilting sideways more and more with each passing second. The echoed shouts of newfound concern from Stan and the Gems as they shot out of their seats were also mostly lost on him. Really, all he was aware of as he helplessly slipped into the void of unconsciousness was pain. A kind of pain that was, without question, more than just skin deep.

Mabel’s eyes hadn’t left Dipper from the moment they left the theater, and even as he was languidly propped up against her for the car ride home, she continued watching him like a hawk, even as out of it as he was. After all, watching her brother collapse right in front of her from injuries far more serious than she had initially thought had been more than enough to shake her to her core. And she hadn’t been the only one; Steven and Connie had both been just as distraught as Mabel upon watching Dipper lose consciousness, and Stan and the Gems hadn’t hesitated to rush up onto the stage to help, all of them equally as shocked and confused as to how he had sustained so many horrific wounds. The barrage of questions they had put upon the equally frightened kids had received no answers, since they really didn’t know how to even begin to explain everything had happened, nor did they really want to in the immediate aftermath of it all. Still, one thing was incredibly clear to everyone: Dipper needed some serious medical attention, and fast, and Steven had readily volunteered to provide it via his healing powers.

And so the rush back to the shack was on, with the intent that such healing would happen there as it was much less public and admittedly more sterile than the heavily damaged theatre. The Gems, Steven, and Connie had promised to meet Stan, Mabel, and Dipper there, which left the latter group to ride back as the conman largely ignored the speed limit the entire time. Stan had spent the first half of the trip hounding his niece with demanding questions, awash with both anger and concern for how Dipper had gotten so beaten up in the first place. But as Mabel maintained a solemn, morose silence, the conman eventually gave up, leaving her to her own heavy, guilt-ridden thoughts.

All of this pain, pain that was only inflicted upon her brother alone, and for what? Just so she could
appease a boy she had already fallen out of love with? So she could give herself yet another aimless distraction to try and steer her mind away from the dreadful events of the invasion? How could she have been so blind not to see that, while she was diverting herself from what truly mattered, Dipper had been engulfing himself in it all, desperately searching for answers that she had done nothing to help him find? How had she not seen him struggle, not noticed the guilt in his eyes or heard the anguish in his voice? How could she have let something like this happen? For while she had sailed through the world with her head in the clouds, just as she always did, her brother had been dragged so far down below them. Really, when it came right down to it, he could have died, a fact that chilled Mabel to the bone, especially as she fixated her gaze on his blood-soaked side. And if he had, then what would she have done? How would she have ever been able to live with herself, knowing that she could have done something to stop all of this? True, Bill had objectively been the one to harm and hurt him, but as far as Mabel was concerned, her own hands might as well have been the ones to cut and cripple him for all she had done to lead him to this point. For while she had sailed through the world with her head in the clouds, just as she always did, her brother had been dragged so far down below them. Really, when it came right down to it, he could have died, a fact that chilled Mabel to the bone, especially as she fixated her gaze on his blood-soaked side. And if he had, then what would she have done? How would she have ever been able to live with herself, knowing that she could have done something to stop all of this? True, Bill had objectively been the one to harm and hurt him, but as far as Mabel was concerned, her own hands might as well have been the ones to cut and cripple him for all she had done to lead him to this point.

As she let out a soft, sad sigh, her eyes finally drifted away from him for a moment, instead landing on a folded slip of crinkled paper on the floorboard in front of her. A frown of curious confusion crossed her features as she reached for it, taking care not to disturb Dipper too much as she retrieved it and flipped it open, her eyes widening at the message inside. It was written out in messy, manic handwriting, no consistency between letters to be found and even a few sparse blood spots on the page for good measure. But what really horrified Mabel was what was actually written in this haphazard scrip, a sharp, distraught gasp escaping her as she struggled to hold back tears. She had only barely finished reading what it said before she quickly folded it back up, though instead of discarding it, she shoved it away into her sweater, knowing that getting rid of it would be the same as denying that any of this had ever happened. Which was something that no one would likely be able to do for a very long time.

The collective group gathered at the shack was a very solemn one, with everyone showing their apt concern and care for Dipper as they eased him onto the couch. With the other kids all intently and worriedly crowded around him, the adults all congregated on the other side of the room, discussing the matter in hushed, bewildered whispers amongst themselves, all of them trying to make some sense of what had just occurred. Steven, Mabel, and Connie did notice them glancing over at them fretfully every few minutes, but for the most part they kept their attention focused on Dipper as he rested before them, still completely out of it, even if his expression was tight with almost feverish agony.

“Uh… aren’t you going to heal him, Steven?” Connie spoke up, breaking the ongoing tense silence between them. “Because he really looks like he could use some of your spit right now. As weird as that sounds…”

“I-I know,” Steven nodded anxiously, holding his hands close to himself out of stress. “It… it’s just… I’m not sure if it’ll work…”

“What do you mean?” Mabel asked fervently, gripping Dipper’s hand tightly in the hopes that it might wake him up. “W-why wouldn’t it work?”

“B-because it didn’t when Bill was… w-well… you know…” the young Gem muttered, glancing down remorsefully. “This is all my fault. The only reason why Bill kept hurting Dipper like this was so he could force me not to tell anybody that he was possessing him! E-even though I tried my hardest to stop him, even though I did everything I could, I still wasn’t able do it on my own. And
now, because of me, Dipper’s… h-he… h-he’s…”

As Steven trailed off into yet another guilty sob, Connie was quick to put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Oh, Steven… Don’t beat yourself up about this. It wasn’t anybody’s fault that any of this happened! In fact, the only one responsible for this mess is Bill, and Bill alone.”

Seeing as how they were still both weighed down by mutual regret, both Steven and Mabel prepared to argue such a claim, but before they could, they were all caught off guard as Dipper suddenly let out a soft, tired groan below them. The trio all held their breath and Stan and the Gems’ quickly looked over as he gradually eased his way back into consciousness, though in a way that was anything but peaceful. Just about every inch of his body was seeped in varying levels of agony, his ribs and his shoulder currently causing the worst of it, though his side wound was still a pretty potent source of pain as well. On top of all that, exhaustion, a feeling he was no stranger to by now, covered him like a veil, to the point that he made no effort of even addressing the multiple faces hovering over him, all of them filled with overwhelming concern and apprehension.

“H-hey, bro-bro,” Mabel greeted, her voice and smile both soft and subdued. “How you feeling?”

“…How do you think?” Dipper remarked somewhat dryly, though his sarcastic manner completely dissipated as he attempted sitting up, only to gasp in pain as his torso jolted in aggressive protest.

“Careful,” Garnet advised, stepping in to lend a lend him a hand, one that he had no choice but to accept. “Whatever happened during that final act certainly left its mark on you, Dipper.”

“Yeah, seriously, kid,” Stan cut in with an openly worried frown. “What the heck happened to you back there? You’re so cut up that I almost considered taking you to the hospital, until I thought about how insanely overpriced they are.”

“O-oh, um… well…” Dipper glanced over at the others, who were just as unsure about what to tell the adults as he was. After all, how could just come right out explain that they had all just battled a twisted, masochistic, incredibly powerful dream demon and only barely won without some kind of disastrous consequence resulting from such a daunting revelation? The short answer was that they couldn’t. And as far as Dipper was concerned, they weren’t going to. “I-I… guess I just… hit the stage the wrong way when we all landed in Steven’s bubble…”

“Y-yeah!” Steven exclaimed in anxious agreement, hating to lie to the Gems especially, but knowing that he was far from ready to tell them about what had really happened. “That… that’s totally what happened! B-by the way, Dipper, did you want me to try healing you up now? I wanted to wait until you were awake because—well, j-just because…”

Dipper flinched upon hearing this offer, not from his ongoing pain but from something else entirely. All day long, Steven had been running himself ragged, just in a futile attempt to protect him from Bill’s sadistic pleasure; he had been dragged into a catastrophe that had never been his to begin with, one that had trampled on his good-natured selflessness time and time again to the point that Dipper was surprised he had any of that left in him. Yet even now, in spite of all the horrors, dread, and danger he had been put through, the young Gem was still kindly extending the offer to heal him, to help him, once more. And even though this was an offer that he knew he needed, it was one Dipper knew he couldn’t think of accepting without piling even more endless guilt onto his already injured shoulders.

“Uh, n-no thanks, Steven,” he shook his head, averting everyone’s gaze as he covered his still-bleeding shoulder. “I… I think I’m good.”

“Good?” Amethyst scoffed incredulously. “Dude, you’re like, totally janked up right now. You
might as well take whatever offers for a free healing session before you clonk out on all of us again.”

“Amethyst’s right,” Pearl nodded fervently. “Dipper, you’re badly hurt, and while my knowledge on human anatomy isn’t encyclopedic, I do know that if those injuries of yours aren’t treated soon, then they could-”

“Don’t worry, you guys, I’m fine,” Dipper assured as smoothly as possible. “They’re all just flesh wounds anyway. All they need is a good cleaning and like, a few bandages or whatever and it’ll be like they never even happened.”

“Well… do you at least want some help wrapping everything up?” Connie asked, dubious of his claim to wellness seeing as how his side was still completely covered in blood.

“No,” Dipper readily refused as he slid off the couch, though he still had to rely on it to help him steady himself. “No, like I said, I’m ok. You guys are all freaking out over nothing. I just need a good night’s sleep and I’ll feel completely better by morning, I promise.”

Everyone exchanged a concerned, bewildered glance at this, but ultimately no one protested as they watched him begin to slowly limp over to the stairs, suppressing an agonized cringe with every single step he took. But even so, Mabel noticed his feeble gait, her heart aching as she desperately wanted to run over to him and offer him all the comfort and assistance she could offer. But instead, her feet remained planted right where they were, her voice trembling with worry somewhat as she addressed him before he could leave the room. “Dipper… are you sure you’re ok?”

Dipper did briefly stop at this, one foot on the first stair as he glanced back to look at her, her pleading expression almost crumbling him apart completely. But even so, he couldn’t fall apart; not here, not now, and especially not in front of her. “Y-yeah…” he answered, putting on a small, bittersweet smile as he tried to convince himself of this lie more than anyone else. “I-I… I’m ok…”

Even if he had refused to take the easy way out when it came to his injuries, Dipper had still decided to do as he had said and patch them up as best as he could on his own. His torso had been easy enough to wrap up in copious layers of bandages, even if they did rather painfully constrict his ribs, which he had the shaken suspicion a few of which had indeed been broken during the fall from the catwalk. His shoulder had been a bit trickier as the blood pouring out of it had been rather persistent, but he had managed to get it mostly under control. Aside from that, the worst external injuries he had sustained were a myriad of smaller cuts and bruises, the worst of which he made sure to cover, even if they’d heal on their own soon enough. But then there were the injuries he couldn’t hide behind bandages, like the black eye Mabel had accidently caused, or his ankle, which still panned with pain every time he put pressure on it, or the countless other wounds he had received from this ordeal that weren’t even physical at all.

He had been outside of his own body for nearly an entire day. What an odd, bizarre, outright horrific thing to think about in retrospect. But what Dipper still found so terrifying was the fact that he could have very well stayed like that forever if his friends hadn’t intervened when they had. But even so, their intervention had nearly gotten them all killed, which was something that would have been so much worse than being condemned to a formless existence within the mindscape for all eternity. Especially since, if they had indeed met their ends at Bill’s hands, it would have been entirely his fault. All because of one wrong choice, one single moment of foolish impulse, one desperate, but failed attempt to set things right.
With a mere handshake, he had lost his body. But now that he had it back, he realized he had lost so much more than that. He had lost a part of himself, one that had died the moment it left him. One that he’d likely never get back.

And for what? It was a question he kept asking himself as he tried to make sense of this, as he tried his hardest to rationalize something that held no reason at all. Why had this happened? Where had it begun? Who was really to blame? And most importantly, was it ever really going to end?

As Dipper slowly dragged himself up to the attic, he realized that he had gotten so tired of asking questions like these. Really, of asking questions in general. After all, they had been what had indirectly lead him to such a low point in the first place: questions about the author, about Gravity Falls, about the Gems, about Homeworld, about so many other things that he had stopped bothering to keep count. Not knowing the answers to any of them had driven him to uncertainty, which had driven him to fear, which had driven him to desperation, which had driven him to devastation. And in the aftermath of such devastation, the only thing he really found amidst the ruins of it all was despair.

In fact, that despair only seemed to grow as he passed by the other attic room, the one where this disaster had started in the first place. A part of him was almost too afraid to enter through its threshold again, out of the admittedly irrational fear that if he did, then certainly Bill would show up and he’d violently rip him out of his body once more and this entire catastrophe would start all over again, endlessly repeating itself in a vicious cycle that would never end. And yet, upon noticing the ruined remains of the laptop still sitting exactly where the dream demon had left them, Dipper knew he couldn’t stay away. The entire room was seeped in solemn silence as he quietly walked in, approaching the laptop’s broken pieces with care. Bill had certainly done a thorough job at destroying it, to the point that Soos or even someone as technologically adept as Pearl likely wouldn’t be able to salvage it now. It seemed like such a waste to Dipper; so many untapped answers, so many brand new leads and clues, now all completely gone forever. Even so, he didn’t wish for it back. After all, the laptop itself was inconsequential when compared to the ends he had hoped to accomplish with it. Ends that he was painfully reminded of as he noticed the scattered bits of photographs littered amongst the laptop’s debris.

Slowly, he lowered himself to his knees, his hands trembling somewhat as he reached out to collect what pieces of pictures he could find amidst the mess before him. Most of the scraps were unrecognizable, but a few he could clearly make out: the pine tree on his hat here, a piece of Lapis’ hand there, one of their now disjointed smiles there. Still, despite his careful efforts, none of the pieces seemed to fit together they way they should have. He had spent so much time since Malachite’s formation wistfully staring at those pictures that he could recall what they looked like from memory. And now, it seemed as though the memory of them would be all he’d have left, not just of the photos themselves, but of the blue Gem in general.

It was so unfair, so incredibly unfair that it almost enraged Dipper. Lapis had taken a chance, she had made a deal, and had given up everything she had, just to save him. Her sacrifice had been selfless, noble, heroic even. She had known exactly what she was doing when she had accepted Jasper’s offer to fuse, and had brazenly turned the tables on her in a way that had ultimately saved the day. Yet there she still remained, trapped at the bottom of the lake, existing as only a fusion composed of mutual hatred. Meanwhile, Dipper had done nearly the same thing; he had taken a chance, made a deal, and had been willing to give what he could up, just so he could find a way to rescue her. But he had been tricked, deceived, manipulated, and robbed of something that he could not truly exist without. His foolish choice had gravely endangered the lives of his friends, it had nearly resulted in his own sister dying, it had almost ended up with him dying for that matter too. He had been selfish, cowardly, impulsive, and reckless. And yet, where was he now? Right back in his body where he belonged, beaten and battered, yes, but alive and safe and free and back among
the warm love of family and friends, something he couldn’t help but feel like Lapis deserved more than he did right now. For unlike her, he had made no sacrifice, he had only caused harm. Unlike her, he had showed fear, not courage. Unlike her, he was a failure, not a hero.

As this brutal realization struck him, the spares photo pieces slowly slipped out of his hands and onto the floor, a starting tear hitting it not long after, soon followed by several more. He had tried, so hard and for so long, ever since Malachite had disappeared into the depths of the lake really, not to lose himself to grief like this. To keep the pain held inside, where it was easy to manage and easy to control. But with every single part of his body and his mind engulfed in a sea of agony, he found it impossible to keep it all in any longer. A harsh sob escaped him, one that he could do nothing to stop as it all finally hit him at once. Lapis was gone and so too was the only lead he had found that could have possibly helped her. Bill had possessed him, had torn him out of his own skin and had mutilated said skin in unimaginable ways. Steven, Connie, Mabel, had all been put in life-threatening danger in their reckless pursuit to save him. And now, at the end of it all, here he remained, but only just barely. Because despite his now-covered outer wounds, on the inside he was still bleeding, he was still bruising, he was still breaking. And given how much of him had already been broken by the past few weeks alone already, there was a good chance that soon enough, there would be simply nothing left of him to break at all.

Which was why he didn’t bother to make any effort to move from that spot, broken laptop and ripped-up pictures all strewn before him aimlessly, all just as disconnected and useless as he currently felt. And, with nothing left to give but tears, he simply sat and sobbed, blanketed by the blood red glow of the familiar triangular window above him, the glass gaze of its central eye gazing down upon him with a shallow, soulless stare that had always been watching, and always would.
Chapter 44: Do It For Them

Chapter Summary

In which Pearl teaches Dipper and Connie how to be child soldiers and Steven and Mabel are NOT ok with it.

Chapter Notes

Dang this one too way too long to finish but here it is! My take on Sworn to the Sword! I think it turned out appropriately angsty, so I hope you enjoy it! (keyword is SWORD) Also, shoutout to tumblr user adventuremaker16 for supporting me on Patreon! You can do the same thing too if you want, right here: https://www.patreon.com/minijen

Any bit of support for a starving college student fanfic writer like me helps! And with that outta the way, let's get on with the chapter!

The evening air was as warm and crisp and welcoming as the pleasing, expansive starry skies reflecting off of the almost glistening waterfall and lake below. They had been here before, not too long before things had taken a disastrous turn, when their close bond had really started to solidify itself. In fact, it was as if they were directly mirroring that early night on the cliff, with both of them perched on its edge as they looked up into the endless stars above, both of them held in a calming state of silence. It was a kind of warm peacefulness that Dipper at the very least hadn’t felt in quite some time, not since before Lapis had unveiled the truth about the impending invasion, before she had surrendered herself over to become Malachite, before everything had gone so horribly wrong.

But all that was in the past now. Because through some miracle or turn of fate, Lapis was free, Jasper was defeated, and Malachite was gone. These were all things that Dipper knew to be true and took immense solace in, especially as he sat next to Lapis on the waterfall cliff once more, something that, not too long ago, he had thought he’d never have a chance to do again. And while he couldn’t exactly recall the events that had led up to the blue Gem’s release from her watery prison, he largely didn’t care, because here they were, together again, despite all the obstacles that had once stood in their way.

And though he still didn’t really know how he had done it, Dipper was more than a little proud of the fact that he had been the one to finally bridge that impassible gap between them.

While things had been comfortably quiet between them thus far, he couldn’t help but break that ongoing silence by letting out a small, blissful laugh in spite of himself. Lapis didn’t bother to look
As Dipper let out another genuinely cheerful laugh at this, Lapis joined in, though her chuckle was a bit more subdued and mysterious as she finally spoke up. “Oh, that’s cute,” she said, her tone just the slightest bit patronizing as a slow smirk began to spread across her features. “But Dipper?”

“Uh, yeah?” Dipper’s smile slowly faded as he glanced over at the blue Gem, finally starting to notice that something seemed off about her. Something that he couldn’t quite place, but something that unsettled him nonetheless.

“If you’re so worried about saving me,” she continued, her bizarre, almost sinister smirk widening as the shadows covering her eyes seemed to darken just a bit. “Then who’s going to save YOU?!”

Dipper immediately froze with unquestionable fear the moment he heard “Lapis’” voice shift from her own into the pitchy, grating, haunting one that had been plaguing his dreams for the past several nights now. But his newfound terror was all too quickly confirmed as “she” finally met his alarmed gaze, revealing “her” now piercing, slitted yellow eyes. The very same eyes his own body had taken on after he had been booted right out of it by none other than Bill Cipher.

“No,” Dipper choked, his eyes wide as he scrambled to his feet to put some distance between himself and the demon-possessed blue Gem. Bill simply laughed twistedly as he also stood, sending him a broad, triumphant smirk all the while. “No, no, not her! Please-”

“Oh, what’s the matter, Pine Tree?” Bill goaded with a demented grin that looked incredibly out of place on Lapis’ usually solemn face. “Don’t tell me you actually thought you saved Water Wings here. You’ve gotta be kidding me! Your chances of helping her out are about as slim as you figuring out that password were. You know, if that dumb old laptop was still in one piece!”

By now, Dipper was in the midst of a full-on panic attack, his heart racing and his breathing short as he tried to find some way to escape from the demon who had nearly killed him just to meet his own sadistic ends. “Y-you… you’re not… Why… why are you still–” he paused, taking in a deep breath in a feeble attempt to steady himself, even as he continued warily backing away. “W-why won’t you just leave me alone already?! You already got what you wanted, so just… just get out of her and go away!”

“No can do, kid!” Bill quipped as brightly as ever. “See, I just realized that neither one of us really lived up to our little deal! So I decided to go ahead and just dig Water Wings up from the bottom of the lake and bring her all the way up here, just for you! Sure was thoughtful of me, wasn’t it?”

“W-what?!! No!” Dipper readily protested, knowing that the last thing he ever wanted was for Lapis, of all people, to fall victim to the dream demon’s sadism as he had. “This isn’t what I-”

“Now, now, Pine Tree, there will be plenty of time to thank me later,” Bill went on with a callous shrug. “For now, it looks like I’m still one puppet short. Think you can help me out with that?”

Dipper couldn’t even find the words to express his outright terror at the thought of his body being brutally ripped away from him to be thoughtlessly tortured while he was trapped in the cold,
unfeeling void of the mindscape all over again. So instead, he simply shook his head, his entire body trembling as the dream demon stepped closer to him, still wearing Lapis’ form and still trying to rob him of everything he thought he had. Bill said something else to him, likely another cruel taunt or jeer, but Dipper didn’t hear him against the sound of his own heart hammering in his chest, against his own shallow, desperate breathing, against the anguished tears starting to well up in his eyes, against the fear, so deep and so crippling, that it was practically overwhelming every fiber of his being. Fear of such an unbearable disaster repeating itself once more, fear of being trapped in invisibility and silence, on the outside forever looking in, fear of having control over nothing, not even his own body as it was used as nothing more than a hallow puppet, an empty pawn, fear that it would never end, that it would just keep going, an endless cycle of panic and pain and despair and-

This distraught train of thought was abruptly broken as Dipper took another step back, only to step on open air instead of solid ground. He only had enough time to let out a small gasp before he backwards, plummeting off the side of the cliff and down into the seemingly endless expanse below. And for a moment, he was surprisingly fine with this harrowing fall, since, at the very least, it had gotten him out of Bill’s range. Yet only mere seconds after he backpedaled off the cliff, something latched itself onto his wrist, violently lurching him right back up towards it. It was only as this same force roughly pulled against his other arm that Dipper noticed what was, of all things, string, which had somehow seamlessly attached itself to the backs of both his hands. His alarm increased tenfold, however, as he glanced up and saw that the other ends of the strings were connected to a large marionette hand controller, one that was firmly held by Bill himself, back in his usual triangular form, no longer masquerading as the blue Gem but instead loomed huge and intimidating as he pulled his “puppet” back up towards him.

“Not so fast, Pine Tree!” Bill exclaimed haughtily, his huge, singular eye seeming to stare straight through Dipper’s soul. “You never got to finish to finish your performance! It’d be such a shame if you didn’t get to have an ENCORE!”

Bill burst into another round of insane laughter as he aggressively jerked the marionette control upward, roughly pulling Dipper up along with it. His first instinct was one overridden with desperation and terror, prompting him to fiercely struggle against the bonds tightly holding him. However, he was quick to come to the horrific realization that he suddenly had no control of his body whatsoever. In fact, he wasn’t even capable of crying out for help, not that he thought he’d get any at a moment like this. And amidst it all was the unexcepted but alarming return of that feeling he had hoped to never experience again. That intrusive, agonizing, merciless, unbearable, unending tug that had so savagely ripped him out of his own body once before, and was currently in the process of doing it once again. And the worst part was that there was nothing, absolutely nothing he could do to stop it. There was nothing he could do to free himself from this helpless state, from the demon’s vicious sway, from the horrendous deal that he had made, one that would forever follow him, keeping him trapped in fear, guilt, sorrow, and regret for what would no doubt be a formless, empty, eternally lonely existence.

Or that’s what Dipper thought until his eyes shot open, the dream demon all but gone and replaced with the familiar sight of the darkened attic ceiling above him. But, as panic stricken as he still was, he didn’t hesitate to bolt upright in bed, only to abruptly realize that he was back in control of his body as a sharp, familiar pain ripped across his ribcage as a result of the sudden movement. He was unable to bite back a rather loud, pained cry as he wrapped his arms around his torso, cringing against the resurgent ache that he had gotten all too acquainted with during the past several days alone.

“Dipper?” Mabel groggily spoke up, wiping the sleep out of her eyes as she sat up as well. Her tiredness was quickly replaced with worry however, as she glanced over to see her brother
essentially hugging himself, his expression twisted in tight, breathless, obvious pain. “Dipper!” she exclaimed in apt alarm, hurriedly jumping out of bed and rushing over to him. “A-are you ok?! Should I wake Stan up?! Or call Steven? O-or-”

“N-no,” Dipper interrupted, his voice quiet and forced amidst the air his constricted lungs were struggling to find. “I… I’m fine…”

“You sure don’t look like you’re fine…” Mabel noted, still immensely concerned for both his poor physical and mental state.

“W-well, I am,” Dipper assured, taking in a steadying breath as he forced himself to calm down. Still, it took him just a bit longer to move past the tears he was struggling to suppress, tears that had nothing to do with the physical pain he was finally starting to overcome. “I was just… a little sore, is all. It’s really no big deal, Mabel.”

“I really wish you’d stop saying that…” Mabel sighed pensively. “You almost died the other day, Dipper… That’s a pretty big deal to me…”

“So what?” Dipper shrugged, trying his best to convince himself that what had happened during that ill-fated puppet show now only lay dead and buried in the past. Something that his persistently dark nightmares refused to let him actually do. “We almost die every other day. Its not like mortal danger is anything new around here.”

“Yeah, but this was different…” Mabel rubbed her arm as she glanced away guiltily, remembering something she had largely tried to forget ever since she had first come across it. “Dipper, I-I… there was… I… I found…” She trailed off upon noticing his curious, but unquestionably exhausted and beleaguered expression, realizing that she couldn’t tell him about this now. In fact, she wasn’t sure if she’d ever have the heart to tell him about it at all. “N-never mind…” she finally relented as she began to head back over to her bed. “Just… try to get some sleep, k, bro-bro? I bet you probably still need to catch up a little on that after… uh, well… y-you know…”

“Y-yeah… sleep…” Dipper halfheartedly sighed as he lay back down again, knowing he would be getting very little of that for the rest of the night. Not that that was anything new, seeing as how sleep had been evading him every nightmare-interrupted night since that disastrous play. Still, for as crushingy tired as he was, he refused to be thrust back into terrors masquerading themselves as dreams, where Bill Cipher eagerly awaited to continue mercilessly toying with him and torturing him for no real reason at all. He wouldn’t, he couldn’t allow any and all sense of agency and control to be so easily stolen away from him again, even in the purely hypothetical world of his nightmares. Which was why he decided to utilize what little control he felt like he did have anymore by avoiding them, and by extension sleep, altogether. An ill-advised idea in light of both his injuries and his persisting exhaustion, but for the sake of his quickly crumbling emotional stability, it was the only option he really had left.

Given how mutually traumatizing their harrowing recent showdown with Bill had been for all four of the kids, they had wisely chosen to take their time in recovering from it. For the past several days, they had quietly yet unanimously signed themselves off of going on any Gem mission or mystery hunt. Instead, they had opted to spend their time in much more mundane but relaxing ways, such as a picnic perched atop one of the temple statue’s massive hands. With the weather warm and pleasant and the breezes calming and gentle, the kids found a welcoming atmosphere as they settled down in this elevated spot, one that provided them with an excellent view of the entire town. In fact, with the ground so far below them and a lush blue sky above, it was almost enough
to make Steven, Connie, and Mabel, at least, feel like everything was finally back to normal. A hopeful sentiment that Dipper sullenly and silently refused to share.

With their late morning snack of biscuits and jam neatly laid out, Steven began tuning his ukulele, a light smile on his face as he decided to fill the picnic in with some lighthearted tunes. Connie had much of the same idea as she pulled her violin out and began adjusting it until both instruments were in harmony with each other, eventually culminating in a charming, cheerful duet between the two.

“The sun is bright, our shirts are clean, we’re sitting up above the scene,” Steven began, strumming happily as he easily crafted impromptu lyrics. “Come on and share this jam with me.”

“Peach or plum or strawberry,” Connie picked up where he had left off, synchronizing perfectly with the young Gem’s melody. “Any kind is fine, you see. Come on and share this jam with me! I’ll do my best to give this jam the sweetness it deserves.”

“And I’ll keep it fresh, I’m jamming on these tasty preserves!”

As this literal jam session continued, Mabel contentedly swayed along to the upbeat tune, though she refrained from joining in, despite wanting to. Her warm grin had already started to falter upon seeing the clearly affectionate smiles Steven and Connie were sending each other as they sang together, but it only fell completely when she glanced over at Dipper. His expression was downcast, cold even while he simply stared out at the town far below, barely even paying attention to anything at all as he gripped his arms loosely, taking care not to touch any of the bandages covering up his smaller cuts and scrapes. She could guess from the deeper than usual bags under his eyes that he likely hadn’t taken her advice about getting some much-needed sleep last night. Mabel was half tempted to call him out on this, voicing her disapproval of his lack of self-care while he was still rather injured, but once again, she held her peace, knowing that the last thing either of them needed right now was to get in yet another petty fight.

“Ingredients in harmony,” Steven and Connie harmonized, drawing their cheery song to a close. “We mix together perfectly. Come on and share this jam with me!”

The melody concluded on a bright, high note from both instruments, followed by a celebratory laugh from the young Gem. “Woo hoo! Jam buds!”

“Nice jam session,” Connie complimented with a chuckle as she started putting her violin away.

“Yeah, uh, y-you guys sounded great!” Mabel cut in with something of a forced smile. “Right, Dipper?”

Unlike Mabel, Dipper made no attempts at trying to be perky or upbeat as he kept his sights set on the view beyond them, his expression clearly glum and doleful as he responded with nothing more than an absent nod, followed by a quiet sigh. Mabel, Steven, and Connie exchanged a concerned glance at this, all four of them very much aware that out of all of them, it was clear that Dipper was still by far the furthest away from fully recovering from that scarring sock opera. Not that any of them really blamed him; after all, he had literally ripped out of his own body and had only managed to get it back after it had been viciously bloodied and brutalized. It was a state of affairs so nightmarish and horrific that none of them really knew how to reconcile it, the least of which being Dipper, to whom all of it had directly happened to. Which was perhaps a large part of the reason why he had been so quiet and disengaged ever since it had happened, even despite his continued attempts at reassuring the others that he was alright, both inside and out. Of course, this was something that Mabel, Steven, and Connie couldn’t possibly believe readily, but even so, none of them had the faintest idea about what to really do to tangibly help him. They figured that for
now, the most they could do was give him time, space, and support as he needed it in the hopes that eventually, it would coax him out of his apparent depression.

“Well, uh… I think we’re all forgetting the best part,” Steven transitioned awkwardly as he grabbed one of the biscuits they had laid out and loaded it up with strawberry jam. “To all of us jam buds!”

“To jam buds!” Mabel and Connie cheerfully echoed this toast, jamming up their own biscuits as they prepared to enjoy their snack. However, before they could, a sudden shrill caw pierced through the peaceful air, alerting the kids to the flock of crows divebombing towards them, or more specifically towards Steven, with the intent of stealing his biscuit right out of his hands. The young Gem let out a startled gasp, but before he could do anything to defend himself from the attacking birds, Connie beat him to it. In an instant, she was on her feet, swinging her violin bow out far and wide in a bold, fierce attempt at driving the crows away. They were quick to see that they were no match for the makeshift weapon or its stalwart wielder as they hastily retreated, leaving the kids to enjoy their picnic in peace once more.

“Go back to your masters!” Connie called out after the fleeing birds, keeping her bow dramatically aimed at them. “Tell them we’re not afraid of your kind!”

“Heh, thanks for saving my jam snack.” Steven chuckled warmly. “Unfortunately, it’s not safe from me.” With an eager grin, the young Gem shoved his biscuit into his mouth, happily munching on the previously periled treat.

“Whoa, Connie, that was so awesome!” Mabel exclaimed, perking up once more. “You were all like ‘swish!’ ‘swash!’ ‘swoosh!’ It was like you turned into some kind of super cool sword fighter for a second there! It was amazing!”

“What, you mean like fencing or something?” Dipper spoke up, suddenly intrigued by the genuinely interesting direction the conversation had taken.

“No, I mean real sword fighting,” Connie shrugged. “I don’t know, I always thought it looked like a really amazing skill to know in moves and on TV. N-not that I’d actually ever be able to learn or anything…”

“Oh!” Steven interrupted with an excited gasp as he finished his biscuit. Stars were in his eyes as he hopped to his feet, grinning at Connie widely as he hurried up onto the nearby warp pad before anyone else could. “Steven has an idea!"

“You want me to do what?!” Pearl asked, completely caught off guard by the rather unorthodox proposal Steven had just made to her.

“You should teach Connie how to sword fight!” the young Gem reiterated earnestly as him, Connie, Dipper, and Mabel all congregated before the confused white Gem. “You know everything there is to know about swords, Pearl, and Connie’s already so good-”

“Steven!” Connie cut in, suppressing an embarrassed blush. After all, the last thing she wanted was for Steven to overexaggerate her meager skills, only for her to end up disappointing Pearl, who was certainly far beyond them.
“But you are!” Steven contested. “You did great when we fought off all those living wax figures at the beginning of the summer!”

“Oh! And there was also that time we beat back those crazy golf ball guys!” Mabel added just as enthusiastically.

“Yeah! And, uh… those mean crows just now!” the young Gem continued, trying to come up with another instance of Connie’s potential swordsmanship.

“Hm… you’re awfully young to begin something like this…” Pearl noted as she looked Connie up and down thoughtfully. “But then again, I suppose I was only a few thousand years old when I began fighting alongside Rose Quartz myself…” Upon seeing that the white Gem was starting to consider the idea, Connie realized she could no longer hold her peace about it. After all, if she really did want to gain such a unique, valuable skill, then she had to earn the right to learn it for herself instead of having others plea it for her. “Oh, yes, Connie?” Pearl asked upon noticing her politely raise her hand.

“Please, I want to learn!” Connie urged devoutly. “I don’t know what’ll happen in the future, but if something dangerous comes along, I don’t wanna be a burden, I wanna help!” She hesitated a beat, a warm flustered blush filling her cheeks as she happened to steal a glance over at Steven. “I-I feel like I’ve been taking a backseat in so many huge things that have happened this summer, but I don’t want to just watch on the sidelines anymore! I want to be there for Steven, f-for all you guys, to fight by your side! The Earth is my home too. Can’t I help protect it?”

Needless to say that upon hearing such a profoundly heroic resolve, Pearl was instantly sold on the idea of taking Connie under her tutelage, largely because it reminded her of the very similar vow she had made countless centuries ago. And so, with proud tears brimming in her eyes, she happily agreed. “Oh… ok…” she whispered gently before sobering up, wiping her eyes as she stood with an enthused grin. “If that’s how you feel, then by all means, we should get started!”

“Wait… now?” Connie asked, somewhat caught of guard as the white Gem began leading the way towards the warp pad.

“Well, of course!” Pearl exclaimed intently, pausing as she turned around. “Since you’ll basically be starting from square one, we’ll have a lot of ground to cover. But I’m confident that a quick learner like yourself, Connie, will pick the most essential skills up in no time! Now come along, we’ve much to do!”

“Oh… uh… y-yes, ma’am!” Connie nodded, steeling herself for the no doubt rigorous training ahead as she went towards the warp herself.

“Whoo-hoo!” Steven cheered excitedly hurrying off after the pair so he could spectate.

“This is gonna be so cool!” Mabel gushed as she did the exact same thing, not noticing that Dipper had hung back until he hesitantly spoke up.

“W-wait!” he exclaimed, suddenly quite nervous as everyone turned back towards him. Yet even despite the flustered redness filling his cheeks, Dipper decided to roll with this burst of impulse, hoping that it would at the very least, somehow take his mind off the last impulsive choice he had made. “Pearl, I… I want to learn sword fighting too!”

A beat of startled silence passed in light of this sudden request, with no one really knowing what to initially make of it. But even so, Dipper didn’t retract it as he instead maintained a resolute expression, his hands clenched into tight fists at his sides, even if they were trembling just the
slightest bit from nerves. He was prepared to elaborate on his unexpected appeal, but before he could, Mabel abruptly broke the stilted silence.

“Whaaaaaaaat? You wanna learn how to sword fight, bro-bro?” she asked, a hint of good-natured quizzical teasing in her tone. “That seems like it might be a bit too strenuous for those noodle arms of yours, no offense.”

“Hey, I can fight!” Dipper protested petulantly, trying his best not to come across as outright embarrassed, especially in front of the white Gem. “Remember how I took Gideon on inside that giant robot of his and won?”

“Yeah! And how we worked together to beat Peridot’s robo-peeps as Stepper!” Steven chimed in with a supportive smile. “And when you fought that beefy video game guy, or when you and me were up against all those clones of ourselves, or when you hunted down that huge multibeast!”

“Huh, come to think of it, you actually have quite a bit of fighting experience already, Dipper,” Connie noted thoughtfully.

“Y-yeah, I do,” Dipper agreed somewhat unsteadily as he crossed his arms. “But, uh… I-I just… I don’t see any reason to not want to get better at it, especially since things have been kind of… intense around here lately. I-it’s like Connie said: I want to, um, help protect the Earth, o-or something…” He paused briefly, glancing down apprehensively as he knew that wasn’t entirely his motivation for wanting to acquire a skill as involved and deft as sword fighting. But as far as he was concerned, nobody had to know his real reasoning except for him. “So, uh… would it be ok if I trained with you and Connie, Pearl?”

“I don’t know, Dipper…” Pearl frowned, her expression rather uncertain as she put a hand to her chin. “Normally, I wouldn’t mind taking on two pupils at once, and yes, you do certainly seem to have some admirable informal combat experience that could prove to be a useful skill base. But… your injuries from the other day are rather concerning… Maybe you should just wait until you’re all healed up before you start training with us. After all, it is a very rigorous curriculum, and I’m not sure if you should be putting any further strain upon your already damaged body by attempting highly complicated maneuvers and techniques…”

“B-but I’m ok, really!” Dipper countered, wishing that his still very prominent bandages didn’t stand out as such dead giveaways to the opposite of that claim. And really, it was indeed a rather blatant lie, because his shoulder did occasionally start bleeding again, his ribs still ached every time he so much as twisted the wrong way, he was still forcing himself to walk without a limp even though his ankle sparked in painful protest with almost every step he took. But once again, nobody else had to know about any of that but him, especially seeing as how he didn’t want to wait for this. Really, if this could help him like he hoped it could, then it couldn’t afford to wait any longer. “I already feel so much better than I did the other day! In fact, it… it’s almost like I never even got hurt at all!”

Mabel couldn’t help but frown upon hearing this, knowing that Dipper was seriously underplaying his injuries for the sake of saving face. Because she had seen the blood-stained bandages he had discarded in the bathroom trash can, she had heard his pained groans every time he put more pressure on his ankle than he should have, she had worried about him every single waking moment since he had passed out immediately after her ridiculous puppet show. And while she wanted to object to the idea of him pursuing something as laborious as sword training in his current state, she knew she really couldn’t. After all, this was the first time in days that she had seen that familiar bold, resilient spark in his eyes, a spark she had been sorely missing for so long now. A spark that, for both of their sakes, she desperately didn’t want to see fade away into blank misery once again.
“Anyway, what matters is that I know I can do this, Pearl,” Dipper continued earnestly, being very transparent about how much he wanted to learn. “All I need is a chance. If there’s one thing I’ve realized in all the crazy things that have happened this summer so far, it’s that I haven’t been prepared for everything that’s come our way… but I want to be! I want to be able to defend myself and Mabel from any other dangerous thing we might come across! A-and I don’t think that’s the sort of thing that can really wait so… please, Pearl. Give me that chance. I won’t let you down, I promise.”

Pearl had practically broken down into warm tears once again at hearing yet another selfless proclamation. Which was why it took her very little further internal deliberation before making an easy decision as she looked between her two new promising young pupils. “Very well then. I’ll teach you both!” she said with bright resolve, finally stepping onto the warp pad as the kids followed suit, all of them mostly ready to go. “Now… let’s be off!”

In order to properly train Connie and Dipper in the ways of the blade, Pearl would need the proper venue to accommodate such training, and fortunately, she knew of the perfect place. The white Gem warped herself and the kids to this greatly elevated destination with a broad, confident smile, a pair of training swords cradled in her arms. The kids were a bit less dignified, with Connie giggling in excitement and falling flat onto the pad as they arrived, having warped only a handful of times compared to Steven and the twins. The young Gem chuckled himself as he helped her up, and while Mabel initially smiled in amusement at this, her expression soon fell as she glanced over at Dipper, whose manner was quite cold and serious, even despite the beautifully bewildering place they were now in.

The massive marble structure seemed to be set adrift in an endless sea of fluffy white clouds, high above the ground with only sunny blue skies above it. The pair of staircases behind the warp pad led to a vast, open-air arena, one that clearly showed its age in how over half of it had completely crumbled apart. What was left was still rather impressive though, from its high staggered seating, to its towering pillars and accompanying statues, to the collection of four diamond symbols stacked together at the pinnacle of the structure, the bottommost of which had broken apart quite some time ago. The kids all soaked this incredibly sight in with apt wonder as they followed Pearl down into the arena’s empty center, which would certainly provide more than enough space to pass her sword fighting skills along to her two new students.

“Whoa… this place is amazing!” Connie exclaimed upon finally seeing the full lay of the arena and the billowing clouds surrounding it.

“It certainly is, Connie,” Pearl smiled broadly, her back turned to the kids as she glanced down to the pair of training swords resting in her arms. “This is an Ancient Sky Arena, where some of the first battles for Earth took place! It was here that I became familiar with the human concept of being a knight, completely dedicated to a person and a cause. Its easily the most noble, heroic resolve any Gem or human could hope to dedicate themselves to. Dipper, Connie, that is what you both must become: brave, loyal, selfless. Entirely devoted and committed not to yourselves, but to those you’re willing to give up everything to protect and serve! You… must be knights!”

At this, the white Gem turned to her young pupils, finally holding the pair of training swords out to them and silently instructing them to take up these blades. For both Dipper and Connie, the moment they both reached out to take their swords felt surreal, almost monumental. After all, these weren’t just plastic toys or dulled metal; these were real, sharp, potentially deadly weapons, weapons that they were about to learn how to wield with their own hands. As the pair exchanged a
rather tentative glance upon claiming these weapons for themselves, they could both acutely feel just how intimidating this prospect really was. In fact, it was so initially intimidating to them both that they gave Pearl’s manifesto much thought, even if Steven and Mabel were rather caught off guard by its somewhat alarming implications. Still, the white Gem didn’t waste a beat as she decided to formally start her training regimen.

“We begin with a bow,” she said authoritatively. “First to me, your teacher.” As Pearl gracefully bowed to her pupils, Dipper and Connie followed suit, albeit a bit less confidently, both of them awkwardly holding their swords and unwittingly showing that they had quite a lot to learn. “Now again, to your fellow student.” The pair did as the white Gem said, respectfully bowing to each other and ignoring the soft chuckles starting to bubble up from Mabel and Steven behind them. “And finally, to your lieges.” Pearl nodded over to the aforementioned laughing pair, who were quick to sober up under the sudden scrutiny.

Steven’s smile was quick to return however as Connie lowered herself to one knee before him, her manner filled with plenty of hints of levity as she did so. “My liege,” she remarked, her tone intentionally over dramatic.

“Miss Knight,” the young Gem acknowledged with an air of playful sovereignty before both him and Connie broke down into a gale of muted laughter under their breaths.

Mabel was already smirking as she watched this silly, lighthearted interaction, but her smile widened with surprise as Dipper suddenly bowed to her, much to her amusement. “Tis an honor, Sir Dipping Sauce,” she giggled, slightly bowing back to him, though Dipper adamantly refused to join in on her merriment.

“Come on, Mabel,” he scowled admonishingly as he glanced up at her slightly, causing her smile to drop almost instantly. “This is serious.”

“Indeed it is, Dipper,” Pearl agreed as she overheard this, taking a step closer. “I’m glad someone here recognizes that fact…” The white Gem frowned as she sent a critical glance to Steven and Connie, who were quick to stop laughing and straighten up upon being called out.

“Oh! S-sorry, ma’am!” Connie blushed, clearly flustered by her teacher’s admonishment.

“Mm hm…” Pearl nodded as her gemstone began to glow. Out of it emerged a pair of near-perfect holographic replicas of the white Gem, both of them already wielding solid rapiers as it stood emotionlessly and rigidly alongside the real Pearl. “Now, to begin, these holo-Pearls will be your opponents.”

While Connie, Mabel, and Dipper were all quite impressed by the white Gem’s holographic abilities, Steven was instantly set on high alert, largely because of something that had happened not too long before summer had begun. In fact, his dread progressively grew as both holo-Pearls raised their blades a bit, their voices crisp and robotic as they spoke in orderly unison. “Level 0, beginner set, dual opponents. Do you wish to engage in combat?”

“Yes!” Connie readily exclaimed, her eyes a light with daring excitement.

“Uh, s-sure, I guess,” Dipper replied a bit more unsteadily, undoubtedly intimidated by the fact that they were actually going to start off learning how to fight firsthand.

Steven, however, was far less complacent with the idea of two of his friends being pitted against such heartless holographs in the same way he had when Pearl had been out of commission for nearly two weeks and one of the only remnants of her he had left had been one such ruthless
combatant apparition. Which was why, upon his mere self-preservation instinct alone, a large pink bubble bloomed around him, Connie, Mabel, and Dipper, startling the other three as they all looked to the wide-eyed young Gem questioningly.

“Steven? Are… you ok?” Mabel asked with a concerned frown, taking note of his rather shallow, sharp breathing.

“H-huh?” Steven blinked before noticing the bubble he had unconsciously created. “Oh! I-I’m sorry! It’s… i-it was… um, r-reflex…” The young Gem lowered his bubble, scratching the back of his neck as he let out an awkward laugh and began to back away. “Uh, y-you guys just be careful and we’ll… we’ll, uh, be over here…”

“Yeah, have fun, you guys!” Mabel called with a small smile as she began to follow Steven over to the stands, but not before placing a steady hand on Dipper’s uninjured shoulder. “Seriously though, bro-bro,” she whispered to him, her manner suddenly quite intent and worried. “Be careful. Even if you said you’re feeling better, you still probably shouldn’t go all overboard with this sword fighting stuff—even if it is really cool—so soon after… w-well, you know. So… so just promise me you won’t push yourself too far… ok?”

Dipper hesitated upon hearing this, his grip tightening around the hilt of his sword as he met his sister’s sincere, almost pleading gaze. But all the same, he forced a weak, reassuring smile, pulling his posture up as he nodded slightly. “Don’t worry, Mabel. I’m not gonna go ‘overboard’ or anything like that. I… I promise.”

Mabel smiled once more, allayed by this affirmation as her hand slipped off his shoulder. “Thanks,” she sighed contentedly as she hurried to join Steven on the stands. “And hey! You got this, ‘Sir Dippin-Dots! I’ll be rooting for you!”

Despite his earlier exasperation with Mabel’s playful nicknaming, Dipper couldn’t help but crack a genuine smile at this, glad for her vote of confidence that easily could have been nothing more than teasing under different circumstances. Even so, he couldn’t help but feel the slightest bit guilty as he glanced down to the sword in his hand, not entirely sure if he’d be able to live up to the promise he had just made to her.

Seeing that there was no further distractions or delay, Pearl came to stand in between her two students, placing guiding hands upon both of their shoulders as she started her very first lesson. “Alright, everything begins with your stance… Remember,” the white Gem began correcting her students’ starting positions, choosing to instruct them in the best way she knew how: through song. “You do it for them,” she sang brightly as she guided Connie to lower her blade a bit while helping Dipper reposition his footing. “And you would do it again.” As the pair of holo-Pearls stepped forward, the white Gem nodded, prompting her pupils to engage them under their guidance. The first swings were slow and simultaneous, with both blades cleanly landing against those of the holograms. Pearl smiled in approval as the kids both flinched at their initial strikes, Dipper out of surprise and Connie out of amazement. “You do it for her—that is to say,” she blushed awkwardly at her missay, something that neither of her students caught as she turned it back around. “You do it for them.”

Steven and Mabel smiled cheerfully as they watched this training commence from the sidelines, both of them more than eager to support and cheer Dipper and Connie on. In fact, Mabel readily did so, excitedly jumping out of her seat as she watched Dipper successfully cross swords with the holo-Pearl yet again. “Yeah! You go-go, bro-bro!”

“Shh!” Pearl quickly quieted, glancing back at the pair on the stands admonishingly, lest her pupils’ concentration be broken.
“Oops! Sorry!” Mabel called back, somewhat embarrassed as she sat back down alongside Steven. Still, despite this brief distraction, Pearl continued her instruction, stepping away from her students as she critiqued their posture and aim.

“Keep your stance wide, keep your body lowered,” she sang, her authoritative frown turning into a smile as Dipper and Connie took her advice and adjusted their stances. With this initial step out of the way, the white Gem decided to move things along by stepping into things herself. Seeing as how there was only one of her, her pupils had to take turns practicing with her in mock, very slow moving back and forth parrying. Dipper went first, trying his best to remain steady and confident as he exchanged gentle, controlled strikes under Pearl’s continued musical instruction. “As your moving forward, balance is the key! Right foot, left foot,” Pearl nodded in approval as Dipper quickly checked and corrected his footing, though she didn’t happen to notice him briefly cringe as he put a bit too much pressure on his injured ankle. Still, he was quick to brush the pain off, knowing that he couldn’t let that, or anything else for that matter, hinder him from doing this.

“Now go even faster. And as you’re moving backwards, keep your eyes on me…”

The rest of that afternoon, as well as the next several days were filled with rigorous training, from sunup to sundown, as Pearl dutifully continued instructing Dipper and Connie in the way of the blade. Not that either of the aforementioned pupils minded such a tireless regiment; both of them were more than eager to learn everything the white Gem had to teach them, which was why they gladly went along with her to the sky arena every day without fail. While most mornings didn’t see Steven and Mabel accompanying them at dawn, they always did make sure to show up to watch the pair train at some point during the day, and needless to say that they were aptly impressed by the progression that they saw. Despite their lack of any former training until now, both Dipper and Connie were amazingly fast learners, something that really wasn’t that surprising given how unwaveringly brilliant both of them already were. Under Pearl’s firm but fair tutelage, their skills excelled at largely the same speed as the white Gem staunchly refused to let either of them lag too far behind before moving on. As a result, the pair learned the skills of sword fighting at a very steady rate, going from the basic beginner set to the introductory intermediate level in only a few days’ time.

As part of the intermediate level, the holo-Pearls became more intense and aggressive, something that wasn’t lost on Connie in particular as she went up against one in a one-on-one duel. Pearl stood by and watched intently, Dipper doing the same thing, especially since he would be going right after her, as she ran to the hologram and met its blade squarely, echoing what the white Gem had taught them thus far in song. “Keep my stance wide,” Connie sang, a fierce expression on her face as she meet the holo-Pearl’s sword back.

“Good,” Pearl noted approvingly, proud of how Connie had managed to move past her most glaring flaw: her difficulty counterattacking.

“Keep my body lowered,” Connie continued, smoothly ducking down under the hologram’s blade.

“Right!”

“As I’m moving forward-”

“Concentrate!” Pearl cut her off upon noticing a small misstep, something that couldn’t be allowed anywhere past the beginner level. “Don’t you want them to live?!”

Upon hearing this, Steven and Mabel couldn’t help but suck in a unified sharp breath from the
stands, both of them already quite on the edge of their seats as they watched Connie narrowly weave out of the path of the hologram’s sword. Certainly, the both figured, the last thing she needed at a high-stakes moment like this was for Pearl to be putting so much pressure on her shoulders.

“Right foot, left foot,” Connie grunted as the holo-Pearl’s sword lightly grazed her arm, but even so, she didn’t stop for an instant. Instead, she lashed her blade out, only barely missing the hologram’s transparent form as she backed up a bit to try again.

“Put your whole body into it!” Pearl admonished, snapping her fingers at the same time and discreetly calling another hologram of herself into action, though its target wasn’t Connie. Rather, it was Dipper, for the sake of eliminating his greatest challenge in training thus far: warding off surprise attacks. Mabel gasped as she noticed the holo-Pearl silently rushing towards her brother from behind, but before she could even call out a warning to him, Dipper abruptly spun around and met the hologram’s blade in a perfectly-timed block. Though Pearl was pleased with this, she didn’t let the hologram ease up as it pressed its blade down hard against Dipper’s, forcing him to maintain his stance and do everything he could to push back, a feat that wasn’t as easy as it should have been, given his still-injured shoulder. At the same time, the holo-Pearl Connie was dueling had locked her in a similar strait, with its sword locked squarely against hers as it applied a daunting amount of force against her. Steven and Mabel watched this display of literal tension breathlessly from their seats, both of them crossing their fingers that Dipper and Connie would prevail, and in the end, they did almost simultaneously. Connie cut herself free first, maneuvering her blade past the holo-Pearl’s and going in for a clean cut across the hologram’s chest and disabling it completely. Mere seconds later, Dipper released his sword from the holo-Pearl’s entirely, narrowly rolling out of the path of its blade as it crashed into the ground where he had once stood before he stabbed the hologram right into its exposed back. “Yes!” Pearl commended boldly at such a successful display, one that only slightly relieved the still quite anxious pair in the stands, who only grew more anxious as they heard the white Gem’s next lesson. “Everything you have, everything you are, you’ve got to give!”

Pearl elaborated on that imposing mantra that night after the sun had gone down and training had ended for the day. The kids all sat on the stands before her as the white Gem detailed an entirely different aspect of sword fighting via yet another holographic projection from her Gem, one that put her own memories on display for them all to see. “On the battlefield, when everything is chaos,” The scene opened up on what had to be thousands of years ago, on a battlefield entrenched in tall, burning flames in seemingly every direction. Amidst these flames ran Pearl, her outfit quite different, a battle-damaged blade in her hand, and a look of unabridged terror on her face as she searched the area with clear desperation. “And you have nothing but the way you feel, your strategy and a sword.” The white Gem screeched to a halt with a frightened gasp as she came across an alarming sight: a tall, bulky, almost monstrous Gem, with a scowl on her face and a huge battle axe in her hands, towering over none other than Rose Quartz. The pink Gem’s expression was obscured by shadows cast by the flames, but her manner was fierce, albeit exhausted as she struggled to remain standing and keep her steady hold on her iconic sword and shield. “You just think about the life you’ll have together after the war,” Pearl was in tears as she watched this brutal scene, her heart breaking at the mere thought of her beloved liege facing such a gruesome end. Which was why she was more than resolved to do everything in her power to put a stop to it. “And then you do it for her,” Without any hesitation at all, Pearl threw herself right in front of Rose as the Homeworld Gem raised her axe, her blade brandished in a bold attempt to stop it and protect the pink Gem from any harm, even at her own expense. “That’s how you know you can win!” As the Homeworld Gem’s axe smashed into Pearl’s sword, the holographic display abruptly disappeared into nothing more than a burst of sparkles in the night air, leaving all four of the kids completely in awe over what they had just witnessed. Even so, Pearl wasn’t finished yet as she
raced forward, her sword at the ready as she engaged a holo-Pearl in a brief skirmish, one that ultimately ended with her easily winning with both skill and grace, just as she always did. “You do it for her, that is to say, you’ll do it for them!”

Considering that their training was so consistent and so physically demanding, it was almost something of a miracle that neither Dipper nor Connie had worked themselves into exhaustion yet. Even so, they had both still gained their fair share of cuts and callouses over the past several days, ones that were getting harder and harder to avoid with each passing practice skirmish.

Connie cringed as she looked over her rough, scarred hand, knowing that trying to wield her blade with it being in such a dilapidated state would be a challenge. At the same time, Dipper was attempting to readjust the bandages covering his shoulder wound, only to little avail seeing as how he was trying to tend to the still rather sore injury all on his own. Fortunately for them both, Pearl soon stepped in, effervescent as ever as she relayed more wisdom upon her two advancing young pupils. “Deep down, you know you weren’t built for fighting,” she sang, pulling a fresh roll of gauze out of her gem before she began wrapping Connie’s calloused hands up for her. “But that doesn’t mean you’re not prepared to try.” As soon as she was done, the white Gem moved on to help Dipper, using the rest of her gauze to cover his exposed shoulder before nodding with pride over his persistence. “What they don’t know is your real advantage,” Pearl paused briefly as Steven and Mabel hurried over, bright smiles on their faces as they cheerfully offered Dipper and Connie a generous tray of snacks and juice they had prepared to help keep the pair energized during their training. Both of them were more than prepared to partake of these snacks too before Pearl cut in, her arms crossed as she staunchly reminded them that there was no time for breaks of any kind. “When you live for someone, you’re prepared to die!”

This dramatic lesson certainly seemed to hit its mark as Dipper and Connie did as she silently instructed and coldly passed Mabel and Steven’s snacks up, instead opting to intently soak in every word Pearl passed on to them. It was clear to see that the white Gem’s dedication to Rose had been endless, selfless and noble. And through this powerful example, both of her pupils were inspired to take after her in showing that same kind of boundless fidelity to Mabel and Steven. Based on everything Pearl had taught them thus far, this was the highest calling either of them could strive towards, the ultimate mission of both of their lifetimes, something that they both deeply and readily believed in as much as Pearl herself did. The white Gem had instructed them, time and time again throughout their training, that those they sought to protect were always to be put first, above anything and everything else, especially themselves. Which meant that for Connie, Steven had to be her number one priority while Mabel was Dipper’s, regardless of how much danger they might have to throw themselves into and how deadly things might eventually become.

However, needless to say that such self-sacrificial sentiments were quite disconcerting to Steven and Mabel themselves, especially as they both started to notice just how serious Connie and Dipper were taking Pearl’s teachings. As the days went by and the pair continued to progress in their sword pair skills, the white Gem noticeably stopped pulling any punches with them, to the point that any misstep usually resulted in injury. Fortunately, both Dipper and Connie were getting to be quite good, but even so, it still bothered Steven and Mabel every time they watched either of them take a hit while Pearl simply shrugged their cuts and bruises off and forced them to keep going. And while both of them were rather unnerved by how things were going, neither of them quite knew how to go about speaking up about it. After all, Pearl was quite invested in watching her pupils succeed, and her students themselves were growing strong and skillful under her tutelage. Indeed, there were benefits to these lessons, ones that went far beyond the expertise being gained. Because Steven could see that Connie had come to love the art she was learning; there was a
passion in her voice as whenever she spoke of it and a fire in her eyes every time she picked up her blade. This was something she wanted to do, Steven knew, and the last thing he ever wanted to do was to hold her back from something she shined so brightly in. At the same time, Mabel largely felt the same way about Dipper’s ongoing training, but for slightly different reasons. As distracted as he was with his sword fighting, he seemed to finally be making a steady emotional recovery from that traumatic puppet show, largely since he seemed to finally have a mostly constructive outlet to take his mind off of everything that had happened. And while his physical injuries still remained, even they seemed to be of little hinderance to him as he practiced the highly complex maneuvers and techniques Pearl demanded of him. So really, Mabel figured, what were a few lessons of implied self-depreciation when compared to all of the good this sword training was doing for Dipper? Certainly that was would prove to be a benefit to them all rather than yet another disaster to add to the ever-growing pile of disasters they had been through lately.

Wouldn’t it?

While the last thing Pearl wanted was for either of her students to become cocky and overconfident in their abilities, she was unable to deny that she was quite pleased with their shared rapid progression. Still, she recognized for as fast as they both were developing their skills, they still had a lot to learn if they ever wanted to truly come close to her level of expertise. But even so, if there was one thing the white Gem didn’t do, it was play favorites, which was why every time Connie received a word of praise, so did Dipper, and every time Dipper admonished, Connie was as well. Interestingly enough, Pearl didn’t seem too interested in teaching them to work off of each other or fight as a team; instead, she wanted them to be able to stand on their own on the battlefield, as that was a very common situation she had faced time and time again during the war. So instead, as they finally moved into advanced techniques, they once again found themselves fighting separate holo-Pearls once more, both of them calibrated to the most challenging, unforgiving battle settings yet. And as Dipper and Connie rushed forward, both of their blades boldly brandished to take their opponents head on, they both firmly reiterated everything Pearl had taught them thus far while also putting it all into skillful practice.

“Deep down, we know,” Connie began, her sword making the first strike against the holo-Pearls as a rapid succession of blows commenced. “That we’re only human-”

“True,” Pearl agreed, smiling somewhat as she watched Connie swiftly dodge a fierce, fast swing.

“But we know that we can draw our swords and fight!” Connie and Pearl sang in unison, and while he normally wouldn’t have, Dipper was so caught up in the gallant spirit of the moment that he found himself joining in.

“With our short existence,” he continued the song with apt verve as he lashed his blade out, outmaneuvering the holo-Pearl, which had almost managed to catch his arm in the process. “We can make a difference-”

“Yes! Excellent!” the white Gem exclaimed, more than proud to see both of her pupils completely adopting her altruistic, sacrificial mindset.

“We can be there for them!” Connie joined Dipper as they sang together while going in for their final strikes. Connie went high, preforming an impressive leap as she brought the tip of her blade down onto the unprepared holo-Pearl. At the same time, Dipper utilized a lower approach, swerving out of the path of the hologram’s blade before kicking its feet out from under it and knocking it down, allowing him to go in for a clean finishing blow. “We can be their knights!”
Pearl clasped her hands together brightly over their brazen victories, delighted to see that they had not only utilized every move and skill she had taught them but also had taken up a similar vow to the one she had made centuries ago. “We can do it for them,” Dipper and Connie sang as they crossed their blades in celebration of their triumph.

“You do it for her,” Pearl harmonized with them as she added her sword onto theirs. Still, she really didn’t let them rest for too long before summoning up two new holo-Pearls to battle. “Ok, now do that again.”

“Yes, ma’am!” both of her students eagerly agreed, wasting no time in taking the set of holograms on. As they battled their opponents, Steven and Mabel continued watching from the sidelines, just as they had been doing throughout this ongoing training, both of them growing more and more anxious about it all. Pearl’s insistence upon Dipper and Connie giving everything they had to give for their sakes certainly didn’t seem to be lightening up; if anything, the white Gem seemed to be enforcing this essential message to her pupils more and more with every lesson. Which was more than alarming, considering just how serious they both seemed to be taking it.

In almost no time at all, Dipper and Connie seamlessly defeated their respective holo-Pearls, and despite the fact that they were both a bit battle-weary and breathless, the white Gem called them over to join her as soon as they were done. “You do it for her,” Pearl began, respectfully bowing down to one knee before Steven and Mabel, her sword crossed over her heart and her expression devout and sincere. “And now you say-” Connie and Dipper followed her example, carrying out the same show of honor and reverence they preformed for their lieges at the end of every training session. A show that only made Steven and Mabel mutually feel all the more uncomfortable and guilty every time they saw it, especially as Dipper and Connie repeated the white Gem’s eternal, self-negating, almost frightening mantra yet again.

“We’ll do it for them.”

Nearly two weeks had passed since Connie and Dipper had started training with Pearl, and in that short span of time, they had both excelled from complete novices to near experts at an exponential rate. The white Gem’s teaching methods were very hands on and effective, adding onto just how enthusiastic and ardent the pair was to learn and creating a very fast-paced but practical lesson plan. Every day, their training would become more and more challenging, and every day, they both found ways to conquer these challenges using their newfound skills and their own innate wit and dexterity. There was hardly anything Pearl could throw at Dipper and Connie that they couldn’t eventually overcome, which was why she had resorted to a type of lesson that would hopefully serve to advance their skills even more.

“So far, you two have proven yourselves to be quite adept at fighting your way through my holo-Pearls,” Pearl began as she paced before her two patiently waiting students. “Which would reasonably equate to faceless, nameless enemies in a real battle, therefore making them relatively easy and consequence-less to take down. However, in such a real battle, you might not always be facing mere “nameless” enemies. There’s always, always a chance, no matter how small or outlandish, that you may someday find yourself standing against your own fellow soldiers. And if that day ever comes, then you both need to be ready to rise to the occasion, to protect them—” She motioned back towards Steven and Mabel, who both sat rigidly on the stands, their eyes wide as they overheard every alarming word Pearl was imparting to her students. “No matter what, against any obstacle that stands in your way, even if those obstacles are your most trusted friends and allies. Which is why today, instead of combatting mere holograms, you two are going to duel each
other."

"Wait… what?" Dipper spoke up, caught off guard by this command as him and Connie exchanged an uneasy glance.

"You want us to fight… each other?" Connie asked, clearly not too fond of the idea. After all, neither of them had ever utilized their skills on actual human opponents before; usually they just practiced with holo-Pearls or the much more experienced white Gem herself. With their abilities as sharp and honed as they were, there was no doubt that they’d be nearly evenly matched, but even so, there was always a chance that they could accidently hurt each other, a thought that equally unnerved them both.

"Yes; that’s what I just said, isn’t it?" Pearl crossed her arms caustically. "Now don’t worry; it’ll only be a friendly skirmish. The first one to be pinned down loses. You may begin whenever you’re both ready. And remember: don’t hold back on each other, because your enemies certainly won’t hold back on you."

Dipper and Connie looked to each other with relative uncertainty once again, but they were both quick to put their apprehension aside and dutifully do as their instructor said. As soon as they bowed to each other and took up their starting positions, their unexpected duel began, their swords clashing and bouncing off each other as they moved fast and smooth, even if it was clear they were pulling their blows a bit. As Pearl attentively supervised this match, Steven and Mabel observed it with unabridged worry, neither of them unable to deny how wrong it was to see two of their friends be openly encouraged to go after each other with deadly weapons like this. And while Steven didn’t particularly want to interrupt such a serious training session, Mabel had few less qualms about it as she suddenly rose to stand, knowing that enough was starting to become enough.

"Dipper, make sure to cover your openings!" Pearl called as her students continued battling. "Connie, remember not to ease up your grip! And both of you, please keep in that you’re supposed to stay moving at all times! A target in motion is a much harder target to hit!"

"Um… Pearl?"

"Yes?" Pearl only barely glanced over her shoulder at Mabel and Steven as they stood behind her, both of their expression quite fretful, though the white Gem hardly noticed. "Make it quick, you two. This duel is an integral step in Dipper and Connie’s training and I need to be able to focus on it to properly analyze their progress."

"Uh, yeah… that’s kinda the thing…" Mabel began, rubbing her arm awkwardly. "A-are you really sure Dipper and Connie should be out there beating each other up like that?"

"Well, first of all, they’re not simply ‘beating each other up’, Mabel,“ the white Gem remarked pointedly. "They’re utilizing highly advanced techniques to test their combat abilities against an opponent of similar skill."

"Uh, y-yeah, we got that…” Steven spoke up, averting eye contact with Pearl out of clear nervousness. "We’re just… not so sure if this is exactly… safe…"

"Safe?" Pearl scoffed somewhat harshly. "Steven, in an actual battle, ‘safety’ is not a commodity that either Connie or Dipper will have at their disposal. They have to be prepared to take down whatever foe crosses their path. Perhaps I should remind you both that all this isn’t a game; this is real, serious, tangible training to equip them with the skills necessary to stand on their own in the intense violence of an unforgiving war!"
“War? What war?!” Mabel asked, growing somewhat frustrated with the white Gem’s insistence upon such skewed morals.

“Any war!” the white Gem scowled as she turned to the pair hotly, heedless of Dipper and Connie still dueling behind her. “We can’t just take advantage of the idea that peaceful times like these will last forever! A threat could come upon us at literally any minute, something you both should know full well by now! And the more blades we have at the ready to stand against such threats, the better off we all are!”

“But Pearl,” Steven said, finally glancing up at his guardian himself with a woeful frown. “This is kinda getting… sort of intense… A-are you sure you’re not taking all of this sword fighting stuff… a bit too far?”

Pearl stopped short at this, taking in a sharp breath as her expression filled in with appalled anger. Even so, she said nothing further on the matter as she instead sharply clapped her hands, abruptly halting the duel as Dipper and Connie stopped, their blades still pressed together as they looked to their teacher in apt confusion. “That’s enough for today,” she said coldly, a somewhat bitter frown on her face as she looked down at Steven and Mabel, who both shrink back away from her slightly. “Apparently, somebody doesn’t approve of my training methods, so we’ll just have to call this one a draw.”

At this interruption, Dipper and Connie both turned to Steven and Mabel, the former showing annoyance in his expression while the latter only maintained a questioning glance at the anxious pair. Even so, they didn’t really pursue their concerns any further at the moment, seeing as how trying to do so with Pearl had only led to the confirmation that this situation was out of their control. They were only reminded of this fact as the white Gem reminded her pupils not to be late for tomorrow’s session, making it quite clear that she really had no intentions of stopping, or even reigning things back at all. She was going to continue imparting these lessons of self-denial and sacrifice, she was going to keep making them practice these devastating maneuvers on each other, she was going to continue enforcing this dangerous, destructive mindset upon them both. And the worst part was, they were both going to willingly continue soaking this mindset in until they had either gone off the deep end entirely of manic zeal, or until they made good on their vow to protect them until death.

Whichever came first.

“Ok, so you agree with me that this has seriously gotten out of hand right? Because this has seriously gotten out of hand,” Mabel frowned as she paced around the attic that night, freely relating her concerns to Steven over the phone. Fortunately for her, Dipper wasn’t there and he wouldn’t be for quite some time; she knew well that he had taken to spending nearly every waking moment he wasn’t training with Pearl and Connie practicing on his own. Of course, that wasn’t really something that exactly relieved Mabel in light of how aggressive things were getting, but still, for the moment, it worked for her.

“Y-yeah, it has…” Steven sighed, covering his eyes with his arm as he lay in bed restlessly. “When we convinced Pearl to teach Connie and Dipper sword fighting, I thought it was just gonna be a fun, one-time thing. But what its turned into is… a disaster…”

“It sure is,” Mabel agreed, so caught up in her worries that she didn’t even notice Waddles trailing behind her. “But it’s not like we can just… force them to stop with all these lessons and junk. They both really seem to be getting really, really good, and they’re both super into it!”
“Yeah, I mean, Connie’s so excited about all her training that its all she ever seems to talk about anymore!” Steven noted, though he wasn’t sure if this was really a good or a bad thing. “She seems like she’s really happy about all of it… I-I… I don’t know if I wanna be the one to take something she loves away from her like that…”

“I know what you mean…” Mabel pouted somewhat guiltily, glancing down to the floor. “Even though he kept telling everyone that he was ok, I could tell that for those first few days after the whole Bill thing, Dipper was really having a rough time. He wasn’t sleeping, he was barely eating, and he wouldn’t even smile or laugh about anything! But ever since he’s started sword fighting, it’s almost like he’s back to his old self! Y-you know, aside from the fact that the only thing he really thinks about anymore is training…”

“Yes, that’s just it, Mabel!” Steven sat up in bed with an exasperated huff. “They’re both going just as overboard with all this as Pearl is! I-I think… maybe… w-we need to say something to Dipper and Connie themselves…”

“Yeah, m-maybe…” Mabel halfheartedly assented, though really she wasn’t too fond of the idea of taking her brother’s very necessary coping mechanism away from him. “But what if they’re like Pearl and don’t listen to us?”

“Well, they need to!” Steven insisted. “If they keep going like they are, then they could really hurt themselves, or worse! We have to do something about this, and soon! B-before… before its too late.”

“Y-you’re right…” Mabel consented, wavering under the thought of seeing Dipper just as broken and miserable as he had been right after that ill-fated puppet show. “But how?”

“We can try tomorrow, before they go off with Pearl to the sky arena,” the young Gem suggested thoughtfully. “Maybe if we catch them early enough, we might be able to talk some sense into them. And if we can’t… well… w-we’ll just have to come up with something else then!”

“Yeah…” Mabel sighed softly, plopping down onto her bed as she stared at her brother’s empty one worriedly. “Well then, I-I guess I’ll see you tomorrow then…”

“Yep, see you tomorrow,” Steven nodded as firmly as he could before hanging up. Still, his confidence in their newfound plan diminished a moment later as he leaned back into bed, staring up at the ceiling listlessly. As much as he wanted to convince Connie and Dipper against the dangerous path Pearl had set them on, he still was quite nervous about going through with it.

Perhaps if all this sword fighting business had begun a few weeks ago, the young Gem wouldn’t have had as many qualms about speaking up about the whole thing, but things felt so different now. The invasion alone had already changed so much and had brought so many new fears to the surface for them all, but their struggle against Bill had only shaken the four of them up even more, in arguably even worse ways. Really, it only made sense that Connie and especially Dipper would want to learn some form of self-defense after they had all been so incredibly close to death. But the fact that such self-defense seemed to be pushing them both towards a potentially willing death was yet another alarming circumstance altogether.

And really, Steven couldn’t help but feel partially guilty for it all. Because he had been the one to bring up training Dipper and Connie to Pearl in the first place. Because he had let things get this far and this deadly. Because, like always, he had been the one to drag his friends into so much disaster and turmoil and pain. Into fights that weren’t theirs at all. Into burdens they should have never had to bear in the first place.
While Steven knew that him and Mabel were already conspiring to talk to Dipper and Connie tomorrow, the young Gem suddenly felt very compelled to get a head start on things. With a fretful frown, he grabbed his phone again, hesitantly dialing up Connie’s number and nervously holding his breath as he waited for her to answer.

“Hello?” Connie greeted briskly, lashing out the pencil she was using in place of her practice sword, since her mother certainly would never allow a weapon like that in their house.

“C-Connie?” Steven began, sitting up on his bed.

“Oh, hey, Steven!” Connie smiled, swinging her pencil out in a broad maneuver as she practiced on her own time. “It’s kinda late for you to be calling, isn’t it? I was just working on a few advanced techniques before bed. Tomorrow, Pearl’s having me and Dipper fight through an entire horde of holo-Pearls! Isn’t that exciting?”

“E-exciting, yeah…” the young Gem halfheartedly agreed. “Uh, Connie? I… well, I just wanted to talk to you about—”

“Hold that thought, Steven,” Connie cut him off, putting her phone aside for a moment so she could pull off a series of more physically involved moves. For a moment or two, the young Gem patiently waited to speak his peace, but as his anxiety began to rise, he found that he really wasn’t able to let it wait much longer.

“Connie? A-are you still there?”

“Yah!” Connie shouted, still engrossed in her practice as she carried out a forceful thrust.

“Oh, well, uh… ok…” Steven misinterpreted, taking in another deep breath before he spoke his piece. “Well, uh… This might sound a little… crazy, but me and Mabel were talking earlier and we… we think that you and Dipper and Pearl might be getting kinda… carried away with this whole sword fighting thing. I mean, you guys have been at this nonstop for almost two weeks now! I-I’m just saying that, m-maybe it might be time for you three to ease up on all this a bit? We just… I don’t want to see you get hurt. So… what do you say?”

“Ok, I’m ready now, Steven,” Connie said breathlessly as she picked her phone up again, revealing that she hadn’t heard a single word of his earnest appeal. “What did you wanna talk to me about?”

Unable to work up the nerve to repeat everything he had just said, Steven instead utilized his flight response and abruptly hung up without even sparing a word of farewell. Connie was somewhat surprised by this on the other line, but even so, she shrugged it off and threw herself right back into practicing. At the same time, Steven flopped back onto his bed, groaning in loud exasperation. He wanted to steer Connie away from this perilous vow, he really did, but it seemed as though every force of fate was conspiring against him on that regard. And yet, the biggest obstacle keeping him from revealing how he really felt was himself. The thought of trying to limit Connie, of keeping her from her full potential and holding her back from something she excelled so much at, was so unbearable to the young Gem that he could hardly stand it. There had to be a better way, but as far what that way really was, he had no idea. Really, the most he could now was just wait until to try and make his case again with Mabel tomorrow, in the hopes that both Connie and Dipper would listen.

Because if they didn’t, then there was no telling how all this would end up.
Mabel flinched as she heard the sound of a blade bouncing off of its target outside once more, her arms wrapped tightly around Waddles as she hugged him close to her chest. She hadn’t felt this low or conflicted since the immediate aftermath of the invasion when she had been trying to keep the truth hidden from Stan. And in a way, this situation was somewhat similar, only much more serious. Because this was about more than just trying to avoid upsetting her great uncle; this was about trying to spare her brother from any more pain than he had already suffered through.

And if she was completely honest with herself, Mabel knew that all that the fault for all that pain rested solely on her shoulders. Even outside of Dipper’s concerning resolve to pick up sword fighting with the supposed intent of keeping her safe, she knew what this all went back to and it was certainly that ridiculous puppet show of hers and her refusal to turn away from it for so much as a second to help him when he needed her most. The truth of it was, she had failed him, abandoned him and put him in a desperate spot that had left him bloodied and broken and nearly ended up costing him his life. And now, he was clearly compensating for the mistake she had made by putting everything he had left into forcing himself to become stronger, pushing himself past his limits, preparing himself to die if it meant keeping her safe.

And Mabel knew she only had herself to blame for every single part of it all.

Her guilt-ridden thoughts were soon interrupted as the attic door started to open, and for a moment, Mabel held her breath at the possibility that Dipper actually intended on giving himself a much needed break. However, her hopes were soon dashed when Stan poked his head into the room instead. “Hey!” the conman exclaimed with an impatient scowl. “Where the heck is your brother?! Every night for the past week, whenever I’ve come up here to check on you two runts, he’s been completely MIA! He’s not out making friends with weird water women again, is he?”

“Uh, n-no… he… h-he’s just—” Mabel frowned as she sat up, unsure of what to really say. Very early on into his training, Dipper had urged her to promise to agree to not say a word about it to Stan, under the fear that the conman would make him stop such a potentially dangerous pursuit. And at first, this wasn’t really a promise Mabel had too many qualms with keeping, until now. While she hated the idea of breaking a vow to her brother like this, she knew that Stan might perhaps be her only chance at getting Dipper to recant from his sacrificial resolve. “Actually, Grunkle Stan, Dipper’s outside practicing,” she started again, her expression determined and hopeful. “He’s been learning how to sword fight from Pearl, but—”

“Whoa, what?” Stan cut in, his eyebrows raised in surprise. “Dipper’s learning how to sword fight? Short, sweaty, noodle arm, can barely even lift a box of snow globes, whines about a paper cut for two days Dipper? Are you sure you’re talking about our Dipper here and not some other one?”

“No, it’s true, Grunkle Stan!” Mabel reiterated with more sincerity. “He’s been at it for the past two weeks, a-and he’s getting really good, but Pearl’s been teaching him all this really crazy, self-sacrificy stuff, and… I’m just not so sure it’s a good idea for him to keep at it…”

“Kid, are you kidding me?” Stan scoffed incredulously, an almost proud grin spreading across his face. “Sounds to me like this is a great idea! Learning some kind of self defense like that is exactly the sorta thing Dipper needs!”

“W-what?” Mabel gaped, knowing that such open support had been the last thing she had been expecting from the conman.

“Yeah, I mean, have you seen how down he’s been lately? Its about time the kid got his head out of those depressing clouds of his and back into the game! And sure, sword fighting may not as be as manly as something like boxing, at least its something! I hate to say it, but I’m actually kinda proud of him for stepping up and fighting back, just like I always hoped he would.”
“Yeah, but Grunkle Stan, Pearl’s been-”

“And he’s learning all this from Pearl, of all people, who could’ve guessed!” Stan interrupted Mabel, not even noticing her clear worried expression. “I knew she had a knack for playing with those glorified knives, but I never pegged her as the kind to teach a 12 year old how to use ’em! Guess I owe her a bit of credit too… even though I really hate to say that.”

“Grunkle Stan!”

“Geez, kid, what?!” the conman asked, looking to his distraught niece caustically. “Can’t ya see I’m trying to have a rare moment of appreciate for two total nerds over here? What’s so important that you gotta tell me about it right now?”

“Uh, well, I… I-I, um…” Mabel hesitated, quickly realizing that her plan was crashing and burning fast. As excited as Stan seemed to be about Dipper’s training after only having just heard about it, there really wasn’t much of a chance that she’d be able to convince him to force him to stop now. Really, when it came right down to it, Mabel realized that the only ones who dissented to this ongoing sword training amidst a sea of blinded support were her and Steven. And as much as she hoped it wasn’t true, chances were that it was going to stay like that. “Uh… Oops! Guess I forgot! I-I mean, it is kinda late, so I should probably be getting to bed anyway. Goodnight, Grunkle Stan!”

“O-oh!, well, I-” Stan cut himself off in surprise as Mabel abruptly curled up into her covers, turning over as she pretended to fall right asleep. “Goodnight, I guess…” While somewhat confused by her very terse, odd behavior, the conman simply shrugged it off as turned off the attic light, leaving his niece alone to her troubling thoughts once again.

As soon as she was sure Stan was gone, Mabel finally let out the long, disappointed sigh she had been holding back. She should have known that asking the conman for help wouldn’t have worked, and honestly, she shouldn’t have even bothered to rely on such an easy way out to begin with. This was her problem, one that she had started and one she ultimately had to deal with. But unfortunately, she knew that she couldn’t deal with it by simply going back in time and undo everything selfish wrong she had done, as much as she wanted to. She couldn’t take back her foolish claim that her meager attempts at impressing some shallow boy were more important than Dipper’s selfless resolve to save Lapis. She couldn’t rush in and stop him from making that last-ditch deal with Bill, one that had left so much agony and ruin in its wake. She couldn’t erase his injuries or free him from his pain, inside and out. She couldn’t even work up the nerve to voice her concerns about the potential dangers of his ongoing training to him. As far as she was concerned, she could do nothing, despite how she wanted to do everything to fix the massive mess she had made.

Still though, she was definitely torn on that last matter more than anything else. Ever since Dipper had taken up sword fighting, Mabel had been able to clearly see that his confidence had returned, his spirits had been lifted, and his mind seemingly taken off of dread-fueled thoughts of toxic fusions and sadistic demons. For the first time in weeks, he had an outlet, something to put his otherwise listless energy into and something to keep him from falling too far into dejection and despair. Dipper needed this, Mabel knew, or at least something like this, lest he merely continue retreating inward into his own grief and trauma until he couldn’t be reached at all.

But at the same time, his sword training was far from completely beneficial. Even disregarding Pearl’s alarming lessons on self-sacrifice and abnegation, lessons that Dipper seemed to very much be taking to heart, he was also throwing himself into his training hard and heavy. Even now, he was outside, practicing his skills on the makeshift dummies and targets he had set up near the
woods, just as he had been doing every night for the past week. It was starting to becoming increasingly clear to Mabel that her brother’s coping mechanism was also starting to turn into an all-out obsession, one that was robbing him of sleep, sociability, and safety.

And yet… she knew she couldn’t force him to leave this risky obsession behind, at least not with a clear conscious. After all, hadn’t her refusal to support her brother’s endeavors inevitably led to his possession and near-end at Bill’s hands? Certainly, the least she could do to make everything up to Dipper after her former negligence and selfishness was to give him all the encouragement he deserved. Which meant that if he really wanted to devote every part of himself to fighting to protect her, then she was really in no place to object to that.

Was she?

No, she wasn’t, she staunchly reminded herself, because that was only a luxury that would have been afforded to her this whole disaster hadn’t been entirely her fault in the first place. But this was her fault, something that she was starkly reminded of every time she heard the distant clamor of her brother’s sword just outside her window. And the more she sat and stewed in silence and guilt, listening to that sword hit its mark again, and again, and again, the more she was compelled to at the very least go and check on him, just to make sure he was alright. After all, if she couldn’t actually steer him off this depreciating path, the very least she could do was try to ensure his safety while he was on it.

So, taking care to be as discreet as possible, Mabel slipped out of the attic and headed downstairs, evading detection from Stan, wherever he was, as she emerged into the warm night air. The small practice course Dipper had set up with Soos’ assistance lay on the edge of the shack’s property line, far enough away from the building itself that Mabel had to resort to tucking away behind trees as not to be seen. And despite her immense earlier worry, the closer she got to her brother, the more her dread started to lift away into pride as she watched him exercise his rather impressive skills.

Though he only had the light of a small lantern to see by, Dipper still managed to land heavy, even blows on the wooden dummy before him with deft and ease. His timing was excellent and his force as fierce as the almost angry look on his face as he slashed and hacked away at his target repeatedly. Mabel had to admit that his progression was amazing, almost miraculous even; in just two short weeks, he had gone from barely even knowing how to hold a sword right to wielding one like an expert. Clearly, he had found his element, one that he excelled and thrived in, and one that would serve as an asset to him far into the future. And perhaps, Mabel thought, there really wasn’t that much of a problem with that after all; true, the severe mantra Pearl passed on was disconcerting, but the skills she taught were without compare. Maybe in time, once their lessons had finally reached their natural end, such conditioning would fade away in time, leaving only those skills and the benefits connected to them behind. And then, perhaps things could finally go back to normal.

Except for no, they wouldn’t.

For as Mabel continued watching Dipper from afar, her eyes lit up with excitement as he boldly thrust his blade forward with an enraged shout, its tip digging deeply and precisely into the wood target in front of him. The moment it hit its mark, however, his battle cry quickly shifted into an unmistakable cry of agony as his hand flew away from his sword and went to grip his right eye instead. Likewise, he hurriedly wrapped his free arm around his torso almost desperately as he began to weakly collapse to his knees, his pained cry still echoing through the trees as Mabel let out a sharp gasp of fear in response to it. Without sparing a second thought about remaining hidden, she rushed forward from the trees, this time refusing to stand by the sidelines as her brother suffered once again.
“Dipper!” Mabel cried fretfully, dropping down to her knees as she reached him and placed a steadying hand on his shoulder.

“M-Mabel!?” Dipper glanced up to her in apt alarm, his hand still pressed tightly against his eye as he struggled to stand once more, but the unbearable pain rushing through his broken ribcage hindered him entirely. “W-what are you doing out here?”

“Who cares!?” Mabel shook her head, rife with worry as she took in the anguish written all over her brother’s face, despite his best attempts at hiding it. “What matters right now is what you’re doing out here! What happened? What hurts?! Is it that cut on your side? Your shoulder? It can’t be the black eye, that’s already healed up by now and—”

“It’s none of those,” Dipper cut in, already quite exasperated as he glanced away from her, flustered. “I-I’m fine, Mabel, really. I guess I just pushed myself too far for a minute there, but I’ll be ok in a second. So just… go back inside and go to sleep, ok?”

“No, not ok,” Mabel replied, her voice so quiet that it was almost inaudible. Her tone grew even more shaken as she finally noticed the bright drop of red slip out from under the hand Dipper was covering half his face up with. A cover that was clearly meant to block out more than just mere pain. “Dipper… let me see your eye.”

Dipper flinched at this request, his visible eye growing wide with obvious dread and guilt as he tersely shook his head. “No, Mabel, I already told you, I’m ok! You don’t need to—”

“If you’re so ‘ok’, then show me your eye!” Mabel snapped with unabridged frustration in her tone. Frustration that was finally enough to get Dipper to slowly, begrudgingly comply as he let out a defeated sigh and slowly moved his hand, allowing Mabel to see something that practically made her heart freeze with fear.

His eye was bleeding; there was simply no other way to describe it. The warning red liquid streamed down his cheek like a teardrop, almost like he was crying it. And really, that wasn’t too far of a stretch as it twitched with clear pain, his other eye starting to well up with actual tears as he looked to her in nothing less than absolute shame over this secret he had been harboring for so long now.

“Oh… Dipper…” Mabel whispered, gingerly reaching up a hand to help him, though she was quick to retract it. “W-what happened? Did… did you accidentally cut yourself or something?”

Dipper simply let out a bitter laugh at this, one that turned into a small, pained cry as he tried wiping some of the blood off his face, though it still kept coming nonetheless. “I wish it was that simple…” he sighed morosely, knowing that he couldn’t really keep the truth hidden any longer. “T-this… this has been happening almost every night since… s-since Bill—y-you… you know…”

“P-possessed you?” Mabel softly filled in the blank as Dipper tersely nodded, his hands folded into tight, trembling fists in his lap.

“A-at first, I didn’t really understand why my eye was just… randomly bleeding every night. Steven had mentioned something about how Bill had tried to threaten him to keep quiet by a-almost… h-he… he almost… he was going t-to…”

“Dipper…” Mabel’s eyes grew wide with alarm as her brother trailed off again, shuddering as he wrapped his arms around himself and tried his hardest to chase away the remnant terror of things long passed but still far from over. “Dipper, c-come on,” she urged as best as she knew how, gripping his shoulders as she tried to snap him out of it. “B-Bill’s gone, you’re ok! Just… just talk
“He was going to cut my eye out!” Dipper choked out suddenly, hating how helpless he was to stop this show of complete and utter weakness and fear from leaking through his mask of indifference. “B-but… but he didn’t, obviously, and I-I just thought he had hurt it some other way, but no… t-this is something different. I was looking through the journal and… I found a bit that talked about side effects of being possessed by Bill a-and… this is one of them…”

“One of them?” Mabel asked waveringly. “W-what are the others?”

“I… don’t really know…” Dipper shook his head. “The whole eye-bleeding thing was the only one the journal really mentioned. Good news is that its only supposed to last a few weeks after… a-after being possessed, so it should stop any day now…”

Mabel initially said moment upon hearing this, mostly since she was rather amazed at both how calm and how shaken her brother seemed to be over such a serious matter like this. But even so, the idea of him just suffering in silence like this bothered her immensely. Clearly, he was anything but fine if he was bleeding from his eye, if he was still going into a near panic attack every time he so much as thought about the dream demon who had viciously deceived him, if he was still trying so hard just to keep it all together, even though it seemed like he was about to break at literally any moment. “D-Dipper… we… we have to tell Grunkle Stan about this. O-or get Steven to heal you, or do something to help you-”

“No,” Dipper cut her off, his manner suddenly turning quite cold. “No, we don’t, Mabel! You don’t understand that this is-”

“No, I think I do understand, bro-bro,” Mabel retorted just as harshly. “I understand that you’re still hurt really badly, and that you’re trying to make it all go away with all this sword fighting stuff. But that’s not gonna make you feel better about any of this and you know its not! If you keep training as hard as you are, you’re only gonna end up hurting yourself even more! That’s why you have to stop being so dumb and just let yourself heal already, before things get any worse!”

“Stop? Stop?! Are you kidding me, Mabel?!” Dipper scoffed as he falteringly attempted to pick himself up off the ground. “I can’t stop sword fighting now, not after I’ve learned so much! What would Pearl say if I just gave up and turned my back on literally everything she’s taught me and Connie so far?!”

“Well, what would she say if she found out that you’re still badly hurt?!” Mabel shot back fiercely. “Because that’s exactly what I’m gonna tell her tomorrow before your next training session! Then you’ll have to stop sword fighting because she’ll make you!”

“Whatever,” Dipper crossed his arms, not phased by this attempt at reasoning. “Pearl isn’t gonna make me stop because she already knows about all of this. Well, everything except for the eye-bleeding that is. But either way, she doesn’t care.”

“W-what?”

“She found out pretty much the first time the cut on my shoulder tore up again during training. And you know what she told me? That she was proud of me for fighting through my physical injuries and not letting them hold me back, because that’s what a real soldier does.”

“Oh for crying out loud!” Mabel practically shouted in frustration as she rose to stand herself. “Dipper, you’re not a soldier! You’re my brother! And its time you started acting like you were instead of spending all your time swinging a stupid old sword around!”
“It’s not stupid!” Dipper protested crossly as he ripped his sword out of the target he had left it in. “It’s really important! For all you know, me learning how to sword fight could end up saving both our lives someday!”

“Or it could end up with you in the hospital, which is where you should have gone after you got your body back instead of you being stubborn just like you always are!” Mabel shouted, her hands curled into tight fists at her sides. “Just admit it already! You’re pushing yourself way too hard and you need to step back from all of this and chill for a change instead of breaking the promise you made to me and going way overboard, because that’s exactly what you’re doing!"

“Ugh, that dumb promise doesn’t matter anymore!” Dipper countered, every bit as incensed as his sister was as he firmly remembered everything Pearl had taught him about what his resolve should be. “What matters is that I can protect you now! I can protect all of us! I could keep something like what happened with Bill from ever happening again! Who knows? M-maybe I could even use everything I’ve learned to finally save Lapis somehow!”

“Oh, yeah, because I can so see you standing up to huge, crazy-mad Malachite with nothing but some dinky little sword to protect you,” Mabel scoffed, letting her severe aggravation with her brother speak for her. “Cause that’ll work just great and you totally would end up being smashed to an angry little pulp.”

For a moment, Dipper was perfectly silent at such a remark, far too enraged to even think of anything to say in response to such callous teasing. But when he did speak again, his voice was quiet and bitter enough to make Mabel stiffen at just how upset he clearly was. “I thought you said you were with me on this.”

“I-I… I was…” her teasing manner completely dissipated into guilt as she remembered just where her opposing him had lead last time. But even so, she couldn’t allow herself to be controlled by her guilt; not this time. “I was with you on this, Dipper. Until you started acting all crazy and obsessive over it!”

“I’m not crazy or obsessed!” Dipper argued petulantly. “You just don’t get it, do you? You think that all this is about me trying to distract myself or prove myself or something, but it’s not. You heard what Pearl taught us just as much as I did: that there’s only one thing I’m supposed to be fighting for and that thing is standing right in front of me! Don’t you see, Mabel? I’m doing all of this for you!”

“Are you, Dipper?” Mabel asked, glaring at him almost piercingly as she asked the very last question he had wanted to hear. “Or are you doing this for you?!!”

Dipper was quick to look away from Mabel upon hearing this, almost as if this accusation had wounded him, and in a sense, it had. Because there was no way he could possibly tell her the truth. That she was right, that a very large part of his sword training motivation was centered around his own feelings rather than hers. That it was the only thing he really had to cling to now in the aftermath of nearly losing everything, including his own body, that made him truly feel like he had some semblance of control again. That it made him feel empowered and confident in ways he hadn’t felt since that hand ship had first appeared in the skies above Gravity Falls. That it washed away the despair, emptiness, helplessness he had been miserably drowning in for weeks now. That it chased away the nightmares filled with massive hostile fusions and sadistic dream demons and instead gave him something to believe in again, something to hope for again, something to fight for again. Something that he refused to give up, no matter how much Mabel wanted him to.

Still, that didn’t mean she wasn’t going to try.
“Dipper… y-you… you can’t keep doing this to yourself…” she implored, her anger gone and replaced with sincere worry as her voice went soft. “I-I won’t let you…”

“Oh yeah?” Dipper asked, his tone surprisingly not challenging but morose and exhausted instead. “And why not?”

“B-because…” Mabel began, taking in a deep, resolved breath as she slowly pulled a piece of crumpled up paper out, looking to it guiltily as she smoothed it out and handed it over to him and hoping that it would somehow work. “Because of this…”

Dipper frowned in confusion as he took the page, initially having a hard time making out the messy script in the low lighting. “What is…” he trailed off as he finally made out exactly what the note said, his breath catching in a soft, terrified gasp as he silently read every horrific word the dream demon had wrote while inhabiting his body.

“Note to self: possessing people is hilarious!” the note began and Dipper could almost hear Bill’s sadistically cheerful voice peak through every word he read. “To think of all the sensations I’ve been missing out on—burning, stabbing, drowning, bone-breaking; it’s like a buffet tray of fun! But the funniest part’s gotta be the horrified look on Rosebud’s face every time I so much as land a bruise I land on Pine Tree! The kid was so easy to blackmail into staying quiet about all this that I barely even had to lift a finger! I can’t wait to see how much he’ll freak out after I destroy that journal and give this body its grand finale by throwing it off the water tower! Best of all, people will just think Pine Tree lost his mind while his mental form wanders in the mindscape forever! Want to join him, Shooting Star?”

Mabel apprehensively bit her lip as she watched Dipper finish reading the note, his expression largely unreadable as it all soaked in for him. For a moment, she briefly regretted showing that dreaded letter to him at all, but she knew that she couldn’t have kept it hidden from him forever. After all, the truth would have eventually found its way through somehow, just like it always seemed to do. “I-I found that on the floor of Stan’s car when we were on our way back from the puppet show…” she spoke up quietly, averting his gaze out of shame. “I didn’t want to show it to you at first because you were just… so miserable and so beaten up over everything that happened that I didn’t want it to make things any worse than they already were. But… y-you deserve to know just how close things were to getting really, really bad. Dipper… Bill, h-he… he was going to kill you if he had gotten that journal… And that’s why you can’t keep this sword fighting thing up. Y-you almost died because of me before… I don’t know what I’d do I-if you actually did…”

Despite the fact that Mabel was finally starting to tear up, Dipper’s expression remained mostly neutral and cold as he looked between her and the crinkled page in his hands, almost as if he didn’t know how to react to any of it. There was no denying that every word of the letter Bill had wrote chilled him to the bone, but he was tired of letting that blind terror show on the surface, tired of letting his fear rule him and tired of arguing with himself over whether or not the path he had chosen to take was the right one. But even if he wasn’t taking the right path, there was no turning back from it now. “Mabel, did you read this?” he asked almost rhetorically.

“Of course, I did…” Mabel frowned in confusion. “I’ve read it a bunch of times since I found it. Why?”

“No, I mean did you read this?” Dipper asked again, his tone a bit more serious as he held the letter up and pointed to its ominous final line: “Want to join him, Shooting Star?”

“Y-yeah…” Mabel nodded, anxiously rubbing her arms as she thought of the implications of such a dark question.
“You know what this says to me?” Dipper scowled as he looked to the note again. “It says that when Bill was finished with me, he was going to try to do the same thing to you. And if he had then I-I… I wouldn’t have… There would have been n-nothing I could have done to…” He sighed sharply, forcing his building emotions away as he roughly balled the note up and tossed it down to the ground before reclaiming his sword. “I wouldn’t have been able to do anything to stop it. And that’s exactly why I have to do this. For you.”

“B-but… but Dipper, you can’t-”

“We’re done talking about this, Mabel,” Dipper staunchly interrupted as he began practicing right here he had left off, by thoughtlessly slashing away at his target once more. “Go inside.”

“Please, Dipper,” Mabel attempted once more, to the point that she was practically pleading with him. “This needs to stop. You have to ease up or get some help, or something-”

“I said,” Dipper cut her off once more, his expression harsh and unforgiving as he rammed his blade into the side of his target brutally. “We’re done!”

Mabel flinched, both out of fear and disappointment as she realized that her earnest, desperate appeals had failed to derail him completely. Because even though he was clearly still hurting so much, inside and out, he wasn’t going to stop this dangerous pursuit, he wasn’t going to give himself the chance to heal that he really needed, he wasn’t going to get better, not like this. And as much as she might try to convince him to give this up and find a different way, he clearly had no intentions of listening to any such reasoning. He was just going to keep throwing himself into his training, sparing thoughts for nothing else as he tried to distract himself from his own pain and failures in ways that simply wouldn’t work in the long run. And really, there was nothing she could do to stop that.

And so, knowing that she wasn’t going to get anywhere on her own, Mabel simply sighed dejectedly as she turned and began to slowly retreat back towards the shack. Still, she did spare one finally glace over her shoulder at Dipper, her heart sinking as she realized that the distance between them suddenly felt far greater than just a few mere feet.

“W-wait… really?!” Steven asked in alarm as he glanced up from the book he had been reading: How To Talk To People. He had already been quite anxious about confronting Connie and Dipper even as early as the previous night, but now, the next day, as Mabel relayed to him everything that had happened just a few hours ago, his worry increased tenfold. “H-he… he was bleeding… from his eye?!”

“Yeah,” Mabel nodded gravely as she paced around the temple den. “He said it was some ‘side effect’ of Bill possessing him and that’ll stop in a few days, but who cares?! Dipper’s still really hurt and the last thing he needs is to be pushing himself so hard with all this training! But he basically just told me that he’s not gonna stop it, no matter how hard I try to convince him too! And I have a feeling that Connie will be the exact same way, all because Pearl keeps drilling those crazy ideas about how they have to give up everything to protect us into their heads!”

“Well… we still have to try!” Steven exclaimed, though his resolve was rather shaky. “This has gotten really serious and really bad, and if something doesn’t change soon, then they’ll-”

“Hey, Steven! Hey, Mabel!” Connie greeted warmly as she entered the house, dressed and ready to train for the day. Dipper entered much more sullenly behind her, only briefly making eye contact
with Mabel before bitterly glancing away, showing that he was still rather sour over what had transpired between them the previous night. But even so, Steven and Mabel exchanged an anxious glance as Dipper and Connie headed over towards the warp pad, knowing that their chance was either now or never.

“Connie! Dipper! Wait up!” Steven exclaimed, hopping up from his seat as him and Mabel hurried after them. “W-we need to talk to you guys for a second?”

“Sure, what’s up?” Connie asked, turning towards them curiously.

“Hold up, Connie,” Dipper cut in much more skeptically as he looked between the pair. “This isn’t about what I think its about… is it, Mabel?”

“I-I… I don’t-” Mabel’s nervous buffering was suddenly interrupted as the temple gate slid open, cutting right through the conversation. Pearl stepped out with a broad, relaxed smile, her hands held behind her back as she addressed her two pupils before her.

“Ah! You’re both right on time, as usual,” she remarked, already stepping up onto the warp pad. “Dipper, Connie, come along. We have a lot of important training to do.”

The pair both staunchly nodded as they joined her on the pad, however, before they could departed, Steven and Mabel made one final attempt at trying to break through to them. “Pearl, wait, we need to-” the young Gem tried, but before he could get any further the white Gem interjected again.

“Oh, don’t worry, you two,” Pearl said with presumptuous confidence. “You don’t need to apologize for yesterday. Still, I’m glad to see that you both realized your concerns were completely unfounded. Dipper and Connie are making great strides; they’re going to assets to you, Steven. O-oh, and you too, Mabel.”

Before either of them could say another word, the white Gem activated the warp pad, whisking her two passionate students away with her and leaving Steven and Mabel behind in their shared worry. Both of them shared a sad sigh as they sat against the warp pad, wanting to follow after the trio but knowing that doing so would only be futile in the end. “What are we gonna do?” Mabel asked morosely, though before Steven could try to supply an answer, the temple gate opened once again.

“Ha! Wow, Garnet!” Amethyst let out a hearty laugh as she emerged from her room, Garnet exiting right after with a wry smirk on her face. “That was the funniest thing I’ve ever heard!”

“Garnet: master of comedy,” the Gem leader joked, a hint of amusement in her otherwise deadpan tone. The pair of Gems stopped short however as they made it to the warp pad and noticed the downtrodden pair propped up against it.

“Yo, Steven, Mabel,” Amethyst greeted, casually at first before her manner turned playfully fierce. “Why are you two sitting there all sad like that?!”

“W-well…” Steven began tentatively, though him and Mabel silently and simultaneously agreed that there was really no harm in voicing their concerns to Garnet and Amethyst. If anything, perhaps there was a chance they could led their aid, or at the very least, their advice in this dire matter. “Connie and Dipper have been taking sword fighting lessons from Pearl, but its starting to get way too serious. She wants them to do all of this dangerous stuff for us, and when we tried to talk to her about it, she wouldn’t listen!”

“Yeah, and she’s totally ok with letting Dipper train, even though he’s still hurt from what happened the other week!” Mabel added just as intently, not noticing as Garnet and Amethyst
exchanged a concerned, yet knowing glance.

“That makes sense,” the Gem leader spoke up, adjusting her shades.

“W-what do you mean?” Steven asked, confused.

Garnet let out a small sigh as she sat down on the edge of the warp pad, her tone still quite even as she began to explain. “Back during the war, Pearl took pride in risking her destruction for Rose Quartz. She put her over *everything*; over logic, over consequence, even her own life. Nothing else mattered to her as long as she was able to protect Rose. And because of that resolve, she nearly met her end countless times, with each sacrifice being more agonizing for her than the last.”

As Garnet detailed this alarming news, the only thing either Steven or Mabel could imagine was exactly what Pearl had shown all of them a few days ago: the holographic depiction of that fierce, fiery battle. Over and over, they pictured the white Gem boldly throwing herself in front of Rose, her sword at the ready to defend, only for her body to take each brutal blow instead. No matter how many times she came back, each one would result in her retreating into her Gem in defeat, all as Rose watched on with an immense amount of concern for Pearl’s complete lack of self-regard. However, as the last repetition of self-sacrifice played out, the white Gem was suddenly replaced with both Dipper and Connie, both of whom leapt forward, swords brandished to protect Mabel and Steven before their frightening imagination starkly cut out. But even so it was effective enough to do more than just shake the pair up with newfound terror as their worst fears were confirmed. Pearl wasn’t just teaching Dipper and Connie how to sword fight.

She was teaching them how to *die*.

“Uh… are you guys ok?” Amethyst asked upon noticing the unified look of paled shock on Steven and Mabel’s faces.

“W-we… have to go do something!” Steven exclaimed stiffly, rushing to pull Mabel up onto the warp pad along with him. “Thanks for telling us all that, bye!” he quickly shouted to Amethyst and Garnet before the pair warped away, both of them very mindful of their shared mission, one that could have very real, very deadly repercussions if they failed at it again.

Upon arriving to the sky arena, Steven and Mabel wasted no time, knowing that there was none to waste in the first place. Both of them knew that they had to stop these perilous sword fighting lessons, and even though neither of them were exactly how they were going to do that, they were still resolved to do whatever they could. Before what were only mere lessons turned into two cases of actual martyrdom.

As they reached the entrance of the arena, the pair stopped short, freezing in apt fear as they overheard Pearl impart yet another depreciating lesson to her pupils. “Connie, Dipper, remember,” she began pointedly as her students listened intently. “In the heat of battle, Steven and Mabel are what matter. You don’t matter.”

“We don’t matter,” Connie and Dipper repeated in dutiful unison, both of them firmly believing exactly that. Needless to say that Steven and Mabel’s alarm spiked high as they heard this however, which is why they both rushed forward down the long flight of stairs towards the center of the arena.

“Good,” Pearl nodded in approval before she spread her arms out wide, her gem glowing as she
“Now… let us begin!” All at once, a mass of thick, fluffy white clouds converged upon the arena from above, swirling and coalescing together to create a seemingly endless sea of incredibly dense fog, a sea that Steven and Mabel found themselves adrift in as they began their search for Dipper and Connie. Even though they were obscured from view, the pair could hear the clatter of them fiercely combatting what they assumed to be holo-Pearls somewhere in the distance, if their sword strikes and loud battle cries were anything to go off of. Just another reminder that they needed to put an end to such dangerous happenings as quickly as possible.

“Connie! Dipper! Where are you guys?!” Steven called out amidst the din of the ongoing battle as him and Mabel stumbled around in the heavy veil of fog. The two of them essentially had to stay standing right next to each other as not to get separated amidst all of the clouds, but even so, they didn’t stop frantically searching for Dipper and Connie, even as the sounds of ongoing battle drew closer.

“Dipper!” Mabel shouted as loud as she could, her heart racing in her chest as she remembered their argument last night. “Connie! Could you guys maybe, y-you know, stop sword fighting so we could talk to you two?! Just for a sec?”

Steven was about to make another attempt at calling out to the pair, but before he could, a holo-Pearl happened to step out of the fog just a few feet away, a sharp blade held firmly in its grasp. And it wasn’t the only one; three other holograms followed suit, all of them surrounding Steven and Mabel with their rigid stances, blank, empty eyes, and deadly weapons held aloft. “Uh, h-hi, everyone…” the young Gem greeted nervously as him and Mabel attempted to back up, only to end up backing into each other, leaving them with nowhere to really go. “Y-you guys wouldn’t have happened to see Connie or Dipper… h-have you?”

None of the holo-Pearls responded, but instead, their eyes all simultaneously turned angry red as they encroached closer upon the two frightened, unarmed kids, their swords raised high in preparation for a deadly coordinated attack. “Unregistered combatants detected!” the holograms all declared in unison, though before any of them could strike, the first of them to appear was abruptly impaled by another blade from behind. As the first holo-Pearl disappeared, two of the other ones were swiftly taken down by fast, successive strikes, leaving only one left to try and bring its blade down on Steven and Connie. Its attempt was instantly halted however by Connie, who was quick to wedge her sword in its path and push it away before skillfully before cutting it down without missing a beat.

“Connie!” Steven cried in relief, though it was clear her attention was still elsewhere.

“You ok over there, Dipper?” she called over to her fellow student, who had just finished kicking away the two fallen sabers of the holo-Pearls he had taken out.

“I would be,” he remarked crossly, glaring over at Steven and Mabel. “If somebody would just stay out of this already and let us train already!”

“But Dipper-” Mabel ventured, though Connie accidently ended up cutting her off.

“Steven, Mabel, what are you guys doing out here?” she asked, raising a confused eyebrow.

“C-Connie!” Steven exclaimed, his tone earnest and almost pleading as he made his appeal. “I… I tried to tell you this on the phone last night, but even if you had heard me, what I wanted to say wasn’t… really what I wanted to say.”

“Then… what did you want to say?” Connie asked, still not following at all.
“I-I wanted to say… I don’t want you to do this anymore!” Steven finally professed, being completely open about it this time. “Either of you! At least not alone! You guys might think that you have to be ready to fight for us, but you don’t. We can all fight for each other, just like we’ve always done before!”

“Ugh, seriously? You too, Steven?!” Dipper groaned in angry exasperation. “How do you guys still not get it yet!? The only reason we’re learning how to fight in the first place is so we can keep you two safe!”

“Dipper’s right,” Connie nodded in agreement, though her manner was much less vitriolic and much more inspired. “Steven, I understand now! Your legacy, your destiny, you are everything! And I… I am nothing. But I can do this for you! I can give you my service! We both can!”

“No!” Steven shook his head adamantly. “I don’t want you too!”

“A-and neither do I!” Mabel interjected just as desperately.

“It doesn’t matter what you guys want,” Dipper concluded harshly, his grip on his sword tightening. “What matters is that this is what you guys need! Like I told you last night, Mabel, we’re doing this for you!”

At that very moment, Dipper lashed out with his blade, spinning around and cleanly impaling the holo-Pearl that had attempted a sneak attack on the group. At the same time, Connie raised her guard once again, holding her sword out in a defensive stance as she looked for any further openings as the heated argument continued. “We need to be able to protect you!” she chastised, glaring over her shoulder at the pair.

“But if you’re the ones protecting us…” Steven began, stifling a gasp as he watched several more holo-Pearls emerge from the fog in all the places that neither Dipper and Connie were covering. “Then who’s going to protect you?!”

Just as the holo-Pearls leapt high to descend upon the group, Steven’s shield suddenly materialized squarely over his arm, large and glistening as it sheltered all four of them from the attacking blades. However, they weren’t entirely in the clear as another holo-Pearl started charging for them, its weapon already poised. Dipper prepared to go take it down, but Mabel ended up beating him to the punch with one click of her grappling hook, which latched onto the sword and pulled it away from the hologram, effectively defeating it. Needless to say that both Connie and Dipper were in shock over how they had just been defended by their own two lieges, but even so, Mabel and Steven turned back to them with broad, reassuring smiles, hoping that the intended message came through.

“We’re already been up against some really bad guys this summer,” Steven began, the confidence in his tone renewed. “And we’re bound to go up against plenty more. And when that day comes, all four of us should fight together, like the great team we are!”

“Yeah! None of us have to do any of this by ourselves!” Mabel added just as firmly. “We’re all pretty great on our own, but we’re only really amazing when we work together and help each other out! I mean, people don’t call us the Mystery Kids for nothing!”

“Exactly,” Steven finished, extending his hand out to Connie with a warm smile as Mabel did to the same for Dipper. “So please… won’t you share this jam with us?”

For a moment, Connie hesitated as she stared at Steven’s outstretched hand, her brow furrowing as she thought about how this was against nearly everything Pearl had taught her and Dipper. The
white Gem instructed them that they needed to be able to stand on their own, to rely solely on their own abilities and wit and succeed completely on their own terms. Teamwork had no part in that equation whatsoever. And yet now… here was Steven and Mabel, the very “lieges” they were supposed to stand to risk life and limb to protect, proposing that they all fight on equal ground as a harmonious unit instead of mere disjointed pieces. It was an idea that, to Connie at least, suddenly seemed quite appealing, especially as she realized just how much she had come to miss feeling the close knit bond between all three of them lately. True, there was honor in fighting one’s own battles, but perhaps, Connie thought, there was even more honor in standing with friends in a courageous band of love and protection. Which was why, as even more holo-Pearls began to beset them all, Connie smiled as she finally took Steven’s hand, knowing at that moment that her choice was the right one.

The second the holo-Pearls pounced, Steven’s shield was there again to block the otherwise fatal blows. As the swords clashed down upon it, Mabel shot her grappling hook out while Connie swung her sword, both of them making easy work of the holograms and clearing the area once more. “Whoa, you guys were right!” Connie exclaimed with an amazed smile. “This is much easier!”

“That’s the idea. No matter what comes, we can do this together!” Steven smirked, more than relieved to see that Connie had finally decided to see reason. However, this still wasn’t over yet.

“Well, bro-bro?” Mabel asked with anticipation as she held her hand out to Dipper again, even though his back was turned to her. “You’re the only one who’s not in on this jam session yet. Care to join?”

“No,” Dipper said rigidly, his shoulders tensing as he gripped his sword tighter.

“W-what?” Steven frowned, taken aback by this unexpected refusal. “But… but why not?”

“Because,” Dipper began sharply, an almost livid scowl on his face as he turned around to face them. “I don’t need anybody’s help! I know how to fight now, which means I can take on any threat that comes along on my own!”

“But Dipper, you don’t have to fight on your own!” Mabel urged intently, wanting to say more, but Dipper quickly cut her off.

“Yes, I do, Mabel! Because if I don’t, then it’ll be just like-” He abruptly cut himself off, his cheeks reddening in embarrassment as he glared down bitterly, unable to even bare to talk about it out loud, lest he break down entirely.

“Oh-just like what?” Connie asked with apt concern, though when Dipper said nothing, Mabel stepped in once more.

“Dipper, what will it be like?” she asked, her voice soft as she reached out a hand to touch his shoulder, though he coldly pushed it away.

“Just forget it,” he muttered despondently. “It doesn’t even matter anyway…”

“Yes, it does!” Steven countered earnestly. “It matters because it’s how you feel, Dipper! Why are you trying to act like that’s not important when it really is, not just to you, but to all of us?!”

Dipper faltered at this, knowing that such support from all sides had been the last thing he had been expecting at such a juncture. And while the logical part of his mind was fighting to keep up his indifference, to maintain his silence and stay just as closed off as he had been for the past several
weeks, his emotions quickly started to override that logic entirely. After all, for so long he had been so worried about what others might feel if they knew the truth about his struggle; perhaps it was time to consider how he was feeling for a change. “I-it’ll be just like when… w-when Bill stole my body,” he began quite shakily, gripping his arms tightly as he averted any eye contact. “A-and I had to rely on you guys to get it back for me. I wanted to help you three somehow, so much, but all I could do was float on the sidelines and watch as you guys nearly died because of me. I felt so useless, so helpless, like I might as well have not even existed… I-I hated that feeling! I never want to feel like that ever again! And that’s why I have to do this on my own! So I’ll never have to go through anything like that again!”

All three of the others were stunned into pitied silence upon hearing this, especially as they noticed Dipper rush to wipe away the distraught tears that were welling up in his eyes. Mabel especially felt as though her heart was breaking as she watched her brother desperately struggle to hold it together, hating the cruel demon who had brought him so low more now more than ever. But as much as she wanted to go after Bill and make him pay for what he did, she knew that now wasn’t the time for that; now was the time to finally give Dipper the help he so clearly needed and deserved. “Oh… Dipper… I” she began, taking another step closer to him only to notice a familiar shape emerge out of the fog right behind him, a hologram’s blade poised to end him while his back was turned. In an instant, her grappling hook was out yet again, and before Dipper could even question her motives, Mabel fired it, hitting her mark perfectly as the holo-Pearl burst away into nothingness, leaving only its sword to fall and wedge itself squarely into the ground right between the twins. Yet another symbol of everything that was keeping them apart, so it seemed.

“See? There you go, saving me again,” Dipper remarked with a bitter sigh as he finally let his sword fall out of his hand and clatter onto the ground. “I just thought that maybe, just once, I could protect you for a change, Mabel. But I guess it was stupid of me to think that I could do anything like that, just like all of the other stupid choices I’ve been making lately, huh?”

“Dipper, that’s not stupid,” Mabel clarified shaking her head as she stepped past the sword. “It was really brave and really sweet of you, and I really do appreciate the thought. But… you really did go overboard with it, and… I really don’t think any of this helped you the way you thought it would. I mean, don’t get me wrong, you did learn how to fight and it has made you a lot more confident and stuff… but… it’s not gonna fix everything that happened to you…”

“T-then… then what will?” Dipper asked, a hint of desperate pleading in his tone.

“Talking about it might help,” Steven spoke up with a soft, encouraging smile. “Even if it doesn’t fix everything right away, at least it might help you feel a little better.”

Dipper quickly shook his head at this suggestion, but even as he did he could feel the warmth of ongoing tears begin to build up behind his eyes. Tears that he had been holding onto for so long now, to the point that it was starting to become almost impossible to keep them from falling. “I-I can’t…”

“Why not?” Connie asked gently.

“Because… t-there’s just… there’s so much…” Dipper sighed, wrapping his arms tighter around himself as his last line of defense against breaking down quickly started to crumble.

“Well if it’s too much for you, then maybe it might not be for all four of us,” Mabel encouraged warmly, taking her brother’s hands as she offered him all the support and love she could give him. “Remember what I told you, bro-bro: anytime you wanna talk, I’ll be right here, we’ll all be right here, to listen.”
And with that simple offer alone, Dipper found that his final defense finally crumbled. Unable to hold it back any longer, the first of many tears escaped him, a sob coming out along with it as Mabel wrapped her arms around him in a sincere, gentle hug, one that Steven and Connie didn’t hesitate to join in on. For as long as he had been holding all of this pain, heartache, guilt, and despair, he had thought that he had been doing so out of strength, out of his own emotional fortitude because of his shame to let others see just how badly it all hurt him. Yet, now, without even saying a single word, he could feel as though a dark, toxic, unbearable weight was starting to lift off his shoulders, as if his sister and his friends were helping free him of it just by keeping him secure in their warm embrace. And really, no words were needed to communicate how he felt at such a moment; his tears were more than enough to show just how agonized he had been these past several weeks. But even as that agony started to ease up a bit, the tears still didn’t stop because Dipper knew these tears weren’t just for himself; they were for Mabel and how he had spoken to her so harshly last night, even though she had just wanted to help. They were for Steven and Connie, who had put themselves in so much harm to help him when they didn’t have to do such a thing at all, out of the mere kindness of their hearts. They were for Lapis, still trapped at the bottom of the lake, true, but still there, still alive, still able to someday, somehow be saved, even if that day wasn’t anytime soon. And yes, there were for himself too, for the pain he had gone through at the hands of the dream demon, for the guilt he had felt when the blue Gem had slipped away into the lake, for the helplessness he had felt to fix any of it on his own. But perhaps, Dipper finally started to realize, this pain, this guilt, this helplessness, weren’t things he could fix on his own or fight away with a simple sword. They were all things that only time, effort, and the support of friends and family could help heal. And maybe, instead of stubbornly pushing them away, it was time that he started accepting all of the things that had always been right there for him from the very start.

And so, with just the smallest hint of a genuine smile shining through the tears, he did just that.

However, for as welcome as this moment of warm healing was, it wasn’t bound to last, especially as the cloud cover over the arena abruptly disappeared, revealing a very perturbed Pearl in their place. “Steven! Mabel!” she growled hotly, blade in her hand as she stormed up to the kids. Upon seeing her clear rag, their hug dissipated, though Mabel still allowed Dipper to lean against her for support as his tears started to peter out. “Don’t interfere! Dipper and Connie need to take me on them-” The white Gem cut herself off as she noticed the clearly emotionally compromised state of one of her pupils, something that she refused to let stand in light of the nature of their training activity. “Dipper, why are you crying? Have you been injured?”

“N-no, Pearl,” Dipper replied feebly, shaking his head as he started wiping his tears away. “I was just-”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Pearl cut him off coldly. “How many times have I told both of you? The battlefield is no place for weakness of any kind! So pull yourself together and get back to fighting! And Steven, Mabel, off the field with both of you, now!”

“No, Pearl!” Mabel staunchly refused, firmly maintain her position of support beside her brother. “We’re not going anywhere!”

“That’s right!” Steven boldly agreed. “The four of us are a team! We’re the strawberry-” he began, nodding to himself and Mabel.

“And we’re the biscuits!” Connie finished as her and Dipper both reclaimed their swords.

“And that makes us-”

“Jam buds!” all four of the kids proclaimed in a rousing battle cry, one that was completely lost on
the white Gem as she looked to them in confusion.

“Wha—” she tried to begin, but the kids were quick to charge at her all at once. Pearl was completely taken aback as Connie’s sword clashed with hers, but even so, she maintained some semblance of control as she drew another blade out of her gem to counter Dipper’s. From there, a small, fast-paced skirmish broke out between the three sword fighters, all of them keeping in step with each other as their blades continued colliding in fierce succession. Pearl soon found an opportunity to counter her two rebellious students as they both opened themselves up on a simultaneous strike, but as she went in for the blow, Dipper and Connie both abruptly turned, revealing Steven right behind them. The white Gem gasped as her blade bounced squarely off her young ward’s shield, and she had no time to regather her bearings as Mabel fired her grappling hook off in her direction, its coil wrapping itself around Pearl’s torso and restraining her free hand. As shocked by this surprise attack as she was, the white Gem still glanced over her shoulder at Dipper and Connie, who had wisely repositioned themselves behind her as they bounded for her again, their swords at the ready. Steven and Mabel joined them, rushing at Pearl from the front with their own weapons, but before either sides could reach her, the white Gem finally put a stop to their brazen display by lashing out unexpectedly.

“ENOUGH!” Upon breaking free from the grappling hook’s hold, Pearl swung her sword out wide, not harming any of the kids, but merely knocking them back and disarming them all in one fell swoop. “No!” she growled at the group, glaring at them amidst her heavy breathing. “This isn’t what its going to be like! In a real battle, Steven and Mabel won’t be there to help you!”

“Yes, we will!” Mabel countered firmly, placing a steady hand on Dipper’s shoulder again as they exchanged resolved smiles. “We’re all gonna be there for each other, no matter what!”

“Yeah!” Dipper readily agreed. “Any battle we fight from here on out, we’re going to get through it as a team!”

“But you don’t know that!” Pearl protested lividly.

“Yes, we do!” Steven asserted boldly. “If any of us are going to fight, we’re going to fight together!”

“That’s right!” Connie exclaimed with an affirming smile. “We’re not going to fight alone anymore because we don’t have to!”

“Yes, you do!” Pearl argued, gripping her sword tighter as she glared over to her young ward in particular, assuming that all of these communal sentiments had started with him. “And Steven, you shouldn’t be anywhere near the fight! You’re too important!”

“No, I’m not!” Steven shot back, not even taking the time to be confused about what the white Gem meant by that in the heat of the moment.

“Yes, you are!”

“No!”

“Why won’t you just let me do this for you, Rose?!” Pearl suddenly cried, countless age-old, pent-up emotions getting the better of her as they finally exploded on the surface. The moment the pink Gem’s name left her mouth, she froze, her breath catching in a gasp as tears filled her eyes and a blue blush filled her cheeks. Still, she tried her best to recover as the kids all stared at her in apt surprise, none of them sure of what to say in the aftermath of such a tense moment. “I… I mean… I-let them… do this… W-why won’t—Steven, why won’t you let… Connie do this, a-and…”
Mabel, let Dipper do this for…” The white Gem finally trailed off, suppressing a feeble sob as her sword fell to the ground with a dull clatter, her shoulders shuddering and her voice empty as she turned away from the kids. “T-that’s… enough for today…”

With a wavering sigh, Pearl walked off, clearly dejected and morose as she went to sit at the edge of the arena and look out over the endless sea of clouds below. The kids exchanged an equally worried glance at this, all of them realizing all at once that the white Gem’s insistence on independence and martyrdom had come from a much deeper place than any of them could have possibly imagined. Still, none of them could really fault her for it; after all, she had only been teaching them in what she had believed, from years and years of past experience, was the right way. Which was why none of them hesitated to head over to her, taking seats on either side of her and noting her expression: heartbroken and closed off as she wrapped her arms tightly around herself, her eyes shut in sorrowful contemplation.

“Hey, uh… Pearl?” Steven began gently, though the white Gem still didn’t open her eyes. “W-we didn’t mean to mess up your training. But… things were starting to go way too far and we were just… really worried.”

“Yeah, I mean… you let Dipper keep training even though you knew he was still all banged up from the other week…” Mabel noted, not angrily, though she still was quite upset over that matter. “We know your heart was in the right place, but even you gotta admit that wasn’t ok…”

“I-it really wasn’t…” Dipper muttered somewhat guiltily, knowing that he was partially responsible for choosing to continue training with his injuries.

“And then there was all that talk about Dipper and Connie being worth ‘nothing’…” Steven continued fretfully. “It was really starting to freak us out…”

“Did… did Rose make you feel like you were nothing?” Connie asked hesitantly, undeniably curious to see how such a train of thought even began.

Pearl finally moved at this, a small, sardonic chuckle escaping her as she finally opened her eyes and looked to the sunset skies, tears still streaming down her cheeks all the while. “Rose made me feel… like I was everything…” she sighed wistfully and nostalgically, deep affection filling her every word. “W-when I was with her… it was like the sun never stopped shining, like nothing could ever be wrong in the world… She inspired me to be myself, she gave me a reason to fight, one that I believed in with everything I had… Her kindness, her passion, her love… made me feel like I could face anything that stood in my way… all for her…” As these tender sentiments trailed off, the white Gem began to wipe her tears away, her manner staring to change as she realized that this wouldn’t be what Rose would have wanted. And even though the pink Gem was gone, how could she possibly disrespect her beloved liege’s wishes now, or ever? “What was I thinking…?” Pearl shook her head, laughing once more as she realized just how foolish she had been all this time, especially as she looked to all four of the still very concerned kids. “I can see now how deeply you all care for each other.” She sniffled, her small smile turning into a proud beam as she suddenly threw her arms around all four of the kids’ shoulders. “That’ll make you all great knights!”

“Wait, what?” Steven asked in apt surprise at this welcome change of heart.

“You mean… we get to fight too?” Mabel asked with a growing grin.

“But of course!” Pearl nodded brightly. “You four are a team, after all? And who would I be to split up such a fine group like you up?” Needless to say that the kids all exchanged an excited glance upon hearing this, all of them more than eager to learn to fight together under the white
Gem’s wise tutelage. Just as they should have been doing from the very start, but still, it was better late than never. “Now, Connie and Dipper are practically experts already, so Steven, Mabel, you’ll both have a lot of catching up to do. Oh, I’m so excited! I can’t wait for the midair and underwater dueling exercises! It’s going to be oodles of fun!”

Everyone returned from the sky arena that evening in very high spirits, a rare sight after how despondent things had been the past several weeks. Pearl had made sure to set a few stipulations in place regarding her future lessons, namely that they were being cut back from every day to just once a week and that Dipper wasn’t allowed to participate until all of his injuries were thoroughly healed. Which, as eager as he was to train alongside the others, was a process he finally decided to properly expedite along.

“So… a-are you sure you’re ok with this?” Steven asked tentatively, his hand already generously covered in spit as he held it apace from Dipper’s uncovered shoulder and the rather ugly scar marring it. “Because if you’re not, t-then we can always just wait and do it when you’re ready, or-”

“No,” Dipper cut him off firmly, his gaze fixated straight ahead but surprisingly relaxed all the same. “No more putting this off. I should have let you heal me from the beginning, b-but…I guess I thought that I… deserved all this because I made that stupid deal with Bill in the first place and put you guys in so much danger…”

“Oh, Dipper…” Mabel frowned sympathetically, plopping down onto the couch beside him as she took his hand and squeezed it supportively. “You didn’t deserve any of this. And just for the record, not a single bit of what happened was your fault! That’s all on Bill, and between you and me, if we ever see that jerkward of a triangle ever again, then I’ll bash him with my grappling hook so hard that he’ll wish he was a square!”

“Heh, thanks, Mabel,” Dipper remarked with a sincere chuckle, touched by the sentiment, no matter how admittedly silly it was. He flinched however, as Steven gently placed his palm on his shoulder, the healing spit working instantly as what was left of the horrendous cut was easily, seamlessly sealed up without leaving a single trace behind. “W-whoa…” Dipper muttered in slight awe as he moved his shoulder without any pain at all for the first time in weeks. “I can’t believe I held out for this long on the no healing thing; this feels so much better!”

The kids all shared a warm, very welcome laugh at this before Steven moved on to tend to Dipper’s other injuries. Even so, Mabel kept close to her brother while Connie lingered tightly beside the young Gem, all four of them content to just be together in a kind of silence that was genuinely blissful, something that they had been so sorely missing these past several weeks. True, not everything had gone completely back to normal; honestly, they all doubted that things ever could after such brutal intrusions into their lives by entities as malicious as Homeworld Gems and Bill Cipher. And yes, as shaken and scarred as they all still were by everything they had been through, it would certainly take a lot of time and a lot of work before they all managed to fully recover from it, if such a complete recovery was even possible at all. But as painful as the past was and as uncertain as the future seemed, one thing was crystal clear to them all: the healing process had at last begun. And they weren’t going to go through any of it alone.

After all, they had said so themselves: they were a team. Dipper, Mabel, Steven, and Connie; the Mystery Kids. They had staked their claim to fight side by side, not just to Pearl, but to themselves in that arena, and it was a claim they were determined to maintain. Their bond was not one that could be broken so easily, not by any arduous sword training, paranormal monsters, violent Homeworld Gems, or even all-powerful dream demons. It was so much stronger than all of those
things combined. And through that bond, all four of the kids knew, without a doubt in any of their minds, that they could be ready to stand against *anything* in their way as long as they were standing together.
Chapter 45: Soos and the Real Girl

Chapter Summary

In which Soos dates an AI, Garnet has a not so secret admirer, and Stan and Amethyst do some illegal shit.

Chapter Notes

Yeah so compared to the last several chapters, this one is kinda... meh, mostly cause I rushed through it. But its ok, it has its moments so yeah, might as well dive right in! (Keyword is GIFFANY)

While the Mystery Shack had just closed for the evening, its staff still hung about for a bit to help close everything up for the night. Seeing as how there wasn’t really much to do, Stan decided to turn Dipper and Mabel lose to their own devices early, which was news that Mabel in particular was more than glad to hear. Excited about her freed-up evening, she skipped merrily towards the gift shop door, only for her exit to be abruptly halted as she ended up bumping into the screen door, getting her braces in adherently caught in its mesh wiring.

“Augh! Braces!” she cried, frantically trying to pry the metal in her mouth out of the screen tightly entrapping it as everyone else in the shop was quickly alerted to her situation. “Braces caught in the screen door! Someone dictate my will! I’m giving it all to Waddles!”

“Whoa, hold on there, girl-dude,” Soos interjected as he hurried over to help. “Just sit still and say ‘ah’.”

Mabel did so, calming her panicked struggle down to allow the handyman to easily and painlessly pry her braces out of the screen door with his screwdriver. “Soos! You saved me!” she exclaimed brightly after quickly checking over her braces.

“Heh, just doin’ my job, hambone,” Soos remarked warmly, smoothly tossing his screwdriver back into its spot on his toolbelt before turning to leave for the night. “See you dudes tomorrow!”

“Bye, Soos!” the twins called out after the handyman, waving him farewell.

“Night, Soos,” Stan and Wendy both replied much more casually amidst being distracted with other tasks. Soos gave the others one last cheerful wave before blithely heading outside to go home for the night, just as he usually did.

“You ever wonder what Soos does when he’s not here at the Mystery Shack?” Mabel asked,
genuinely curious to know how the handyman spent his free time. A sentiment that none of the others really seemed to share.

“No.”

“No really.”

“Not once ever.”

As it turned out, most of Soos’ time outside of work he spent at home in the company of his Abuelita and his video game collection, namely his copy of *First Person Puncher*, which he was playing has he helped his grandmother highlight her hair. “Punch! Punch those leopards!” the handyman exclaimed, engrossed in the fast paced action of his game until the timer sitting on the nearby table went off. “Oh! Highlights are done!” he proclaimed, turning to Abuelita as he began taking the foil out of her hair. “You’re gonna make the other grandmas at the bingo hall so jealous!”

“Just a minute, mi’ijo,” she interjected with her usual calm smile as she handed Soos a letter. “Look at this. Your cousin Reggie is having an engagement party next month.”

“Wait, what?” Soos asked, flabbergasted as he looked over the invitation, which pictured Reggie happily embracing his fiancé. “Reggie is engaged? B-but how? He’s like the poor man’s Soos!”

“Yes, well…” Abuelita began somewhat awkwardly as she placed a hand on her grandson’s arm. “I do not want to pressure you, Soos, but you are a man now… in a way. It’s time for you to start meeting girls. I would like to see you settled before I ascend to heaven and live with the angels.”

“And with grandpa!” Soos quipped innocently.

“No, he is… not there…” Abuelita corrected, glancing down knowingly for a beat. “Anyway, please find a girl to bring to Reggie’s engagement party. For Abuelita.” The elderly woman smiled encouragingly, placing a hand against her grandson’s face before she got up and walked out of the room, leaving Soos to mull over this request.

“Oh, no problem, Abuelita!” Soos called after her with apt resolve, knowing that he wasn’t about to let her down. “I have all the qualities that I’m fairly sure girls are into. I’m great at fixing stuff, playing video games, having a sort-of mustache. I could *totally* get a date in a week! Totally. Piece of cake.” The handyman smiled to himself as he leaned back against the couch, picking up his game controller once more as he stepped himself in his confidence that he’d be able to find a date easily enough. After all, even though he had never been a relationship, or on a date, or ever even asked a girl out before, his complete lack of romantic experience certainly didn’t mean he didn’t have a chance at all, did it?

Soos was broken out of his suddenly worried thoughts by his game, which he had been ignoring to the point that he ended up getting a game over as the TV blared out: “You’re dead!”

“I’m dead…” Soos echoed nervously as he realized that his quest for romance was going to be much harder than he originally hoped.
“Ok, everyone! We gotta scoot in closer to make this one work!” Steven said, pulling in tighter to Connie as Dipper and Mabel did the same. The kids had spent most of their morning in a rather lighthearted selfie-taking session, mostly since there wasn’t really too much else to do and also because it was a generally relaxing pastime. After the hectic, daunting past few weeks they had had, all four of them had taken to reveling in every laid back, lighthearted moment they could manage together, knowing better than to ever take advantage of them again after how close they had all gotten to losing such peaceful times on a number of occasions.

“Alright, I think we’re ready,” Connie grinned as all the others did the same in preparation of the photo as she held her phone out further. “Say cheese!”

“Cheese!” all four of them proclaimed in bright unison as Connie snapped the picture, only for her to notice something was off about it as soon as she got a look at it.

“Aw, Steven! You blinked!” she scolded playfully, giving him a light shove.

“Whoops! Sorry…” the young Gem blushed, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Hey, we can always take another one!” Mabel suggested blithely, running over to the other side of the clearing. “Hows about we try one with the view of the temple behind us? It’ll be so pretty!”

“Are you sure we don’t already have enough selfies already?” Dipper asked with an amused chuckle as they all went over to join Mabel. “I’m pretty sure Connie’s phone has gotta be running out of storage space by now.”

“Mm, actually, I think we should be good for a few more,” Connie noted, checking her phone once more.

“And besides, a group of friends can never have enough selfies!” Steven quipped cheerfully. “Huh, you know, those are some pretty good words to live by. I should really write that down…”

“Save it for later, Universe!” Mabel jokingly ordered as the kids all clustered together again with the temple in view behind them. “We got more selfies to take! Now, again, this time with feeling: cheese!”

The others all repeated this, bearing their biggest smiles as Connie attempted to take the photo, though it was a bit challenging seeing as how the screen and the camera button were both facing away from her, despite her continuously tapping at where she thought it would be.

“Did it take it?” Steven asked in a mumble, still holding his wide grin as he waited for the snap.

“I don’t know…” Connie replied, also maintain her smile as she continued her attempts at hitting the button.

“Maybe try pressing it again?” Dipper suggested, getting somewhat impatient with holding up his own smile, even though it was clear Mabel was ready to keep hers as long as she had to.

“I’ve been pressing it,” Connie assured, her grin starting to falter a bit as the photo still failed to take.

“You guys look cute.”

Steven gasped upon hearing this casual interruption to their selfie session, his photo-ready grin turning into a genuine one as he glanced across the yard at the familiar mailman who had just arrived at the shack. “Jamie!” the young Gem exclaimed excitedly as he ran over to greet him.
While Connie, Dipper, and Mabel didn’t really know this young mailman, they followed suit, though not as bombastically as Steven did.

“What’s up, Steven?” Jamie asked coolly, his large sunglasses giving him an even more laid back look. “Long time, no see.”

“Ohhhh myyyyy gosssshhh!” Steven shouted enthusiastically as he rushed to give Jamie a high five. “It really has been so long since I’ve seen you around here, Jamie! Oh, by the way, these are my friends: Connie, Dipper, and Mabel! Guys, this is Jamie: the mailman!”

“Greetings, Connie, Dipper, Mabel,” Jamie said to the kids with an amicable grin.

“Hey, how’s it going?” Dipper greeted affably.

“Nice to meet you, Jamie,” Connie nodded politely.

“I love your sunglasses!” Mabel quipped, beaming.

“Heh, thanks,” Jamie smirked as he adjusted said shades.

“So, where have you been all this time, Jamie?” Steven asked curiously. “I don’t think I’ve seen you around here since the beginning of the summer!”

“Oh, you know, I’ve been spending some time where all the big movies are made…” Jamie began, his smile turning daring and dramatic. “Just a little place called… Kansas!”

“Kansas?” Dipper asked, confused. “Uh… don’t you mean Hollywood?”

“Oh, wow! Kansas!” Mabel interrupted, thoroughly impressed. “I heard that place is super glamorous! Did you meet any big-name movie stars while you were there?”

“But of course,” Jamie assured, crossing his arms.

“Like…?” Steven pursued eagerly.

“Like…. Uh… well… a bunch! I-its pretty hard to keep track of particular names when you’re rubbing elbows with the rich and famous, you know. But I did receive plenty of valuable inspiration while I was there.”

“Oh, are you an aspiring thespian?” Connie asked.

“Why, yes!” Jamie proclaimed with a bold, performer’s bow. “Yes, I am.”

“Wow! I didn’t know you wanted to become an actor!” Steven noted in amazement.

“That’s because-” Jamie suddenly paused, pulling off a dramatic spin as he clenched his fist passionately. “I’m very good at acting.”

The kids all got a good laugh out of this brief preformance, all four of them applauding it as Jamie bowed once again. “So that must be why you’re wearing those super cool sunglasses in the first place, huh?” Mabel asked, pointing to his shades that read “movie star” across the top of them. “Cause you’re on the fast track to becoming a movie star yourself?”

“Oh, well, no…” Jamie blushed awkwardly, lowering his shades a bit. “I just bought these at a souvenir shop. I missed being a regular old mailman, so I just came back. And, uh, both you and Mr. Pines got a lot of mail while I was gone, Steven…” The mailman dropped the heavy sack he’d
been toting, pulling it open to reveal an abundance of packages and letters that were long past late.

“Looks like the postal service has really been slacking off,” Connie noted, bewildered by all the undelivered mail.

“Jamie’s the only mailman who comes all the way out here to the shack and the temple,” Steven explained.

“Oh so that explains why Grunkle Stan’s been so upbeat lately!” Mabel exclaimed in realization. “It’s cause he hasn’t gotten any bills since the beginning of the summer!”

“Well, if that’s the case, then he’s in for a pretty major disappointment here soon…” Dipper mused, glancing at the pile of overdue invoices intended for Stan lying on the ground.

“I’m also gonna need a lot of signatures as well,” Jamie said as he held his sign pad out to Steven.

The young Gem smiled, seemingly cracking his knuckles in preparation only for them to make no apparent sound at all. “Your knuckles are so quiet…” Connie said, impressed.

“My hands are polite,” Steven replied with a proud smile. Before he could sign however, the kids were caught off guard by a sudden rustling in the nearby trees, a familiar figure emerging from them a moment later.

“Oh! Hi, Garnet!” Mabel greeted the Gem leader first, though the other kids soon followed suit as she began to approach them.

“Who’s Garneeee-” Jamie trailed off, his jaw and his sunglasses dropping in awe as he glanced up and got his first glimpse of the Gem leader. Her form was stunning as she smoothly sauntered forward, the droplets of water drenching her sparkling in the midmorning sun. Her shades and neutral expression gave her an air of alluring mystery, one that Jamie couldn’t help but be immediately compelled by.

Her confidence only continued as she reached the group, placing a hand on her hip as she looked down to the group of kids with a casual greeting. “Howdy.”

“Hey, Garnet, whatcha up to?” Steven asked. “And why are you all wet?”

“I was just at the bottom of the lake, checking for signs of Lapis and Jasper,” Garnet reported. “Or at least as close to the bottom as I could get to…”

“Wait, what?” Dipper cut in, immediately interested in this development, seeing as how this was apparently the first time any of the Gems had done anything about the Malachite situation at all. “Did… did you see them?”

Garnet let out a soft sigh, shaking her head with apt sympathy. “No. It seems as though Malachite has trapped herself underneath a thick layer of ice just a few hundred feet down, one that spreads across the entire lake bed. I tried my best to penetrate it, but I had no luck. I’m sorry, Dipper.”

The most Dipper could do upon receiving such disparaging news was let out a small sigh of disappointment as he hung his head. He supposed it did make sense that Lapis would make herself and Jasper even more inaccessible than they already were, for the sake of protecting them all from the orange Gem’s fury. But, that didn’t change the fact that Dipper still wanted to help Lapis, just as much as ever, especially after how his last true lead has been so brutally destroyed. And though such a feat seemed even more out of reach with what Garnet had just told him, Mabel subtly reminded him that they’d get there someday by simply placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder,
one that this time, he didn’t push away.

“W-wow…” Jamie spoke up softly, looking to Garnet in complete amazement. “How are you able to swim to the bottom of the lake?”

“It was easy,” Garnet shrugged, adjusting her shades. “I’m a really good swimmer.” Jamie’s jaw simply fell even more upon hearing this, his eyes widening as he noticed the Gem leader’s visor seemingly change colors from pink to blue, as if by magic. Still, Garnet didn’t seem to notice how awestruck the mailman was with her as she readjusted her posture. “Excuse me,” she said before swinging her arms out gracefully, all of the lake water flying off of her form in a singular flash of light.

An astonished gasp finally escaped Jamie at this incredible sight, his heart pounding as he continued staring at the Gem leader and nothing else. Even if Garnet herself didn’t really pay the mailman’s clear awe any mind, the kids started to take notice of it, prompting them to exchange something of a confused glance. In fact, his wonderstruck gaze only continued after the Gem leader as she bid them all farewell and began making her way up to the temple, with Jamie watching her almost longingly, even after she had completely vanished from sight.

Stan smirked readily as he watches his customers mill about the gift shop from his hidden vantage point behind a postcard display, knowing that their disposable income was a untapped potential goldmine for him. The conman wasn’t the type to turn his nose up at even mere pocket change, such as the nickel a young boy was flipping as he happened to absentmindedly wander over in his general direction. And while it was just a simple five cents, that was a five cents Stan wasn’t about to pass up.

“Hello!” he exclaimed loudly as he suddenly jumped out from behind the display, ignoring the child as he let out a startled scream and shrunk back. “Please, don’t let my horrible elderly face frighten you. Don’t you want to use that nickel to get a nugget from old Goldie?” With a flourish, the conman pulled the sheet off of the attraction behind him: a rather decrepit old novelty gold nugget dispenser, complete with a homely bronze statue of the miner sitting atop it. While Stan grinned between it and the child confidently, the kid seemed much less certain about giving his money away to such a shabby machine, which prompted the conman into giving a demonstration of exactly what it could do. “Watch this!”

Stan inserted a nickel of his own into the slot in Goldie’s mouth, activating the machine, which at first seemed to be working fine. It quickly malfunctioned though, as a plume of smoke started to rise up from it, its eyes popping out as oil poured from its open mouth while it emitted what sounded like an agonized scream. Needless to say that the child was aptly terrified by such a horrific display, which resulted in him running off crying and taking his money with him, much to Stan’s disappointment.

“Ok, seriously, Mr. Pines,” Wendy spoke up from her spot at the counter upon watching this disastrous scene unfold. “Its time to throw that old thing out. Its face reminds everyone of the inevitability of death.”

“What?! Throw him out?!” Stan exclaimed, appalled by such a suggestion. “Sure, he’s a little rough around the edges, but old Goldie is a classic showstopper, like me!” No sooner had the conman said this, however, than his hand happened to slip on the oil that had spilled from Goldie, resulting in his arm getting caught in the machine’s wide open jaws. “Ah! Kill it!” Stan cried, flailing to break his arm free in a frantic panic. “Kill it with fire!”
Despite this sudden disarray on one side of the gift shop, the other half was quite calm as Soos was contentedly working, hanging up a new stock of tee shirts. His attention was soon diverted away from his task, however, upon noticing a woman shopping just a few feet away from him, reminding him of the task his grandmother had entrusted him with the previous night. “Ah! A woman!” he exclaimed, suddenly nervous as he dove into the middle of a nearby circular clothes rack before the woman could notice him. “Ok, Soos,” he whispered to himself encouragingly. “You can do this. Just use your mouth to say words that make romance happen.” Upon taking in a deep, resolved breath, the handyman rose up out of the rack to do just that as he gave the unsuspecting woman an incredibly awkward greeting. “Your face is good. I am a Soos!”

Needless to say that the woman was anything but charmed by Soos’ forwardness, but was rather terrified by his sudden unsettling appearance, hence why she was quick to rush out of the shack, screaming all the while. The handyman let out a dejected sigh at his failed first attempt as he sunk back into the rack, unaware that the kids had noticed this entire bizarre exchange, and needless to say they were all unanimously curious about it.

“Soos?” Dipper asked as he pulled a few shirts aside to reveal the hiding handyman. “What was that all about?”

“I-I think I was flirting?” Soos frowned as he crawled out of the rack. “But I’m not sure…”

“Yeah, no offense, Soos, but what just happened right there… it… didn’t really look like flirting…” Connie remarked, nodding over to the door the woman just ran out of.

“Did someone say flirting?!” Mabel suddenly interjected as she popped out of a barrel of keychains nearby.

“Well… I kinda promised my grandma I’d get a date by the end of the week,” Soos began, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. “Problem is, I’ve never actually been on a date before. Oh, I might as well just admit it; I have no idea what I’m doing with all this romance stuff. You belong on me, out of order sign.” The handyman sighed as he took said sign off of the vending machine and pinned it to himself instead, making it clear how morose and hopeless he seemed to be.

“Aw, Soos! You’re not out of order!” Steven reassured warmly. “Maybe all you need to do is to find that one special someone out there who’s meant for you!”

“You really think that someone like that is out there, dude?” Soos asked, somewhat doubtful.

“Oh, they just gotta be out there!” Mabel quipped, growing more enthused by this discussion by the second. “Ah, this is so exciting! Finally my prayers for a chance to play match-maker this summer have been answered!”

“Soos, a little advice,” Stan interjected, having finally freed his arm from Goldie, though not without a few tears in his suit. “You need to get rich. Or lie about being rich. Outside of that, I don’t like your chances.”

“Pfft, don’t listen to Stan, dude,” Wendy scoffed. “You’re a sweet guy with a steady job and a pickup truck. Steven’s right; there’s bound to be somebody out there for you.”

“Would you date him?” Stan asked caustically.

The cashier flinched at this, immediately rushing to hide herself behind her magazine to avoid such an awkward question. “Oh, uh… Would you, um, would you look at that…”

“Soos, you help us out so much, it’s time we help you out for a change,” Dipper said with a
resolved grin. “We’re gonna get you that date!”

“Yeah!” Steven exclaimed brightly as Connie nodded her agreement. “We’ll find you that special someone, or die trying! …Ok, well, maybe we won’t die, but… we’ll find her all the same!”

“Aww, thanks, dudes…” Soos beamed, truly grateful for their willingness to help him in his plight. “But uh… where are we even gonna start with something like this?”

“That’s easy,” Mabel assured confidently, already leading the way out of the shack. “We’re taking you where romance lives and fashion styles die. To the mall!”

With this destination in mind, the other kids essentially dragged the much more hesitant Soos out of the shack so they could leave, with Stan toting the clearly busted Goldie not too far behind. However, they didn’t make it too far before Steven happened to spot a certain mailman making a hurried beeline back towards the shack.

“Jamie!” the young Gem exclaimed in surprise as he headed over to meet him. The other kids curiously followed as Soos and Stan continued heading for the car, only to find that Jamie’s manner was beyond flustered as he nervously greeted the them.

“H-h-hi, kids!” the mailman stammered, anxiously holding something behind his back.

“Hiya, Jamie!” Mabel quipped cheerfully. “Are you here to deliver more bills to Grunkle Stan? Cause, uh… he wasn’t too happy about that first round earlier this morning…”

“Hey! Is that that mailman kid again?!” Stan shouted from his car, clearly far from pleased upon spotting Jamie. “You kids tell him that if he’s gonna drop off any more late bills, I’ll train Waddles to chase him off like an attack dog if he ever steps foot on this property again!”

“Wha—uh, no,” Jamie quickly shook his head, still quite jumpy as he started to pull the pink letter he had been hiding behind his back out. “I-I… I just… I just came to, uh… I-”

“Hey, what’s that?” Steven asked upon finally spotting the letter the mailman was gripping tightly.

Jamie blushed furiously at this, only growing even more jumpy upon being called out. “Uh… i-its… here!” Without a single word of explanation, the mailman shoved the letter into the young Gem’s hands, leaving the kids to all look to it curiously.

“But what is… it?” Connie trailed off upon glancing up to see that Jamie was already stiffly running away. As he did, he soon started to break out of his former nervousness and into a gale of rather unhinged, ever growing laughter, which only grew more wild as the confused kids happened to turn the letter over and gasp upon seeing who it was addressed to: Garnet. By now, Jamie was in a complete frenzy, laughing almost manically as he babbled nonsensically and flapped his arms out in a failed attempt to restrain his overflowing emotions before he disappeared into the woods, leaving a group of absolutely dumbfounded kids behind.

“Ok, I’m just gonna come right out and say it,” Dipper remarked somewhat bluntly. “That was really, really weird.”

“Yeah, it was…” Steven frowned as he looked to the letter in his hands again. “I wonder why Jamie would write Garnet a letter… They’ve never even met before this morning… What could it possibly say?”

“Well, why don’t we go take it up to Garnet so we can find out?” Mabel asked excitedly.
“Oh, but what about Soos?” Dipper asked, nodding back over to the car, where Stan was impatiently waiting to get going with the handyman in tow. “We promised we’d help him get a date; we can’t just back out of him now.”

“Hm… maybe we should split up,” Connie suggested thoughtfully. “Steven, Dipper, you guys head over to the mall with Soos. Mabel and I will take Jamie’s letter to Garnet. We’ll come catch up with you guys when we’re done. How does that sound?”

“Sounds good to me!” Steven grinned as Dipper nodded in agreement.

“Yeah! Look at the four of us, being all productive and stuff!” Mabel proclaimed with a proud grin. “That’s what teamwork’s all about!”

“Good luck, you guys!” Connie called to the boys as her and Mabel began making their way up towards the temple.

“Good luck to you too!” Steven replied brightly back.

“Steven, they’re just going to deliver a letter,” Dipper pointed out, somewhat amused as they headed for the car. “Somehow I doubt they’re gonna need too much luck with that.”

“Yeah, I know,” Steven shrugged, waving the girls off once more. “But hey, a little positive encouragement never hurt anyone. And I’m sure we’ll be using plenty more of that while we’re helping Soos get that date!”

Gravity Falls’ local mall, or as it was more colloquially known, Gravity Malls, was actually a surprisingly bustling shopping center, despite the fact that its offering of stores was less than stellar. Even so, Dipper and Steven were quick to realize Mabel had been right on the mark in suggesting the mall as the place to scope out potential dates for Soos, seeing as how it was essentially swarming with potentially available young women.

“I’m gonna go find a replacement for old Goldie,” Stan remarked to the boys as he began to haul the bygone attraction away. “Babysit Soos while I’m gone.”

“Alright, Soos,” Steven began with an eager grin. “Are you ready to go out there and find that special someone, then settle down with her and move into a cute three bedroom house in the suburbs, where you’ll live happily ever after with your kids and grandkids until you’re both old and grey?”

“Uh… I-I dunno, dude…” Soos frowned, breaking into a nervous sweat. “I thought I was just here to find a date…”

“You are, Soos,” Dipper assured much more rationally than Steven had. “And there’s no pressure in finding one either. You know, aside from the whole, you have to get one by the end of the week thing. B-but other than that, no pressure!”

“Um… r-right…” the handyman gulped anxiously as he looked between the boys. “So, uh… any advice before I go out there and try this whole ‘flirting’ thing again? I mean, both of you dudes have been on dates before, haven’t you?”

“Oh, well, I—uh… hm…” Steven trailed off, thoughtfully glancing down as he pondered this question.
“Um… well, not technically, but I… I’ve… uh…” Dipper also struggled to properly answer this question as him and Steven exchanged an awkward glance of realization.

“Huh, what do you know? I guess neither of us have been on an actual date before,” the young Gem mused thoughtfully.

“Oh, that doesn’t matter,” Dipper remarked dismissively, trying to paly off his own slight embarrassment with this fact. “It’s not like flirting is even that hard anyway. Just go up to any of those women and be yourself, Soos. You’re good at that.”

“Er… I-I guess so…” Soos rubbed his arm, still quite apprehensive about the whole thing. “But what if I-”

“Aaaaand flirt!” Steven interupted with a blow of his whistle, prompting the handyman to rush forward in a sudden panic. As Soos frantically hurried off to strike up a conversation with the nearest female, the boys stood by, confident that their efforts in match making would be a success. “You know, I’ve got a good feeling about this,” Steven remarked with a proud smile, not even noticing as Soos inadvertently scared off a woman just a few feet away.

All the same, the handyman didn’t stop trying after this first failed attempt, mostly at the earnest urging of his two young coaches. The boys hid on the other side of a decorative fountain as they watched Soos approach another woman, all while Steven held up a sign reminding him to maintain eye contact with her when addressing her. Which was exactly what the handyman did, albeit to his detriment.

“Hey there!” he greeted the woman boisterously. “I’m not scared of your eyes at all! I’m gonna look at them!” At this, he used his fingers to pry his eyes open wide, which of course, sent the woman running off in fear, despite the fact that Soos followed her, his eyes still held open all the while. “Eye contact!”

Seeing as how their first bout of dating advice hadn’t quite worked as expected, Dipper and Steven decided to go a different route by encouraging Soos to focus on conversation first. The handyman heeded this tip as he started up a rather one-sided conversation with at the arcade.

“So, uh, you know, I actually got trapped inside a pinball machine before,” Soos remarked, leaning against the pinball machine the woman was clearly paying more attention to than him. “I guess it was like, cursed or something. It nearly killed me and my friends for cheating. Pretty crazy, huh?” The woman only responded with a frustrated growl as she apparently lost, and based on the sullen glare she sent Soos as she walked away, she more than likely blamed him. “Hey, where are you going?”

With Soos’ attempts getting him nowhere fast and the boys running out of viable advice to give him, they eventually just resorted to telling him to remain confident, which was what he somewhat put into practice while talking to a goth of indeterminate gender outside of Edgy on Purpose. “So, you’re probably a girl, right?” He paused, unsure of this assumption as the bored goth gave him no reply. “Wrong…? No, I was right the first time. …Wrong?”

“Oh boy…” Dipper muttered to Steven as the two watched the handyman figuratively crash and burn from a distance, both of them knowing that their endeavors had been completely fruitless thus far. “This might be a lot harder than we thought…”

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After deciding to split up with Steven and Dipper, Mabel and Connie wasted no time in rushing up to the temple, both of them more curious to know what Jamie’s letter said than anything else. They knew it would have been wrong to simply open it and read it themselves, which was why they hoped they could catch the Gem leader before she headed off on another mission. Which fortunately enough, they did.

“Garnet! Garnet! Garnet!” Mabel shouted, bursting into the house with Connie following right behind. “The most unbelievable thing just happened! You’ll totally die of shock!”

“Well, I don’t know if its that shocking…” Connie mused. “But it is kinda surprising.”

“Sorry, you two,” Garnet interjected calmly as she summoned a pair of goggles over her usual visor. “I’m busy.”

“B-but you got a letter!” Mabel halted the Gem leader before she could leave.

Garnet paused, her expression as unreadable as ever as she turned back to the girls, lifting up her goggles as she did. “Read it.”

The girls exchanged a quick glance at this, but even so, Mabel wasted no time in opening the letter up and reading the heartfelt message Jamie had written. “To Garnet,” she began, mimicking the mailman’s knack for theatrics as she read it as dramatic and passionately as she could. “When I saw you emerge like an ancient forest nymph, a white hot steel pierced the deepest artery of my being. You—you are a cardiac surgeon and I am your transplant patient and you stand poised over my chest, holding still my beating heart; hesitating, waiting, wondering—Ohhhh, this is so steamy!” Mabel interjected with a girlish squeal before continuing. “So I implore you to join me for dinner or maybe lunch if you wanna keep it casual, next Friday at The Club! I await your response, as the camellia awaits the rise of the moon! Cause, you know, it only blooms at night and stuff. Love, Jamie.” As soon as she was finished, Mabel let out another excited gasp, hugging the letter before letting out a wistful sigh. “Oh, how romantic! I wish a cute guy would come along and write me a little like this! I’d be his in a heartbeat!”

“Whoa, wait a second…” Connie said, glancing up to the Gem leader. “Garnet… I think Jamie is asking you out… on a date!”

A beat of somewhat awkward silence passed at this revelation, the prospect of such an idea only left hanging in the air for a moment until Mabel spoke up to stanchly shut it down. “Oh, well, that ain’t happening.”

“Nope,” Garnet readily agreed, hands on her hips.

“Why not?” Connie asked with a confused frown.

“Because Garnet can’t be in a relationship, silly!” Mabel grinned knowingly. “She already is a, really, really cute one too, might I add.”

“Why, thank you,” Garnet said with a soft, amused chuckle.

“Ohhh, you mean cause she’s a fusion,” Connie mused in realization.

“Ruby and Sapphire are already so perfect together; it just wouldn’t make any sense to tear such an adorable couple apart!” Mabel quipped, clearly gushing with zeal by this point, though she hardly cared.

“Hm… So I guess this date with Jamie is out of the question, then…” Connie assumed, glancing
back at the letter as Mabel handed it off to her.

“Three’s a crowd,” Garnet remarked, adjusting her shades.

“But guys, Jamie but so much thought into this letter,” Connie contested sympathetically. “It would be rude not to reply!” Despite her lack of enthusiasm with the matter, Garnet dryly agreed to this and in no time at all, the trio had taken a spot on the couch so to formulate some kind of response. “Ok, Garnet,” Connie began as she prepared to write out whatever the Gem leader dictated. “It might be best to play off the tone of his letter.”

“Oh! Good idea, Connie!” Mabel exclaimed brightly. “You can use lots of big, fancy words, just like he did! And maybe even throw in a few smiley faces or a drawing of a kitten, just to show there’s no hard feelings.”

“And we should probably start off with something like… ‘Dearest Jamie’…” Connie wrote before glancing up at the Gem leader herself for more. “Ok, go for it, Garnet!”

“Start with the letter ‘n’,” she instructed right off.

“Um… ok….” Connie frowned, slightly confused as she wrote this first letter down. “What’s next?”

“Uh, the letter ‘o’.”

“…Ok…” Connie raised an eyebrow as she tried to understand what the Gem leader was doing here. “You can just say the whole word instead of spelling it out, you know.”

“Period.”

“Hm… so… N-O-period?” Connie read, immediately understanding Garnet’s intention as she did. “Oh…”

“Uh… well, at least its to the point?” Mabel said with a small shrug. “Still, I think we’re gonna need a little more than that…”

“‘The end. Forever. And even after that’, Garnet added succinctly.

“‘Sincerely yours, Garnet’!” Mabel finished effervescently, finishing the letter off herself before scribbling a picture of a cat onto it. “Aw, so cute! This’ll be the most adorable rejection letter Jamie’s ever gotten, for sure!”

“Well, at least it’ll be that if nothing else…” Connie said, somewhat worried. “Garnet, do you want us to find Jamie and give this to him for you?”

The Gem leader simply shrugged, showing her general apathy towards the situation as a whole off in her response. “Sure.”

“Well, then let’s get going!” Mabel hopped off the couch, pulling Connie up along with her as they began to head out. “It’s time to be the mailmen to the mailman! Well, technically, we’re mailgirls, but still. To mail and beyond!”

Stan figured that before searching out a new attraction for the shack, he might as well get rid of one of its oldest ones, hence why he had no initial qualms about hauling Goldie off to the dumpster
behind the mall. That is, until he actually got there to do it.

“Tossin’ away garbage, in the garbage can,” the conman sung blithely to himself before lifting the machine up and into the dumpster itself. “Phew!” he exclaimed, wiping the sweat from his brow before he happened to glance back at Goldie’s homely, yet also somehow dejected face popping out of the trash. “Aw, don’t look at me like that. This is how it’s gotta be.”

Ironically enough, at that very moment, a bit of oil happened to leak out of one of Goldie’s eyes, almost as if the machine was “crying” over its abandonment. Stan simply cringed at this, uncomfortable with the strange sense of guilt in his gut as he abruptly shut the dumpster. His remorse didn’t last long however, as he happened to notice a group of giggling kids run past him, all of them clearly eager to head into the building nearby. “What in the…?” the conman trailed off, curious as he followed them into a place of unspeakable horrors.

Immediately, Stan was already overwhelmed by the grating sounds of arcade machines, modern music, and children laughing. But even worse were the sights of the “hip” wall mounted beaver head, the greasy pizza dripping cheese onto the floor as a kid shoved it into his mouth, and the machines dispensing piles of tickets to eager, albeit somewhat greedy children. “Ugh, what is this place?” the conman recoiled in disgust as he looked around. “And why do kids love it so much?”

No sooner had he asked this question than a large crowd of cheering children garnished his attention towards the gaudy stage they were gathered in front of. The kids all watched with apt attention and apparent adoration as the curtains peeled back to reveal a band of animatronic animals, the leader of which was a badger clad in flashy 90’s attire. “Who wants to get baaaaadgered?!” the animatronic shouted, strumming his guitar as the kids in the audience cheered wildly for him.

“What?” Stan asked flatly, not understanding what the appeal was supposed to be here.

“Oh yeah, that’s Will E. Badger,” the restaurant’s manager, a young man with a nametag reading “Gary” remarked casually as he came to stand next to the conman. “He opens for Hoo-Ha and the Jamboree.”

Stan scoffed at this as he looked back to the dancing animatronic on stage, still failing to recognize it as anything special, even as the kids in the audience clamored for the badger. “Now give me your moneeeeey!” Will E. sang, holding his cap out. As gullible as the children were, they all instantly tossed their change and cash into the hat without any qualms whatsoever, much to Stan’s amazed shock.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed with wide eyes, instantly seeing how such a thing could work to earn anybody copious amounts of cash, including him. “Sir, I would like to buy that badger.”

“Pfft, you’re in over your head, gramps,” Gary laughed condescendingly. “Animatronics is a young man’s game. You couldn’t handle the hardcore life of a pizza-robot manager.” He ignored the fierce, bitter glare the conman sent his way as he overheard a child vomiting on the other side of the restaurant and hurried off to take care of it. “Hey, you! Barfin’ in the ball pit! Gary’s on the case!”

“I couldn’t ‘handle’ it, huh?” Stan growled to himself after Gary left. “We’ll just see about that. I’m gonna get that badger….” The conman’s scowl soon turned into a sly grin as he glanced back over at Will E. Badger, knowing that a Revenge Trip would be an ideal way to nab him. “And I think I know the perfect Gem to recruit for the job…”

After what felt like countless failed flirting ventures, Soos finally decided to tap out and take a much-needed break. The handyman was clearly in low spirits over his seemingly complete incapability to talk to anyone of the opposite gender, but even so, Steven and Dipper did what they could to console and reassure him in order to get him back in the game.

“Aw, don’t worry, Soos,” Steven said with a comforting smile. “So what if you weren’t able to talk to any of those ladies without scaring them off and so what if one of them actually beat you away with her purse? That doesn’t mean you won’t find a girl who won’t run away screaming when you try to flirt with them!”

“I think what Steven’s trying to say is that you just need to keep trying,” Dipper remarked a bit more tactfully. “After all, you’ve only been at it for a day; you still have the rest of the week before you absolutely have to get a date.”

“I appreciate what you dudes are trying to do…” Soos began with a dejected sigh. “But let’s face it; this whole dating thing is hopeless… Could this day get any worse?” The handyman was quick to find that it certainly could as he glanced up and happened to see a familiar young couple wander by several feet away. “Oh no! Cousin Reggie!” the handyman gasped upon spotting his cousin and his fiancé, both of whom were chuckling blissfully as they enjoyed each other’s company. “H-he can’t see me like this! I gotta hide!”

Before either of the boys could stop him, Soos hopped up from his seat and hurried into the nearby video game store. Not knowing what else to do, the handyman hurried to the closest shelf of games and tucked down behind it, his nervous panting soon turning into another morose sigh. “This is it, Soos: a lifetime of loneliness,” he bemoaned to himself before taking a pair of games from the shelf. “You’re the only ones who could love me, Fighty Hogg, Dr. Punch Head, M.D.” Soos started to put both games back, only to pause upon noticing a rather interesting looking title sitting in a clearance box in front of him. “Huh, never seen that one before…” he mused as he grabbed the game, its cover depicting a very colorful anime-esque young woman with a wide, endearing smile. “Romance Academy 7… ‘Virtually improve your dating skills. Nine out of ten basement dwellers recommend.’ This is perfect!”

“Well, I guess you are better at games than at flirting,” Dipper noted as him and Steven joined the handyman and noticed the game he had found.

“Oh! This could be just the kind of controlled, consequence free romance practice you need to get you back out there, Soos!” Steven chimed in with full support.

“Um, I’m not sure you wanna buy that game, sir…” the store clerk spoke up from behind the counter with an uncertain frown. “This is the third time someone’s brought it back and there’s a note on it that says ‘destroy at all costs’.”

While Soos didn’t really heed this warning, Steven and Dipper somewhat did as they exchanged a somewhat wary glance before looking to the game again, wondering what could possibly be so bad about it to elicit such an ominous warning. However, this concern was quickly put out of both of their heads as they glanced back at Soos, who was in the process of flirting with one of the store’s female cardboard cutouts. “So, hey there. What’s your deal? Like to-” As the he leaned against the cutout, it of course, fell over, eliciting a frightened cry from the handyman. “Oh no! She’s dead!”

“I… think we’ll take our chances,” Dipper said, both him and Steven knowing that Soos could use all the help he could get. Even if said help came in the form of a seemingly innocent video game, even despite the apparent, more than likely unwarranted warnings against it.
“Where do you think Jamie could be?” Connie asked Mabel as they wandered through downtown in search of the mailman. They carried Garnet’s response letter in tow with them, neither of them thinking about how Jamie might react to it, hence their relative lack of hesitance in wanting to find him and hand it over.

“Who knows? He could be dropping off mail halfway around the world by now!” Mabel exclaimed worriedly.

“Mabel, I’m pretty sure Jamie’s just a local mailman…” Connie noted. “That said, he could be literally anywhere here in Gravity Falls, so maybe we should—”

“Oh, wait! There he is!” Mabel pointed down towards the lake, where the mailman sat upon a log on the shore, wistfully staring up into the afternoon sky. That is, until the pair of girls hurried down to join him. “Jamie!”

“Huh? Oh, hi, Connie and Mabel,” he greeted the girls with a warm smile as they sat down on the log next to him. “You guys come down here to stare at the lake and think about life too?”

“Uh, no…?” Connie frowned, exchanging a confused glance with Mabel. “We just came to—”

“Yeah, life is crazy,” Jamie interrupted, still clearly lost in his own deep thoughts. “One day, you’re right here in Gravity Falls, delivering mail, and then the next thing you know, you’re on a bus to Kansas, following your dreams to becoming an actor. ‘Follow your dreams,’ they said. But no one said anything about all the rejection and sadness there was to be found.” The mailman paused dramatically, letting his words sink in as he clenched his fists and looked to the sky once again. “So many auditions, day after day. So much rejection, day after day! That’s why I came back. One more rejection certainly would have destroyed my fragile heart!”

The girls were both at a complete loss of what to say after hearing all this, especially as Jamie choked out a small sob, completely caught up in the emotion of his monologue. He quickly wiped his tears away however, letting out a small chuckle as he brought himself back down to earth once again. “Sorry, sometimes I get caught up in the ‘drama zone’, you know?”

“Uh… yeah… ‘drama zone’…” Mabel repeated, suddenly quite apprehensive as she remembered Garnet’s letter.

“Oh, by the way,” Connie spoke up, pulling out said letter. “We have something for yo—”

“No, we don’t!” Mabel quickly cut in, stopping Connie before she could hand it over to him. While she was initially confused at first by this, Connie quickly understood exactly why Mabel was suddenly hesitant to give Jamie Garnet’s correspondence upon seeing the infatuated look in the mailman’s eyes as he looked up into the sky and remembered what he had just said about facing rejection.

“Oh, uh, n-no, we…. Uh… never mind!” Connie exclaimed rather awkwardly as Jamie looked to the pair, growing somewhat confused by their odd behavior.

“W-we gotta go now! Somewhere really far away, don’t ask where!” Mabel hurriedly as both her and Connie got up and began to briskly walk away. “Bye!”

“Oh, uh… ok then…” Jamie frowned as he waved them farewell. “Bye!” He paused for a beat as he watched them leave before turning back to his skygazing. “Huh, weird.”
Meanwhile, the girls wasted no time in rushing back for the temple as fast as they could, both of them knowing that they had to come up with an entirely new strategy of setting the mailman’s misguided affections straight. Unfortunately, Garnet herself was no longer there, which meant that they couldn’t go to her for advice on the matter, which meant that they were left to come up to a solution to this rather difficult situation all on their own.

“Augh, how are we supposed to give that letter to Jamie now?” Mabel asked fretfully as she paced around the house. “You heard what he said; any more rejection will ‘destroy his fragile heart’ and we can’t do that!”

“There has to be a better way to do this…” Connie said thoughtfully as she sat on the couching, staring down at Garnet’s letter. “One that won’t ruin Jamie’s emotions with unbridled tactfulness…”

“Maybe we could hire a barber shop quartet or a mariachi band to sing the news to him!” Mabel suggested. “That way it’d be way more fun to hear and not as heavy as a plain old ‘no’, she threw on a scowl, crossing her arms as she mimicked Garnet’s accent.

“Or better yet…” Connie grinned as she began to erase Garnet’s letter entirely. “We can make adjustments. We can match Jamie’s poetic language and let him down easy! I watched some episodes of a torrid soap opera once, so I’m confident that I get the gist of romance!”

“And I’ve read more than a few passionate romance novels and fanfictions in my time,” Mabel grinned daringly. “So between you and me, we’re bound to come up with something that’ll let Jamie know just how much Garnet isn’t into him. The right way!”

“Ok, so…” Connie cleared her throat before she began to dictate what she was writing down. “Dear Jamie, you, dear camellia, expectantly await the light of my moon. Yet my light is more of a scorching, wilting, dry desert heat. And as your metaphorical surgeon, it is with a heavy heart that I urge you to seek a second opinion. I return your heart to you—"

“Also, tell him that his hair is pretty!” Mabel interjected. “And that the blue in his mailman uniform is really his color!”

“Hair… is pretty… Blue… is your color…” Connie muttered, still writing. “Yours, but not really, Garnet."

“It’s perfect,” Mabel grinned, looking over the letter for herself. “Still missing one thing though…”

“Let me guess,” Connie smirked as Mabel started to doodle on the blank space left on the page. “A picture of a kitten?”

“They say that kittens make 99% of breakups less painful,” Mabel professed astutely. “And while this isn’t exactly a breakup, per se, I’m pretty sure the same basic principle still applies.”

Connie couldn’t help but let out a small chuckle at this as her and Mabel got up to take their letter down to the mailbox in the hopes that Jamie would pick it up during his next mail delivery. Both of them were aptly confident that it would not only get Garnet’s message across, but that it would do so in a gentle, painless way that wouldn’t emotionally cripple the mailman for years to come. But for now, all they could do was send their letter out and wait and see what might come of it, hoping that Jamie’s allegedly ‘fragile heart’ would remain intact through it all.
Seeing as how Soos clearly wasn’t getting anywhere with his real-life flirting ventures, he agreed with the boys on heading home not long after her purchased Romance Academy 7. The handyman was rather eager to see what his new game had to offer in the way of teaching him about dating, hence why he wasted no time once he got home in putting the disk into his computer and booting it up.

The first thing Soos was met with was the flashy, pixelated logo for the game’s developer, “Year 2000 Electronics”, giving him a brief taste of what the rest of the software would look like. “Man, I can’t wait for the year 2000,” he remarked with a wistful grin before the game’s very colorful menu loaded up. Upon clicking the start button, the handyman read along to the game’s mistranslated poetic text. “When the cherry petals of magical romance academy are in bloom… anthyding can hadplen.’ That is so true.”

With its introduction over, the game’s screen switched over to a simple classroom setting, though a moment later, a pixelated girl appeared standing over it. She was admittedly quite cute, with long pink hair, a large, computer ribbon bow, a colorful school uniform, bright, sparkly eyes, and a wide, cheery smile. “Oh, hi there!” she quipped, her tone robotic, yet quite effervescent as she held a binder to her chest. “My name is .GIFfany. I’m a schoolgirl at School University. Will you help me carry my books?”

At this prompting, a series of three options popped up, ranging from “Yes of course!”, “Date me now!”, and “Hey look, a squid!” “Hm…” Soos pondered, looking over these choices for a moment. “I’m really feeling number two…” The handyman clicked it, only for the game to buzz loudly in response to his incorrect choice. “Ah! Oh no! I messed up!” he cried, flinching away from the computer. “I-I’m sorry! Please don’t whip your purse out and beat me with it like that other lady!”

“That’s ok,” .GIFfany assured, much to Soos’ surprise. “Try again!”

“Huh?” Soos blinked, taken aback by this lack of an initial rejection. Even so, he collected himself and clicked on the first option, which the game celebrated with the reward of 100 ‘love points’ and a rousing chime of triumph. “Wow, I’m learning!” the handyman grinned, pleased with his newfound success. “And games are making it fun!”

“What would you like to talk about?” .GIFfany implored as the options “Your interests!”, “Samurais!”, and “Squids!” appeared next to her.

“Hm… I’d rather just click your face…” Soos mused as he did just that, eventually eliciting a stilted laugh from .GIFfany.

“Ha ha, you are so funny!” she grinned warmly, much to the handyman’s delight.

“Man, this game is amazing!” he exclaimed. “I don’t know why anyone would abandon it.”

“And I sure you’ll never abandon me, new boyfriend…” .GIFfany remarked, her constant grin taking on almost an almost manic appearance at this, though Soos didn’t notice.

“Boyfriend?” Soos repeated with a coy smirk, somewhat amazed to finally find someone willing to call him by that coveted title. “Oh my, .GIFfany, that’s so totally sweet of you! It’s almost like you’re actually alive!”

“Yes…” .GIFfany glanced to the side, still smiling as always. “Almost…” From there, the program broke into another gale of her robotic, rhythmic laugh, one that Soos couldn’t help but join in on.
“Oh man, you have such a nice laugh!” he chuckled brightly, more than ready to spend the rest of the evening with .GIFfany, given her very amicable personality. What the handyman didn’t notice, however, was the fact that even though the game was apparently running as smooth as silk, his computer wasn’t even plugged in...

The next morning saw Dipper and Steven rising early, both of them still intent on keeping their promise to Soos and helping him land a date. They met up at the shack first, but upon finding that he strangely hadn’t shown up for his shift from Stan, they decided to go over to his house to check on the handyman themselves. The sight they found open entering Soos’ room was rather disconcerting, as the handyman was still sitting in front of his computer, where he had clearly been all night, judging from the heavy bags under his eyes. Yet all the same, he hardly seemed to be tired at all as he continued his ongoing conversation with .GIFfany with a bright smile, completely captivated by the pixelated company he was keeping.

“So that’s basically my entire life story,” Soos finished with a chuckle. “Now you tell me a thing about you!”

“Every time you compliment me, I get another highlight in my eyes!” .GIFfany proclaimed cheerfully, pointing to her already quite detailed eyes.

“Oh… you’re pretty!” Soos ventured, which resulted in .GIFfany letting out an excited squee as her eyes did indeed sparkle. “And pixely!” The program gasped once again, her eyes shining brightly as she gladly took in everything he told her. “And so agreeable!” By now, .GIFfany’s eyes had reached their maximum brightness, to the point that stars, hearts, cat heads and even planets had appeared in them. “Yes!” the handyman cheered, satisfied that his time with the program was being very well spent.

“So… Soos?”

Soos flinched upon hearing a voice other than .GIFfany’s, though he still grinned as he turned to face Steven and Dipper as they stood in his doorway, watching him interact with the game with slight concern. “Oh, hey, dudes! Come in! This game is amazing! I’m making eye contact, going on dates, and I haven’t seen any natural sunlight for thirteen hours! It’s the best!”

“Um… that’s great, Soos,” Steven said with a halfhearted smile. “But since you’re learning so much, don’t you think its time you put all these new skills to use in talking to real girls?”

“Uh… m-maybe…” Soos frowned as he glanced back at .GIFfany, hesitant to leave her hanging. “B-but I’m about to meet her parents! Her dad is an octopus man!”

The boys exchanged a rather dubious glance at this, both of them starting to think that the handyman might be growing a bit too attached to his new game. This was all but confirmed for them as Steven pulled the window blinds open, only for Soos to hurriedly retreat under his desk to hide from the suddenly bright, piercing light of day.

“Come on, Soos,” Dipper urged as he began to pull Soos out from under his desk and out of his room. “We’re going back to the mall to get you a real date. You need to unplug!”

“Ah! B-but I-” Soos cut himself off as he stole one final glance at .GIFfany, who was still beaming brightly on his monitor, just as she always did. “I’ll see you later, .GIFfany! I’ll be back, I swear!”
“Soos, don’t feel bad!” Steven chuckled as he began heading out after Soos and Dipper. “It’s just a game. You don’t have to wish it goodbye, even if it does seem really nice. It’ll be right there waiting for you when you get home. It’s not like it’s going anywhere.”

And with this, the young Gem closed the door behind him as the trio set off for the mall, not noticing .GIFfany as she got the final say in the matter. “Yes… It’s not like I’m going anywhere,” she remarked knowingly right before the computer shut off. An arc of electricity passed from it onto an electronic toy on the shelf, before flowing into the clock next to it and passing into a power outlet before connecting with the power cables outside. Despite the boys’ assumption that .GIFfany would stay put, she had no intentions of doing anything of the sort; no, instead, she was going to follow her new ‘boyfriend’ in any means necessary. Wherever Soos went, then that’s where she went too. Just like the perfect girlfriend should.

Even so, only a moment or two passed after .GIFfany’s departure than the door to Soos’ bedroom opened once again, only this time, Abuelita was the one to poke her head inside it. “Hello…?” she glanced around, making sure no one was there before talking over to the desk and grabbing a small journal. “Time to read Soos’ diary.”

Since Mabel and Connie had been a bit too late in waking up to accompany Steven and Dipper in helping Soos, they decided to spend the day up at the temple instead, mostly to celebrate their own successful navigation in clearing Jamie’s affections for Garnet away. Their purpose there was twofold, however, as they both wanted to be the ones to tell the Gem leader that they had promptly and painlessly delivered her message to the mailman. And as the Gem leader arrived via the warp pad, the girls eagerly did just that.

“Garnet! Garnet! Guess what?” Mabel grinned as she bounded up to the Gem leader, Connie rushing in not too far behind. “We delivered your letter to Jamie yesterday, just like we said we would!”

“Well… we delivered a version of it…” Connie corrected, being a bit more honest.

“Letter?” Garnet tilted her head in slight confusion.

“Uh, yeah… the one for Jamie? Where you basically just turned him asking you on a date down?” Mabel ventured tentatively.

“Jamie?”

“You know, the mailman?” Connie asked with a small frown.


“Uh… well, anyway, we gave him your letter!” Mabel quipped with renewed verve. “And as far as we know, he took it pretty well. And honestly, how couldn’t he take it well seeing as how it was so, uh… well worded!”

“Hm,” Garnet nodded as she succinctly turned to head into the temple, leaving the girls to let out a shared sigh of relief.

“Well, its nice to know that all this love letter business is over with,” Connie remarked as she plopped down on the couch, Mabel doing the same thing. “For a second there, I was worried that things were gonna get way over dramatic.”
“Tell me about it,” Mabel agreed. “Don’t get me wrong, I love some good drama, but I have a feeling this would have turned into the bad kind of drama if it had gone on any—”

“Garnet!” A sudden familiar shout from outside jolted both girls upright in their seats, one that unquestionably belonged to the mailman himself.

“Oh no…” they both muttered in worried unison, though all the same, they rushed outside onto the porch to find exactly what they had been expecting. Standing before the temple was none other than Jamie himself, his posture and expression both awash in passion and desire as he addressed the Gem leader.

“Garnet! Where art thou, my sweet, scorching sunbeam?” he cried zealously, eyes shut as he shouted his proclamations up to the sky more than anything else. “I read thy letter and I understand. Thou hast returneth mine heart!”

“What?!” Mabel gasped, alarmed at just how much the mailman had misinterpreted things.

“N-no!” Connie shook her head, grabbing the porch railing tightly. “That’s not what we—”

“Garnet!” Jamie boldly continued, still completely unaware that the Gem leader wasn’t even present. “You like my hair just as I adore yours! And as my color may be blue, yours is an elegant, majestic magenta! Come to me, Garnet! So that we may caterwaul into the night together like two of the graceful felines you drew upon your letter to me!”

“Jamie!” the girls finally interrupted the mailman’s heartfelt speech, directing his gaze up to them as they looked down at him fretfully.

“Ah! Young ladies Mabel and Connie!” he greeted them brightly. “Pray thee, where is Lady Garnet?”

“Uh, she’s—no, she’s not coming,” Mabel said, trying her best to be firm, but gentle.

“But I’ve come to proclaim my love for my woman!”

“But Jamie, you don’t understand!” Connie tried to reason. “We—” She cut herself off with a gasp as Garnet suddenly emerged from the house, her expression as neutral as ever as she came to stand alongside the girls to see what all the fuss was about.

“Garnet! Ha, I knew you’d come!” Jamie exclaimed with a huge, affectionate grin. “You can tell the girls here all about the beautiful things you wrote to me in your missive!” His smile widened as he produced the letter, holding it up for the Gem leader to see.

Garnet paused only for a moment, tilting her head once more before very bluntly stating the truth. “I didn’t write that.”

“B-but its all right here!” Jamie argued, looking over the letter again. “Stained with my tears of joy as I read ever single beautiful, emotionally charged word!”

“Mm… Connie and I wrote that letter, Jamie!” Mabel blurted out before she could stop herself.

“Mabel!” Connie exclaimed, surprised by her willingness to just openly admit this.

“Sorry, Connie, but its time we came clean,” Mabel shook her head in shame. “We’ve already turned this whole thing into an even bigger mess than it already is.”
“W-wait… I… I don’t understand…” Jamie frowned down at the letter, woe starting to flood his expression. “What’s going on here?”

“We’re so, so sorry, Jamie,” Mabel said with complete sincerity. “We just wanted to let you down easily. We never meant for things to get this… well, dramatic.”

Jamie finally dropped the letter, tears starting to well up in his eyes as he looked to Garnet in complete and utter desperation. “W-Willst thou not scorch me, my darling sun?”

Garnet pulled herself up to her full height at this, prepared to lay down the law where the girls hadn’t been able to before as she spoke with complete, absolute authority. “I am not, nor will I ever be interested. Go away!”

The mailman gasped at this, clutching at his chest as though the Gem leader had physically struck his heart. And she might as well have for all the pain he was apparently going through, his expression rife with grief as he let out a loud, broken, miserable sob. “M-my panache!” he wailed morosely before he abruptly turned and ran off, crying tears of noisy anguish all the while.

Garnet hardly seemed phased by this show of heartbreak as she simply turned and headed back inside without another word, leaving the girls to exchange a guilty, worried glance. “Well, so much for keeping things from getting any worse…” Connie muttered as Mabel let out a defeated sigh, knowing that they had both inadvertently done just that.

Needless to say that after his almost perfect, all-night-long chat with .GIFfany, Soos was anything but excited about plunging headfirst back into the world of real-life flirting. Still, upon Steven and Dipper’s insistence, he went with them back to the mall, but only in the hopes that the day would go by fast so he could be reunited with his newfound pixelated sweetheart once more.

“Ok, Soos, let’s get operation ‘find you a date’ rolling again!” Steven eagerly grinned to the anxious handyman. “I’ll even help you get a head start by finding you a few girls to start out with. Be right back.”

“Steven, wait, how are you going to-” Dipper quickly received an answer to his unfinished question as the young Gem ran into the nearby food court, jumping onto a table and excitably speaking his piece through the megaphone he had brought along with him.

“Hi, everyone!” Steven began brightly and loudly, ignoring how the megaphone screeched glaringly as soon as he turned it on. “Ok, so quick question, how many of you ladies out there are still waiting for that ‘special someone’ to come along?” He paused, smiling as he saw a few hesitant female hands raise within the immediate vicinity. “Great! Uh, well, it’s not great that you guys are single, but its great that you won’t be for much longer, since my buddy Soos over there is just as available as all of you!” The handyman flinched, caught of guard as Steven pointed him out, eliciting a round of confused, rather disinterested glances from the women in the crowd. “So get on over there and mingle to your heart’s content! You won’t regret it!”

“And… here comes security…” Dipper noted upon spotting the pair of officers heading over to remove Steven from his table perch. “I’ll handle this. Stay here and practice on some real girls, okay, Soos?”

“But wait!” Soos cut himself off as Dipper hurried off, effectively leaving him all along. Immediately, the handyman longed for .GIFfany’s comfortable, albeit computerized company,
seeing as how she clearly already taken such a strong liking to him, something that had happened through very little effort on his part. But now, here he was, adrift in a sea of completely unfamiliar women, none of whom were guaranteed to even give him the time of day like .GIFfany so readily had.

“Oh man…” Soos muttered anxiously to himself as he aimlessly stumbled through the crowd, desperately searching for any woman that looked even the slightest bit approachable. “These girls have so many dimensions! And no explanation-ing menus!”

As the handyman continued fearfully backing away in an attempt to seek refuge, he accidentally ended up backing into a woman, knocking both her and her bag to the ground. “Ah! My purse!” she cried in appalled surprise as she started to pick it up while Soos turned to her apologetically.

“Oh no! Undo! Undo!” he exclaimed, expecting this social error to be corrected just as easily as the ones he had made in playing Romance Academy 7 usually were. But of course, it wasn’t.

“You can’t undo who you are…” the woman hissed darkly, sending the handyman a fierce, judgmental glare. Needless to say that Soos panicked at such a harsh response, fleeing before he could even try to smooth the situation over and tucking himself out of the way in front of the television store.

“Ugh, why is this real life flirting thing so hard?!” he groaned, facepalming as he leaned against the storefront. “This is the worst. I wish I was back home with-”

“Hi, Soos!”

Soos jumped at this cheery voice, spinning around to the array of screens on display behind him to find an ironically, familiar pixelated face. “.GIFfany! Oh man, I’m so relieved to see you! Talking to you is way easier than talking to real girls, mostly cause you agree with like almost everything I say. Though I gotta admit, I am kinda confused about how you’re… ya know, here?”

“Oh, Soos,” .GIFfany chuckled coyly, nodding over to the screen next to her, where a perfect double of her appeared before continuing. “I am not an ordinary game.” Another .GIFfany showed up on yet another screen, bewildering Soos even more. “I am... special.” The program’s smile widened across the board as she pointed to an electronic toy dog near one of her screens, making it bark solely upon her electrified command. “I became something more than what the programmers wanted me to be. They tried to delete me.” A rare hint of bitterness entered .GIFfany’s tone as one of the screens showed a room of faceless figures hard at work programming on computers. One of them began to panic as their screen flashed red, only for a burst of lightning to lash out from the machine and zap the programmer, disintegrating them on contact. “So I had to delete them.”

“Whoa…” Soos muttered with wide eyes, taking just the smallest step back away from the screens .GIFfany was occupying. “W-what did you do to them?”

Suddenly, a myriad of .GIFfany’s appeared over all of the TV screens on the store front, all of them beaming warmly as they looked down at Soos. “That’s not important,” she assured, her tone as robotic as ever. “What’s important is that as long as you have me, you won’t have to talk to real girls ever again. You and me can be together.” She paused, only long enough for her presence to overtake all of the screens to create a huge, singular .GIFfany, her arms outstretched to the handyman in loving affection as her many voices echoed together. “FOREVER!”

“Wow, that’s awesome!” Soos exclaimed with a renewed smile, almost completely forgetting the ominous implications the program had laid down just a moment ago. Almost. “Sort of a red flag, but mostly awesome! So, what do you wanna do now?”
“Anything you want, Soos!” .GIFfany obliged brightly. And the program was true to her word on this as she happily went along with the handyman’s suggestion of riding the small stationary train in the mall’s kid’s zone. As Soos sat on the train itself, .GIFfany had connected with the machine and put herself on its screen, riding a virtual train within it. Even so, the pair was completely lost in laughter throughout the ride, both of them clearly enjoying each other’s company as much as they had the all of the previous night. While the handyman couldn’t quite explain it, he felt as though all of his former anxiety about talking to girls completely vanished when he was with the program, who in an of herself seemed completely and utterly infatuated with him. The idea of not having to deal with the pressure of actually find a real flesh and blood date was a very enticing one to Soos, given his complete failure to do so thus far, which was why he figured he’d just ride things out with .GIFfany, both literally as far as the train ride went, and figuratively. After all, certainly there wasn’t any harm in being in a relationship with what was essentially a set of somehow sentient, incredibly devoted pixels. Right?

Despite how much fun Soos and .GIFfany were having with their train ride, it soon came to an end as the handyman’s turn ran out. The screen the program was on went black, and as the train itself instructed him to insert fifty cents to continue, Soos eagerly searched his pockets, only to let out a disappointed sigh a second later. “Aw man… out of quarters… And I was having so much fun too!”

The handyman’s dejection was soon interrupted by a nearby laugh, one that came from a young woman who had tucked herself away behind the nearby Meat Cute stand. “Oh, sorry!” she chuckled again, stepping forward and allowing Soos to get a better look at her. She was rather pretty, with a full, but decent figure, light brown hair pulled into a loose, low ponytail, and a colorful uniform that told of her position as an employee of the food cart she stood by. Even so, she gave Soos a grin that was bemused rather than mocking, something the handyman wasn’t really used to, giving how women usually met him with either disinterest or fear. “I didn’t mean to laugh at you. I just think its awesome that you’re a grown man riding a little train like that! You’re like, totally owning it.”

“Huh?” the handyman blinked, unsure of what to make of such a nonjudgmental sentiment. “O-oh yeah. I’m just like, if it’s fun, uh, do it. You know?”

“Exactly!” the woman readily agreed. “Being an adult is the worst. Skewering meat, remembering to pay bills… I just wanna ride tiny trains all day.”

“At least you get to work at Meat Cute,” Soos noted, pointing to her apron. “Extreme lunch meats are the food of the future.”

“I feel the same way, and it’s a legacy I’m proud to be apart of,” the woman said with an intentionally overdramatic grin that soon broke into another small chuckle. “So, do you have a job?”

“Oh, yeah, I work over at the Mystery Shack on the other side of town,” the handyman said, grinning himself now. “Have you ever been there?”

“No, I’ve actually never heard of it before,” the woman shook her head, though she was still smirking all the while. “Sounds pretty mysterious though.”

“It sure is! It’s—ohhhh! I see what you did there!” Soos laughed. “Nice one, dude! Oh, by the way, I’m Soos.”

“Melody,” the woman introduced herself with a warm smile as they shook hands. “You know, you’ve got me pretty curious about this Mystery Shack place. Guess I’ll have to check it out
sometime.”

“Oh, you totally should,” Soos nodded before glancing down to the train he was still sitting on. “Speaking of stuff you should check out, if you like robots for kids, you should definitely try the best restaurant of all time!”

“You mean…” Melody began with a growing smile before both her and Soos said its name in excited unison.

“Hoo-Haw Owl’s Pizzamatronic Jamboree!”

Melody broke into another gale of laughter at this, a slight blush lighting up her cheeks as she fiddled with her hair a bit. “Aw, what? You’ve heard of Hoo-Haw Owl’s? I loved that place when I was a kid!”

“Oh yeah, dude! There’s one right in this mall,” Soos grinned brightly. “I should show you sometime.”

“I’m… free around eight…” Melody offered, her blush reddening just the slightest bit.

“Boom! Done,” the handyman agreed, more than happy to oblige.

“Perfect,” Melody smiled cheerfully as she turned to leave, though not before handing Soos off a pair of quarters. “See you then.”

Soo was still smiling himself as he watched her walk away, waving after her as she did the same. “What a nice lady,” he remarked, glad for the enjoyable conversation he had just had with her and already looking forward to their meeting later that evening. “Well, back to riding this tiny train for children.”

Before the handyman could do so, however, he found himself abruptly tacked off of his train and onto the ground by a very excited Steven. “Ahhhh! Soos! You did it!” the young Gem exclaimed, completely elated as he hopped to his feet while Dipper ran over to join them.

“Huh? Did what?” Soos frowned in confusion as he sat up.

“Don’t be so modest, Soos!” Dipper grinned, apparently just as pleased as Steven was. “We saw the whole thing. That was amazing! You talked to a real girl, and you got a date!”

“I did?” Soos balked, still completely bewildered.

“Yeah, you did!” Steven chimed in brightly. “And we’re so proud of you! We told you you could do it, just by being yourself, which is what you did and it worked perfectly! Ah, this is so exciting! I can’t wait to tell Mabel and Connie all about it!”

“You were in the zone, you made eye contact,” Dipper explained to the still rather confused handyman. “It was like you’ve done this a million times before! Don’t you see? That game actually worked!”

“And now that you’re such a pro, you don’t need it anymore,” Steven added. “You can just toss it out!”

“T-toss it?” Soos asked, suddenly uncertain as he remembered exactly what, or rather who was in that game. “Dudes, I don’t… I don’t think I can do that. I like .GIFfany. She’s good to me. She’s predictable.”
“Soos, can a computer game go with you to Reggie’s engagement party with you?” Dipper asked knowingly.

“Uh…” the handyman hesitated upon hearing this, still quite torn, even if the answer was quite obvious here. As much as he appreciated .GIFfany and the company and help she had provided him with, Soos couldn’t very well ever actually have her as a real girlfriend, or even a real date for that matter. And while yes, he had literally just met Melody, at the very least she was a real person, one who, if his supposed “date” with her that evening was a success, could possibly lead to a legitimate relationship, or at least a date to Reggie’s engagement, if nothing else. So as much guilt as it already brought the handyman, he knew what he had to do. “I-I guess you dudes are right… I just don’t know how .GIFfany will react to this though…”

“Aw, Soos, you don’t have to worry about that,” Steven assured. “.GIFfany’s only a game; it can’t really get mad at you or anything. Heck, I’m pretty sure the worst it can do is give you a ‘game over’, which isn’t the end of the world, is it?”

Soos apprehensively agreed with this as he began to leave with the boys, though he failed to notice that, as soon as he had departed, the train screen spark back to life, bearing a certain pink-haired pixelated figure watching him go, one that was far from pleased with what she had just seen and heard…

Though several hours had past since Jamie tearfully fled from Garnet’s presence, both Mabel and Connie still felt quite low about the entire situation at large, knowing that they were largely to blame for how sour things had went. After all, it was their flowery letter that had given the mailman such a drastic false impression about the Gem leader’s feelings, thus prompting him to making his feelings known to her directly and eventually tying into his eventual, inevitable heartbreak. And despite their earlier attempt at trying to rectify this uncomfortable problem, this was something that both Connie and Mabel found themselves at a complete loss to fix.

“I feel so bad for poor Jamie…” Mabel sighed as her and Connie sat at the foot of the steps leading to the temple. “His fragile little overdramatic heart was completely crushed! And it’s all our faults!”

“W-well, look on the bright side,” Connie tried to reassure. “Jamie will probably bounce back from this in no time. He’s probably gonna show up with the mail any moment now.”

Mabel perked up somewhat at this, but before she had a chance to agree with it, the girls were interrupted by a call from a bit down the hill. “’Scuse me, kids!” Gravity Falls’ other mailperson, Barb, shouted up to them in her usual quite loud way, mail in hand. “I’m looking for the home of… Steven Universe?”

“Uh, well, he’s not here right now,” Connie said, exchanging a glance with Mabel as they went to meet her. “But we’re friends of his, so-”

“Eh, good enough for me,” Barb concluded with a shrug. “Just figured I’d hand off his mail to someone, since Jamie ain’t up to coming all the way out here and ol’ Stan’s already mad enough as it is about all of his mail bein’ so late for the past month or so which means we can’t skimp out on this neck of the woods anymore.”

“Wait, hold on,” Mabel interjected with a suddenly concerned frown. “Jamie’s… not up to it? What’s that mean?”
“Oh, it means that poor kid’s emotions have been destroyed!”

“What?!” both girls gasped in equal worry at this.

“Yeah, he’s a mess!” Barb nodded, a hint of pity in her tone. “Said he couldn’t bear to deliver mail on this route after having his love spurned.” She struck a dramatic pose at this, one that was very reminiscent of the kind Jamie himself would strike. “He said it just like this. Like when he’s in the ‘drama zone’. Then he clenched his fist and closed his eyes like this. Full of drama till the end. Anyway, here’s a book of coupons,” she finished, handing said coupon book off to Connie. “Have a good one!”

As soon as Barb had left, both girls let out a unified groan of disappointment, largely with themselves for just how severe this had all gotten. “Ugh, this stinks!” Mabel moaned, flopping back down onto the porch step. “We were just trying to help Jamie, and the only thing we ended up doing is ruining any chances he might have had at happiness! I mean, as much happiness as a mailman can get what with being chased by dogs all the time and the whole having to deliver mail in ‘rain, sleet, or snow’ thing.”

“Come on, Mabel, it can’t be that cut and dry,” Connie remarked as she also sat down. “There’s gotta be something we can do to smooth all this over, once and for all.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?” Mabel asked rather flatly, clearly dejected with how far their ultraistic attempts had fallen.

“Uh well… we could… there’s always… hm…” Connie trailed off into thought, largely unsure of what could be done to ease the disaster they had unintentionally caused. Before she could put much thought into formulating any kind of solution however, the girls’ fretful thinking was soon interrupted by the boys’ sudden, triumphant arrival.

“Connie! Mabel!” Steven exclaimed somewhat breathlessly as he hurried up to the pair, Dipper hurrying not too far behind. “You guys will never believe what just happened, it was the most amazing thing we’ve ever seen and it was so awesome, and I wish you two could have been there because it was the best, and—”

“Whoa, you might wanna slow down there a second, Steven,” Dipper interjected, something that the girls were rather thankful for, seeing as how they were quite lost. “We’ll have plenty of time to tell them about what happened with Soos. For now, though, I’ve been wondering… where have you guys been the past two days?” he asked Mabel and Connie. “I thought you were gonna catch up with us and help us with Soos after you delivered Jamie’s letter to Garnet.”

“Well, we were gonna do that…” Mabel began with a defeated huff. “Until it turned out that letter was actually a love letter from Jamie to Garnet.”

“Whaaaat?” Steven asked with a sharp gasp. “A love letter? But that’s… wait, Garnet can’t—”

“We know,” Connie cut in, wanting to the tale of their grave missteps as short as possible. “And she was gonna just turn him down point-blank until we came up with our own ‘fancy’ letter to try and let him down gently. Unfortunately, he… didn’t really get the point of what we were trying to say…”

“So… what happened then?” Dipper asked with just the slightest smirk of amusement, finding the girls’ plight to initially be rather humorous without knowing just how heavy it actually was. “Don’t tell me he actually tried to ask Garnet out, did he?”
“Actually… he did…” Mabel replied hesitantly, both of the boys losing all sense of levity towards the situation upon seeing how rarely downcast she was. “And she… sorta, completely… shut him down, like really harshly. And now he’s a heartbroken mess and its all because we had to stick our noses where it didn’t belong and we don’t know what to do to make things right and it’s the worst!”

“Oh man…” Steven frowned sympathetically. “It sounds like it’s the worst… I feel so sorry for Jamie… Is there anything we can do to help?”

“Not unless you can go back in time and keep Jamie from ever falling in love with Garnet,” Connie sighed before trying her best to put on a small smile. “But enough about all this sad stuff; what was this big, ‘amazing’ thing you guys wanted to tell us about?”

“Well…” Dipper began with a steadily growing smirk before Steven burst out with the news.

“We helped Soos get a date!” the young Gem cheered, stars of excitement in his eyes.

“What?!” the girls exclaimed, both of them quite surprised to hear this.

“Ok, well, technically, he did most of the heavy lifting on his own,” Dipper clarified. “But still, I like to think we pushed him in the right direction.”

“And we watched it happen and it was like something out of an adorable romantic comedy!” Steven quipped cheerfully. “Soos really hit it off with the lady he met; their going out on their first date tonight and everything! I can already tell they’re gonna make such a cute couple!”

“Oh… well that’s… great…” Connie said with a halfhearted smile, glad for Soos’ success, but still rather regretful about her and Mabel’s failure.

“I can’t believe it,” Mabel remarked, feeling much of the same way. “You guys managed to matchmake perfectly on your first try, while we end up making a huge mess of things even though we’re both self-proclaimed romance experts! It’s not fair!”

“Aw, don’t worry, Mabel,” Steven encouraged. “I’m sure you guys will figure some way to fix all this out!”

“Yeah,” Dipper agreed with a nod. “We’d help, but we kinda promised Soos we’d help him gear up for his date tonight first, so maybe after that.”

“Can you believe they’re going out to Hoo-Haw Owl’s Pizzamatronic Jamboree?” Steven asked with a smile as him and Dipper started to head off. “They’re so lucky! That place is so much fun! Anyway, see you guys later!”

“Fun, huh…?” Mabel mused after the boys had left, a small smile started to spread across her expression as an idea started to form. “You know, Connie, I think a little fun could be exactly the thing we need to smooth things over between Jamie and Garnet…”

“What do you mean?” Connie asked, raising an incredulous eyebrow.

“I mean, we should set those two up on an apology date!” Mabel exclaimed with newfound verve, jumping to her feet. “Nothing too serious, just a nice, controlled way for them to meet on equal ground so they can finally talk all this through. And where better for them to have that kind of emotionally heavy conversation than a place as loud and colorful as Hoo-Haw Owl’s?”

“Huh, that’s… actually kind of a good idea,” Connie mused. “Well, aside from it happening at a
place like Hoo-Haw Owl’s… That seems just a little… tone deaf?”

“Oh, I’m sure it’ll work out fine!” Mabel concluded with a wave of her hand. “Besides, it’s not like it can make things any worse than they already are, right?”

“Hopefully not,” Connie remarked. “You know, unless something totally crazy happens, but maybe we’ll get lucky this time and things will finally go off without a hitch for a change.”

“That’s the spirit!” Mabel quipped as Connie stood so they could carry their newfound plan out. “Now let’s go clean up this huge anti-romantic mess we’ve made, once and for all!”

Before preparing for his date with Melody, Soos had wisely decided to take care of the only loose end he was facing, as the boys had suggested. Said loose end being .GIFfany, who initially seemed just as bright and bubbly as usual when the handyman turned her game on. Little did he know, however, that this upbeat façade was only barely masking the untapped rage and jealousy beneath it.

“Hey, so, uh, .GIFfany?” Soos began, shifting somewhat uncomfortably in his seat. “We… we gotta talk…”

“Of course,” .GIFfany nodded in a somewhat anticipating grin. “I am programmed to find anything you say interesting. Unless what you have to say has to do with you breaking up with me…”

Soos’ eyes widened somewhat with this, a large part of him fearing that the program was already onto him. Still, he knew he couldn’t dance around this issue any longer; as far as he could tell, it ending this bizarre relationship would happen now or never. “Uh… w-well… have you ever had to choose between two things you like, but don’t know which one is right for you? I mean, I’m just thinking long-term… M-maybe I should be with someone a little less… ‘beep-boop’, you know?”

.GIFfany’s manner very abruptly shifted upon hearing this, her cheerfulness suddenly diminishing into bitter anger as she scowled at the handyman disapprovingly.

“I don’t think you know what you’re saying, Soos,” she growled, her pixelated hands clenched in tight fists at her sides. “No one loves you more than me! The girls out there will just make fun of you!”

“Y-you really think so?” Soos asked, shrinking back in his chair a bit. A part of him felt as though what the program had just said was in fact true, seeing as how most of the girls he had tried flirting with in the past had done just that. And yet… one of them hadn’t. So what exactly did that really mean?

“I know so!” .GIFfany shot back fiercely. “Besides, we had a deal! You bought my game, you carried my books, you’re my boyfriend! So sit down in that chair and love me like I love you!”

“Uh… I don’t think I like the way you’re acting…” Soos remarked, rather unsettled by just how sporadically demanding the program was being.

Of course, his hesitance only made .GIFfany’s already palpable anger completely explode into raw fury as she began pounding on her end of the computer screen amidst furiously shouting at the handyman. “I won’t let another girl take you away from me, Soos! You hear me!?”

“W-whoa! .GIFfany, calm down!” Soos pleaded, genuinely frightened by the program’s incredible rage.
“You’re MINE, Soos!” .GIFfany practically screamed. “MINE! No one else’s! We’re going to be together forever, whether you like it or not!”

As she continued her heated rant, the handyman hurriedly looked for a way to escape her obsessive wrath, and he fortunately found one in the form of the game controller sitting on the desk in front of him. “Uh… pause!” he exclaimed, pressing just that.

“How do you hear me!? MIII-” the program abruptly stopped short, her expression flashing to one of alarm as she froze, finally paused right in the middle of her chaotic episode.

The handyman glanced around nervously for a beat after .GIFfany went silent, before letting out a tentatively relieved sigh. “Yikes… that got pretty intense… I’m sorry, .GIFfany,” he frowned as he took the game disk out of his computer, not noticing the small spark that lashed out from it as he did. “But maybe having a cursed robo-girlfriend wasn’t such a good idea. I’m taking you back to the video game store after my date with Melody.”

Though Soos felt somewhat bad about how harshly things had ended between him and .GIFfany, he still put her disk back in its case before pocketing it and heading out, knowing that he couldn’t think too much about it right now. After all, he had to get ready for his first date with an actual girl. And besides, seeing as how .GIFfany had just shown her true crazy and obsessive colors, perhaps it was for the best that he was cutting his ties with her, once and for all.

However, as soon as the handyman had left his room, his computer hummed back to life on upon its own accord. The monitor flashed with the distorted image of .GIFfany herself, her now void eyes still filled with untold anger before she left the screen entirely, intent on following Soos once more, and claiming him as hers and hers alone.

“You should have seen that thing, Amethyst,” Stan remarked to the purple Gem as he finished gathering up the last few supplies for their upcoming Revenge Trip. “That animatronic badger sings, it dances, it’s the perfect money taking attraction! But he won’t sell it to me!”

“K, Stan, I’m gonna be real with you here for a sec,” Amethyst said, casually laying back on the gift shop counter. “This whole badger thing is… really dumb. Actually, it might just be about the dumbest reason you’ve called me up for a Revenge Trip ever. But hey, who am I to stop you from wanting to get even with this weird earring-wearing creep you keep complaining about?”

“So you’re in then?” the conman asked, pulling a large black suitcase onto the table.

“You know I am,” the purple Gem grinned, hopping off the counter. “Even if it is dumb, at least it’ll be good for a laugh to watch you rob some goofy kid’s pizza joint. Like the ‘professional’ thief you are.”

“Oh, I plan on being professional about this,” Stan retorted firmly, pulling a pair of black gloves on. “And careful too. No more Colombian nights.”

“Alright, Stan,” Wendy spoke up as she noticed the conman and the purple Gem prepping for their latest escapade. “This is weird, even for you. Do you need to talk or something?”

“Nothing you can say will change my mind, Wendy,” Stan concluded dismissively. “Sometimes, a man has to steal an animatronic badger to stay in this crazy game called life.”

“Or… you could just not care,” Wendy retorted, crossing her arms.
“Aw, but where’s the fun in that?” Amethyst asked with a wry smirk. “Besides, it’s not like this is the first time either of us have been around the bend. This kind of Revenge Trip fare is a piece of cake for two pros like us.”

“Uh, ok…” Wendy frowned, still not entirely convinced as she glanced over at the conman preparing to leave through the open window. “Still, Amethyst, are you really sure you should be enabling Stan like this? I mean, he is kinda-”

“If you finish that sentence with the word ‘old’, then you’re fired!” Stan interrupted with a harsh scowl, prompting Wendy to wisely hold her piece.

“Uh, no offense, but you are pretty old, Stan,” Amethyst pointed out with a somewhat teasing grin, much to the conman’s annoyance, though she elaborated immediately after. “But the good news is that I’m even older than you are, and what’s even better is that we’re both still rockin’ it with the revenge schemes through and through, so that jerky guy who made fun of you is gonna totally eat his words once we steal his singing badger thing!”

“Yeah!” Stan cheered with newfound verve upon hearing the purple Gem’s support. “That’s the spirit! No one tells Stan Pines he’s out of the game! No one tells-” The conman was cut off as he abruptly fell out of the window he was trying to climb out of, a clear cry of pain escaping him as he landed in the shrubs beside the shack.

“I’ll get your orthopedic back pillow,” Wendy called to him, leaning out the window to make sure he wasn’t too badly hurt.

“Thank you!” Stan responded somewhat weakly, still trying to pull himself up off the ground.

“Woo!” Amethyst exclaimed excitedly as ran up to the window herself, more than ready for their latest Revenge Trip. “Let’s go break some laws!” Without any further ado, she daringly jumped out the window herself, only to land squarely on top of Stan, resulting in yet another loud groan from the already injured conman. “Whoops. Sorry, Stan.”

Under Steven and Dipper’s direction, Soos had made sure to show up to the mall quite early for his date, mostly so the boys could go over the last minute pointers they had to offer him. The trio congregated in the food court, the importance of this event not lost on any of them as the boys drilled the handyman on exactly what he was to do to make this date a rousing success.

“You got this, Soos!” Steven encouraged boldly as Dipper handed the handyman off some much-needed water to refresh him. “We believe in you! Just remember everything you’ve learned so far. How does she look?”

“Nice!” Soos answered with determination.

“What are her stories?”

“Interesting!”

“And who’s going to pay for dinner?”

“Soos is!” Soos shouted, jumping out of his seat as he prepared to tackle this great challenge head on.
“Now… date!” Dipper exclaimed with the blow of an air horn, prompting the handyman to rush forward with a courageous battle cry. The boys watched him go with eager smiles, both of them unanimously proud of everything they had accomplished in helping Soos reach this previously unattainable point.

“Aw… they grow up so fast…” Steven remarked warmly as both him and Dipper silently wished the handyman the best of luck, even if they did plan on making themselves available to the handyman throughout his date, if need be.

With purpose in his step, Soos steadily approached Hoo-Haw Owl’s, excitement and nervousness simultaneously forming in his gut as he spotted Melody standing outside its entrance, patiently waiting for him. For a brief moment, GIFfany’s warning of real girls making fun of him found purchase in his thoughts, but the handyman was quick to push the thought from his mind. He wasn’t about to let the memory of the insanely manic program, or anything else for that matter, ruin tonight, not after how hard for him to get here in the first place.

“Oh, hi, Soos!” Melody greeted the handyman with a bright smile as she spotted him approaching.

“Melody! Are you ready for a-” Soos paused, looking to the script the boys had written on his hands earlier to help him along. “Date with me?”

Melody chuckled at this, clearly bemused and charmed by the handyman’s lack of subtlety. “I totally am,” she said, taking the first step by linking arms with Soos as they both headed into the restaurant.

As usual, Hoo-Haw Owl’s was noisy and lively, with children running about, playing arcade games and eating pizza to their hearts’ content. While Connie still thought it was a rather irreverent place for Garnet to smooth things over with Jamie, Mabel was completely confident with her plan as she led the ever-stoic Gem leader to an empty table to wait for the mailman.

“We’re super glad you agreed to come all the way out here tonight, Garnet,” Mabel grinned as they all sat down. “Now, Jamie is supposed to show up any minute now, so when he gets here, we need you to be nice and gentle with him.”

“Yeah, be sure to apologize for how things went earlier today,” Connie added. “And then let him down easily this time, you know, so you won’t completely shatter his heart all over again.”

“And if worse comes to worse, then maybe you could just zap his brain to make him forget that any of this happened in the first place!” Mabel suggested. “That… that is something you can do, right?”

“Don’t worry,” Garnet assured flatly. “I know what I’m going to say.”

“Oh… y-you do?” Connie asked, exchanging a somewhat worried glance with Mabel at this.

“Mm hm,” Garnet nodded. “But that’s not the only reason why I’m here.”

“Uh… then why else did you come?”

 “…You’ll see,” the Gem leader replied, adjusting her shades knowingly and leaving the girls with an abundance of unanswered questions.

Meanwhile, just a few tables away, Soos and Melody’s date was getting off to a decent, if not somewhat initially awkward start. “Man, I could really go for some complimentary breadsticks right now,” Melody remarked, glancing around the restaurant for their server.
“Uh, one time I was so hungry, I ate the decorative bamboo at a Chinese restaurant,” Soos quipped, nervously at first, before easing up a bit. “Like a big old panda!”

“You’re hilarious,” Melody chuckled, eliciting a relieved laugh from the handyman himself as he realized that the date was going rather well so far, even if he was admittedly still on edge for reasons he couldn’t quite explain.

“Yeah, well, you know… I just sorta say whatever pops into my, uh…” Soos trailed off as he took a sip from his water, his gaze drifting up to the arcade screens behind Melody, only to spot something that made him freeze with apt fear. Despite all logic, .GIFfany was there, her expression severe as she stared at Soos piercingly, a subtitle reading “You paused me?” appearing below her.

Unable to hold back his shock at the program’s unexpected return, the handyman accidentally spit out his water onto Melody before breaking into a round of panicked coughs. “Soos, are you ok?” Melody asked with concern as she wiped the water off of her.

“No!” Soos exclaimed as a knee-jerk reaction before quickly correcting himself. “I, uh, I’m fine! Everything’s fine! T-there’s totally nothing creepy going on at all!”

“You sure?” Melody frowned, not noticing .GIFfany appear on the screens right above her head. “You’re spitting an awful lot…”

Soos barely stifled a gasp as he watched the screens, reading .GIFfany’s bitter messages to him of “You left me? For HER?” before a pixelated version of Melody’s face showed up on the screen before quickly being x-ed out by the jealous program herself. The handyman didn’t even have to think twice about the frightening implications of this, which was why he knew he had to get some help in dealing with .GIFfany, and fast.

“Uh, can you sit tight?” he asked Melody amidst breaking out into a cold sweat. “I have to go to the bathroom for a long time. Not in a weird way!”

Before Melody could even ask any questions, Soos ran off, quickly finding Dipper and Steven laying low at a nearby table along with Mabel and Connie, who had joined them there to scope out the situation with Jamie and Garnet from afar. Still, the kids were all rather confused and concerned upon seeing the handyman plop down into the booth with them, his breathing short and frantic as he nervously glanced around at the surrounding arcade screens.

“Soos, what are you doing out there?” Dipper asked, knowing that Soos’ sudden panic wasn’t what they had drilled him on.

“I’ve got a big problem, guys,” the handyman explained in a distraught whisper. “I’m being stalked by .GIFfany!”

“.GIFfany?” all four of the kids questioned, the girls not knowing who he was referring to while the boys were surprised to hear Soos bring the program up again.

“Or maybe its pronounced ‘.JIFfany’? I was never really sure…” Soos mused, even though such a detail hardly mattered at the moment.

“Soos, get a grip on yourself,” Dipper urged. “.GIFfany can’t stalk you because she’s not real.”

“Yeah, and besides,” Steven added. “We thought you got rid of that game already.”

Before Soos could explain what had really happened, the entire group was alerted to the program’s ominous presence on the screens just above them. .GIFfany’s expression was set in a tight glare as
she set her sights on Soos alone, showing that she wasn’t about to let him go so easily, much to the alarm of the kids and the handyman.

“Wait, that’s .GIFfany?” Connie asked, still rather lost when it came to this situation.

“Aw, she’s really pretty!” Mabel quipped. “Really scary, but still, pretty!”

“Take it from someone who brought an arcade game to life, this will not end well,” Dipper said, referencing the Rumble McSkirmish fiasco.

“D-don’t worry,” Soos tried to reassure. “I’m pretty sure she’s stuck on TV screens.” Almost as soon as the handyman had said this, .GIFfany was quick to prove him wrong as she spread down to the arcade machines, quickly spreading across them at a rapid pace as she made her way up towards the stage. “Uh oh…” Soos gulped upon witnessing this, wasting no time in getting up and hurrying back to Melody in the hopes of saving her from .GIFfany’s obvious wrath. “So, uh, hey, you wanna move this date far away into the woods away from all electronics and people?” he asked his date, putting on a fake confident smile, even if he really was anything but.

“What? But the floor show’s about to start,” Melody reminded, nodding up to the stage as the curtains began to open and the band of animatronics began playing their cheerful opening number.

“Oh man, this is getting really serious!” Steven exclaimed to the others as they remained sitting by at their tucked away table. “We gotta do something to help Soos!”

“But wait!” Connie interjected with a surprised gasp, pointing over to the other side of the restaurant, where a certain mailman sat, his head buried in his heads as a sign of absolute misery. “There’s Jamie!”

“And there’s Garnet!” Mabel added as the Gem leader started heading over to join him. “Oh, fingers crossed that her words don’t destroy him this time!”

The kids continued watching as Garnet silently took a seat at the table across from Jamie, startling the mailman out of his depressive revere. “G-Garnet!” he exclaimed, quickly sitting up. “You… you actually came. A-are you here to crush what’s left of my withered, cracked heart with the mighty hammer of your agonizing rejection?”

Garnet didn’t answer this right away, but instead took pause, almost as if she was trying to figure out what to say before giving Jamie what he deserved: the truth. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“T-then will you go out with me?” the mailman asked, a small hint of hope in his tone.

“No!” Garnet asserted, completely firm in her response.

“B-but… I’ve loved you since I first saw you…”

The Gem leader let out a frustrated sigh at this, shaking her head at Jamie’s continued persistence. “Jamie, you’re not-”

Garnet was abruptly cut off as the floor show got into full swing, the loud music making it hard to get any point across as the Hoo-Haw Owl animatronic shouted out over top of it.

“Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!” the animatronic began brightly as he strummed his banjo. “Who wants to hear Hoo-Haw the Owl? Hoo! Hoooo…” The owl trailed off as it suddenly shut down, its form dropping limp as the upbeat music faded into a slow, ominous singular banjo tune. The bright lights on stage abruptly shifted over to the badger cheerleader, who seemed to be the only
“Hello, friends!” she exclaimed brightly, in a voice that was immediately familiar to Soos, if no one else in the audience. “Hoo-Haw the Owl is dead.” At this starkly dark remark, the stage lights suddenly went dark altogether, save for the spotlight still focused on the possessed cheerleader animatronic. “This next song goes out to my forever boyfriend, Soos.”

“Soos, what’s going on?” Melody asked, turning to the handyman with disturbed alarm upon hearing this.

“No time to explain!” Soos exclaimed fearfully, grabbing Melody by the hand and pulling her out of the booth. “We gotta get outta here!”

“The only way out, Soos, is in my arms!” GIFfany shouted amidst controlling not just the cheerleader animatronic, but the entire band of them as their eyes also began glowing red. “After them!”

As the machines threateningly began lurching off the stage, the restaurant was thrown into a complete and utter uproar, with its young patrons and their parents rushing to escape from this animatronic onslaught. As Soos continued pulling Melody towards the exit, the kids also hopped out of their booth to flee along with him, though Garnet took a slightly different approach.

“W-whoa!” Jamie gasped, tucking under the table a bit as Garnet rose to stand, her gauntlets forming as one of the animatronics steadily marched towards them. “What’s happening?!”

Garnet largely ignored his question as she swiftly dodged an empty plate the animatronic hurled at her. “I saw this coming,” she remarked, preparing to move from the defensive to the offensive. “Just stay here and keep out of the way.”

“But wait!” Jamie worriedly exclaimed, reaching after the Gem leader as she bravely leapt into action. “Garnet! My fierce, majestic moon! Don’t leave me here to—ah!” The mailman was abruptly cut off as another animatronic rammed its fist into the table he was at, prompting him to get up and flee with a cry of apt terror, despite Garnet’s instructions.

Right before this bout of chaos broke out in the restaurant, Stan and Amethyst had gotten to work on sneaking in through the back and securing the Will E. Badger animatronic without anyone taking notice of their heist at all.

“So this is that great ‘money making’ badger you keep going on about?” the purple Gem asked, not that impressed as the conman tied it to a dolly. “Huh, you know I thought it’d be a bit less… lame?”

“Hey, it may not look like much, but this guy is gonna earn me its weight in gold,” Stan retorted, tightening up his knots. “And… done. Out with the old, in with the new. I feel invincible!”

Amethyst was about to respond with another sly remark, but before she could, the animatronic suddenly powered on, completely out of nowhere. “Uh… Stan?” the purple Gem began with wide eyes, only for her surprise to spike as the badger broke free from its bonds and turned to punch Stan square in the jaw.

“Ow!” the conman shouted, falling to the ground from the heavy blow. “W-what the-”

“Who wants to get badgered?!” the animatronic threatened, shades painted red as he stood over Stan, ready to go in for another hit. Fortunately though, its hand was stilled as Amethyst’s whip tightly coiled around it.
“Hey, badger brain!” the purple Gem scowled, pulling back her whip a bit as the animatronics’ head turned completely around to face her. “Back off!” The animatronic simply let out a wild battle cry as it yanked its arm back, tossing Amethyst along with it into the wall near Stan. The pair had relatively little time to recover from the blows they had suffered as the badger prepared to go in for more, its suddenly violent behavior being more than enough to elicit fearful gasps from them both.

Inside of the restaurant itself, the animatronics seemed to be even more aggressive under .GIFfany’s control. While most of the other patrons had safely fled, the program had made sure to bar off any exists before Soos could reach them, trapping not only him, but Melody and the kids inside the store and cornering them as the animatronics all started to gang up on them.

“I’m sorry, Soos, but you can’t run away from our relationship!” .GIFfany proclaimed, pointing towards a nearby skee-ball machine as her electrical current reached it, giving her complete control over it. A barrage of balls flew out from it, shooting towards the group until Soos pulled an arcade cabinet down to itself, taking refuge behind it along with Melody and the kids.

“So about all this,” the handyman said to his confused date in this brief moment of tentative reprieve. “I may have purchased a dating simulator that obtained sentience and went crazy…”

“Oh, I am crazy,” .GIFfany spoke up upon overhearing this as she stepped forward. “Crazy for you, Soos!” At this, lightning sparked out of the hands of the animatronic the program was possessing, the bursts catching small bursts of fire as they landed near the group hiding behind the arcade cabinet. Some of these flames happened to catch in Melody’s hair, eliciting a fearful cry from her before Soos hurried to help her pat it out.

“Oh no! Melody, I’m so sorry,” the handyman said with sincere remorse for the disaster he had inadvertently cause. “I wanted this date to be perfect, but its turned into a huge mess! And now, we’re all gonna”-

“Hey!” a sudden bold shout broke through the ongoing clamor, startling all everyone and even catching .GIFfany herself off guard as she turned to see the brazen Gem leader standing behind her, ready to fight. “Leave them alone!”

“Garnet!” the kids and Soos all exclaimed in apt relief upon seeing her, hoping that she could put an end to this madness once and for all. .GIFfany, however, was far from pleased.

“Never!” she fiercely shot back. “I’m not going anywhere without my Soos! We are going to be together as the perfect couple forever, and no one is going to get in the way of our love!”

“If that’s what you think love is all about,” Garnet began steadily, disdain for the twisted program clear in her tone. “Then clearly you don’t know the first thing about it.”

.GIFfany simply responded to this accusation with a frustrated shout before commanding most of the other animatronics to go after Garnet. At first, the Gem leader took them on with little problem, dodging their blows before lashing out several of her own. Still, it was clear that she was quite outnumbered, despite her palpable strength, something that Soos in particular took notice of as he peeked out from behind the arcade machine.

“Aw man, she won’t be able to fight all those dudes off forever,” he said with a fretful frown. “That’s it! I gotta fix this! It’s me .GIFfany wants in the first place. Melody, I’ll distract her while Dipper, Mabel, Steven, and Connie keep you safe. It’s the only way!”

“Soos, these are children,” Melody remarked rather incredulously as the handyman bravely rose to the occasion.
“The only waaaaaay!” he shouted, running out into the fray, despite being pelted by skee balls all the while. “Over here, .GIFfany!” he taunted the program as he ran past her towards the kitchen.

“Stop!” .GIFfany shouted after him, a fierce glare crossing the animatronics’ expression as she followed him. At the same time, the other machines were still on the attack, most of them dealing with Garnet. The Gem leader managed to defeat one of them with a heavy punch through the chest, only for one of them to latch a firm hold onto her arm. She punched the first animatronic away, but several more rushed at her only seconds after, eliciting a fearful gasp from Jamie as he watched this entire display from behind the row of tables he had tucked under. And as yet another animatronic went in to launch a hit upon the Gem leader from behind, the mailman knew he could no longer remain watching this epic battle from the sidelines.

“Halt!” he shouted dramatically, jumping up onto a table to catch the gang of animatronics’ attention. “Step away from my lady, you cads, and face me instead! I will gladly stand against any adversity in the name of protecting-” Jamie cut himself off as the machines all turned to face him with their threatening red gazes, frightening him enough for him to quickly retract his courageous stance. “Um… y-you know what?” he squeaked, getting off the table as several of the animatronics mobilized to go after him before he quickly fled. “I think this adversity might just be a bit too much for me to handle! Ah!”

Despite their best efforts at teamwork, Stan and Amethyst weren’t really faring much better against Will E. Badger as they found themselves knocked out of the restaurant by the attacking animatronic. As the conman sustained another hit to the gut, the purple Gem tried to rush the badger with her whip. She managed to wrap it around the animatronic almost entirely, but its metallic form proved too strong for her weapon and it broke free from it with little effort at all before kicking her away.

“S-stay back, you monster!” Stan shouted at the animatronic, lifting his arms to defend himself again as he backed away from it.

“Geez! What’s this stupid thing’s deal anyway?!” Amethyst groaned, summoning yet another whip.

“Heck if I know!” the conman clenched his fists a bit tighter as the animatronic reeled its fist back. “If I had known that stealing this creep would be this potentially deadly, I never would have-”

“Look out!” the purple Gem warned, only for Stan to heed her a moment too late as the badger punched him into the pile of abandoned trash sitting next to the building. Though the conman was let reeling from the blow, he still did have the wits about him to duck out of the way of the animatronics’ next hit, which just so happened to land in the open maw of old Goldie. As Amethyst pulled Stan away from the badger, they both happened to notice that its arm was tightly caught in the prospector’s biting grip, something that it couldn’t break free from, no matter how hard it tried.

“Hey, isn’t that that old nugget thing you used to have back at the shack?” Amethyst asked, slightly confused by this bizarre turn of events.

“Yes, it is!” Stan proclaimed with a proud smile as Goldie continued munching upon the animatronics’ arm. “Get ‘em, Goldie! Get ‘em!”

Unfortunately, this tread of easily subduing the animatronics didn’t really carry through inside the restaurant itself. As the machines scattered to apprehend everyone else, the kids also split up, in the hopes that Garnet would have an easier time taking the animatronics on if they were thinned out a bit. Steven and Mabel wisely decided on hiding out in the indoor playground where the animatronics wouldn’t be able to squeeze into had reach them, though of course, they both took the
time to remove their shoes before heading inside, despite the peril they were in. Dipper and Connie, on the other hand, both realized they were at a distinct disadvantage as neither of them had swords on them, which meant their relatively new skills were completely useless in defending themselves against the animatronics. But they did manage to narrowly avoid a brutal blow by dodging out of the path of an attacking beaver animatronic, with its hit landing down on one of the arcade machines instead. As it was distracted and the pair fled, Melody rushed in, brazenly knocking the animatronic out with a chair, only for several more to beset her immediately after. Even Garnet seemed to be having a hard time dealing with the group of animatronic she was squaring off against, largely because she had to protect Jamie in the process as he fearfully cowered behind her.

“G-Garnet, my love,” the mailman spoke up shakily as the Gem leader punched another animatronic back, despite the fact that they were both essentially cornered against a wall. “If these are indeed our last moments together on this Earth, then please, at least allow me the chance to beg for the light of your love to shine down upon-”

“Not now!” Garnet ordered fiercely, not wanting to deal with this distraction as she pushed an animatronic away. “Or ever for that matter.”

“B-but-” Jamie cut his dejection off with a startled gasp as one of the animatronics rammed right into the Gem leader, pinning her to the wall by both arms as it prepared to take her out. “No!” the mailman cried, pushing all his fear away as he tried a last ditch effort to help her by diverting the animatronics’ attention away by throwing letters at it. Much to his and Garnet’s surprise, it was enough to get the machine to turn to him, but this time, Jamie didn’t flee as he instead continued hurling letters at it while steadily backing away. “T-that’s right, you cur! Taste the unflinching wrath… of mail!”

Despite Jamie’s feeble success, Melody and the kids soon found themselves overwhelmed and apprehended, something that Soos noticed with a fretful gasp as he glanced out of the kitchen window. To make matters worse, .GIFfany herself continued to pursue him in slow, calculated steps, knowing that she had him right where she wanted him.

“I’ve got you surrounded, Soos,” she warned, her animatronic wearing a huge, learning grin as she essentially cornered the handyman. “There is no way out!”

“P-please,” Soos tried to reason with the rather unreasonable program. “Just let my friends go. I’ll do anything, I promise!”

“I seem to remember someone promising to be my boyfriend!” .GIFfany’s robotic tone pitched as she appeared on the screen right beside the handyman, her usual smile taking on a sinister aura. “Think about it. Real girls are unpredictable. They judge you. What makes you think you could ever have a chance with anyone else but me? Do you really think Melody will take you back after this awful date?”

The handyman’s tentative courage faltered upon hearing this, unable to deny that .GIFfany likely had a point. After all, what kind of girl would ever give him the light of day after being put in such mortal danger thanks to his own missteps and failures? Certainly, after tonight, he’d be right back to square one when it came to his empty love life, just like he always had been. However, the option the program proceeded to present him with was far from anything better.

“I can download your game into the game with me,” .GIFfany offered warmly, her animatronic projecting a flash drive from its finger, which it then pointed out at Soos. “And we’ll be together, forever…”

“Ah!” Soos gasped, covering his exposed belly button with his sweater vest. “S-stay back!” In a
meager attempt to ward off the program, he dug through his pockets for anything to throw at her, tossing both pocket change and a spare screwdriver at her, which she easily dodged as she continued sulking towards him.

“Cone on, Soos,” .GIFfany patronized, cheerful as always as she quickly started bridging the gap between them. “Don’t make me delete you too!” Soos sucked in a sharp breath as he pressed against the wall behind him, desperately searching for a way out of his seemingly inescapable fate. It seemed as though, no matter what, .GIFfany was determined to have him all to herself, which the handyman knew was a complete impossibility, even despite how they had hit it off early on. But still, he knew that he couldn’t abandon reality to be with her, despite her promises of understanding, compliance, and love. When it came right down to it, he needed a real girl, one of flesh and bone rather than of bits and bytes. Which was why, as he happened to pull the Romance Academy 7 disk out of his pocket, Soos knew exactly what he had to do. “What do you say?” .GIFfany asked, inching her flash drive ever closer to the handyman in the hopes of finally claiming him as hers alone.

“I say, game over, .GIFfany!” Soos boldly proclaimed, pulling the pizza oven behind him open before tossing the game disk right into its immense heat.

“NO!” .GIFfany cried in apt fear as the disk began to shrivel up and melt. The image of the program on the screen let out a shrill scream of defeat, her pixels starting to break apart and dissipate out of existence, her scream doing the exact same thing as the screen went black. The animatronic the program had been possessing emitted a high pitched whine as well, its face melting off to reveal the robotic mechanism underneath before it shut down and collapsed, confirming that her malicious presence was indeed finally gone.

As a result of .GIFfany’s obliteration, all of the other rouge animatronics shut down, including the one Stan and Amethyst were dealing with outside. While still struggling to free itself from Goldie’s grip, the Will E. Badger animatronic suddenly deactivated, roughly plummeting to the ground as the pair watched in apt amazement.

“Whoa…” Amethyst breathed as her whip disappeared. “I can’t believe that janky old thing… saved us!”

“Well, believe it!” Stan grinned, picking Goldie up and hugging it tightly. “You did it! You beautiful old monster! You did it! How’s about the three of us hit the town? These old has-beens are going to Vegas!”

“Now you’re talking!” Amethyst cheered, gladly following the conman as he carried the prospector machine off to head off on this tandem trip. “Let’s go make some cash money!”

As the animatronic that Jamie had been pelting with mail finally went limp, the mailman let out a huge sigh of relief at the imminent danger finally coming to an end. However, his dread was quick to return as Garnet stepped over to him, her expression unreadable as she motioned to a nearby table.

“Sit,” she instructed staunchly, which Jamie tentatively did as the Gem leader did the same before speaking her peace. “Jamie, I hope you know that what you just did was very dangerous.”
“Yes… I-I do,” Jamie nodded, somewhat confused before leaping right back into his usual theatrics. “B-but I was glad to risk it all for you, Garnet, my love! From the moment I first laid eyes upon you, I knew that we were destined to be together!”

“No, we’re not,” Garnet firmly denied, finally ready to set the record straight. “Love at first sight doesn’t exist. Love takes time, and love takes work. At the very least you have to know the other person. And you literally have no idea who, or what, I am.” The Gem leader finished by adjusting her shades, knowing that every word she had just spoken came from the genuine experiences of love both of the halves that composed her had been through together.

“B-but… I bloom for you like… like a… camellia… under moon light…” Jamie stammered, his voice breaking a bit as he looked to her pleadingly.

“No, you don’t,” Garnet said, eliciting a confused, albeit saddened glance from the mailman. “You make a very convincing lovesick fool. You convinced those children,” she nodded over to Mabel and Connie, who were not very discreetly eavesdropping on the whole scene from afar. “You even convinced yourself. You’re a fantastic actor.”

“R-really?” Jamie asked, eyes wide with surprise upon hearing such a compliment. “So… what am I supposed to do now?”

“Start with local theatre,” Garnet advised, giving the mailman a hearty slap on the back before she got up and walked off. For a moment, Jamie simply sat there, still rather shaken as he tried to take it all in before the girls hesitantly approached him.

“Uh… hey, Jamie,” Connie began with a small, sheepish smile. “Are you ok?”

“…Yeah,” the mailman nodded, still trying to get over his initial surprise. “That was… some pretty solid advice.”

“Well, uh, that’s good to hear,” Mabel said somewhat tentatively. “Um, we’re sorry for kinda causing this whole mess between you and Garnet. We didn’t mean for things to get so… you know, crazy.”

“Yeah, it probably would have been better if we had just left well enough alone in all this…” Connie remarked, rubbing her arm awkwardly.

“Eh, it’s ok,” Jamie reassured, finally smiling himself. “You girls were just trying to help me out, and I can’t really blame you for that. So thanks for everything. Even if it was kinda meddling…”

“Well, yeah…” Mabel chuckled, exchanging a glance with Connie as they both realized they had learned a pretty important lesson about such meddling. “So, were those more letters you wrote to Garnet?” she asked, nodding towards the discarded mail Jamie had used to ward off the animatronic.

“No, that was the mail I was supposed to deliver on my last route.”

A beat of silence passed at this as the three of them looked towards the rather disastrous mess of mail littering the floor of the restaurant before Connie stiffly spoke up. “We’ll help you pick it all up.”

“Thanks,” Jamie said as they all got up to do just that.

Meanwhile, with GIFfany gone, Soos had wasted no time in hurrying back to Melody to make sure she was ok. Surprisingly, she rather understanding upon hearing the whole story as the handyman
detailed to her while they sat together in the wreckage of the animatronic disaster. Still, despite her lack of anger, Soos couldn’t help but feel rather guilty for just how much danger he had inadvertently put her through, especially since he really had grown to like her very much.

“I’m sorry for all this, Melody,” the handyman sighed, looking out over the mess GIFfany had left behind. “I honestly remember this place being a lot more fun when I was a kid.”

“Believe it or not, I’ve been on worse dates,” Melody shrugged with a small smile.

“Really?”

“Never date a magician.”

“Ugh, why would I?” The pair got a good laugh out of this, one that eventually dissipated as they met each others’ gazes with mutually affectionate smiles. Soos figured that it was now or never, which was why he decided to go ahead and ask the question that had been plaguing him for the past few days. “So, uh, you wouldn’t be interested in going with me to my cousin’s engagement party in a week, would you? I promise there’s like, zero animatronic badgers.”

“Sure, sounds like fun,” Melody chuckled. “I should still be in town then.”

“Still be in town?” Soos frowned, confused.

“I’m going back home to Portland in a few weeks,” Melody sighed somewhat sadly. “But when I do, we can still video chat, if that’s ok with you.”

“A relationship with a girl who I can only see through my computer…” Soos mused for a moment before breaking out into an affirmative smile as he placed his hand on top of Melody’s. “Sounds perfect!”

The couple shared another warm laugh over this, both of them more than enjoying each other’s company, even if they were relatively unaware of the boys proudly watching them converse from their spot in the ball pit.

“Aw, they already make such a nice couple!” Steven quipped warmly as he changed a glad smile with Dipper. “I’m so glad Soos got his happy ending; if anyone deserves it, its him.”

At this, both boys were instantly caught off guard as Soos’ Abuelita suddenly popped up out of the ball pit, completely out of nowhere. “Yes, yes,” she remarked with a contented smile, looking over at her grandson. “I am so happy.”

“Uh… have you been following us all day?” Dipper asked her, rather concerned by such an implication.

Abuelita simply nodded, throwing the boys off even more, though she hardly noticed amidst her controlled elation over Soos’ finally successful attempts at romance. “Soos’ life is my soap opera.”
Chapter 46: Keeping It Together

Chapter Summary

Garnet and the kids discover something that's REALLY fucked up while Stan and Pearl argue until they learn to finally get along.

Chapter Notes

So yeah, this one's kinda by the books, but it still has its moments so I guess its ok. Either way, Happy upcoming New Year to you all! Here's to plenty more Universe Falls in 2018! (keyword is MUTANT)

“We need to track down Peridot,” Garnet addressed the collection of Gems and kids sitting before her in the temple’s living room, her tone steady, firm, and authoritative. The Gem leader had figured that more than enough time had passed since the invasion for them to be getting back to business, namely by curtailing one of the few lose ends still left over from it. And as far as they were all concerned, it was their responsibility to tie that end up for the safety of the planet as a whole. “We found her pod. We know she’s out there somewhere. She came to Earth with a job to do, and odds are, she’s still going to try and do it. That’s why I’ve gathered you all here.”

“Whoa, so this is a super serious magical meeting, then?” Mabel asked, aptly enthused. “Man, if I had known that, then I would have baked cookies for everyone!”

“I thought we were here so everyone could help me fold all this laundry,” Steven noted, nodding down to the massive pile of unfolded tee shirts that they were all sitting around.

“That too,” Garnet said, picking up a shirt and folding it up. “The chore wheel idea you had fell apart fast.”

“Wasn’t me,” Amethyst vouched, reclining back as she nodded over at the aforementioned wheel hanging on the fridge. While various housekeeping responsibilities had been divided up evenly among Steven and the Gems, Pearl had taken the liberty of crossing their names out and commandeering every single one of them.

“I just really enjoy doing all of those things,” the white Gem said with a proud smile.

“It’s better if we do them together,” Garnet asserted, giving Amethyst in particular a critical glance that prompted her to begrudgingly sit up and help.

“So… why are me and Mabel here then?” Dipper asked, somewhat lost amidst all this talk of
“Oh, mostly for the Peridot thing,” the Gem leader reiterated. “Though more hands does make the folding go by faster.”

“Ugh, humans should just stop wearing clothes,” Amethyst groaned boredly. “Be a lot funnier.”

“Hey! I’m a civilized part human, thank you very much,” Steven remarked in playfully pointed protest. “Clothing is a must.”

“Ok, but seriously, Steven, do you really have to have so many versions of the exact same shirt?” Dipper asked, holding one of the young Gem’s many star shirts up to prove his point.

“Pfft, don’t listen to him, Steven,” Mabel scoffed, rolling her eyes at her brother’s usual cynicism. “This is coming from the guy who wears the same clothes almost every day because he hates doing laundry.”

“Laundry is a waste of time,” Dipper remarked defensively, crossing his arms. “I’m a busy guy.”

“Well, I happen to like all my star shirts,” Steven grinned as he happily folded one of them. “It’s guess its sorta like my look, you know? Simple, yet iconic!”

“Suuuuure, it is, Steven,” Amethyst said with a wry, joking grin as she tossed another shirt over to Steven. “Still, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but Dipper might have a point about you having too many of these things. Folding them all up is so booooooooring…”

“Hm…” the young Gem mused, a growing smile spreading across his face as he happened to glance over at Garnet. “Well, its like you said, Garnet, this goes by a lot faster when we have more hands to help. So… maybe we could finish a lot sooner if Ruby and Sapphire were here!”

“Oh my gosh, yes!” Mabel readily agreed with an excited gasp. “It’d be so great to hang out with those two! It feels like it’s been ages since the last time we saw them!”

“Mabel, the ‘last’ time we saw Ruby and Sapphire was the first time we ever saw them,” Dipper pointed out dryly. “And that was only a few weeks ago.”

“Well it’d still be really cool to see them again!” Steven reiterated before looking to Garnet with a pleading smile. “So…? What do you say?”

“I’m sure they’d be glad to see you three,” the Gem leader remarked with a hint of an amused smirk. “But I am not unfusing for laundry.”

“Aw…” Steven and Mabel sighed in disappointed unison, their sudden hopes for seeing the Gem couple again quickly dashed.

All the same, Pearl spoke up amidst this, taking the opportunity to get the conversation back on the more pressing matter at hand. “Garnet, you don’t think Peridot would come looking for us, do you?”

“She better not, if she knows what’s good for her…” Dipper muttered disdainfully, more than ready to put his fresh sword skills to use if the green Gem came anywhere close. After all, he was still ever mindful of Peridot’s involvement in leading up to the horrible straits that Lapis was still very much in. And that was not something that he was about to forgive and forget so easily.

“We weren’t her priority,” Garnet said, as rationally as ever. “She was sent here to do something in
“Do you think she’s still going to try to reactivate it?” Pearl asked, suddenly anxious.

“Mm… if she gets it back up and running, the injectors will turn back on…” Garnet said, her expression darkening as she said this.

“Injectors?” Steven spoke up, curious. “What are those?”

“You’re already seen them…” Pearl said with a remorseful sigh. “Well, you’ve seen them disabled.” To give a visual demonstration, she projected a hologram of her Gem, showing one of the many, massive, drill-like machines that dotted the Kindergarten. However, instead of downed and dusted, this one was erect and active as it began digging into the ground, planting something therein. “If Peridot reactivates them, they’ll pick right up where they left off, planting Gems in the crust of the Earth, where they’ll incubate and suck the life right out of the ground! We can’t let Peridot restart Gem production here. If we do, the entire planet will become…”

“Janked,” Garnet succinctly finished where Pearl had left off, eliciting surprised gasps from the kids and a rowdy laugh from Amethyst.

“Garnet! That mouth!” the purple Gem chuckled, not noticing Pearl’s still very apparent distress, which was aptly shared by all three of the kids.

“So, uh, we should probably stop her from turning those injector thingys back on then, huh?” Mabel asked, quite uneasy.

“That’s the plan,” Garnet affirmed, rising to stand. She paused though, noticing the worried looks on the faces of both the kids and her teammates as they all unanimously feared what could happen to the planet they all called home if Peridot was left to her own devices. “Don’t worry,” the Gem leader assured with a small, but confident smile. “We’ll stop her. Come on, everyone.”

“Coming!” Pearl chimed, hopping to her feet as she hurried after Garnet to the warp pad.

“As long as we don’t have to fold anything,” Amethyst remarked, gladly leaving the pile of laundry behind to the kids, who simply continued folding. After all, the Gems had made it clear that they had this situation covered, which was why they were all quite surprised when Garnet called for them.

“Steven, Dipper, Mabel,” the Gem leader beckoned with a small grin, one that Amethyst shared as she hopped onto the warp pad.

“C’mon! That means you guys too, right?” she asked, chuckling as the kids exchanged excited smiles at the open invitation, one that they knew, just a few weeks ago, the Gems would have never even extended to them.

“Woo! Gem mission time!” Mabel readily perked up, rushing over to the warp pad without delay as the boys quickly followed. “I can’t remember the last time we’ve been on one of these that didn’t involve all of us almost dying!”

“That’s because we’ve almost died on just about every one we’ve been on,” Dipper said, somewhat deadpan, though not as much as he could have been, given how disastrous the invasion itself had ended.

“Hm…” Pearl frowned upon hearing this, her worry palpable as she whispered to the Gem leader. “Garnet, are you sure we should bring the kids along with us? This could be dangerous.”
“Peridot’s got nothing we can’t handle,” Garnet promised, confident that this claim was true.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Amethyst asked eagerly. “Let’s go mess her up!”

“O-or maybe we could just ask her nicely to stop trying to hurt the Earth!” Steven reasoned, not wanting to see things resort to violence.

“No, actually, I agree with Amethyst,” Dipper staunchly remarked. “If we have a chance to stop Peridot, then we might as well take it. No matter what we have to do.”

The others too pause upon hearing such a dark, coldly-stated resolve, all of them looking to Dipper with apt concern over it. However, before any of them could question it, the front door happened to burst open, startling everyone as a very perturbed conman bared in.

“Kids!” Stan shouted, an obviously annoyed look on his face as he caught sight of the twins accompanying the Gems on the warp pad. “What do you two think you’re doing up here?! I thought you were only gonna be up here bugging the Gems for a few minutes, not all day! We gotta get back down to the shack and restock the gift shop before people start thinking we’re having some sort of ‘clearance sale’. Ugh, just saying those terrible words makes me wanna barf.”

“Uh, actually, Grunkle Stan…” Mabel began, exchanging a tentative glance with Dipper. “We’re kinda about to go on a super important Gem mission to save the entire Earth! So…”

“So restocking the gift shop can definitely wait until we’re done with that,” Dipper finished with a bit more certainty, though he couldn’t claim to be completely confident in light of Stan’s already disapproving glower over this information.

“Oh, it can?” Stan asked, raising an eyebrow as he glanced up from the twins to look towards the Gems.

“I’ll certainly say it can!” Pearl cut in, crossing her arms. “Like Mabel said, we have very important work to do, work that, if not tended to, could result in the death of this planet and everything on it! Which means, Stan, that we have no time to deal with you or your little… gift shop dilemma.”

While Stan usually would have countered the white Gem’s condescending behavior with some kind of sharp, witty retort, instead he simply seemed to shrug it off and respond in a way almost no one had been expecting. “Alright then,” he said, his tone as calm and collected as his expression. “If this ‘mission’ or whatever it is is so important, then I guess I’ll just have to go with you guys.”

“What?!” everyone, save for Garnet, exclaimed in stunned unison at this sudden twist, their surprise only growing as the conman started to nonchalantly head towards the warp pad himself.

“You heard me,” Stan shrugged, hardly even phased by their shocked expressions as he addressed the twins in particular. “Its about time I go on one of these nutso Gem adventures with you kids. And considering what happened with that whole hand ship thing, I think I have a right to come along and make sure you two don’t get beat up by any more of those ‘Homeworld’ jerks.”

“Awww, yeah!” Amethyst exclaimed excitedly before any of the others could even react. “I’ve always wanted you to come on a mission with us, Stan! It’ll be just like a Revenge Trip, only with like, higher stakes, I guess. Still, it’s gonna be awesome!”

“Yeah, it will be!” Steven grinned, equally as enthused. “Finally, all seven of us, going on a mission together! I’ve dreamed of this day for so long now! We’re like one big, huge, super team!”
“We should call ourselves the ‘Crystal Pines’!” Mabel chimed in brightly.

“Whoa! We should!” Steven gasped, stars in his eyes. “We can make matching team tee-shirts and everything!”

“Please, no more tee shirts,” Dipper deadpanned, nodding over to the still plentiful pile of unfolded shirts still lying on the floor on the other side of the house.

“Now, hold on just a minute!” Pearl interjected hotly as the kids started to get carried away in their excitement. “Stan, you are not coming with us!”

“Oh, really?” the conman asked dryly.

“Really!” the white Gem reitered harshly. “We’re going to track down a Homeworld Gem with intel and resources far beyond our own. This could be incredibly dangerous, and the last thing we need is for our attention to be divided because we have to keep an eye on you.”

“Keep an eye on me?” Stan repeated with a caustic scoff. “Oh, that’s rich. Maybe you don’t remember how I was the one who saved you three from that horde of zombies?”

“W-well… yes, but-”

“Or that you apparently had to be saved from those ‘dangerous Homeworld Gems’ by three kids?”

“Alright, b-but that wasn’t-”

“Seems to me like you three could use all the help you could get,” Stan concluded with an almost smug grin. “And luckily for you, I’m nice enough to offer that help, so you might as well take it.”

“Ugh, like we even need your-”

“You can come,” Garnet interrupted Pearl’s bitter refusal, her expression alone showing that she was growing impatient with this ongoing debate.

“But, Garnet!” the white Gem protested amidst Steven, Mabel, and Amethyst’s shared excitement and Stan’s clear satisfaction.

“Hey, P, no butts except Stan’s up here on this warp pad!” the purple Gem quipped with a rowdy laugh.

“Yeah, you heard her,” Stan remarked triumphantly as he finally stepped onto the rather crowded warp pad. “Move over and make some room, Pearl.”

“I can’t believe this…” Pearl growled to herself, clearly quite displeased with this turn of events. Even so, she figured there was no use in arguing with it, seeing as how they had wasted enough precious time as it was. “Still, if we have to have one more along for this mission, I suppose its best to take the necessary precautions…” With a relenting sigh, her gemstone began to glow as she pulled a medium-length, thin, elegant rapier with a symmetrical, ornamental guard and a blueish tint to its glistening edge. “Dipper, here,” she said with a small smile as she handed this sword to her already amazed pupil, who was even more awestruck as she entrusted it to him out of nowhere. “That is the Ancient Sea Blade. I stole it off a Homeworld Gem during a fierce underwater battle back during the war. But I don’t have much use for it nowadays, and seeing as how this is your first real mission since you’ve been training under my tutelage, it only makes sense that you go in properly armed.”
“Whoa…” Dipper said in apt muted wonder as he held the stunning blade up for Steven and Mabel to get a better look at. “This thing is so cool! Thanks, Pearl! I promise I’ll be super careful with it.”

“I trust that you will,” Pearl nodded with warm approval.

“Oh, wow,” Stan spoke up as he sent the white Gem an unimpressed glance. “So you’re just gonna hand some deadly weapon off to my nephew while I’m standing right here? Real classy.”

“Is there a problem with that?” Pearl asked, crossing her arms and returning his scowl.

“No, not really,” the conman shrugged apathetically. “But would it have killed you to give the kid a sword that isn’t so, ya know, girly?”

“Girly?” Dipper frowned as he looked to the Ancient Sea Blade’s sleek, graceful structure again.

“I’ll have you know that sword is a steadfast, sturdy weapon that requires a skillful hand to wield and demands respect from all those in its path,” Pearl asserted to Stan pointedly. “Which, of course, is something that you would know nothing about.”

“Oh, I’ll show you ‘respect’,” Stan growled, rolling his sleeves up in preparation for a brawl, though Garnet was quick to put a stop to it.

“That’s enough,” the Gem leader said stanchly, holding her arms up to keep the white Gem and the conman apart. “We’ve already wasted enough time here. Let’s get going.”

And so, without any further arguments or deliberations, that’s exactly what they did.

The darkened, hollowed out walls of Kindergarten were just as lifeless and solemn as ever as the collective group arrived, their voices and footsteps being the only natural sounds for miles around as they began to search for Peridot. A search that initially seemed to be rather fruitless as there were no apparent signs of the green Gem, or anyone else for that matter, in sight.

“So, Stan, does this place still give ya the ‘heebie-jeebies’ just like it did when I brought you here all those years ago?” Amethyst asked with a goading grin as she elbowed him in the knee.

“Pfft, are you kidding me?” Stan scoffed, though he was still rather uneasy as he glanced around the desolate area. “This place never freaked me out. A-after all, I’ve seen plenty of dead, barren wastelands in my day.”

“Suuuure, you have,” the purple Gem quipped, rolling her eyes as she moved on ahead. “But just be sure to keep an eye out. Your never know when something’s gonna… jump out at you!” At this, she suddenly turned around, having shape shifted her face into a grotesque, monstrous appearance, one that was more than enough to elicit a startled gasp from the conman.

“Hey!” Stan shouted angrily, already chasing after the purple Gem as she broke down into heavy laughter. “Amethyst!”

“Ha! Try and catch me, ‘old man’!” Amethyst teased, vaulting over a rock as she hurried through the Kindergarten.

“Could you two please be quiet and try and take this seriously?!” Pearl fussed after both of them. “If Peridot hears either of you, she’ll be able to tell we’re coming from a mile away!” Of course,
neither Stan nor Amethyst heeded the white Gem as they continued to have their noisy fun, much to the white Gem’s severe aggravation. “Oh, this is already a disaster…”

“Calm down, Pearl,” Garnet advised as she walked past, briefly placing a hand on her teammate’s shoulder. “Everything will work out, you’ll see.”

“Ugh, I hope so…” Pearl groaned as she trudged on ahead, wishing that this bothersome mission was already over.

At the same time, the kids hung a bit behind the adults, though they still followed them, at first anxiously as they remembered just how ominous the Kindergarten was. However, Steven and Mabel were quick to loosen up as they noticed Dipper practicing with the sword Pearl had given him, swinging it around experimentally to get a sense of how it handled. Mabel stifled a laugh as she watched her brother’s broad, almost over dramatic movements before she started mimicking his maneuvers with an imaginary sword of her own, complete with exaggerated facial expressions and all. Dipper only caught on as he overheard Steven’s amused chuckle at this, and as he paused and glanced over his shoulder, Mabel abruptly stopped and put on a front of unknowing innocence, one that wasn’t very convincing, all things considered.

“Didn’t you guys hear what Pearl just said?” he asked, rather exasperated. “We’re supposed to be taking this mission seriously.”

“Oh, we are taking it seriously!” Mabel protested with a wide smile. “In fact, its so serious, that I even brought this along!” She pulled her grappling hook out of her sweater, brandishing it proudly. “You’re not the only one around here with a fancy-smanzy weapon, bro-bro. If Peridot tries to mess with us, I’ll bop her with this!” To prove her point, she launched the hook out, only for gravity to quickly enough pull it back down to the ground, where it landed with a dull, unimpressive thud.

“…I… think we should just stick with letting my sword do all the fighting, if its all the same to you, Mabel,” Dipper remarked dryly, turning to catch up with the Gems.

“Well, either way, I still think we’re being pretty serious about all this,” Steven vouched confidently as he hurried over to the Gems as well. “Don’t you think so, Garnet?”

“Sure,” the Gem leader smirked, taking a moment to ruffle the young Gem’s hair playfully.

“Hm… Well, nothing looks activated…” Pearl noted, her gemstone reflecting light upon one of the broken-down injectors. “In fact, it doesn’t look like anything’s budged since the last time we were here…”

“You’re right,” Garnet said, hands on her hips as she looked around. “But just because Peridot hasn’t been here yet, it doesn’t mean she won’t come.”

“Hm,” Steven nodded in terse agreement, making his expression resolved to show just how serious he really was.

“Let’s do a thorough check of the perimeter,” the Gem leader continued authoritatively.

“Hm.”

“That way, we can monitor any further entry.”

“Hm, sounds good to me!” Steven chimed with a thumbs up, already heading off to do just that as the others began to split up.
“Oh! If we’re teaming up to go look for Peridot, then you and me should totally be Search Buddies, Dipper!” Mabel exclaimed with a daring grin. “That way, when we find her, I can deflect my grappling hook off your sword and we can knock her out clean before she tries any of her sneaky shenanigans!”

Upon hearing such a bizarre plan, the most Dipper could initially do was look to his sister with apt confusion, looking between the rather thin blade of his sword and her quite bulky grappling hook. “Mabel, do you understand how physics work? Like, at all?”

“Yo, if we’re choosing Search Buddies, I call Stan as mine!” Amethyst proclaimed with a wide grin, shapeshifting her legs to be long so she could be tall enough to steal the conman’s fez off his head to put it on her own.

“Yeah, you would,” Stan sardonically remarked, though he was still grinning in amusement as he reclaimed his hat.

“You two teaming up is a catastrophe just waiting to happen,” Pearl muttered, rolling her eyes at their joking manner in light of the serious situation.

As the others continued discussing their investigative arrangements, Steven had already wandered off on his own to look around the corner. The young Gem didn’t expect to see too much, but he kept an eye out for suspicious activity, even if he had no idea what he’d really do if he happened upon any. He couldn’t deny that he was rather worried, especially as he passed by another injector, about what Peridot might do if she was allowed to succeed in her unknown ambitions. After all, she had already been stranded on Earth for quite some time now, completely left to her own devices, whatever they might be. Chances were that she had likely made some kind of progress on her mysterious, likely harmful goals, and that she would only continue to do so if she wasn’t found and stopped soon. Steven only hoped that Garnet’s hunch that the green Gem was somewhere around the Kindergarten was right, otherwise the search for her could go on endlessly, all the way until she completed what she came to Earth to do. And while that was a thought that alarmed the young Gem quite a bit, fortunately, he wouldn’t have to wait that long, for as he continued to independently investigate the area, he happened to overhear the unmistakably familiar voice none other than Peridot herself.

“Log date: 6 5 2,” the green Gem began as she rose up along with a platform that had emerged from underground. Steven froze up in his spot only a few feet away, clearly within Peridot’s frame of view, though she didn’t seem to notice him at first as she continued her report while fiddling around her with finger-formed touchscreen. “This is Peridot, updating status. Still stuck on this miserable planet… The fusion experiments are developing properly. A few have even emerged early-” The green Gem suddenly cut herself off with a sharp gasp the moment her eyes drifted away from her screen and towards the equally startled young Gem standing right in front of her.

For a moment, neither of them said anything, both of them completely unsure of how to react to such an unexpected, awkward encounter. Though based on how still both of them were, it was clear that they saw each other as equal threats, based on what little they knew about each other thus far. Even so, Peridot was the first to speak up, albeit in an anxious whisper as her screen dissolved and she looked around nervously. “Are the… other ones with you?” Steven initially shook his head, though he was quick to recant this lie with an honest nod and awkward shrug. Peridot let out a frustrated groan, her disjointed fingers covering her face as she lamented her incredibly bad luck. “Of course… Why not?”

“Peridot!” The green Gem gasped in sharp fear as she heard Garnet’s firm shout from across the Kindergarten, her cover completely blown as the Gems and the Pines spotted her all at the same
"There she is!" Pearl exclaimed, her spear already in her hands.

"Let’s get her!" Amethyst grinned daringly, rushing forward with her whip at the ready as everyone else quickly followed.

Needless to say that with such a crowd on her case, Peridot didn’t hesitate to flee, rushing down the Kindergarten corridor with her pursuers hot on her trail. Oddly enough, the green Gem seemed to be running right for one of the high, impassible walls of the canyon, confusing the others a bit, though even so, they continued to chase her in the hopes of finally ending this ongoing game of cat and mouse.

"Give it up, Peridot!" Dipper shouted, his sword already at the ready to go after the green Gem who was largely responsible for the disasters of the past several weeks. “You have nowhere to run!"

"Yeah! We’ve got you cornered!" Mabel added, trying to get a good aim with her grappling hook. “I’ve always wanted to say that!"

"That’s what you think!" Peridot retorted, glancing back with a snide grin before she did something none of them had been expecting. Without even skipping a step, the green Gem began to run vertically straight up the Kindergarten wall, snickering triumphantly as she put distance between herself and her foes. “Try and catch me now, you filthy rebels!"

“So that’s this ‘big, scary Homeworld Gem’ you guys are so afraid of?" Stan asked the Gems rather caustically as they all stopped at the base of the wall as Peridot continued running up it. “Pfft, she just seems like a loudmouthed nerd to me.”

“She mostly is,” Amethyst shrugged with a scowl. “Her being able to run up walls is new though.”

“Aw, I can’t do that!” Steven pouted, wishing that he could pursue her somehow.

“Neither can she!” Pearl exclaimed, tossing her spear straight up towards the green Gem.

Peridot ducked out of the weapon’s path as it sailed straight over her, her smug smile returning as she glanced back down at the group below. “Ha! Missed!”

Her assumption was quickly proven wrong, however, as Pearl’s spear did strike something: an injector stuck in the wall near the top of the cliff. And given its already loosening grip on the canyon wall, the impact was enough to get the injector to not only detach, but come collapsing down right towards the green Gem. Peridot gasped as she noticed the massive machine start hurtling down towards her, which was why she had no choice but to turn on her heel and start bolting down the wall the opposite of how she had come up it.

“Oh! I got her! I got her!” Pearl notified the others, her arms held open wide to catch their foe when she inevitably fell.

“Please,” Stan scoffed as he pushed the white Gem aside. “At the rate she’s bookin’ it down that wall, she’d knock you down flat the minute she runs into you. I got her.”

“Then what makes you think, you’ll have any better of a chance?” Pearl countered crossly, pushing the conman right back. “Why don’t you just step aside and let those of us with actual experience handle this?”
“A lot of good that ‘experience’ is gonna do when Greenie up there pummels you into the ground and gets away!” Stan argued back, shoving Pearl once more. However, before the white Gem could shoot back an angry retort of her own, their fight was abruptly interrupted as Garnet ran for them both, pushing the pair out of the way just as the falling injector struck Peridot first, before brutally crashing into the ground below.

“Both of you, pay attention!” Garnet ordered to Stan and Pearl, her gauntlets summoned as she let them up.

“Hmph, he started it,” Pearl scowled as she crossed her arms.

“Right back at ya, stretch,” Stan deadpanned just as sourly.

“Do you think Peridot’s hurt?” Steven asked, somewhat concerned as he took a step towards the downed injector as the dust from the crash settled.

“Hopefully,” Dipper remarked, his grip tightening on his sword as he held it aloft in case the green Gem suddenly emerged. And that’s actually exactly what she did.

Surprisingly, Peridot was seemingly uninjured as she pulled herself out of the wreckage with little more than an exasperated groan. The moment she spotted her foes surrounding her, however, she was quick to pull herself up and attempt escape yet again.

“Nope, guess she’s ok!” Amethyst quipped, already lashing her whip out. “But she won’t be for long!”

Before Peridot could get too far, the purple Gem’s whip happened to catch her, coiling around her torso and pinning one of her arms down to her side. Before the green Gem could even think about wriggling free, Dipper and Mabel were both already running for her, their respective weapons poised to attack, albeit in different ways.

Dipper brought his sword down first, the Ancient Sea Blade clashing squarely with the lower half of Peridot’s arm, which, oddly enough, seemed to solid, sturdy metal. Though he was initially confused by this, he was quick to go in for another attack, trying to work past her surprisingly steadfast block. This process repeated itself several times over, with neither of them making any real progress until Dipper struck Peridot’s arm once again and decided to keep his blade there, in the hopes that applying pressure would wear her down, though really, the only thing it seemed to do was frustrate her even more.

“Augh! You irritating clods don’t know when to quit!” the green Gem seethed, beyond irritated with her current desperate straits.

“Apparently, neither do you!” Dipper countered just as harshly, suddenly pulling his sword back so Mabel could come in with a surprise firing of her grappling hook. Unfortunately though, Peridot saw it coming just in time and her disjointed fingers easily managed to catch the hook, though not before it knocked her against the side of her head first.

“Ow!” she growled, tossing the hook aside hard as one of her fingers began to spark with a self-generated electrical current. “I’ve had just about enough of this uncalled-for interference for one day!” With this, Peridot pressed her electrified finger down on Amethyst’s whip, its charge spreading throughout the entire weapon to the point that the purple Gem was forced to relinquish her hold on it.

“Whoa! Hot whip! Hot whip!” she shouted, her hands flying away from her weapon as Peridot
hurriedly released herself from it. The green Gem let out another small victorious snicker as she began to flee on foot, though she didn’t get far before running smack dab into Stan, who had wisely, and quickly put himself directly in her path.

“And where do you think you’re goin’, Greenie?” he asked caustically, glaring boredly at her as he crossed his arms.

“Oh great… another meddling human to deal with…” Peridot grumbled, backing up a bit as she calibrated one of her fingers into a laser. While somewhat caught off guard by this, Stan was prepared to deal with it; what he wasn’t prepared for, though, was the spear that was suddenly vaulting towards both him and the green Gem. The projectile missed Peridot completely, and fortunately, Stan was quick enough to duck out of its path, but at the expense of inadvertently letting the green Gem go free.

“Hey, Pearl!” Stan shouted crossly over at the white Gem as he quickly picked himself up off the ground. “What do you think you’re doing, chucking spears at my head like it’s some kinda target?!”

“I was trying to hit Peridot!” Pearl protested, already running forward as Amethyst started to do the same. “And what do you think you’re doing just letting her get away?!”

“Uh, looks like we’re all kinda letting her get away now!” the purple Gem pointed out, nodding up to Peridot as she continued running on ahead.

“Go ahead, you Crystal Clods!” she shouted over her shoulder somewhat breathlessly. “Wreck this place! See if I care! I already got what I needed!”

“Get back here!” Pearl yelled after her, another spear summoned as she ran after the green Gem.

Peridot responded to this command by simply throwing her hand up, her fingers starting to spin rapidly until they had essentially become helicopter blades. As she began to lift up off the ground and out of the reach of her pursuers, her small smirk gradually turned into a maniacal laugh as she looked down upon her foes, who still seemed insistent on giving chase after her. “Ha! Face it! You simple lumps are no match for my superior technology and intellect! You’ll never catch up!”

“You wanna bet, you noisy, green, triangle-headed punk!” Stan shouted now thoroughly invested in this mission simply due to the rather large aggravation Peridot proved to be for all of them.

“I’m gonna bop her good!” Amethyst growled, leading the charge after her as the white Gem and the conman followed not too far behind.

“I’ll help!” Pearl fiercely agreed as they all rounded a corner in the Kindergarten to continue the chase. The kids were eager to follow after them, all wanting to put a stop to the green Gem’s ambitions as well, but before they could get too far, Garnet was quick to reel them back in.

“Wait,” she called calmly, still standing by the fallen injector.

“Wait? Wait for what?” Dipper asked impatiently. “Peridot’s getting away! We have to go after her!”

“I’ll help!” Pearl fiercely agreed as they all rounded a corner in the Kindergarten to continue the chase. The kids were eager to follow after them, all wanting to put a stop to the green Gem’s ambitions as well, but before they could get too far, Garnet was quick to reel them back in.

“Wait,” she called calmly, still standing by the fallen injector.

“Wait? Wait for what?” Dipper asked impatiently. “Peridot’s getting away! We have to go after her!”

“Yeah, come on, Garnet!” Steven urged intently, starting to run ahead. “We gotta hurry!”

The Gem leader stopped her young ward once again, this time by holding him back by his shirt until he finally gave up and stopped trying to run. Seeing that Garnet was quite serious about this, the kids all decided to take pause to see exactly what was so important that chasing the green Gem down could wait for.
“If Peridot’s mission was to reactivate the Kindergarten, the injectors would be on. Look,” she nodded over to the closest injector, which was as still and silent as ever. “They’re not.”

“Oh?” Steven frowned, initially confused by this before he started to get the picture. “Oh!”

“So that means… she was trying to do something else?” Mabel guessed, even if she was still a little confused.

“Exactly,” Garnet nodded. “Let’s see what she was actually doing—” The Gem leader paused, easily lifting up the broken injector and tossing it aside to reveal the elevator shaft Peridot had initially emerged from. “Down here.”

“Ohhhhh…” all three kids mused in understanding unison, immediately realizing what a smart plan this was.

“But wait, what about Peridot?” Steven asked, glancing over his shoulder at the direction the others had taken off.

“Pearl, Amethyst, and Stan can handle her,” Garnet assured, adjusting her shades. “If they can manage to get along.”

“Well, then I think it’s safe to say they’re pretty much doomed then,” Dipper sarcastically remarked as they all began to follow Garnet into the dark depths below, none of them anywhere close to sure of what they might find down there.

At the same time, Stan, Pearl, and Amethyst, had hardly noticed that Garnet and the kids hadn’t joined them in chasing Peridot down as they were all adamantly intent on catching up to her. The green Gem simply continued laughing mockingly at their attempts from her high vantage point, easily dodging Pearl’s spears and Amethyst’s whip as she glided smoothly through the air. For the most part, they didn’t lose sight of her, that is, until she happened to fly behind one of the injectors resting on the cliff above, only for her to not appear on the other side of it seconds later like she should have.

“Aw, great!” Amethyst huffed in breathless disappointment as they all came to a stop. “She got away!”

“Oh, I’m sure she didn’t get too far,” Pearl assured with a wave of her hand. “After all, if her primary objective, whatever it is, is here in the Kindergarten, then chances are she’s not going to just leave it behind so soon. I’m sure that if we remain diligent, we’ll be able to find her, capture her, and put an end to her mission once and for all!”

“Well we would have caught her sooner if somebody had just let me nab her instead of just wildly hurling spears like a nutcase,” Stan remarked crossly, not even trying to hide his frustration with the white Gem as he glared her way.

“Well maybe we would have caught her even before that if somebody hadn’t tried to unnecessarily interfere with me catching her as she was running down the cliff!” Pearl countered just as bitterly.

“Oh, what, so you’re saying this is all my fault then?” Stan asked harshly, not noticing Amethyst’s look of growing concern as she looked between him and Pearl.

“Yes!” the white Gem exclaimed, appalled. “The only thing you’ve done since this mission began is make an absolute mess of things! In fact, why are you even here in the first place?! It’s not like you had to come along with us!”
“Hey, I already told you,” the conman reiterated with a persistent scowl. “I’m here to keep an eye on the kids, remember?”

“Oh, and what a wonderful job you’re doing of it too!” Pearl exclaimed with faux approval. “But do you happen to notice something? Oh, that’s right! They’re nowhere to be found!”

Stan was more than ready to shoot back a heated retort, but right before he could, Amethyst finally interjected, growing quite aggravated with their ongoing squabbling. “I’m sure the kids probably just hung back with Garnet,” she began, staunchly stepping in between the pair. “For now, we gotta get our heads back in the game! P-dot’s hiking it away from here, and all we’re doing is standing around here yelling at each other about it, which isn’t really gonna do anything to stop her, you know.”

“Well, Amethyst, how do you purpose we do to find her?” Pearl asked, hands on her hips.

“Uh, I dunno, actually come up with some kinda plan instead of biting each other’s heads off,” Amethyst said, passing a rather critical glance between the white Gem and the conman. She paused, however, upon noticing a rather large exit hole marring the nearby Kindergarten wall, as well as a plentiful pile of rocks resting on the cliff high above it. “And you know what? I think I might just have an idea…” She smirked wryly, though her confidence quickly turned to worry as soon as she remembered who she had to work with for this plan. “But uh, for this to work, you guys are gonna have to, um… get along? Just a little?”

“Get along? With her?” Stan scoffed haughtily at the idea. “C’mon, Amethyst, you know me better than that. I don’t work well with snooty airheads.”

“Well I don’t work well with miserly charlatans,” Pearl shot back, turning her nose up as she glared away.

“…You know what, I also don’t work well with people who use words that nobody knows the meaning of.”

“Well, could you guys at least try to work together?” Amethyst asked, nervously amidst the ongoing tension. “At least until we catch Peridot? Then you two can go right back to hating each other.”

Stan and Pearl were both still quite bitter as they exchanged distrustful, disdainful glances, neither of them too keen on having to cooperate for any period of time, however small. But as they both met Amethyst’s sincere, pleading pout, their shared resistance to her proposed teamwork-heavy plan fell apart almost instantly.

“Ugh, alright, fine,” Pearl begrudgingly agreed. “But only until we capture Peridot, and not a moment after that.”

“Yeah, and this doesn’t mean we gotta be all buddy-buddy about it either,” Stan remarked, arms still crossed as he sent the white Gem a cold scowl.

“Oh, believe me, I have no intentions of being anything of the sort.”

“Uh… well… that’s fine, I guess,” Amethyst frowned, still uncertain of whether or not her plan would go off without a hitch given these less than favorable circumstances. “But shouldn’t we at least all shake on it just to-”

“No!” Stan and Pearl were quick to reject this idea, both of them firmly believing that them agreeing to work together along was more than enough.
“Ugh,” the purple Gem groaned, running a hand through her messy hair as she tried to figure out how she was ever going to make this work out. “I can already tell this is gonna be a pain in my gem…”

With the elevator disabled, Garnet and the kids had no choice but to descend into the underground control room on foot. Its slanted walls and floors were just as dark and uninviting as they had been when they had first happened upon them weeks ago, and yet they still somehow carried a heavy air of mystery to them, even if the group now knew what rested at the end of the tunnel.

“So… what exactly do you think Peridot was even doing down here?” Dipper asked Garnet, hoping that the Gem leader’s future vision could at the very least give them a hint about what they were up against.

“It’s hard to say,” Garnet said, her manner as levelheaded as ever. “But no matter what she’s up to, if Homeworld sent her here to do it, then we need to put a stop to it.”

“Oh, that’s such a good point, Garnet!” Steven said with a bright grin. “You’re brains and brawn. The whole package!”

“Thank you,” Garnet smirked, accepting her young ward’s high five.

“It’s gotta be cause you’re a fusion, right?” Mabel asked with eager curiosity. “Cause fusions can do like, anything. Believe me, I know from experience!”

“So do I!” Steven chimed in proudly.

“Me too, I guess,” Dipper added with a small, bemused chuckle.

“Fusions can do a lot,” Garnet confirmed, still grinning. “But I have to keep some of my secrets.”

“Aw, please?” Steven pleaded. “We wanna know! Is the strong part of you Ruby and the wise part of you Sapphire?”

Garnet paused for a moment, pondering this question before delivering an expectantly enlightened answer. “It’s all of both. When two Gems combine, it creates something greater than the sum of their parts. For instance,” she glanced over at Steven and Mabel. “When you two fused into Maven, what do you think each of you brought to the fusion?”

“Oh! I know!” Mabel quipped first, raising her hand. “I brought my impeccable fashion sense, great social skills, and my award winning smile! Oh, and I also brought glitter, lots of glitter! We were basically covered with it the entire time we were fused, it was great.”

“Hm… Well… I guess I brought my positive attitude and all-around friendliness to Maven,” Steven said, blushing in embarrassment as he tried not to sound too immodest.

“True, but those things weren’t all that Maven was,” Garnet said, still pushing on ahead. “They were everything that you two were, and more. They were a symbol of your friendship, your bond, the perfect image of your relationship and what it means to each of you.”

“Relationship…” Mabel muttered to herself, her cheeks suddenly red as she stole a quick glance over at the impressed young Gem. “Wow…”
“Another good example would be Stepper,” Garnet continued, looking between Steven and Dipper this time. “What parts of you two went into making him who he was?”

“Oh, well, uh… Hm…” Steven paused thoughtfully for a moment. “I don’t… really know.”

“Yeah, me neither,” Dipper shook his head. “I guess its because Stepper was… pretty awkward his first time around.”

“But not after you found harmony between each other,” Garnet countered smoothly. “So after that…”

“Oh, wait a second!” Steven filled in as the Gem leader trailed off. “The way we tricked Peridot when we were fighting her robots! Dipper, that was definitely your brains at work there!”

“Huh, I guess you’re right,” Dipper noted with a small, growing smile. “And I gotta say, Steven, even if I wasn’t super ok with it at first, you were pretty determined to keep us together, which was something that totally carried over to when we fused that second time.”

“Oh yeah!” Steven exclaimed, excited by this revelation.

“Stepper did have both of those traits,” Garnet acknowledged. “And many more, including ones that neither of you were even aware of. His existence told the story of you two growing closer, and the moment you found the harmony between each other was the moment you finally came together.” The Gem leader paused, her smile growing a bit as she adjusted her shades. “In the same way, that’s what I am. The symbol of our—of Ruby and Sapphire’s relationship, their devotion to each other. I’m both of them, and so much more than them, all at the same time. That’s why I’m so great.”

“Wow…” all three of the kids mused in genuine amazement at everything the Gem leader had said as they finally reached the control room.

“So what’s it like to stay fused all the time?” Steven cut his question off as he took in the ruinous sight before them. The control room was still just as damaged as it had been the first time they had all been there, with its central crystal busted in and all power cut off to it completely, leaving the place dark and still. The key difference, however, were the numerous pillars standing erect throughout the entire room, most of them about Garnet’s height and all composed of tightly compacted dirt. All of this combined to create an atmosphere that was deeply unsettling, in ways that none of the kids could really describe as they tentatively followed Garnet into it. “I don’t know how… but this place is even creepier than the last time we were here…” Steven mused, flinching as he heard his own voice echo back at him amidst the otherwise dense silence of the room.

“Yeah…” Mabel agreed with a fretful frown as she approached one of the pillars. “What’s the deal with all these tuby things?”

“Mabel, don’t touch those things! We don’t know what they’re for!” Dipper cautioned, his hand already resting on the hilt of the Ancient Sea Blade, just in case. “You know, I’m suddenly really glad Pearl gave me this sword…”

“There’s clearly something different here this time,” Garnet spoke up, glancing around meticulously. “I don’t like it.”

“The power’s not on…” Steven noted as he looked back to the broken crystal. “What was Peridot doing down here?”

“W-what if she was just collecting dirt for some reason?” Mabel suggested anxiously, hoping that
this was nothing too serious. “Not sure why anyone would do something like that, but maybe she just has a weird hobby?”

“It looks like she pulled these out of the Kindergarten walls,” Garnet mused, glancing up to notice that there were even pillars of dirt hanging from the ceiling above. “Something strange is—” The Gem leader cut herself off as she caught onto the soft sound of sudden rumbling coming from one of the pillars on the far side of the room. Stoic as ever, Garnet made her approach, summoning her gauntlets as a precaution in case anything dangerous were to emerge.

“Garnet?” Steven called over to her, curious, as Dipper and Mabel also glanced over in her direction. The kids exchanged a somewhat worried look after not receiving a response from the Gem leader, but even so, they all hurried over to her, making sure to keep their guard up all the while. Garnet still said nothing as she reached out to touch the dirt pillar, only for it to start shaking violently the moment she made contact with it. The kids shared a startled gasp at this, Steven and Mabel tucking behind Garnet’s legs for protection while Dipper quickly drew his sword, aiming it at the pillar with a tight, albeit somewhat shaky grip.

“Y-you don’t think something’s in there… do you, Garnet?” Mabel asked nervously as they all steadily backed away. The Gem leader still provided no answers, her manner suddenly tense as she kept her gauntleted hands in tight fists. The pillar’s shaking only seemed to be growing more rapid and aggressive by the second, and yet nothing seemed to emerge from it. Instead, something unknown happened to fall from the ceiling above, landing right behind the group and frightening them all more than enough to prompt them to spin around and see exactly what it was.

And what it was seemed to be a hand and a foot, both of different colors, awkwardly fused together as they wriggled around aimlessly. The kids were all completely awestruck and aptly disturbed as Garnet picked the small, bizarre creature up, but they only had a moment to examine it before several more, similar creatures began dropping down from the pillars on the ceiling. Hands mixed with feet, arms connected to legs, two arms connected by their joints, legs linked at the knee and still several other twisted combinations of disjointed, multi-colored body parts began slinking across the floor in whatever limited way they could, all of them slowly but surely pulling themselves towards the alarmed group near the front of the room.

“O-ok! So I guess Peridot wasn’t just collecting dirt down here!” Mabel exclaimed fearfully, quickly pulling her grappling hook out of her sweater.

“What the heck are these things?!” Dipper asked, his eyes wide as he held his sword out in front of him defensively.

“And why are they—Ah!” Steven’s wondering was cut off as the creature Garnet was holding leapt out of her hand and onto his face. The young Gem gasped in terror as its hand grabbed at him, but fortunately, the Gem leader was quick to defeat it with a swift, decisive strike. The malformed creature dissipated much like a downed Gem monster would, and all that was left in its place were its jagged, crystalline remains.

“Gem shards? As in… broken Gems?” Mabel asked with growing horror towards the situation as a whole. “So these things are basically like Gem zombies… if they were stuck together…”
“Are you kidding?! These things aren’t *anything* like the zombies we’ve been up against before!” Dipper exclaimed hotly, not hesitating to bring his sword down on one of the creatures that managed to get a bit too close for comfort.

“Stop!” Garnet suddenly ordered, her voice oddly tight and tense as her expression conveyed just how unnerved she was. “D-don’t hurt them!”

“W-why not?” Steven asked waveringly, especially as he noticed that the usually unshakably courageous Gem leader was trembling in nothing less than absolute terror. “G-Garnet?”

Garnet didn’t get a chance to explain, but even if she had, she wouldn’t have been able to amidst her steadily rising panic. But all the same, the onslaught of smaller shard creatures was quickly forgotten as one of the larger dirt pillars let out a sickening crack, one that tore itself clean across as it began to grow wider and wider with each passing second.

“W-what was that?!?” Steven exclaimed, him, Dipper, and Mabel all hanging close by Garnet, even if the Gem leader could hardly be considered a form of defense amidst her own deeply distraught state.

But even so, the young Gem’s question quickly got an answer as the pillar suddenly exploded, bright light pouring out of it. And at the center of this light was another cluster of Gem shards, their forms gradually starting to emerge as it rose higher and higher into the air before the stunned group. Soon enough, the light silhouettes of four distinct Gems appeared, merged together by their torsos in a mess of trapped limbs and shapes. They let out a unified, distraught, desperate scream as they tried to escape from their entangled form, only for them to glitch out, their different appearances being lost completely as they fused against their will. From there, the silhouette’s shape started to change, taking on the form of what first looked like a massive hand, before the “fingers” of that hand shifted into various arms and legs. As the light faded, it became clear that these multi-colored limbs were conjoined together, its long, hulking body wrapped in a ragged grey cloth as it landed on the ground with a powerful crash, rattling the entire room in the process.

And, without wasting even a second, this nightmarish amalgamation began crawling its way towards Garnet and the kids, who were all aptly horrified by this monstrous being. Though none of them were more petrified and transfixed than the Gem leader herself, who knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, exactly what, or rather who this clustered creature used to be.

“Ok, so here’s how its gonna go down,” Amethyst began with a sly grin as she outlined her plan to Stan and Pearl. “I’m going to track Peridot down and chase her back here. That’s when you guys make sure she runs into this hole,” she nodded over at the large hole in the wall behind them. “And then you pull those rocks up there down using this whip.” She held up the two handled, very long whip she had summoned and lassoed around the pile of rock on the cliff above. “And we’ll trap her inside. Pretty easy, huh? Are we all good on what we’re supposed to be doing?”

“Of course, we are, Amethyst,” Pearl confirmed with an exasperated huff.

“Yeah, we’re not stupid,” Stan remarked, pausing briefly before continuing with a smug smirk meant for Pearl. “Or at least I’m not.”

“Hey!”

“Ok, s-so we’re all ready, then!” Amethyst quickly interjected before another argument could
break out between the pair. “I’ll be back in a few; you guys be ready to bring those rocks down on Peridot’s stupid triangle-shaped head. Oh, and try not to kill each other until I get back, k?”

“No promises…” Pearl muttered, exchanging a cross scowl with Stan as the purple Gem headed off to put their plan into action. For the first several minutes after Amethyst had left, the pair remained in a state of stilted silence, each of them holding onto their own respective ends on the whip and stubbornly refusing to make eye contact. However, this silence soon dissipated as Stan began to whistle in an attempt to alleviate his boredom with their uneventful station, something that was very quick to set the white Gem off.

“Could you please stop that infernal whistling?” Pearl asked with a very thin layer of politeness.

“Oh what, is it getting on your nerves?” Stan paused for a moment, glancing over at her with a knowing smirk.

“Yes,” the white Gem replied with a disapproving glower.

“Great!” the conman’s grin grew wider before he started whistling again, only much louder this time, much to the white Gem’s growing aggravation.

“You do realize that our plan is never going to work if Peridot hears you, right?” she asked pointedly. “If you wanted to be obnoxious and cause a ruckus, then you should have gone with Amethyst.”

“Yeah, I should have,” Stan remarked coldly. “At least then I wouldn’t have to hang out with a boring, stuck-up killjoy like you.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Pearl relinquished her hold on her end of the whip as she placed her hands on her hips.

“It means you’re annoying,” Stan began, also letting go of the whip as he took a challenging step towards the white Gem. “And pushy and bossy, and controlling, and a nag, and a prude!”

“Well, you, Stan,” Pearl countered just as fiercely as they essentially stood only apace away from each other. “Are careless, callous, irrational, dishonest, inconsiderate, and selfish!”

Stan flinched at this, his eyes widening at such this all-too familiar accusation before his former fierce demeanor quickly returned. “Take that back,” he demanded with tranquil fury.

“No, I won’t,” the white Gem staunchly refused. “Because it’s true.”

“No, its not!” the conman shot back, hands clenched into tight fists at his sides.

“Yes, it is.”

“No, its not!”

“Yes, it is!”

“No, it’s-”

Stan instantly cut himself off upon hearing the sudden loud rumbling coming from above them, something that Pearl took notice of too as they both glanced up to see a sight that shocked them both. Somehow, the pile of boulders they were supposed to pull down to trap Peridot had budged, almost as if it had been pushed from above seeing as how the rocks were already starting to rain
down towards them. A few of them already fell right before the startled pair, keeping them from effectively fleeing, but they shared a frightened gasp upon realizing that one of the larger rocks was plummeting down directly towards them.

“Look out!” Stan shouted, acting on instinct alone as he pushed Pearl and himself out of the way of the rock and into the exit hole. The pair barely had a moment to pick themselves up off the ground before the rest of the rocks finally fell, essentially trapping them both inside. And they had virtually no time at all to question how this cave in had even happened before a familiar, irritating snicker sounded out from the other side of the rock wall.

“Ha! You two must have thought that your little ‘plan’ to apprehend me was so smart and so foolproof,” Peridot began, leaning against the rocks with a smug smirk. “But I just so happened to overhear all of your futile deliberations, as well as your incessant arguing, which, of course, ended up being your complete and utter downfall! And once again, I’ve proved myself to be vastly more intelligent than you dull clumps by turning the tables on you and imprisoning you in the very same trap you had intended for me! It’s simply genius!”

“Yeah, yeah, you know what would be more genius, Greenie?” Stan asked, his tone deadpan as he tried to peek through one of the sparse gaps between the rocks. “Letting us outta here.”

“Please! Like I’d ever do that,” Peridot scoffed, rolling her eyes. “No, instead I think you’ll both stay right in there… trapped forever with no way out while I make my daring escape! Enjoy your new home, you clods!” The green Gem let out another triumphant laugh as she ran off, leaving the pair behind and stuck in the hole that, as she had said, they had no real way out of.

“Oh, this is just perfect!” Pearl growled as she tried prying the rocks aside with her spear, to no avail. “I have to admit that Amethyst’s plan to capture Peridot was actually quite promising, until you had to go and ruin it completely, Stan!”

“Oh yeah, go ahead and blame me,” Stan shot back, crossing his arms. “You know, the guy who literally just saved you from being crushed by a bunch of rocks. Heck, maybe the plan would have worked if I had actually thought twice about that.”

Pearl took pause at this, a spark of something akin to guilt striking her as she remembered that Stan had indeed saved her, as much as she was loathed to admit it. But she was quick to shake it off in favor of her former disgruntled anger. “Well, regardless of who’s fault it is, we’re still trapped in here all the same. Any ideas as to how we’re supposed to escape? Or should I just assume that the limits of your imagination only extend as far as creating new tawdry falsities to put on display at the Mystery Shack?”

“I dunno, why don’t we just have you yell at the rocks until they fall down?” Stan remarked sarcastically as he leaned against the cave wall. “You’re full of enough hot air that it would probably work pretty quickly.”

The white Gem couldn’t hold back a frustrated scowl upon hearing this, her cheeks lighting up blue in a flustered blush before her anger finally exploded. “See, Stan, that’s exactly your problem! You never take anything seriously! You think everything is just one big joke!”

“A joke, huh?” Stan retorted with a harsh scowl. “Shows how much you know, stretch. You’d be surprised at how many things I take very seriously.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“Like-” the conman quickly cut himself off before he could even make mention of the one thing he
had been heavily focused on for the past 30 years. So instead, he went in a different, far less incriminating direction. “Like taking care of Dipper and Mabel.”

“Oh, yes, of course!” Pearl exclaimed sardonically. “Taking care of the twins! Something you do so well that you just carelessly them run around as they please and get themselves into life-threatening situations on almost a daily basis! Clearly, their safety is your number one priority, right?”

“Hey, a little freedom never hurt anyone,” Stan said, still not retracting his stance. “Besides, it helps them learn lessons about life or whatever. Lessons that you refuse to learn, Pearl, seeing as how you’re about as stubborn as, well, a rock!”

“I am not a rock!” Pearl protested, appalled. “I am a Gem, thank you very much.”

“Yeesh, and so literal too,” Stan rolled his eyes, letting out an annoyed sigh as he paused for a moment, glancing down. “You know, Pearl, ever since I met you Gems, you’ve always been the one constantly on my case, even from the start. Heck, even Rose tried lightening up a bit near the end of her run. But you just keep fussing and nagging at me, even though I’ve never done anything to you. So what’s your excuse for hating me so much, huh?”

“Oh, please, Stan, don’t be ridiculous,” the white Gem crossed her arms. “I don’t hate you. I just— I’m not… w-well you’re just so… so frustrating! Like I said before, its like nothing is of any real importance to you, and the things that do matter to you, you just seem to brush aside to let them be on their own! Would it kill you to show just a little more concern and consideration every now and then?”

“Would it kill you to just loosen up and relax for a change?” Stan countered evenly. “Seriously, Pearl, you’re like, one of the biggest control freaks I’ve ever met, and believe me, I’ve known plenty. But you wanna know something crazy? You can’t control every little thing life throws at you. Sometimes you just gotta take things as they come, without throwing a massive tantrum every time something doesn’t go your way.”

“I-I know that!” Pearl protested defensively. “I just… w-well sometimes, I… Huh,” she paused, her expression softening in slight realization. “Y-you know… that’s… some surprisingly good advice, especially coming from you. Perhaps… perhaps I do sometimes get a little out of sorts when things go awry…”

“Oh, ya think?” the conman deadpanned, though he also began to drop his sour attitude upon recalling what the white Gem had said before. “But uh… maybe you do kinda have a point about me being sort of careless sometimes… I guess I could try to keep a better eye on the kids, and, well, everything else for that matter…”

“Wait a second…” Pearl said with a small, tentative smile. “Stan, did you just… admit that I was right?”

“Huh, yeah, I guess so,” Stan shrugged though he quickly tried to play it off. “But don’t take it too seriously, stretch. It’s probably just because of the lack of oxygen in here or something. But hey, looks like this is a two way street seeing as how you technically said I was right too, Pearl.”

“Oh! W-well… Well I, uh…” the white Gem stammered, trying to suppress an embarrassed blush. “Well, I suppose everyone has their moments every once in a great while, including you, Stan.”

The conman couldn’t help but let out a genuine laugh at this, one that Pearl gradually joined in on as the ongoing tension between the two of them slowly started to lift. True, the two of them had
never really been on good terms in the past, but they were steadily starting to realize that perhaps there was no real reason for them to hold such longstanding disdain towards each other in the first place. Even if they didn’t necessarily agree with each other on every point, there was still grounds for compromise between them, grounds that they had finally started to reach in, ironically enough, one of their worst squabbles yet.

“Um… so… Stan?” Pearl began, still flustered as she averted the conman’s gaze, though spoke sincerely nonetheless. “I just… Well, I’m… I’m sorry. It wasn’t really your fault that we got trapped in here. And you did end up pushing me out of the way of those rocks so… thank you for that.”

“Yeah, well… I-I guess I’m sorry too,” Stan acknowledged somewhat awkwardly. “You know, I don’t like admitting it, but you’re not always an overbearing stick in the mud.”

“And you’re not always a swindling con artist,” Pearl said with an amicable smile that turned to a worried frown as she looked to the rocks behind them. “Now, how are we ever going to get out of here?”

“I guess we’ll just have to follow Amethyst’s advice and work together,” the conman remarked with a knowing smirk as he positioned himself against the rocks. “On the count of three, we’ll both push on these rocks as hard as we can.”


“Two,” Stan continued, making sure he had a steady footing.

“One!” they both exclaimed in unison, giving the rocks a hearty shove. Neither of them had expected the stones to go down on the first push, but somehow they did, resulting in both Stan and Pearl falling down along with them, started, but free all the same.

“W-we did it!” the white Gem exclaimed with a laugh, exchanging a relieved smile with the conman.

“Uh, actually, I’m pretty sure I did it,” Amethyst pointed out as she stepped up to the pair, whip in hand and an amused grin on her face.

“Amethyst?” Stan frowned in confusion as him and Pearl picked themselves up to stand. “Wha—h-how did you—What’s going on?”

“Oh, not much,” the purple Gem shrugged, still grinning slyly. “Just savin’ you two dorks. I heard those rocks fall and I thought you guys had caught Peridot on your own, but then I overheard you guys yelling at each other in there, so that’s when I realized things kinda fell apart.”

“Wait… Amethyst, if you knew we were trapped in there, then why didn’t you try to save us sooner?” Pearl asked, her tone disapproving.

“Cause I figured a little… quality time would be just the thing to get you guys to finally get along, and it looks like I was right!” the purple Gem exclaimed with a pleased smile. “Guess all it took for you two to make nice with each other was to trap you in a cave for a while and force you guys to talk it out. Who would have thought?!?”

“Are you kidding me?! Amethyst, we could have died in there!” Stan exclaimed harshly.

“Exactly!” Pearl huffed. “That was completely inadvisable! Not to mention the fact that Peridot got
“Yeah, maybe,” Amethyst shrugged, still far too elated over how the pair were finally on good terms to be brought down from it. In fact, she was so excited that she ended up catching them both off guard with a surprise group hug. “But we’ll get her next time for sure. Right, you guys?”

Neither Stan nor Pearl answered this at first as they exchanged an initially stilted glance, uncertain of whether or not they wanted to carry their newfound affability onward past the cave it had been found it. But as they glanced down at the clearly delighted purple Gem, they both found that her happiness was contagious enough for them to reciprocate her hug, deciding that they really didn’t have much of a reason to go back to the way things used to be. “Right,” they confirmed in determined unison, knowing that from here on out, things were going to start moving forward instead of remaining in bitter stagnation.

Despite the warm resolution going on above ground, down below in the control room, things were still in a state of absolute chaos. The massive amalgamation monster continued sulking towards the frightened group, its mess of entangled arms and legs continually inching its way towards them with unknown intent.

“G-Garnet?” Steven shakily tried to get the Gem leader’s attention, which was still completely fixed on the lumbering mutant. “Garnet, what do we do?!” Almost as soon as he had raised this question, the young Gem let out a startled cry as one of the smaller limb clusters jumped onto him from behind. Mabel rushed to pull it off of him, but as soon as she let it hit the ground, Dipper plunged his sword into it, poofing it easily.

“What are you doing?!” Mabel exclaimed, looking to her brother in disbelief. “Garnet told us not to hurt them!”

“Well if we don’t, then they’ll end up hurting us!” Dipper argued, his sword at the ready to take down another smaller limb creature slinking towards them.

“Garnet, w-we need your help!” Steven pleaded with the Gem leader in the midst of all this, only to turn around and realize the huge mutant had grabbed her. Its array of arms gripped her tightly by the arm, hip, and head, and as shocked as she was, she was unable to release herself from its tight hold, especially as it began pulling her towards it. “P-please! You gotta talk to us!” the young Gem cried, only for Garnet to remain in terrified silence, her entire form trembling in speechless horror as her breaths came out in short, panicked gasps.

“W-watch out!” Mabel warned as another creature pounced for Steven. The young Gem reacted quickly, his shield forming over his arm to block its advance, though its disfigured hand continued pressing hard against it.

“I don’t understand!” Dipper exclaimed, slashing through yet another mutant as it clamored for the young Gem. “Steven, why do these things only seem to be going after you and Garnet?”

“I-I don’t know!” Steven shook his head, distraught as he glanced back at the Gem leader again. Garnet was still trapped in the larger monster’s hold as another one of its hands rushed for her face, roughly shoving her shades off and revealing all three of her huge, terror-filled eyes. As caught up in her frozen fear as she was, the Gem leader hardly noticed the kids trying their best to beat the still numerous smaller mutants away only for more of them to keep coming without any seeming end in sight. But even amidst this, Garnet suddenly spoke up, her usually strong, stoic voice
completely shaken, almost broken even, as she finally explained exactly what these creatures were.

“T-these… these were Crystal Gems…” she choked, tears starting to stream down her cheeks as
the mutant pressed its hand against her face. “S-shattered into pieces during the war… They were
buried together… T-they were **forced** together… They were **forced** to fuse!”

Needless to say that upon learning the truth about these monsters, the kids were all aptly shocked,
though they all immediately understood why Garnet was so petrified by them. As horrific and
unimaginable as it was, these grotesque, twisted monsters were composed of the broken remains of
her former comrades, Gems she had known, fought with, likely even befriended back during the
war. They had been merged, against their will, together into these nightmarish fusions, if they
could even be called that, with no way of breaking free and barely any sentience left to speak of as
they acted on pure, mindless instinct alone. In all honesty, it was almost enough to send the kids
into the tears that Garnet herself was already completely lost in.

“T-this… this is wrong…” Garnet’s voice was little more than a heartbroken whisper as she stared
at the mess of conjoined gemstones positioned at the fusion monster’s core. Her voice wavered
even more as she began speaking to the creature itself, her tears still falling hard and heavy as she
offered them a weak apology that would never be enough to suffice for the amount of suffering
they were likely going through. “… I-I didn’t… None of us knew you were… t-that they would…
None of y-you deserved… I… I’m sorry!”

The Gem leader let out a loud, agonized shout as her immense emotions finally started to
overwhelm her, to the point that they quickly began to compromise her completely. With both of
her halves in absolute despair and disarray, the white light of unfusion began to consume her, her
form still shaking as the fusion monster continued to cling onto her tightly.

“Garnet!” all three of the kids gasped in shocked unison, especially as a large gaping hole began to
spread through the Gem leader’s midsection, another sign of her all to quickly falling apart.

“No!” Steven cried, his shield still holding up as he shoved another mutant back, shuddering as the
gap in the Gem leader’s form began to widen. “Garnet, you’re coming undone! T-this isn’t like
you!”

“Y-yeah! You gotta keep it together!” Mabel pleaded just as anxiously as she took out a smaller
creature with her grappling hook before Dipper covered her by stabbing through another one. “This
is all **really** messed up, yeah, but remember what you told us! You’re way more than any of this!
You’re Garnet!”

Upon hearing this, the Gem leader’s tightly shut eyes flew open, this distraught, yet truthful
reminder filling both of her struggling halves with the motivation she so desperately needed. All at
once, her manner suddenly shifted, her grief and fear turning to righteous fury, not towards the
forceful amalgamation of her fallen allies, but of the ones who had done such a horrible thing to
them in the first place. With a courageous shout, Garnet pressed her hands against the limbs
restraining her, the gap in her form starting to close as she fought back with sheer, outraged
ferocity. Though she was still engulfed by obscuring light, she pushed the mutant away from her
with a powerful blow before rushing towards it, this time completely on the offense. As she pushed
heavily against the creature, its four abnormal, oversized eyes appeared around its clustered gem,
all of them staring at her almost pleadingly, as if they were silently begging for her to release them.
And that’s exactly what she did. The unfusing glow disappeared from her, her halves still united as
she literally ripped the forced fusion apart, its monstrous form poofing away in a momentous
explosion of smoke. Garnet quickly bubbled its remaining gemstone mere seconds after it hit the
floor, her manner still tense and rigid and silent, even as the kids breathed a shared sigh of relief
behind her.

“So… is it bad that all of this somehow wasn’t the most disturbing thing we’ve seen this summer?” Dipper asked rather stiffly, his sword still drawn just in case any more mutants showed up. “Because even if its not, its… pretty up there on the list…”

“But we did it!” Steven exclaimed with a newfound allayed smile. “We beat them back!”

“And its all thanks to you, Garnet!” Mabel chimed in, brightly at first, though all of the kids’ smiles faded as they looked to the silent Gem leader with concern, especially as she kept her back turned to them. “Garnet?”

“So this is what Homeworld thinks of fusion…” Garnet suddenly growled to herself, an edge of ferocity that could only belong to Ruby in her tone as she glared down at the bubbled gem resting over her palm. “W-we couldn’t have known they would do this…” she seemed to reply to herself, her voice softer, sadder, much more like Sapphire’s, before she exploded into anger again. “This is where they’ve been. All the ones we couldn’t find. They’ve been here the whole time! And Homeworld’s been doing… this to them! Rose couldn’t have known… We couldn’t have known… This is punishment for the rebellion! We could have stopped this! We could have saved them! It’s not our fault!”

“Garnet!” Steven fearfully exclaimed upon hearing the Gem leader let out a distraught sob. All three of the kids were still quite unsettled to see Garnet in such a rarely vulnerable, shaken form, but she was quick to start regaining her composure as she sent the bubbled clustered gem away, turning to the trio behind her with a soft, strained expression.

“K-kids…” she began, all three of her eyes looking down to them with unspoken apologies for her moment of weakness. It was clear that there was much she wanted to say to them, but she didn’t get the chance as the tense moment was abruptly interrupted, though fortunately, not by fusion mutants this time.

“Yo!” Amethyst called as her, Pearl, and Stan slid down into the control room. “We’re back!”

“Garnet, we lost Peridot,” Pearl reported regretfully. “We had a plan to catch her but it…”

“It fell through,” Stan finished, smirking in slight amusement as he crossed his arms. “Literally!”

“Whoa!” the purple Gem gasped upon noticing one of the lingering fusion mutants crawling up onto her. “Check out those freaky things!”

“W-what are they?” Pearl asked, unnerved as she picked the pair of conjoined hands up.

“I’ll tell ya what they could be,” Stan remarked, grabbing another stray mutant with an intrigued grin. “The Mystery Shack’s newest headlining attraction! People would eat these creepy little suckers right up!”

“Put them down!” Garnet suddenly ordered, her tone incredibly harsh as her shades returned. Stan and Pearl were quick to do so, alarmed by her fierce manner just as much as the kids were, even if they understood where it came from. “We need to poof and bubble all of them,” the Gem leader commanded coldly, raising her fist over the mutant Pearl had dropped before brining it down in a heavy, brutal swing. “We can’t let any escape.”
Though the horrific disaster in the Kindergarten was over, it was safe to say that the kids were still somewhat shaken by everything they had seen in that control room. It was for that reason that they had unanimously decided to regroup the next day, for both the sake of helping Steven with his last bit of laundry, as well as to discuss and debrief from it all.

“So… what do you think Peridot wanted to do with all those fusion monsters from yesterday?” Mabel asked the boys with a fretful frown as they headed for the warp pad.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Dipper retorted with resurgent disdain for the green Gem. “She probably wants to use them as weapons or something and sick them on all of us. Seeing as how she’s already tried to kill us with robots and a spaceship, it really wouldn’t be that surprising if she was trying to do it with reanimated Gem mutants.”

“I don’t know… those Gems… they didn’t really seem to know what they were doing…” Steven noted solemnly as they congregated onto the warp pad to go up to one of the temple statue’s hands. “If anything, they all seemed to be really… scared. And… like Garnet said, they used to be Crystal Gems! So I don’t think they’d want to attack us on purpose…”

“Uh, speaking of Garnet, how’s she doing?” Mabel asked with concern as they warped up to the hand, where the washer and dryer awaited.

“Oh, well, she’s-” Steven cut himself off as they arrived, only to find the Gem leader herself casually leaning against the statue’s thumb. “Right here, apparently.”

“Oh, hi, Garnet,” Mabel greeted with a small smile. “How’s it going?”

“Still damp,” Garnet replied, nodding over to the washing machine.

“Oh, right, the clothes,” Steven said, heading over to take care of his laundry. “I guess that makes sense. There are towels in there.”

“Wait a second, how does the washer and dryer work all the way up here?” Dipper asked, rather confused. “Is there like, some kind of special plumbing system or does something else make them run?”

“It’s magic,” Garnet said with a flashy wave of her hand and a small, joking smile. The kids shared a warm laugh over this, but it quickly died out as the Gem leader looked away, her arms crossed and her expression unreadable.

“Um… a-are you… alright?” Steven asked worriedly, remembering just how distraught and panicked his guardian had been the previous day, traits that she was certainly not known for.

“…I wish you three hadn’t seen that…” Garnet answered, her tone steady, but still layered with hints of remorse.

“Oh, its ok,” the young Gem assured gently.

“Yeah, I mean, we were all kind of freaking out down there,” Dipper said with a small shrug. “And given what we were up against, I think we had every reason to be.”

“It’s not ok,” the Gem leader countered, shaking her head.

“…W-why not?” Mabel asked, rather tentatively.

“What Homeworld did,” Garnet began, her expression darkening as she looked down. “Taking the
shards and parts of fallen Gems and combining them. Those Gems weren’t asked permission to be fused together like that. Fusion is a choice; those Gems weren’t given a choice. It isn’t right. It isn’t fusion!”

The kids all went silent upon hearing the Gem leader’s resurgent anger over the matter, all of them realizing exactly why she had every reason to be angry. After all, she was a fusion herself; the concept was deeply important to her, it was everything she was. And to see it be tarnished and distorted in such a twisted way no doubt filled her with a kind of fury she couldn’t fully begin to describe.

But even so, as the dryer beeped, Steven glanced up to his guardian again, still rather worried for her in light of everything that had happened. “W-what’s it like?” he asked, both curious and anxious. “Being a fusion?”

Garnet glanced over to the kids at this, her expression once again stoic as she offered a terse response. “You all have fused.”

“I mean, like, all the time,” the young Gem clarified. “Do you forget who you used to be when you’re together?”

The Gem leader finally smiled at this, glancing down at the gemstones on her palms. “You forget you were ever alone. You all know, that when you fuse, you don’t feel like two people. You feel like one being. And your old names might as well be names for your right arm, and your left.”

“So… when you split up, is it like you disappear?” Mabel asked, remembering fearing the exact same thing happening with Maven not too long ago.

“I embody my—I mean, Ruby and Sapphire’s love,” Garnet assured. “I’ll always exist in them, even if they split apart. But the strength of that love keeps me together, so I can stay Garnet for a very long time.”

“That’s why you’re so great,” Steven finished with a bright, warm smile.

The Gem leader let out a small chuckle at this, one that the kids all joined in on. Regardless of the horrors they had witnessed in the Kindergarten the previous day, one thing was still clear: Garnet was still there, still keeping it together, still existing as the ultimate proclamation of Ruby and Sapphire’s love for one another. And try as they might to pervert the image of fusion through mutant monsters and forced amalgamations, that was something that Homeworld would never be able to destroy.

This warm moment continued until a gust of wind passed by, blowing a blue and white sock out Steven’s laundry basket. The young Gem gasped as the sock was carried by the abrupt breeze, nearly off of the statue’s hand entirely until Garnet managed to catch it at the very last second. “Don’t wanna break up a pair,” she smiled, handing the sock back to her young ward.

“Yeah,” Steven grinned, folding the blue sock back together with its matching pink counterpart, together, just as they were supposed to be. “They belong together.”
Chapter 47: Society of the Blind Eye

Chapter Summary

In which there's a cult, some angst, some hillbilly speak, and some foreshadowing....

Chapter Notes

Yeee so this one is a lot of fun I think. It really has a lot of interesting elements to it and I'm excited to finally get it out! So I hope you enjoy! (keyword is MEMORY)

Seeing as how Greasy’s Diner was one of the few general eateries in Gravity Falls, it often stayed open rather late into the night to accommodate the offhand insomniac customer. Even so, it did close eventually every night, and every night Lazy Susan dutifully closed the diner up before heading home. It was business as usual as she cheerfully swept the floors, emptied the register tills, beat the possums out of the dishwasher, and chased Old Man McGucket out from under one of the tables. With all of these average tasks completed, the waitress locked the restaurant for the night, blithely bidding it farewell as she began to head home to tend to her multitude of cats.

“Good night, diner!” she exclaimed brightly before doing the same to the surrounding woods. “Good night, trees!” Her string of warm goodbyes continued even as she passed by the group of gnomes, stacked upon each other’s shoulders, trying to reach a still-warm pie sitting on the diner’s windowsill. “Good night, tiny men stealing my pie.” Lazy Susan stopped dead in her tracks immediately after saying this, a shocked gasp escaping her as she spun around to face the thieving gnomes again. “Wait, what?!”

“Lift with your knees,” Jeff commanded his tower of tiny accomplices, unaware that the waitress had caught them. “No, your knees! If I go one more hour without eating, I’m gonna resort to cannibalism.” The gnome leader paused, briefly, noticing the still quite stunned Lazy Susan standing nearby before he casually tipped his pointy hat to her. “Ma’am.”

Needless to say that upon seeing such an alarmingly bizarre sight as actual, living gnomes of all things, Lazy Susan’s first reaction was to let out a panicked shriek of fear. The gnomes themselves hardly reacted to the waitresses’ terror as she hurriedly backed away, trying to make sense of the impossibility standing right in front of her. “M-magic little men! What does it mean?! What do I do?!” At that moment, she fortunately managed to bump into the payphone near the diner, and she didn’t hesitate to scramble to dial 911 amidst her palpable distress. “Yes, hi, I’d like to report something” she began frantically as the dispatcher answered on the other end. “I’m at Greasy’s Diner. You won’t believe what I’ve witnessed! It’s unbelievable! Its indescribable! It’s-”

Lazy Susan was abruptly cut off as two sets of hands suddenly grabbed her from behind. She
barely even had time to let out another fearful scream before the pair of robed figures covered both her mouth and her eyes as they began to forcibly drag her away. Their leader nodded in approval as they passed by him, before he followed after them himself, leaving only a graffiti insignia of a single eye crossed out on the wall behind him. “It is unseen…” he proclaimed darkly as him, his cronies, and their unwitting target disappeared into the darkness of the night.

“…Welp, back to pie!” Jeff concluded in the aftermath of what him and his fellow gnomes had witnessed. Still, they hardly cared about its ominous implications as they made off with their prize, all of them more than eager to devour it whole. “I was this close to eating you, Carl.”

With the laptop busted seemingly beyond repair and the bunker devoid of any further tangible clues, Dipper had found that he was largely back to square one when it came to his search for answers about the author of the journals. Still, despite the roadblocks he had faced, personal and otherwise, over the past several weeks, he still saw that search as a necessary one, for both the sake of uncovering the mysteries of Gravity Falls, as well as potentially rescuing Lapis from her aquatic imprisonment. A goal that, regardless of the pain he had been put through in his reckless attempt to achieve, he was still striving towards as intently as ever.

Of course, seeing as how his last venture in this search had ended in such momentous disaster, Dipper had wisely decided against going it alone this time, which was why he had ask Steven and Connie to help him sort through all of the clues and leads he had gathered thus far. The trio congregated in the attic, Connie already scribbling away on a notepad as Dipper carefully examined the detailed photo board he had put together concerning the author’s unknown identity. “Alright, author,” he muttered to himself, stepping away from the board as he absentely chewed on the end of a pen. “Who are you? Who are you…?” Dipper’s concentration was abruptly broken as the pen he was gnawing suddenly snapped, resulting in a messy spray of ink all over his face. “Ugh! Not again,” he groaned in disgust, tossing the ruined pen into a bin of other pens that had met the same fate.

“Uh… Dipper? How about instead of snacking on pens, you snack on one of these?” Steven offered with a smile, holding out a plate of cookies he had brought up from downstairs. “They’re a lot sweeter, and way less inkier! That’s a guarantee.”

Dipper let out a somewhat exasperated sigh as he cleaned the ink off his face and took one of the cookies before turning back to his collection of clues. Steven couldn’t help but smile a bit as he handed the cookie plate off to Connie, a wave of contentment washing over him as he thought about how normal this all felt. With Dipper thoughtfully mulling over the mystery of the author, Connie working through her own theories on paper, and Mabel having promised to bring more snacks up in a few minutes, the young Gem was more than happy to see them all working together again. In a way, it was almost as if the sword training debacle, their struggle against Bill, and even the hand ship invasion had never even happened. Like nothing had changed at all. And after all of the upheaval of the past several weeks alone, that was something that Steven was more than happy to hold onto.

“You know, you guys,” Steven began with a warm smile, wanting to spread this happiness to Dipper and Connie as well. “This is… really nice. These last few weeks have been pretty rough, what with those Gem mutants in the Kindergarten, and the invasion, and that whole thing with Bill–”

“Um… Steven?” Connie spoke up in a small whisper, her expression filled with sudden concern as she looked over at Dipper. Upon the mention of the dream demon, he merely glanced down
disdainfully, clearly not wanting to be reminded of such a sore subject, though Steven didn’t initially notice this as he continued blissfully.

“I guess I’m just glad that we’ve been able to move past all that,” the young Gem remarked, still smiling, though it quickly fell as he looked over at Dipper. “…R-right?”

“Oh, yeah, sure, we’ve ‘moved past it’,” Dipper remarked, feigning dismissiveness and complacency, though his tone was still somewhat bitter as he muttered his next statement. “Of course, we wouldn’t have had anything to move past if none of it had ever happened in the first place…”

Steven’s upbeat manner diminished completely upon hearing this as he instead instantly regretted even bringing any of it up at all. In all honesty, he should have figured that, even weeks later, the entire possession incident would still be quite a sore subject for Dipper, even despite his apparent progress in recovering from the wounds it had left behind both physically and emotionally. As much as it worried the young Gem to think so, those were wounds that ran so deep that they might not ever completely disappear, no matter how much time and healing passed. And despite his sincere sympathy, regret, and devout desire to help Dipper, to help all of them really, move beyond the pains of the not too distant past, Steven had no idea where to even really start with such an immense endeavor.

All the same, the newly solemn atmosphere was soon broken through as Mabel blithely barged into the attic, message in a bottle in hand as she hurried over to greet the others. “Hey, guys! Guess what I got!”

“Oh… a dirty green bottle?” Connie ventured with a small, joking smile.

“It’s a bottle message from Mermando, remember?” Mabel explained, still smiling fondly at the thought of her former infatuation. “He was part fish, part shirtless guy, and by far one of the hunkiest, least creepy guy I’ve crushed on this summer! What if he wants to get back together?!”

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up, Mabel…” Dipper said rationally. “I mean, the guy does live in the ocean and the chances of you two actually, you know, being together seem kind of-”

“Too late! Hopes are way up!” Mabel interrupted as she rushed to get the letter out of the bottle and read it aloud. “‘Dear Mabel, So far so good! ‘It is with a heavy heart-’ So far so good! ‘-that I must inform you I’m getting married?!’”

“And… there it is,” Dipper remarked with an already sympathetic frown upon noticing how suddenly distraught his sister was by this news.

“‘In order to prevent an undersea war… arranged marriage… queen of the manatees’?!’ Mabel frantically read, growing more distressed and heartbroken with each word. “And she’s so beautiful!” she wailed upon looking at the picture Mermando had enclosed of him and his new, rather unsightly bride. “This can’t be happening…”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mabel,” Connie said comfortingly. “We all know how much you liked Mermando.”

“But look on the bright side,” Dipper attempted to encourage. “You’ll get over him eventually.”

“That’s not the point,” Mabel huffed as she pulled out her summer scrapbook. “On my first day here, I made this page for summer romances because I thought I was going to have so many sweeping relationships! But look at my luck so far: turned out to be gnomes,” she pointed to a
picture of ‘Norman’, who had indeed ended up being a stack of lovestruck gnomes. “Child psycho…” she continued with apt disgust as she nodded at Gideon’s picture. “Made out with his own hands,” she went on, pointing at a picture of Gabe and his puppets. “And now with Mermando out…” Mabel sighed as she scribbled the word “failed” above the page’s title of “summer romances”, a claim that rang true, as every single one of her relationship attempts had ended in nothing but heartbreak thus far. “I wish I could just forget about them all forever…”

“Aw, don’t count yourself out yet, Mabel!” Steven encouraged as he placed a hand on her shoulder. “The summer’s not over yet! There’s still plenty of chances for you to find that special someone. In fact, I bet it’ll probably happen when you’re least expecting it!”

Mabel looked over at the young Gem at this, her cheeks filling in with an almost invisible blush as she met his warm, sincere smile. A smile that she almost returned, until she took a second look and saw Connie sitting right next to Steven, and rather closely at this. Much closer than she was to him, in more ways than one. “Y-yeah…” she muttered, looking away dejectedly. “When I’m least expecting it…”

“Hey, if its any consolation, my summer mission hasn’t been a huge success either,” Dipper said, turning back to his photo board full of dead ends and incomplete hints. “We’re still no closer to finding out who the author of the journals is. And honestly, at this rate, it feels like we’ve barely made any progress at all!”

“Well, we do have some clues…” Connie interjected, glancing back at her notes. “Like the fact that he probably has six fingers and that he supposedly disappeared over thirty years ago. But other than that… yeah… we really don’t have a whole lot to go off of.”

“Well, we would if the laptop wasn’t smashed…” Dipper added, hesitantly glancing over at the brutalized laptop sitting on the desk nearby. Despite its current uselessness, he still decided to hold onto it, much like how he had held onto the torn scraps of the pictures of himself and Lapis. After all, even aside from sentimental value, he never knew when either of those things might become useful again. “But without it, we’ve lost just about any lead we might have had for finding him…”

“Wait a minute…” Mabel mused as she took a casual look through the bottle Mermando’s message had come in at the laptop, noticing something that none of them had before. “Dipper, look at this!”

“Through your bottle?” Dipper asked dubiously.

“Just do it,” Mabel rolled her eyes as she handed the bottle over to him.

While still skeptical, Dipper did as she said, peering through the end of the bottle as it effectively magnified some of the laptop’s smaller features. Most notable of those being a small metal plate screwed to the undercarriage of the machine, engraved with the name of its inventor. ‘McGucket Labs’. As in… Old Man McGucket?!”

“Isn’t he that crazy old hillbilly that lives in the junkyard downtown?” Connie asked, just as confused as Dipper was. “He built that laptop?”

“Well, he did build that Gobblewonker robot,” Steven pointed out. “And it actually worked pretty well. Until Opal shot it in the face with one of her magic arrows.”

“But wait,” Mabel interjected with a dawning realization. “If the laptop was McGucket’s then… you guys don’t think…?”

“No, he couldn’t be,” Dipper quickly refuted, though as he took another look back at his compiled
clues, his tune gradually started to change. “It wouldn’t make any sense. Unless….” He trailed off as he began making connections that had previously seemed completely arbitrary, such as the laptop’s label reading “property of F” and McGucket’s first name: Fiddleford. Connie got up to join in on this, correlating the six fingers on the cover of the journal to the fact that McGucket’s right hand was continually bandaged up, almost as if one of his fingers had somehow been chopped off. Mabel and Steven also ended up collaborating, adding ties between clues and facts until nearly everything seemed to point towards one person and one person alone: Fiddleford McGucket.

“No way…” Dipper muttered, completely awestruck by what had never, ever seemed anywhere remotely possible until now. “So that means… Old Man McGucket wrote the journals?!”

“You know, I gotta admit that out of anyone, he was probably the last person I would have suspected…” Mabel remarked, rather taken aback herself.

“Same here,” Connie agreed, checking over the clues again to see if they checked it, which, against all logic, they somehow did.

“Oh my gosh, you guys, just wait until we tell the Gems!” Steven exclaimed with an excited smile. “They’ll totally freak out when they hear we’ve found out who the author is! Heck, maybe it’ll even jog their memory and they’ll remember helping him write the journals!”

“Then that’s who we’ll go ask first,” Dipper said with apt resolve to finally put this longtime mystery to rest. “Let’s go!”

“Am I blanchin? Girl, we blanchin. I live up in a mansion. Am I blanchin? Girl, we blanchin, I live up in a mansion.” Soos sang along to this rather repetitive rap tune playing on the radio as he swept up in the gift shop, not noticing Wendy’s growing annoyance with the song until she could no longer remain quiet about it.

“Ugh! Soos, can we please turn that stupid song off?!” she groaned, slamming a fist down on the counter. “I can’t get it out of my head!”

“Oh, you mean ‘Straight Blanchin’ by Lil’ Big Dawg?” Soos retorted with a smile. “It’s the catchiest song of the summer!”

“What even is ‘blanchin’?” Wendy asked with a harsh scowl. “Rappers can’t just make up words!”

“Rappers are visionaries, Wendy,” Soos countered. “If they told me to eat my own pants, I would do it.”

“Eat your own pants! Eat your own pants, yeah!” the song blared, and of course, the handyman readily followed along with it.

“Guess I have no choice,” Soos shrugged blithely as he began to unzipper his pants and chow down. However, before Wendy could talk him out of it, the kids rushed into the shop, all fueled by the adrenaline of their newfound lead.

“Soos, Wendy! We need to go see the Gems and Old Man McGucket!” Dipper hurriedly informed, effectually asking them to come along.

“We’ll explain on the way!” Mabel added, booking it after her brother towards the door.
“For now, let’s just say we discovered something huge!” Steven exclaimed, running backwards until he happened to trip. Fortunately, Connie caught him before he could fall, eliciting a small chuckle from both of them. “Thanks.”

“Anytime,” Connie nodded before beckoning Soos and Wendy again. “Come on, you guys!”

Not even needing to ask anymore questions, the pair was immediately on board with whatever unknown mission the kids had in mind, so they wasted no time in running out after them, past a very confused Stan.

“Hey, what about work? Kids!” the conman shouted after his employees, though he paused in disturbed bewilderment upon turning to catch the fleeting sight of them. “Why is Soos eating his own pants?”

The Gems’ peaceful afternoon of putting together new stools for the kitchen’s island was abruptly interrupted as the kids burst into the house, all of them more than excited to unveil their latest development. “You guys! You guys!” Steven shouted, stars in his eyes as he ran over to his guardians, the others not too far behind. “The most amazing thing just happened, you’ll never believe it!”

“Now, Steven, what did we talk about overexaggerating things?” Pearl chastised gently.

“But he’s not overexaggerating!” Connie protested.

“No, he’s not,” Mabel agreed readily. “Cause we just found out who the author of the journal is!”

“What?!” Pearl and Amethyst exclaimed in shocked unison, while immense, silent surprise crossed over Garnet’s expression as well.

“Well, what are you waiting for?!” the purple Gem asked, just as eager as her teammates to get these long awaited answers. “Spill it! Who is he?!”

“Yes, by all means, tell us!” Pearl nodded vigorously. “It’s about time we find out who this mysterious, seemingly all-knowing “author” is!”

“Go ahead,” Garnet advised more calmly, nodding to the kids to make the anticipated reveal.

“Ok, so this might be a little far-fetched,” Dipper began somewhat tentatively, hoping that the Gems would hear him out on this. “But based on every clue we’ve gathered thus far, we have reason to believe that the author of the journals is none other than… Old Man McGucket!”

Upon hearing this, the Gems’ shared interest immediately fizzled out into confusion and doubt, which were things they had no qualms about sharing with the kids. “Huh, looks like Steven was right,” Amethyst remarked, crossing her arms caustically. “I really don’t believe it.”

“Oh, I get it!” Pearl exclaimed with an amused chuckle. “It’s a joke! There’s no way someone as outlandish and scatterbrained as that wild hillbilly could have written something as collected and articulated as the journals! Very funny, kids. You almost had us going there for a second!”

“Uh, actually, Pearl, they’re not joking,” Wendy clarified as Soos nodded his support. “Even if it does seem pretty out there.”
“And you have proof that McGucket wrote it,” Garnet assumed as she looked to the kids again.

“Y-yeah, we do!” Dipper assured, pulling out the broken laptop. “His name is on the laptop we found in the bunker and everything! And he easily would have been around over 30 years ago to write it.”

“Is the thought of you guys maybe working with him ringing any bells?” Connie asked curiously. “At all?”

“Uh, not really,” Amethyst shook her head.

“Mostly because it’s a rather absurd notion…” Pearl muttered dubiously.

“But is a notion we can’t dismiss, at least not yet,” Garnet interjected, placing steady hands on both of her teammates’ shoulders. “The only way to for sure is to go talk to McGucket ourselves.”

“And if he really is the author, then maybe you guys will remember working together and you can all be friends again,” Steven said with a small smile. Of course, the Gems merely exchanged an uncertain glance at this, none of them really wanting to dash their encouraging young ward’s hopes. But even if McGucket was indeed the author, none of the three of them had any intentions of rekindling whatever “friendship” they might have had with him way back when, for reasons that had little to do with the hillbilly personally and everything to do with the nature of the journal itself. So much of its contents concerned them, and they didn’t seem to have the faintest idea about how all of that comprehensive information was either gathered. Really, what the Gems wanted most now were answers; answers about the past that could hopefully, finally lead to certainty in the future.

Without any further ado, the kids, Soos, Wendy, and the Gems all headed down to the junkyard, knowing that they were McGucket’s favored stomping grounds. Oddly enough, there were no apparent signs of the hillbilly as they arrived, but the Gems in particular were rather tense and alert, all three of them aware that this meeting could change everything. Either that, or it would be nothing more than a rather bizarre waste of time.

“Old Man McGucket, are you here?!” Dipper called, glancing around the mountainous piles of trash for the supposed author.

“Here, hillbilly-billy-billy!” Soos exclaimed louder, as they drew closer to McGucket’s shack in the middle of the dump.

“I still can’t believe we’re following through on this…” Pearl murmured, clutching close to Garnet as she narrowly avoided stepping on any stray bits of garbage.

“Me neither,” Amethyst said as she munched on a stray shoe she had found. “How could that crazy old McGucket guy and author dude be the same person? Pretty sure that guy doesn’t even know what a book even is, much less how to write one.”

“Like I’ve said before,” Garnet spoke up, her tone firm to balance out her teammates’ doubt. “Before now, we didn’t even have any guesses about who the author could be. Even if this new lead seems unlikely, it’s the only one we have. And that alone makes it worth pursuing.”

While Amethyst and Pearl were still rather hesitant to buy into the possibility of McGucket being the author, they heeded their leaders’ advice and held their peace on the matter. At least for now.
As the group finally arrived to McGucket’s ramshackle shack in the center of the junkyard, they found that it was in the middle of being vandalized, as Nate and Lee graffitied the words “McSuckit” onto its side. “Ha! This is hilarious,” Nate chuckled as they finished up their prank.

“T ook an hour to think of this, but it was worth it!” Lee laughingly agreed, though the levity was cut short as McGucket suddenly emerged from his hut, having overheard the noise, prompting the teens to flee from the scene.

“Get outta here, ya salt-lickin, hornswaggl ing…” the hillbilly trailed off, his anger dissipating into dejection as he turned back to the insult painted onto the side of his dilapidated home.

“’McSuckit’ … They got me good…” McGucket was quick to perk up, however, upon noticing the group of kids and Gems standing nearby. “Visitors! Come, come!” he exclaimed brightly, leading the way into his shack. Its interior was expectantly a disaster, with trash and spare broken down mechanical parts strewn all over as the hillbilly’s racoon wife scurried about freely. Even so, McGucket hardly seemed to pay this any mind as he instead cheerfully entertained his rare guests. “Pull up some rusty metal! You’re just in time for my hourly turf war with the hillbilly that lives in my mirror. Quit starin’ at me when I bathe!” he shouted at his reflection in the nearby metal bathtub.

“Somehow I find it hard to believe that he was the one whom Rose trusted with so many of her best kept secrets…” Pearl muttered to Garnet, the doubt and disdain in her tone clear.

“You can drop the act, McGucket!” Dipper exclaimed boldly as he pulled out the journal. “I know you’re the author. You studied the mysteries of this town and wrote this book!”

“Yeah, and you filled it with all kinds of personal junk about us,” Amethyst added, her hands on her hips. “Speaking of which, I don’t think you have a lot of room to write about my room bein’ a mess when your place is pretty much just as bad. Kudos to you on that though, I’d party in a mess like this.”

“Anyway, dude, you’re the genius Dipper’s been looking all summer for!” Wendy got back on track.

“Er, genius?” McGucket questioned with an uneasy frown that was quick to turn remorseful. “I’m no genius…I’ve never done nothin’ worthwhile in my life. Everyone knows I’m no good to nobody. I can’t remember what I used to be, but I must’ve been a big failure to end up like this.”

“Wait, so… you’re saying you lost your memories too?” Steven asked, glancing over at the Gems as he said it.

“That seems a bit too ironic…” Pearl remarked, looking to McGucket with newfound suspicion.

“I-I swear… I don’t know nothin’ about no book or mysteries or any o’ that there flimflam…” McGucket said, fretfully fiddling with his long beard. “Sorry to disappoint ya kids…”

“But… but your name is on the laptop!” Connie argued intently.

“Well, what about this book?” Dipper asked, presenting McGucket with the journal. After all, he wasn’t about to forget about his only possible lead on the author so easily, especially not when it felt like he was starting to get so close. “Are you sure you didn’t write it? Here, take a closer look.”

McGucket shook his head once more as Dipper started flipping through the journal’s pages, none
of them apparently registering in his already sparse memory whatsoever. “I told you, I don’t recall. Everything before 1982 is just a blur. Just a dim, hazy—” The hillbilly abruptly cut himself off as the journal landed on a page featuring the dominating image of a single eye crossed evenly through its piercing pupil. McGucket let out a shriek of raw terror upon so much as catching a glimpse of it, and he fell to the ground hard, scrambling away from the journal as his manner grew frantic and erratic. “The Blind Eye! Robes—the men! My mind! T-they did something!”

“Wha—who did?” Dipper asked, just as taken aback as the others by this sudden outburst.

“I… I don’t recall…” McGucket admitted, his shoulders slumping in defeat.

“Oh, well isn’t that just incredibly convenient?!” Pearl exclaimed, a hint of accusatory hostility in her tone. “I mean, what are the odds that this elusive author we supposedly worked with years ago just so happens to be an amnesiac garbage-dweller who can’t even remember anything important at all? Ugh, I knew this would be a waste of time.”

“Pearl,” Garnet interjected, silently commanding the white Gem to calm down before she turned back to McGucket. “You mentioned something called the Blind Eye. What is that?”

“I… uh, I don’t… they… i-it was…” the hillbilly trailed off, placing a hand on his head as he seemed to lose himself to a longstanding yet unknown panic. “I don’t know!”

“Aw, you poor old man!” Mabel said with genuine sympathy. “No wonder your mind’s all loopy. You must have been through something really intense.”

“What if McGucket learned something he wasn’t supposed to know, and someone or something messed with his mind?” Dipper theorized. “If that’s the case, then we have to get to the bottom of this!”

“Well, I guess we gotta if we ever wanna figure all this journal junk out, huh?” Amethyst asked, glancing to her teammates.

“Yes,” Garnet nodded resolutely. “It’s not entirely clear, but I can see that looking into all this will lead us to answers of some kind, though it’s hard to say exactly what those answers might be right now.”

“And even if you aren’t the author, then at least maybe we’ll be able to help you get your memory back,” Steven said to McGucket with a supportive smile. “So no matter what, it’ll be a win-win!”

“Think, dude, what’s the earliest thing you can remember?” Wendy asked the hillbilly.

“Uh… this, I reckon,” McGucket took a newspaper clipping he had pinned to the wall down, one that pictured him lost and disoriented in front of a rather familiar building in town.

“That’s the history museum!” Connie exclaimed, pointing the building out.

“Then that’s where we’re going,” Dipper asserted, knowing that it would be the best place to start looking for clues that could very well finally led to the missing piece of this intricate puzzle they had all been searching for.
song playing over the stereo that set Wendy off the moment she heard it.

“Are we blanchin’? Girl, we blanchin, I live up in a mansion.”

“Ugh, Soos!” the cashier groaned in frustration as she hurriedly ejected the aggravating CD and tossed it out the window. The others all looked to her in surprise at this, particularly Soos, which was why she was quick to make a terse, rather stilted apology. “I’ll buy you a new one.”

“Can you guys believe it?” Steven remarked to the other kids with a bright smile. “The four of us are finally back in action, solving mysteries and rewriting history again! Isn’t it great?”

“It will be great if we can jog McGucket’s memory and he actually turns out to be the author after all,” Dipper remarked rather dryly, his attention mostly focused to combing through the journal for any further clues.

“And hopefully we can do all that without running into that Blind Eye thing he mentioned, whatever that is,” Connie added just as seriously, already examining a map of the museum on her phone for anything out of place.

“Y–yeah, but… we can still have fun doing all that, can’t we?” Steven asked, suddenly apprehensive as he glanced back at the Gems, whose expression were all also rather somber and tight.

“Fun?” Dipper repeated with something of a scoff. “Steven, come on. This is serious, our biggest break towards finding the author yet. We have to focus on that first. Especially considering what happened the last time we let ourselves get distracted…”

“R–right…” Steven said, his smile finally falling completely as he let out a small sigh as he leaned his head against the window. Dipper and Connie didn’t notice this, and the young Gem didn’t blame them for it; after all, he knew exactly why they both had every intention of pushing themselves so hard with this important mystery. Still, that didn’t make him feel any better about one of the underlying reasons in particular about why that was.

Mabel, on the other hand, had taken notice of Steven’s sudden melancholy as she sat right next to him, and while it did worry her, another part of her saw it as an opportunity. One that, largely without thinking, she decided to try and take. “Uh… hey, Steven?” she spoke up, trying her best not to come across as flustered.

“Yeah?” the young Gem replied in an absent mutter.

“W–well… I was just wondering… if maybe you and me could, uh… if we could…” Mabel trailed off, her cheeks blushing brightly as she let out a small gasp of realization. “Oh my gosh, I think I finally know how Dipper felt about this whole confession thing…”

“What was that?” Steven asked, having not heard her last muttered statement.

“Oh! Uh, I was just…” Mabel finally gave up with a small sigh, deciding that now really wasn’t the time for this, especially as she spared a quick glance over at Connie sitting on the other side of her. “I was just, uh, thinking that you and me should take Dipper’s advice and be more, um… serious and focused about this author mystery, is all… Y–yeah, that’s… that’s totally what I was gonna say…”

“Oh… Ok, then…” Steven frowned, both confused and downcast as he went back to staring out the window, not noticing Mabel’s clear frustration with her own nervousness. Usually, she had no problem with this sort of thing, but this instance was entirely different than anything she had ever
felt before. If she was perfectly honest with herself, these feelings in general were rather foreign to her, at least to the extent that she had been experiencing them for the past several weeks. Which was likely why she was having such a hard time admitting them to anyone really, but especially to the young Gem and in a sense, even to herself. After all, she had already failed at this so many times already; what would good would throwing her heart out on the line again do her, especially since she knew there was such a huge chance that it would be thrown right back?

The rest of the ride was rather silent until the group got to the museum, which was, for some reason, closed for the day. Fortunately, they were able to find easy enough access inside through an open window, and as soon as they all made it inside, Garnet held her teammates back for just a moment, to make sure that they were all clear about what exactly their mission was.

“Remember,” she cautioned, her voice quiet but firm. “Our main mission is to fill in the gaps between us and the author. We don’t know what we’ll find here, so we need to be ready for anything. And if we learn something that we don’t like... then we’ll just have to deal with it and move on from there.”

Amethyst and Pearl nodded in affirmation of this, both of them knowing just as much as Garnet did that today’s investigation could very well change everything they thought they knew. But all the same, they were quick to rejoin the others in starting their search for clues.

“Alright, everyone, keep your eyes peeled for anything suspicious,” Dipper advised as they all spread out throughout the main hall.

“So would this exhibit on these groady old caveman forks be considered suspicious?” Amethyst asked, casually infiltrating said exhibit without a care.

“Uh, that’s not really that suspicious, Amethyst,” Connie remarked, raising an eyebrow. “Its just… weird, I guess.”

“Yeah, I’ll say so,” the purple Gem agreed, grabbing one of the wooden utensils. “How the heck did humans used to eat with these lame things without getting mad splinters all up in their mouths? They should have just used their hands to chow down, like a civilized person or whatever.” With that, Amethyst downed the ancient fork with one gulp, much to the startled surprise of everyone watching. “Huh, kinda woody but other than that, it’s not too bad.”

As the investigation continued, Mabel found herself rather disinterested with it as she heaved a morose sigh, something that Wendy too notice of as she paused her search to check up on the younger girl. “Mabel, are you ok? You just walked past a cat without petting it,” she pointed to the nearby taxidermy mountain lion, which Mabel had barely even spared a second place at.

“Oh, Wendy, everything I look at reminds me of my failed romances…” Mabel pouted, nodding to several of the nearby exhibits. “That formaldehyde heart, that romantic diorama. Even this poster of my most recent crush,” she said, looking up to a poster advertising one of Gabe’s puppet shows before disdainfully pulling it down only to reveal an old poster for Sev’ral Timetzn underneath it. “Oh come on!”

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“So, your last memory was here,” Dipper said to McGucket as the hillbilly meandered about. “Anything coming back?”

McGucket frowned as he looked around the museum, quite uncertain though it was clear he was making a genuine effort to try and remember something, as difficult of a task as that often was for him. “Er—well, I-“
“Guys, look!” Soos cut in, pointing down the museum hall. At the end of the corridor, obscured by shadows, was a vague human figure, one that was quick to further into the darkness upon being spotted.

“Whoa, who was that?” Steven asked with apt alarm.

“Everyone, after them!” Pearl commanded, already running on ahead. The others followed suit, chasing the shadowy figure down the hall, tracing their path all the way to a room lined with a myriad of images of eyes. Yet as they all piled into this room, the unknown figure was seemingly nowhere to be seen at all.

“Well kettle my corn! He vanish-ified!” McGucket exclaimed, aghast.

“But that doesn’t make any sense,” Dipper shook his head, confused. “Where did he go?”

“Hm…” Garnet mused, looking over the eyes covering the walls and remembering something the hillbilly had mentioned earlier. “The Blind Eye…”

“You don’t think this could be it, do ya, G?” Amethyst asked, slightly disappointed. “Just a room filled with a bunch of creepy old eyeballs?”

“This better not just be it!” Pearl remarked hotly. “That would make this whole thing even more of a wild goose chase than it already is! You!” she spun around to face McGucket. “We brought you all the way here, so I think its about time you start remembering something or else!”

“I-I… I’m tryin’,” the hillbilly said, clearly intimidated as he shrunk back a bit. “But its mighty difficult to recall just ‘bout anything when I feel like all these eyballs are a-watchin me…”

“Wait,” Dipper interjected, tracing path of nearly pupil in the room right back to McGucket. “They are! Move aside.”

The hillbilly did so, casting a nervous glance at the rather impatient Gems as he did to reveal a central stone tablet, one that carried a carving of yet another eye, yet much like the one in the journal, it was crossed cleanly through. The way it was set up, it almost looked like a switch, and as Dipper gave it an experimental push, that proved to be exactly what it was as the wall started to peel back to a short staircase that led into mysterious darkness down below.

“Whoa, a secret passageway!” Connie exclaimed, amazed. “This just took on a whole new level of cryptic! And that’s saying something, seeing as how it was already really cryptic to begin with.”

“What’s down there?” Pearl asked, looking to Garnet for answers, which was something the Gem leader didn’t really have as she instead simply shrugged point blank.

“We’ll have to be stealthy,” McGucket noted with newfound resolve. “I’ll hambone a message if there’s trouble.” He did so, slapping his arms and legs in a rhythmic message that was lost on everyone else.

“I… have no idea what that means,” Dipper admitted with a frown.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Amethyst asked daringly. “Let’s scope this sucker out!”

Seeing as how the group was unsure of what they’d find below the museum, they made sure to take care to keep quiet as they descended the staircase down below. As they reached the bottom, the sound of deep, unified chanting soon became apparent amidst the narrow, candle-lit corridors. They all remained on high alert as they followed this chanting, which only grew louder and more
ominous with each passing second until they reached a thick scarlet curtain. And as they collectively peered out what lay beyond this curtain, they were met with by a sight that none of them had been expecting.

A large, wide open room laid before them, once again lit only by candles sconced on the walls. At the room’s center rested a reclined leather chair, one with restraining straps attached to the armrests and body. But by far the most sinister thing about this already alarming setup was the multitude gathered around this chair in an organized circle, all of them wearing crimson, floor-length robes with hoods that concealed their faces completely. And as they assembled for their unknown purposes, they continued their Latin chant, unsettling the hidden group watching them from behind the curtain. “Novus ordo seclorum. Novus ordo seclorum.”

This continued chant continued as the apparent leader of this gathering stepped forward, the familiar crossed-out eye symbol adorning his robe as he held his hands up to quiet his followers. “Who is the subject of our meeting?” he asked, his manner cold and authoritative.

“This woman,” another one of the robed men announced, escorting a familiar, albeit blindfolded figure into the room. Her identity only became clear, however, as he pulled the sack covering her head off, revealing a very confused, disoriented waitress underneath.

“Lazy Susan?” Mabel whispered, exchanging a bewildered glance with the other kids at this. After all, what could the usually kindly, albeit a bit dimwitted waitress have to do with this foreboding group of robed figures?

“What is it you have seen?” the leader asked Lazy Susan as she was sat down in the reclined chair. “Speak!” the other members echoed, startling the already anxious waitress quite a bit.

“Uh, w-well, I was leaving the diner,” she began unsteadily. “And I saw these little bearded doodads. And I was like ‘bwaaa?!’”

“There, there. You won’t be like ‘bwaaa?’ for much longer…” the leader said with faux sympathy as he opened up a wooden box one of his compatriots presented him with. He pulled a strange looking device out of it, one that was clearly some kind of gun or blaster, though it was rather archaic and bizarre in its design. A large lightbulb was fixed to its front, and on its side was a dial used to input letters, though overall its purpose was initially unclear. As the leader began to dial the words “little men” into the machine, the other members all pulled their hoods down, none of them bothering to even acknowledge Lazy Susan’s barrage of curious, nervous questions.

“What is that gizmo? It looks like a hair dryer. Are you guys barbers? I-” the waitress cut herself off with a sudden scream as the leader pulled the gun’s trigger, a burst of electricity zapping Susan squarely against her forehead. The blast held her paralyzed in its thrall until it finally died out, leaving her slack in the chair for a moment, her eyes blinking slowly and unevenly as she recovered from what looked like a very horrific experience.

“Lazy Susan, what do you know of little men?” the leader asked, hands held behind his back as he set the ray gun down.

“My mind is cleared, thanks to the Society of the Blind Eye,” Lazy Susan reported almost robotically, much to the satisfaction of said society members.

“It is unseen!” they all proclaimed in triumphant unison, their mind-erasing mission complete for now.
“Oh my gosh! They just wiped Lazy Susan’s memory!” Dipper exclaimed in a stunned whisper, just as shocked as all the others at such a disturbing sight.

“They should have wiped off that awful mascara,” Soos joked, trying to lighten the mood, though his attempt wasn’t well received by Mabel or Wendy.

“I think she looks beautiful!”

“She’s doing the best she can, Soos!”

“Whoa… touched a nerve there…” the handyman frowned, glancing away fretfully.

“So uh, I guess this whole mission just got a lot more serious, huh?” Amethyst asked, rather apprehensive in light of what they had just witnessed.

“I’d certainly say so…” Pearl muttered, somewhat shaken by the implications of all this as she gripped the edge of the curtain a bit tighter.

“Lazy Susan, how do you feel?” the society leader asked the waitress as a few other members helped her out of the chair.

“I feel great!” the waitress remarked brightly as she began to be led away. “I can’t even remember what was wrong, or what I’m doing here, or if I’m a man or a woman!”

“Your memories will be safe with us,” the leader said solemnly as he removed the glass tube from the ray gun, labeling it with Lazy Susan’s name. “Buried in the Hall of the Forgotten.”

“Into the Hall of the Forgotten! Into the Hall of the Forgotten!” the other members chanted as the leader sent the cylinder off through a vacuum tube, one that carried it up to the ceiling and out of the room.

“Good chanting, boys!” the leader exclaimed proudly. “Have you been practicing? Either way, meeting adjourned.”

“Unsee you later,” the society members bid each other farewell as they began to disperse.

“Unsee you later!”

The group behind the curtain waited a moment or two to make sure all of the society members had left, and upon Garnet’s cue that the coast was clear, they all emerged to investigate things further. “Amazing. A secret society of evil mind erasers!” Dipper remarked, both amazed and unnerved. “I’ll bet they erased your memory a long time ago, McGucket. And maybe even all of your memories about the author too!” he theorized, turning to the Gems.

“But… but that’s impossible!” Pearl exclaimed, looking to the nearby memory gun anxiously. “If we ever had a run into this so-called ‘Society of the Blind Eye’ in the past, then certainly we would have remembered it!”

“No, we wouldn’t have,” Garnet clarified. “Not if they used that gun on us.”

“So, uh… what are we supposed to do now then?” Amethyst asked.

“Well, if we can find where you and McGucket’s memories are hidden, it could be the key to unlocking all the mysteries of Gravity Falls! And then some…” Dipper mused, ever mindful of his own personal reasons for wanting to find these long awaited answers. “Alright, Mabel, Wendy,
Connie, you three stay here and make sure those robe guys don’t come back.”

“Whoo! Girls club!” Wendy cheered, exchanging fists bumps with both Mabel and Connie.

“Steven, Soos, McGucket, we’re gonna go find that Hall of the Forgotten,” Dipper continued with apt resolve.

“Meanwhile, we’ll try to track down some of those society members,” Garnet said readily, her hand clenched into a tight fists. “And if they won’t give us answers willingly, then we’ll make them.”

“Yeah, now you’re talkin’!” Amethyst exclaimed rowdily, already summoning her whip. “Time to beat up a bunch of creepy, robe-wearing nerds!”

“W-we’re not actually going to utilize any physical violence against them!” Pearl assured as her and the other two Gems began to head off. “Unless, of course, they refuse to deny us access to memories that are rightfully ours, in which case we might consider it…”

“Well, dudes, I guess we should-” Soos was cut off as his hat was suddenly sucked into one of the nearby vacuum tubes, sending it off to where all of the memories the society collected were supposedly sent.

“Quick! After that hat!” Dipper exclaimed, already running after it as McGucket and Soos followed quickly after.

Steven started to join them, though he did stop short briefly upon taking another glance at the memory gun sitting on the table behind him. The example of its use they had all witnessed had been frightening to say the least, but there was no deny that gun was effective at clearing away any and all memories of harrowing experiences. And while the idea was just a small, fledgling thought inside the young Gem’s mind, he couldn’t help but wonder if it could be used to erase other kinds of memories as well, including those of pain, remorse, fear, and sorrow. If it could destroy all thoughts of past regrets, from a perilous invasion that ended in heartbreak or an ill-fated puppet show marred by wrongly-spilled blood. If it could do more than heal the long-lasting scars of the past, but instead make it as so they had never happened in the first place.

All the same, Steven’s initial musings on the matter were cut short as he was abruptly thrown right back into the moment thanks to Connie. “Uh, Steven? Aren’t you going with them?” she asked, noticing the young Gems rather awestruck expression as he stared at the gun.

“Huh? O-oh… oh yeah,” he blinked, shaking his head clear of such thoughts for now as he hurried after Dipper, Soos, and McGucket, but not before calling back to the girls. “Good luck, you guys!”

“R-right back at ya!” Mabel called back with a smile that was just a bit too wide, though thankfully neither Wendy nor Connie seemed to notice.

The Gems remained swift and silent as they made their way through the society headquarters’ labyrinthine halls, all three of them ready to summon their weapons at a moment’s notice if need be. Needless to say they were all rather tense, and they had every reason to be; after all, it truly did seem as though the Society of the Blind Eye could possibly be behind their string of missing memories concerning the author. And yet, despite how close they apparently were to getting answers, they couldn’t help but be mutually anxious about it all the same. None of them really knew what they would learn if they truly did recover their supposedly lost memories, but if
anything was clear, it was this: reconnecting the faded pieces of their past would either answer all their questions, or create countless more.

“Gems,” Garnet stopped suddenly as they began to pass by a closed door, one that was more than enough to peak some interest.

“It’s locked,” Pearl reported, trying to wedge it open to no avail. “I suppose we’ll just have to-”

The white Gem was cut off as Garnet’s gauntlet crashed into the door, breaking it apart easily. “Well, I guess that’s one way to get in,” Amethyst chuckled, hopping inside the rather small storage room. At first glance, it didn’t seem like there was anything of note to be found save for several boxes filled with spare society robes. However, as preceptive as always, Garnet approached the far end of the room, which was largely concealed in darkness until Pearl followed suit, her gemstone casting light upon something that made all three Gems gasp in shock.

The entire wall seemed to host a wide array of old documents and newspaper clippings, some tracing back as far as almost thirty years ago. Regardless of their age though, almost all of these clips contained common themes: reports and coverage of Gem monster attacks, of the Crystal Gems themselves fighting off such attacks, of the town suffering mass damage from those attacks. The Gems themselves recognized every single one of the instances hanging before them, though they were still quite surprised by them all, especially seeing as how they weren’t the only things there. A myriad of notes was also tacked to the wall, filled with all manner of disparaging accusations and insults towards the Crystal Gems themselves: “Crystal Menaces!”, “Gravity Falls isn’t safe with them around!”, “Disaster Magnets!”, “Are they even of this Earth?!”, “Alien Invaders?!”, “Some ‘protectors’ they are!”, “They must be witches!”, “They’ll bring destruction upon us all!” and so on and so forth, seemingly without end. All of these notes had been arranged in such a way that they formed the society’s ionic eye symbol, its center being a picture of the Crystal Gems, one that included Rose Quartz herself that had been crossed through in dark red ink. A perfectly obvious testament to what the Society of the Blind Eye clearly thought of the Crystal Gems.

“W-wha… what is all this?” Pearl asked in a shocked whisper, taking a small step back as she looked to this unnerving display with wide eyes.

“Uh, I think its pretty obvious what this is, P!” Amethyst exclaimed in sudden defiant anger. “It’s proof that those ‘Blind Eye’ chumps, or whoever they are totally jacked our memories! All cause they hate our guts for some reason, which is like, whatever! Obviously they don’t know how awesome we are and how we save this town’s butt like, pretty much every day!”

“G-Garnet, what do you make of all this… this slander?” Pearl asked, gripping the Gem leader’s arm tightly. Garnet herself still seemed quite taken aback by what they were seeing, her jaw still dropped and her expression unreadable as she glanced around again. Her gaze finally stopped, however, upon the newest article of the collection, one that pictured the hand ship’s approach on Gravity Falls just a few weeks ago. The Gem leader was still silent as she pulled it off the wall, and when she finally did speak, her tone was soft, solemn, and most of all guilty.

“They… they’re right,” she said, not bothering to glance up. “The only reason Gem monsters attack Gravity Falls is because we’re here. We’ve known that for years now. Our presence puts this town in danger nearly every day.”

“W-well… b-but we always do manage to fend the monsters off and keep the town safe!” Pearl protested fretfully. “It’s what Rose wanted us to do! She… we… Oh, what would she think of all this? An entire society dedicated to ridding people of their memories of anything out of the ordinary? Including us? She would have hated it…”
“S-so… they’re trying to erase people’s memories of Gem stuff,” Amethyst said, still shaken and upset. “And that’s super messed up, yeah. But what about our memories? Why would these guys even go after us in the first place if they want everyone else to forget about us? And why would they only get rid of our memories of author dude and like, nothing else?”

“Maybe they wanted to get rid of the memory of him even more than us…” Garnet theorized, putting the picture down.

“Of McGucket?” Pearl asked incredulously. “But he’s completely harmless! Well, aside from that fact that I’m fairly certain that supposed ‘raccoon wife’ of his is rabid…”

“What if he wasn’t so harmless before those robe dudes took his memory?” Amethyst wondered worriedly. “What if he was some kind of threat to them, so they messed his brain up and made him go totally nuts? And… what if they wanted to do the same thing to us only they didn’t make it that far?”

“But… no,” Pearl shook her head, refusing to believe it, even though the evidence was starting to add up. “Rose would have never allowed something like that to happen! She would have put this Society of the Blind Eye nonsense to a stop the moment she heard about it! U-unless…”

“Unless they erased her memories too…” Garnet mused, looking back up to the wall of accusations before them. “The shapeshifter… When we were in the bunker, it mentioned something about us having ‘gaps’ in our past… And it questioned whether Rose had those same gaps or not.”

“W-well of course she did!” Pearl countered, flustered for the sake of defending her former liege. “She must have! Otherwise, she would have known about all this. She would have told us!”

“Would she have?” Amethyst asked, an anxious frown crossing her features. Pearl initially prepared to counter back that Rose indeed would have, but her words faltered as she looked back to the wall of clippings again. Specifically, at the photo of their happy, smiling, stalwart team, standing together, tarnished by the blood red X crossed over it by the society. Rose had had many enemies in her time, from the highest elites on Homeworld, all the way down to mere Gem foot soldiers who loathed her stance to protect the Earth. But that was back during the war. For practically the duration of their time living in Gravity Falls, the Crystal Gems had faced no severe opposition to their presence there, save for perhaps Gideon, but the Gems saw him as only a minor aggravation at best. But this, this was nothing less than complete and utter malice on the part of the Society of the Blind Eye towards them, malice that had most likely led to several important memories being stripped away from them, if not more so. But, in the eyes of the Crystal Gems at least, Rose Quartz was infallible. She had never been defeated by any foe before, to any degree. Certainly, there was no way she would have never let herself fall victim to a group of mere humans with an archaic memory erasing ray gun, even if the rest of them had. So why, then, would she have never filled in the gaps for her teammates? Why would she have let memories that bore at least some significance fade away into nothing?

And most of all, why would she decide to keep things that way, even after she was gone?

With the boys and the Gems gone, the girls found themselves with little to do as they remained in the meeting hall, keeping a tentative eye out for any stray society members. Mabel and Wendy sat on the steps leading into the hall as Connie stood a few paces away, practicing some maneuvers with the blade Pearl had entrusted her with for this mission. It wasn’t an incredibly eventful way to
pass the time, but at the very least, it was something.

“Whoa, Connie, you’re getting pretty good at swinging that thing around.” Wendy remarked with an impressed grin upon watching the younger girl pull off a deft technique.

“Thanks, Wendy,” Connie returned her smile. “Pearl’s been teaching me and Dipper some pretty advanced moves lately, and it’s a good thing too, seeing as how we’re basically dealing with a sinister mind-erasing cult here.”

“Correction: they’re an evil, mind-erasing cult that totally needs to invest in some new robes,” Mabel added, sticking her tongue out. “The look like they’re all in some kinda demonic choir or something. A few more colors other than that overdramatic blood red would totally spruce things up!”

The girls all got a good laugh over this lighthearted suggestion, though the levity was soon broken as a sudden rattling crash sounded out from somewhere down the hall. Upon hearing it, Connie was instantly on the defensive, her sword held out in front of her as she poised to listen once again.

“What was that?” Mabel asked with a curious, concerned frown.

“I don’t know, but I’m gonna go check it out,” Connie said, resolved. “You guys stay here, I’ll be right back.”

“You got it, ‘Miss Knight’,” Wendy smirked, sending Connie off with a salute before she disappeared into one of the headquarters’ many halls. Only a beat or two passed after she left, however, before Mabel let out the long sigh she had been holding in, flopping down to lie on her back with an exasperated groan.

“I just don’t get it, Wendy,” she began, still caught up in her earlier dejection. “I hug a lot, I can burp the alphabet, I have scratch and sniff clothing, I’m the total package! So why does every boy leave me?”

“Pfft, who cares?” Wendy asked with a shrug. “Boys are the worst. You shouldn’t get hung up, man.”

“M-maybe I come on too strong, you know?” Mabel wondered, sitting up.

“Well, what’s your opener? Pretend I’m a boy.” At this, the cashier tucked most of her hair under her hat, though she did leave enough to make herself a fake mustache with it. “Mm, testosterone,” she quipped with a manly spit before Mabel dove right into her incredibly enthusiastic pitch.

“Hi! I’m Mabel! I’m 12 and own a pig! Wanna get married?!” she exclaimed loudly and exuberantly, a bright, beaming smile dominating her features.

“Honestly, that was perfect,” Wendy chuckled, amused by her excitability as she let her hair fall down once more. “Like I said, just don’t let all those sour crushes get you down, dude. You’re way better than like, all those loser guys, if you ask me.”

“Ugh, that’s what I keep trying to tell myself,” Mabel groaned. “But its so hard when not even one of them has worked out at all! I mean, I have so many failed romances now that its getting hard to keep count of them all: there’s Norman, Gideon, Sev’ral Timez, Mermando, Gabe, Steven—”

“Whoa, whoa, hold up!” Wendy interjected, looking to Mabel with stark surprise. “Who was that last one again?”
Mabel flinched, covering her mouth as her face flushed red with a bright red blush over her accidental slip up. “Uh… n-no one! It was no one!”

“Nuh uh, man, I heard you,” the cashier remarked with a knowing grin. “You totally said Steven! Since when have you been crushing on him? You gotta spill all the details, dude.”

“Mmm…. You promise you won’t tell anyone?” Mabel asked hesitantly, knowing that if there was anyone she could trust with this information, it was Wendy.

“Your secret’s safe with me,” she assured, pulling of her signature zipping lips motion.

Mabel still didn’t jump right in, mostly out of nerves more than anything else. It was bizarre, really, seeing as how she had been vaguely aware of these feelings for quite some time. But only now was she finally admitting them out loud, not just to Wendy, but to herself. “I guess… it all started when me and Steven fused… We had such a great time together, to the point that… neither of us really wanted to let go. I-I sorta felt like I would have been really happy just staying with him forever, you know? And… in a way, I guess I still kinda feel like that…”

“Aw, Mabel, that’s super sweet,” Wendy said with a sincere smile. “But if you’ve felt like that about Steven for this long, then why don’t you just tell him about it already?”

“Ugh, cause it would make things super awkward!” Mabel exclaimed, frustrated. “Steven’s not just some random guy of the week, he’s Steven. He’s one of my best friends! If I told him I had a crush on him and he turned me down, then it’d ruin like, everything! And not to mention, he’s already…” She trailed off as she glanced over at the hallway Connie had headed down, shaking her head as she decided to leave it at that. “N-never mind…”

“Dude, don’t worry about it being awkward,” Wendy advised, placing a steady hand on the younger girl’s shoulder. “Steven’s like, one of the most chill people ever. I’m sure he’ll understand. And even if he says no, it won’t really change anything. Chances are you’ll both just forget about it and move on with your lives eventually.”

“Forget…” Mabel repeated, her eyes widening with realization as she glanced over at the memory gun sitting only a few feet away. “Wendy, that’s it!” she exclaimed excitedly, rushing over to the device as the cashier followed in confusion. “I just need to type ‘summer romances’ into this thing, and I won’t feel bad about them anymore! And I bet if I do, it’ll even get rid of that silly old crush I have on Steven too! It’s perfect!”

“Whoa, hold up, Mabel,” Wendy cautioned, concerned. “We don’t even know what that thing does. You could accidentally erase, like, learning how to read, or breathe, or-”

“Or one of those terrible summer songs you can’t get out of your head?” Mabel suggested with a broad smile, instantly quieting the cashier at the promising prospect of forgetting the incredibly aggravating ‘Straight Blanchin’ once and for all.

Dipper, Steven, Soos, and McGucket had narrowly avoided being spotted as they raced after the handyman’s hat, in the hopes that it would lead them to the mysterious Hall of the Forgotten. And, seeing as how they had a definite path to follow, it didn’t take them too long to find it. It was a large, sparsely lit room, much like the rest of the society’s headquarters, but its defining feature were the countless glass tubes contained within it, staking almost all the way up to the ceiling. There were hundreds, probably thousands of them, all encompassing the memories the Society of
the Blind Eye had taken away from innocent people over the years. An alarming, yet awe-inspiring sight, to say the least.

“Honey fogelin’, saltlickin’ skullduggery!” McGucket exclaimed upon taking in this incredible sight.

“Man, you have got to teach me some of those old man swears,” Soos remarked, impressed by the hillbilly’s vernacular.

“Look at all these tubes!” Steven remarked as they walked into the room itself. “How are we ever gonna find McGucket’s memories in all this? Or the Gems’?”

“I know, right?” Dipper agreed, just as daunted by this seemingly impossible task. “No wonder nobody knows in Gravity Falls seems to know anything about the supernatural. These guys must erase the memories of people all over town!”

“Dudes, what if they’ve even erased some of our memories, but we forgot about it because our memories were erased?!?” Soos exclaimed with a gasp. “Wouldn’t that be totally nuts?”

“Y-yeah… it would be…” Steven muttered rather apprehensively. He took pause, however, upon noticing yet another memory gun lying on a nearby table otherwise laden with tubes. His earlier uncertainty returned to him at the sight of it, especially as he looked around at all the stolen memories surrounding him. The Society of the Blind Eye used that gun to strip people of their pasts, though their purpose in doing so was by all accounts unclear, but it was easy to assume their motivations weren’t too ultraistic. But just because the hands using it were sinister, didn’t mean the memory gun itself necessarily was. There had to be beneficial uses for it, uses that the young Gem had already considered, uses he thought about as he took a tentative glance over at Dipper, remembering well just how hard of a time he in particular had had of things immediately following that disastrous puppet show, knowing that the memory of that dark day still haunted him, even weeks later. And yet, that painful memory could so easily disappear, for all of them really, with just the mere pull of a trigger. It would be so quick, so easy, so harmless, and so ultimately helpful for helping all four of them finally move on. Which was why, without drawing any attention to himself at all, Steven slowly and silently grabbed the memory gun and slipped it into his backpack, with an idea in mind but not enough courage in his heart to act on it just yet.

“Whoa, check this out,” Dipper spoke up, calling everyone over to what was clearly a viewing machine for the memory tubes. He had managed to find one with Robbie’s name on the label, and so, unable to shake his curiosity, he inserted it in the machine. The screen went live, showing the angsty teen strapped to the chair in the meeting room amidst being interrogated by the society.

“Yes, Robbie, what is it you have seen?” the leader asked somewhere offscreen.

“So I was attacked by this magic kung fu guy that was throwing, like, balls of fire at me,” Robbie began recounting a familiar tale. “I kicked his butt though.”

“Robbie, speak honestly.”

“…I was saved by a 12 year old and a lady with a square-shaped afro…”

From there, the society was quick to wipe the teen’s memories of the encounter completely clear, resulting in the screen abruptly going black as a result. Of course, this was only more proof that the society had been clearing the town of their memories of the alarming or the paranormal, but that they did so to seemingly any extent, both massive and mundane. And seeing as how they had apparently taken so many memories already, it was clear their intentions were to keep the people of
Gravity Falls in the dark about the magic and mystery that surrounded them at every turn.

“I still don’t get it,” Dipper remarked, glancing around at the immense collection of memory tubes filling the room. “We know what they’re erasing memories of, but why are they doing this in the first place? What would they have to gain from—”

“Looky, fellers!” McGucket cut in, excitedly pointing up to a memory tube that, fittingly enough, had his name on it. “It’s those words what people call me!”

“Oh, dude, your memories!” Soos grinned. “We did it!”

“Great, now all we need to do is find the Gems’ memories and we can put a rest to this mystery once and for all,” Dipper said with pleased resolve as McGucket headed for the shelf his memories were sitting on.

“Grabby grabby!” the hillbilly exclaimed blithely, climbing onto the shelf and retrieving his tube. “I got it!” However, what McGucket, or any of the others failed to notice, was that as soon as the tube was removed, the discreet electrical chip that had been positioned underneath it began blinking. And as a result, a sharp alarm suddenly began to blare throughout most of the museum, one that startled the entire group as their stealth was completely compromised. “Ah! The alarm in my brain is a-ringin’ again!” McGucket cried as he fell off the shelf.

“Halt! Who’s there!?” the distant shout of a society member sounded out from somewhere down a nearby hall.

“Oh no! Run!, dudes” Soos exclaimed, already leading the way out of the room. Dipper and Steven were quick to follow suit, though it was clear they had already been spotted by a member who was now on their tails.

“Get back here!” the member shouted after them, not noticing as McGucket managed to tuck away behind the large statue at the back of the room as he chased after Soos, Dipper, and Steven. Fortunately, no other members seemed to be hunting them down as they rushed through the headquarters’ narrow halls. Not too long into this chase, however, the young Gem happened to remember the weight of the memory gun in his backpack, and, given how things had just drastically changed, he realized that it would either be now, or never. And so, without any warning, Steven suddenly grabbed Dipper by the arm and pulled him into a nearby shorter hallway. Dipper was about to question the young Gem on this, but he was quick to assume what Steven had apparently been thinking as the society member ran right past them, not spotting them at all as they tucked away out of sight.

“Nice thinking, Steven,” Dipper said with a smile, though he was quick to prepare to move on ahead. “Now, we should probably go find the Gems so they can help us—”

Dipper cut himself off abruptly upon hearing the familiar sound of a memory gun sparking up, prompting him to stop dead in his tracks and turn around to see the last thing he could have ever expected. Instead of a society member, the charging memory gun was in Steven’s hands as he pointed it directly at him, with the clear intent of firing it. Yet despite this intent, the young Gem’s face was awash in worry, regret, and most of all fear, emotions that were all quick to amplify the moment he took in Dipper’s expression of immense shock at this unexpected twist.

“S-Steven, what… what are you doing?” he asked, scarcely able to believe what was happening.

“Dipper, I... Y-you...” Steven trailed off, taking in a deep breath to steady himself before continuing, though he still held the memory gun up all the while. “Listen. What happened to you a
few weeks ago, that whole thing with Bill, i-it… it was terrible. A-and so was most of what came after it. When I stood there and watched him possess you, the only thing I wanted to do was go back in time just a few seconds to stop it from ever happening. And while I know I can’t do that, I… I feel like this memory gun might be the next best thing.”

“Wait, so… you want to erase my memories of Bill possessing me?” Dipper asked, deeply unnerved by this news. “Steven, that… that’s crazy!”

“No, it isn’t!” Steven argued with a small, wavering smile. “Don’t you see, Dipper? It could be like none of it ever happened, especially if Mabel, Connie, and I get rid of our memories of it too! It could help all of us finally move on and feel better!”

“How would it make us feel better?!” Dipper asked hotly. “Steven, that thing is dangerous! You saw what it did to McGucket; it made him go completely insane! And what about the Gems? It’s the reason why they can’t remember even a single thing about the author of a book that’s filled with information about them! Do you honestly think that gun would make anything better? Because the way I see it, it would only make things so much worse!”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Dipper said, trying his best to remain calm and rational amidst one of his closest friends pointing a memory-erasing gun right at him. “Steven, you got hurt really badly, in so many different ways. All I want to do is help you finally forget all that pain because you didn’t deserve any of it in the first place. W-wouldn’t the chance to make it all go away be worth a few lost memories?”

“Not if we only erase our memories of Bill!” Steven protested, though his adamant tone was quickly starting to waver. “Dipper, you got hurt really badly, in so many different ways. All I want to do is help you finally forget all that pain because you didn’t deserve any of it in the first place. W-wouldn’t the chance to make it all go away be worth a few lost memories?”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Dipper said, trying his best to remain calm and rational amidst one of his closest friends pointing a memory-erasing gun right at him. “Steven, if you erase all our memories of Bill, then we’ll be completely defenseless against him the next time he shows up, which he will eventually, I know it. And even if he didn’t, you’d still basically be undoing all the progress we’ve made in getting over it, which wouldn’t be fair to any of us.”

“B-but… but we wouldn’t have anything to get over if I just… i-if I…” Steven trailed off again, guilty tears starting to well up in his eyes.

“Steven, I’m not going to try and stop you,” Dipper sighed almost wearily, even though he could have easily stopped the young Gem if he really wanted to. It would be as easy as simply drawing his sword, and yet he didn’t. Mostly because some part of him, however small, that was still plagued by the pain of nightmares and remorse, might have actually wanted him to pull that trigger. “But I do want you to ask yourself this: if you go ahead and do this, how would it make you any different from those Blind Eye people?”

Steven paused at this, a very soft, tearful gasp escaping him as he briefly considered this question. By all accounts, he was intending on using the gun on Dipper largely without his consent, before moving on to do the same to Mabel and Connie. He wasn’t giving any of them a choice, much like the society didn’t give its victims any choice, all because he thought this was the right way to go. Because he believed this would help, regardless of the risks it might bring about. Because he thought it could, at least in some small, fleeting way, help ease the load of guilt and sadness off his own shoulders and finally make things right.

Except no. The only thing this would do, was make things all wrong.

As torn apart by conflict as he was, the young Gem’s finger still rested lightly on the memory gun’s trigger, even though the decide itself had begun shaking in his trembling hands. No matter how hard he tried to force himself to swallow his palpable fear and regret, he found that he simply couldn’t, especially as he met Dipper’s soft, sad, and surprisingly almost accepting gaze. Still, even despite that, Steven had barely just begun to squeeze the trigger when the tension of the moment
was broken through completely.

“Steven?!” Connie’s shocked exclamation instantly caught the attention of both boys as they turned to see her standing at the other edge of the hallway, sword in hand. “Dipper? W-what’s going on? What are you doing with that thing?!”

“C-Connie!” Steven gasped, tears still streaming down his cheeks as he abruptly lowered the memory gun. “I-I… I wasn’t… T-this isn’t what… I-”

“I-it was my idea!” Dipper suddenly interjected, maintaining this course even as both Steven and Connie looked over at him in apt disbelief. “I… I guess I was still feeling kinda torn up about the whole Bill thing, a-and I figured that memory gun would be a good way to just forget about it once and for all. So… I asked Steven if he would… you know…”

Connie’s expression was still wide-eyed and incredulous as she looked to Dipper, but all the same, she still let out an appalled scoff in response to such an apparently hazardous idea. “Dipper, I know what you went through because of Bill was awful, but… that memory gun is really dangerous. We really shouldn’t be messing around with it.”

“Yeah, that’s… exactly what Steven told me,” Dipper lied, feigning guilt. Guilt that the young Gem refused to let him take.

“W-wait, Connie, no,” Steven shook his head, wiping his tears away. “Dipper wasn’t the one who-”

He never got to finish as suddenly, out of the shadows of the hallway, three pairs of hands emerged, each of them abruptly covering each of the kids’ eyes before they could even see who their assailants were. “W-wha-? Who’s there?!” Steven asked in apt alarm as the memory gun was starkly ripped out of his hands.

“Let us go!” Connie growled, swinging her sword out broadly as Dipper struggled to draw his amidst the hands already pinning his arms down. “Or else!” Her threat went unfulfilled however, as her blade was subsequently knocked out of her hand. With all three kids left essentially defenseless, the hands restraining them were quick to whisk them off, dragging them all back to the main meeting hall and an unknown fate.

As the society members rounded up all the kids, they failed to track down all of the intruders to their headquarters and among the ones they missed was McGucket. The hillbilly had indeed had the wits about him to tuck himself away just out of their sight, his memory tube still tight in his grip as he peeked out from behind his hiding place. True, the key to restoring his long lost memories lay right in his hands, but he couldn’t very well take that key in good conscious while the ones who had done so much to help him find it were in trouble.

“Oh, you’ve really tarred up now, Fiddleford,” McGucket lamented to himself fretfully. “This is all your fault… Oh wait! I know! I’ll go get them three shiny women!” With this newfound idea in mind, the hillbilly prepared to emerge from his hiding spot, though he stopped short another brief moment upon glancing down at his beard. “Why does my beard have a bandage? Does that even make sense? Why has no one pointed that out?”

While still confused, McGucket was quick to shake this momentary distraction off as he headed off, scuffling his ways down the halls. However, like most everything else he tried to do, the
The hillbilly had something of a hard time focusing on this task of finding the Gems. His already frayed and scrambled mind could barely stay on any tangible, rational thoughts for too long before it dove right back into the dense fog of forgetfulness he was so used to. But this was a serious situation, one that could have a very dire outcome if he wasn’t vigilant with this search. Which was why he did everything he could to force himself to buckle down and focus, to keep his flighty mind grounded, and remain on track, despite how much of a challenge that was for him. Yet in the end, his hard mental work paid off as he eventually passed by the room the Gems were still congregated in, its door hanging wide open as they continued investigating the photo collage on the walls for any further clues.

“Hey! Ladies!” McGucket exclaimed, frantically running over to them. “I need ya’lls help!”

“Oh, great…” Pearl grumbled, rolling her eyes as they all turned to face the hillbilly. “Just what we need right now…”

“What’s the problem, dude?” Amethyst asked, crossing her arms as she watched McGucket anxiously shift back and forth on his feet. “Did you find a beehive in that big hat of yours?”

“No! I-it’s… I… Aw, hornswaggle! I done went and forgot!” McGucket exclaimed, his slipping memory a result of mentally spending himself so much moments ago.

“No! I-its… I… Aw, hornswaggle! I done went and forgot!” McGucket exclaimed, his slipping memory a result of mentally spending himself so much moments ago.

“Of course you did…” Pearl remarked dryly, turning back to the clippings. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, we’re in the middle of something actually important here…”

McGucket frowned as he glanced down fretfully, unsure of what to say or do to get the Gems to hear him out, much less what they were even supposed to be hearing him out about in the first place. He turned to leave them to their business, but he stopped short upon glancing up at the wall of clippings, catching sight of the photo at the very center of the board. And as he spotted the pink haired figure in that picture specifically, the hillbilly stopped to stare, his jaw dropping in awe at the striking familiarity of her warm, smiling face. The kind of familiarity he had not been acquainted with in years.

“I… I remember her…” he began, almost in a daze as he stepped forward. The Gems all glanced back at him, confused as he took his hat off in almost a solemn show of reverence.

“Who?” Garnet asked, even if she already had an inkling of who he was talking about.

“I-her,” McGucket nodded up to the pink Gem’s image, still clearly trying to recall the details. But in the very smallest of ways, a vague, broad picture had started to emerge from the fog, one that he forced himself to cling onto as he continued. “I… I think her name was… o-or at least I called ‘er… M-Miss… Miss Quartz…”

“R-Rose Quartz…” Pearl whispered, her eyes widening with shock. “You… really did know her… Then that… that would mean… I can’t believe it… You actually are the author?!”

“I-I don’t know ‘bout all that…” McGucket shook his head. “But I do know I know her! O-or at least I used to, way back in the bygone days…”

“What do you remember about her?” Amethyst ventured, exchanging a tentative glance with the other Gems.

“Not too much…” the hillbilly mused. “B-but I reckon she was big, and pink, and pretty, and… and she had a voice like sweet honey, and boy howdy she was smart too! She always had somethin’ nice to say, no matter what the occasion. But I wasn’t really as close to her as…” He
trailed off, his brow furrowing in confusion as the gaps in his memory returned, gaps that, despite his bout of recollection, he was unable to fill in.

“As who?” Pearl pressed, growing more curious by the second about the secrets her liege had supposedly left behind.

“I… I can’t quite recall…” McGucket frowned. “But there was someone else, I know there was. I just ain’t got any recollection of who…”

“Ugh, someone else?!” Amethyst groaned, exasperated. “How many other people were involved in this whole journal biz?”

“That doesn’t matter right now,” Garnet shook her head before looking back to the hillbilly with respectful sincerity. “What matters is that we finally get to the bottom of these missing memories. All of our missing memories.” She smiled somewhat at this, something that McGucket returned as a sense of familiarity passed between them, one that had been long forgotten, but was just starting to come out of the darkness and back into the light. “McGucket, we need you to try to remember what you came here to tell us. I have a feeling that whatever it was, its important.”

“What I was gonna… oh!” McGucket gasped, realizing that calming down had led to the clarity he needed. “The young’ins are in trouble! Them Blind Eye folks are after ‘em!”

“What?!” the Gems exclaimed in startled unison at this alarming news.

“Well then we gotta go and save them!” Amethyst exclaimed intently. “If those creepy guys get their hands on them, their memories are as good as janked! And I’m not about to be the one tryna explain to Greg and Stan why Steven and the twins don’t remember them.”

“Then let’s go,” Garnet ordered, already heading for the door. However, before the Gems could leave, McGucket happened to stop them with a sly, barely even manic grin.

“Hold on a second, ladies. I got me an idea…”

Despite their struggling, the kids, Soos, and Wendy found that they were largely outmatched by the sheer number of society members, which had made their capture relatively easy. Mabel and Wendy had been apprehended first, seeing as how they had been on guard in the open in the meeting hall itself and Soos had been caught just before Steven, Dipper, and Connie. The society could tell that their young captives were all quite resilient, which was why they had taken the precaution of tightly tying all six of them to a large beam in the meeting hall, as all the society members gathered around to watch their intruders be punished.

“You should not have come here,” the leader began ominously as he stepped forward. “We do not give up our secrets lightly.”

“Who are you bathrobe wearing freaks?” Wendy asked harshly as she tried pulling out of the ropes.

“Why are you doing this?” Connie demanded just as fiercely.

“And what’s with your creepy British accent?” Mabel asked the society leader in particular.

“Well, I suppose we are just going to erase your minds anyway, so…” the leader nodded to his followers, who complied with his orders as they removed their hoods, one by one, revealing a host
of surprisingly familiar faces.

“Toby Determined?”

“Mr. Fryman?”

“Bud Gleeful?”

“Mr. Smiley?”

“That farmer guy?”

“Creepy dude who married a woodpecker?” Soos finished this barrage of stunned exclamations. “How’s that marriage goin’, by the way?”

“Oh, great, great,” the man chuckled nervously, glancing at the woodpecker perched on his shoulder before dropping his voice down to a whisper. “Not great.”

“But you’ve never met me before. And if you had, you wouldn’t remember,” the leader said, finally removing his own hood. Sure enough, he was completely unfamiliar to all the kids, with a gaunt, rather grey face, a crossed scar over his right eye, and interestingly enough, a bald head adorned with a complex set of tattoos replicating a phrenology map all over. “I am Blind Ivan, and we are the Society of the Blind Eye! Formed many years ago by our founder… our founder… Does anyone remember who he was?”

The society members took pause at this, all of them trying to come up with an answer to this question until they inevitably found one. “Huh, well, what do ya know?” Mr. Smiley shrugged, grinning blithely as usual. “Guess none of us remember.”

“We have been usin’ that ray on our own brains an awful lot,” Bud added just as casually.

“Why would you guys do all this?” Dipper asked petulantly. “What do you have to gain?”

“As you have no doubt discovered,” Blind Ivan began to explain, hands behind his back. “Gravity Falls is a town plagued with supernatural strangeness. The kind of strangeness that can drive any normal mind to madness. No one knew how to stop the things that went bump in the night, so our founder invented the next best thing: a way for us to forget. We took it upon ourselves to help the troubled townsfolk by erasing the memories of the strange things they’ve seen. Now the people of Gravity Falls go about their lives ignorant and happy, absolved of the dread of the dangers that lurk in the shadows all around them thanks to us. And as a perk, we help ourselves forget things that trouble us. Everyone has something they’d rather forget. In fact, your own sister was about to use that ray on herself. Isn’t that right?” he asked Mabel with a knowing smirk.

“Mabel? Seriously?” Dipper asked, incredulously looking over at her.

“Heh, I was thinking about it, ok?” Mabel shrugged with an awkward laugh. “I wasn’t actually gonna do it… Ok, maybe I was…” She bit her lip, especially as she stole a quick glance at Steven.

“Uh, Dipper, I don’t think you really have a lot of room to talk seeing as how you basically asked Steven to do the same thing for you,” Connie pointed out, not harshly, but still rather disappointed.

“What?” Mabel, Soos, and Wendy all asked in unison as they looked to Dipper, genuinely surprised by this news.

“Oh, uh… y-yeah, I guess I kinda did?” Dipper admitted, still keeping up his former ruse up.
“W-wait, no,” Steven tried to clarify once more, rather overwhelmed by guilt that Dipper had chosen to take the fall for his own mistake. “He didn’t—”

“Enough squabbling!” Blind Ivan interjected impatiently as he grabbed the nearby memory gun. “You children have seen quite enough. But worry not; very soon it will all be come unseen…”

“And how is that your call, huh?” Wendy asked defiantly. “In fact, why do any of you weirdos get to decide what memories people keep and which ones they don’t. This whole thing seems pretty rigged in your favor if you ask me.”

“Yeah, don’t you see? This thing is ruining lives!” Dipper added just as boldly. “What about Old Man McGucket? He lives in a hut and talks to animals thanks to you. Don’t you feel bad about that?”

“Mmm… maybe a little…” Blind Ivan considered briefly before promptly shooting himself with the memory gun. “But not anymore! Now…” he began inputting the word ‘summer’ into the device. “You won’t be telling anyone else about what you’ve learned here. Say goodbye to your summer…”

Needless to say that the entire group panicked as the memory gun was aimed at them, charging up with the power to delete their entire summer from their minds altogether. “Guys, if we’re gonna forget everything, I got some stuff I wanna get off my chest,” Soos began anxiously. “Mabel, for half the summer, I thought your name was Maple, like the syrup. No one corrected me!”

“I only love some of my stuffed animals, and the guilt is killing me!” Mabel cried, knowing that she could have easily admitted something much more personal, but she figured it would be best to let those feelings be buried in the past.

“Sometimes I use big words but I don’t actually know what they mean!” Dipper admitted tightly. “I mean, I’m supposed to be the smart guy. If I’m not the smart guy, then who am I?!”

“One time I got an A- in science and I never told my mom about it!” Connie exclaimed guiltily. “She’s a doctor! If she ever found out I preformed less than perfectly in science of all things, she’d completely flip out!”

“Ok, I’m not actually laid back,” Wendy took in a sharp breath. “I’m actually stressed like, 24/7. Have you met my family?!”

Steven was the only one of the group to hesitate in this round of confessions, but in the end, his remorse won out and prompted him to finally speak the truth before anyone could stop him. “C-Connie, I was actually the one who wanted to erase Dipper’s memories about the whole, uh… puppet show thing. A-and yours and Mabel’s too…”

“Steven!” Dipper exclaimed sharply, having not wanted the young Gem to admit this.

“You wanted to what?!” Connie looked over at Steven, completely appalled.

“Wait, what happened again?” Mabel frowned in confusion, completely lost about this news.

“Oh, stop being a bunch of babies,” Blind Ivan rolled his eyes at this melodrama, more than ready to fire the ray at the frightened group. However, just before he could, something that was nothing short of a miracle happened. And, bizarrely enough, that miracle came in the form of a loose canon hillbilly.

Out of seemingly nowhere, McGucket dropped down from above, landing squarely on Blind Ivan
and knocking the memory gun out of his hands. Of course, the kids were pleasantly surprised by this interruption, but they were even happier to see that the hillbilly wasn’t alone as the Gems suddenly emerged from the shadows of the room, their weapons ready as they confronted the startled society members.

“All of you! Stand down!” Garnet ordered as Pearl rushed over to cut the kids free. “Or else.”

“You three!” Blind Ivan exclaimed in outrage as he pulled himself up to stand again. “The Crystal Gems… By far our greatest adversary in keeping the minds of this town clean from thoughts of disaster, seeing as how disaster follows your group around like its attached to you at the hip! Gravity Falls would be much better off if your kind was forgotten about completely… in fact…” The society leader smirked darkly as he reached for the memory gun, but before he could get it, Amethyst was quick to snatch it away from him with her whip.

“Sorry, baldy,” the purple Gem smirked, keeping a tight grip on the gun. “But we’re not gonna let anyone around here forget about how awesome we are!”

“We raided the mining display for weapons!” McGucket informed the newly freed kids, presenting a cart full of what they had nabbed. “Now fight like a hillbilly, fellers!”

The kids heeded him as they were all quick to take what they could from the cart, including pickaxes, banjos, taxidermized animals, and Soos even managed to find a display block on dysentery. “Oh nobody better mess!” the handyman exclaimed, holding his ‘weapon’ out threateningly.

“They know too much!” Blind Ivan shouted to his followers. “Don’t let them escape!”

While the society members were quick to attack, kids all steadily defended themselves against them now that they were armed with their unorthodox weapons. “Get this song out of your head!” Wendy proclaimed, bashing one member in the head with a banjo.

“Dysentery’s gonna get you, dawg!” Soos warned, chasing another member through the hall with his dysentery plaque.

“I’d watch out if I were you,” Connie smirked as she fended a member off with a stuffed rattlesnake, aptly terrifying them. “I’ve heard rattlesnake bites are pretty deadly.”

As this scuffle continued, everyone managed to hold their own, including the Gems, who did use some restraint with their weapons as they kept the memory gun out of the members’ reach. In the midst of this chaos, however, Dipper happened to spot a familiar, rather important tube lying on the ground just a few feet away.

“McGucket’s memories!” he exclaimed with a gasp, rushing for it only to be blocked off as soon as he had grabbed it.

“Not so fast, kid,” Fryman said, his arms crossed as he kept Dipper from getting the tube back to McGucket. Fortunately though, a vacuum tube was right next to him, giving him a another option.

“Mabel, catch!” Dipper shouted to his sister on the other side of the room, shoving McGucket’s tube into the suction. Mabel did so, grinning triumphantly as she nabbed it, only the farmer to try and snatch it away from her a moment later.

“Give it up, girl,” he warned as she held it away from him, though she had a sly idea as she looked to the vacuum tube once more. “You’re no match for the unstoppable power of.” The farmer cut himself off as Mabel pointed the suction tube at his robe, which was quick to come flying off as a
result, revealing that he was only wearing his underwear and nothing else. “That’s right. I don’t wear nothin’ under my robe. Not gonna apologize for that. Maybe ya’ll should apologize for bein’ a bunch of prudes.”

“Ew!” everyone exclaimed in disgusted unison at this unsavory sight.

“Welp, time to erase that forever,” Soos quipped, holding up the memory gun Amethyst had just handed off to him. However, before he could do anything with it, Blind Ivan finally reclaimed it, not hesitating to point threateningly at Dipper as he caught the memory tube Mabel had tossed back to him.

“Give me that tube,” the society leader growled, clearly tired of playing games.

“Never! These memories belong to McGucket!” Dipper protested firmly, shoving the tube back into the suction tubes to get it away from Blind Ivan.

“The society’s secrets belong to us!” the society leader countered as they both raced after it in the hopes of securing it once and for all, even as it zoomed across the ceiling and into the Hall of the Forgotten. They were largely neck-and-neck in the chase for the memory tube, until Blind Ivan ended up intentionally tripping Dipper, allowing him to claim the coveted tube first. “End of the line,” the society leader scowled, pointing the charging memory gun at the defenseless boy before him. “By tomorrow, this will all seem like a bad dream. Say goodbye to your precious memories…”

“No!” Dipper gasped, fearfully, unable to really bear the thought of losing his memories of the Gems, of Steven, of Connie, of Lapis, even as he braced himself for the inevitable blast. One that, much to his surprise, never ended up hitting him as someone else took the brunt of it instead. “M-McGucket?” he flinched upon noticing that the hillbilly had jumped in between him and Blind Ivan at just the right second. “You… you took a bullet for me…” McGucket didn’t get a chance to respond as he was blasted by the memory gun once more, much to Dipper’s apt alarm. “Oh my gosh! Are you ok?!”

The hillbilly paused, blinking away the ray’s effect for a moment or two before letting out a hearty laugh. “Ok as I’ll ever be!”

“W-what?” Dipper asked in confusion, surprised as everyone else was as they all rushed into the room to see what was happening.

At the same time, Blind Ivan continued shooting blast after blast at McGucket, startled that it seemed to have no apparent effect on the hillbilly as he continued approaching him steadily. “Why… isn’t… this… working?!”

“Hit me with your best shot, baldy!” McGucket challenged with a wide, wild grin amidst the successive round of memory blasts. “But my mind’s been gone for thirty-odd years! You can’t break what’s already broken!”

“Wha—no!” Blind Ivan growled hotly, still trying in vain to wipe the hillbilly’s mind. “This is impossible! You can’t just be immune to—”

“I reckon I can!” McGucket interrupted, finally snatching the memory gun away from the distraught society leader. “Say goodnight, Sally!” With this, the hillbilly abruptly headbutted Blind Ivan, knocking him out cold just long enough to allow the Gems to finish apprehending the rest of the society members. With the entire group captured, the kids didn’t hesitate to tie them all to the same pole they had formerly been restrained to, all of them quite pleased that they had gained the upper
hand against the sinister society and their mind-erasing agenda.

“Unhand us!” Blind Ivan demanded upon regaining consciousness as him and his fellow society members tried to break free. Their attempts were quickly stopped, however, as Garnet stepped forward, cracking her gauntleted knuckles to keep them in check.

“Yeah, it isn’t so fun being tied up, is it?” Mabel asked with a smug smirk before turning to the others. “Hey, you guys wanna draw on their faces?” Despite protests from Blind Ivan on this, Mabel proceeded to do just that, crossing out his tattoo that read ‘knowledge’ and writing the word “butts” over it.

“Hey, stop that! Its not funny!” the society leader clambered angrily, especially as the kids and the Gems all got a good laugh out of it.

“I dunno, dude, its pretty funny,” Amethyst chucked.

“It’s like, objectively funny,” Soos agreed with an amused nod.

“Now, before we put an end to this horrid little society of yours…” Pearl began, her spear at the ready as she addressed Blind Ivan coldly. “We still have one final question for you: where are our memories?”

“Your memories?” Blind Ivan shook his head incredulously. “You fools, we never took any of your memories! We were only ever interested in eradicating the townspeople’s memories of you and your so-called ‘Gem monsters’. What good would erasing your memories do for us?”

“Wha—but… nah, man, you guys gotta have them,” Amethyst contested. “We saw that whole room of newspaper clippings you keep around just to bash us! So quit your lying and tell us where our memories are!”

“He’s not lying,” Garnet suddenly spoke up, looking down intently.

“Huh?” all of the others looked to the Gem leader, surprised by this revelation.

“He’s not…” Garnet shook her head, placing a hand against her temple as her future vision refused to comply with her. “I-it… its foggy, but… I can tell. Our memories, wherever they are, aren’t here.”

“So… they weren’t the ones who took your memories about the author away?” Steven asked with a confused frown.

“But if it wasn’t them, then… who did?” Dipper added, just as bewildered by this ongoing mystery. “And why?”

Garnet sighed, looking between her two aptly disappointed teammates first, and then to the worried group of kids. “The truth of it is… we don’t know… For all we know, they might not have been erased by one of those guns at all. But its safe to say that something happened to make us forget the truth. And even if we didn’t get that truth here today, we’re not going to stop looking for it until we find it. Right, Gems?”

Pearl and Amethyst paused, both of them frowning as they looked to their leader with initial uncertainty. They had wanted to finally get answers, to finally piece together the puzzle that was this part of their past so much, that the thought of having to wait much longer for those answers seemed almost unbearable. But as it stood, their memories were still lost, still unknown and forgotten; which meant that the most they could do now was keep moving forward, in the stalwart
hope that the missing pieces of their past would return to them soon enough. “Right,” they both agreed with small smiles, resolved to do just as Garnet had said and keep searching until they finally found what they were looking for.

“This isn’t over!” Blind Ivan cut through this moment with an angry threat. “We’ll have our revenge! We’ll never forget what you’ve done!”

“Oh, I think you just might…” Dipper smirked as he fired the memory gun up, entering ‘Society of the Blind Eye’ into it as the subject. And, with a mere pull of a trigger and a flash of light, the mind-erasing society was, ironically enough, completely erased.

Of course, all of the former society members were somewhat disoriented upon having their minds wiped of their original purpose for being at the museum. So the kids had been quick to come up with a convenient guise, one that even ended up helping McGucket out as they escorted the society members out.

“Thanks for visiting the museum for Gold Miner Appreciation Night,” Dipper grinned as he stood alongside McGucket, who happily held his hat out for solicitation as the passing former society members dropped money into it. “Be sure to tip the gold miner on the way out.”

“I’m sorry, but… what’s my name?” Blind Ivan stopped short at the door, far more confused and lost than any of the other society members. “Where am I?”

“Uh oh… might have gone a little overboard on him…” Dipper noted worriedly.

“Well, remember, he did try to erase all our memories,” Connie said, hands on her hips. “So I wouldn’t feel too bad about it.”

“Your name is Toot-Toot McBumbersnazzle!” Mabel quipped to the former leader brightly, handing him a banjo. “You’re a traveling banjo minstrel, with a song in your heart and funny tattoos on your head!”

“,..Yes,” Blind Ivan, or rather “Toot-Toot” said with a wide grin of acceptance with this. “I am Toot-Toot McBumbersnazzle! Cheers!” And with that, the former society member walked off, plucking away at his banjo happily, his former ill intent completely forgotten.

With the society members all gone and the threat they had posed eliminated, everyone decided to head back into the museum with the same intent: to finally uncover the secrets that lay hidden within McGucket’s memory tube. They all gathered in the Hall of the Forgotten, eager to see exactly what and who the hillbilly used to be, but even so, McGucket himself was quite anxious as he glanced down to the memory tube in his hands.

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“Uh, Mr. McGucket?” Steven spoke up with a small supportive smile. “Aren’t you going to put your tube in that machine so you can finally see your memories? You know, find out who you really are?”

“I-I… I’m not so sure…” McGucket frowned, still uncertain. “What if… what if I don’t like what I see?”

“We’ve come all this way,” Mabel encouraged warmly. “You gotta at least take a peek. Go on.”

The hillbilly let go of his lingering reservations as he took in a deep breath, inserting the tube into
the machine to see what hidden past it contained. As the static on screen cleared away, it revealed a much younger version of McGucket, who, by all accounts, looked much more scrupulous and put-together than he currently was. This younger McGucket was keenly dressed, with a suit jacket, tie, spectacles perched on his nose, mostly neat light brown hair, and no unkempt, overgrown beard in sight. Yet even despite this, his expression was still tight and deeply unnerved as he spoke to the unseen screen before him.

“My name is Fiddleford Hadon McGucket, and I wish to unsee what I have seen.”

The group watching all let out a shared gasp of surprise upon seeing this younger version of the hillbilly, and to learn that he had apparently willingly wanted his memories erased. Though none of them were more stunned than McGucket himself as he took a small step forward, awestruck as he listened to what his younger self had to say.

“For the past year, I have been working as an assistant for a visiting researcher,” Young McGucket said, his tone and expression still quite serious. “Along with the help of four magical, extraterrestrial women, he has been cataloging his findings about Gravity Falls in a series of journals. These women, the ‘Gems’, and I helped him build a machine which he believed had the potential to benefit all mankind, but just as easily could be used to bring about great destruction.”

Upon hearing about this unknown machine, Dipper was quick to turn to one of many cryptic pages in the journal, one that held what he assumed to be at least part of some kind of blueprint for a mysterious device. More than likely, they were one and the same, but even so, then what could such a supposedly dangerous machine even do? And more importantly, did it even still exist somewhere?

At the same time, the Gems all exchanged a bewildered glance upon hearing them be mentioned directly, though what bothered all three of them more was, once again, the sparse details McGucket provided about this machine. Certainly, there was no way they had been a part of constructing something that could put humanity in such apparent danger… could they?

“I decided to quit the project,” Young McGucket continued, wringing his hands anxiously. “But I lie awake at night, haunted by the thoughts of what I’ve done. I believe I have invented a machine that can permanently erase these memories from my mind,” he said, holding up the memory gun, of all things. “Test subject one: Fiddleford.” At this, he fired the gun off, the screen going to static as a result. As it cleared once more, a much happier McGucket appeared, clearly absolved of his horrific memories. “It worked! I can’t remember a thing!” The screen cut once more, with McGucket still quite ecstatic over his new invention as he held up the society’s iconic eye image. “I call it the Society of the Blind Eye. We will help those who want to forget by erasing their bad memories!”

As static cut in once again, the next shot of McGucket showed him much more disheveled and distraught than before, the lab setting behind him in a complete state of disarray as he twitched almost endlessly. “T-today I came across a colony of little men, very disturbing. I would like to forget seeing this.” The inventor used the memory gun on himself again, cutting to show that some time had passed. His hair had begun to grey and wither, his arm was held in up in a cast, and dark bags had formed under his eyes, which had begun to take on a glazed, blank state. “I-I accidentally hit another car in town today. I feel terr-bibble—terrible! I’ve been forgettin’ words lately. I wonder if there are any negative side effects to-” McGucket was cut off as the scene cut again, this time to show that he was in a rundown motel, his mental and physical state steadily declining even more as he had finally started growing his thick white beard. “I s-saw somethin’ in the lake, something big!” In the next shot, his beard was even longer, his manner wild and untamed and a wide manic smile on his face as he put his large hat on. “My hair’s been a-fallin’ out, so I got this
hat from a scarecrow! Hey, are my pants on backwards?"

The tube cut to one last memory, this time showing McGucket as he was in the present, living in the mess of the junkyard as he cheerfully ran about, insanely chuckling and speaking in absolute gibberish. “Yroo Xrksi! Giszmtov!” he laughed, using his fingers to form the shape of a triangle over his eye right before the memories cut out into nothing more than static completely.

With this show of memories finally over, a solemn silence fell over everyone in the room as they all looked to McGucket sympathetically. There was no question that the hillbilly had fallen far from the seemingly promise beginnings he once had, into the depths of insanity and instability he was famously known for. And the worst part of it all was that he had instigated that fall himself, out of the best intentions that had turned into the worst of situations.

“Oh, McGucket…” Mabel was the first to speak up, her voice soft and somber. “We’re so sorry…”

“Aw, hush,” the hillbilly said with a wave of his hand as he retrieved his memory tube. Surprisingly enough, a small smile was on his face as he turned back to the group, even despite everything he had just seen. “You kids helped me get my memories back, just like ya said.”

“But… did you want those memories back?” Connie asked, concerned.

“After all these years, I finally know who I am,” McGucket mused, still smiling as he looked down at the tube. “Maybe I messed up in the past, but now that I’ve seen what happened, I can begin to put myself together again. And I hope you ladies can do the same when you find your memories,” he said to the Gems with a smile of solidarity.

“Thank you,” Garnet said with a cordial nod.

“Yes… we’re… sorry about how we might have treated you before…” Pearl rubbed her arm guiltily. “We just… really want to get to the bottom of this, once and for all…”

“Aw, it’s all water under the bridge,” McGucket cheerfully quipped. “And don’t worry, I’m sure ya’ll will figure it out eventually!”

“Yeah, and maybe once we do, you can tell us about all the crazy stuff we used to get up to, since we all apparently used to hang out back in the day,” Amethyst remarked with a playful grin, eliciting a genuine laugh from all four of them.

“So, wait,” Dipper interjected at this, still somewhat confused as he looked between the journal and McGucket. “You aren’t the author, but you worked with him. Do you remember who he was?”

“Its… beginning to come back…” McGucket acknowledged. “But I need more time. And reading glasses!” The hillbilly grinned as he grabbed a pair of said glasses that was fortunately sitting on the nearby table before letting loose a hearty spit. “Heck! I got some rememberin’ to do!”

“Uh… speaking of remembering…” Steven spoke up apprehensively, addressing Dipper and Connie in particular. “Dipper, I’m sorry about what happened back there with the memory gun… I guess I just thought that it could finally help us all forget about… well, you know, but… maybe forgetting about it isn’t really the right way to heal from it…”

“You’re only getting that now, Steven?” Dipper asked with a small, joking grin. “Man, and I thought I had to learn that lesson the hard way.”

“Heh, yeah…” the young Gem let out a small, awkward laugh. “So… are we all good?”
“Well, Steven, I’m not gonna lie, what you wanted to do to all four of us was… kind of messed up,” Connie said, crossing her arms. “But your heart was in the right place, just like it usually is. So I guess I can’t be too mad about that.”

“Thanks,” Steven nodded warmly. “And you, Dipper?”

“Yeah, we’re good too, Steven,” Dipper said, still smiling. “Just as long as you promise to never try to pull something like that again, no matter how bad things get, ok? Because, no offense, that was a pretty bad idea…”

“Yeah… it really was…” Steven admitted, though he still couldn’t help but crack a growing grin. “But I promise.” Unable to contain his happiness at this debacle being resolved, the young Gem couldn’t help but pull both Dipper and Connie into a tight, unexpected hug, one that surprised them both, but they were quick to return it all the same.

As the three of them continued to talk, and the Gems kept on discussing the matter of the still-unknown author with McGucket, Mabel found her sights landing on Steven from afar, though he didn’t seem to notice. Wendy, on the other hand did, which is why she decided to address her, knowing exactly what was on her mind. “So, Mabel, you still wanna erase those failed summer romances?” she asked with a knowing grin.

Mabel paused at this, taking a quick glance over at the memory gun lying on the table nearby before letting out a small sigh of acceptance. “You know, nobody likes having bad memories, but maybe its better to remember the bad things and learn from them than to go all denial crazy trying to forget them.”

“And what about your feelings for… you know who?” Wendy asked, dropping her voice down to a whisper.

Once again, Mabel hesitated, casting another longing glance over at Steven as he laughed along with Dipper and Connie. “I… I guess I’ll just have to deal with those feelings as they come,” she shrugged, hoping that would be a task easier done than said.

“That’s some real mature junk right there, Mabel,” Wendy grinned, nodding in approval.

“Yes, Miss Mature, that’s me,” Mabel smiled proudly before turning to the others. “Hey, you guys all wanna help me vandalize this picture of my jerky ex-crush?”

Everyone was quick to agree on this, all of them grouping close to doodle on the poster of Gabe Mabel had found earlier. When they were done, no one say any point to linger in the now-defunct society’s headquarters any longer, and so they all piled into Soos’ truck to head home for the night.

“Hey, you know what?” Wendy remarked to Soos with a grin as she got into the passenger’s seat up front. “Going on this big adventure actually made me get that stupid song out of my head.” Of course, she was quick to remember it again as the very first song that played on the radio as the handyman turned the ignition on was none other that ‘Straight Blacin’. “Oh come on!”

“So, the author wrote all this,” Dipper informed McGucket as he let him leaf through the journal, still trying to glean whatever sparing bits of information he could get. “Does any of it ring a bell for you?”

“Hm… It’s all so familiar…” the hillbilly mused, adjusting his newfound glasses as he peered over the time-weathered pages, pages that he had likely seen before while in the author’s employ. The piece of the mysterious blueprint at the center of the book in particular struck a chord with him, but
exactly what kind of chord that was, he couldn’t quite discern yet. “It’s almost like I can remember…”

Unbeknownst to any of them, the realization of those very blueprints rested under the Mystery Shack itself, in the form of the machine that Stan had been pouring the past 30 years into bringing back to life. And with the information he had gathered from journal 3, the conman was growing ever nearer to its reactivation, something that he couldn’t help but revel in as he stood before its brilliant, basking light.

“Alright, you’re getting closer,” Stan said to both himself and the machine with apt resolve. “Every day its getting stronger.” As if to prove to this fact, the machine burst with brief power, ripping the conman’s notepad and mug right out of its hands and into the clarion glow at its center, never to be seen again. “Hah! Yes!” he exclaimed, satisfied by this result. He was less satisfied, however, by the stray pipe that had gone flying from one of the rafters, only to strike him against the back of his hand hard, resulting in a sizable cut. Stan was quick to bandage this injury up, hardly even paying it much mind at all as he looked back to the fruits of his labor, all the more eager to see the very soon coming day when it would all finally come together.

“Hmph, it’s ‘dangerous’, she said,” he rolled his eyes at the recollection of what Rose Quartz herself had told him over thirty years ago. “If that’s so, then why’d you build the dumb thing in the first place, huh, pinky?” he asked the replication of the pink Gem’s gemstone fixed to the bottom tip of the machine. “Well, I don’t care if its dangerous,” Stan continued pointedly, looking back to the vast light ahead. “I don’t care how long it takes. I’m gonna pull this off, and no one’s gonna get in my way!”

The conman’s stern vow echoed throughout the room, all the way back into the lab, where his picture of Dipper and Mabel still remained, their bright, blissful smiles almost serving as something of a testament to the immense secret their uncle had been keeping from them all summer.

A secret that could only remain as such for so much longer.
Chapter 48, Part 1: Like a Comet

Chapter Summary

In which Greg gets a girlfriend and a job all in one night.

Chapter Notes

So here we are at another short lil mini arc, the Ballad of Rose and Greg! This one's only two chapters long, so with this one out of the way, we're already halfway finished with it! Hooray! But yeah, this one is super cute so I hope you enjoy it!

A steady summer shower had blanketed Gravity Falls, the large, continuous raindrops creating a gentle layer of steam as they hit the otherwise warm earth. These wet conditions made it a good day to stay inside, which was exactly what Greg and Steven ended up doing at the Mystery Shack along with Stan and the twins. The pair had originally stopped by for a brief hello, but their visit became extended as the unexpected storm outside began pouring down. And so, upon Steven and Mabel’s shared suggestion, everyone congregated in the den, including Stan, albeit a bit begrudgingly. After Greg helped the kids make some hot chocolate, they all settled down in the mass of pillows and blankets Mabel had gathered together and compiled near the window so they could all watch the rain fall. Once they had all gotten comfortable, Greg broke out his guitar and began strumming a few of his old songs as a way to pass the relaxing, idle time, much to the kids’ shared enjoyment.

“Woo! Go dad!” Steven cheered as his father finished skillfully playing another song.

“See? What’d I tell you kids?” Greg asked with a smirk. “I may be losing my hair, but the magic’s still there.”

“Magic? That’s what you’re calling it now?” Stan raised an amused eyebrow. “Didn’t it used to be ‘cosmic energy’ or something weird and spacey like that?”

“Eh, yeah,” the former rock star shrugged. “But somewhere down the line I shortened it to ‘magic’. It just flows off the tongue a lot easier, you know? Anyway, are there any requests out there for the next song?”

“Oh! Oh! Play the one about your van!” Mabel chimed in, raising her hand. “It’s super catchy!”

“Can’t argue with you there,” Greg said, poising his guitar to play again. “‘Let Me Drive My Van
Into Your Heart’ is one of my best, if I do say so myself. If I had ever made it big, I’m pretty sure that it would have been a chat-topping single.” The former rock star was all set to start playing the tune, but he was only able to strum a single chord before a loud burst of thunder crashed outside, aptly startling them all.

“Yeesh, its really coming down out there, isn’t it?” Dipper remarked with a newfound frown.

“I’ll say,” Stan said, taking a quick peek out the window. “The last time it came down in buckets like this was when I tossed that scumbag ex-manager of yours outta here, Greg.”

“Oh yeah… Marty…” Greg recalled with a nod. “Man, that was a long time ago, wasn’t it?”

“Eh, it wasn’t that long ago; probably only about 20 years or so,” Stan paused, grimacing at the thought. “Ugh, when did I get so old that 20 years feels like a short amount of time?”

“Whoa, hold everything!” Steven interjected, looking to his father with immense curiosity. “Who’s Marty?”

“Oh, he was my manager way back when,” Greg said with a bright smile. “He’s dead to me.”

“Whoa, that seems kind of… harsh, doesn’t it?” Dipper asked, somewhat taken aback by this abrupt sentiment.

“Trust me, kid, no its not,” Stan concluded, crossing his arms. “That guy was a sleaze and a creep. And I should know, seeing as how I’ve had plenty of people call me those things in my time, but unlike me, he actually deserves to be called that.”

“Aw, Marty wasn’t all that bad, Mr. Pines,” Greg interjected. “Heck, if it wasn’t for him, I probably wouldn’t have ended up meeting Rose or working here at the Mystery Shack.”

“Wow, so this Marty guy helped you and Rose get together?” Mabel asked, quite intrigued. “In that case, he really doesn’t sound all that bad!”

“Er, well… it didn’t exactly happen like that…” the former rock star admitted. “It was… complicated…”

“Complicated?” Dipper asked. “What do you mean?”

“Yeah, tell us all about it, Dad!” Steven exclaimed, enthused.

“Steven, I already told you the whole story of how I met your mom before, haven’t I?” Greg asked with a knowing grin.

“Not the version with Marty,” the young Gem shook his head.

“Yeah, and we’ve never heard it before at all!” Mabel excitedly chimed in, motioning to herself and Dipper. “I’ve always wanted to know how you two met. I bet it was super romantic, wasn’t it?”

“It was, a little,” Greg grinned rather bashfully. “But it was more lucky than anything else.”

“It sure was, seeing as how you ended up landing both a girlfriend and a new job all in one night,” Stan reminded with a casual smirk.

“Wait, you got hired here at the shack the same night you met Mom?” Steven asked, amazed. “I never knew that! Well now you gotta tell us the full story, Marty and all!”
“Ok, ok,” Greg chuckled relentingly, positioning his guitar in his lap once more. “Well I guess its story time then. Sit back and get comfy.”

Steven and Mabel were quick to do just that, nestling down into the plentiful pillows and stuffed animals surrounding them before tossing a thick, warm blanket over themselves and Dipper, who happened to get awkwardly sandwiched squarely in between them. “Uh, guys?” he spoke up rather tightly, unable to really wedge himself out from their cozy huddle. “I don’t think he meant get this comfy…”

“Shh, bro-bro, you’re gonna ruin the vibe of the story before it even starts!” Mabel chastised playfully.

“Yeah, you guys are in for a real treat,” Steven grinned brightly before taking on a faux dramatic tone. “You’re about to hear the story of how my father met my mother…”

“No including Marty,” Greg added succinctly. And with that, the former rock star began strumming a steady, upbeat tune on his guitar, the nostalgic song almost seeming to take him all the way back to that fated, yet incredible night over twenty years ago.

1989

The instant the stage lights flooded the stage, the young musician felt a spark of adrenaline and excitement fill him, one that was so bright and so big that he could scarcely even begin to describe it. Even so, it was a spark he was familiar with, one that brimmed warm in both his heart and soul every time he picked up his guitar to preform. There was nothing in the world that could compare to it, at least as far as he knew. That feeling that filled him with every chord he strummed across his strings, with every note that rung out from his throat free and clear, with every moment he stood bold and proud on stage. It was a feeling of elation, of exhilaration, of belonging that came along with every note and beat of his passionate performance.

“Some... say I have no direction,” he began, finally turning to face his audience as his long hair blew freely in the summer night’s breeze. “That I’m a lightspeed distraction... but that’s a knee-jerk reaction.”

He strummed a bit harder as he sang this, embolden by the desire to prove those doubtful sentiments he had heard aimed towards him countless times in the past wrong. Such doubts he had always believed to be unfounded and unfair, seeing as how he was only just starting out, only breaking onto the music scene and making his touring debut. He knew well that superstars weren’t born overnight, and he was willing to work as hard as it took to reach the success and fame he had been dreaming of ever since he was a starry-eyed child with a heart full of dreams. Dreams that, as far as he was concerned, he was already starting to make into reality.

“Still... this is the final frontier... Everything is so clear... To my destiny I steer...”

The stage lights seemed to fade into the distance as he looked up to the endlessly star-filled skies above, a mass of cosmos and galaxies that he was more than ready to take his place among someday. Even if he didn’t exactly know when that day would be.

“This life in the stars is all I’ve ever known... Stars and stardust in infinite space is my only home...”

As the song built up to its chorus, he grabbed the microphone, his eyes closed but a huge smile on
his face as he imagined the adoring cheers of his legions of fans. As he pictured his name, ‘Mr. Universe’ framed in bright, glowing lights, not just behind him, but on the marquee of every major venue across the globe. As he dreamed of his future, a wild, yet incredible ride of music, freedom, and adventure beyond anything he had ever known before. And it was that dream, so close within his reach but just far enough out of it, that filled every word of his song as he belted it out dauntlessly.

“But the moment that I hit the stage, thousands of voices are calling my name! And I know in my heart it’s been worth it all of the while. And as my albums fly off of the shelves, handing out autographed pics of myself, this life I chose isn’t easy but sure is one heck of a ride.”

He could almost feel himself sailing through the stars themselves as he dove across the stage, sliding to his knees as he shredded his chorus out again. There was no denying he was pouring everything he had into his performance, just as he always did. After all, music was his passion, his dream, his life. It was more than just his eventual claim to fame, it was everything he had at this point, outside of his van of course. He had given up much to pursue it, had cut ties and walked away from the past, just to let music be his guide down this brave, new road. A road that he was more than willing to venture down, even if he wasn’t entirely sure where it would end up yet.

“At the moment that I hit the stage, I hear the universe calling my name! And I know deep down in my heart I have nothing to fear! And as the solar wind blows through my hair, knowing I have so much more left to share, a wandering spirit who’s tearing its way through the cold atmosphere…”

“I’ll fly like a comet…”

“Soar like a comet…”

“Crash like a comet…”

“I’m just a comet…”

Greg landed the final chord of his song with as much verve and passion as the first. He was admittedly breathless after such a rousing performance, but he still smiled as he heard something he didn’t often get after too many of his shows: applause. It wasn’t really the thunderous cheers he had been hoping for, mostly since his audience seemed to consist of one lone feminine figure, who stood towards the back of the sparse rows of folding chairs he had set up on the lake shore. Still, Greg couldn’t help but be grateful for this single spectator all the same, knowing that one was better than nothing.

“Thanks for coming everybody, I’m Mr. Universe,” he spoke through the microphone, still quite worn as the adrenaline of the show started to wear off. “If you like what you just heard, go check out our merch table! My manager Marty can hook you up with CDs and tee-shirts—oh wait,” the young musician cut himself off as he glanced over at the aforementioned table, only to find it unmanned. “He’s not there. I guess I’m going over there now…”

Greg did just that, hopping off the stage and running over to the table. He didn’t really expect his lone audience member to stop by, and yet she did. And as soon as the young musician glanced up and got a better look at her, he was absolutely awestruck by what he saw.

Simply put, she was gorgeous, perhaps the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his entire life. She was also quite large, her full, yet elegant figure standing at least twice as tall as he was, if not more. Her hair was an abundance of soft, flowing unexplainably pink curls and her attire was a long, graceful, sleeveless white gown that revealed, oddly enough, a bright pink gemstone resting upon her navel. But what caught his eye the most was her smile, bright, kind, and curious as she
picked up one of the CDs he had for sale, a hint of amusement in her sweet, harmonious voice as she read its title.

“‘Space Train to the Cosmos’… How interesting…” she remarked, intrigued, before looking back to him with a smile that made him practically freeze in awe and amazement. When his initial shock finally did fade, he shook his head clear, playing it as cool as he could, given the circumstances.

“Yeah,” Greg nodded with a nonchalant shrug as he broke out into song. “One way ticket and I’m ready to ri-ide!”

The woman let out a genuinely charmed laugh at this, one that seemed to make Greg melt even more than he already had at the mere sight of her. “Aw, that’s adorable!” she quipped sweetly. “But how will you get back?”

“Back?” Greg frowned, confused.

“Back to Earth?”

The young musician smirked as he leaned back in his chair. “I’m never coming back.”

“Oh, that’s awful!” the woman gasped, as if appalled by this news. She smiled once again though, before looking back down to the CD in her hand. “This is your home… And I know I never want to leave it. There’s far too much to see and do here to ever want to go anywhere else…”

Another beat of somewhat awkward silence passes as Greg took this in, the woman’s gentle, almost nostalgic smile filling him with even more curiosity about her than before. Yet for as many questions as he had about this mysterious, beautiful being, he quickly remembered what he was there for in the first place as he glanced at the CD she was holding. “Uh… you want that? C-cause you can have it…”

“Hm?” It was the woman’s turn to be confused now as she looked back at him.

“Oh, a-and it comes with a free tee-shirt!” Greg added, holding a smaller shirt up. “You’ll probably need a bigger one though… I’ve got an extra-extra large in my van! Stay right there!”

“O-oh, you… you really don’t have to…” the woman shook her head, her smile turning somewhat strained as she put the CD back down on the table.

“O-oh, you… you really don’t have to…” the woman shook her head, her smile turning somewhat strained as she put the CD back down on the table.

“Oh no, I insist!” Greg grinned as he got up and started walking backwards towards his van. “I mean, you came all the way out here to see the show. There’s no reason for you to walk away empty handed!”

“N-no, it’s… I… I really shouldn’t have… I-I…” the woman said, her smile finally dissipating into hesitation and discomfort. Discomfort that the young musician didn’t really notice in his innocent cheerfulness. “I… I should probably go…”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Greg reassured warmly, calling over his shoulder at her before he began to open his van. “It’ll take me just a second to grab-” The young musician cut himself off as he realized the back of his van was occupied, namely by his manager and his apparent female companion who was leaning incredibly close to him. That is, until they were caught.

“Star child!” Marty exclaimed, hardly surprised as he hopped out of the van, his blonde-haired date accompanying him. “Perfect timing. I want you to meet Vidalia.”

“Nice van,” Vidalia greeted dully, her tone obviously unimpressed and deadpan as she popped her
bubble gum. “Really living the high life.”

“I picked her up right before the show,” Marty whispered to Greg with a leering smirk. “Guess there are some actual babes in this boring old hick town after all, huh?”

“Uh…” Greg frowned, rather put off by what his manager had just implied. Marty, however, didn’t really give him much of a chance to respond as he continued, slinging an arm over Vidalia’s shoulder as he did.

“So, how’d the show go? You finally sell out for a change? Or you know, sell anything at all?”

“Oh, the show was great!” Greg perked up. “One person showed up! And she—oh, that’s right!” The young musician gasped as he hurried to pull a large ‘Mr. Universe’ shirt out of his stash. “I have to give her this free tee… shirt…” His smile fell as he turned back to where the woman had been waiting, only to find that she had ended up slipping away after all, much to his newfound disappointment.

“Greg! You can’t give stuff away for free!” Marty scolded, breaking the young musician out of his thoughts on the mysterious woman. “What about my 75%?! 75% of nothing is nothing. Are you worth nothing?”

“N-no…” Greg hesitantly replied, glancing down.

“That’s right,” Marty nodded coldly. “Just you wait and see, star child. I’m gonna make us both rich.” He paused, leaning forward to whisper to the young musician so Vidalia, or nobody else for that matter, couldn’t hear. “And as far as these backwoods boneheads know, we already are. So let’s live it up before we hit the road again, alright?” The manager smirked as he began to lead his date off for a wild night. “Next stop, Portland!”

Greg didn’t reply right away as he instead glanced down at the shirt in his hands, a part of him knowing completely well that Marty’s heart wasn’t entirely in the right place. True, at first, the manager had encouraged him to keep things solely about the music; but as time went on and expense money ran dry, cash soon became his primary drive. As much as Greg wanted to try and steer Marty back in the right direction, he always backed down when it came right to it. After all, out of anyone he had ever known, Marty was the only person who supported his dreams of becoming a famous rock star, who actually helped him begin climbing his way towards that dream. The young musician knew he couldn’t possibly turn his back on his transparently greedy manager, especially since, regardless of his frustration with his lack of ticket or merchandise sales, he had never turned his back on him.

Yet at the same time, he soon found his thoughts drifting back to that intriguing, alluring woman, who had, in just the very brief encounter they had had, already managed to leave a tangible impression on him. Greg wasn’t entirely sure where his newfound curiosity about her came from, but all the same, he craved to know more about her. Certainly, she was special; her memorable presence and her poetic words were definitely indications of that. But exactly how she was special, the young musician found himself really wanting to know. Perhaps it was foolish, seeing as how he didn’t even know her name, to want to chase after a woman he had only candidly talked to for a moment or two. But he was quick to remind himself that such a pursuit wouldn’t be completely without merit.

After all, he had never gotten the chance give her the free tee-shirt.

“Y’know…” Greg called after Marty, his gaze still fixated on the shirt to the point that he didn’t even notice his manager was already long gone. “I’ll catch up with you…”
Greg had been so caught up in preparing for his performance prior to it that he hadn’t actually
gotten the chance to do very much looking into the town of his most recent venue. Marty had
briefly mentioned that Gravity Falls was a minor tourist trap, one that only ever ended up attracting
a few tourists at best given its remote location and obscure nature. Still, as the young musician
could see that it did carry a simple, rustic, folksy appeal, one that seemed amplified by the pleasant
early evening as he began his search for the mysterious woman. He figured that Marty would be
preoccupied with Vidalia for most of the evening, which meant he had as much time as he wanted
to wander around, though unlike what he usually did with his free time, he was far from idle. Greg
figured that woman couldn’t have gone too far, unless of course she had driven to see his concert
by the lake, but that hadn’t seemed to be the case. Her sudden disappearance did indeed confuse
him, but he figured he could always just ask her about it when he gave her the shirt. If he managed
to find her at all, of course.

Though Gravity Falls seemed initially small in both size and population, Greg was surprised to find
more than a few people strolling the evening streets. A fact he was glad for as asking around for
the woman’s whereabouts where really the only lead he had in finding her at the moment. And,
after inquiring a few of the townsfolk who actually seemed to know who he was talking about
when he described a “huge woman with pink hair in a white dress”, the young musician found
himself heading in the direction he had been pointed to: the woods to the west of town.

Greg hadn’t anticipated such a long walk, which was why he had gone on foot, but by the time he
had reached the end of the road leading into the woods, he was already rather breathless from the
hike. Still, for as much as he was wishing he had his van, he couldn’t help but pause in surprise
upon noticing two structures afar in the distance. The larger one he couldn’t make out too well in
the darkness, but it towered over the trees all the same: a large, statue-like shape, one that seemed
to bear several incomplete arms as it stood out from the cliff face it was carved out of. More
immediate and somewhat less intimidating however, was the small, homely hut resting at the foot
of the hill from this statue, one that seemed to welcome people to it based on all the makeshift
signs pointing the way towards it. Greg couldn’t easily read any of them though due to none of
them really being well-lit, but all the same, he couldn’t help but be rather curious about its purpose
just as much as he was about the statue.

“Huh…” he muttered to himself as he decided to venture a bit closer. “Wonder what this old place
is… Some kind of forest information center? …Those are a thing, right? …Yeah, I’m probably
right.”

The young musician shrugged as he stepped onto the side porch of the shack, still unable to find
any readable signage on it. Still, he figured that this was probably the best place to get some
information about the woman, seeing as how these very woods had been where everyone had
directed him too. Perhaps if he was lucky, this cabin actually belonged to her and his search could
reach its end right then and there. However, as he knocked on the door to find out, he was met not
with the mysterious, bright-smiling, pink-haired woman, but rather an unfamiliar, immediately
surly, middle-aged man instead.

“Geez, kid, can’t you read!?” the man harshly began upon swinging the door open. He looked
rather disheveled, almost as if he had come to the door in quite a hurry, based on the crimson fez
positioned askew on his head and his only semi-tucked in button-up shirt. “The sign says we’re
closed!”

“Oh, w-well, I—Sign? What sign?” Greg asked, looking around in confusion.
“That sign!” the man pointed to a large, painted, empty slab of wood nearby, one that didn’t even bear so much as a single telling mark upon it. “Oh, right. It just got here today. I haven’t put it together yet. Well either way, I’m tellin’ ya to scram, kid! I’m not working overtime just to entertain some beatnik punk in desperate need of a haircut.”

“Uh… s-sorry, sir,” the young musician rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “I didn’t mean to, um, trespass, or anything. I was just wondering if I could get some directions to—”

“Directions?” the man raised a caustic eyebrow. “What does this place look like to you, some kind of ranger’s station?”

“Uh… yeah, a little?” Greg shrugged with a small, good-natured smile.

“Well, its not,” the man crossed his arms. “This is the Murder Hut, buddy. We don’t give out directions around here, at least not for free.”

“M-Murder Hut?!” the young musician gaped, alarmed. “Y-you mean… you don’t actually… murder people here, do you?”

“What? No!” the man scoffed, rolling his eyes. “That’s just a creepy tag I came up with to draw the tourists in. Nobody’s ever actually died here before. …At least… I’m pretty sure nobody has… huh…”

Greg shifted somewhat uncomfortably during this small beat of silence before finally getting back on track. “Uh, well, I know you said you didn’t really give out directions, but I just need some help finding this woman who came to my concert earlier tonight. I heard around town that she lives out this way? She’s super tall, has really curly pink hair, some kind of weird… gemstone thing on her stomach—”

“Whoa, hold up!” the man interjected, his already harsh manner suddenly growing even moreso. “You’re not talking about… Rose, are you?”

“Rose…?” Greg repeated with a small, somewhat dreamy smile. “Wow… It’s so fitting! Even her name is beautiful…” The young musician didn’t have much of a chance to pine for her, however, before, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted the side of a baseball bat rushing right for him. Luckily, he had the wits about him to jump off the porch out of its path, but even so, he landed on the ground in apt surprise as he looked up to the clearly livid man standing over him wielding the aforementioned bat. “W-what are you doing?!?”

“I think that’s something you should be asking yourself, kid,” the man growled petulantly. “You’ve got some gall to come around here asking about any of those Crystal Crones, especially about, ugh, Rose…”

“So… you do know her then?” Greg asked, smiling slightly in a feeble attempt to break the tension. This attempt failed, however, as the man loosely swung for him again, only for him to narrowly roll out of the bat’s way.

“Of course, I know her! I know that she’s a pain in my neck!” he shouted harshly. “And if you were smart, kid, then you’d stay away from her and that all that magic mumbo-jumbo up there at that ‘temple’ of hers.” He scowled as he nodded up to the massive statue his hut stood in the shadows of, finally giving the young musician an indirect tip on where to go. All the same, he finally relented in his apparently violent pursuit as he turned to head back inside, but not before sending Greg one more warning glare. “And while you’re at it, stay away from my property too. The last thing I need around here is some lovestruck, doe-eyed punk…”
And with that, he slammed the door shut, leaving Greg still on his spot on the ground, rather shaken by the encounter as a whole, but hardly deterred by it. “Uh… thanks for the directions!” he called after the man as he picked himself up to stand, looking up to the so-called ‘temple’. If what that man had said was true, than the mystery woman, Rose apparently, was just a short walk up the hill. And, with no other leads to really go off of, the young musician decided to simply go ahead and take that walk.

Still, as Greg began his venture up the hill, he couldn’t help but think back on what the man had said, namely his warning to stay away from the woman and her temple. While he didn’t really know how much merit or credibility the man really had, the young musician wondered where such an advisory had even come from, especially given the apparent venom that had been behind it. Was it just something that resulted from a longstanding neighborhood grudge? Or did some kind of mysterious, unknown danger really lie await in the massive arms of this towering, almost goddess-like statue?

Greg found that he was right on the money about the mysterious aspect, at the very least, as he drew closer to the temple. A wide metal fence barred it off from the rest of the forest, and unlike the “Murder Hut”, the signage here was actually very readable: ‘STAY AWAY FROM HILL’, written in bold, authoritative letters, with a much gentler sign inscribed in neat cursive below it reading ‘please’.

“Is she really other there…?” Greg wondered to himself, holding onto the fence as he tried to get a better look at what lay beyond it.

“Hoo!”

The young musician flinched at this until he spotted the owl sitting perched on top of the fence nearby. Oddly enough, it seemed to be purple, though Greg figured that might have been credited to the sparse nighttime lighting of the woods. “Heh, just some giant mysterious lady with enormous pink hair,” he answered back to the owl with a joking smirk. “You haven’t seen anyone like that around, have you?”

Greg was somewhat surprised when the owl intentionally turned towards him, but what completely shocked him was that, against all odds, it actually responded back to him. “Sure have, pal!” it replied, its beak breaking into a wide smirk.

“W-wha—how-” Greg cut himself off, his eyes wide as he took in the fact that he was really talking to an owl of all things. “W-where…?”

The owl chuckled, its grin taking on a teasing turn. “Well… if I told you any more I’d have to kill you!” it hooted wildly, spanning its wings out before taking off towards the temple with a raucous laugh.

“Hey! Wait!” Greg called after the bird, knowing that he couldn’t possibly just turn back now. Despite the warnings the signs gave, the young musician acted on impulse, haphazardly climbing up the fence and trying his best not to fall off of it. “Hold on a sec!” he shouted to the still-retreating owl, only to end up falling over the fence as he straddled the edge of it, landing clumsily on the other side. Fortunately, he was no worse for wear as he quickly picked himself up and followed the owl as best as he could through the rather unkempt path leading up towards the apparent entrance of the temple. Greg stopped short upon seeing it, for a number of reasons; the first was that this entrance looked like it was something akin to a crystalline cave, one that practically shimmered in an array of dream-like colors amidst the backdrop of night. A large door with a collection of gemstones fastened to it awaited at the back, while its central feature seemed to be a large, radiant crystal platform. And on this platform was the owl, perched upon the arm of a
tall, slender young woman with pale-peach hair, porcelain white skin, a silky blue shawl, pink legwarmers, and a smooth, round stone resting on her forehead.

“This long haired human was talking to me over by the fence!” the owl informed her excitedly. “I spotted him down at the bottom of the hill talking to that Stan guy and then he came up here!”

The woman let out a startled gasp at this, her eyes growing wide with what looked like uneasy fear. “A-a human?! But… we haven’t let humans come around here since-”

“Yeah, I know!” the owl chirped daringly. “I’ve missed having ‘em around! They’re hilarious.”

“W-well, I certainly haven’t missed them,” the woman turned her quite pointed nose up coldly. “Did this new human speak to you?”

“Yep! He was asking about Rose,” the owl informed before abruptly turning her head in a perfect 180 towards Greg as he still stood afar. “Look, there he is!”

“Uh… yo,” Greg greeted rather awkwardly. At this, the owl laughed once more, flying off to greet the young musician, her wings hitting the woman in the face in the process.

“Ugh, Amethyst, wait!” she called after the owl, already running after her.

The “owl” hardly listened as a bright glow enveloped her briefly, and in an instant, her shape changed from a bird of prey to that of a small humanoid girl, one with purple skin, short lavender hair, and a gemstone resting squarely on her chest. “It’s you!” she quipped, hardly phased by the young musician’s startled gasp as she began to circle him in an almost animalistic, yet curious crawl. “I’ve never seen this one around here before! I really like your hair! Check him, Pearl! He looks way less tired and cranky than ol’ Science Man always used to!”

“Amethyst, leave him be!” the woman, Pearl, scolded, scooping Amethyst up into her arms, despite her playful struggling. “You don’t know where he’s been!” At this, she glanced over at Greg with a very tight, overtly forced smile. “I’m very sorry about this, um… you… But you should definitely leave. I’m not sure if you could read the sign, but it said ‘keep away’, and rather politely, might I add, so if you could please-”

“W-wait!” Greg interjected, hoping he could at least make his appeal. “I… I was just looking for-” The young musician was abruptly cut off as a sudden, stark burst of light erupted from the crystal platform, one that aptly left him just as stunned as everything else he had seen tonight. “Whoa…” he mused, wide-eyed, especially as a third woman materialized from this light. She was even taller than Pearl, with a curvaceous figure, deep magenta skin, cubical black afro, and shades that gave her a mysterious, yet steadfast and calm look as she appeared, two large bubbles floating over her gemstone-wielding palms.

“Pearl, Amethyst,” she spoke with a hint of surprise in her British accent as she tapped both bubbles to send them away. “You’re with a human.”

“Pearl, Amethyst,” she spoke with a hint of surprise in her British accent as she tapped both bubbles to send them away. “You’re with a human.”

“He followed me over the fence!” Amethyst exclaimed effervescently, still grinning in amusement as the tallest woman stepped up to Greg rather imposingly.

“What should we do, Garnet?” Pearl asked anxiously, still not letting Amethyst out of her grip. “We put that fence up to prevent humans from coming around here anymore, but they just climb over it anyway! It’s simply inconsiderate!”

“State your purpose,” Garnet addressed Greg her tone stoic and authoritative as she stood over him.
“Uh… I was kinda looking for the mysterious pink lady,” he explained somewhat timidly. “Kinda tall? Lots of big, pink, curly hair?”

“See? He’s talking about Ro—mmphhh!” Amethyst was cut off as Pearl slapped a hand over her mouth to quiet her.

“I don’t know how to make him go away,” she whispered to Garnet, her smile still tight and uncomfortable.

“I’ll just throw him back over the fence,” Garnet said simply, easily hoisting the unsuspecting young musician up to do just that.

“W-whoa!” Greg exclaimed, surprised by both her strength and her apparent intent as she began hauling him back towards the fence.

“Oh, excellent idea!” Pearl quipped in cheerful agreement as she followed with Amethyst in tow. “Humans should stay on the other side of the fence like the sign says. After all, the last thing we need is another one around after that last disaster…”

“Please! No throwing!” Greg pleaded, bracing himself for what would no doubt be a rough landing as they approached the fence. “Man, and I thought being chased off by that guy with a bat was bad. This is turning into some crazy night…” However, before Garnet could toss him back into the woods, miraculously enough, the final member of this group happened to appear.

“Wait!”

The trio turned, Greg glancing over as much as he could, to see none other than the pink woman, Rose, he remembered, herself emerge from the temple, clearly shocked to see what was happening. “Mr. Universe?” she asked, confused and surprised to see him again.

“Yes!” Greg couldn’t help but grin, though his pleased smile was short lived as Garnet abruptly dropped him, flustered in her leader’s presence. “Ow…” he groaned, rubbing his newly-sore back. Still, his attention was quickly diverted back to Rose as she preformed a high leap, only to slowly, gracefully land right in front of him, amazing him all the more.

“Are you alright?” she asked, extending a hand out to him, along with a warm, gentle smile. Greg only responded in a small nod as he took her hand, ignoring the rush of warmth that filled his cheeks as he met her beautiful smile. Somehow, she looked even more picturesque and angelic now, her eyes alight with kindness and curiosity and her pink curls gently blowing about in the gentle evening breeze. The young musician could feel his heartbeat pick up just a bit as she helped him rise to stand, so many parts of him wanting to say so many things to her at once. But he didn’t get a chance to even get a word out before Pearl starkly cut in.

“You know this human?” she asked Rose, rather alarmed by the thought.

“He was playing a concert near the lake, and I couldn’t help myself,” Rose remarked with a bemused smile. “I know I said we’d be more careful after… w-what happened a few years ago, but I figured it wouldn’t hurt. And besides, he’s very adorable.”

Greg found his flustered blush deepening even more upon hearing this, an awkward, yet genuine laugh escaping him as he glanced to the side. “Aw, gee… uh… thanks!” he was quick to collect himself however, remembering what Marty had told him about playing it cool in front of woman. “Uh, I-I mean… No one can ignore the Universe. Oh, but wait!” his nonchalant demeanor quickly dissipated as he pulled out the shirt, remembering why he had come all this way in the first place.
“I brought you this. It’s the free t-shirt that came with the free CD!”

“Why, thank you!” Rose exclaimed, pleasantly surprised as she took the shirt, holding it in front of her as the other Gems curiously turned to look. “His gimmick is space!” she quipped cheerfully, eliciting amused laughs from her teammates. Or rather, from Garnet and Amethyst, as Pearl was really anything but amused.

“Rose,” she whispered to the pink Gem, gripping her arm tightly, almost possessively. “Are you sure fraternizing with humans again is such a good idea? After all, we all remember what happened with F—” The white Gem quickly cut herself off, her hold on Rose tightening a bit as both of their expressions briefly darkened with remorse, remorse that obviously caught Greg off guard as he observed the conversation in confusion. “W-with… with the last one…”

“Yes… I… I do remember…” Rose muttered, pain lingering on her lovely face, but only briefly. “B-but time is different. He’s just a musician, Pearl, and a traveling one at that. He’s completely harmless.”

“I-harmless?” Greg asked with a frown, even more confused than ever as to what the context for all this was. However, before he could ask, Amethyst blithely cut in.

“Hey, play something, Music Man!” she exclaimed with a smile, gripping Rose’s skirt.

“Better make it good,” Garnet commanded firmly, a powerful gauntlet forming on her raised fist.

“Aw, man, I’m working on this awesome new set,” Greg said with a daring grin, more than ready to perform for them. “It’s gonna kill at my next show! …My next show… Aw, jeez, what time is it?!"

“Uh…. Night… time?” Pearl ventured with a confused frown.

“Yeah… Marty’s probably looking for me,” Greg rubbed the back of his neck. “We’re supposed to hit the road…. We’ve got a big show in a big city coming up soon… and I didn’t drop out of community college for nothing!”

“…What?” Pearl asked flatly, still not following.

“Well then, you better hurry,” Rose encouraged with a playful smirk. “You don’t wanna miss your ‘space train to the cosmos’.”

“Okay, I’ll see you later then,” Greg nodded with a small laugh, turning as he began to leave. Still, he couldn’t help but briefly turn back around again, voicing something that was indeed a wish he hoped would come true, even if he wasn’t really sure how. “Uh, I hope the stars align for us to meet again!”

“I’m sure they will!” Rose called back after him warmly as she saw him off.

“Bye, Music Man!” Amethyst shouted after him with a cheerful wave, one that Greg returned before he began scaling the fence again. A beat of silence passed among the Gems in wake of their latest human visitor, the first one they had gotten in quite a long time due to some rather extenuating circumstances. Yet even so, Rose smiled softly as she looked down at the shirt Greg had given her, something that was not lost on Pearl in particular as she let out something of a snarky, jealous scoff.

“I can sing!” she protested, hands on her hips as she looked up to her liege. Rose broke out into a larger, more amused grin at this, especially as both Garnet and Amethyst chuckled knowingly,
It had started raining not long after Greg and Marty had left Gravity Falls, something that the young musician only became aware of as he relined in the back of his van, absently listening to the patter of drops against metal as his manager drove them off to their next destination. Yet even though they were back on the road again, this was perhaps the first time Greg felt as though he wasn’t there, not completely at least. Because now, with his head full of thoughts of magical pink women and massive stone temples, it was as if he had left a piece of him back there on that hill. A piece that he was already feeling very incomplete without.

“Man, Greg, you really missed out,” Marty smirked in torrid satisfaction. “Vidalia’ friends were wild and crazy. Glad that town wasn’t a total waste.”

“I met some wild ladies too,” Greg spoke up, his guitar positioned on his chest as he finally decided to tell his manager about his earlier misadventure. “They changed shape and appeared out of beams of light. And they lived inside this giant temple place, and-”

“Ah ah ah, save the poetry for Portland, star child,” Marty interrupted, clearly not believing him. “We’ve got a big day ahead of us tomorrow.”

“I’m serious, Marty,” Greg said, sitting up. “Something’s going on back there. That town is… weird. But like, in a good way, you know?”

“Are you nuts?” Marty scoffed, rolling his eyes. “There was nothing back there in that two-bit loser town. Just wait till you see what’s ahead of us. It’s fame!” To emphasize his point, the manager pressed the play button on the radio, only for it to refuse to work. “Hey, what’s jammed in your tape deck? Have you been putting pennies in here again, you weirdo? Play me something, star child.”

Greg complied, strumming his guitar as he began the newest melody he had been mentally composing ever since he had left the temple. One that was directly influenced by Rose and her immaculate beauty and kindness. All things that he couldn’t get out of his head, no matter how hard he tried.

“Do you believe in destiny? Close your eyes and leave the rest to me-”

“Snore! You’re gonna put people to sleep with that!” Marty cut him off, far from impressed with this heartfelt song. “Where’s this schlock coming from?”

“I-I just can’t stop thinking about that woman at the show…” Greg admitted, blushing in embarrassment.

“Oh boy, here we go,” Marty deadpanned with a wry, patronizing grin. “How big was she?”

“Eight feet tall… massive pink hair…” Greg detailed, smiling softly as he reflected back on her affection smile and melodic voice, the memories filling his heart with a warmth that he wasn’t sure he had ever really felt before. That warmth was quick to diminish, however, as he heard what Marty had to say on the matter.

“See, Greg, this is your problem,” the manager began callously. “You want one huge woman, when you could have multiple smaller ones.”

“Ugh,” the young musician groaned in apt disgust at this sentiment. “Marty, women are people.”

“Suuuuure, they are, star child,” Marty scoffed once more. “People who are only gonna want you if you have the chops and the cash to back it up. So just follow my lead. I’m gonna get you
everything you want.”

Greg took pause at this, glancing over at the boxes of unsold merchandise sitting next to him. There was no denying that he was rather put off by Marty’s views on many things, women and romance chief among them. But never had those views really driven Greg to question his Marty’s lead before, even when that lead only seemed to be in the pursuit of money over everything else. However, as he thought between the lines for perhaps the first time, the young musician started to wonder if his manager really did have his best interest in mind after all.

“What if I wanna go back…” Greg muttered, furrowing his brow in thought as he wondered what it could be like. What would happen if he turned the van around? If he rushed back to that temple? If he ventured to take a chance unlike any he ever had before?

“What?” Marty asked sharply, glaring back over his shoulder at him.

“What if I want to go back and be with her?!” the young musician reiterated, this time much more intent on doing just that. Something that of course, set his manager off completely.

“No one cares about your dumb feelings, Greg!” Marty snapped, livid as he turned to face him fully. “They’re making you lose sight of what’s really important!”

Greg didn’t get a chance to fire back a response as he instead let out a startled gasp upon noticing the steadily approaching headlights filling in the front window. “Watch the road!” he warned, prompting Marty to turn around just in time. He quickly swerved the van out of the path of the oncoming truck, narrowly avoiding a head-on collision before coming to a grinding halt on the side of the empty road. A beat of heavy tension lingered in the aftermath of this adrenaline spike, one that left Greg reeling as he glared back over at his manager with a sense of newfound distrust.

“Why do you always get to decide what’s important?” he asked, realizing how unfair and unjust this was, how unfair it had always been really, as he said it aloud.

“Because I’m your manager,” Marty scowled coldly, his tone harsh and demanding. “And you’re just some spaced-out kid. I’m taking you to the city, and you’re gonna play, and you’re gonna like it, and you’re gonna stop thinking about giant pink women and all of that fairy tale garbage. And maybe you’ll actually make me some money for once.”

If Greg had had any doubts about Marty’s sincerity before, they all instantly confirmed themselves in that one, single moment. And for the young musician, it was more than enough to finally, finally convince him to put his foot down and be an adult. “Get out of my van,” he growled, standing as he gripped his guitar tightly.

“Sit down, Greg,” Marty sighed tiredly, hardly thinking the young musician to be serious.

“I said get out of my van!” Greg suddenly yelled, proving the exact opposite as he showed he absolutely meant it. He refused to even indulge his now former manager in any further argument as he pushed Marty out of the driver’s seat and into the rain outside, not even bothering to look back as he turned the van around to make the drive back to Gravity Falls.

“Hey! W-what are you doing?!” Marty shouted after his former protégé, running after him for a bit before giving up in petulant anger. “You’re making a huge mistake!”

Greg hardly seemed to think so as he recklessly sped back in the direction they had come, leaving his ex-manager in the dust. In fact, he couldn’t shake the growing, inspiring feeling of just how right all of this felt; cutting Marty loose, making his own choices for a change, and especially
pursuing his newfound feelings that he couldn’t very well hide from himself any longer. He didn’t know if he loved Rose, at least yet, but there was no denying that he had fallen for her to some extent, hard and fast, to the point that every mile he got closer to her felt like a mile he was drawing closer to home. True, he was acting on mere impulse alone, fueled solely by the desire to see a woman he had only just met mere hours ago. But in those brief few hours alone, he had known more magic, more excitement, more curiosity, and more longing than he had ever really known before. Perhaps Marty hadn’t been the only one to be wrong all this time; maybe he had been wrong too. Because the closer he got to that mysteriously alluring statue standing astute in the moonlight, the more Greg realized that what he had spent his whole live searching for wasn’t in the cold, unfeeling stardust of space or the distant, impersonal cheers of his imaginary fans. What he was looking for was here, right in front of him, in the lovely smile and kind words of the undoubtedly magical woman who had somehow managed to steal his heart.

Or rather, she would have been right in front of him, if not for the Murder Hut’s blank sign, which Greg, in his rush to get back to the temple, didn’t even notice until he happened to drive right through it.

The van screeched to a grinding halt at this, with the young musician practically falling out of it as he rushed to inspect the damage. Fortunately, his van seemed fine, but the sign had been completely destroyed, to the point that nothing was left of it but scattered shards of wood lying strewn all over the place.

“Oh geez…” Greg muttered worriedly, rubbing the back of his neck as he tried to think of a quick way to fix things. However, he didn’t even get the chance to come up with any ideas before the hut’s proprietor, Stan, Greg vaguely remembered Amethyst calling him in passing, burst out of the house, bat already in hand.

“Alright, what’s the big idea out-” he cut himself off, his already livid expression growing even more so upon spotting the frightened young musician standing near his obliterated sign across the lawn. “Oh. I should have guessed.”

“Ah! Um, I-I’m super sorry, sir,” Greg began, taking a defensive step back towards his van. “I didn’t mean to run over your sign! I can explain!”

“Then start explaining,” Stan scowled bitterly, patting his free hand with his bat. “And it better be good, or else I might finally have a good reason to use this thing.”

“Uh, w-well, I…” Greg trailed off, quickly faltering as he realized he couldn’t come up with anything. “O-ok, so… I don’t really have a good explanation for this other than it was an accident, but again I’m really sorry!”

“And what makes you think sorry is gonna cut it, kid?” Stan asked coldly, still fortunately not raising his bat to attack. “In case you forgot, you ran over my brand new sign with your goofy hippie van! I could have you hauled off to jail for this, and at this point, I’m thinkin’ I should so you’ll finally stop coming around here and getting on my nerves.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Stan interrupted, rather caught off guard by this news. “Did you just say you’re in love? With… Rose?”
“Uh… I mean, I might be?” Greg ventured. “Everything feels so up in the air right now… T-the only thing I know for sure is that I really, really wanna go up there and see her again. Like… like if I stay with her, then… then maybe I’ll finally be where I belong…”

Stan let out a mocking scoff at this as he rolled his eyes. “Yeesh, kid, looks like I was right about you being nothing more than a lovestruck punk,” he remarked dryly. “Fair warning: you’re in way over your head if you wanna go a round with ol’ Pinky up there.”

“W-what do you mean?”

“I mean, she’s nothing but trouble!” Stan scowled disdainfully. “Her and all the rest of those ‘Crystal Gems’. Why, the last guy who got tangled up with them was—” He cut himself off with a sharp breath, his glare sharpening and softening all at once, almost as if this was a personal matter to him instead of one of mere hearsay. “…Nevermind. But still, those Gems aren’t worth the trouble. If I were you, kid, I’d turn around and head right back the way I came and never, ever look back on this nutso town. You’ll be a lot happier if you do, trust me.”

Greg took pause upon hearing this, somewhat surprised as he noticed just how sincere Stan seemed to be about this apparent warning. Yet as much as he wanted to ask about where it had even come from, he was reminded of his former resolve once again as he looked back up towards the temple. To where Rose, where perhaps the rest of his life, might just have been waiting for him, regardless of what that life might be like. “I… I can’t…” he shook his head, a small, wistful smile on his face. “I’ve already given up a lot to make it this far. I don’t think I could just turn back now, even if I wanted to, without at least finding out if its all gonna be worth it in the end.”

“Pfft, what a load of schmaltz,” Stan rolled his eyes again, though his harsh manner lessened considerably upon hearing all this. “You’re not too bright, are you, kid?”

“Maybe I’m not,” Greg shrugged with a small chuckle. “I mean, I did accidentally run your huge sign over with my van after all. Speaking of which…” his smile faltered. “I-I guess you’re gonna call the police on me about that, aren’t you? To be honest, I wouldn’t really blame you; I mean, it was your property and I did kind of destroy it, a-and though I’ve never really been to jail before and I don’t really have any money for bail or anything, I guess I’ll figure out some way to—”

“Kid, would you shut up already?” Stan interjected, crossing his arms. “I’m not gonna call the police on you. You’re honestly too pathetic to just haul off to jail. Plus, the last thing I need swarming this place are a bunch of cops.”

“B-but what about the sign?”

“I’ll tell you what you’re gonna do about the sign,” Stan began, still rather staunch. “You’re gonna work for me here at the Murder Hut until you’ve paid it off. I’ve been meaning to hire on a cashier around here anyway, so I guess this works out for everyone.”

“H-hire… Wait, you mean like a job?” Greg asked, quite surprised. “I… I’ve never had one of those before…”

“Why does that not surprise me?” Stan deadpanned, turning to head back inside.

“W-wait! Sir… why are you letting me off so easily?” the young musician wondered, bewildered.

“A second ago, I thought you wanted to beat my head in with a baseball bat but now you’re giving me a job? I’m confused…”

“Don’t be,” Stan concluded with a shrug. “I usually wouldn’t bother, especially seeing as how
you're all head over heels for Rose, of all people, but... the truth is, you kinda remind me of, well, me when I was your age. Believe it or not, I used to be every bit as lost and spacey as you are until I had to grow out of it. Though, uh... just out of curiosity, you're not on the run from any Colombian gang members, are ya?"

"Um... no...?" Greg frowned, unsure of what such an odd question had to do with anything.

"Good, then there won't be any problems," Stan finally grinned as he opened the door to go in. "You start at 8 a.m. sharp. And I don't care if you stay all up all night making goo-goo eyes at Pinky up there, you better not be late!"

"I-I won't be!" Greg assured with a relieved smile as he prepared to get back into his van. "I promise! Thank you so much, sir!"

"Yeah, yeah," Stan remarked sardonically as he waved the excited young musician off. He let out something of an amused sigh in spite of himself as he watched him leave, but all the same, he was resolved to remain careful about all this. After all, the last thing he needed was for his new, lovestruck "employee" to end up being the wild card that unraveled everything he had been working the past seven years for. "Ugh, I better not end up regretting this if that kid knows what's good for him..."

The small burst of regret Greg had felt upon kicking Marty out of his van was all but forgotten as he continued speeding up towards the temple, a huge grin spread wide across his face. Even though he hadn't had much of a choice in his new employment, he couldn't deny he was excited about it. After all, it was by far a better alternative to being arrested, and maybe if he was lucky, then Stan would let him keep a portion of his earnings to keep food in his stomach and gas in his van. The money would certainly be appreciated, seeing as how he probably wouldn't be making any revenue off touring anymore, not that he really ever had in the first place. Still, getting a job wouldn't be the thing to ultimately make this night for him; the only one who could make it truly special was now only right behind a chain link metal fence. A fence that, unlike Stan's sign, Greg didn't really have too many gripes about running his van straight through.

The young musician didn't hesitate to jump out of the van as soon as he pulled it up in front of the temple, grabbing his guitar as he did. Rose and her friends were nowhere to be seen, but Greg assumed that she was inside of the statue itself, which was why he hurried up to its large door and knocked eagerly, his heart practically aching with longing at the thought of seeing her again. "Hey, are you in there? In the real world? What are you doing here? So close I could touch..."

He began with a bold, earnest strum, his voice echoing throughout the shimmering grotto as he began to sing from his heart. "Do you believe in destiny? Close your eyes and leave the rest to me... Do you believe fantasy? I have to when its right in front of me..."

Greg realized just how true this was as he glanced around the cave, its beautifully crystalline walls looking as though they were something out of an interstellar dream. Honestly, Rose herself seemed like that too, the air of mystery that surrounded her making him want to know so much more about here. Where had she come from? Why had she chosen to live in a seemingly unassuming little town like this? Who was she, really, and her odd, yet interesting friends? How did every word she say, every glance she sent his way, every second of her smile, seem to enchant him more than anything else ever could?

"Oh, what are you doing here? In the real world? What are you doing here? So close I could touch..."
you…” He continued, his beat steadily building as he approached the temple gate once more with purpose in his step. Rose had still yet to appear, but still he didn’t stop. He couldn’t stop, because now his emotions were guiding him far more than anything else. His hope, his heart was pushing him forward, into something that he was perfectly content to fall into without a sign of hesitation.

“What are you doing here? And what are you doing to me?!”

As Greg’s song reached its peak, he dropped to his knees, the temple door finally glowing as he did. He watched in muted awe as it started to split open, flooding the grotto with light that was only obscured by the large, curly-haired silhouette standing amidst it.

“Oh!” the young musician smiled upon seeing what Rose had on over her dress, though his elation soon turned to confusion at the look of somber worry on her face. “You’re wearing the… shirt…”

“Please,” she began, her voice morose, regretful as she stepped forward a bit. “Go away.”

“I-I’m sorry…” Greg blushed, looking down apprehensively. “D-did I…?”

Rose sighed, her shoulders dropping as she stole a brief glance down the hill, almost in the direction of the Murder Hut. “You’re awfully cute, a-and I really wanna play with you but… I can’t.”

“You… can’t?” the young musician raised a confused eyebrow. “I… I don’t understand…”

“No, you don’t…” Rose sighed once more, her pink locks blowing a bit in the dull, almost chilly breeze. “I still don’t understand myself, really…” her voice turned to a mutter as her gaze drifted up towards the stars almost reminiscently. Greg was quiet at this, unable to really voice his ongoing bewilderment as he watched her carefully, unable to ignore the lingering sadness in her lovely eyes. “I’ve known humans much like you before… I’ve lost even more of them. It’s nothing new. But the last one though, I… h-he… w-what happened to him… it… it was all my fault!” The young musician was rather taken aback as he watched, still awestruck as tears started to well up in her eyes, though she was quick to wipe them away. “I… I just… I don’t think I can do this again… I’m sorry…”

“W-wait!” Greg exclaimed, jumping to his feet as she turned to head back inside. Much to his fortune, she paused, looking to him with dejected curiosity as he spoke his piece. “Look, I-I don’t know what happened between you and this other guy, but… I… you… t-there’s something about you, I just… I-I can’t get you out of my head! I mean, you’re so… wow, you know?”

“Wow?” Rose frowned, confused.

“Yeah! It’s almost like you’re magical or something!”

“I… am?”

“Really? Well then, that explains a lot!” Greg chuckled, bewildering the pink Gem even more. “Can you really blame me for being a little curious? You’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever seen! And you get bonus points in my book for being about the only person who’s ever showed up to one of my concerts!”

Rose had to suppress a laugh at this, one that she abandoned quickly in favor of maintaining her former seriousness. “W-well… I… you’re…” she trailed off, clearly unsure of what to say before she finally steadied herself again. “E-even if you do feel that way, your life is short and you have dreams. I won’t let you give up on everything you want.”
“Well, then that’s gonna be a problem…” Greg began, bowing his head low.

“Huh?” Rose asked before the young musician looked up at her with a bright, winning smile.

“You’re everything I want!”

Rose gasped, stars in her eyes as she heard this romantic statement. All her former grief was soon replaced with a laugh that she was powerless to contain, a stray tear streaming down her cheek in the process. Greg joined in, chuckling as he felt his cheeks burn red with a rewarding kind of warmth, a warmth that seemed to explode into a bright, glowing, welcome fire as Rose did something quite unexpected. Without any warning she leaned forward and gently kissed his forehead, her lips feather light yet sweet on his skin before she pulled away just as smoothly. Greg stilled for just a second in the aftermath of it, his jaw dropping as he looked to her in complete surprise, only for Rose to break down into even more laughter, ultimately encouraging him back into doing the same.

The two of them remained there, laughing and loving for quite some time as the crystalline dream world she was a part of glistened beautifully all around them, both of them truly feeling that something special was beginning here. Something that would take them both to places they never thought possible, but never once dared to regret.

Greg smiled and hummed to himself as he finished wiping the Murder Hut’s counter down prior to closing. He had been working there under Stan for a little over a month, and in that short span of time, the young musician grew quite content with his new lot. The work at the small but booming tourist trap wasn’t anything too taxing or demeaning, and despite his sour attitude during their first encounter, Stan had proven himself to be a mostly easy to work with boss, with some sparse exceptions here and there. Of course, the conman didn’t really approve of Greg’s ever growing relationship with Rose, for reasons he never really cared to explain, but he largely held his peace about it in exchange for that lack of an explanation. But despite all that, the young musician felt as though his new employment at the shack was going rather well, to the point that he had largely forgotten he was working here really only to pay off a debt. That is, until Stan decided to offhandedly remind him about it as he watched his young employee dutifully complete his tasks for the afternoon.

“Make sure you dust up around the register, kid,” the conman reminded as he counted his earnings from the day on the other side of the gift shop. “It’s a proven fact that people are ten times as likely to rob registers that are dirty cause that makes ‘em think the employees are slacking off on the job.”

“Is that really a proven fact, Mr. Pines?” Greg asked with a small, knowing grin as he did as his boss advised.

“…Alright, maybe it’s just a little something I picked up from experience,” Stan shrugged candidly. “But don’t expect a promotion or anything just because you think your slick, kid. In fact… don’t expect a promotion in general, seeing as how your time’s just about up here.”

“Wait, what?”

“What, you really think I haven’t been keeping tabs on how close you’re getting to paying that sign of?” Stan asked, heading over to the counter. “I may scam all the rubes that come in here to give me their money, but I’m not about to do that when it comes to my cash. You’ve just about worked
your debt off, kid. In fact, seeing as how you haven’t really whined about this whole thing, I might be willing to cut you off a bit early and let today be your last day. Just as long as you don’t tell anyone I went soft on ya, cause I didn’t. I made you work your butt off here and don’t you forget it!”

“I won’t,” Greg chuckled, though it soon petered out into a bout of thoughtful musing. “But man, I’m really almost done working here at the Murder Hut? Huh, it feels like this past month flew by. It’ll be pretty weird not coming into work every morning… I wonder what I’ll do with all that free time?”

“Knowing you, you’ll probably spend it gawking at Pinky all day,” Stan remarked, rolling his eyes sardonically.

“Heh, yeah…” the young musician grinned halfheartedly as he continued wiping the counter off, his smile gradually fading into a frown the more he let his thoughts wander. Really, as much as he wanted to spend all his time with Rose, she wasn’t all the time as she frequently went off on magical missions with the other Gems. For the most part, Greg was at work at the hut whenever she was gone, but without his employment there, he’d have to find some other way to spend his time. The only problem was, he didn’t have the slightest idea about where to go or what to do from the starting point he had miraculously gotten here.

The young musician’s thoughts were soon interrupted as the gift shop door suddenly swung open, revealing the heavy rain ongoing outside, as well as someone Greg hadn’t been expecting to see here, of all places. “M-Marty?!”

“Greg! There you are!” Marty exclaimed incredulously as he barged into the shop largely uninvited. “I’ve been looking all over this loser town for you. Should have guessed you’d end up in a chintzy place like this. Still, I figured that you’ve had enough time to come to your senses about all this ‘pink women’ stuff by now, so come on!” Without even letting the young musician get a word in edgewise, his former manager grabbed him by the wrist and started to pull him towards the door. “We gotta get going; you’re gonna have to work hard to catch up on our tour schedule, but I managed to pull a few strings, so we’ll-”

“W-whoa! Marty, hold on!” Greg interjected, pulling back against his ex-manager as he was essentially dragging him across the shop. “I don’t think I’m gonna-”

“Oh, you don’t need to thank me for saving you from this dollar-grabbing dump, star child,” Marty remarked with a smug smirk. “And you also don’t have to apologize for your little diva fit a few weeks ago, even if you should seeing as how I ruined my good shoes in that rain you tossed me out into…”

“B-but I-”

“Hold it!” Stan interjected this time, coming to block Marty from reaching the door with Greg in tow. “I don’t know who you think you are, bub, but if you think you can just waltz outta here with my employee while he’s still on the clock, then you got another thing coming!”

“Your employee?” Marty scoffed. “Sorry, old timer, but star child here was with me first. This kid wasn’t meant to work in some two-bit tourist trap like this; he’s meant to make me a ton of money! Now get out of my way so he can finally do that like he’s supposed to!”

“B-but Marty,” Greg spoke up, pulling his arm away from his ex-manager. “I don’t want to go back on tour.”
“What?” Marty asked dryly, glaring back at his former protégé.

“I said I don’t wanna go back,” the young musician shook his head. “I like it here. I like being with Rose and working at the Murder Hut and not always having to go from city to city without ever just stopping to take a break and breathe. When I used to tour with you, it always felt like I was looking for something I could never find. But… I think I’ve finally found that something right here in Gravity Falls. And its something I don’t want to give up.”

“Ugh, how many times do I have to tell you, Greg?” Marty asked harshly. “What you want matters about as much as this run down old shack does! Don’t you get it? I could make you a star, Greg, just like you’ve always dreamed of!”

“Well… w-well maybe I don’t wanna be a star anymore!” Greg shot back brazenly.

“Are you kidding me? Everyone wants to be a star!” Marty argued fiercely. “You really think working in tourism and being with some weird pink broad makes you anything special? ‘Cause it doesn’t. It makes you a nobody, just like everyone else out there.”

“…Then I guess I’ll just have to settle for being a nobody,” the young musician shrugged, a small smile of acceptance.

“Oh for crying out—just come on already!” Marty tried pulling Greg out once more, only to be met with much more resistance this time. “Quit being a big baby about this! You’re going back on tour whether you want to or not!”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Stan interjected coldly, completely put off by the ex-manager’s behavior as he continued to block the door. “The kid’s not going anywhere unless he chooses to. So what do you say, Greg? You wanna stay? Or you wanna go with this sleazebag over here?”

“Uh, I wanna stay,” Greg immediately replied, as though it were obvious, which, by all accounts, it was. Still, he couldn’t help but feel incredibly grateful for Stan’s intervention at the moment; after all, the conman was giving him an actual choice in the matter, something Marty had never done for him, even once.

“You heard him,” Stan said to Marty very curtly. “Now, take a hike. Or else…”

“Or else what, old timer?” the ex-manager scoffed, rolling his eyes at what he say as a weak threat. That is, until mere seconds later when he found himself landing face-first in the mud outside.

“And stay out!” Stan shouted after him, brushing his hands off with satisfaction. “If I ever see your mug around here bothering Greg again, then I won’t be so nice next time, so beat it!”

“Augh!” Marty shouted in absolute rage as he picked himself up from the mud, which completely covered him from head to toe. “You’ll be hearing from my lawyers, you crazy old geezer! And as for you, Greg, I hope you realize you just lost your last chance to ever make anything out of your life! You’ll never be anything without me!”

“You know, I think he’ll manage just fine,” Stan remarked, exchanging a genuine smile with Greg before they both stepped back inside and slammed the door behind them.

“I’m sorry about that, Mr. Pines,” Greg said, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. “I didn’t know Marty would be that dead set on becoming my manager again but I’m glad you were able to chase him off.”

“Eh, what can I say? I know an absolute creep when I see one,” Stan shrugged nonchalantly.
“Besides, I know what it’s like to not really have a choice about where your life’s gonna go, so I figured I’d spare you from that. ‘Cause trust me, kid, it’s pretty much the worst.”

“Well, thank you anyway,” Greg smiled, unable to resist giving his boss a hug out of gratitude. Stan didn’t really return it, but he did grin in brief amusement at his employee’s sentimentality before snapping back into his usually surly show.

“Alright, alright, enough hugging,” the conman deadpanned, pulling himself out of the embrace. “Your shift’s over for the night, so get going. But only as long as I see you bright and early again tomorrow morning.”

“Wait…” Greg paused, his eyes widening as he realized what his boss was implying. “You mean…?”

“Sure does. I’m hiring you on full time,” Stan smirked, crossing his arms. “That is, only if you want to-”

“Yes, I do!” Greg readily agreed, elated by this opportunity to work and make money on his own terms instead of on someone else’s for a change. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” he cheered, suddenly embracing his boss once again.

“Hey! What’d I say about the hugging?” Stan asked with faux impatience.

“Heh, sorry!” Greg chuckled as he backed off, grabbing his things as he prepared to head out. “I gotta go tell Rose about this! Thanks again, Mr. Pines! For everything!”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t sweat it,” Stan remarked with a wave of his hand as he watched his new full-time employee take off. He only waited until after he was fully gone, of course, to crack the smile he had been holding back ever since Greg had told Marty off. A smile that was filled with pride and relief over a life that, in some aspects, was quite similar to how his had used to be; only unlike his, Greg’s was already being spent in a much better way. “Heh, good kid…”

At the same time, the young musician practically bounded up the temple hill, excitement flowing through him as he drew closer and closer to where Rose always waited for him. Despite his happiness over his newly secured job, a part of him still thought back to what Marty had said, about how he’d never amount to anything without the stardom he used to always think he wanted. But as it stood, Greg realized he had it pretty good. True, he may not have had legions of cheering fans or countless people lining up for his autograph, but he had a van, a steady job, and a girlfriend who was quite literally out of this world. As far as he was concerned, he may not have gotten the dream of stardom and fame he had been chasing at first. But the dream he had gotten in its place was worth so, so much more.

Greg felt his heart skip a beat with joy as he spotted Rose afar, perched on a rock near the temple as she patiently waited for him. Her lovely face lit up the moment she caught sight of him, making it even more beautifully radiant than it already was. “Greg!” she exclaimed in a bright, cheerful greeting as she stood to go meet him.

“Rose!” Greg called back to her, quickening his pace. The moment they met was a sudden collision of a hug, one that resulted in Rose sweeping Greg off his feet as she spun him around, both of them laughing warmly together. It didn’t take long for this to transform into a kiss, a deep, full one that lasted quite a while, seeing as how neither of them were too keen on breaking it apart.

And in the midst of that kiss, Greg realized that there was no shadow of a doubt: this was all he
had ever wanted. This was what gave the young musician a spark of love and excitement that was so bright and so big that he could scarcely even begin to describe it, one that brimmed warmer than anything else could in his heart and soul. There was nothing in the world that could compare to it, at least as far as he knew. That feeling that filled him every time his and Rose’s lips met, every time they fell into a loving embrace, every time they were so much as even together at all in any way. It was a feeling of elation, of exhilaration, of finally belonging after searching for a place that had always been right here all along.

Present day

“And that’s the whole story,” Greg concluded, putting his guitar aside. “So, what’d you three think?” He looked to the kids with a smirk as he gaged their reactions to the tale he had just told. Dipper was thoroughly enraptured, Mabel was on the verge of joyful tears, and Steven simply wore a huge, knowing grin as he look his father playfully. “And what are you smiling about?”

“You loved her!” Steven teased, still beaming brightly.

“Heh, come here, you!” Greg laughed, pulling his son into a playful noogie that ended with them both in hopeless chuckles.

“Geez, Greg, 23 years later and you’re still just as schmaltzy as you were back then,” Stan remarked with a wry smirk upon watching this display. “Its like nothing’s changed at all.”

“Ugh, it was all so romantic!” Mabel gushed, hugging her pillow tightly. “Mr. Universe, you should adapt all this into a movie! It’d win so many awards for being the most adorable love story of all time!”

“In that case, you might wanna take out all the parts with that Marty guy then,” Dipper noted sardonically. “He sounded like a complete jerk.”

“Like I said earlier, kid, ‘jerk’ is an understatement for that creep,” Stan agreed. “Still, I gotta admit it felt pretty good to toss him out into the mud like that. The look on his face was priceless!”

“Yeah, seriously, Dad, how’d you even end up with him as your manager anyway?” Steven asked with a confused frown.

“Eh, I think that’s a story for another time,” Greg shrugged with another small laugh. “Still, you guys are right, he was awful. But I guess I owe him a lot. He made it easy for me to stay.”

“Made it easy?” Stan asked, raising an eyebrow at his former employee.

“Oh, a-and you did too, Mr. Pines!” the former rock star exclaimed, flustered.

“Well, whoever helped you decide to stay, I’m glad you did,” Steven said to his father as he went in for another hug.

“Yeah,” Greg smiled down at his son, returning his embrace with a smile of deep satisfaction. That satisfaction so deep in fact, that it had been there ever since that magical night that had forever changed his life 23 years ago and had, in the end, ultimately brought him here to this very moment. A moment that he wouldn’t have given up for all the riches and fame in the world. “Me too.”
It wasn’t very often that Greg was able to find the time to organize the van he called home, but when he did, Steven was always the first to volunteer to help him. And this particular evening was no exception to that, as the young Gem hurried down to the carwash as soon as his father had made mention of doing some summer cleaning over the phone. Steven had already been spending most of the day with Connie, Dipper, and Mabel, so he had easily been able to recruit them in coming along and so they all soon found themselves congregated around the former rock star’s van, organizing his extensive collection of vinyl records.

“Here’s all the Orange Magic Orchestra ones,” Steven reported, holding up a set of three records to his father.

“Great,” Greg smiled as he rifled through another box of discs. “Put them in the Transcendental Space Rock pile.”

“Wow, Mr. Universe, your taste in music is so great!” Mabel complimented with an excited smile as she shuffled through several records. “Bam!, Purple Lloyd, Princess, Sadonna… These are some of the best bands ever!”

“Aren’t they all from the 80s?” Dipper asked with a lightly teasing grin.

“Maaaaybe,” Mabel shrugged, defensive of her musical preferences. “Its better than being a diehard fan of a certain Icelandic pop group that hit their peak in the 70s then just sorta fizzled out into obscurity, don’t ya think, bro-bro?”

“…Low blow, Mabel,” Dipper remarked, completely deadpan. “Low blow.”

“At home, we only have classical music and movie soundtracks,” Connie spoke up, looking
through a box of unorganized tracks. “My parents are… pretty conservative when it comes to music. Or movies. Or TV shows. Or just about anything, really. Point is, I’ve never heard of any of these.”

“You’ve never heard of the Philosophy Majors?” Greg asked, holding a disc up for Nietzsche’s Breakdown. “Oh man, then you gotta hear this. It’ll really knock your socks off.” The former rock star took the record out of its sleeve and proceeded to place it on the nearby player. As soon as he put the needle down, a loose, mellow, yet upbeat tune began to play, one that unanimously perked all four kids up as soon as they heard it. Steven and Mabel took the initiative, grabbing Connie and Dipper respectively and pulling them both into sudden, unexpected dances. All of their moves were rather uncalculated and spontaneous, mostly just amounting to both pairs spinning in wide, sloppy, carefree circles along to the music and their own buoyant laughter. Greg stood by, chuckling himself as he blithely played air guitar as the kids continued dancing, their original intentions of cleaning completely forgotten as they all freely and readily enjoyed themselves to their hearts’ content.

As the song continued and started to build even more, it was quickly becoming clear that Steven and Connie were getting caught up in it more than anyone else. Their laughter only silenced itself as their eyes met, both of them still spinning together to the point that the world around them started to blur, literally and figuratively. Steven couldn’t help but smile warmly to Connie, eliciting a small, bright blush from her that she was quick to suppress in place of another helpless but happy laugh. A familiar feeling started to overtake the pair, one that they couldn’t quite describe, but openly welcomed all the same. And that feeling only grew deeper and richer as Steven’s gem started to flush with a pink glow, one that quickly overtook them both and brought them even closer together than they already were.

Dipper and Mabel were the first to stop and stare in awe as the recognizable light of an oncoming fusion swell over Steven and Connie. Greg also took pause, his eyes widening as he watched in complete disbelief as the glow faded and revealed a startlingly new, singular figure in place of his son and his friend.

Stevonnie.

They were still laughing and spinning as they formally appeared, but they were quick to stop upon noticing something felt different, but still familiar all the same. “What the-” the fusion cut themselves off starkly upon taking a single glance down at themselves, instantly realizing what had happened as a result of their lighthearted fun. “W-when did we… How… Wha…” Stevonnie trailed off, rather jolted by both surprise and also by a sudden, almost overwhelming burst of joy over being together again, though they didn’t let it show.

“S-Stevonnie!” Mabel quipped with a rather forced smile, one that Dipper didn’t share has he simply looked to the returned fusion in apt surprise. “Uh, long time no see, huh?”

“Uh… y-yeah…” Stevonnie nodded, rather caught off guard by their own sudden reappearance. “I guess it has bee-” The fusion abruptly stopped on a sharp gasp as they happened to glance over at Greg, a deeply embarrassed blush flooding their cheeks as they met the former rock star’s stunned, awestruck gaze. “M-Mr. Dad! Er—I-I mean, Dad U- Universe! O-or, uh… um, I… We—we didn’t mean to! I-it was an accident! We just… W-we’re not… we-” Stevonnie was unable to finish their frantic ramblings as the same glow that had brought them together suddenly split them apart as a result of their unreconcilable panic.

Steven and Connie tumbled to the ground together as Stevonnie vanished, but even so, their shared alarm remained as they briefly exchanged a wide-eyed glance before looking to the twins for
assistance. While Dipper and Mabel were quick to help them up, there wasn’t much either of them could think to say or do in light of what had just happened as they all glanced over at Greg expectantly. The former rock star was still in absolute awe, his jaw still hanging agape as he fumbled to turn the record off behind him. When he finally was able to collect himself enough to speak, it was in an expression of absolute shock as he looked between Steven and Connie dumbfoundedly.

“Y-you two can fuse?!” he asked, still partially wondering if he had just been seeing things a moment ago.

“Uh… y-yes?” Steven replied, exchanging another uneasy glance with Connie.

“Oh! We’ve each fused with Steven too!” Mabel informed excitedly, motioning to herself and Dipper.

“Mabel!” Dipper scolded, knowing that this didn’t need to get any more awkward than it already was.

“S-so… all three of you kids have… w-wow!” Greg exclaimed with a growing smile of amazement. “That’s incredible! Since when? Wait, how is this even possible?!”

“The Gems think its because I’m half human-” Steven began to explain before Connie anxiously cut him off.

“Please don’t tell my parents, Mr. Universe!” she pleaded desperately. “They don’t know I’ve been doing magic stuff with Steven, Dipper, and Mabel! I can’t tell them! They’re not going to understand, I-”

“Whoa, whoa! It’s ok,” Greg quickly reassured. “I’m not gonna tell anyone if you don’t want me to. And besides, I may be the only other human being on the planet who’s gonna understand this whole fusion thing outside of you three.”

“W-what do you mean?” Connie asked, confused.

“Wait a second… Mr. Universe, have you ever actually fused with one of the Gems before?” Dipper asked incredulously. “I thought humans and Gems couldn’t fuse.”

“They can’t, for the most part,” Greg said, rubbing the back of his neck. “And to be honest, that’s not… exactly what happened…”

“Then what did happen?” Mabel asked, quite curious.

“Well….”

“Story!” Steven interjected with a gasp, stars in his eyes as he rushed over to the back of the open van and beckoning the others to do the same. “Come on, you guys!” Connie, Dipper, and Mabel joined the young Gem in taking a seat, all of them more than eager to hear another riveting tale from the former rock star’s intriguing past. “Ok, Dad, we’re ready.”

“Aw geez, I didn’t think I’d be telling you this so soon…” Greg remarked with an awkward grin as he reached into a nearby box, pulling a video tape out of it. “Probably best to start with this…” The former rock star inserted the tape into his VCR, the screen buzzing with static for a moment or two before opening up on a recording that he had filmed 23 years ago, one that set the scene for the story he was about to tell.
Even though Greg had given up on the touring life, he figured that there was no reason for him to give up on his music altogether. After all, he had a knack for it and he enjoyed it immensely, so he figured he might as well keep at it in some way. And fortunately, he had found that way upon buying a video camera and coming up with the idea to produce his own music videos. What made this idea even better was when he had first brought it to Rose, who eagerly agreed to pitch in to help in any way she could, claiming that it sounded like it would make for a wonderful time.

In fact, for the video the young musician planned on shooting that particular evening, the pink Gem had managed to recruit both Garnet and Amethyst to help them out. She had mentioned to Greg that she had encouraged Pearl to join in as well, but for some reason, the white Gem had rather sullenly declined the offer. Even so, together, Rose, Greg, Garnet, and Amethyst had managed to transform the temple grotto into the backdrop for the video, putting up boards filled with rows of lightbulbs that cast a sweet, sultry pink light upon the makeshift band as they prepared for their preformance.

It took Greg a few minutes to finish setting up the camera, but once he was done, he turned to the others, an excited smile as he had high hopes for this particular video. “Everybody ready?” he asked, not getting much of a response as he ran over to grab his electric guitar. Rose was already poised on the warp pad with a microphone, Garnet set up with her keytar and Amethyst with her sticks hovering over the drums. And as soon as Greg hurried to join them, he took his spot near the pad and started his cue. “One, two, three-”

The young musician cut himself off as he began to strum, his melody progressive but carrying a distinct swing to it as Garnet backed it up with bass and Amethyst provided a steady rhythm. Its intro was short and solid, and as soon as it was over, Greg and Rose began their first real duet.

“What can I do for you?” the couple sang together, exchanging small, warm smiles as their voices harmonized perfectly. “What can I do that no one else can do? What can I do for you?” Greg and Rose leaned in close as they repeated this phrase again, both of them knowing that the somewhat sensual nature of this song had everything to do with their ever-developing relationship. A relationship that had now been going strong for at least several months now, though it was rather hard to keep track based on how time seemed to fly and crawl by all at once whenever they were together. “What can I do for you?”

As the first chorus ended, Rose suddenly deviated from the original song Greg had written in favor of singing her own lyrics, ones that left the young musician speechless as he continued playing along to them. “Human man, you are so much fun,” she began, her impossibly beautiful voice ringing out sweetly as the background lights cast a lovely glow upon her. “I hadn’t planned on finding you quite this entertaining.” Greg practically melted as he looked up at her, her eyes sparkling with flirtatious affection as she graced him by glancing his way, something that always managed to catch him off guard in the best of ways. “I like your band-”

“Woo!” Garnet interrupted in the background with a playful cheer as Rose referred to her and Amethyst.

“And I like your song,” the pink Gem continued, her full lips still grinning playfully as she winked at the camera. “I like the way... human beings play...” Greg’s jaw had dropped by this point, the beat and melody building intensifying as Rose twirled the microphone’s cord in her hand absently. She leaned in close to him again, almost as if she was going to kiss him, something that the young musician would have gladly welcomed, despite the fact that the camera was still rolling. “I like playing along. oh-whoa-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh...” Suddenly, Rose pulled back, her curls spilling over her
shoulders as the song turned back into a duet once more.

“What can I do for you?” the couple resumed, though this time, Greg was a bit off pace with Rose as he found his eyes unable to leave her gorgeous form. There had been many times, over the course of the past several months, that the young musician asked himself how someone as incredibly, as ethereal, as literally magical as her could fall for someone as simple and plain as him. And yet, she had, if her flirtatious words and uncontested kisses were any indication. And on the same note, Greg had so easily fallen for her, and come to love her more than he had really ever loved anyone else, to the point that he didn’t even have to ask himself whether or not he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. Of course, Rose had trusted him with the truth that she didn’t originate from Earth, that she wasn’t even a human at all, but those things hardly mattered to the young musician. He adored her, not for what she was, but for who she was. And as far as he could see, she adored him for the exact same reasons. “What can I do that no one else can do? What can I do for you?”

Yet even still, despite his assurance in this fact, Greg was unable to shake the feeling that something was off about the solo Rose had just sung, though he really had no idea what. He knew well by now just how Rose liked to flirt with him, how she would make playful, coy remarks and send cute, amorous winks his way. And while her verse had carried all those elements to them, there seemed to be another layer to it, one that he felt went beyond him in ways that, for some reason, started to unnerve him just a bit. “What can I do for you?”

Greg’s concerns were soon forgotten as their chorus ended, prompting him to start his rehearsed guitar solo. Rose let out a small, bemused chuckle as the young musician shredded away, neither of them noticing the lone figure who stood afar on the sidelines just off camera. Pearl scowled bitterly as she glanced over her shoulder at the nearby performance, her arms crossed as she leaned against the backdrop. To say that she wasn’t a fan of what she was seeing was an understatement. The white Gem had thought that Rose would have learned her lesson about fraternizing with humans in light of how wrong things had gone so incredibly wrong with the last one she had gotten close to. But unfortunately, it seemed as though that lesson hadn’t stuck with the pink Gem, seeing as how her relationship with the young musician was going strong, a thought that only made Pearl angrier the more she thought about it. Of course, she’d never outright admit to being jealous of someone like Greg, but still, she hardly believed that he was what was best match for Rose.

Which was why, perhaps she needed to show Rose who was the better match for her.

Pearl finally smirked as she moved out from behind the scenes and onto the set, striding up to Rose with purpose and confidence. She paid Greg no mind as he continued his guitar solo, but rather stopped to discreetly whisper something to her ward, an idea that Rose readily smiled in cheerfully agreement with. The pair split off, both of them heading off to separate ends of the grotto as Greg watched in curious confusion, which only grew as they both started to dance. They spun towards each other gracefully, making it quite clear that they had done this many times before as they met in the center of the floor, linking hands before Rose spun Pearl out deftly. The white Gem moved with all the agility of a ballerina, her limbs stretched wide before Rose pulled her back in close, spinning her again before dipping her low. Pearl sent Greg a smug, almost triumphant smirk when Rose wasn’t looking, bewildering the young musician even more as he wondered what all this was about.

He soon got his answer, however, as both Gems were suddenly flooded by a brilliant white light, one that resulted in their forms somehow merging together into someone else entirely. She looked both like Rose and Pearl, and yet nothing like either of them all at the same time. She was tall, standing at almost 20 feet, shapely, and smooth, with a cascading abundance of white and pink hair. Oddly enough, she bore both Rose’s gemstone on her stomach and Pearl’s on her forehead, and she seemed to have two sets of eyes, with one resting calmly right underneath her primary pair. Her attire carried the air of a dancer to it, from her white leotard, her silky blue blouse over it, and
And she was easily able to back this air up as she picked off right where the pair who had formed her left off by shaking down low to get to Greg’s level. Needless to say that the young musician was aptly awestruck by this magical event, his jaw dropped as he looked to this apparent fusion with immense amazement. She said nothing to him as she sent him a wry, playful smile before rising again, spinning smoothly and keeping her gaze on the still quite stunned Greg. Her smirk turned almost vindictive as she ascended up the stairs to the warp pad, striking a dramatic pose as the guitar solo began to reach its stark ending. And then, just as suddenly as she had appeared, she split apart, collapsing onto the pad as light consumed her again until Pearl and Rose emerged from her. The former Gem spun out of the fusion, the microphone Rose had formerly been holding in her hand as she looked over at Greg with a pompous grin that was clearing indicative of the message she had wanted to convey. And, as the song finally ended, Pearl dropped the mic, confident that she had gotten this message across.

“I-I can’t believe I got that on video!” Greg exclaimed after his initial shock had worn off as he looked to Rose for answers. “What on Earth was that?!”

“That was Rainbow Quartz,” the pink Gem smiled brightly. “Pearl thought a fusion might give your video a little something… extra.”

“A fusion?” he asked curiously as Rose pulled away. “What’s that?”

“It’s only the complete and total union of two Gems’ bodies, minds, and essences,” Pearl explained pointedly, stepping close to Rose with a still very smug smile. “Rose and I have done it plenty of times before; it’s almost like a symbol of how close our bond is, isn’t it, Rose?”

“It certainly is,” Rose chuckled, unaware of the white Gem’s rather superior front as she looked back to the young musician. “So, what did you think? Pretty cool, right?” With this, the pink Gem gave Greg a gentle kiss, one that sparked his amazement almost as much as the aforementioned fusion did.

“Y-yeah, it really was,” Greg smiled, not noticing Pearl’s smug grin turn into a disappointed scowl upon watching this exchange. “Do you think I could see it again? It was just so incredible!”

“Hmph, indeed it was,” Pearl remarked, her smirk returning as she latched onto Rose’s arm. “And we’d be happy to demonstrate it for you again.”

“Well, normally I would love to, but unfortunately, I have to go,” Rose remarked, giving the white Gem a small, apologetic look as she stepped back towards Greg. “Are you doing anything tomorrow?” she asked him, placing an affectionate hand against his face.

“You know I’m not,” Greg replied with nonchalant finger guns.

“You’re adorable, Mr. Universe,” Rose laughed as she stepped onto the warp pad to depart. “See you later.”

“Bye…” Greg waved her off, unable to hide his absolutely love-struck grin as she disappeared. He didn’t have long to pine after her, however, before he was broken out of this revere by Amethyst as she suddenly popped up from behind him.

“Hey, Music Man! I hit the drums, so pay up!” she demanded, holding her and out expectantly.

“Here you go,” Greg grinned in amusement, making good on his promise as he handed her a small bag of pre-popped popcorn. The purple Gem eagerly snatched it away from him with her teeth,
shaking her head wildly in an initial attempt to open it before simply tearing it open with her hands. Greg chuckled at this as he began to clean up the grotto from his performance, not paying much mind to Pearl as she lingered by, swinging the microphone casually by its chord. All the same, the white Gem smirked in spite of herself, knowing that now was as good a time as any to put the brazen young musician in his proper place.

“You’re just a phase,” she began, not turning to look at him. “You know that, right?”

Greg let out an exasperated sigh at this, quite used to Pearl’s often petty remarks by now. “No, Pearl, I actually don’t know that.”

“Oh, of course, you don’t,” Pearl laughed as she finally faced him. “You don’t know anything about Rose.”

“I know she’s super into me!” Greg contested confidently.

The white Gem rolled her eyes, her tone turning condescending as she decided to make her stance quite clear. “Listen, Mr. Universe,” she said dryly, not phased by his challenging glare. “Rose may find you charming right now, but it’ll pass. I’ve seen it all before; you’re hardly the first one to come around here vying for her attention or her affections. The only reason she’s so ‘into you’ is because you’re human. You’re a novelty, at best. And in the end, I’ll always outlast you when it comes to Rose. I outlasted the last human, and the one before that, and the one before that. I’m sorry to break it to you, but that’s just how this works.”

“…What makes you so sure?” Greg asked, not wanting to believe a majority of what the white Gem had just so astutely explained. Even still, a part of him couldn’t help but feel as though they might be true. After all, Pearl had been with Rose for a very, very long time; she would know far better than anyone else really, as much as the young musician didn’t like to admit it.

“Well, that’s quite simple!” Pearl said with a broad smile, not noticing Amethyst sliding in behind her, curiously listening in on this contentious conversation. “Humans can’t fuse! Like I said, fusion is the ultimate connection between Gems,” The white Gem’s goading manner became even more apparent as she gently lassoed the young musician with the microphone chord. “And you—are not—a Gem!” She cheerfully flipped Greg’s hair, obviously enjoying the bitter rise she was getting out of him.

“W-well,” the young musician began, flustered as he slipped out of the cable. “Has any human ever tried fusing with a Gem before?”

Pearl’s confident manner suddenly jolted at this, largely because she was so caught off guard by such a bizarre question. “Uh…. No? I don’t think so.”

“Well then, I will try!” Greg proclaimed, proceeding to drop the mic much like Pearl had after Rainbow Quartz had separated.

“Ohhhhhhh!” Amethyst shouted in the background, impressed by the young musician’s bold resolve. A sentiment that Pearl clearly didn’t share.

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“W-well, go ahead and try then!” Pearl retorted with a haughty glare. “Just don’t be too disappointed when your little “attempt” falls through and Rose realizes maybe you aren’t as perfect for her as you think you are.”

And with that, the white Gem stormed off, her hands clenched in tight fists at her sides in a clear sign of her frustration with the young musician’s persistence. As soon as she was out of earshot,
however, Greg’s former determination fizzled out as he quickly rushed to grab his fallen microphone. “Aw, geez, what am I doing? These things are expensive.”

Try as he might, Greg was largely unable to get what Pearl had taunted him about out of his head the next day. In fact, her biting words stuck with him even as he went to work at the Murder Hut for his shift in the morning, to the point that he seemed to be on autopilot as he preformed his usual tasks and duties. As caught up in his thoughts on his resolve to fuse with Rose as he was, around lunchtime he decided that the only thing he could do for now was prepare himself for such an endeavor. And as far as he knew, the best way to do that was by practicing the very thing that seemed to initiate a fusion: dancing.

So Greg did just that, practicing his rather limited move set even while on the clock at the Murder Hut. As he restocked the shelves, he worked on pulling off precise spins. While ringing customers out, he would preform pirouettes (much to the confusion of the tourists he was waiting on). And as he swept the floors, he used the broom as a stand-in for Rose, mimicking Pearl’s fancy movements as best as he could remember them, all in the hopes that he’d be able to prove her wrong and pull this off after all.

For the most part, Greg was able to dance unfettered, not noticing most of the odd, bewildered glances customers sent his way as he did. It only ended up becoming a problem, however, as a elderly woman asked him to grab a bobblehead for her from a high shelf. The young musician essentially waltzed over to do so, refusing to stop practicing for even a moment, lest he lose his edge. Remembering how Rainbow Quartz had remained perfectly pointed on her tip-toes during her dance, Greg did the same thing as he climbed the step ladder to reach the shelf. Of course, he wasn’t able to hold his balance very well like this, especially given the fact that he was wearing flip-flops, of all things, which was why, after a few seconds of unsteady wobbling, the young musician ended up losing his footing altogether. Instead of falling backwards, he forced himself to fall forward, the much less painful alternative, though it did result in him collapsing against the rows of fully-stocked shelves lining the wall. Immediately, knick-knacks and souvenirs began falling off the shelves, hitting the floor and many of them breaking upon impact. The customer fearfully fled the moment the merchandise avalanche began, and Greg still clung to the now rather empty shelves for support, his eyes wide as he glanced down at the disaster he had unintentionally caused.

“Oh boy…” the young musician gulped, pulling himself back upright as he slowly climbed down the stepladder. He didn’t get much of a chance to start cleaning things up, however, before Stan rushed into the gift shop from the museum, having apparently heard the clatter of the falling souvenirs.

“Greg!” the conman exclaimed in apt alarm over the mess on the ground before him. “What the heck happened in here?! Did some knucklehead come in here and try to rob us again? Because if so, then I’ll just have to break out my brass knuckles or a wooden stool and go bash that numbskull’s skull in!”

“Oh, uh, don’t worry, Mr. Pines, nobody tried to rob the shop,” Greg assured somewhat guiltily. “Actually… this was kinda my fault…”

“Your fault?” Stan repeated incredulously. “Look, Greg, I know I don’t pay you that much to work here, but did ya really have to take it out on me by wrecking an entire shelf of merchandise?”

“I-it was an accident,” Greg clarified. “You see, I was just practicing dancing and-“
“Wait, dancing?” the conman raised an eyebrow. “Since when have you ever danced? I thought you were more into making music than cutting a rug to it.”

“Well, I usually don’t do much dancing, which is kinda the problem…” the young musician began. “Last night I was shooting a music video with Rose and the Gems, but then Pearl came in and danced with Rose and they suddenly, I dunno, started glowing and fused together into a giant magical woman? At first I thought it was really cool until Pearl told me that I’d never be as close to Rose as I want to be because I can’t fuse with her and so I’m trying to teach myself how to dance like Pearl did so that I can do it and ugh… I’m really having a rough time at it, if you couldn’t already tell…”

Stan was silent for a moment or two, looking to his employee with relative confusion over everything he had just been told as he tried to make sense of it all. “So let me see if I’ve got this right,” he began, crossing his arms. “You wanna… ‘fuse’ with Rose? Is that some kind of innuendo for something?”

“Wha—uh… n-no, it’s not!” Greg shook his head, blushing in embarrassment a bit. “They literally turned into the same person. It’s some kind of Gem thing, I think. Which is why Pearl said I wouldn’t be able to do it, b-but no human’s ever tried before so I’m gonna prove her wrong and fuse with Rose! If I can ever figure this whole dancing thing out…”

“Mh hm…” Stan duly noted, glancing down at the mess of broken knick-knacks at his feet. “You know, Greg, I’ve never really been… ‘supportive’ of that little fling you’ve got going on with Rose, for, uh, for obvious reasons.”

“You complain about me dating her almost every day,” Greg pointed out with a frown. “I think I’ve kinda got a right to do at least that much, don’t ya think, kid?”

“…Uh… yeah, I guess, but she—”

“Anyway,” Stan was quick to change the subject. “While I may not support that, if there’s one thing I do support, it’s putting that bird-beaked prude Pearl in her place. So whatever help you need in pulling this whole ‘fusion’ thing off, count me in.”

“Wait, r-really?” Greg asked, caught off guard by his boss’s offer.

“Sure, why not?” Stan shrugged casually. “If nothing else, at least it’ll be funny to see the look on ol’ egghead’s face when you end up showing her up. I’ve been needing a good laugh like that for a while now.”

“Wow! Thanks so much, Mr. Pines!” the young musician exclaimed happily, rushing to embrace his boss.

“Eh eh eh,” the conman quickly stopped him before he could hug him. “How many times do I have to tell you, Greg?”

“Heh, right, no hugging,” Greg chuckled good-naturedly. “Still, this is great! I already have an idea in mind about how I wanna set all this up tonight, and with your help, getting everything ready will be a piece of cake!”

“Yeah, yeah, sure it will,” Stan remarked with a small smirk as he rolled his eyes at his employee’s enthusiasm. “Just as long as I get a front row seat to Pearl’s massive hissy fit when you prove her wrong about this fusion junk, which you better, Greg. I’m counting on you.”
“Yeah…” the young musician’s smile faded into worry a bit at this as he realized just how much this evening might change everything between him and Rose. “I’m counting on me too…”

After closing the gift shop down for the night, Greg and Stan got to work on setting up a makeshift dance floor in a clearing not too far away from the hut. It took awhile, but eventually they managed to construct the floor out of the same backdrop the young musician had used in his music video the previous night. And thanks to a lengthy extension chord running back to the hut, it would be able to provide plentiful light in addition to the myriad of fireflies already lazily hovering about the lovely woods. All in all, it was a rather romantic setup, but of course, it would only be able to take Greg so far in his fusion attempt. He still needed to get the dancing part down pat, which was why, as soon as Stan had left to make sure everything was hooked up correctly, the young musician went right back to his former practicing. This time, he had his TV and VHS of the music video on hand, so he was able to watch Rose and Pearl’s fusion dance and try and mimic it accordingly. To mixed results at best.

As Rose spun Pearl out on the tape, Greg attempted the same thing, only to end up losing his balance and falling to the ground as he tried dramatically stretching out like the white Gem had. “Oh geez,” the young musician remarked, breathlessly flopping onto his back. “How’d she get her leg to do that? Ugh… how am I ever gonna do this…?”

“Hey!” Greg was suddenly startled as Amethyst appeared, standing over him curiously as Garnet joined her. “Are you dead?”

“Wha—oh, no, I’m alive,” the young musician assured, sitting up.

“Whoa, cool!” the small purple Gem exclaimed upon taking a glance over at the nearby TV. “It’s us from before! What is this thing, some kinda magic past box or something?”

“Uh… No?” Greg frowned, confused. “I was just watching the video from last night while trying to get my head around this fusion dance thing.”

“Ha! A fusion dance ain’t about your head!” Amethyst chuckled teasingly. “It’s about mashin’ it up! Right, Garnet?”

“That it is,” Garnet replied simply.

“Wait, you guys are Gems,” Greg looked to the pair almost pleadingly. “You gotta help me out here. I need to be able to fuse with Rose if things are ever gonna work out between us! So, uh… any advice?”

“First, you need a gem at the core of your being,” Garnet began to explain. “Then you need a body that can turn into light. Then you need a partner that you can trust with that light.”

“M-metaphorically?” the young musician asked hopefully.

“Literally.”

“Shh! Come on!” Amethyst urged with a wry smirk. “I still wanna see him try it! It’ll be funny!”

“So, its true…” Greg sighed in defeat, running a hand through his hair. “I really can’t do it. I’m kidding myself with this! I’m never gonna be a Gem and I’ll never be able to fuse with Rose and she’ll end up moving onto someone else, just like Pearl said!”
Garnet took pause upon hearing this, her expression still as stoic as ever as she picked up a stray stick on the ground nearby. “Amethyst, give us some privacy!” With a mighty throw, she tossed the stick afar off into the woods, prompting the purple Gem to eagerly hurry after it to fetch it. With Amethyst distracted, Garnet knelt down to Greg’s level, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder as she addressed him encouragingly. “Let me tell you something, Mr. Universe. I think you can do it, but it won’t work if you dance like Pearl. You have to dance like you. You have to fuse your own way. Get open, get honest, invent yourselves together. That’s fusion.” She then proceeded to lower her shades a bit, revealing her trio of eyes, one of which winked to the young musician knowingly.

“Eye!... think I get it…” Greg said, rather startled, though he couldn’t deny that there was some much-needed truths in Garnet’s words.

The tall Gem simply smiled widely upon hearing this, putting her shades back on before she bid him farewell to allow him to continue preparing for Rose’s arrival. Greg finally gave up on his dancing practice, realizing that perhaps he didn’t need it as much as he just needed to heed Garnet’s advice. Perhaps a bunch of fancy twirls and spins wouldn’t bring him and Rose together, but maybe him being himself would. Still, he couldn’t help but be anxious as he waited for her to arrive. After all, them being able to fuse or not could very well be the thing that would make or break their budding relationship. A relationship that he desperately didn’t want to lose, given that it filled him with so much love and joy that it was almost overwhelming at times. The thought of disappointing Rose, of not being enough for her, of being just a mere phase to her practically drove Greg crazy with worry and dread. He wanted to prove, not just to Pearl and not just to Rose, but to himself that he was worth the pink Gem’s time and attention, that he was something more than a simple novelty or an aimless distraction, that he wouldn’t just fade away into the background when everything was said and done. And as far as he knew, the only way he could ever prove any of that was by connecting with Rose in every level possible through the one method he was determined to succeed in: fusion.

And so the young musician steadied himself in this resolve as he made his last few preparations. He made sure to look his best for the occasion by putting on his best suit jacket and smoothing out his hair. And, as soon as he heard the distant sound of the warp pad activating up at the temple, he knew the time had come. Placing all of his former reservations aside, Greg put the needle down on his record player, a gentle, sweeping, romantic tune playing as he took in a deep, steadying breath. He didn’t turn around upon hearing Rose’s footsteps behind him, his eyes closed in calm contemplation as she let out a surprised chuckle.

“What’s all this?” she asked, bemused by her partner’s unknown motives for this unplanned date. Still, Greg said nothing, wanting his actions to speak more than his words ever could as he turned, holding his hands out to her in offering. Rose smirked as she took them, allowing Greg to take the lead onto the dance floor as they spun together a few times. They stopped, however, as the young musician reached the switch he had set up beforehand, tapping it lightly with his foot to turn the floor lights on. Rose gasped in amazement at this unexpected shift, her eyes lighting up beautifully as she smiled to Greg with apt excitement. Her elated reaction gave the young musician a much-needed boost of confidence as their dance continued, their movements slow, sweeping, and natural as they seemed to glide across the glowing ground. For a few brief, beautiful moments, it seemed like nothing was truly real around them as they moved together in perfect harmony, spinning around in what seemed like a perfect dream frozen in time. As if guided by instinct alone, Greg continued to lead, his thoughts drifting away from fusion as they instead wandered towards the absolutely gorgeous Gem he was dancing with, who he was so incredibly lucky to be with and who he wanted to hold onto for as long as he was able. Gradually, he guided them over to the stereo boxes he had stacked together, climbing them like a staircase so he could reach Rose’s height. And then, slowly, gently, he dipped her low before lightly pressing his lips against hers. Their kiss
quickly deepened, growing in passion and purpose as it lingered for what seemed like blissful ages. Greg was unable to deny that he felt something stirring within him as he kissed Rose, something that he had felt before but at the same time was entirely new. He was confident, certain even, that this was it. That they were coming together, that they were uniting, that they were fusing.

And yet… they didn’t.

Greg pulled away as slowly as he had pushed in, opening his eyes to find the warm glow of the surrounding forest greeting him once more. He felt rather numb, in a way as he glanced down at Rose, still positioned below him as she stared up at him with stars of wonder in her eyes at the incredible moment they had just shared. Yet clearly, it hadn’t been incredibly enough as it had failed to do what the young musician had wanted it to. For here they both were, still apart, still singular, still so drastically different.

“W-we… we didn’t fuse…” Greg practically whispered, dejection filling his tone. Dejection that Rose didn’t seem to even pick up on as she instead, of all thing, let out a snorting laugh of disbelief.

“What?!” she exclaimed, laughing hysterically as she rose to stand properly once more. “You can’t fuse! You’re a human!”

“I know!” Greg groaned, distressed. “That’s the problem! I’m just a human!”

“That’s not a problem!” Rose remarked, practically howling with laughter by this point. “I love humans! You’re all so funny!”

Greg flinched upon hearing this, finally realizing exactly what was wrong here. Something that he had never really been aware of until this very moment, though he was amazed that it had taken him this long to realize it. “L-look, these past few months have been great–”

“Oh yes…” Rose purred almost seductively, still grinning to the young musician coyly before chuckling once more.

“But I’m getting a little worried about the future–”

“Oh! Just ask Garnet!”

“No, that’s not what I–” Greg cut himself off this time, realizing that their communication was quickly falling apart. “I… I’m starting to wonder if you… you know… respect me…?”

Rose broke out into another round of jovial laughter at this, almost as if to confirm the young musician’s worrisome suspicions. “Oh, you’re hilarious, Mr. Universe!”

“Rose, please!” Greg pleaded as the pink Gem simply continued chortling in endless amusement, as if his genuine concerns were the funniest thing in the world to her. “Can you just… I’m starting to wonder if you… you know… respect me…?”

Rose cut him off once more, by this time, something that was quickly starting to frustrate him to the point that he wasn’t really able to contain it any longer. “Talk to me for one second like a real person?!”

The pink Gem finally stilled at this, her laughter fading off into abrupt silence as she looked to him, her eyes wide with surprise. Clearly, he had caught her off guard, something that he hadn’t anticipated as she spoke, her voice oddly shaken and uncertain. “I’m… not… a real person… I thought… Haven’t we… i-is… is this not how it works…?”

Now it was Greg’s turn to freeze up, his mind reeling as he realized that Rose was exactly right. She wasn’t a real person, she was a Gem. Which meant that their relationship was something far
different than any he had ever been in by its mere nature alone. A thought that excited him and terrified him all at once. “Oh boy… t-this is so weird… You really are an alien!” At this, the young musician broke down into a laugh of his own, one that he was powerless to contain as countless emotions overwhelmed him at once.

“W-why are you laughing?” Rose asked, unnerved. Her confusion turned into worry, however, as Greg suddenly broke down into tears amidst his almost broken chuckles. “Why are you crying?”

“H-how are we ever gonna make this work?” Greg asked with an incredulous, tearful smile.

“Fusion?”

“No, us! We’re really different!”

Rose glanced down at this, her brow furrowing as she let out a small, almost reminiscent sigh. “Yes… we are… I guess had started to forget that…”

The young musician shifted a bit uncomfortably, a new train of thought occurring to him upon hearing this. “W-was it easy to forget that when… when he was still around?”

The pink Gem met his curious gaze at this, pain filling her expression as she knew exactly who he was talking about. “Y-yes… it was…”

“Did… did you respect him?”

“I… G-Greg, I don’t…” she hesitated, holding her hands close to her as she looked over in the direction of the Murder Hut. “I… did… At least at first, until… u-until everything went wrong…”

“O-oh…” Greg mused in a whisper, realization dawning upon him. “I-I think I get it now…” And indeed he did; he didn’t know much about what had happened between Rose and the last human she had gotten close to, but from what he had heard from both the pink Gem as well as Stan, it had ended in disaster and heartbreak on all sides. Really, it only made sense for Rose to want to keep humans at a safe, comfortable arm’s length after something like that, to lower them from her level to the point that they easy to cut loose if things went too far or took a sour turn. It was a mindset that the young musician understood, even sympathized with, but one that he desperately wanted to break free from, lest she end up cutting him loose when things took the shift from playful to permanent. Which seemed to be what was happening at that very moment.

“So… what do we do now?” Rose asked, her tone still rather fragile, something Greg wasn’t really used to with her.

Greg paused, deciding to quickly weigh his options here. Fusion hadn’t worked, and at the rate they were going, it likely never would. But perhaps fusion wouldn’t have really worked at all even if it was possible. So instead, they’d just have to try something different. “Let’s just… talk…” the young musician conceded solemnly, holding his arms open to the pink Gem. Rose accepted his offer, the two of them embracing gently and holding that position as they conversed in a series of soft, successive whispers.

“I barely know you,” Greg began, staring off into the forest as he leaned his head against Rose’s shoulder.

“That’s a good thing,” the pink Gem assured, still somewhat unsteady.

“We really rushed into this.”
“Everything on Earth seems fast to me…”

“Do you… miss your home planet?”

“No, never.”

“How’d you end up with, uh, Harpo, Groucho, and Chico?”

“Huh?” Rose paused, confused at this before she glanced over to the treeline in the distance, noticing the other Gems spying on them. Amethyst sat out in plain view while Pearl and Garnet were both tucked away behind a pair of trees, but even still, they were hardly being discreet. “Oh, them,” the pink Gem grinned. “Those are three long stories.”

Upon realizing that Rose had spotted them, Pearl quickly tucked back behind the tree she had peeked out from, whispering to Garnet sharply. “What are they doing?! They're just standing there… talking!”

“Shh,” Garnet quieted her, casually leaning against the tree as she continued listening in on the conversation.

“A-are you… afraid?” Greg asked, his thoughts turning back to his earlier conclusion about Rose keeping herself emotionally distant.

“Of what?” the pink Gem frowned, confused.

“Of something like… what happened a few years back happening again?” he asked, deciding to be vague, seeing as how he didn’t have all the details about that situation anyway.

“N-n—maybe…” Rose sighed remorsefully. “I just… don’t want anyone else to get hurt because of my mistakes… And I’ve made so many mistakes that it’s getting almost impossible to keep them all in check…”

“Do you miss him?” Greg asked, wanting to know exactly what the status was of the man who had come before him.

“All the time…”

“Did you… love him?”

“…I… y-yes? No?” Rose hesitated uncomfortably. “I don’t know… We were very close, I know that, but… things between us weren’t like this. They were… complicated…”

“Complicated…” Greg mused softly, unsure of what to make of this. “Have you loved other humans before?”

“Have you?” she echoed his question curiously.

“Yes,” the young musician said, even though he wanted to add: but not like how I love you...

“Yes…” Rose repeated, her expression turning thoughtful.

“Have you ever been… in love with a human?” Greg asked, not sure if the pink Gem knew exactly what he was asking.

“How would I know?”
“It’s torture,” Greg smiled jokingly, though it was quick to fade as he suddenly felt Rose pull away from him. Her expression was incredibly serious as she looked to him, her eyes wide as she seemed to search him for answers to a question she hadn’t even asked yet.

“Greg,” she spoke, her voice so intensely quiet he could barely even hear it.

“R-Rose?” he shuddered, the way she said her name so fervently rattling him to his very core.

“Is this torture?” she asked, the lights from below casting her eyes in both light and shadow.

“The worst…” he answered honestly, knowing that he relished every bit of this torture for all it was worth.

“I-I’m so sorry…” she whispered tightly, tears starting to well up in her eyes. “I… I never wanted to hurt you… I just… I didn’t…”

“Huh?” Greg blinked in confusion as she trailed off into almost tearful silence. “N-No! Don’t be sorry! You did nothing wrong!”

“W-what?” Rose asked, alarmed and bewildered. “B-but I… You just said… Oh, I’m so confused!”

Greg couldn’t help but laugh at this, grabbing Rose’s hand cheerfully. “Me too!”

“W-well, that’s good!” Rose chuckled herself, abandoning her tears for joy as they both reached a new understanding with each other. “If nothing else, then we’ve got one thing in common!”

“Heh, yeah, I guess we do,” Greg smirked, realizing that despite all of the pitfalls they had just gone through to get here, they had both come to a better place, a stronger place, a more sincere place, than they had started out at.

By that point, neither of them were really able to contain their elation over their newly solidified connection and so, swept Greg off his feet, twirling him broadly and widely as their laughter filled the dance floor all the while. After all, they really had nothing to fear anymore, not the past, not the future, not even the present. As different as they were, they still had each other, and that was enough.

As caught up in their blissful dance as they were, the couple failed to notice the distant spectators on both sides of the woods watching their sudden celebration. Stan couldn’t help but smirk as he leaned against the side of a tree near the Murder Hut, his arms crossed as he watched Rose and Greg spin about aimlessly but freely. While he still wasn’t really a fan of their relationship and while he was rather disappointed that he didn’t get to see Pearl’s probably outrage over their romance, the conman couldn’t very well deny one thing: he didn’t have to pretend to be happy for his young employee. “What do you know, kid?” he asked Greg in satisfaction, even if he knew the young musician wouldn’t hear him and he’d never admit his genuine pride to his face. “Looks like ya did it after all…”

At the same time, the Gems continued observing their leader and her newest lover, all of them quite surprised at the sudden shift in mood from solemn to sanguine. “Why are they still dancing?!?” Pearl asked hotly, glaring at the couple from behind her tree. “I-It didn’t work!”

“Yes, it did,” Garnet interjected calmly.

“W-what?” the white Gem turned to her, confused.
“It worked,” Garnet assured, nodding back out to the unanimously happy pair.

“I think this one’s my favorite,” Amethyst remarked with a smile as she sat out in the open without a care.

Pearl ducked down further behind the tree at this, her tone turning sad and dejected as she watched Rose drift away from her yet again. Something that had happened so many times before, but one that she’d never, ever get used to. “I think he’s her favorite too…”

Greg and Rose continued dancing long into the night, their laughter eventually fading out but their love never dimming. It was clear to them both that what they had was special, perhaps the most special thing that either of them had ever experienced. Their relationship was odd, yes, but that’s what seemed to make it work. It was something deep, something meaningful, something worth holding onto, something they were willing and ready to hold onto. Because now, not only were they on the same page, they were on the same path, a path that would lead them in love and life. What lay at the end of that path, neither of them knew, but one thing was certain:

Wherever it took them, they would follow it together.

Present day

As Greg finished his tale, all four of the kids were rather stunned into silence by everything they’d just heard. Given the rather intimate nature of the story, they were all unanimously blushing, though still, they understood the point of it well enough.

“Whoa…” Steven was the first to speak up, stars in his eyes as he reflected on the undoubtable connection between his parents.

“And I thought the story of how you and Rose met was romantic!” Mabel quipped as her initial awe passed. “That was so adorable! I swear, you guys were like the perfect couple!”

“Well, I don’t know about that…” Greg chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. “But once we figured everything out, things were pretty great between us.”

“There’s one thing I still don’t get though,” Dipper frowned in confusion. “Who was that other guy Rose was so close to before you came long?”

The former rock star flinched at this, his eyes widening briefly before he forced himself to play his sudden nervousness at such a question off. “Uh, w-well… t-that’s another long story…. A really long story…” he glanced aside apprehensively for a moment, realizing that he knew much more of said story now than he had 23 years ago. “We should probably save it for some other time…”

The kids shared a somewhat disappointed frown at this, but much to Greg’s good fortune, they accepted this answer all the same. “So you and Rose were never able to fuse?” Connie asked, thankfully changing the subject.

“Oh, no,” Greg calmed down, smiling nostalgically. “But that wasn’t as important as talking to each other. Look… humans and Gems… it’s still some pretty new territory. It might be weird or hard sometimes, but you kids are gonna have to work it out together. And Connie? Dipper? Mabel? If any of you three ever need to talk to another human being about this, you can always talk to me.”

The aforementioned trio nodded warmly in regards to this offer, all three of them thankful for the
support the former rock star was willing to provide them with when it came to their connection to Steven. Greg further showed his solidarity in this by holding up his hand, showing that he truly meant it. “Human beings?”

“Human beings,” the kids responded solidly, all three of them in turn high fiving the former rock star in favor of this unanimity.

At the same time, Steven couldn’t help but watch, still rather lost in thought after the story he had just heard. Still, he felt rather left out of the loop as he realized this was something he couldn’t really be a part of, at least not completely. He was a human, yes, but he was also a Gem. For the first time, he realized that he was indeed different from his friends, just as his parents had been so different from one another. And yet, they had made things work in the end, so why couldn’t the kids? Still, the thought unnerved the young Gem, to the point that it began to make him wonder. Would he ever really find his true place among either humans or Gems? Or would he always be caught in some uneven, uncertain ground between the two? To those questions, Steven had no answers, at least not yet. Really, he had no idea if he’d ever get answers to them at all. Which was why his voice was soft, almost inaudible really, as he slowly reached to clutch the gemstone on his navel, the thing that set him apart from his friends in ways he had never really considered before now. Ways that unsettled him, that worried him, that maybe even frightened him a bit as he solemnly, almost sadly, repeated their mantra to himself, even if it didn’t seem to hold much meaning to him at all anymore. “Human beings…”
Chapter 49: Northwest Mansion Nightmare

Chapter Summary

In which there's a ghost, Gem mutants, and copious amounts of MiniJen making her massive bias for her two biggest OTPs in this story apparent to you all.

Chapter Notes

Hahahahah yesssss I've been looking forward to this one for a VERY long time, mostly because its the one to launch one of my favorite almost canon but not quite ships (see if you can guess which one that is hahahah) plus after this one we have our HUGE arc ender, which will be quite intense, but for now, enjoy this, the longest chapter of UF thus far! (keyword is Northwest)

Northwest Manor was bustling with activity as its various staff and servants bustled about, preparing for the immaculate celebration held within its lavish gates. The aptly named Northwest Fest was by and large a legendary party, one that carried a very high reputation that extended far beyond the boarders of Gravity Falls alone. And like all the parties prior to it, this year’s formal event was rumored to be every bit as posh and elegant, if not then some, and those were exactly the kind of rumors that both Preston and Priscilla Northwest wanted circulating as they oversaw the preparations for the event.

“Preston, I must say, the guest list for this year’s party has so much diversity!” Priscilla remarked to her husband as she overlooked said list.

“Yes, a nice mix of millionaires and billionaires,” Preston nodded proudly as one of his many servants handed him the day’s newspaper. His calm manner abruptly shifted, however, upon noticing another servant incorrectly setting the nearby table nearby with fine china and pure silverware, which the billionaire was quick to correct with an admonishing swat with his newspaper. “Put the oyster fork at an angle! We’re not animals, man!”

“E-excuse me, Mr. Northwest?” another servant anxiously interjected, two other staff members hauling in a large covered glass case behind him. “T-those rare, uncut gemstones you ordered have arrived.”

“Ah, yes, good,” Preston said rather dismissively. “Let me see them.”

“Oh, uh, w-well, sir…” the servant continued, wringing his hands nervously as the other staff members removed the cover from the case. “They… they’re not exactly what you ordered…”
“I’ll say they’re not!” the billionaire exclaimed hotly upon taking a look at the collection of precious stones before him. Instead of the smooth, radiant gems he had been expecting, these stones were clustered and clumped together with no real order or organization at all, giving each set a haphazard, almost even ugly appearance. “What on earth all these hideous things?! I specifically ordered the finest raw gemstones available, not these grotesque chunks of rock!”

“Ugh, just look at them!” Priscilla interjected, quite mortified herself. “What will our guests think if they see those gaudy excuses for gemstones?!”

“They won’t be thinking anything because they’re not going to see them,” Preston staunchly concluded as he addressed the servant. “Take those back to the jeweler immediately and have them send us some real stones to put on display.”

“W-well, normally I would, sir, b-but… these were the last gems the jeweler had…” the servant gulped fretfully. “T-they said they found them buried not too far away from a canyon a few hours out from town and that they’re actually quite rare, but-”

“But nothing!” the billionaire huffed, quite displeased. “I suppose that since its far too short notice to get replacements, we’ll just have to put last year’s gemstones out on display like we’re a bunch of simple peasants! And as for those… unsightly hunks of rock… just put the entire case in some hallway that no one’s likely to wander down during the party. We’ll figure out what to do with those disappointments later.”

“Speaking of which, where the devil is-” Priscilla cut herself off upon spotting her daughter finally making a rather tardy appearance. All the same, Pacifica smiled brightly as she strode into the room, already clad in the sophisticated light green ball gown she planned on wearing to the party the following evening. Her mother, however, was far from pleased. “Pacifica! What did I tell you about that dress?! The theme for the party is sea foam green, not lake foam green! Go change!”

“But… I kind of like it…” the heiress frowned, having already anticipated this scolding. Still, she had hoped her mother wouldn’t have noticed when she had put the dress on, but clearly, Priscilla’s sharp eye for fashion beat her own tastes in this case.

“Mind your mother, Pacifica,” Preston gave his daughter a critical glance. Still, given the fact that this was a rather minor detail, Pacifica hoped that she could somehow win out in this debate, even if she knew her chances were rather slim.

“But I-” Her soft protests were succinctly cut off by the sharp, high ring of a small bell, courtesy of her father. A bell that she was all too familiar with and knew well to obey. “Y-yes, father…” she muttered meekly, glancing down in embarrassment for even trying.

However, before Pacifica could even head out to follow her parent’s rigid orders, the entire dining room began to shake as if it was being rattled by a major earthquake. And yet, this was no natural occurrence as the dining ware on the table began to clatter violently, a bizarre, undeterminable gale striking up solely inside of the room as everyone present gasped in terror over the alarming sight surrounding them.

“Oh no!” Preston exclaimed fearfully, well aware of exactly what was going on. “It’s happening.” The billionaire didn’t have much more of a chance to react to this newfound catastrophe before the opulent objects filling the room, plates, forks, knives, spoons, trays, chairs, and more, all suddenly lifted up into the air, flying around at random as they seemed to launch themselves on their own accord. Many of the servants fled altogether as this dangerous cascade of inanimate items swirled around the room, but even so, Preston did his best to fend the attacking objects off, though to little avail. “You are my possessions! Obey me!” he ordered, only for several
plates to go zooming towards him in particular. The billionaire let out a frightened cry as he joined his wife and daughter in hiding under the table in the hopes that it would shield them from this chaotic onslaught.

“This is a disaster!” Priscilla cried, aptly panicked as the silverware continued flying just overhead. “The party’s in just 24 hours! What are we going to do?!”

“Surely there’s someone who can handle this sort of nonsense!” Preston lamented, only for his cry to receive a timely answer as a copy of the newspaper flopped down onto the ground right in front of him. Its headlining article featured a giant bat attacking Sherriff Blubbs and Deputy Durland atop the town’s bell tower. Though what stood out most was the young boy, roughly about Pacifica’s age, whom he had seen around town a handful of times this summer, fearlessly fending the bat off while the officers behind him cowered in fear. Clearly, from his brazen, undaunted expression, he seemed to be right at home warding away such supernatural danger, which was something that gave Preston a much-needed idea for how to handle the current plight the upcoming party was facing. “And I think I know just the person…”

Things had been rather uneventful around the Mystery Shack as of late, a welcome change of pace, particularly for Dipper as he used this relatively peaceful rainy morning as a rare chance to relax. He had already set up shop in the den, surrounded by a plentiful abundance of snacks and sodas to keep him company as he sat comfily in front of the TV.

“You asked for it, you got it!” the TV blared excitedly. “An entire 48-hour marathon of Ghost Harassers, on the Used To Be About History Channel!”

“Be strong, bladder. We’re not gonna move until sunset,” Dipper remarked, more than content to do just that. Until, of course, his plans quickly fell through.

“We interrupt this program to bring you breaking news!” the local town news commandeered the broadcast, deviating away from the ghost hunting marathon, much to Dipper’s immediate disappointment.

“Aw, what?” he frowned crossly, only for Mabel to suddenly run in, Candy and Grenda trailing blithely behind her.

“It’s starting!” she quipped, hopping onto the chair beside her brother and forcing him to move aside.

“Turn it up!” Candy exclaimed, squeezing onto the other side of the chair as her and Mabel essentially sandwiched the already rather perturbed Dipper between them.

“Make room for Grenda!” Grenda shouted boisterously, leaping on top of them all and recklessly knocking over a lamp in the process. The girls were just in time to see the beginning of the news story, featuring Toby Determined reporting on the scene outside of Northwest Manor, standing amongst an already very large, very eager crowd of townsfolk. “Well, tonight’s the night, but I’ve been out here for days!” the reporter exclaimed, his clothes tattered and muddy from doing so. “The Northwest family’s annual high-society-shindig-ball-soiree is here! And even though common folk aren’t let in, that doesn’t stop us from camping out right outside the gates for a peek at the fanciness!”

“Ooooooh!” all three of the girls mused, stars of amazement in their eyes as they stared at the
screen, enthralled. Dipper, on the other hand, couldn’t have been any less interested in this rather soft, largely unimportant news.

“Ok, can someone please explain to me why people actually care about this?” he asked dryly, rolling his eyes at the brief snippets of poor-quality clips of past Northwest parties on screen.

“Northwest Fest is pretty much the best party of all time!” Grenda informed in her usual loud way. “Rich food, richer boys!”

“They say each gift basket has a live quail inside!” Mabel added just as enthusiastically.

“Give me your life, Pacifica…” Candy sighed wistfully as a clip of the heiress played during the newscast.

“You guys have got to be kidding,” Dipper deadpanned. “In case you’ve already forgotten, Pacifica Northwest has been a complete jerk to us all summer. She’s almost as bad as Gideon, minus the whole trying to kill us thing.”

“Oh, come on, bro-bro, you’re overexaggerating,” Mabel huffed. “Pacifica’s nowhere near as crazy or evil as Gideon is.”

“Maybe not, but she’s still the worst.” Dipper was suddenly interrupted by a random knock on the door, but even so, his sour attitude towards the heiress didn’t change as he got up to answer it. “And that’s not just jealousy talking; I’d say that to her face.”

Ironically enough, however, the face he was met with upon opening the door was none other than Pacifica’s herself. “I need your help,” she said, saving the pleasantries and getting right to the point.

A very brief beat of rather awkward silence passed between the two of them before Dipper quickly acted upon what he had previously said. “You’re the worst,” he quickly told the heiress before abruptly slamming the door on her without bothering to hear her out whatsoever.

The trio of girls inside gasped in horror at response to Dipper’s careless rudeness towards Pacifica, especially given the fact that her family was hosting the most incredible party in town. Still, he hardly seemed to care as he turned towards them, arms crossed and caustic expression set. “See?”

Unfortunately for him, Pacifica wasn’t willing to give up that easily as she knocked on the door once again, this time much more insistently. And despite really not wanting to, Dipper knew that she likely wouldn’t go away until he at the very least heard her out. “Alright, what do you want?” he asked coldly as he opened the door again, sending her a quite transparent glare.

“Look, you think it’s easy for me to come here?” Pacifica asked, dressed in clothing that would largely obscure her identity, including a scarf over her hair and sunglasses over her eyes. “I don’t want to be seen in this hovel. But my dad made me come all the way out here because there’s something haunting Northwest Manor.” At this, the heiress removed her sunglasses, a hint of desperation in her otherwise haughty manner as she continued. “If you don’t help me, the party could be ruined!”

“And you really think that matters to me, like, at all?” Dipper raised an eyebrow as he leaned against the doorframe. “Honestly, I don’t know why I should even trust you. All you’ve ever done is try to humiliate me, Mabel, Steven, and Connie.”

“Hey, its not my fault you four are easy targets,” Pacifica scowled, every bit as bitter over this exchange as Dipper was. “Just name your price, ok? My dad will freak out if go back without any
help, so I’ll give you anything!”

“Hi, Pacifica!” Mabel quickly interjected, rushing to the door before her brother could get a single word out. “Excuse us!” At this, she was quick to pull Dipper back into the shack despite his confused protest. “Dipper! Don’t you see what this means?!” she asked him in a fervent whisper. “If you help Pacifica, you could get us into the greatest party of all time!”

“What?” Dipper asked incredulously. “Mabel, this is Pacifica we’re talking about here. Helping her out will just end up turning into a huge disaster, I know it.”

“But it’s Candy and Grenda’s dream!” Mabel pleaded, nodding back to the starry eyed duo behind her. “And you know… it’s kinda mine too and you’d totally be the world’s number one best brother ever if you got me and my friends into this party and I’d totally owe you and shower you with the biggest, happiest hugs I can give and—”

“Ugh, alright already!” Dipper interjected, quite tired of his sister’s enthusiastic rambling on the matter as be begrudgingly turned to address Pacifica again. “I’ll bust your ghost. But in exchange, I’ll need three tickets to the party.”

The heiress let out a disgruntled growl at this, but nonetheless she conceded, reaching into her purse and retrieving the aforementioned tickets. “You’re just lucky I’m desperate.”

“Woo!” all three of the girls chanted in absolute elation in the living room, completely overwhelmed with excitement about the immaculate party that lay ahead of them. “Desperate! Desperate! Desperate!”

“Grenda, get the glue gun!” Mabel commanded with a huge, zealous grin. “We’re making dresses!”

“Ugh, I can’t believe I agreed to this…” Pacifica muttered, face palming as she prepared to leave.

“I can’t believe I agreed to this either…” Dipper remarked just as crossly, almost completely certain that he’d come to regret this choice some way or another.

Warm, plentiful laughter rung out between Steven and Connie as they emerged from the house, Lion trailing not too far behind them. The pair had spent most of the morning hanging out around the temple, with Connie practicing her sword skills on her own while Steven readily cheered her on. Still, soon enough the rousing rounds of swings and swipes soon came to an end as they decided to head down to the shack for a bit to see what Dipper and Mabel were up to.

“Well, time to assume my secret identity,” Connie joked, putting her glassless glasses back on. “Thanks again for letting me practice at your place, Steven. It’s a shame I can’t practice at home…”

“Well, why can’t you?” Steven asked, curious as he continued to hold the umbrella up for both of them, shielding them from the rain as they walked down the hill.

“Because my mom would totally flip if she caught me with a sword,” Connie remarked with a small chuckle, even though she was being serious. “And besides, Pearl hasn’t given me a ‘take home’ sword yet like she has for Dipper. Probably because I haven’t really gone on a lot of missions with you guys since we’ve started training, which I understand.”
Steven took pause upon hearing this, seeing that while Connie was apparently complacent with this fact, there was still a hint of longing in her expression all the same. Longing that he couldn’t help but feel compelled to fulfill. “Hey, wait a sec,” the young Gem stopped, prompting both Connie and Lion to do the same. “May I?” he asked, turning to the pink beast, who obediently lowered his head to allow his owner to reach inside his magical mane. Connie watched in apt curiosity as Steven felt around inside the pocket dimension for a moment, before finding what he was looking for and pulling it cleanly out of Lion’s forehead: Rose Quartz’s legendary sword.

“Here-eth,” Steven began, playfully yet dutifully bowing before the rather surprised Connie. “You can borrow-ethhhh my mother’s sword-ethhhhh.”

“S-Steven! That… that’s so nice!” Connie exclaimed with a small, albeit taken aback smile. “If grammatically incorrect. But…” At this point she was quick to switch into the same medieval tone Steven had been using. “Thou canst just giveth me thine mother’s sword!”

“Why not… -ethhh?” the young Gem asked with a confused frown.

“Because its really important-ethhh!” Connie argued as they finally made it to the shack.

“That’s exactly why you should have-ethhhhh it! You can have it to practice-ethhhh with-ethhhhh.”

Connie hesitated as Steven presented the sword to her once more, its large, pink form suddenly seeming quite intimidating as she looked upon it. This was by far a special blade, one that held more history that she could likely ever even hope to understand. Even with her skills progressing at the rate they were, she still felt largely unworthy by merit alone to wield such an impressively powerful sword. And yet, as she looked back to the young Gem who was so kindly offering it to her with such a hopeful smile, she found it was becoming increasingly difficult to turn that offer down. “Are you sure-ethhh?”

“Positive-ethhh,” Steven nodded with a confident, steady grin. One that was finally enough to convince Connie to take the illustrious, surprisingly light sword into her own hands.

“Thhhhhhank you!” she exclaimed with a laugh, finally capping off the pair’s playful barrage of medieval speech.

“You’re welcome,” Steven said, his smile finally falling a bit as his tone became serious. “It’s just… I was thinking… We gotta be ready if we need to fight Malachite or Peridot o-or Bill or… or those creepy Gem fusion experiments. And seeing as how you’ve already got the skills, all you really needed was a sword. Which means we’re bound to be ready for whatever comes our way next.”

“Well, there’s no real way of knowing that for sure,” Connie mused thoughtfully as they prepared to head inside the shack. “But still, I’ll take good care of it.”

The pair exchanged another warm smile as they opened the door, only to find a scene of colorful chaos unfurling before them. Mabel, Candy, and Grenda were congregated in the den, mutually awash in frantic excitement as they scrambled to put their home-made evening gowns together in time for the party. As Candy and Grenda collaborated on pouring copious amounts of glitter onto a swath of already very shiny fabric, Mabel rushed towards the stairs, energized as ever.

“Hi, Steven! Hi, Connie!” she greeted the confused pair quickly as she ran past them. “No time to talk! Our pom-pom supply is running dangerously low and I gotta replenish it ASAP!”

“Uh… what’s going on?” Connie asked as Mabel rushed off.
“They’re getting ready for tonight,” Dipper said as he came over to join the pair.

“Tonight? What’s tonight?” Steven asked curiously.

“There’s some stupid party happening at Northwest Manor,” Dipper explained, still rather vexed over the matter. “And I somehow got roped by Pacifica into getting rid of a ghost that’s apparently haunting the place in exchange for getting those three tickets for it.”

“Oh my gosh, the party!” Connie exclaimed with a recollective gasp. “I can’t believe I forgot about it! Ugh, my mom got invited for being one of the ‘top tier medical professionals’ in Gravity Falls, which means I have to go too, as much as I’d rather do literally anything else.”

“Same here,” Dipper staunchly agreed. “The last thing I want to do is spend an evening with Pacifica, of all people.”

“Tell me about it,” Connie crossed her arms with equal distain. “It’s kind of hard to believe Pacifica would ask you for help, Dipper, seeing as how she’s made it really clear she hates all four of us. Not that the feeling isn’t completely mutual, seeing as how she’s just about the worst.”

“That’s what I said!” Dipper exclaimed, exasperated. “But unfortunately, I couldn’t really turn her down; Mabel would have never let me live it down if I didn’t get those tickets for her.”

“Aw, I don’t know what you two are so upset about,” Steven interjected with a small smile. “This party sounds like a lot of fun! You know, aside from that whole ghost thing you mentioned, Dipper.”

“Yeah, it’ll be ‘fun’ alright,” Dipper deadpanned, rolling his eyes. “About as fun as getting a root canal.”

“Or getting hit by a bus,” Connie added before they both broke out into a bout of rather cynical laughter. Steven didn’t really join in on it as someone knocked on the door, but even so, as he went to answer it he offered the pair some more encouragement over the evening they were both so clearly dreading.

“Well, even if you guys don’t think so, I still think you’ll both have a great time at the party,” the young Gem said warmly. “I sure wish I could go. But I wasn’t invited, so I guess I’ll just have to—”

Steven cut himself off as he opened the door to see a rather impatient doctor standing outside. “Dr. Maheswaran!”

“Yes, yes, hello, Steven,” Priyanka greeted dully as she stepped inside. “Hello, Dipper.”

“Uh, hi, Dr. Maheswaran,” Dipper replied, glancing over at Connie in confusion as she hurriedly hid Rose’s sword behind her back before her mother could see it.

“M-Mom!” she exclaimed, eyes wide with alarm at this unexpected intrusion. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to pick you up so we can go get ready for the party this evening, remember?” Priyanka remarked in a huff. “It’s only a few hours away and we have much to do before then, to the point that I even had to leave work early. But it’ll all be worth it if I can land the Northwests as the sponsors for the purposed new wing at the hospital. Which means I expect you to be on your best behavior tonight, young lady.”

“Yes, mother…” Connie grumbled, far from keen on the idea of sucking up to Pacifica’s family like her mother seemed to be.
“Now say goodbye to your friends,” the doctor ordered, reaching out to grab her daughter’s hand without any warning. “We’ll have to hurry if we want to—” Priyanka stopped short upon hearing the noisy clatter that came as a result of Connie loosing her grip on the sword she had been concealing as it fell to the floor.

“Oh no…” Connie groaned, face palming as she realized she had no time to reclaim it before her mother turned to see it lying in plain sight on the ground beside her.

“Is that… a sword?!” Priyanka gasped, picking the sheathed blade up in complete appalment. “Connie, where did you get this?!”

“I-it’s-” Steven nervously began to explain before Connie quickly interrupted him. “I-I found it! It was just… lying outside and I wanted to show it to Steven and Dipper.”

“Wait, but isn’t that Rose’s-” Dipper was immediately cut off by Connie as she slapped a silencing hand over his mouth while her mother seethed with fury all the while.

“How could you possibly think this is ok?!” the doctor exclaimed, completely livid as she paced back and forth the foyer with the sword still in her grip. “Do you know how many children I see coming into the hospital every day who’ve cut their faces off playing with swords?!”

“Uh…”

“None!” Priyanka snapped hotly. “Because they have parents who love them and don’t let them play around with deadly weapons like some kind of gang member!”

“B-but-” Connie tried to protest, but her mother immediately shot her down.

“No buts! I don’t even know why I have to tell you this! You should know better! No playing with swords! Under any circumstances! Now, come along, we still have to get ready for the party. I’ll have a talk with your father after he gets off work tonight to calculate just how grounded you are. And we’re using the abacus!”

And with that, Priyanka abruptly turned on her heel and walked out, taking Rose’s sword along with her, much to Connie’s dismay. “I hate that abacus…” she remarked sourly before her tone turned fretful. “Steven, I’m so sorry! She took your mother’s sword!”

“Maybe we could get her to change her mind?” Steven suggested with a reassuring smile.

“She never, ever changes her mind,” Connie huffed, rubbing her temples. “We’ve got to get that sword back ourselves.”

“How are you going to do that?” Dipper asked with a frown. “There probably isn’t a great chance that Dr. Maheswaran will let the sword out of her sight considering how upset she was about it.”

“Oh, you’re right…” Connie mused worriedly for a moment before excitedly snapping her fingers. “Wait! I know! The party! We can wait until she’s distracted tonight and then, Steven, you and me can sneak off with it without her even knowing!”

“That’s a great idea, Connie!” Steven chimed brightly. “There’s just one problem though… I’m not invited to the party.”

“Connie!” Priyanka shouted quite impatiently from outside. “We need to leave, now!”
“W-well, you’ll just have to figure out a way to get in!” Connie urged as she began to hurry out. “I’ll see you tonight!”

“Hopefully…” Steven said, halfheartedly waving her off as she rushed to join her mother. “Wait a second! Dipper, didn’t you say that you convinced Pacifica to give you some tickets to the party? Do you think maybe you could get just one more from her so I could get in too?”

“Steven, it was basically a miracle that she even agreed to give me tickets for Mabel, Candy, and Grenda,” Dipper said with an apologetic frown. “I highly doubt she’s gonna be willing to fork over another one, even with me taking care of her ghost problem for her.”

“You’re probably right…” Steven sighed in disappointment. “But what am I gonna do? I gotta find a way to get into that party somehow!”

“Did somebody say party!?” Both boys were quite started as, out of nowhere, Amethyst suddenly dropped down from the ceiling, grinning wryly as she landed in between them.

“Amethyst? What are you doing here?” Dipper asked in apt confusion.

“Oh, ya know, just napping up in the rafters, just like I do all the time,” the purple Gem remarked, stretching herself out as she fully woke up. “The ones here at the shack are way more comfy than the ones up at the temple, believe it or not. But it’s been kinda hard to get any rest around here with everyone being so loud for some reason. Seriously what’s up with all that?”

“Oh well uh…” Steven began rather anxiously, not wanting to admit to any of the Gems that he had lost track of his mother’s sword. “E-everyone’s just… really excited about the Northwests’ party tonight and-”

“Ugh, that yearly snooze-fest?” Amethyst stuck her tongue out in disdain. “I don’t know why anyone would get excited over that. It’s barely even a party! Just a bunch of rich stiffs standing around yapping about how much money they have. The only good thing about it is that the grub is all you can eat, which is an offer I always took them up on whenever we went to it back in the day.”

“Wait, so you guys have been to this party before?” Dipper asked curiously.

“Yeah, a few times,” the purple Gem shrugged. “But only because we kinda sometimes filled in as bodyguards for those Northwest losers way back when before we learned that they’re a bunch of crooked jerks. Crazy thing about it is that we still actually get invites for their party every year, even though he haven’t gone since Rose was still around. Guess they never bothered to take us off the guest list, not that we’d go anyway seeing as how those prudes didn’t keep their-”

“A-Amethyst!” Steven suddenly interjected, eyes wide with newfound hope upon hearing that his guardians had invitations to the exclusive party. Which meant that there was a chance he could help Connie out after all. “Did we get invited this year too?!”

“Uh… yeah? Pretty sure Pearl has the invites up at the temple. Why?”

“B-because I wanna go this year!” Steven urged, his manner still rather tight as Amethyst looked to him in confusion.

“What? Why?” she asked caustically. “Did you hear what I just said? That party’s lame, Steven. You’d get bored in the first 5 seconds, just like I always used to.”

“W-well… maybe its not as boring as it used to be anymore!” the young Gem argued earnestly.
“And besides, Connie’s going! And so are Dipper and Mabel!”

“That’s right,” Dipper nodded, supporting the young Gem in his effort to try and win the purple Gem over on the matter. “Amethyst, would it really be fair if the three of us got to go to some huge fancy party while Steven just spends the night home, bored and alone?”

“Like a poor little sadsack?” Steven added, pouting pleadingly.

Amethyst didn’t answer right away as she looked between the pair, arms crossed and expression dry. Still, her manner didn’t stay that way for long upon watching the young Gem’s lower lip start to quiver as a sign of his genuine desperation. Which was something that none of the Gems, not even Amethyst, was able to resist. “Ugh, ok fine!” she groaned in exasperation. “I’ll help you convince Garnet and Pearl into going with us to that dumb party. But only because their food is really good. And also ‘cause I’m in the mood for busting up some of the Northwests’ expensive fancy property.”

“Yes!” Steven cheered, quite relieved as he gave Dipper a thankful high five. “Thanks so much Amethyst!”

“Yeah, yeah,” the purple Gem remarked with a casual wave of her hand as she took her leave to inform her teammates of their plan. “Just don’t come cryin’ to me when you end up clonking out on that ballroom floor from how boring it all is. Which will happen. Trust me, I know, I’ve done it before.”

Sure enough, with Northwest Fest set to start in roughly an hour, a massive crowd of spectators had congregated around at least a mile radius from the mansion’s securely locked gates, ones that were meant to keep the common folk out while the exclusively wealthy guests enjoyed the finery inside. Of course, this year’s party did carry some exceptions to these upscale standards, namely the group Pacifica unceremoniously escorted in through the mansion’s stately front doors.

“Welcome to Northwest Manor, dorks,” she announced dryly as Dipper, Mabel, Candy, and Grenda all got their first glimpses of the immaculate ballroom. “Try not to touch anything.”

The girls hardly heeded the heiresses as they rushed past her, clad in their flashy home-made dresses as they rushed to take in every lavish sight surrounding them. The mansion’s grand hall was quite a splendor, with high vaulted ceilings, expertly crafted woodwork and spotless marble floors. With most guests having yet to arrive, the only ones milling about at the moment were maids and servants as they put together the finishing touches for the festivities, including the massive apple cider fountain and lengthy buffet of hors d’oeuvres. Overall, the setting of the party alone lived up to the stories of its splendor, splendor that the girls were more than happy to explore as they cheerfully ran about.

“Everything’s so fancy!” Mabel quipped, stars in her eyes as she spun around in her fluffy pink gown. “Fancy floor, fancy plants, fancy man!” she finished as she zealously patted the face of a nearby butler.

“Mm, yes, very good, miss,” the butler conceded dutifully before walking away.

“The rumors were true!” Candy proclaimed, running by with a quail-filled gift bag in hand before Grenda and Mabel hurried after her, chuckling cheerfully all the while.

At the same time, Preston and Priscilla entered the room, calm and composed over their nearly-
complete party preparations, even despite the previous night’s setback. “Ah, if it isn’t the man of the hour!” Preston addressed Dipper cordially as the couple approached him. “I trust you can help us with out little… situation before the guests arrive in an hour.”

“I’ll do my best,” Dipper assured rather confidently. And really, he had every reason to show confidence for the task ahead as equipped as he was with the journal, ghost tracking equipment, and even his sword as an extra precaution. On top of all that was the general level of experience in fending off supernatural danger he had gained over the course of the summer alone, which made him feel more than equipped to deal with a simple, run of the mill ghostly haunting.

“Splendid! Pacifica, take our guest to the ‘problem room’, ” the billionaire said to his daughter before dropping his voice down to a mutter while Dipper was distracted. “And uh… he’s not wearing *that* is he?” he asked, rather unimpressed with the boy’s common, almost sloppy attire and overall manner.

“I’m on it,” Pacifica nodded, wasting no time in dragging Dipper off to the mansion’s quite extensive guest dressing room. And, despite his extensive protests, she eventually managed to get him fitted in an appropriately formal suit, something that Dipper found to be incredibly uncomfortable and restricting even from the moment he first put it on.

“Ugh, it’s like this collar is strangling me,” he grumbled, pulling at the offending, quite aggravating collar. “Who do you guys think you’re impressing with this stuff anyway?”

“Uh, everyone?” Pacifica retorted just as sharply as she quickly adjusted Dipper’s tie. “You wouldn’t understand. High standards are what make the Northwest family great. And part of those high standards is that we *always* look our best.” To prove her point, the heiress motioned down to her own fashionable lavender ball gown, one that she knew and was quite proud of the fact that it was the best that money could buy.

“Oh really?” Dipper remarked with a wry, knowing smirk. “That’s funny seeing as how you guys didn’t look all that great when we exposed you for lying about founding the town.”

“Ugh, whatever,” Pacifica scoffed, rolling her eyes. “We’re still way better than pretty much anyone else in this town, even if we didn’t found it some stupidly long time ago. And in case you haven’t noticed, everybody still loves us, so its not like you guys ‘revealing the truth’ even changed anything.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that maybe the only reason why people supposedly ‘love’ your family is because you guys are ridiculously rich?” Dipper asked rather crossly.

“No, its because we’re respected,” the heiress corrected pointedly. “There’s a difference.”

“Oh yeah, sure, ‘respected’,” Dipper deadpanned. “For pretty much nothing but being rich.”

“Oh, just shut up already and come on!” Pacifica snapped, quite frustrated especially as Dipper kept up his smug, triumphant grin. Still, both of them were rather eager to get this ghost hunting mission over with, if for nothing more than to cut the begrudging, yet momentarily necessary tie between them. Which was why they continued on to investigate in a state of cross, bitter silence, one that neither of them felt compelled to break, lest even more biting, hostile words spark between them. Words that, ironically, were the exact opposite of the kind of sentiments that would spark up between them soon enough.
Though it had taken some doing, Steven and Amethyst had managed to convince Garnet and Pearl into going to the Northwests’ party. Still, despite their agreement to show up, none of the Gems were very excited to be there as they arrived early, just as they always used to do when they used to attend the party in the past. They had almost ended up arriving in their usual attire, but upon Steven’s insistence, they had begrudgingly shifted into more elegant wear for the evening. Garnet had taken on a smooth, sleeveless, sleek magenta gown, one that filled out wide past her knees and had a large slit revealing her shapely left leg. Pearl’s dress was more modest; a graceful, pale blue, silky ensemble, with straps and an additional skirt from behind. Though Amethyst usually abhorred getting dolled up, she had made an exception for Steven, putting on a shorter purple dress with loose skirts and low straps on top of tying her hair up into a messy, yet still presentable (thanks to Pearl) bun. As for Steven, he was clad in a rental tux that Greg had managed to score for him at the last second, but even still, he was quite ready for the party himself, even despite his apprehension for even having to be there in the first place.

“I still can’t believe we agreed to come to this shallow parade of overindulgence and excess,” Pearl huffed disdainfully as the group approached the mansion’s entrance. “I thought our days of attending these despicable Northwest parties were long over.”

“We all agreed to make an exception this year for Steven, Pearl,” Garnet reminded, even though it was clear she was none too pleased to be there either. “So we’ll just have to suck it up for a few hours.”

“Yes, I know, but still…” the white Gem dropped her voice down to a whisper as she clutched the Gem leader’s arm. “All of this shameless touting of refinement, power, and position over others? You can’t deny that it’s a little like-”

“Homeworld, I know,” Garnet’s expression darkened somewhat. “That’s one of the many reasons we stopped going to these.”

Despite their quiet conversing, Steven still picked up on what his guardians were talking about and he couldn’t help but feel somewhat guilty for stirring up bad memories of their former planet by essentially using them as his ticket into this party. Part of him wanted to tell them his true reasoning for wanting to come, namely to help Connie reclaim Rose’s sword, but he couldn’t very well admit that to them out of shame that he had lost something so precious and important, especially since it was his responsibility to keep it safe in the first place. So instead of telling the truth, the young Gem decided to do one of the things he did best: cheer them up.

“I-I know you guys aren’t looking forward to this, but I still think we could end up having fun!” he quipped with a warm smile. “I mean, we’re all here together, and Connie, Dipper, and Mabel are coming too so maybe the party won’t be as bad as it used to be when you guys used to go to it.”

“Oh yeah, speakin’ of which,” Amethyst interjected curiously as they all presented their invitations at the door before being let inside. “How did those three get invites to this ritzy blowout anyway? I always remember this thing being super exclusive, to the point that they only let rich, snobby jerks in. And last time I checked, Connie, Dipper, and Mabel aren’t rich, snobby jerks.”

“Oh, uh, well-”

“Steven!” the young Gem was interrupted almost as soon as him and the Gems stepped into the ballroom by Mabel, who had managed to spot them from the other side of the hall. She didn’t hesitate to excitedly run over towards him, though she did slow her pace somewhat, her cheeks flushing red upon noticing the rather dashing suit he was in. “W-wow…” she said as she came to a stop, trying her best not to come across as flustered and doing anything but. “Steven, you… y-you look, uh… you… um… G-great to see you!”
“Uh, its great to see you too, Mabel, even though I did just see you a few hours ago.” Steven chuckled, fortunately not paying her stumbling much mind.

“Heh, yeah… Oh my gosh!” Mabel quickly changed topics, averting her gaze from the young Gem lest she turn incoherent again as she addressed the Gems instead. “You guys all look so pretty! I love, love, love your dresses!”

“Well, thank you, Mabel,” Pearl smiled kindly. “Your dress for the evening is very… creative as well!”

“Aw, thanks so much! I made it myself!” Mabel cheerily gushed, pulling off a playful curtsy. “Still, this is so crazy awesome! I wasn’t expecting to see any of you guys here! Isn’t this party the fanciest thing you’ve ever seen?!”

“Mm… we’ve seen fancier,” Garnet noted rather dryly, eliciting confused frowns from both Mabel and Steven.

“Mabel! You gotta get over here!” Grenda suddenly called, her deep voice echoing from across the ballroom.

“Oh! Hold that thought!” Mabel exclaimed as she started to run off, though not before bidding Steven and the Gems a quick farewell as they waved her off. “I’ll catch up with you guys later! I hope you have fun!”

“Ha, like that’ll ever happen at this lamo snob party,” Amethyst grumbled, crossing her arms petulantly.

“What’s up?” Mabel asked Candy and Grenda as she joined them before a large, stately book resting on a stand.

“Look what we found! It’s the guest list!” Grenda grinned, eagerly flipping through it before stopping a few pages in. “Whoa! Check out this hottie!”

“Marius von Fundshauser!” Candy read, already completely enthralled with the wealthy young man from his picture alone. “He’s a baron from Austria!”

“Forget the quail, I’m putting him in my gift basket!” Mabel quipped, more than ready to indulge herself with another summer crush. Especially if it helped her get her mind off her ever-growing feelings for a certain young Gem.

“Hold up, ladies,” Grenda interjected, her tone surprisingly serious. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I think this boy might be out of our league.”

“Grenda is right,” Candy nodded just as rationally. “He is a white whale. Hunting him will destroy us.”

“Well, there are plenty of other cute boys coming to this party,” Mabel vouched with a conceding smile. “So let’s make a sister’s truce not to waste our time on Marius. Deal?”

“Deal!” Candy and Grenda both agreed as they all put their hands together in mutual agreement on this plan. Still, all three of them laughed somewhat nervously as they broke their hands apart, none of them entirely sure if this was a deal they intended on keeping.
As her father had instructed, Pacifica led Dipper to the so-called “problem room”, which, even upon an initial glance, was exactly what he had been expecting. It appeared to be some kind of lounge, just as stately as the rest of Northwest Manor was with hand-crafted hardwood furniture, walls lined with paintings hailing the family’s allegedly proud history, and mounted animal heads, and a large roaring fireplace that cast the entire room in a shadowy, almost blood red glow.

“This is the main room where it’s been happening,” Pacifica informed as they stepped inside, her usual confident manner somewhat diminished in place of fledgling fear.

“Yeah, this looks like the kind of room that would be haunted alright,” Dipper concluded as he pulled the journal out and turned to the fortunately extensive section on ghosts. “I wouldn’t worry about it though. Ghosts fall on a ten-category scale. Floating plates sounds like a category 1, which is pretty far from being anywhere close to dangerous.”

“So what?” Pacifica asked with a teasing smirk. “Are you gonna bore him back into the afterlife by reading from that book? Or are you going to pretend to stab him with that cute little toy sword of yours?” she asked, nodding to the Ancient Sea Blade he had securely strapped to his back.

“First of all, it’s not a toy, its real,” Dipper corrected, half tempted to draw it and show her. “And secondly, I only brought it with me as a precaution. If it really is a category 1, then the most I gotta do is splash that sucker with some anointed water,” he said, holding said small bottle of holy water up. “And he should be out of your probably-fake blonde hair.”

“What was that about my hair?” Pacifica scoffed, glaring at him disapprovingly.

“Shh!” Dipper quickly interrupted her as he pulled a small, ghost-tracking device out of his backpack, one that was already beeping in response to the apparent supernatural activity in the room. “I’m picking something up.”

The heiress simply sighed in aggravation but all the same she hung back, allowing him to investigate further as he followed the readings the device was giving off. Dipper stopped short in front of the fireplace as he briefly glanced up to the large painting of who appeared to be an 1880s lumberjack until the device’s signal suddenly went dead. “Ugh, come on, stupid thing,” he muttered in annoyance, beating the side of it until it began beeping once more. “There we go. Huh?” He was met with immediate confusion as he glanced up again, only to find that somehow, the lumberjack in the painting had suddenly disappeared from the frame in what couldn’t have been more than a few seconds at best. Something that Dipper already knew well from experience, was far from normal. “Uh… Pacifica?”

The heiress didn’t even heed him as she instead let out a frightened scream on the other side of the room, one that was quite warranted given the pool of blood she had just spotted near her feet, one that was being fueled from above. Both her and Dipper let out shared gasps of shock as they glanced up to see blood, thick, dark, and real, swelling from the seemingly dead mouths and eyes of every single one of the taxidermized animal heads on the walls. A steady, unnatural gale-force wind started to swirl around the room as bright, sinister flames began bursting out from the confines of the fireplace, almost as if they were trying to latch onto Dipper and Pacifica as they rushed to meet each other near the center of the room. The danger seemed to escalate more and more with each passing second as the animal heads, still dripping with unexplainable blood and blank, unseeing eyes glowing a sharp, warning red, began to raise their voices in a deep, unearthly, ominous chant.

“ANCIENT SINS! ANCIENT SINS! ANCIENT SINS!”

On and on this mysterious mantra continued as the objects in the room began to take flight, books,
furniture, and antiques all rising into the air before they haphazardly glided around the appropriately terrified pair. “Dipper, what is this?!” Pacifica cried about the incredible din surrounding them, her trembling hands held close to her as her long hair whipped about in the hurricane winds.

“I-it’s a category 10…” Dipper replied, absolutely shaken. After all, the last time he had witnessed a supernatural disaster this dire or intense was when he had watched his own body be taken over by a vicious dream demon while he floated outside of it, distraught and helpless. And while this haunting was nowhere near as immediately catastrophic as that had been, it was still every bit as deadly, a fact he was starkly reminded of as his only real option for taking care of it, the vial of anointed water, abruptly shattered right in his hand.

“ANCIENT BLOOD AND BLACKENED SKIES,” the animal heads changed their chant into something new, but every bit as dark and sinister. “THE FOREST DARK SHALL ONCE MORE RISE!”

“What do we do?! What do we do?!” Pacifica practically screamed as she grabbed Dipper by the suit jacket and shook him desperately.

“I-I… I don’t know!” Dipper answered truthfully, realizing that he was actually quite unprepared for something of this caliber.

“What do you mean you don’t know?!” Pacifica shot back in disbelief. “Aren’t you supposed to be some kind of supernatural expert or something?!”

“Who on earth told you that?!”

“Uh, the town newspaper did!”

“Whoa, really?” Dipper paused, rather pleasantly surprised to hear this. “That’s… actually pretty awesome.”

“Focus!” Pacifica snapped harshly. “We’re about to be killed by creepy dead animal heads and flying furniture, remember?!”

“Don’t worry,” Dipper assured as evenly as he could, given the circumstances. “It can’t possibly get any worse than this!”

Of course, he was immediately proven wrong as the fire violently sparked up again, forcing the pair to dive under the nearby table to avoid getting burned. And they did so just in time as, out of nowhere, a powerful black skeletal arm emerged from the flames, still completely consumed in them as it smashed down onto the ground. The rest of the charred skeleton subsequently pulled itself out of the fire, something akin to skin and clothes forming around the bones as they formed the visage of a large, burly man, the lumberjack from the painting himself, who was clearly deceased based on his rotting, grisly form. A sharp, deadly axe had cleaved his head, the obvious cause of his death that still remained in his undead form. And his manner was every bit as outraged and heated as the burning inferno he had emerged from as he belted out his first proclamation in a deep, rumbling voice.

“I smell… a NORTHWEST!” the ghost growled, blue flames igniting in place of where hair and a beard would normally be as his one remaining eye shot open. Dipper and Pacifica made sure to remain hidden out of the ghost’s view under the table as he began to storm around the room, another axe materializing in his hand as he dragged it threateningly across the floor with each torturously slow step. “Come out, come out, wherever you are!”
“Hurry!” Pacifica whispered to Dipper sharply as he frantically flipped through the journal for answers. “Read through your dumb book already and figure out a way to get rid of that… thing!”

“I’m looking!” Dipper retorted just as harshly as he pulled out his blacklight. “And its not dumb, ok? This book is gonna save our lives! Alright, here we go; Advice:” Hoping that the category 10 ghost page would hold the key to ousting this great, newfound threat, he held the blacklight over the page, only to get the lone, disconcerting message of “Pray for mercy!” instead of anything tangibly useful. “Aw, seriously?!”

Matters were only made worse as the table, their only real cover from the ghost and his deadly axe, suddenly hovered away, leaving them directly in the menacing specter’s line of sight, much to their shared horror. “You should not have come here!” he shouted, not even hesitating to swipe at the pair with his weapon, which they only barely dodged.

“This way! Hurry!” Pacifica exclaimed, grabbing Dipper by the arm and quickly pulling him up before they rushed out of the room. The ghost was in hot pursuit, his fiery manner sparkly with murderous intent as he relentlessly chased them down the mansion’s maze-like halls, ready to strike.

Northwest Manor’s massive doors finally opened to the illustrious group of invited party guests as Preston proudly stood by to greet them all, his wide, cordial grin completely hiding any implications that ghostly danger was currently lurking through the mansion’s halls. “Welcome, dukes, duchesses, sultans and sportsmen! And—ugh… Mayor Dewey…”

“Preston!” Dewey exclaimed brightly, rushing forward as he threw an arm over the billionaire’s shoulder. “We’re so honored to be here, isn’t that right, Buck?”

“Not really,” Buck dryly stated, his arms crossed and his shades still on despite his formal attire.

“Ha! Isn’t my son just hilarious?!” Dewey chuckled with an incredibly forced laugh as he snapped a finger at one of his aids, not noticing Preston’s quickly growing aggravation with him. “Now, smile for the campaign promotion!” The mayor did so brightly, even if the billionaire made his annoyance quite clear before finally acting upon it as soon as the aid snapped a photo.

“Alright, Dewey, that’s enough of your ‘campaigning’ for one evening,” Preston scowled scornfully, pushing the mayor back into the crowd. “Now then,” the billionaire continued, quickly regaining his composure as he addressed the rest of his guests. “Tonight we will enjoy only the finest of tastes and only the snootiest of laughter.” Someone in the crowd let out an incredibly haughty chortle in response to this remark as Preston nodded in approval. “That’s the ticket!” he exclaimed, motioning for the guests to finally step inside.

Despite the party’s exclusivity, there were still quite a few attendees who filed in, most of them quite prominent in some regard, be it wealth or reputation. Within this group were some of the town’s most esteemed medical professionals, and among them was Dr. Maheswaran, with Connie almost sullenly following in after her. After since her mother had confiscated Rose’s sword, she had been trying her best not to fall even further out of Priyanka’s good graces than she already had. Hence why she had been obedient, almost rigidly so, all the way leading up to their arrival at the party itself, in the hopes that her mother would loosen up her newly tightened reigns for the evening. And fortunately enough, her vigilance paid off, as that’s exactly what Priyanka did.

“I have to go meet with the other doctors before we propose the hospital sponsorship to the
Northwests,” the doctor said to her daughter, her tone as serious as ever. “I trust that you can mind
yourself like a proper young lady without getting into any more trouble for an hour or two, right?”

“Y-yes, ma’am,” Connie nodded apprehensively, keeping her poise and manner as polite and
compliant as possible as to not give away her intention of going against her rules.

“Good,” Priyanka nodded in staunch satisfaction as she began to walk off. “And remember what
we talked about on the way here!”

“Don’t worry, Mom,” Connie assured with a rather fake smile. “I-I don’t think you’ll need to worry
about me stumbling across any swords around here!” Her smile immediately fell into partial guilt
as soon as her mother fully turned away, since she knew she would soon be seeking out the very
sword that had gotten her into all this trouble on her own accord. Still, she didn’t let herself linger
on that guilt for too long as Steven managed to spot her amidst the crowd and didn’t hesitate to
come running over.

“Connie!” he called with an elated smile as he caught her off guard with a sudden hug.

“S-Steven!” Connie chuckled as the broke apart. “You actually made it!”

“Yeah, it turns out the Gems actually get invited to this party every year,” Steven’s smile quickly
turned to wonder as he got a better view of Connie’s attire for the evening: a floor length turquoise
dress with short sleeves and a dark sash, one that complimented her neatly-done updo quite nicely.
“W-wow… Connie, you look great!”

“Thanks…” Connie blushed, her reddened cheeks matching the young Gem’s own. “You look
really nice too. B-but there’s no time to talk about that now! We gotta get your mother’s sword
back while my mom is distracted!”

“Right,” Steven nodded, resolved. “So where is it?”

“She left it outside in the car,” Connie reported with a worried frown. “Which means that we can’t
just go out through the front door to get it, everybody will notice. There has to be another way out
of the mansion…”

“Then I guess we’ll just have to find it!” the young Gem grinned encouragingly. “Come on!” And
with that, Steven grabbed Connie’s hand, reigniting the warmth in her cheeks as they slipped
through the party’s growing crowds towards the back of the ballroom, where the beginning of the
hallways leading to the inner sanctums of the mansion awaited. Neither of them had the faintest
clue about the manor’s layout, which was why they had to settle on picking a random hallway and
seeing where it led. They managed to do so without Priyanka, or really anyone else for that matter
noticing them, mostly since everyone was already so distracted with the fancy offerings of the
party itself. And as soon as they were out of the party proper, they both noticed that the mansion’s
lofty halls were much more spacious, quiet, and even eerie than either of them would have thought
they would be.

“Whoa, this place is even bigger on the inside than it looks on the outside,” Steven remarked as
they made their steady way down the corridor they had chosen. “And that’s saying something
seeing as how it looks huge on the outside.”

“What do the Northwests even need such a huge mansion for anyway?” Connie asked, making her
disdain for the wealthy family as apparent as ever. “They probably don’t even use half the rooms
in here and if they do, then they’re probably just filled with stuff they never look at or use.”
“You’re sounding like the Gems did earlier,” Steven remarked with a small, bemused smile. “They… really aren’t that happy to be here.”

“Well, who can blame them?” Connie huffed. “I’d rather be anywhere else but here either, but at least this party his good for one thing: helping us get that sword back.”

“True,” Steven nodded. “Though I don’t really know what we’re gonna do with the sword once we get it back… Lion didn’t come with us to the party, so I guess we’ll just have to sneak it back inside and hope your mom doesn’t see-” The young Gem stopped short as a display case resting against the nearby wall caught his attention as they were passing it. A case that was filled with what seemed to be rather clusters of conjoined gemstones.

“Steven?” Connie frowned as she also paused, noticing his apparent surprise. “Is something wrong?”

“Oh, uh, nothing,” Steven glanced away from the case briefly. “Its just… these rocks look an awful lot like the ones those Gem experiments in the Kindergarten had…”

“Really?” Connie asked, concerned. “You don’t think…?”

“…No, they couldn’t be,” the young Gem shook his head. “We bubbled all of them up. A-and even if there were any left that we didn’t find, how would they have ended up here?”

“You got me,” Connie said with a small, reassuring smile. “Now come on, we gotta hurry and get that sword!”

Steven nodded in firm agreement, only taking a very short final glance back at the gemstone display case before he hurried after her. Still, as they continued their way down the narrow mansion hall, neither one of them noticed as one of the odd, strangely familiar-looking gem clusters slowly began to glow, its kin all steadily starting to do the same.

Given their tarnished history with the Northwest family in general, the Gems had decided early on to make their contempt towards their party very apparent. They refused to engage themselves in interacting with any of the transparently pompous guests as they instead hung back together near the other end of the ballroom, their disdainful, disapproving scowls clear as they refused to show any signs of willingly indulging in this wasteful finery.

Well, that is, save for Amethyst.

The purple Gem had essentially overtaken an entire buffet table, scarfing down all of the expensive entrees she could get her hands on, much to Pearl’s ever increasing aggravation.

“Amethyst, could you please try to control yourself for a change!?” the white Gem asked, her arms crossed as she continued standing alongside Garnet nearby.

“No can do, P,” Amethyst said as she essentially poured an entire punch bowl on herself. “These Northwests may throw some lame parties, but at least the snacks never disappoint. I gotta admit, I almost kinda missed this.”

“Well, I certainly haven’t,” Pearl concluded, turning her nose upward coldly. “Now get down from there, you’re making a mess!”
“Good,” Garnet spoke up, undermining the white Gem with a nod of approval, much to her teammates’ confusion.

“Huh?”

“Go ahead and make a mess,” the Gem leader clarified staunchly. “It’s not like the Northwests don’t deserve it after everything they’ve done over the years.”

While Pearl was still rather lost by this bizarre order, Amethyst was more than happy to follow it through. “What, you mean like… this?” she grinned as she dropped a very expensive china tray onto the ground, shattering it upon contact.

“That works,” Garnet nodded in approval as she discreetly summoned her gauntlet. “So does this.” With a simple flick of her fingers at the window behind her, a large crack rippled across its otherwise pristine surface as the Gem leader simply smiled in smug satisfaction.

“G-Garnet!” Pearl gasped, appalled by such destructive behavior.

“Aw, c’mon, Pearl, don’t be such a stick in the mud!” Amethyst goaded, tossing another plate to the ground. “After all, you were the one who painted that awesome tag on their wall a few weeks ago. How is this any worse than that?”

The white Gem hesitated briefly, but in the end, her usual desire for order was quickly overruled by her longstanding contempt for the Northwests and all those like them. “Well…” she began by summoning her spear. “I suppose a tiny little scratch wouldn’t hurt too much…” With this, she placed the tip of her weapon against the smooth marble floor before she began to slowly drag it, leaving a long, marring scratch across the pristine surface. “Oops. Did I do that?” she grinned, already exhilarated by this act of rebellion.

“Yeah, that’s the spirit!” Amethyst cheered, continuing her own form of vandalism as Garnet and Pearl both took to theirs, all three of them reveling in taking their age-old scorn towards the Northwests out, even if it was in a rather simple way.

It stood to reason that a party as fancy and upscale as Northwest Fest would have food and appetizers that were every bit as fancy and upscale to match. And though Amethyst had partaken of the many buffet tables around the ballroom, fortunately she hadn’t gotten to the fondue fountains yet, which was where Candy had been firmly planted for at least the past ten minutes.

“Cheese, chocolate,” she said to herself, essentially entranced as she moved her stick between the two melted substances. “Cheese, chocolate-”

“Candy, listen to me carefully,” Mabel finally interjected as she stepped over to her, halting her constant switching. “You’re caught in a sweet-savory loop. You need to stop now, before you’re lost to the chocolatey cheesiness forever! So put the fondue fork down.”

“I want to… but I can’t…” Candy mused, still completely transfixed on her fondue stick. That is, until most of the ballroom’s attention was garnished by a butler near the front doors.

“It’s the first time I’ve heard anyone call me Baron Marius von Fundhauser!” he proclaimed, stepping out of the way to reveal the young baron. Upon a very first glance at him, Mabel, Candy, and Grenda were all instantly enamored, all three of them awestruck by his stately, royal attire and long, silky auburn hair. Clearly, he carried the air of a majestic baron in both title and manner as he strode into the
ballroom confidently, the girls’ watching him in utter captivation all the while.

“Guten tag!” Marius greeted the trio with a friendly smile as he passed by them, apparently not noticing their jaws unanimously hanging agape in amazement.

“Guten take me now!” Mabel exclaimed, lovestruck as she started hurrying after him, only for Grenda and Candy to quickly stop her.

“Mabel, we had a truce!” Grenda frowned, still clearly serious about keeping said truce.

“Yes, yes, a truce,” Candy nodded, somewhat less so as she forced a complacent smile. “Uh, Grenda? Can you go fetch us some fancy napkins?”

“Wow, ok!” Grenda blithely agreed, innocently heading off to do so.

“Listen, Mabel,” Candy began, dropping her voice down to a whisper as soon as Grenda was out of earshot. “I don’t know if I can follow this truce. He is too adorable!”

“Ugh, I know, right?!” Mabel gushed tightly, almost relieved for Marius’ welcome arrival and Steven’s subsequent, unexplained disappearance from the party. “But what do we do? He’s unattainable! I mean did you see his hair!? It’s like he was straight out of a shampoo commercial!”

“What if we flirt with him as a team?” Candy suggested. “With our cuteness combined, one of us might have a chance!”

“It’s the perfect plan! But… what about Grenda?”

“I love Grenda, Mabel, but these boys are fancy! Her aggressive flirting style might scare them away!”

The pair glanced over at the larger girl, who was in the midst of “fliting” with another boy, though in her own unique, incredibly forward way. “What’s on your shirt?” she asked, pointing to his chest until he glanced down, at which point she proceeded to bring her finger up and flick him hard in the nose. “Ha! Gullible! Loser!”

Upon seeing this display, both Mabel and Candy nodded, both of them immediately on board for their plan to win Marius over between just the two of them. Really, the figured that it would be better for everyone if they left Grenda out of this loop, as much as they didn’t want to hurt her feelings. After all, the baron was exactly that, a baron. They couldn’t risk the chance of Grenda scaring someone as prestigious and esteemed as Marius off, or worse yet, offending him or hurting him at her own expense. And if, in the process of keeping their attempts at courting Marius between just the two of them, either Mabel or Candy ended up catching his eye and his affections, then, they supposed, that would just be an added benefit.

With the party in full swing as it was, few guests bothered to wander anywhere in the mansion past the main ballroom where all the festivities were being held. And yet, if any guest happened to start wandering the manor’s halls, then they would have likely caught sight of a fiery lumberjack ghost relentlessly chasing a pair of fearfully fleeing kids with nothing less than the absolute intent to kill.

Fortunately though, Pacifica knew the winding corridors and lengthy halls of her mansion home well as she navigated herself and Dipper through them while the ghost sped after them, chuckling threateningly all the while. Despite their efforts to shake the spirit off their trail, he kept on them
tightly, his exact motivation for wanting their ends rather unclear, though that was hardly what either of them were concerned with as much as staying alive.

“What are we gonna do?!” Pacifica shouted amidst her growing breathlessness as they continued fleeing. “We can’t keep running from that thing forever!”

“I’m looking!” Dipper shouted back, the journal in one hand and his sword in the other. Of course, it was of little use against the incorporeal ghost, but at the very least it was good for fending off the stray pieces of furniture and dinnerware the specter sent flying their way.

“Well look faster!” the heiress snapped impatiently, worriedly glancing over her shoulder as they rushed through one of the mansion’s several inner gardens. The ground was still muddy from the earlier rain showers, which made their trek through it somewhat haphazard, but all the same, they managed to make it to the other end with the ghost still only a few dangerously short feet behind them.

“Come on, come on…” Dipper muttered, frantically flipping through the journal as much as he could until he finally found what he was looking for. “Aha! I got it! Haunted paintings can only be trapped in a silver mirror. And look!” he pointed ahead to the pristinely white parlor they were running straight towards, or more particularly, the large mirror conveniently hanging from its wall. “There’s a silver mirror right there!”

“Wait!” Pacifica exclaimed, grabbing Dipper’s arm before he could so much as even step foot into the room. “Don’t go in there! This room has my parent’s favorite carpet pattern! They’ll lose it if we track mud in there!”

“What? Are you serious?” Dipper scoffed, unable to believe that the heiress was even remotely concerned with something so unimportant. “Pacifica, we don’t have time for this!”

“W-well we need to make time!” Pacifica retorted, her eyes wide with fear that seemed to go beyond the threat the ghost posed. “We’ll find another way!”

“Why do we need to find another way if there’s a perfectly fine way right in front of us!?” Dipper argued crossly, trying to press his way past her into the room.

“Because my parents will kill me if I don’t listen to them and mess up their rug!”

“You are so afraid of your parents?!”

“You wouldn’t understand!”

By now, the argument between the pair had escalated quite a bit in intensity as they roughly grappled with each other, Dipper desperately trying to get into the room while Pacifica desperately tried keeping him out. They could both hear the ghost steadily approaching by his deep, ominous laughter alone, but he had largely been forgotten as Pacifica unexpectedly grabbed the journal, hoping that prying it away from Dipper would be enough to convince him to move on. And fortunately for her, this plan worked as she pulled it away from him, surprising him quite a bit as their eyes met in a very short beat of awkward tension before the heiress took off running down the adjacent hallway with the journal in hand.

“Hey!” Dipper shouted, adamantly running after her. “Pacifica, give that back!”

“Oh what?!” Pacifica smirked back over her shoulder, triumphant and relieved that her impromptu plan had succeeded. “You want your dumb nerd book? Then come and get it, Pines!”
Dipper couldn’t help but let out a small growl of frustration at her teasing, still rather taken aback by the heiress’ stubbornness and boldness as he ran after her nonetheless. And of course, all the while, the lumberjack ghost continued its haunting chase after them both, more than ready to rain his fiery fury down the moment he inevitably caught up with them.

After traversing and admittedly getting lost amidst the mansion’s many hallways, Steven and Connie had eventually stumbled upon a back door that led to the large parking area roped off for guests behind the manor. And, though it took some doing to find Dr. Maheswaran’s vehicle amidst the myriad of limos and sports cars, they eventually reached it, only to find a setback they admittedly hadn’t anticipated.

“It’s locked…” Connie frowned in disappointment as she tried pulling the trunk open. “Ugh, we should have seen this coming. There’s no way my mom would leave something like a sword in her car without keeping it locked up tight. What are we supposed to do now?”

“How… I think I have an idea…” Steven said, looking to the lock thoughtfully. “Do you have a hair pin or something like that?”

“Um, yeah?” Connie complied in confusion, pulling a non-essential pin out of her updo.

“Thanks!” the young Gem grinned as he started wedging the pin into the lock.

“Where did you learn how to pick locks from?” Connie asked, her brow furrowed as she watched Steven work.

“Amethyst and Mr. Pines taught me after I walked in on them trying to open a safe they found somewhere,” Steven explained with an innocent smile. “So they taught me how to pick locks in exchange for not ‘spilling it’ to anyone else about the safe. Tough I’m still not sure why they wouldn’t want anyone else knowing about something like that…”

“Uh, probably because they stole that safe instead of finding it, Steven…” Connie pointed out.

“…Oh. Well, at least I learned something useful,” Steven shrugged as he successfully unlocked the trunk. Sure enough, Rose’s sword lay within, and despite a moment of initial trepidation for breaking her mother’s strict orders, Connie took the blade nonetheless, strapping it over her shoulder before shutting the trunk behind her.

“Ok, we got it,” she said, letting out the deep breath she felt as though she had been holding in since this entire situation began. “Now we just have to sneak it out of the party without my mom seeing…”

“And without the Gems seeing either,” Steven noted as they began making their way back up the hill to the mansion. “I sorta didn’t tell them about this whole sword thing, and I feel like they probably wouldn’t be too happy if they found out its pretty much the reason why I begged them to come to this party in the first place…”

“I guess we’re gonna be on double duty when it comes to being stealthy for the rest of the night then,” Connie said with resolve as they reentered the manor the same way they had left it. However, the pair stopped short as soon as they stepped inside upon seeing what lay before them. The highly decorated hallway was in shambles, wall tapestries torn and decorative displays laying in shattered remains on the ground without any rhyme or reason at all. “Whoa…” Connie mused, her voice dropping down to an apprehensive whisper. “What could have done all this?”

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“D-didn’t Dipper say something about Pacifica asking him to help out with a ghost haunting the mansion?” Steven asked nervously, drawing a bit closer to Connie out of fear.

“Yeah but… a ghost wouldn’t have been able to do this much damage… would it?”

“I… I don’t know, maybe,” Steven shook his head fretfully, remembering well just how much destruction the convenience store ghosts had cause at the start of the summer. “We should go find Dipper and ask him if he’s seen-”

The young Gem was cut off as a low, rather inhuman moan echoed from the end of the hall in front of them. The pair froze, their hands unceremoniously intertwining tightly as a large, looming shadow draped itself over the wall, its source unknown as it grew in size and intimidation. Neither Steven or Connie dared to even breathe as the unearthly groans raised in volume, the shadow coming to a stop as a massive arm slammed down into the open before the rest of its twisted body emerged from around the corner. Simply put, it was a mass of multiple mismatched limbs, all strewn together into a hulking, massive, discolored body, if it could even be called that at all. And, resting at the center of where its face would have been if it had one, was a very familiar cluster of conjoined gemstones.

“C-Connie?” Steven whispered, gripping her hand tighter as this monster began lumbering its way towards them through the mess it had made earlier. “I-I think that’s one of the Gem mutants I was telling you about…”

“What? Are you sure?” Connie asked, her voice just as quiet, even though they had clearly already attracted the mutant’s attention.

“Preeeeetty sure at this point,” the young Gem nodded stiffly, knowing this creature looked quite close to the ones they had encountered at the Kindergarten the other week.

“Well then, we got this sword back at just the right time,” Connie scowled towards the mutant as she swiftly drew Rose’s sword, wielding the massive blade with both hands as she took up an offensive stance. Steven watched in amazement as she rushed forwards, seemingly undeterred as she pulled the mighty sword back before delivering a clean swipe straight through the mutant’s weighty midsection before it could even try to attack. With a pained whine, the forced fusion imploded, its shard-composed gemstone tumbling to the floor before Steven ran forward to bubble it and send it away.

“Looks like you were right,” Connie said, still gripping Rose’s sword tightly as she looked around for any more. “Those rocks really were Gem mutants after all.”

“Yeah, but why would they be-” Steven was cut off as a loud crash sounded out from the other end of the hall. This was immediately and unsurprisingly followed by the emergence of even more gem mutants, both big and small, rounding the corner en masse as they walked, crawled, sidled, anything they could to inch their way towards the aptly frightened pair. “Uh, C-Connie? I think now would be a good time to run!” Steven warned, grabbing her by the arm as he tried to pull her down the other way.

“No, Steven, I can take them!” Connie protested, already positioning her sword to strike.

“I-I know, but still!” Steven pleaded, fearful for her safety more than his own really. After all, the last thing he wanted was to see her get hurt as a result of overconfidence in her newly acquired blade, even as powerful as it was. “We gotta get the Gems! They can help us take care of these things before they can make it into the ballroom and end up hurting someone!”
“…You’re right,” Connie begrudgingly relented, sheathing her blade. “So come on, then! We have to hurry!”

“Right!” Steven readily agreed, leading the way out of the hallway that had already been claimed and decimated by the marauding gem mutants.

As Steven and Connie began their hasty flight through the mansion’s lofty halls, Dipper and Pacifica continued theirs, with the former still chasing after the latter in the hopes of reclaiming the journal before the ghost could catch up to them.

“Pacifica!” Dipper shouted after the heiress, quite surprised at how fast she was. “I’m serious! Give me back the journal, now!”

“Why should I?” Pacifica countered just as harshly. “So you can go running back to that room, get mud all over the floors, and get me in trouble with my parents? Because last time I checked, that’s not what you’re here for!”

“You’re right, I’m here to get rid of that ghost!” Dipper reiterated, severely annoyed. “But I can’t do that if you won’t let me just because you’re scared of setting off your parents for some weird reason!”

“I already told you!” the heiress shot back, gripping the journal in her arms tightly as she continued running. “You don’t understand!”

“Then help me understand!” Dipper urged, both out of frustration and genuine curiosity as to why she seemed so adamant about all this. Interestingly enough though, this was what finally got Pacifica to stop in her tracks, her expression startled and strangely soft as she turned to face him.

“W-what?” she asked rather quietly, taken aback that anyone would even inquire about the matter at all, especially him. However, before Dipper could even reply, a brand new threat made itself apparent as it slammed down into the space directly behind Pacifica from the high ceiling above. It was a tall, lanky creature, with six disproportionate arms and no face to speak of as it balanced on a pair of long, mismatched legs amidst towering over the frightened heiress, letting out a low, threatening groan all the while. Pacifica let out a horrified scream at this grotesque creature as it started to advance on her, her long dress tripping her up as she clumsily fell to the ground, shielding herself with her arm as the creature raised one of its many arms with the intent to strike. And yet… it was a strike she never felt.

Hesitantly, Pacifica opened her tightly shut eyes and took a glance back towards the monster, only to see something that shocked her just as much as its sudden appearance had. For standing squarely in between her and the multi-limbed creature was none other than Dipper, his sword raised as he firmly, fearlessly pressed back against the many hands pressed against it. Yet all the same he held his ground, his footing steady and his expression fierce as he warded off the mutant, eventually managing to push it back enough to give himself enough space to properly fight it. All the while, Pacifica remained practically frozen to her spot on the ground, her eyes wide and her jaw dropped as she watched in absolute awe as Dipper rushed towards the monster with a courageous shout, lashing out with his blade as he maneuvered with skill and ease. The creature was unable to keep up with him as he dodged its slow, sloppy movements, and in what seemed like no time at all, the tip of his sword had punctured the monster squarely in its back, resulting in its hideous form poofing into nothing more than a mismatched cluster of gem shards.

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“A Gem mutant?” Dipper frowned in confusion as he carefully picked the compiled stone. “How’d this get in here? Pacifica, do you know anything about this thing?”

Strangely, he received no answer from the heiress as he glanced back to look at her, only to find that she was staring up at him, seemingly captivated, though for what reason, he had no idea. Still, try as she might, Pacifica couldn’t convince her body or her mind to respond properly as her thoughts raced randomly and her cheeks began flushing warm and pink as she kept her eyes on the boy who had effectively just saved her life. She couldn’t deny that, with both his suit and hair as mildly yet endearingly disheveled as they were, resolve and adrenaline still sparking in his eyes, and the sword still held confidently in his hand, he did look the slightest bit dashing, almost heroic even, though she’d never dare to admit that out loud.

“Uh… Pacifica? Are you ok?” Dipper asked, making the heiress realize that she had gone far too long without taking her eyes off him.

“W-wha—oh, uh, y-yeah!” she exclaimed, clearly flustered as she rejected the hand he had offered to help her stand in favor of doing so on her own. “I-I don’t know why you think I wouldn’t be. That weird arm thing wasn’t even that scary.”

“Oh sure it wasn’t,” Dipper remarked with a wry, rather playful smirk. “That’s why you screamed in terror as soon as you saw it, right?”

Pacifica shot him a disapproving glare at this, though it wasn’t as harsh as it admittedly could have been as she shoved the journal back into his arms. “Here, take you lame nerd book back,” she huffed, still trying to suppress her ongoing blush. “So… uh… where’d you learn how to do that?”

“Do what?”

“You know…” she held her hands behind her back as she nodded to his sword casually enough. “That.”

“Oh, sword fighting?” Dipper clarified, glancing to his blade before sheathing it. “Me and Connie have been taking lessons from Pearl for the past few weeks. It tends to come in handy when you deal with stuff like this a lot, which… yeah, I kinda do.”

“And… your family’s just… ok with you running around with a dangerous sword all the time?” Pacifica asked, slightly baffled by such apparent freedom.

“Uh… yeah?” Dipper shrugged, unsure of what she meant by this question. “Why wouldn’t they be?”

The heiress didn’t answer as she glanced down somewhat, her brow furrowing in both confusion and what almost felt like envy, though that couldn’t possibly be right. After all, how in the world could someone as well off and highly esteemed as her be jealous of someone as common and unrefined as him?

While it was quite likely that the ghost had lost track of them in the chaos that had just ensued, Dipper didn’t want to take any chances, which was why he took the lead in moving on. However, they barely even rounded the corner before they were held up again, though this time by it fortunately wasn’t by the ghost or any Gem mutants, but rather by Steven and Connie as they all accidentally happened to run smack into each other.

“Wha—Steven? Connie?” Dipper frowned in confusion upon seeing the pair at such a random juncture. “What are you guys doing here? Why aren’t you back at the party?”
“W-well, we got my mom’s sword back,” Steven began anxiously. “But then we ran into a ton of Gem mutants, just like the ones we fought at the Kindergarten!”

“Wait, you mean there are even more of those things running around here?” Dipper asked incredulously as he handed the remains of the mutant he had defeated over to Steven so it could be bubbled. “We were just attacked by one. How’d they even get into the mansion in the first place?”

“I don’t know…” Connie mused, her tone and expression growing quite suspicious as she glanced over at the nearby heiress. “That’s a really good question, isn’t it, Pacifica?”

“Oh what? You think I have something to do with this?” Pacifica asked harshly.

“Well, seeing as how all these Gem clusters were in a display case in your mansion, so it only makes sense that you’d know something about how they ended up here.”

“Well, I don’t,” the heiress huffed, her hands on her hips. “My parents probably bought them for the party and didn’t know they were actually gross, grabby, nightmarish freakshows.”

“Actually, they’re shattered Gems who were forced to fuse with each other,” Steven said with a sympathetic frown for the mutants’ plight.

“…I literally have no idea what any of that means,” Pacifica said, clearly out of the context loop. “Still, I don’t know anything about how those things wound up here.”

“Oh yeah? And how do we know you’re actually telling the truth?” Connie asked, still rather distrustful. And really, she believed she had every reason to be, given just how dangerous these Gem mutants were and just how not coincidental their presence in the mansion seemed to be. “After all, your family has a known history of lying when it comes to their dirty little secrets, so it wouldn’t be surprising at all if you inherited that bad habit right alongside all the money you don’t deserve.”

Pacifica let out an appalled gasp at this, outraged and offended by such an accusation as she took a bold, almost threatening step forward. “Ok, you know what, Maheswaran, I’m gonna-”

“Whoa, ok, hold it!” Dipper quickly interjected before any sort of scuffle could break out, both him and Steven rushing in to stand between the two incensed girls. “Connie, I know you’re uh, not really a fan of Pacifica, but as much as I hate to admit it, I don’t think she’s lying about this.”

“ Seriously, Dipper?” Connie scoffed. “You know how she is, we all do! Heck, for all you know, she could be lying to you about this whole ‘ghost’ thing too!”

Dipper was actually quite prepared to correct Connie on this, not noticing Pacifica flinch slightly behind him as she realized this accusation was at least partially true. However, he really didn’t have to as the lumberjack ghost’s laughter began booming through the nearby corridor once again as he started to catch up with his victims.

“Its time to stop running, Northwest, and face you DOOM!” he shouted, finally appearing at the end of the hall with blue flames sparking all over his frightening form. All four of the kids let out a shared scream of terror as the spirit soared towards them at a breakneck speed, and all of the discourse concerning mutants and lies was quickly left behind as they unintentionally split up. Steven and Connie took off in the hallway they had just ran down, wanting to get back to the ballroom and find the Gems now more than ever with the appearance of this new ghostly threat. Still, the spirit paid them no mind as he continued pursuing his original targets, who were both desperately searching for any way they could find to subdue the ghost as they fled from him. In
their frantic rush, they haphazardly turned a corner, only for Pacifica to end up tripping over her dress once more. She happened to grab Dipper by the sleeve in a last ditch attempt at steadying herself, only for them both to end up falling towards the nearby wall. Or rather, right through it. The ghost didn’t see this fortunately, as he glided straight on by while the pair tumbled into an apparently hidden storage room inconspicuously hidden behind a large tapestry.

“Huh? What’s this place?” Dipper asked as both him and Pacifica picked themselves up, glancing around the apparent collection of the Northwest’s various treasures and portraits.

“I… don’t know…” Pacifica admitted in apt confusion. “That’s weird. I don’t even know where this room is…”

“Hopefully the ghost and those Gem mutants don’t either…” Dipper remarked, taking a cursory peek back into the hallway.

“Yeah, maybe we’re safe,” the heiress let out a somewhat relieved breath, not noticing as the large sheet covering a painting behind her began to swell forward on its own accord. Dipper fortunately caught sight of this just in time as the sheet began to take on the clear, massive shape, one that reached out over Pacifica slowly and threateningly.

“Pacifica! Watch out!” he warned, drawing his sword as he rushed forward to defend her. Pacifica let out a frightened gasp as the ghost tossed the sheet away, laughing menacingly as he towered over her.

“Your fate is sealed!” the specter proclaimed, his blue flames rising as he prepared to strike the terrified heiress down once and for all. Dipper had just about reached her, unsure of what he was really going to do against the ghost with his sword alone, but he stopped short immediately upon noticing a discarded antique lying on the floor nearby, none other than a small, pure silver mirror.

“Prepare to die, Northwest!” the ghost shouted, his axe raised to deliver the final blow. Pacifica quickly braced herself for what would likely be a very painful end, only for Dipper to end up saving her from it at the last second. However, instead of doing so with his sword, this time he did so with the mirror, and the moment the ghost’s weapon made contact with it, everything seemed to happen at once. The entire room was engulfed in a blinding flash as Dipper was knocked back into Pacifica, who herself was pushed back towards the room’s small, low to the ground window. The pair was still completely in the dark about what was happening as they were practically launched out of the window, entangling themselves in its curtains as they rolled down a short hill, finally landing together at the bottom of it, breathless and rattled, but largely unharmed.

“W-what happened?” Pacifica asked her and Dipper both pulled themselves up. “Did you get him?”

At this, they both looked to the mirror, only to find an incredibly relieving sight: the ghost was trapped securely inside of it, demanding his freedom in an absolute fit of rage as he pounded against the other side of the glass to no avail. “Ha! Yes!” Dipper cheered, satisfied that at the very least one threat had been neutralized.

“We did it!” Pacifica exclaimed just as triumphantly, throwing her arms around Dipper without really thinking about it. Needless to say he was complete caught off guard by this unexpected hug, especially given the fact that it was coming from the heiress of all people. Still, what baffled him even more was the sudden rush of warmth he felt in his cheeks, coupled with the odd, yet strangely wistful feeling of not wanting it to end. It did, however, as Pacifica realized exactly what she was doing, her blush even brighter than Dipper’s as she quickly pulled away, averting his gaze as she awkwardly cleared her throat, wishing she could calm her racing heart and confused, flustered thoughts down already as she pulled out a dollar. “Uh… c-can I pay you to pretend that never
Despite being held up by the occasional minor Gem mutant, Steven and Connie eventually managed to navigate their way back to the main ballroom, only to stop short in surprise upon realizing that no one at the party was even remotely aware of the dangers lurking the halls just behind them. The pair ran into the midst of the celebrating crowd, more than ready to warn them all to flee the premises before it was too late. However, before they could even get a single person’s attention, they happened to accidently bump into the last person Connie had wanted to encounter at the moment.

“M-Mom!” she exclaimed in surprise upon running right into her mother’s torso. The doctor paused, looking away from the conversation she had been engaged in to her daughter instead, only to freeze with shock and motherly fury upon noticing the large pink sword strapped to her back.

“Connie!” Priyanka gasped, appalled. “How did you even—what are you doing with that?! I made a rule, no swords under any circumstances!”

“But mom-” Connie tried to argue, knowing that she needed to be armed in the dire circumstances they were facing.

“No,” the doctor interrupted rigidly. “I told you once, and I can’t believe I have to tell you again! But its clear to me now that I can’t even trust you to so much as listen to me even after I put my foot down! So you leave me with no choice; you're grounded until further notice. Hand that sword over, now.”

“But Mom, you don’t understand, I-”

“I said now!”

Connie flinched, clearly startled by her mother’s incredibly harsh tone as she let out a defeated sigh. With no other choice, she took the sword off her back and relinquished it, largely feeling as though she was handing over a piece of herself in the process. And as Steven caught sight of her utterly dejected expression, he found he could no longer stand by in silence.

“Er, Dr. Maheswaran, wait! You can’t take that sword away from Connie! She needs it—we need it to-”

“That’s quite enough,” Priyanka cut him off, sending him a fierce warning glare. “I’m not going to argue over this sword nonsense any longer. It’s done.”

“Mom, please-” Connie pleaded desperately only to be shot down one final time as her mother began to walk off, sword in hand.

“Done!” she reiterated, glaring back at her daughter with what was nothing less than absolute disappointment. Disappointment that left Connie feeling crushed even more than losing her sword had.

“So… what now?” Steven asked gently, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“I guess we just go find the Gems and let them save the day, as usual…” Connie sighed, wrapping her arms around herself as she morosely headed off to do just that. Of course, what neither of the pair was aware of was that the Gems had actually taken their ongoing vandalizing spree up onto
the roof, where they were currently in the process of spelling out the word “snobs” in huge letters using paint Amethyst had “happened to find”, much to the enjoyment of the still large crowd gathered outside the gates below. But even still, Steven and Connie began duly, almost solemnly even pressing their way through the party, knowing that with the horde of Gem mutants drawing ever closer and Rose’s sword no longer a viable option, they were the only hope they had left.

With the ghost finally subdued and captured, Dipper and Pacifica blithely went to go report their shared success to the heiress’ parents. And while the Northwests weren’t as openly elated or excited as the young pair, they were still quite relieved to know that their haunting had been taken care of and their immaculate party saved.

“Well, Pacifica, you really found the right man for the job,” Preston remarked, snapping his fingers to signal to the nearby butler to shake Dipper’s hand in his place.

“We can’t thank you enough,” Priscilla said before a brief pause that ended with her nodding to the butler. “That’s enough.”

“Hey, just holding up my end of the deal,” Dipper grinned as he took the mirror the ghost was in and prepared to head out.

“Wait, leaving already?” Pacifica asked in slight disappointment. “You’re at the world’s best party, dummy. Are you sure you wanna go so soon?”

“Well I’d love to stay,” Dipper said with a smile just as playful as the heiress’. “But I’ve got a category 10 ghost to dispose of and then I should really go help Steven and Connie out with the rest of those Gem mutants.”

“Oh that’s right, I almost forgot just how adventurous your life is,” Pacifica rolled her eyes with a lightly teasing smirk.

“Heh, yeah,” Dipper chuckled, not paying too much attention to where he was going as he kept his sights on the heiress behind him. Which was how he ended up walking straight into one of the garden’s pillars. Pacifica was unable to contain her laughter at this, something that flustered Dipper quite a bit as he backed up and tried to play his clumsiness off as intentional. “O-oh, uh, l-like you said: a-adventurous.”

“Oh yeah, running into a pillar,” Pacifica quipped, still chuckling. “That’s totally an epic quest right there.”

Despite still being somewhat embarrassed, Dipper couldn’t help but finally join in on the heiress’ ongoing amused laughter, something that only died down between them as he sent her a small wave of farewell, one that she returned with a warm, genuine smile. He held up a similar smile as he departed, unable to deny that this misadventure, despite all of its harrowing moments, had ended on a much better note than he had could have ever expected anything pertaining to Pacifica Northwest to. For instead of being just as closed off and callously coldhearted as she had always come across to him before, it seemed as though there was another side to her: a playful, daring, capable side that came across as so much more authentic than the haughty front she usually seemed to put up. And even more unexpected than that was the fact that he had found himself taking a genuine liking of that side of the heiress, one that he hoped to see again in any of their future encounters. “Call me crazy, but… maybe she’s not so bad after all…” Dipper remarked to himself once he was out of the heiress’ earshot, surprised that he was even admitting something
like that, but pleasantly surprised nonetheless.

His satisfaction was soon cut short, however, as a mocking, knowing laugh sounded from within the mirror in his hand. “What are you laughing about, man?” Dipper asked, glancing down at the trapped ghost in apt confusion. “I defeated you.”

“You’ve been had, boy,” the ghost said with another bitter laugh. “The Northwests lied to you, just as they did to me and my kin one hundred and fifty years ago.”

“…What do you mean?” Dipper ventured, genuinely curious as the ghost began to recount his tale of woe.

“One hundred and fifty years ago this day, the Northwests asked us lumber-folk to build them a mansion atop the hill. We were told it would be a service to the town, that once a year they would throw a grand party that would be open to the people of Gravity Falls, and all would share in the bounty of their wealth! It took years of backbreaking labor and sacrifice, but the promise of such a luxurious feast kept all of us going as we worked towards the manor’s completion, aided by a group of strong, magical, yet kindly women the Northwests had contracted to help the project along.”

“Wait, magical women?” Dipper interrupted, intrigued by this point in particular. “You mean the Crystal Gems?”

“Yes,” the ghost nodded disdainfully. “The Crystal Gems were invaluable in helping us raise these stately halls, but on the night we needed them most, they were nowhere to be found to stop the injustice committed against us lumberjacks. For when it was time for the grand party the Northwests promised the common folk of the town, they coldly refused to let us in. And with the trees we had cut to build the mansion gone, the mudslides began. While they partied and laughed, I was swept away by the storm and met my end to the very axe I had used to build their undeserved empire. And so I said with final breath: ‘One-fifty years I’ll return from death, and if the gate’s still closed to the town, wealthy blood will stain the ground!’ A curse passed down across every generation of Northwests, even to this day.”

“So… wait a minute,” Dipper said once the ghost was finished, quickly putting the pieces together of how everything he had just heard related back to the present. Which, in turn created a picture he was far from happy with. “The Northwests knew this haunting was coming, and they tricked me into helping them to avoid ghostly justice? …I’ll be right back…”

With the state of the party as seemingly secured as it was, Pacifica had returned to her expected spot by her parents’ side as they mingled with their wealthy guests. Yet her thoughts were hardly in the fancy festivities going on around her as they usually were during Northwest Fest and instead they were focused on the boy she had spent the earlier half of her evening with. She found it so incredibly strange that just a few hours ago, she had barely even spared a second thought towards Dipper, viewing him as just as common and ordinary as anyone else. Yet now, after the past few hours of narrowly surviving a deadly haunting with him, she couldn’t deny that he somehow fascinated her in ways that confused yet excited her all at once. And as she thought about his brazen swordsmanship, his clever readiness for almost any situation, his awkward yet almost frustratingly endearing laughter, Pacifica couldn’t help but sail through the evening with a distant, almost dreamy smile on her face, one that was filled with an unknown yet brimming longing to see him again.
A longing that was incidentally fulfilled sooner than she thought it would; though in the last way she could have wanted it to.

The Northwests were in the midst of entertaining dignitaries in the foyer when the mansion’s front doors suddenly burst open, revealed an incredibly indignant Dipper behind them. “Northwests!” he exclaimed angrily as he marched in, mirror still in hand. “You have some explaining to do!”

“Dipper! You came back!” Pacifica instantly perked up, a bright smile on her face as she began to rush over to him. Though it was quick to disappear as he shot her a particularly harsh, glare, one that was a very far cry from the warm smile he had left her with.

“You lied to me!” he accused furiously before addressing the entire family. “All of you did! All you had to do was let the townsfolk into the party and you could have broken the curse! But you just made me do your dirty work instead!”

Pacifica took in a sharp breath at this, knowing that he had discovered the one wrench in all of this that she had hoped he wouldn’t find out, especially as the newfound camaraderie began forming between them. But before she could even try to explain anything, her father was quick to only make things worse.

“Look at who you’re talking to, boy,” Preston began coldly, essentially ignoring the incredibly hostile scowl Dipper was sending up at him. “I’m hosting a party for the most powerful people in the world. Do you really think they’d come here if they had to rub elbows with your kind?”

“*My kind*?” Dipper repeated with an appalled scoff, not even bothering to contest the billionaire any further. After all, he had expected as much from the head of the Northwest household, but he had foolishly come to believe that their daughter was different, that she wasn’t just another pompous, heartless sob, that she had at least some redeeming shred of actual humanity in her. But as he had just discovered, none of that was true at all. “Looks like I was right about you all along,” he said to Pacifica bitterly, not even caring about her genuinely distraught expression. “You’re just as bad as your parents. Another link in the world’s worst chain!”

“N-no! Dipper, you don’t understand!” Pacifica protested earnestly, determined to set the record straight. “I’m sorry, they made me lie to you! I should have told you everything from the start, but—” The heiress was abruptly cut off by the sharp, sudden peal of the bell in her father’s hand, one that instantly silenced her back into submission as she glanced down submissively, ashamed by her own inability to resist it, ashamed by the fact that she had even agreed to this deceptive charade in the first placed, ashamed by everything really, but mostly, she was ashamed of herself.

“Enjoy the party,” Preston remarked mockingly as Dipper turned to head out, not even bothering to send Pacifica a second glance in his palpable fury, something that made her heart ache even more than just about anything else. “It’s the last time you and your kind will ever come.”

As vehemently outraged with the Northwests as he was, Dipper knew there wasn’t much he could do get back at them for their despicable actions. So instead of frustrating himself further, he sullenly took the mirror outside, following the journal’s instructions to create the proper setup needed to oust the ghost from the mortal plane. “Stupid Northwests, making me do their exorcism for them,” he grumbled to himself after placing the mirror at the center of the circle of candles. With everything in place, he began to read the journal’s spell to get rid of ghosts, though given the circumstances, he was hardly invested in the matter whatsoever “Exodus demonous, spookus scarus, aintafraidus noghostus.”
“Dipper… Dipper!” the ghost called from within the mirror. “Please let me have my revenge on the Northwests. You hate them just as much as I!”

“Hey, I feel for you, I really do,” Dipper conceded and it was true, for more reasons than one. Even aside from the fact that they had both been made fools of by the Northwests, this ghost wasn’t exactly the first being trapped inside a mirror he had taken pity on. “It’s just… my sister and my friends are in there and you seem just a little unstable…”

“Very well, boy,” the ghost hung his head in apparent acceptance of his fate. “But… before you banish my soul, may these tired lumber eyes gaze upon the trees one final time?”

“Uh, I guess,” Dipper said, somewhat confused by this odd request though he obliged nonetheless, picking the mirror up and holding it towards the nearby forest. “Go nuts, man.”

Upon getting even just a glimpse at the trees, the ghost laughed wildly as the sight of the forest empowered him enough to ignite his flames brighter and hotter, to the point that their heat rapidly spread to his mirror prison itself. Dipper didn’t even have time to be confused about what was happening before the mirror’s handle suddenly turned red hot, burning his hand to the point that he was forced to let go of it. The glass shattered the instant it made contact with the ground and with it the ghost exploded from its ruined shards, paying no mind to the startled boy who had accidentally released him as he set his sights on the mansion once more.

“Yes! Vengeance!” he proclaimed with a triumphant laugh, speeding towards the manor with the intent of finally fulfilling his bloodthirsty vendetta.

“Oh no!” Dipper exclaimed, aptly alarmed as he remembered who else was still in the mansion. “Mabel! Steven! Connie!” Despite his lasting anger at the Northwests, he knew well that he couldn’t let the ghost accomplish his violent ends so long as innocent people were in danger. Which was why, after making sure his blade was strapped securely to his back, he rushed back up towards the mansion, unsure of what he was going to do to stop this disaster but determined to try rather than do nothing, as he assumed the Northwests were very likely to do.

With their freeform destruction on the roof complete, the Gems returned to the party proper, mischievous grins on their faces as they continued their own form of “revenge” by turning over tables, piercing through expensive paintings, and breaking priceless antiques. Of course, they were always discreet enough in doing so that no one really noticed, but still, they couldn’t deny that they were all three having genuine fun in their righteous form of destruction against the wealthy family. When it came right down to it, it almost felt nostalgic, at least to Garnet and Pearl as they recalled helping break apart the similar upper-crust regime of Homeworld centuries ago. And though this was indeed on a much smaller scale than that, they still couldn’t deny that it felt incredibly cathartic all the same.

Not too far away from the tapestry the Gems were currently tearing apart, Mabel and Candy were carrying out their strategic plan to flirt with Marius, with the former boldly taking the lead as she approached the baron with a wide, cheerful smile. “Hi, I’m Mabel!” she greeted loudly, catching Marius somewhat off guard. “So, Australia, huh? Do you guys eat kangaroo meat over there, or, uh… a-are they strictly pets?”

“I am from Austria,” Marius corrected with a confused frown.

“Haha! Yeah!” Mabel let out a forced, awkward laugh, panicking as she tapped Candy’s shoulder.
“Tag! Tag!”

“I am Candy!” the other girl said to the baron as she took over just as brightly. “I love the tiny hats you wear on your shoulders!”

“Hi again!” Mabel cut back in, roughly pushing Candy aside in light of this. “If you were a boat, do you know what kind you’d be? A dream boat, that’s what kind.”

“You are tagged out!” Candy protested in a harsh whisper as she elbowed Mabel.

“I tagged back in,” Mabel pushed her back crossly.

“You can’t do that!”

“I can tag myself! Its allowed!”

“No, its not!”

“Yeah, it is!”

As the girls continued to bicker amongst themselves, the very confused Marius nervously retreated, unsure of how to react to them so clearly arguing over him. They also failed to notice that someone else had watched this entire embarrassing display, and she was far from pleased with what she had just seen. “Ahem!” Grenda interjected, hands on her hips as she cut through Mabel and Candy’s argument. “What exactly was all that?! You were flirting with Marius without me!”

At this, the pair exchanged a tense glance, knowing that there was really no playing any of this off as they had been caught red-handed. “W-we are sorry, Grenda,” Candy began, genuinely apologetic. “It’s just…”

“Your flirting style can come across as a bit… intense…” Mabel continued rather hesitantly.

“Oh, I see!” Grenda scoffed, thoroughly offended by this opinion. “You think I shouldn’t be myself just because I’m at this stupid mansion! I thought you liked my style!”

“We do!” Candy affirmed. “But these boys might not!”

“Oh, then I guess they wouldn’t like this either! Hey, Marius!”

“Yah?” the baron asked curiously as he wandered back over to the group.

Grenda paused briefly, looking to her friends with a critical glare as they both shook their heads with silent pleas for her to stop before it was too late. But of course, as angry as she was, she refused to comply with them and ‘flirted’ with Marius anyway. “You’ve got something… on your shirt!” Of course, the baron glanced down, only for Grenda to launch her finger upward to hit his nose rather unforgivingly. Mabel and Candy gasped in shock at Grenda’s apparent audacity, and, with all three of them equally frustrated with each other, they all stormed away from each other in a huff without sparing another word. Still, none of them paid much mind to the rather stunned baron they had left behind, who looked off in the direction of the girl who had so aggressively “flirted” with him with amazed stars of newfound infatuation in his eyes.

After what felt like ages of searching in vain for the Gems, Steven and Connie eventually gave up, opting to rethink their options when it came to dealing with the infestation of Gem mutants. An
infestation that was more than likely to make it into the ballroom itself sooner rather than later.

“We’re running out of time,” Connie noted, peaking down the nearby hallway for any signs of approaching mutants. “If we don’t hurry, then those mutants could end up hurting someone!”

“Yeah, but what can we do?” Steven asked fretfully. “We can’t find the Gems and your mom took my mom’s sword… Huh, that’s… actually kinda ironic now that I think about it…”

“I’ll tell you what we’re going to do,” Connie said with firm resolve, ignoring her issues with her mother for the moment for the sake of the greater good. “We’re going to handle this problem ourselves, sword or no sword, whether my mother likes it or not!”

“Excuse me?”

Both kids let out a startled gasp as they spun around to find none other that Priyanka herself standing right behind them, having sifted her way through the crowd in search of her daughter only to find her at the exact wrong moment. The doctor still had Rose’s sword tucked under her arm, her expression completely shocked and outraged over what she had just heard, but even so, Connie had no intention of retracting what she had said.

“M-Mom, I… You have to listen to me listen to me,” she began somewhat unsteadily, though her confidence started to grow as she reached for the sword. “I really, really, really need that sword! If you don’t give it to me, then a lot of innocent people could be in huge danger!”

“What? Connie, no!” Priyanka staunchly refused, holding the blade up as her daughter continued trying to grab it. “What has gotten into you? You know I never go back on a rule, young lady.”

“But there has to be some exceptions!” Connie argued fiercely. “I’m not some… rule-driven robot!”

As soon as she had said this, a brutal crash sounded from the end of the nearby hallway, one that was immediately followed by the appearance of a very large Gem mutant, one that didn’t hesitate to lunge forward towards the group near the ballroom. “W-what on earth is that thing?!” Priyanka asked, protectively gripping her daughter’s shoulder tightly.

“It’s a Gem mutant!” Steven exclaimed, determined to help Connie fend it off as his shield formed over his arm. “It’s why you have to let Connie have that sword back, Dr. Maheswaran! So she can beat it and protect everyone here!”

“Wha—b-but-” the doctor’s protests were cut off as the mutant pounced, one of its many hands reaching out and grabbing the closest thing to it, which just so happened to be Connie. “Connie!”

“M-Mom!” Connie called back as the mutant began dragging her towards it, its grip on her strong, despite her attempts to break free from it.

“I’ll save you!” Steven exclaimed, rushing forward before slamming his shield into the mutant’s side, forcing it to relinquish its hold. “Keep away from my Connie!”

The mutant let out a threatening groan as it shoved the young Gem back roughly, still towering over the group as more creatures began filling in behind it, pressing the trio back towards the ballroom. “T-these things are beyond reason!” Priyanka shook her head, unable to believe what she was witnessing.

“Mom, if you would go back on your rule this one time!” Connie pleaded, feeling largely useless against this threat without a sword in her hand. “I just need to help Steven get us out of here!”
“No! Mother knows best!” Priyanka reiterated harshly, still keeping the sword away from her daughter, even despite the growing danger.

“W-we can’t let these things into the ballroom!” Steven cried, struggling to maintain his stance as the largest mutant continued pressing against his shield. The smaller mutants were starting to maneuver their way around the group, crawling up the walls and ceiling as they essentially surrounded them, though they still didn’t work their way into the ballroom just yet. Upon seeing this, the young Gem gasped but reacted accordingly, abandoning his shield for a bubble instead, though the mutants continued pounding against it just as viciously.

“W-we’re trapped!” the doctor exclaimed, quite alarmed by this turn of events.

“We don’t have to be!” Connie proclaimed, her expression adamant as she turned to face her mother, refusing to give up in these dire straits. “Really, Mom. I know how to do this!”

“No, you don’t!” Priyanka argued, just as resilient on her side of the matter as her daughter was.

“Ugh, yes, she does!” Steven cut in quite impatiently, knowing they were wasting very precious time fighting like this. “She’s been training! She hasn’t just been playing around with that sword! She’s been taking classes learning how to use it right! Even though she’s always studying, or practicing tennis, or playing violin, she still works really hard to be a good sword fighter and she is!”

“No,” the doctor quickly denied, refusing to believe anything of the sort. “No, no, no, no. I know my daughter! I know what she’s doing every second of the day. All her activities, all her internets, everything. I know she’s definitely not some sword fighting hooligan!”

By this point, Connie had gotten to the point where enough was enough. For as long as she could remember, she had always rigidly stuck to whatever her parents had told her, complying perfectly for the sake of winning their approval and pride more than anything else. It was tedious, laborious, even difficult at some points giving their very high standards for her. But now, such standards could no longer apply. Because not only were they in a life or death situation, but things had changed. She had changed. It was a shift that everyone who knew her, everyone who came in contact with her had been able to see, especially herself. Everyone but her own mother, it seemed. “You don’t know me at all!” Connie finally exploded, beyond frustrated with her mother’s stubbornness by now. “You still haven’t even noticed my glasses!”

“W-what about your glasses?”

“They don’t have lenses anymore!” Connie huffed, taking her frames off and sticking her finger straight through them. “I haven’t needed actual glasses for almost the entire summer!”

“What?!” Priyanka asked, completely baffled. “Your eyesight just… magically got better?”

“Yes!” Connie shouted adamantly as Steven shrugged in slight embarrassment, given his involvement in all this. “I’ve been dealing with magic and monsters and things like these,” she pointed to one of the mutants beating against the side of the bubble. “Ever since I met Steven! That’s why I need you to just trust me and believe that I know what to do here!”

The doctor paused, her expression softening somewhat as she looked to her daughter with genuine conflict before looking back to the pressing danger that was so clearly surrounding them all. “But… you-”

Before Priyanka could get another word out, the entire mansion itself seemed to shake,
accompanied by what sounded like a massive explosion coming from the ballroom itself. All of the party guests let out a collective gasp as the room’s large fireplace swelled dramatically, and from its sparking embers, the lumberjack ghost emerged, laughing manically as he prepared to rain righteous devastation down upon the entire party.

“Generations locked away, my revenge shall have its day!” he shouted boisterously, blasts of blue light bursting from his palms. As this apparent magic struck several of the party guests, the effects were immediate, their bodies starting to freeze before slowly turning into hollow, immovable, non-sentient wood.

And from that moment, the entire ballroom erupted into complete and utter chaos.

Aside from the petrifying blasts the ghost continued firing off at random, his power also brought the mansion’s many taxidermized displays to life, with the dead animals terrorizing every guest who had been lucky enough to escape being transformed into wooden statues. Nature itself soon started to overtake the hall, with vines and tree limbs bursting through the floor and entrapping more unfortunate attendees for the ghost to cast his horrific spell upon them. Almost as soon as this disaster had begun, the Northests had been quick to tuck themselves out of sight, unable to do anything else but watch as their elegant party and their mansion itself began to crumble right before their eyes.

“Preston, what are we going to do!?” Priscilla cried mournfully, though her husband remained stoic in his cowardly plan.

“Prepare the panic room,” he remarked coldly, punching a taxidermized squirrel off of his shoulder.

While the Northests had no intention of doing anything to stop this violent onslaught, the Gems were quick to notice it, forcing them to quickly put their ongoing vandalism aside as they leapt into action. “Whoa, isn’t that guy one of those lumberjacks from way back when?” Amethyst asked, summoning her whip as she beat back a mounted deer head. “Pretty sure that dude should be dead by now, shouldn’t he?”

“He is” Garnet confirmed, gauntlets at the ready. “That’s a ghost.”

“Well, he’ll be even less than a ghost once we’re through with him!” Pearl exclaimed boldly, finally calling the specter’s attention. “You! We demand that you put a stop to this senseless destruction and release these innocent humans at once!”

The ghost did take pause at this, though only to turn to the Gems with an expectant, almost smug grin as he glided towards them. “Ah, the Crystal Gems, what ages have past since we last met?” he asked almost calmly before a certain bitterness started to enter his tone. “I suppose its only fitting that you would stand to defend those treacherous Northwest scum even all these years later. After all, you did the very same thing one hundred and fifty years ago by not rising to the occasion to ensure my brethren and I the justice we deserved!”

“We’re not defending the Northests,” Garnet countered, her gauntlets in tight fists. “We never would. Especially after we found out what happened that night.”

“So you DO know!” the ghost exclaimed, his flames rising in fury upon hearing this. “And yet you still did NOTHING to stop it!”

“If we had been there, we certainly would have!” Pearl protested firmly. “But we were away on a mission that night; we only found out about the Northests breaking their promise from the other
lumberjacks the next day! And believe us, we’ve condemned them for their horrible actions against you all ever since!”

“Oh you have?” the ghost scoffed, clearly not believing this claim. “Then answer me this: why are the mansion gates still closed, one-fifty years on!?! Why have you not forced the Northwests to right the wrongs of their sinister past? Why have you failed to do what you promised: to protect this town and its people from the evil lying right within its own borders?!”

The Gems exchanged a rather surprised glance at this, none of them quite sure of what to say at such a strong accusation of their apparent failure. But really, when it came down to it, there had been nothing they could have really done to correct this unfair situation. They couldn’t force the Northwests to open their gates to the common folk, they hadn’t been able to keep that initial rejection from happening in the first place and they couldn’t keep it from happening now. It was a delicate situation, a very human situation that the Crystal Gems had found themselves ill-equipped to deal with and still did. And, based on their lack of an answer, that was a conclusion the lumberjack ghost had already angrily reached.

“You three are no better than the very Northwests you claim to condemn,” he remarked hatefully and dismissively. “And for that, you deserve nothing more than to share their DOOMED fate!”

The Gems only had time to let out a shared gasp before the ghost struck them with his power, which, alarmingly enough, effected them in the exact same way it would any human. In mere seconds, all three of the Crystal Gems were nothing more than wooden statues, stuck frozen in offensive poses against a foe they were powerless to defeat.

“Oh no!” Steven gasped, completely distraught as he happened to watch this entire display from the edge of the hallway him, Connie, and Priyanka were still in. “The Gems!”

“Steven, no!” Connie stopped him before he could rush out, still mindful of the Gem mutants as well as the ghost. Unfortunately, it seemed as though these threats were starting to combine as mutants began pouring out of the other hallways, sulking into the ballroom and openly attacking the dwindling number of non-wooden guests right alongside the ghost himself.

It was this absolute state of pandemonium that Dipper returned to as he burst back into the mansion, breathless and soaking wet from the ongoing thunderstorm outside. He stopped immediately within the doorframe however upon taking in the disaster before him, with undead animals and marauding mutants running amok amidst the myriad of already petrified party guests. Dipper didn’t get much of a chance to analyze the situation however before a nearby Gem mutant lunged at him, prompting him to act on instinct in drawing his sword and stabbing it cleanly through right before it could reach him. However, there was little his blade could do to help the poor soul who was inching across the floor, his body already half wooden as he desperately tried to escape his fate. “P-please, help me!” the guest cried before the inevitable happened, entrapping him in an immovable, unaware wooden form.

“Whoa! That is messed up!” Dipper exclaimed in apt shock upon witnessing something so horrific, though the ghost was quick to divert his attention as he let out a rather fitting proclamation.

“Just one way to change your fate!” the specter shouted amidst turning even more terrified guests into wood. “A Northwest must open the party gates!”

“A Northwest?” Dipper gasped, realizing that this situation wasn’t as hopeless as it seemed. “Pacifica!” Knowing that there really wasn’t any other viable option for quelling the ghost’s intense, deadly fury, Dipper took off, cutting through any Gem mutant in his path as he went in search of the heiress, hoping that despite her earlier deceptiveness and dishonesty, she could still
turn the tide in this mess once and for all.

At the same time, Steven, Connie, and Priyanka hung back a bit from the ballroom, mostly to avoid being detected by the ghost more than anything else as most of the Gem mutants had already pressed their way past them. Still, all three of them were quite shaken by the chaos playing out before them, especially the doctor as she shook her head in frightened disbelief.

“And now there’s a ghost too?” she asked, dumbfounded. “You mean to tell me that you kids deal with deadly threats like these on a daily basis?!”

“Um… yeah, kinda,” Steven shrugged with an awkward smile, hoping the truth wouldn’t set the doctor off even more.

“But like I said, we know how to handle it!” Connie argued brazenly. “We have experience, we can stop all this and save everyone, I know we can! I just need you to let us do that!”

Priyanka didn’t answer, instead peaking out into the tumultuous ballroom and then back to her daughter, clearly unable to make a choice about what to do or what to say. “C-Connie, I… I don’t…” she trailed off, true concern and fear in her eyes as she met her daughter’s still quite adamant expression. And while Connie was somewhat surprised by her mother’s near-allowance, she knew that she couldn’t afford to wait for it any longer.

“Ugh, there’s no time for this!” she groaned, finally doing what she had wanted to do from the very beginning. In a move to quick for Priyanka to stop her, Connie pulled Rose’s sword out of its sheath in her arms, gripping it tightly as Steven pushed the bubble forward into the ballroom proper, anticipating the fight that was about to commence.

“Ready?” he asked, glancing over his shoulder at Connie, who had already taken up an offensive pose as Gem mutants started crowding around them.

“Drop the bubble,” Connie nodded readily as Steven did just that.

With their only line of defense gone, Steven and Connie both leapt into action, the latter lashing out first to the mutant that tried to jump at Priyanka, only for her blade to end up slicing cleanly through it. At the same time, the young Gem beat a handful of smaller mutants back, but as he nodded to Connie once more, they both prepared for a maneuver that they had only ever practiced before, but finally felt ready to put to use in a real fight. With deft precision, Connie leapt to Steven, using his shield as a boost to gain the proper height to land a brutal finishing blow on a taller mutant, poofing it instant. Priyanka could only stand by and watch in dumbfounded awe as her daughter, usually so intellectually minded and well-mannered, sliced her way through these savage creatures with a kind of skill that was far beyond anything she had been expecting. Still, with the majority of mutants having taken to the ballroom, Steven and Connie knew they had no time to rest on their laurels as the danger running rampant throughout the party was still quite high.

“Steven, let’s split up to take care of the rest,” Connie ordered, stilling gripping Rose’s sword tightly. “Then maybe we can try to figure out some way to get rid of that ghost and free all those people.”

“Right!” Steven nodded affirmatively, his shield still positioned on his arm as he prepared to follow Connie out into the fray.

“Mom, stay here and don’t let that ghost see you,” Connie continued, her tone just as authoritative as she turned to her mother. “Steven and I have this covered.”
“C-Connie, wait!” Priyanka exclaimed, stopping her daughter by grabbing her shoulder. Connie shot her a rather upset glance at this, fully expecting her mother to try and restrain her and hold her back, just like she always did. But instead, she did something entirely different. “Be careful,” she urged, pulling her daughter into a loose, caring, but rather solemn embrace.

“...I will be,” Connie promised, letting out a small, somewhat remorseful sigh before the hug broke apart. “Now come on, Steven. We have a party to save.”

Seeing as how Pacifica had been nowhere to be found amidst the unfurling chaos of the ballroom itself, Dipper had no choice but to rush through the mansion’s halls in search of her, knowing that he had not a moment to waste. Fortunately, his search didn’t have to go on for too long as he happened to take a quick peek in the hidden room they had first captured the ghost in, only to find the heiress sitting there alone in the dark, knees pulled to her chest and her head bowed low in apparent shame.

“Pacifica!” Dipper exclaimed, rushing over to her, even despite that fact that she seemed to pay his entrance no mind whatsoever, even as he leaned down right next to her. “I’m so glad I found you! The ghost is back and he’s turning everyone to wood and he just started rhyming for some reason? B-but anyway, I need your help!” he urged, grabbing her wrist in an attempt to pull her up but she was quick to bitterly pull it away. “Pacifica?”

“You wanna know why this room was locked up?” Pacifica began, still averting his gaze as she coldly nodded up to the set of paintings sitting a few feet away from them. Paintings which depicted NorthWests of the past taking part in deceptive, duplicitous, downright dastardly acts across history. “This is what I found in here. A painted record of every horrible thing my family’s ever done. Lying, cheating... and then there’s me. I lied to you just because I’m too scared to talk back to my stupid parents!” In a fit of apt rage, the heiress took off her expensive earrings, tossing them disdainfully towards another painting of her own parents before letting out a sigh of defeat. “You were right about me... I really am just another link in the world’s worst chain...”

Dipper took pause at this, unsure of really how to respond to the heiress’s palpable, genuine guilt. Immediately, he couldn’t help but regret his former harshness towards her, especially now that he knew she had only been following her parents’ rigid orders in tricking him. And yet, instead of offering an apology right away, he ended up going with a different tangent instead. “Well... you don’t have to be...”

“Huh?” Pacifica finally glanced over at him, confused.

“Just because you’re your parent’s daughter, doesn’t mean you have to be like them,” Dipper clarified, offering her a small, encouraging smile. “You don’t have to keep this terrible chain going; you can choose to break it, you can choose to be better than them!”

“Heh, you make it sound so easy...” Pacifica said with a bitter laugh. “And for someone like you, I guess it probably would be. You don’t have your parents standing over you almost every second of the day with some stupid bell, drilling it into your head that you have to be perfect, that you have to uphold the family reputation, that you have to be just like them otherwise you won’t ever be worth anything to anyone!”

By now, the heiress’ usual composure had completely crumbled as she let out a tight sob, with tears that she quickly tried to wipe away only for more to end up following it. If she was perfectly honest with herself, she felt doomed, doomed to repeat the treachery of her ancestors, doomed to keep this...
cycle of corruption going, doomed to be just another lying, cheating, heartless Northwest. It was a line of thinking that she had once been proud of, a legacy that she had willingly wanted to uphold. But now, it felt suffocating, agonizing even, as though it was pulling her down into a darkness she wanted no parts in, but would inevitably end up drowning in, no matter how hard she tried to resist it.

And yet… maybe she wouldn’t.

For as she felt herself slipping deeper into the darkness of this despair and awful repetition, an unexpected hand suddenly took hers, somehow steadying her and pulling her up out of that darkness by its mere contact alone. Pacifica drew in a small, tearful breath as she glanced up at Dipper, his expression sincere and sympathetic as he kept his firm, yet gentle grip on her hand all the while.

“Pacifica…” he began, his tone solemn yet steady. “You don’t actually believe any of that, do you?”

“I-I… I don’t know…” she shook her head truthfully, knowing that it was all she had ever been taught by her parents. Then again, it could have all just as easily been yet another lie, another fabrication to add on to the countless others her family was so infamous for. “I… I don’t… want to, I just… I guess… I just want to feel… free for a change…” Like you, she wanted to add, knowing that Dipper was perhaps one of the most unfettered people she had ever met. He could do what he wanted, say what he wanted, all without the fear or worry of anyone telling him that he couldn’t, that he had to conform to some strictly set standard that stood against everything he believed in. It was a bold, foreign concept to Pacifica, one that fascinated her to no end and made her wonder what it would be like if she was granted that much open, endless, liberating freedom herself. Freedom that she had only ever gotten close to as a result of being close to him.

“Well… then that’s up to you,” Dipper said, still smiling kindly to her. “Like I said, you don’t have to be what your parents say, especially if they’re trying to train you to be just as horrible as they are, no offense.”

“Believe me, none taken,” Pacifica remarked, unable to hold back a brief, sardonic laugh at this.

“But still,” Dipper continued, letting go of her hand, though he still kept his other one positioned on her shoulder, something that she couldn’t help but smile about. After all, it was probably among the most genuine physical affection she had gotten from anyone really, including her own parents. “You can way more than they want you to be. Heck, as far as I’m concerned, you’ve already proved that by just realizing that what your family’s doing is wrong. I’m sorry about what I said earlier, but… I do mean it when I say I think you can be someone better. It’s not too late.”

“It’s too late!” the ghost’s triumphant shout could be heard all the way from the ballroom, startling the pair out of their tender moment as they hurried out to see what was going on. The alarming sight before them elicited a horrified gasp from them both as the entire ballroom had been overtaken, either by unruly, encroaching plants or still meandering Gem mutants, all spread out around the multitude of now wooden, immovable party guests with no single survivor seeming to remain. “You’re all wood!” the ghost proclaimed with a victorious laugh from his spot at the top of the stairs overlooking the ballroom, which is vengeance had completely claimed.

For a moment, all Dipper and Pacifica could do was look over this horrific scene in apt terror as they tried to spot anyone still living and free amidst the apparent forest of wooden statues. But there seemed to be no one left, for Steven and Connie were nowhere to be found, and the Gems, Candy, Grenda, even Mabel had all fallen victim to the lumberjack’s petrifying curse. Which, of course, was something that Dipper refused to let stand as he swiftly drew his sword, determined to
finally put this violent specter in his place once and for all.

“Dipper, wait!” Pacifica shouted, failing to hold him back as he rushed out brazenly, taking up a stance of opposition not too far away from the ghost itself, much to the heiress’ apt alarm.

“All right, ghost,” Dipper began boldly, grabbing a discarded silver platter with the hopes of trapping the ghost inside of it. “Prepare to get-” He was abruptly cut off as the ghost blasted both the platter and his sword out of his hands, showing that the spirit had no patience to even trade barbs with the boy who had trapped him in the first place. “No, wait!” Dipper exclaimed in sudden fear as the ghost remorselessly hit him with his inescapable curse. The effect was immediate, working from the ground up as it all too quickly turned his flesh into hallow, unfeeling wood, much to his apt panic. “N-no! No, stop! Someone, help!” he cried desperately, crippled by a hauntingly familiar sensation of rapidly losing all his senses entirely as his chest became nothing more than frozen bark before it spread up his arms and finally to his face. “Help, please!” His final, agonized plea hung onto the air as an echo as he finally froze, completely turned to wood and stuff in an eternal pose of stricken terror as he reached for help that would likely never come.

All Pacifica could do as she witnessed all this was let out a sharp gasp of both shock and anguish, unexplainable tears welling up in her eyes as she watched Dipper succumb to the threat that her family was solely responsible for. One of the few people who had managed to inspire her, to encourage her to move beyond her family’s harsh standards, who showed her genuine warmth and kindness that hadn’t been bought but rather earned, was now nothing more than a wooden husk and she knew it was all thanks to her. Which was why she had to do something. She couldn’t just walk away and leave Dipper, and really every other innocent person in the mansion, to such a grisly fate. She had to stand up, to right the wrongs of her family’s past, to truly be someone better than any of her predecessors had been, including her own parents.

She had to open the gates.

And yet… she couldn’t. As much as she wanted to, she knew well what would happen if she even tried. Her parents would never forgive her, in all honesty, they’d probably punish her more than she could possibly imagine. They didn’t take disobedience kindly, especially when it came to massive matters like this. Seeing as how she couldn’t find them amidst the crowd of statufied guests, she knew that they’d find out about her blatant defiance somehow, they just would. And then, any shred of empirical freedom she thought she had would disappear completely; any hope she might have had to become a better person, to improve herself and rise above her family name, would vanish entirely. She’d be trapped, just like she always was, in that cycle of lies and greed and selfishness that had poisoned the Northwest name for decades.

And the possibility of that happening was something she desperately didn’t want to risk.

So instead, Pacifica let fear take over as she took a step back into the shadows, out of the ghost’s range, away from the disaster she could so easily solve with just the pull of a lever. However, she failed to see one of the few other survivors rushing along the edges of the hall, trying to take out the remaining Gem mutants while remaining out of the ghost’s sight, until they happened to haphazardly crash right into each other.

“Ugh, Pacifica!” Connie snapped, pulling away from the heiress with a cold scowl. “Get out of my way! I have to—wait a second,” she stopped short, lowering her sword somewhat as concern filled her expression. “W-where’s Dipper? Wasn’t he with you earlier?”

“H-he was…” Pacifica glanced down guiltily, trying her best to hold back her returning tears. “But… but he… t-the ghost… I wasn’t able to-“
Connie cut her off with a sharp, startled gasp as she glanced out into the ballroom, instantly spotting Dipper’s now wooden form near the center of the hall. “Dipper!” she exclaimed, aptly distraught as she turned back to Pacifica, clearly livid. “What happened?!”

“H-he just… ran out there! I wanted to stop him, but I—”

“Oh yeah, sure you did,” Connie deadpanned harshly. “Like I’m gonna stand here and believe that you actually even thought about sticking your neck out for someone else. Heck, I bet the only reason you’re so torn up about what happened to Dipper is because you lost your only ghost hunter, right?”

“Augh, you don’t know anything do you?!” Pacifica retorted just as fiercely, her gloved hands clenched in tight fists at her sides. “You think the only person I care about is myself, but you’re wrong! Believe me, I’d love to just run out there and open the gates so that ghost would set everyone free, but I can’t! Because if I did, then my parents would… t-they’d…”

“They’d… what?” Connie asked, her glare softening somewhat as she noticed just how visibly anxious Pacifica seemed to be.

“Forget it,” the heiress said dismissively, wrapping her arms around herself as she glanced out towards the ballroom sadly. “You wouldn’t understand…”

“…Somehow, I think I would…” Connie admitted with a hesitant sigh, looking to the hallway she knew her mother was still hiding in. “My mom is… pretty strict. She didn’t even know about my sword fighting training until tonight and when she found out about it, she refused to let me fight, even against all these Gem mutants running around. But… I knew I still had to fight, that I was one of the only ones with any hope of stopping all this, and so I am.”

“E-even though your mom said no?” Pacifica asked, rather amazed by such a concept as blatantly going against parental orders with no apparent regret.

“No, I knew I had to.” Connie confirmed with a nod, pausing for a moment as she looked to the rather conflicted heiress with newfound pity. Perhaps, despite what she had been led to believe, Pacifica wasn’t really spoiled or cruel from her own choosing; maybe that was just how her parents had raised her, had forced her to be. And as someone who knew all too well just how heavy a burden trying to live up to parental standards was, maybe, Connie realized, the two of them weren’t so different after all. “I think I realized that… sometimes my parents aren’t always right. And when they’re not, that’s when I have to just… figure things out for my own, you know? And maybe… maybe that’s something you need to try for yourself, Pacifica.”

The heiress said nothing in response to this, her brow furrowed as she kept her sights on Dipper afar in the distance more than anything else. Connie raised an eyebrow upon seeing this, surprising something of an incredulous smile as she realized what was going on here, though she said nothing about it at the moment. “Try to make the right choice, ok?”

Pacifica took in a deep breath, steadying herself as she slowly nodded, even after Connie had left. “Ok,” she whispered, resolve to do this, determined to save them all, to save him.

Whether her parents liked it or not.

“All is lost,” the ghost concluded grimly, still presiding in his spot above the ballroom. “A forest of death,” the ghost concluded grimly, still presiding in his spot above the ballroom. “A forest of death,” the ghost concluded grimly, still presiding in his spot above the ballroom. “A lesson learned, and now the Northwest Manor will BURN!” The specter erupted into vengeful laughter as flames rose up from him, igniting the large portrait of the Northwest family hanging
from the nearby wall first, though it quickly began to spread, more than ready to burn everything, and everyone, in the mansion to ashes in minutes.

Or at least it would have.

“Hey, ugly! Over here!” Pacifica shouted as she emerged from hiding, figuring now was as good a time as any to put an end to all this. She stood before the ghost boldly, unfettered by the powerful, hateful spirit as she stepped towards the lever that would open the mansion’s outer gates. “You want me to let in the townsfolk? Cause I’ll do it! Just change everyone back!”

“You wish to prove yourself?” the ghost asked challengingly. “Then pull that lever and open the grand gate to the town! Fulfill your ancestors’ promise and right this wrong once and for all!”

Pacifica was prepared to do just that, her expression hardened as she began reaching for the nearby lever. However, her hand froze right before she could grab it as an underground hatch leading down to the panic room opened up a few feet away, her father, mother, and one of their countless butlers anxiously peeking out of it. “Pacifica Elise Northwest! Stop this instant!” Preston exclaimed in a harsh, incredibly disapproving whisper. “We can’t let the town see us like this! We have a reputation to uphold!”

“A reputation?” Pacifica looked to him, appalled. “Our entire mansion’s about to go up in flames and a bunch of innocent people right along with it and you’re worried about our reputation?!”

“Well, of course I am!” Preston scowled adamantly. “And you should be too, young lady! Our family is built off of power and position, we can’t have common nobodies off the street running rampant in our mansion! Now come into the panic room. There’s enough mini-sandwiches and oxygen to last you, me, and a butler a full week.” At this, he quickly dropped his voice down to a whisper so the nearby servant couldn’t hear him. “We’ll eat the butler.”

“You’re wrong!” the heiress snapped, her former fear of standing against her parents quickly fading as she realized just how many self-serving lies she had been fed her entire life. Lies that she refused to eagerly buy into any longer. “The only things our family was built off of are cheating and dishonesty! I can’t believe it’s taken me this long to learn that, but I have! And its about time everyone else did too!”

“You dare disobey us?” Preston scoffed in disbelief. “Where did this shamefully disrespectful attitude of yours come from—oh wait, I know…” The billionaire’s tone turned disdainful as he shot a glance towards the center of the ballroom, where Dipper’s wooden remains stood. “It was that foolish Pines boy, wasn’t it? He was the one who inspired you to start thinking like a no-account vagrant instead of the elite young lady of status that you truly are! Well, worry not,” he said, pulling the bell that Pacifica had come to dread and loathe so much out of his suit pocket. “I know of the perfect to fix that…”

Pacifica flinched, pulling her hand away from the lever on instinct upon hearing the bell’s clarion ring, a ring that seemed to echo throughout her entire childhood and always carried one, singular order: behave. A ring that had groomed her into what her parents wanted her to be: submissive, unquestioning, accepting of all the atrocities the Northwests were responsible for in the past and were still committing even now. A ring that she hated, with every fiber of her being, but she knew better than to resist it.

Until now.

Because now, that ring wasn’t her master any longer. It couldn’t be. She remembered the advice both Dipper and Connie had given her, advice that mixed together inside her mind that she could be
more, that she could do the right thing even when her own family never had, that she could change.

That she could be free.

And no matter what the cost might be, that freedom was something she was finally ready to take.

“Dingly, dingly!” Preston growled, ringing the bell harder as he noticed Pacifica was paying it no mind and reaching for the lever once more. “Is this bell broken?”

“Our family name is broken!” Pacifica proclaimed, slamming her foot down as she finally grabbed the lever. “And I’m gonna fix it!”

Putting every last ounce of reservation and fear behind her, the heiress pulled the lever down hard, at long last finally opening the gates up to the common townsfolk outside. The people of Gravity Falls gasped in amazement at this unexpected turn of events, but of course, none of them hesitated to rush forward, delighted to be allotted inside the legendary Northwest Fest for the very first time ever.

“Yes! Yes, its happening!” the ghost happily cried as the townsfolk excitedly ran up the hill to get to the mansion itself. “My heart, once as hard as oak, now grows soft, like more of a… birch or something.”

As a result of the ghost’s satisfaction, his curse upon the mansion quickly faded away, the taxidermized animals becoming still and unmoving as the wild plants disappeared back into the ground they had emerged from. At the same time, all of the petrified party guests seamlessly and painlessly were returned to normal, from the wealthy dignitaries, to the Gems, and to Dipper, who let out a sharp gasp as he returned to normal, rather startled by this shift as he happened to glance across the hall over at Pacifica. The heiress remained where she was by the lever, but even so, the huge smile of warm relief she sent him was undeniable, knowing that to see him alive and well again made all of her struggling against her parents more than worth it.

“Pacifica,” the ghost addressed her, briefly diverting her gaze away from Dipper right as he returned her smile. “You are not like other Northwrights and for that, you should be proud. I feel… lumber justice…” And with these final words of contentment relayed, the specter finally disappeared from the mortal plane, leaving only his axe behind as it slammed into the ground, the only remaining physical sign of the devastation he had wrought.

Of course, almost as soon as the ghost had vanished, the multitude of townsfolk reached the manor, flooding in through the front doors in a flurry of chaos and excitement. They had no mind for manners whatsoever as they ran about, indulging on buffet tables, leaping into cider fountains, and laying their hands on whatever expensive knick-knacks they could find. Still, their arrival had added an undeniable and much-needed element of reckless fun and freedom to the party, one that absolutely appalled Preston and Priscilla as they stood by, helpless to stop what their daughter had so brazenly done.

“Good lord, the riffraff! Its everywhere!” the billionaire cried, aghast at the state of his once pristine party as he ran about, trying and completely failing to reclaim some sense of class and order.

At the same time, the Gems, upon recovering from their formerly petrified states, were quick to see the wild debauchery going on all around them, something that aptly confused them, given how they knew Northwest parties to usually be.

“What’s going on here?” Pearl asked, her spear dissipating as she watched Manly Dan toss a keg of
cider across the hall.

“I dunno, but this is my kinda party!” Amethyst cheered, laughing as a few of the town’s teens rode an empty platter down the nearby stairs.

“Looks like everyone else has followed our lead,” Garnet remarked with a wry smirk, placing hands on both of her teammates’ shoulders. “You know what that means.”

“Woo! Time to bust it up!” the purple Gem rowdily whooped, rushing forward unrestrained.

“N-now Amethyst, let’s try not to bust things up too much!” Pearl warned as she began to run after her, though she quickly stopped with an incredulous scoff. “Wait, what am I saying? This is the Northwests’ mansion we’re talking about here! Let’s bust it up to our hearts’ content!”

“Now you got it,” Garnet nodded in amused approval, joining her teammates as they gladly leapt into the ongoing chaos and fun all around them.

Meanwhile, Mabel, Candy, and Grenda were all in the midst of recovering from their own bouts as wooden statues, though none of them knew much about what had really occurred. Still, as soon as they had properly gathered their bearings, Grenda was quick to turn on the pair, sending them a disapproving scowl as she addressed them.

“Ahem,” she began somewhat coldly. “Don’t you two have something you’d like to say?”

“…Grenda, we are so sorry,” Candy relented remorsefully.

“Yeah, we shouldn’t have left you behind,” Mabel added just as empathetically.

“It’s ok,” Grenda conceded, her bitter manner quickly dropping upon noticing their sincerity. “Maybe I do need to work on my flirting. But for now, come on. Let’s go dip our heads in some cheese and chocolate. Friends?”

“Friends,” the other two girls happily agreed as they all joined together in a group hug. This moment of reconciliation soon came to an end however, for before they could make their way over to the fondue fountains, they were abruptly halted by a certain baron.

“Wait! Don’t go!” Marius called after them, approaching Grenda in particular with a fond, longing smile. “Grenda, was it? I must speak with you. There is something about you, I-I can’t get you out of my head! You’re so bold and confident! I know you are probably out of my league, but… might I give you mien phone number?”

“I don’t have a phone!” Grenda brightly exclaimed, elated by this offer. “Write it on my face!”

The baron proceeded to do so as Mabel and Candy watched on, neither of them having to pretend to be happy for their friend’s successful romantic catch. “Whoa-oh! Go Grenda!” Mabel exclaimed with a surprised grin.

“I guess we shouldn’t have sold her short,” Candy concluded. “I call bridesmaid!”

“What? I call co-bridesmaid!” Mabel countered before both of them shared a warm laugh. Despite their earlier scuffle, their friendship had been easily repaired, with all three of them knowing that no boy, no matter how cute or fancy, was worth damaging something so valuable to them all.
“Is that the last of them?” Connie asked Steven as he finished bubbling away what seemed to be the last of the Gem mutants. They had finished proofing and capturing them all around the same time the ghost had disappeared, which meant that now the party and its guests could truly be safe to enjoy the remainder of their evening.

“Yeah, I think so,” Steven nodded, offering her a small, congratulatory smile. Connie didn’t get much of a chance to return it, however, before her mother approached, her manner strangely anxious as she met her daughter’s somewhat unreadable gaze.

“C-Connie,” Priyanka began gently, looking between her daughter and the sword in her hand. “I… is this… really what you’ve been doing all summer? Training to fight these… things?”

“Yeah…” Connie nodded, glancing down guiltily. “Mom… I’m really sorry about lying to you. It started off as a tiny secret, and then it felt like I didn’t hide it, you wouldn’t let me see Steven or Dipper or Mabel ever again…”

“Is… is that how you feel?” Priyanka asked, her tone genuinely upset at the thought of unintentionally causing her daughter such worry and fear. “Are we too controlling?”

“…Maybe…” Connie admitted with a small shrug, deciding to be completely honest with her mother on this.

“I just… wanted to be a good mother,” the doctor said remorsefully, almost sadly even. “I-I just wanted to protect you.”

“But I can protect myself now!” Connie urged firmly. “You saw that I can! You just… need to start trusting that I can handle some things on my own.”

Priyanka sighed, a bittersweet smile crossing her face as she knelt down and placed a hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “You are growing up awfully fast, aren’t you?” she said, a hint of pride filling her tone. “Okay. We’ll pull back on the rules. And I’ll try to keep an open mind about this,” she nodded to the sword in Connie’s hand. “And that,” she looked towards the bubbled Gem Steven was sending off to the temple. “And… him…” She finished rather tightly, nodding to the somewhat confused young Gem himself.

“That’s… all I really want,” Connie said, finally smiling herself.

“I know, it’s just… it scares me that you can’t talk to me about all this!” Priyanka pressed with apt concern. “I need to know what’s happening in your life. I need to be able to step in when you’re in over your head. Would you just promise me that you’ll stop all the lying?”

“That’s a rule,” Connie nodded, resolved to meet her mother halfway in doing just that.

“I love you, honey,” Priyanka smiled as she pulled her daughter into a warm, protective embrace.

“I love you too, Mom,” Connie retorted just as contentedly, more than happy to let her mother intervene if the need ever arose.

Steven wore a soft smile himself as he stood by, watching this heartwarming display. However, his grin did fade somewhat as he happened to glance down at Rose’s sword in his arms, particularly at his mother’s iconic symbol on its scabbard. He couldn’t help but wonder, as he watched Connie and her mother share such a tender, genuine moment, if he would have ever known a similar relationship with his own mother if she was still around. But as it stood, this was a gap he’d never truly have filled, a kind of protective, motherly love he’d never fully get to know. Or at least he thought.
For the young Gem was soon drawn out of his solemn thoughts as a familiar hand landed on his shoulder. Steven glanced up to meet Garnet’s gentle grin, followed by Pearl’s and Amethyst as they filled in beside her.

“Y-you guys!” he exclaimed in apt relief to see them unharmed. “You’re ok!”

“Of course we are!” Amethyst quipped, playfully elbowing him. “What, you really think we’re gonna let some undead lumber loser beat us down? Please, you know us better than that!”

“Are you enjoying the party, Steven?” Pearl asked, flustered changing the subject though she was still smiling down at her young ward nonetheless.

Steven paused, looking down at his mother’s sword one last time before smiling back up at his guardians. “You know what? Yeah. Yeah, I am.”

With the ghost gone and the heiress’ parents preoccupied, Dipper and Pacifica had found it rather easy to reunite and debrief from their harrowing experiences, both of them more than happy to watch the unfurling freedom of the newly-opened party all around them. “Man, if your family hates this, then they’re idiots,” Dipper remarked with a small laugh as several townsfolk ran by noisily but happily. “This is great!”

“Enjoy it while it lasts,” Pacifica huffed, crossing her arms. “Next year, I’m sure they’re just gonna lock everyone out again.”

Dipper paused, briefly noticing that the heiress still seemed rather remiss after everything had happened. Fortunately though, he quickly thought of a sure-fire way to change her sour tune. “Hey, guess what we’re standing on.”

Pacifica glanced down, her face lighting up with a vindictive grin as she noticed their muddy shoes were planted firmly on a repeat of her parents’ favorite white rug. From that point, neither of them were really able to hold their laughter in as they freely tarnished the carpet, spilling food and punch onto it without any care in the world, all in a sign of defiance to the billionaire’s rigid, self-righteous rules.

“Hey, so, uh…” Pacifica began somewhat awkwardly as their laughter began to die down. “I just wanted to say… um… thanks, I guess, for what you said back there. In a way, I guess it kinda inspired me to finally stop listening to my parents’ self-entitled garbage and start listening to myself for a change. And I gotta admit, it… feels kind of… nice.”

“If anyone’s thanking anyone around here, I should be thanking you,” Dipper said just as warmly. “If it wasn’t for you, then I’d still be a boring old hunk of wood right now.”

“Yeah, that totally would have sucked,” Pacifica remarked with something of a flirtatious grin. “I couldn’t imagine you, of all people, being so stiff and board…”

Dipper couldn’t really hold in a burst of heavy laughter at this, something that only served to fluster the heiress even more than she already was. “What, did you come up with that one yourself?”

“Hey, at least I tried. It’s not like puns are really my strong suit.”

“Yeah, I can tell.”
“Oh shut up,” Pacifica smirked, pushing him playfully as he continued laughing. “But seriously though, I should probably go and find someone to clean this mess up. I’ll be right back!”

Dipper waved her off with a fond smile that he was unable to chase away, even if he had wanted to. As catastrophic as this night had turned out to be, at the end of it all, it had all been worth it to form a true, genuine bond with Pacifica, who, as far as he was concerned, was so, so much kinder, braver, and better than he had ever thought her to be.

His contented musings on the heiress didn’t last too long, however, before a certain old hillbilly ran up, seemingly just as zany and excitable as ever. “Woo! Scoobity-doo!” McGucket exclaimed, hopping up and down in his usual wild way. “Hornswaggle m’goat knees!”

“Whoa, hey, McGucket!” Dipper greeted with a bright smile, happy to see the hillbilly out and about in the aftermath of recovering his memories. “How have you been? Are you—whoa!” he was succinctly cut off as McGucket suddenly pulled him aside, his kooky act falling to the wayside for a much more serious one as soon as they were out of everyone else’s earshot.

“Dipper! I’ve been lookin’ for ya!” the hillbilly began intently, his expression and tone both dire as he put his glasses on and pulled out the old laptop, which looked nowhere as bad off as it had been before. “I fixed the laptop and—”

“You fixed it?! Dipper interrupted, his eyes wide with surprise at this news. He paused, however, forcing himself not to be too overwhelmed by it as he remembered exactly why he had strived so hard to unlock said laptop in the first place. “Y-you… you didn’t happen to find anything on there about how split Gem fusions up… did you?”

“Er, uh… no?” McGucket frowned, confused by such an odd question before he returned to the matter at hand. “But anyway, I’ve been doin’ calculations, and I think somethin’ terrible is comin’! The apocalypse! The end times!”

Dipper simply let out a disappointed sigh at this as he glanced to the laptop somewhat bitterly, knowing he had wasted and lost so much for something that wouldn’t have even been able to help Lapis in the first place. But given that his spirits were relatively high from the party, he didn’t particularly feel like lowering them at the moment to look into the hillbilly’s frantic warnings, which in and of themselves, might not really hold any weight at all. “You know what, McGucket? How about we talk about this stuff tomorrow?”

“But—” McGucket fretfully tried to protest, only for Dipper’s already waning attention to quickly be diverted.

“Dipper!” Pacifica called from the party proper, smiling brightly as she beckoned for him to join her.

“Be there in a second!” he called back to her before turning to the distraught hillbilly once more with a small smile and a shrug. “It’s a party. Let’s have some fun for once, huh?”

“N-no! Wait!” McGucket exclaimed, though his pleas were in vain as Dipper left, dangerously unaware of what he had just uncovered. The hillbilly quickly opened the laptop up, its screen blaring the words “Imminent threat” in bright, glaring red as a countdown steadily blinked upon it, showing that only less than 24 hours remained. “Oh, this is bad!” he shook his head nervously. “Something’s coming! Somethin’ big!”

The hillbilly continued to look over his worrisome findings, completely unaware of the tapestry behind him, one that seemed to almost foretell of the very danger he feared was soon to come: a
“Hey,” Dipper greeted Pacifica blithely as he rejoined her near the makeshift ‘dance floor’ the townsfolk had set up at the center of the ballroom. “What’s up?”

“Uh… well…” the heiress blushed, anxiously averting his gaze. “I was just, um… Well… Oh, how do I put this…? I was thinking maybe… y-you and I could… you know…” Unable to spit it out, she instead nodded to the several pairs freely moving about the dance floor, biting her lip as she noted his initial confusion, followed by his dawning realization.

“What, you mean, dance?” he asked, looking back to her rather surprised.

“Y-Yeah, I mean, i-if you wanna…” she crossed her arms, feigning stoicism over the matter. “W-we don’t have to. I just thought it would be like, fun or something.”

“Oh, well, uh… I-I’m not really that much of a dancer,” he admitted, starting to become rather flustered himself in light of this offer.

“So? Neither are any of them,” she nodded back to the dance floor again, where the couples upon it were basically just spinning around in tandem without any rhyme or reason at all. All the same, he hesitated, his eyes wide and his cheeks just as red as hers as he met her awkward, apprehensive expression. “W-what? Are you embarrassed or something?”

“N-no!” he shook his head quickly. “Are you?”

“No!”

“W-well then, I guess we should…”

“Yeah…” she took in a deep breath, slowly taking the hand he shakily offered out to her. In truth, neither of them were exactly sure why there were so nervous, even as they emerged onto the open floor together. After all, they really had no reason to be; this was just going to be a loose, friendly, freeform dance. Nothing less, and nothing more.

And though it took a moment or two of mental preparation, they soon started to fall into this mindset themselves as they began to spin, hands intertwined as they rotated in wide, dizzying, almost chaotic circles. It didn’t take long for them to start laughing, their faces still somewhat red but this time it was a welcome warmth as they “danced” about, the ballroom around them and the multiple pairs of eyes curiously watching them soon forgotten just as much as their initial inhibitions were. As wild and unkempt as it was, there was no denying they were both having fun, enjoying each other’s company, something neither of them thought could never happen before this fateful night. Yet here they were, a highly-esteemed heiress with a tarnished family history and a middle-class boy only really known for his knowledge of the supernatural. An unusual pair, for sure, but that hardly mattered to either of them at that moment for as far as they were concerned, they were the same. Just two kids, spinning around an elegant ballroom, hands intertwined as they laughed together with freedom in their minds and happiness in their hearts.

Happiness that would someday become something that nothing, not the past, the present, or the future, would ever be able to destroy.
Chapter 50, Part 1: Not What He Seems

Chapter Summary

In which Stan is shady as hell, the Gems are confused, the kids are conflicted, and Ford finally fucking shows up in this damn fic.

Chapter Notes

AHAHAHAHAH AND HERE WE ARE THE BIG ONE!!!! THE BEGINNING OF THE END (of arc 5) AND THIS ONE IS HELLA INTENSE! BUT for real I hope you guys enjoy this one! I poured a lot of love and thought into it so I hope it shows! And so I won't hold you up here any longer. ENJOY THE INSANITY (the keyword is PORTAL)

In the very early hours just past midnight, the bulk of the residents of Gravity Falls were tucked in their beds, fast asleep as they should have been. The town was quiet, the summer night warm and starry as both the natural and the supernatural got their night’s rest. However, there was no such rest for the conman hard at work in the basement tucked away underneath the Mystery Shack, especially since he was so incredibly close to achieving exactly what he was working so hard for.

“Come on, come on…” Stan muttered as he watched the machine’s nearby energy tanks fill up with the hazardous liquid he had just acquired. “That should be just enough to finish the job,” he said with a nod of satisfaction, briefly removing his fez to wipe the sweat from his brow only to wipe a bit of toxic waste across his forehead in the process. “Whew! Can’t be too careful with this stuff.”

The conman’s attention was quickly diverted by a flash of vibrant light from the machine itself, followed by the telltale buzz of the countdown timer right above his head. Its screen blared read with the messages ‘event initialized’ before switching to a countdown of 18 hours. Stan couldn’t help but grin proudly upon seeing this, knowing that after years of waiting and working towards what had always seemed like an impossible dream, the end was finally in sight.

Of course, as close as he was to that end, Stan still took the time to once again briefly glance over what the first journal had to say about the machine’s operation. “Warning,” he began, though he quickly grew bored of the book’s wordy advisory. “Blah, blah, blah, ‘extreme usage could result in minor gravity anomalies.’ Aw, can it, poindexter!” He slammed the journal shut in aggravation. “I’ve come this far, I’m not giving up now!” And he meant exactly that. Not only had he been working tirelessly on this project for 30 years now, but he had done so in complete and total secrecy all that time. He had dutifully kept this momentous machine hidden, his life’s work...
unbeknownst to everyone: to the town, to the Crystal Gems, to even his own niece and nephew innocently sleeping upstairs. Still, the conman knew that secrecy was set to end roughly around the same time the countdown above him did, something he admittedly didn’t feel fully prepared for, especially when it came to his nibblings. There would be no avoiding telling them the truth, Stan knew, but at least he still had a few hours left to mentally prepare himself before he finally told them everything. Everything that he had hidden and everything he had hoped for, all at once.

But he had no time to plan his strategy on that front now; now was the time to set it all in motion once and for all. With the push of a button, the machine roared to life, sparking with its usual blue, vibrant, clarion glow that completely illuminated the darkened basement. “Yes!” Stan cheered excitedly, remembering that same kind of glow well from 30 years ago, though back then it had been under much different circumstances. “This is it!”

Amidst his growing elation, the conman hardly noticed the journal’s warnings start to come true as his fez slowly began to lift a bit off his own head on his own accord. Likewise just outside the shack, a few stray rocks and pebbles gradually came to levitate, Gompers the goat raising up a few inches off the ground right along with them. But the effects of these gravity anomalies were hardly limited to just the Mystery Shack. Up at the Crystal Temple, the patio furniture lightly hovered, and inside, with Steven, still totally asleep, rising a bit off his bed on the loft as Lion did the same off the couch below. In town itself, several cars were gently removed from the ground, sidewalk benches and unattended bicycles experiencing the same phenomenon. The anomalies spread even as the junkyard, where McGucket snoozed with his racoon wife, unaware that the repaired laptop was flashing red with an ‘active’ warning as it lifted off his desk. Back at the shack itself, even Dipper and Mabel remained fast asleep, unaware of the fact that they were lightly lifting off their own beds, unaware of the unearthly blue glow bleeding up to the attic through the floorboards, unaware of just how many things were about to change in the next 18 hours alone.

And, just as soon as gravity began to disappear from the unsuspecting town, it all came rushing right back.

Stan barely even heard the resounding thunk that echoed around the shack as everything landed back in their proper places. Instead, his sights were focused solely on the machine, solely on the dream that was so close, so very, very close to finally becoming a reality. “It’s gonna be a bumpy ride, but it’ll all be worth it,” he assured himself, firmly believing that as he synchronized his watch to match up to the countdown timer. The conman took in a deep, resolved breath as he shut the other journal he had in his possession, knowing that soon enough, he’d have no need for them at all. “Just eighteen more hours. Finally, everything changes, today.”

An early morning for Mabel almost always meant an early morning for Dipper, whether he liked it or not, and this morning was no exception. As she cheerfully rushed down the hall, he tiredly followed after her, hardly paying his sister’s energized excitement much mind.

“Ah! Here it is!” Mabel exclaimed brightly as they arrived at one of the shack’s less-opened doors. “Ok, so I was opening random doors—because I’m a creep—when I found something amazing!”

“If it was worth waking up at 7 AM for, then it really will be amazing,” Dipper deadpanned, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

“Oh, trust me, bro-bro, it will be,” Mabel assured as she began to open the door. “Feast your eyes!” she boldly proclaimed, motioning to the box loaded with all manner of fireworks and pyrotechnics resting on the closet floor.
“Whoa! No way!” Dipper exclaimed, now just as equally impressed and invested.

“Bro. Bro,” Mabel began, slinging an arm around her brother’s shoulder. “We’re both thinking it—”

“Crazy rooftop fireworks party!” both twins cheered daringly, though their plans were seemingly ruined as Stan happened to overhear them.

“Not so fast, kids!” he exclaimed, sending the startled pair a staunch glare. “There is no way on earth you’re setting off those dangerous, illegal fireworks…” Upon trailing off, the conman broke into a wide, mischievous grin as he placed hands on each of his nibblings’ shoulders. “Without me!”

The twins shared an excited gasp at this, one that Stan merely chuckled in warm amusement over as he pulled the fireworks stash out of the closet and led the way outside. The family decided to take to the roof platform, dragging both the fireworks as well as a cooler filled with ice cream up with them before the intentional explosions began. While Stan mostly hung back and let Dipper and Mabel have their fun with the fireworks, he was more than happy to help them out by lighting their fuses up so they could freely set them off.

“Here ya go, sweetie,” the conman grinned as he used a sparkler to ignite the skyrocket Mabel was holding. “Set something on fire for your Grunkle Stan.”

“I am the god of destruction!” Mabel shouted at the top of her lungs, wildly shooting the firework off into the sky without any restraint at all.

No sooner had the burst of fiery color exploded in the morning sky then Steven and the Gems arrived from the temple, all of them curious as to what all of the noise and excitement was about.

“Heyooo, Pines fam!” Amethyst greeted casually as she rolled up to the shack alongside her teammates. “What’s happenin’?”

“Are you guys having a crazy rooftop fireworks party?” Steven asked with intrigued stars in his eyes. “Can we join in too?”

“Eh, sure,” Stan shrugged with an amicable smirk. “Pretty sure we’ve got enough of these babies to go around. Ya know, as long as we don’t end up blowing up the entire box at once somehow.”

“Now, hold on a minute,” Pearl cut in, hands on her hips as she sent the conman a disapproving frown. “Stan, are you sure you should be letting children play around with such dangerous explosives?”

“Uh, I dunno,” the conman retorted, his tone slightly teasing. “Are you sure you should be totally lame, Pearl?”

As the white Gem let out an appalled scoff at this, both Stan and Amethyst burst out laughing, the kids all quickly joining in. Even Garnet got a good chuckle out of this as she placed a hand on her disgruntled teammate’s shoulder. “He’s got a bit of a point,” she remarked wryly, which ended up being enough to get break Pearl’s stoicism and elicit a small laugh from her as well.

From there, it didn’t take long for the Gems to get in on the fun. Everyone hopped up on the roof, shooting off what was left of the fireworks and cracking jokes among each other all the while. Steven leapt right into waving around sparklers and eating ice pops with Dipper and Mabel while Garnet was able to use just her fingertips to give a spark to most of the fireworks Stan, Amethyst, and even, despite some initial hesitance, Pearl were blasting off to the sky. In the colorful radiance put off by the explosions, no one was able to deny that they were enjoying their early morning
party immensely, even if it was somewhat destructive. For by the time the fireworks had all run out, small, controlled fires had broken out across the perimeter of the shack, though fortunately none of them were too serious.

“Woo!” Mabel cheered as she finished sending the last firework flying. “This whole place is on fire!”

“Literally,” Dipper noted, glancing down at the flames dotting the shack below them.

“Well, I suppose that’s the risk you run when you set off literal explosives this close to a wooden structure,” Pearl said with something of a bemused grin.

“Eh, this is far from the worst this whole shack has seen this summer alone,” Stan remarked, taking a swig of his cola. “But seriously though, we should probably clean this mess up.”

“Oh! I have an idea!” Steven chimed in. “We can use water balloons to put all these fires out!”

“…I don’t see why not,” the conman shrugged, with the twins and Amethyst eagerly getting on board with this idea.

In no time at all, thanks to Garnet, a whole bucket of water balloons had been filled up, and the purple Gem and the kids were all more than happy to partake. Stan, Garnet, and Pearl hung by on the porch, watching in apt amusement as the kids ran about, pelting each other with water balloons and laughing all the while as they tried to dodge Amethyst’s direct onslaught with the garden hose.

“Honestly, Amethyst, isn’t using the hose cheating?” Pearl asked as the purple Gem laughingly sprayed both Steven and Dipper down, easily blocking off the water balloon Mabel tossed her way before doing the same to her.

“Honestly, Pearl,” Amethyst mocked playfully. “Isn’t sitting on the sidelines like that boring?” At this, the purple Gem turned the hose on her teammate, effectively soaking her and eliciting plentiful laughter from everyone else.

“Ha! Nice one, Amethyst!” Stan exclaimed, readily chuckling at the white Gem’s unserious frustration.

“Ya think so?” Amethyst asked with a mischievous smirk. “Cause I this one will be even better!”

“Hey!” the conman exclaimed, unable to hold back another laugh as the purple Gem sprayed him down as well. “Alright, now you’ve done it! I’m gonna… eh forget it,” Stan shrugged. “You’re just lucky I’m too lazy to get up outta this chair.”

“Well I’m certainly not!” Pearl huffed, standing as she grabbed an armful of water balloons as Amethyst hurried off. “Amethyst! Get back here! It’s payback time!”

“Hey, Pearl! Wait up!” Steven called after the white Gem as him, Dipper, and Mabel readily followed after her.

“Yeah! We wanna get some payback too!” Mabel proclaimed with a wild war cry, already launching a water balloon in Amethyst’s direction.

“Ah, this is what Saturdays are for,” Stan remarked contentedly as he reclined into his seat. “Doing dumb things forever.”

“Dumb things forever!” all three of the kids echoed in a triumphant shout as they jumped into a
pile of left over water balloons together. Somewhere behind them, Pearl was still in hot pursuit after Amethyst, tossing balloons at her while the purple Gem occasionally aimed her hose back at her teammate, both of them laughing all the while.

“This is the life, ain’t it, shades?” Stan asked Garnet as she leaned against the nearby porch post.

“I’d say it is,” the Gem leader replied with a small smile. She paused for a moment, said smile disappearing before it returned a bit more genuine than before. “Actually, Stan, I’ve been meaning to offer you an apology, one that’s not just from me, but from Amethyst and Pearl too.”

“Uh… for what?”

“Before this summer began, we had all seemed to live under the unspoken rule that we’d avoid each other whenever possible,” Garnet began to explain. “And when our paths did cross, we usually only met each other with hostility and suspicion. But then…” She looked out towards the kids, who were engrossed in their own miniature water balloon battle. “Steven met Dipper and Mabel, and the close friendship they have now sparked almost immediately after they did. And in a sense… they were the ones who brought all of us together, who helped us realize that there’s more to you than we thought, Stan.”

“Oh really?” the conman asked, glancing away in slight nervousness upon hearing all this.

“Really,” Garnet confirmed, placing a friendly hand on his shoulder. “And so we’re sorry for however unfairly we might have treated you in the past. But its good to know that we can all finally get along. For the kids’ sakes.”

“Uh… y-yeah,” Stan took in an anxious breath. Normally, he would have been somewhat surprised, even grateful even, to hear such warm sentiments from any of the Crystal Gems really. But in light of the massive secret he had been keeping from them for years now, a secret that was very close to being brought to light, he couldn’t help but feel rather uncomfortable, to the point of near guilt, as he weakly returned the Gem leader’s smile. “F-for… for the kids.”

“Hey, Mr. Pines!” Steven exclaimed as him and the twins ran forward, all three of them equally cheerful despite being soaking wet. “We just wanted to say thanks for all the water balloons and popsicles and fireworks! This has been so much fun!”

“It sure has!” Mabel readily agreed, holding her popsicle up in a “toast” of sorts. “To Grunkle Stan! Not just a great uncle-”

“The greatest uncle!” Dipper finished as they all playfully tossed a round of water balloons at the conman as he put forth a weak effort to shield himself from them.

“Alright, alright,” Stan chuckled as both him and Garnet got the watery brunt of the kids’ attack. “I tell ya,” he said to his nibblings in particular. “It’s unnatural for siblings to get along as well as you two do. Heck, its honestly crazy just how great all three of you get on with each other even though this whole little ‘group’ of yours only started this summer.”

“Well, they don’t call us the Mystery Kids for nothing!” Steven exclaimed with a warm smile.

“Ha! Yeah!” Mabel grinned, pulling both boys in for a sudden hug from their spot on the ground. “And don’t worry! We’ve still got plenty of summer left to drive each other crazy!”

“Ugh, Mabel!” Dipper groaned as Mabel pulled on him a bit too tightly, prompting him to push her away and resulting in another water balloon falling on both her and Steven.
“Heh, yeah…” Stan said with something of an anxious laugh. “Plenty of summer left…” He paused briefly, glancing towards his nibblings in particular as he realized that he needed to stop beating around the bush. He had clearly already warmed them up enough by giving them this morning of blissful fun. He could only keep it going for so long before the truth came bursting through, which meant that it would be for the best if he was the one to reveal it instead, on his own terms. “Uh… kids? There’s something I, um, s-something I should tell you. It’s, um… well i-its complicated… I-” The conman hesitated as he looked back to the trio of curious kids before him, noticing that they weren’t the only ones listening. Amethyst and Pearl had just happened to finish their ongoing chase as they happened to overhear Stan, and of course, Garnet was still standing right next to him. And just like that, his own terms had turned into everyone else’s terms instead. “…I-I gotta go refresh my soda!” he quickly improvised, throwing on a casual-enough smile. “B-be right back!”

At this, the conman quickly stood and walked over to the far side of the shack, away from the scrutiny of both the kids and the Gems. He let out the breath he had been holding in for some time now, briefly glancing over his shoulder to make sure no one had followed him. “Enjoy it while you can, Stan,” he muttered to himself, glancing over at his own reflection in the window nearby. “They’ll all find out sooner or later. After all, today’s the day…”

And indeed it was. For in just a few hours, just about everything would change in ways no one could really expect, Stan included. But how could he just say that to everyone, right out of the blue? How could he tell the Gems about the real reason behind his longstanding conflict with them, just when they were all finally starting to get along? Or even beyond that, how could he possibly even begin to describe any of it to his nibblings? To the two kids who looked up to him, who believed in him, even when he didn’t always believe in himself? Who had managed to work their way so deeply into his heart that he would do anything, anything for them? Who he was constantly putting in danger by simply working on the massive, potentially catastrophic machine that had been resting just under their feet the entire summer?

In truth, Stan hadn’t the faintest clue about how he was even going to start to explain any of his age-old secrets to anyone, Gems and kids included. But when it came right down to it, it would turn out he wouldn’t even have to. Because everything was about to be revealed in the very last way he had wanted them to.

Stan was broken out of his ongoing musings as he happened to glance up and notice what looked to be a strange red dot resting on his fez. “Huh? What is that, a ladybug?” he frowned, reaching up a hand to slap it away only for it to remain where it was. In fact, several of more dots appeared in quick succession, all of them aimed directly at the confused conman. “What the—oh no!” Stan barely even had time to let out a gasp before he was abruptly tackled by a formerly-hidden man in black.

Countless more similarly-dressed man, or agents, rather were quick to follow the first out of their hiding spots in the nearby woods. “Target secure!” one of the leaders of the invading bunch shouted over his walkie-talkie. “Take the house!”

The agents did just that, still pouring out of the forest as they rushed forward to form a perimeter around the Mystery Shack. Somewhere overhead, a helicopter buzzed overhead, several more agents repelling down from it and bursting into the shack itself through windows and doors. Several teams filled into almost every room of the house, from the gift shop, to the den, to even the attic were Waddles had been napping peacefully. “Pig secure!” one of the agents called through the intercom upon embracing the unwitting pig tightly. “We have secured a pig!”

Outside, things were still in absolute chaos, the ground agents rushing to surround the quite startled
group of kids and Gems in the front yard. Steven, Dipper, and Mabel all bunched up close together, the Gems standing over them protectively as they took up an offensive stance, ready to summon their weapons at a moment’s notice if they needed to protect the kids. “Kids and aliens are secure!” another agent called to his superior as he cocked his weapon as a precaution.

“A-aliens!?” Pearl huffed, offended by this derogatory title.

“Technically, we are aliens,” Garnet corrected, though all the same, she was rather baffled as to how she hadn’t seen this strike coming through her future vision. Really, she hadn’t been getting any clear, concise visions all day, which, considering how peaceful things had been thus far, she hadn’t really put much thought into. But now, with the peace abruptly shattered and replaced by an all-out government raid, the Gem leader was immediately thrown off by her foresight not properly working for some unknown reason, especially at an integral moment such as this.

“Don’t move!” one of the agents shouted at the Gems in particular, the entire legion circling them keeping their weapons trained on the trio. “Or else!”

“Or else what?” Amethyst brazenly challenged, ready to draw her whip. “You’re gonna shoot us with those dinky little water guns of yours? Pffft, as if!”

The agent in question was quickly provoked to action at this as he aimed his weapon at the purple Gem and opened fire. The gun’s stunning blast was quickly deflected by Steven, however, as he summoned his shield and jumped in front of Amethyst at just the right time. “Whoa! Hold on!” the young Gem exclaimed, just as alarmed by this dramatic turn of events as Dipper and Mabel were. “I-I don’t know what’s going on here, but can’t we all just talk this out without shooting each other with lasers?”

“Whoa, the chief wasn’t kidding,” one of the other agents whispered to his nearby teammate. “The kid really is one of them too!”

“One of them?” Steven frowned in apt confusion, though he never received an answer.

“But what about those other two?” the other agent nodded towards the equally bewildered twins.

“Nah, they’re normal, I think. Pretty sure they’re related to the old man.”

“Old man?” Dipper asked, exchanging a worried glance with Mabel as they quickly figured out who that was. “Wait! Grunkle Stan?!”

“Ugh! Hey! Hands off, you stooge!” the aforementioned conman shouted as he was dragged up to the front of the shack, securely handcuffed. The pair of agents roughly pulled Stan up to one of the countless government vehicles surrounding the shack, pressing him firmly against it as they patted him down for any hidden weapons. “I-I don’t understand! What did I do that warrants this much arresting?!”

None of the lower level agents bothered to explain this as their pair of superiors stepped forward, both of them quite familiar to everyone present: Agent Powers and Agent Trigger. “The government guys?” Dipper interjected in confusion upon seeing the pair of agents alive and well again. “I thought you guys got eaten by zombies!”

“We survived,” Trigger remarked curtly. “Barely.”

“I used Trigger as a human shield,” Powers said, just as dryly as ever. “He cried like a baby.”

“What? Hey!” Trigger exclaimed in embarrassment. “Not in front of the special-ops guys!”
Wanting to get right to the point, Powers stepped up to Stan, pulling out a government tablet which was currently displaying footage of what appeared to be a person in a hazmat suit hauling away barrels of some unknown substance. “This is security footage of a government waste facility. A o’four hundred hours last night, someone robbed three hundred gallons of dangerous toxic waste.”

“What? You think that’s me?!” Stan asked, seemingly appalled by such an accusation, especially as the kids and the Gems all looked to him in surprise.

“Don’t play dumb with us, Pines,” Powers warned as he motioned for his fellow agents to take Stan away.

“But I actually am dumb!” the conman pleaded as he was shoved into the backseat of the government vehicle. “Last night I was stocking the gift shop, I swear!”

“Wait!” Mabel shouted as her and Dipper broke out of the barricade of agents to rush forward on Stan’s behalf. “You’ve got the wrong guy! Our Grunkle Stan might shoplift the occasional tangerine, but he’s not some evil super villain!”

“Listen, kids,” Powers began sternly, kneeling down to the twins’ level. “We’ve been watching your family all summer, and we’ve seen some disturbing things, but nothing as dangerous as what your uncle is hiding. Somewhere hidden in this shack is a doomsday device!”

Needless to say that neither of the twins were able to suppress a gap upon hearing such an incredible accusation, one that couldn’t possibly be true. As they glanced over at Stan himself, he gave them a look that was telling that he had no idea what the agent was talking about, one that carried a good amount of pleading for them to believe him in his innocence, which they readily did, no questions asked. After all, there was no way someone like Stan could ever be harboring anything like a doomsday device right under the Mystery Shack. Certainly, the agents had to have been mistaken somehow, in more ways than one.

“Yo! What about us?!” Amethyst asked, still scowling fiercely at the agents surrounding them. “What’s the deal with you losers holding us up if you’re only here for Stan?”

“That should be obvious,” Powers remarked evenly, glancing over at the Gems. “You so-called ‘Crystal Gems’ are being detained by order of the U.S. Government for being a highly dangerous extraterrestrial threat to planet Earth.”

“Threat?” Steven asked, exchanging a baffled glance with his guardians. “No, you guys have it all wrong! The Gems protect the Earth from all sorts of stuff, even if they are from outer space!”

“That’s right!” Pearl staunchly agreed. “All of this is complete, absolute nonsense! You have no right to ‘detain’ any of us considering the fact that all we’ve ever strived to do is keep you humans safe for centuries now!”

“Then how do you explain all this?” Powers held his tablet once again, swiping through a collection of pictures. Pictures of various Gem monster attacks, of Peridot’s robinoids, of meandering Gem mutants, and the highlight of it all: of the menacing hand ship descending upon Gravity Falls. “We have substantial proof that all of these disasters, and several more, are directly connected to the four of you, and as such, our orders are to bring you to our maximum security research facility for extensive testing and experimentation.”

“Painful experimentation,” Trigger added sharply.

“Mm… yeah, that’s not happening,” Garnet concluded, pulling her arms around all three of her
teammates. “Sorry to disappoint.”

At that moment, the tables abruptly seemed to turn as Powers gave the preemptive command for the agents surrounding the Gems to surge them, only for Garnet to act before they could even think. With a tight hold on Pearl, Amethyst, and Steven, the Gem leader leapt high, temporarily blinding the nearby agents with a burst of lightning aimed for the ground. By the time things had cleared, the Crystal Gems and their young ward were all but gone, leaving not so much as even a trace behind.

“Steven!” Dipper and Mabel exclaimed in surprised unison at the daring escape they had just witnessed. Still, they were both somewhat relieved to know that the young Gem and his guardians had given the agents the slip, even though it looked as though Stan wouldn’t be so lucky.

“Ground team! Form a search party and go after those Gems now!” Powers ordered, frustrated that they had all been so easily outsmarted. “They couldn’t have gotten far. Raid their base up the hill if you have to, use of force and weapons is completely authorized! Leave no stone unturned until those aliens are found!”

A fraction of the agents immediately acted upon their chief’s orders, taking their weapons as they hurried up the hill towards the temple in search of the Gems. “In the meantime,” Powers continued, calming down somewhat as he turned to his partner. “Trigger, you take the children. I’ll talk to the old man. Sorry to break it to you, kids,” he said to the twins as he put his darkened sunglasses on. “But you don’t know your ‘neighbors’ or your uncle at all.”

By this point, both Dipper and Mabel were far too stunned by everything that was all too quickly unfurling to say much at all as Trigger motioned a pair of agents over to escort the twins to another nearby government vehicle. Stan grew quite distraught upon seeing this, knowing that the last thing he ever wanted was for his nibblings to get dragged into all of this mess. A mess that he had done everything in his power to try and avoid, but in his assurance that he wouldn’t get caught, he had gotten sloppy and careless to the point that the consequences could very well be severe if he couldn’t think of a way out of it in time. “Kids!” Stan shouted, beating against the window of the car he was in with his handcuffed wrists to catch his concerned nibblings’ attention. “You gotta believe me! For once, I’m actually innocent! Kids!” The conman left off on this final desperate plea as the vehicle drove off, taking him with it. Dipper and Mabel only had time to exchange a bewildered glance as they were also hauled away against their will, neither of them having the faintest clue as to what was really going on or what they could possibly do about any of it.

It turned out that Powers hadn’t been wrong in his assumption that the Crystal Gems hadn’t gotten far, for they had taken refuge up on one of the temple’s outstretched hands thanks to Garnet’s quick thinking. Still, it was clear they wouldn’t be able to hide out there for too long as the agents were already beginning to swarm the temple, busting into the house and raiding everything therein as they tried to beat the temple gate itself down to no avail.

“Oh, this is a disaster!” Pearl huffed, tucking back behind one of the stone hands’ fingers. “For over 150 years, we’ve operated out of Gravity Falls without being bothered by any of Earth’s governmental bodies, and now all of the sudden, here comes a bunch of agents trying to arrest us simply for being here! It’s completely absurd!”

“Ugh, this is just like what happened with those stupid society jerks!” Amethyst growled, kicking another one of the fingers petulantly. “It’s like nobody around here appreciates just how much we do for them! So what if we lure a few dumb monsters or Homeworld ships around here every now
and then, we always make sure to clean up whatever messes we make when it comes to those
things!"

“Y-yeah, we do!” Steven exclaimed with a small, assured smile. “After all, we’re the Crystal
Gems! Helping people, helping the Earth, is our job! If only we could make those agents realize
that too... Maybe if we try talking to them, they’ll realize that we’re not.”

“That’s not going to work,” Garnet shook her head, watching with scrutiny from above as more
agents piled into the temple. “I have a feeling these agents aren’t going to listen to reason.”

“S-so what are we going to do?” Steven asked anxiously.

“Well, it seems as though we only have one choice,” Pearl remarked with an aggravated sigh.
“We’ll need to leave Gravity Falls, possibly even the country, until further notice. At least for 100
years or so until all of this nonsense dies down.”

“Ugh, darn it!” Amethyst moaned in protest. “But I kinda liked it here!”

“Well its not like we have any other options, Amethyst!” the white Gem argued back, though it
was clear she wasn’t too keen on the idea herself. “Those agents won’t let up, no matter how many
times we drive them away! Of course, it’ll take some time to sneak past them and get everything
out. We’ll have to find a way to move all of the bubbles, and pack up Steven’s things, but—”

“Wait!” Steven interupted, distraught even by the suggestion of leaving alone. “Pearl, we can’t just
leave Gravity Falls! This place is my home, our home! Everyone we care about is here: Dad, Mr.
Pines, Dipper, Mabel, we can’t just leave them all behind!”

“Steven’s right,” Garnet firmly agreed. “We are not leaving.”

“B-but the agents-”

“We’ll figure out a way to get rid of them,” the Gem leader interrupted Pearl. “But we’re not going
to let them drive us out of our home. This is where Rose wanted us to stay, the place she wanted us
to protect, after she was gone, and we’re going to do exactly that, agents, or no agents.”

“Yeah! That’s the spirit, G!” Amethyst cheered, giving Steven a celebratory high five. “Always the
rebel against the system! I love it! But uh… speaking of rebels... looks like they’re in the middle
of hauling Stan off down there…” The purple Gem’s smile quickly faded as she glanced down
towards the shack, where the vehicle Stan was in was just starting to pull away.

“I hate to say it, but that’s also rather odd that they’d want to arrest Stan, of all people,” Pearl
mused. “True, he’s committed many illegal activities in the time that we’ve known him for alone,
but nothing on the level that the law of the land would have any reason to go after him for… And
all that talk of a ‘doomsday device’? It sounded way too far fetched to me…”

“So that means Mr. Pines has gotta be innocent, right?” Steven asked, his tone hopeful. “Then we
need to do something to help him! And Dipper and Mabel too!”

“Uh, normally I’d be down for a good old-fashioned jailbreak, Steven, but... we should probably
be keeping a low profile for now with all these agents running around,” Amethyst said with a
pittied frown.

“Amethyst’s right,” Pearl nodded. “Knowing Stan, he’ll be able to figure his own way out of all
this mess. And as for the twins, I... um... w-well I’m sure those agents won’t do anything to harm
them, so—”
“No!” Steven protested, his hands clenched in tight fists at his sides as he looked to his guardians intently. “Dipper and Mabel risked their lives helping us break out of Peridot’s ship; it’s only fair that we save now in return! We owe it to them, you guys know we do! That’s why we have to go bust them out and do anything we can to help them and Mr. Pines! They’re our friends, heck, at this point it’s almost like they’re our second family! So, who’s with me?!”

“I am.” Garnet answered immediately, putting her hand on top of Steven’s outstretched one. “Steven’s right, we owe it to the twins, and in a way, to Stan too to help them.”

“Oh, you better believe I’m in!” Amethyst grinned daringly, slapping her hand down as well. “It’s jailbreak, part 2, baby! C’mon, Pearl, you know you want in on this action!”

“Ugh, I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this but… fine,” Pearl consented, well aware of just how risky this endeavor would be as she added her hand to the pile. “Though let’s please try to be careful about this, alright?”

“Great!” Steven sent a grateful grin to all three of his guardians, confident in the believe that together they could do this, no matter what obstacles were put in their way. “Then its all settled. It’s time for the Crystal Gems to save the day!”

As part of their intensive investigation, the government agents had taken up shop at the Gravity Falls police station, turning it into a temporary headquarters of sorts until they could take both their findings and their new convict back to Washington with them. Still, as eager as the agents were to book Stan and put him away, he still had to be properly processed first, including fingerprinting, mug shots, and of course, a proper round of scrutinizing interrogation.

“Stanford Pines,” Agent Powers began authoritatively as he stood before the detained conman. “You stand accused of theft of government waste, conspiracy, and possession of illegal weapons. How do you plead to these charges?”

“Oh, g-guilticient!” Stan exclaimed, his nerves driving him more than common sense. “I-I mean, innoguilty! I-I mean, uh… c-can I have my phone call now?”

Fortunately, Powers conceded to this request, allowing the conman to dial up whoever he chose. Of course, Stan was going to make this call count, and though he had been half tempted to call Greg up and ask for help giving the former rock star’s knowledge on the matter, he decided to go down a less incriminating route as he dialed up Soos instead.

Normally by this time, the handyman would have shown up for his shift at the shack, but of course, word of Stan’s arrest had already spread far and wide throughout town. Soos was practically in the midst of a meltdown over the news as he pulled up to the drive through at Yumberjacks, though he managed to compose himself just enough to place his hurried order. “Ok, gimme whatever you got that comes with a free toy.”

“Soos!” The handyman gasped upon suddenly hearing Stan’s voice out of the blue, and his initial assumption jumped to the restaurant’s lumberjack-shaped drive through speaker.

“Mr. Pines?!” Soos exclaimed, leaning out of his truck a bit to pat the speaker down. “Is this some sort of… possession situation?”

“Just pick up!” Stan shouted, the handyman realizing that his voice was coming from the walkie talking on his dashboard.

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“Mr. Pines, what happened?” Soos asked, deeply concerned as he picked the walkie talkie up. “I heard you got arrested or something? I-I had to go get some panic food before heading over, but I—”

“Never mind that now,” Stan quickly interrupted, knowing that he had to talk fast, lest the agents right on the other side of the door overhear him. “Listen, I need you to do something for me. You know that vending machine in the gift shop? I need you to guard it with your life. No matter what happens, no matter who talks to you, do not let them touch that machine!”

Before Soos could even think to ask any questions on this strange request, the walkie talking cut out, leaving the handyman a direct order from his boss that he was obligated to carry out, regardless of how odd it was. “Time for repair guy…” he began firmly, adjusting his hat. “To become a repair man.”

“Sir, your Junior Yum-Yum Baby-Time Kiddo Meal?” the drive through employee asked as Soos sternly pulled up to the window.

“Oh, just put it in my mouth,” he commanded resolutely, gripping the steering wheel tightly as the employee pulled a fry out of the box and put it in the handyman’s open mouth. “Let’s do this.” With this steady proclamation, Soos set forth, driving straight through the nearby hedges as he sped off towards the direct of the Mystery Shack, determined to do as his boss had said down to the very letter, no matter what.

As caught off guard by the raid on the shack as they were, Dipper and Mabel were none too happy about being abruptly hauled away in wake of their uncle’s supposedly uncalled for arrest. But even still, very few of their questions and concerns were answered as Agent Trigger drove them away from the shack, stoic as always as he conversed with his partner through the vehicle’s video screen.

“We’ve got Mr. Pines in custody,” Powers reported from the police station. “Our men are searching the shack for that device and we still have a team hunting high and low for those Crystal Gems. You take care of those kids, Trigger.”

“Right.” Trigger staunchly nodded as the video feed cut out, leaving the twins to begin their ongoing barrage of questions anew.

“What are you gonna do to us?!” Mabel demanded as both her and Dipper sent the agent in the driver’s seat defiant glares.

“We’ll be taking you to child services,” Triggers remarked, not even bothering to glance back at the twins.

“Boo!” Mabel goaded crossly at this.

“Wait, that’s it?” Dipper asked incredulously. “Are you sure you guys don’t wanna, you know, interrogate us? See what we know about this whole ‘doomsday device’ thing?”

Trigger let out something of a mocking snicker upon hearing this, rolling his eyes at such a suggestion. “Kid, please. If we thought either of you actually knew anything about this, we would have pulled one of you aside for questioning a long time ago.”

“B-but what about all of the Gem stuff?!?” Dipper protested, rather frustrated by this dry response. “We know about all of that. Heck, we were even there for a lot of it, and we-”
“Just quit while you’re ahead, kid,” Trigger cut him off, clearly disinterested as he pressed a button up front. “Here, enjoy some mindless reality TV, designed to pacify you and make you stop asking questions.”

As disgruntled as both twins were, they briefly glanced at the screen in front of them where a surgeon was just starting an operation on an unconscious patient. “I’m about to make the incision…”

“KER-PRANK!” a flamboyantly dressed young man suddenly jumped out from behind the nearby potted plant, aptly startling the focused surgeon.

“You’re watching KER-PRANKED with Justin Kerprank!” the announcer for the show exclaimed as the logo popped on screen.

Of course, the twins were quick to lose interest in this rather silly program, both of them well aware that they had much more important matters to discuss, especially now that Trigger seemed to be distracted. “I can’t believe it,” Dipper said quite petulantly as he crossed his arms. “These guys still won’t take me seriously, even though they know about all of the supernatural stuff in Gravity Falls now! How much more is it gonna take to get them to finally just listen!?”

“Dipper, who cares about getting these stuffy dodoheads to listen to anything?” Mabel asked with a huff of exasperation. “What matters right now is Grunkle Stan. There’s no way he was stealing hazardous waste! We gotta clear his name somehow! And we have to find a way to help keep Steven and the Gems from getting caught too! They don’t deserve to be experimented on in some creepy government lab!”

“…You’re right,” Dipper sighed, anchoring himself back to the matter at hand. “I don’t really know what we can do about the Gems at the moment, but as for Grunkle Stan…” he trailed off, pausing to glance around the vehicle for any kind of inspiration, only to get one in the security camera positioned near the driver’s seat. “Oh! Wait a minute! The security tapes! Didn’t Stan say he was restocking the gift shop last night? If we can get the Mystery Shack’s surveillance tapes, we could prove he’s innocent!”

“Great idea, bro-bro!” Mabel exclaimed, instantly on board with it. “Now we just need to think of a way out of here. Think, Mabel… think…”

“Uh, actually, it looks like you won’t have to think too hard over this one,” Dipper said, glancing out of the car’s back window.

“Why not?”

“Because our way out of here is coming up right behind us,” he nodded back to the window, prompting Mabel to look out as well. And indeed, rushing up along the road from behind was none other than Lion, toting Steven and all three of the Gems on his back as he fiercely raced after the vehicle.

“Go, Lion, go!” Steven cheered his pink pet onward, Amethyst chuckling wildly behind him as Pearl held tightly onto Garnet to remain on his back. “Aaaaand get ready with a portal in 3… 2… 1!”

At this command, Lion let out a piercing roar, a sonic blast ripping forth from him into the open air ahead, creating a tear in space time large enough for them all to get through. The portal reopened on the path ahead of the car, and the pink beast stopped squarely just several feet in front of the quickly approaching car.
“W-what the-?!” Agent Trigger exclaimed in alarm at the pink animal in his path, but before he even had time to slam down on the breaks, Lion roared once more, this time sending out only a simple sonic blast. The burst hit the front of the car squarely, sending it spinning off of its path and into the forest on the side of the road. “Mayday! Mayday! Agent down!” Trigger shouted through his com as the car sped down the hill, completely out of control. In the chaos, Dipper and Mabel were equally as frightened as they held onto their seats for dear life, until the car finally came to an abrupt, crashing halt courtesy of a cluster of well-placed trees. Fortunately, no one was harmed in the accident, though Trigger was quick to find that his door was jammed shut by the nearby trees, while the twins were able to easily slip out of the vehicle just as Lion arrived at the bottom of the hill with Steven and the Gems in tow.

“Dipper! Mabel!” the young Gem cried, hopping off the pink beast’s back to give both of his friends a relieved hug. “I’m so glad you guys are ok!”

“You’re glad we’re ok?” Dipper couldn’t help but let out a small laugh at this. “Steven, you guys are the ones who are technically on the run from the U.S. Government, aren’t you?”

“Technically,” Garnet cut in with a small smile.

“Still, you two aren’t hurt, are you?” Pearl asked the twins, concerned. “We apologize for our rather… unorthodox way of rescuing you two. It was Amethyst’s idea…”

“Hey, it worked, didn’t it?” the purple Gem shrugged.

“Backup! Requesting backup!” Trigger exclaimed to his com, sending an alarmed glare the Gems’ way. “The Crystal Gems are right here at my location! I require at least an entire support squadron in order to neutralize-”

The agent was abruptly cut off by Dipper, who ended up swiping Trigger’s earpiece away before defiantly crushing it on the ground in order to keep the agent cut off from the rest of his team.

“Nice one,” Garnet remarked, sending Dipper a nod of approval.

“Grrr, you aliens will never get away with this!” Trigger shouted, infuriated. “And neither will you kids for siding with them! They’re a dangerous extraterrestrial threat and they’ll end up destroying this entire planet if they’re not taken care of immediately!”

“Geez, calm down, dude,” Amethyst rolled her eyes. “What, do you think we’re gonna like ‘abduct’ you onto our ‘spaceship’ and ‘probe’ you or something like that? Ha! Come on, man, get real.”

“Thanks for bailing us out, you guys,” Mabel said to the Gems with a grateful smile. “But we still need to do the same for Grunkle Stan.”

“And fortunately, we have a plan about how we’re going to clear his name,” Dipper assured confidently.

“Really? That’s great!” Steven beamed, already hopping back onto Lion. “So, what are we waiting for? Let’s go save Mr. Pines!”

“Oh, you poor kids. Do you really think your uncle’s innocent?” Trigger shook his head sympathetically. By now, Steven, the Gems, and Mabel had already moved on to head back to the shack, but Dipper happened to linger back a bit as the agent continued his almost rather sincere appeal. “I’ve seen it all before. False names, double lives… One minute they’re playing with water balloons, the next they’re building doomsday devices. Your uncle scammed the whole world. Are
you really gonna let him scam you too?"

Dipper took pause upon hearing this, somewhat jolted by everything the agent had just said. Stan had to be innocent, it just made no sense for him to be the mastermind behind a villainous plot as massive as a doomsday machine. And yet… how did any of them really know that for sure? After all, the conman was a proven pathological liar when it came to his business practices; who was to say he hadn’t lied about other things? Much more important, potentially life-threatening things?

Yet certainly, even if he was involved in some notorious scheme like this, Stan would have told at least his nibblings. If he was transparent with no one else, he was with them. And even beyond that following the zombie incident weeks ago, Stan had promised he wasn’t harboring any other secrets concerning Gravity Falls, a promise that Dipper wanted to believe, that for the most part, he did believe. Which meant that despite the agent’s warnings and his own fledgling doubts, Stan was innocent.

Right?

“You… you don’t know what you’re talking about,” Dipper finally said, the hesitance in his tone clear as he briefly glanced back at Trigger before staunchly moving on to catch up with the others.

“You’re gonna regret this!” Trigger shouted after the entire group prior to his airbag bursting out and uncomfortably trapping him in his car even more.

Stan huffed impatiently as he sat alone in the interrogation room, his hands still cuffed tightly behind his back, making any real movement largely impossible. Powers and his cronies were off somewhere handling the proper paperwork to formally put him away, which left the conman with some much-needed time to try and come up with a way to escape. It was true that Stan had been in some tight spots before, but he had never gotten himself in enough trouble to be wanted by the whole of the U.S. Government itself. He had also never been arrested at such an integral time before, which meant that his escape would have to be both quick and discreet. There would be time to deal with the consequences later; now was the time for action.

“Only five more hours till it happens…” Stan muttered to himself, glancing back at his wristwatch as it continued to count down. “I gotta be there! Come on, Stan, you have to think of a way outta this…” Frustrated, the conman pounded his head against the table in front of him, hoping it could get his jumbled thoughts flowing. “Think! Think!”

Stan was quickly caught off guard as his watch suddenly beeped, a warning reading ‘anomaly in progress’ coming with it. Alarmed, the conman lifted his head off the table, only to see the coffee few feet in front of him begin to lift up out of its mug on its own accord before the mug and everything else on the table did the same. They came crashing back down a moment later, but still, the abrupt reversal of gravity on display surprised Stan nonetheless as he noticed exactly what kind of effect the machine was having on the world around it, just as the journal had warned.

“They’re getting stronger…” he noted before letting out a gasp of realization as to how he could end up using this to his advantage. “Of course! That’s it!”

What the conman didn’t put much stock into as he began to plot out his jailbreak was the fact that these gravity anomalies spread far beyond simply the police station. The entire town took notice when, in the middle of their daily activities, they were suddenly lifted off their feet and into the air several inches, cars and bikes and even some trees being uplifted along with them. As everything
and everyone clumsily fell back to their usual spots on the ground, a ripple of apt confusion seemed to ripple through the townsfolk on main street in particular as they picked themselves up off the ground.

“Is it just me, or did the entire world just hiccup?” Tyler Cutebiker asked Lazy Susan as they helped each other back up.

“I’m sure it was just a baby-sized earthquake,” the waitress smiled with a wave of her hand.

“Aw, baby sized!”

“That was no earthquake!” Ronaldo shouted as he frantically ran out of Gravity Fries. “It was the Sneople! They’re back and they’re reversing the sky and the ground in order to suck us into their reptilian trap and devour us all!”

“Ronaldo, for the last time!” Fryman scolded, pulling his frantic son back into the shop. “There are no Sneople!”

“Sneople or no Sneople, I am not closing my restaurant and evacuating again!” Kofi scoffed, stepping out of Fish Stew Pizza. “The last time I lost three days’ worth of profits! It was ridiculous!”

“So… we just don’t do anything then?” Kiki asked as she stood alongside her father. All of the others gathered nearby casually shrugged in muted agreement with this plan, none of them too keen on fleeing town again, especially since this strange occurrence didn’t seem to be anything too dangerous or severe.

However, not everyone thought so, for over at the junkyard, McGucket was in an absolute frenzy, the laptop blaring bright red with a steadily decreasing countdown. A countdown that was ticking down to nothing less than complete and utter devastation. “It’s happenin’!” McGucket cried as he rushed to pack up his few belongings and flee while he still had a chance. “The end times! When that machine activates… I gotta get out of town! Get in there, racoon wife! Git!” he shouted, shoving said racoon into his knapsack before rushing out of his hut, the laptop in tow. And with that, the hillbilly made his hurried, fearful flight, desperately searching for any place of refuge from the disastrous end he knew was coming.

Traveling on Lion made getting back to the Mystery Shack quite quick and efficient as the collective group of Gems and kids traveled through the woods rather than by the road to avoid detection by any agents. As they approached the shack, they all gathered behind a row of trees on the border of the property, which was essentially swarming with agents both standing on guard and investigating just about everything in sight. The shack itself had been roped off with police tape, and it was easy to tell, even from the outside, that the building was infested with investigators, all of them in search of any further clues about that supposed doomsday device they claimed was hidden somewhere inside.

“Alright, so here’s the plan,” Mabel began, tucking back down behind the trees as she addressed the others. “I’ll start by taking out those two guard guys, then Dipper, you find a stick or something to use as a sword and chop that other dude in the neck with it, then Steven, you can use your shield to cover us from behind as Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl beat up any of the other guys who try to stop us until we backflip through the front door!”
“Good plan,” Garnet nodded in stoic approval.

“I like it, but… do you think there’s a way we could get in there without hurting any of those agents?” Steven asked with a frown. “They are just here to do their jobs after all.”

“So are we, Steven,” Pearl reminded, glaring towards the temple up the while, which had been completely taken over by agents at that point.

“So, are we gonna bust these guys up and sneak in there or what?” Amethyst asked, already summoning her whip. “Cause I’ve been wanting to do knock their heads in ever since they rushed the place this morning.”

“Oh, right,” Mabel said, understanding his intent as she pulled her grappling hook out. With a well-aimed strike, the hook latched onto the side of the window, allowing Dipper, Mabel, and Steven to slide up along its rope while the agents who should have been standing guard were fortunately distracted by the rock-that-looks-like-a-face-rock. Once all three of them were safely inside, the Gems followed, Pearl deftly walking across the cord like a tightrope while Amethyst rowdily climbed up it and Garnet swung across it up to the window. Knowing that they had to be stealthy and discreet to avoid detection, everyone was as quiet as possible as they crept downstairs from the attic, following the twins’ lead as they narrowly kept out of sight of the agents in the living room before making it to Stan’s office.

“We made it!” Steven grinned, exchanging a three-way fist bump with the twins as they made sure to lock the door tightly behind them. “So now that we’re here, what’s the plan?”

“We need to find where Stan keeps the shack’s surveillance tapes,” Dipper explained, already starting to look for them at the conman’s desk. “If we can find the tape from last night, then we’ll be able to prove to those agents that he didn’t steal that illegal waste!”

“Wait, that’s what you guys are digging around in here for?” Amethyst asked with a wry grin. “Pffft, you should have just said so. Luckily for us, I know all of Stan’s tricks…” The purple Gem’s smile widened as she stretched her hand up towards the jackalope head hanging from the wall, pushing its bent antler into place. With this hidden switch activated, the bookshelf on the far wall suddenly flipped over, revealing the shack’s extensive collection of security tapes as well as a tv to view them on.

“Yes!” the kids cheered as they ran forward, perusing through the tapes for the most recent one.

“Well, Amethyst, I have to hand it to you,” Pearl remarked to her teammate with a satisfied smile. “I never thought your rather… bizarre camaraderie with Stan would actually end up coming in handy.”

“Hey, what can I say?” the purple Gem smirked with a shrug. “Paling around with the old guy has its perks. Plus, I can’t wait to see the look on his face when he realizes it was my know-how that bailed him out again, it’ll be hilarious!”

“Aha! Here it is!” Mabel interrupted, holding one of the tapes of. “The one from this week! Here we go!” Without any further hesitation, she slid the tape into the player, only for it to open up on a clip of Mabel, Soos, and Wendy in the gift shop, with Garnet leaning against the counter and nodding her head in time to the music the handyman was wiggling on the floor to as the girls cheered him on.
“Someone yelled ‘wormy dance’,” Mabel explained to the others, who were giving her a rather curious look.

“It was me,” Garnet grinned slightly, raising her hand in admittance.

“Ha! I knew it!” Mabel exclaimed, snapping her fingers until she met Dipper’s impatient expression. “Oh, right. Go ahead and fast-forward.”

Dipper did so, zooming through the tape by several days until it at last reached an image of Stan at the counter, peacefully piling up knick-knacks as he often did. “Ha! There it is! Stan restocking just like he said!” Dipper said with a satisfied smile. “And the date shows it was last night! This is proof that he’s innocent!”

“So that’s it then,” Steven smiled brightly. “This was all just one big misunderstanding! We just gotta show this to those agents and they’ll let Mr. Pines off the hook for sure!”

“Uh… not so fast, kids…” Pearl frowned, nodding back up to the screen. Stan had stopped stocking around 7 PM, casting a careful glance around the shop before stepping outside. Fast-forwarding an hour revealed that the conman still hadn’t returned, something that set the entire group watching on edge as they wondered exactly what he could have been up to for so long.

“Um… m-maybe he’s just going to the bathroom outdoors,” Mabel suggested with an uneven smile. “The way nature intended?”

“Oor he might have just gone on another one of those Revenge Trips with Amethyst!” Steven added looking over to the rather alarmed purple Gem. “R-right?”

Amethyst hesitated, biting her lip anxiously as she looked screen, where the hours continued to go by, with no sign of Stan returning in sight. Still, she quickly forced a smile as she glanced back to the kids, all of them looking to her almost desperately for a confirmation that the conman had been with her last night rather than the suspected alternative. “Uh…. S-sure!” she shrugged awkwardly. “We… we’ll go with that!”

“Amethyst…” Garnet shook her head disapprovingly at her teammate’s idea to cover for the conman.

“O-ok, so… he wasn’t hanging out with me…” Amethyst admitted sheepishly, shrinking back somewhat. “B-but he totally could have been! If he had, ya know… asked me to go with him…”

“Well, if he wasn’t with you, then where was-” Pearl was cut off as the tape arrived at 5 AM. Exactly at that point, an unknown figure walked into the gift shop, fully clad in a hazmat suit and wheeling in a large barrel that was clearly labeled as radioactive waste.

“Oh no, Stan, you didn’t…” Dipper said, his hopes for the conman’s innocence sinking immediately upon seeing this.

“D-don’t panic!” Mabel quickly reassured as everyone else simply watched the figure pull more barrels into the shack in apt dismay. “That could be anyone in that suit!”

This theory was instantly proven wrong, however, as the figure on the tape accidentally dropped one of the waste barrels onto his foot, eliciting a familiar cry of pain in an unmistakably familiar voice. “Augh! Hot Belgian waffles!” he shouted, gripping his injured foot. “Wait… I’m alone! I can swear for real! SON OF A-”
At this, Pearl rushed forward to shut the tv off before the kids could hear said swear, while everyone else shared a disturbed, uncertain glance in light of who’s voice they had just heard. “Well, there’s no doubt about it, that’s totally Stan,” Amethyst shook her head incredulously before letting out a frustrated huff. “I don’t get it though… If he was gonna go as far as to pull a crazy heist like that, why didn’t he come and ask me for help, just like he always does!?”

“Amethyst, that’s not important right now!” Pearl scolded. “What’s important is that Stan seems to be every bit as guilty as those agents said he was! And what really is baffling is how he thought he could possibly get away with pulling a hairbrained scheme like this off without getting caught! Of all of the ridiculous capers he’s pulled over the years, this one by far is the most nonsensical!”

“You’re right, Pearl,” Garnet mused, a hand to her chin as she continued looking to the security footage. By all accounts, her future vision was still strangely static, refusing to give her the answers she was looking for in regards to all this, but she didn’t see the need to inform the others of that. At least not yet. “It doesn’t make any sense as to why Stan would do something like this…”

“W-well… what if he had a really good reason for why he needed all that stuff?” Steven asked, his tone undeniably apprehensive.

“S-Steven’s right!” Mabel chimed in just as anxiously. “So what if Grunkle Stan stole a little toxic waste? That doesn’t mean he’s leading a nefarious double life!”

“Uh… Mabel?” Dipper spoke up as he pulled out the box that had been tucked away underneath the shelves of security tapes. “I’m not so sure about that…”

As soon as they had hoisted the box onto Stan’s desk, everyone curiously began to look through it, only to be unanimously stunned by what they found. It was filled to the brim with all sorts of documents, from driver’s licenses to passports to newspaper clippings and everything in between, all of them connecting back to Stan somehow, though no two of them were exactly the same.

“W-what is all this?” Mabel asked, picking up one of the countless drivers license inside of the box. “‘Stetson Pinefield’?”

“‘Hal Forester’?” Dipper read off another license, growing steadily more confused and suspicious. “‘Andrew ‘8-Ball’ Alcatraz’? You guys, these are fake IDs! You wouldn’t need these unless you were trying to hide your real identity!”

“B-but why would Stan do that?” Mabel wondered, shaking her head incredulously.

“Guys, look at these,” Steven cut in, holding up a stack of official documents. “Legal Notice: Stan Pines is hereby banned for life from the State of New Jersey. And Pennsylvania… And Delaware… And Ohio… And Texas… and a bunch of other states too! But why?”

“Amethyst, did you know about all this?” Pearl asked the purple Gem, clearly unnerved.

“Uh, o-of course I did!” Amethyst quickly replied, her manner tense as everyone looked to her. All the same, there was a hint of betrayal in her tone as she looked between the box of fake IDs and the rest of the group, none of them really believing her and her lack of a conviction on this lie. “I, uh… S-Stan’s told me about all of this stuff a super long time ago! A-after all, w-why would he hide junk like this from me? I-I know him better than anyone!”

“Amethyst, now isn’t the time to lie for Stan,” Garnet advised. “We need answers and we need them now.”

The purple Gem flinched at just how serious her leader’s tone was, and its harshness was more
than enough to get her to cave. “Ok, fine! I’ve never seen any of this stuff before, alright?!” she exclaimed, running a hand through her hair as a sign of her severe stress with these unfurling revelations. “I… I-its just, why wouldn’t he tell me about at least some of this stuff?! I thought the two of us were a team, we have been for the past 22 years! What could be so huge and so important that he’d need to keep it a secret from me?!”

Mabel quickly caught everyone’s attention as she let out a stark gasp of alarm at the newspaper clipping in her hands, her eyes wide as she stared down at the headline before handing it off to her brother. Likewise, Dipper froze in equal shock at the headline, though he managed to regain his bearings just enough to shakily read it aloud to everyone else. “‘S-Stan Pines Dead’?!”

“What?!” everyone else asked in apt surprise upon hearing this, all of them crowding around the twins to see what else this article had to say.

“H-how can Mr. Pines be dead?!” Steven asked in complete disbelief. “We just saw him a few hours ago and he looked pretty alive then!”

“T-this is from almost 30 years ago!” Pearl exclaimed, shaking her head as she read the article’s date. “Which… if I remember correctly… is about the time Stan showed up here in Gravity Falls, i-isn’t it?”

“I… I think so…” Garnet said, placing a hand against her temple. “But… its foggy for some reason… And I certainly don’t remember anything about him dying…”

“‘Foul play suspected in Pines’ death’,” Mabel read from the article, gripping the clipping frantically. “‘Fiery crash, breaks cut…’ By who?”

“‘Unnamed grifter at large’?” Dipper read from yet another clipping showing a picture of Stan. “Why would they call him unnamed? Unless Stan isn’t actually…”

“Stan?!” everyone questioned in nervous unison as they glanced behind them at the large portrait of the conman hanging right on the wall behind them. His grin was wide and proud, something that usually no one would have ever thought twice about but now, it seemed so much more mysterious and sinister as it left all of them, kids and Gems alike, wondering exactly what his true history and motives were. In their search for Stan’s innocence, they had stumbled across something that seemed to incriminate him much more than before, putting into question literally everything they knew about him, from his past, to his intentions, to even his identity. To the Gems, these revelations were incredibly alarming on their own, seeing as how they had lived next to the conman for years now, but none of them, not even Amethyst, had ever had any inclination to his seeming double life. But to the kids, everything they had just uncovered was far more baffling. Steven always saw the best in everyone and Stan was certainly no exception to this, given his father’s camaraderie with the conman but despite the apparent tension between him and his mother. However, it seemed as though Stan seemed to harbor just as many dark secrets as Rose herself, something that left the young Gem completely uncertain on where to stand amidst it all. Dipper and Mabel, on the other hand, were even more torn over the matter, especially considering this was their uncle, of all people. Or maybe he wasn’t their uncle at all, if his false identities were any proof to the contrary. True, they had never really known too much about Stan’s past, but up until now they had never thought they really needed to. And now it was quite clear as to why the conman never spoke too much about it in the first place: because the secrets buried within it were some of the most incredible and sinister they had ever uncovered.

“None of this makes any sense!” Dipper exclaimed as he began pacing, trying his best to calm down amidst all of these increasing bombshell revelations. “If Stan isn’t actually Stan, then who have we been living with for the entire summer?!”
“Y-you’ve been living with Stan, duh!” Amethyst snapped, her hands clenched in tight fists at her sides. “The fake IDs and junk are all whatever! It’s still him, I know it!”

“Do you, Amethyst?” Pearl asked rather coldly. “Do you really know it’s actually him? Or are you sure he’s not really a master criminal who really did build some kind of doomsday machine and plans on using it to wreak havoc across the entire planet?!”

“Don’t be dumb, Pearl!” the purple Gem shot back just as fiercely. “Stan would never, ever do something like that! Even if it totally sucks that he hid all this stuff from me, I know him! And so do all of you guys!” she glared over at the startled trio of kids beside her. “So back me up on this! Stan’s not some crazy psycho villain, right?!”

A brief bout of silence passed between the kids, with Dipper not offering a response at all as he instead looked away rather bitterly, lost amidst doubts and frustrations that were too much to simply suppress by this point. Steven was also silent, biting his lip as he glanced down apprehensively, not having the faintest idea about what to say at such a tense juncture. Mabel, on the other hand, was just as adamant as Amethyst was when it came to Stan’s innocence, and she had no qualms about showing just that. “Right,” she nodded firmly before looking back to the stack of evidence against the conman they had compiled. “Still, there has to be some kind of explanation… Maybe we’re getting Ker-Pranked! Justin Kerprank is gonna jump up from behind one of these plants any minute now!” she quipped, glancing behind the nearby potted plant in the desperate hope that her rather weak theory was somehow true. “A-any minute now, Justin…”

“I-I can’t believe it…” Dipper muttered, just as dedicated to this resolve for the truth, even if he was still a bit wary of discovering it. “All summer I’ve been looking for answers, and the biggest mystery was right under our noses this whole time! This could be bigger than anything we’ve discovered so far!”

“And that’s why can’t keep jumping to conclusions or making excuses,” Garnet said, her tone rigid as she glanced over at her teammates. “Whatever’s going on here, we need to get to the bottom of it, whether Stan really is Stan or not, and whether he’s responsible for a doomsday machine or not. We have to find the truth, no matter what it might be and how much might change as a result of it.”

“W-well, maybe there’s something we might have missed in here that’ll fill in all the holes!” Steven suggested, rifling through what was left in the box on the desk until he found something of note. “Huh? What’s this? ‘Secret code to hideout’?”

“Hideout?” Amethyst raised a confused eyebrow. “Stan doesn’t have a hideout. Well… at least I thought he didn’t… Guess that was just another thing he never bothered to tell me about…”

“Let me see that,” Dipper said, taking the slip of paper from Steven and holding it up against the journal’s code page for comparison. “‘A1, B… C3’? I’ve never seen a code like this before…”

“Wait! I have!” Mabel exclaimed with a gasp of realization and hope. Hope that whatever this was, it would bring them closer to the answers they were all so desperately searching for. “You guys, it’s the vending machine in the gift shop! Come on! Let’s go check it out!”

As Mabel was quick to lead the way, the others all readily followed, knowing that they had no choice but to take this new lead, as odd as it was. Still, none of them were really sure what they were going to find, if anything at all, as they continued unraveling this massive web of lies and deceit that Stan himself had apparently entangled them all within.
Stan shifted restlessly in his seat as he looked back at his watch again, a spark of dread filling him as he saw that only a mere 13 minutes remained. 13 minutes until everything finally came together and here he was, trapped in a police station on the other end of town. But not for too much longer, he reminded himself. For as Powers and a few other officers entered the interrogation room, the conman knew that his daring escape was in sight.


“What?” Stan balked, not ready to be hauled off so soon seeing as how his plan was so heavily dependent on proper timing. “Uh, c-can’t we stick around for maybe one more minute? O-one minute thirty seconds?”

“We’re not falling for your games, Pines,” Powers staunchly refused. “You’ve been running your whole life. Your time is finally up.”

“B-bathroom break?” Stan continued to plea as he cast an anxious glance up at the clock. “Just give me fifteen seconds!”

“Sorry, but you’ve got a flight to catch,” Powers said as he moved to unlock the conman’s cuffs. Stan prepared to make another last ditch appeal before his watch happened to beep at just the right moment. “Oh yeah?” he asked with a wry, confident smirk, knowing that everything was finally going according to plan. “So do you.”

“Huh?” Powers only had time to ask before gravity abruptly began to reverse itself, the effect stronger than every this time. All of the agents let out startled gasps as they were picked up from their spots on the ground, unable to regain their grip on the world as they floated about the room in absolute upheaval. And while they were lost amidst the newfound chaos, Stan used it to his advantage as his chair also rose up into the air, allowing him to kick the free-floating table at the row of agents in front of him. As Powers frantically attempted to anchor himself to something behind him, Stan acted quickly, ramming the head agent with the back of his chair hard enough to knock him into the wall. As his chair happened to flip over in the gravity-free air, the conman grabbed the keys right out of Powers’ hands, uncuffing himself and finally freeing him up from his restraints as he made his escape.

“Hey! Get back here!” Powers shouted hotly from his spot against the wall. “Men, get him!” The other officers attempted to do so, clumsily swimming through the air as Stan easily evaded all of them. The conman ended up using one of the agents as a boost, jumping off of his chest and claiming his lost, floating wallet in the process as he launched himself towards the door while Powers angrily shouted after him the entire time.

“No! You won’t get away with this!” he yelled, pushing himself off the wall after Stan. The conman was ready for him though as he slammed the door squarely in the agent’s face just as the gravity anomaly ended. As everything fell back to the ground, Stan locked the door to the interrogation room with a satisfied grin as he landed on his feet, though he knew he had no time to waste in holding his victory over their heads, especially with only about 10 minutes left on the countdown.

While the rest of the police station was still in a state of confusion over gravity’s recent reversal, the conman rushed outside, fortunately finding a taxi sitting right outside. Stan hadn’t exactly planned that far ahead, but he was quick to improvise as he rushed up to the idling cab, knowing that this would help him get back to the shack exponentially quicker. “Hey, do you know where
“the Mystery Shack is?” the conman asked the driver breathlessly.

“Uh, yeah?” the driver responded, somewhat confused by Stan’s seemingly frantic manner.

“Ok, here’s a hundred bucks,” the conman pulled a hundred out of the wallet he had stolen from one of the agents. “Drive as far away from the shack as possible and don’t stop when the cops start chasing you!”

The driver took pause at this, giving Stan a somewhat bewildered glance, but even so, he shrugged in acceptance at this strange request before taking the money and speeding off. The conman acted quickly after this, hiding behind a nearby overturned car as Powers and the other agents emerged from the station.

“He’s getting away!” Powers shouted upon spotting the retreating taxi. “Obviously, follow that cab!”

Stan smirked as he watched the agents follow the bait he had set for them, leaving him free to hurry back to the shack on foot. Still, things were far from over; with less than 10 minutes left, the conman had not a second to lose, or else everything he had worked for over the past 30 years would be all for nothing. Which meant he couldn’t waste a moment thinking of anything else, not the agents, not the Gems, not even his own nibblings as he raced back to where everything he had ever hoped for, everything he had ever dreamed of, was about to become wide open. Literally.

The majority of agents who weren’t currently on the hunt for the Crystal Gems were still scouring the shack, searching it high and low for any further relevant clues, a search that, by all accounts, had been rather futile thus far. However, their investigation was quickly brought to an end as Agent Trigger pulled up to the shack, having been rescued from the crash by a few other agents, to report the latest news Powers had just passed along to him.

“Stanford escaped!” Trigger shouted to all of the other officers. “He’s at large! We need to sweep the town! And keep looking for those Crystal Gems while you’re at it! They’re still out there somewhere too! Move! Move! Move!”

The agents were quick to file out at this command, piling into vehicles and choppers as they dispersed to track their assigned targets down and subdue them once and for all. And fortunately, they left at just the right time, for as soon as they had vacated the premises, Soos happened to arrive, slipping in through the gift shop’s open window to carry out the odd responsibility Stan had entrusted him with. “Alright, Soos, remember the plan,” the handyman said to himself, firmly planting himself in front of the vending machine. “Protect the machine, earn Stan’s trust, get legally adopted by Stan, change name to Stan Jr.”

“Soos?”

“Ah!” Soos let out a fearful shout, only to calm down upon seeing that it was only the Gems and the kids had just entered the gift shop. “Oh, you guys! Where have you all been?”

“Just about everywhere, it feels like…” Steven said, somewhat exhausted by the barrage of revelations they had been faced with in the past few hours alone.

“Soos, what are you doing here?” Dipper asked, aptly confused by the handyman’s rather random presence.
“Stan gave me a mission to protect this machine,” Soos informed with a proud smile. “Ha! And I thought I loved snacks.”

Upon hearing this news, the Gems and the kids all exchanged a concerned glance, all of them realizing that if Stan had specifically asked Soos to guard the vending machine, then certainly it must be yet another piece of this quickly growing puzzle after all. “Soos,” Garnet stepped forward, her tone authoritative. “We need you to step aside and let us see that machine.”

“U-uh, well…” the handyman flinched, quite intimidated by the Gem leader’s rigid manner. “I-I can’t… Mr. Pines said-”

“Listen, Soos,” Dipper interjected earnestly. “Something huge is going on here. If Stan is hiding some dangerous secret, we need to find out what it is!”

“And based on what we’ve uncovered thus far, that vending machine, of all things, may very well help us do just that!” Pearl added with apt resolve.

“Yeah, just let us through so we can prove this is all just a big misunderstanding!” Mabel encouraged, offering the clearly anxious handyman a reassuring smile.

“Guys, I-I know this seems crazy, but I promised Stan I would guard this with my life,” Soos contested with a fretful frown. “I can’t let him down on this!”

By this point, the Gems were at something of a loss over what to do; while they wanted to access the vending machine, it was clear that the handyman was heavily intent on doing whatever he had to to protect it under Stan’s orders. The kids, fortunately, had a plan of their own in mind, one that they acted upon, one that they wordlessly put into action as Mabel stepped forward.

“I’m sorry, Soos,” she said, pulling her hands out from behind her back before blowing a handful of glitter right into the unsuspecting handyman’s face.

“Ah! Attack glitter!” Soos cried, trying to wipe the sparkly substance out of his eyes as Steven and Dipper both rushed forward. “It’s pretty but it hurts!”

At this juncture, Mabel joined the boys in pouncing on the handyman, trying their best to either pull him away from the machine or press their way past him to get to it as the Gems stood by, watching the scene before them in apt bewilderment. “Aw, c’mon! I don’t wanna fight you guys! This hurts me more than it hurts you!” Soos exclaimed, struggling to pull the kids off of him only to end up accidentally getting kicked in the face. “Ow! Seriously it hurts me way more than it hurts you!”

“Sorry, Soos!” Steven sincerely apologized amidst the ongoing struggle. “But we gotta get to that machine!”

“B-But I gotta keep it safe, dudes!” Soos argued, not even noticing Dipper leaning over his shoulder to input the code on the keypad. He barely managed to do so, but the moment it was fully entered, the entire machine swung forward, as if it was a door, knocking Soos and the kids back into the Gems and knocking them all to the floor. And when they glanced up at what lay just beyond the machine, they were all unanimously shocked by what they saw.

The vending machine had indeed acted as a door, one that opened to a short, hidden staircase leading down to what looked like an elevator. As everyone gathered around this new, mysterious opening, no one really knew what to say, seeing as how literally anything could be waiting at the end of this newfound path.
“W-what’s down there?” Pearl asked in a tense whisper, gripping onto Garnet’s arm tightly.

“I… I-I don’t…” the Gem leader trailed off as everyone looked to her for answers. Answers that her failing future vision failed to provide her with. Still, she tried, so very hard, to break past the wall of fog that was keeping her away from her usual foresight, that was blocking her from seeing the dangers that might await them all below. Yet in the end, she still saw nothing, leaving her in complete and utter darkness at the very worst of times. “I-I don’t know!” Garnet finally shouted, pounding her first against the backside of the vending machine in apt frustration.

“What?!” all three of the kids asked in startled unison, their eyes wide as they exchanged an alarmed glance. Of course, they instantly had a theory as to why Garnet’s future vision might have failed to function that day, but they weren’t able to even voice it as Amethyst spoke up instead.

“S-so… I guess we’re goin’ in blind then?” she asked apprehensively as she nodded towards the staircase.

“We have no other choice…” Garnet confirmed, adjusting her shades as she took the lead into the unknown.

“Dude… its like something out a video game…” Soos muttered as they descended down the rather dark staircase.

“Or a dream…” Mabel whispered just as tightly.

“Or a nightmare…” Dipper shuddered, realizing that with Garnet’s future vision out of the equation, there was literally no telling what they were about to find.

“I-its so strange…” Pearl said as they reached the elevator at the bottom of the stairs, as well as the code panel resting on the wall beside it. “It’s like… all of this is… familiar somehow… Almost as if… I know this…” Absently, the white Gem’s hand went towards the keypad of odd symbols, her fingers lightly pressing several of them in a very specific order. An order that ended up being the exact keycode needed to open up the elevator before them.

“Whoa!” Steven exclaimed, absolutely amazed by this. “Pearl, how did you know that code would work?”

“I-I didn’t!” the white Gem shook her head, her eyes wide as she looked between her hands and the elevator. “I… I just… i-it… it’s like I… r-remembered it somehow…”

“You remembered it?” Dipper asked, before looking to all three of the Gems incredulously. “You guys don’t think all of this could have to do with your missing memories… do you?”

The Gems all looked to each other, their expressions mutually torn and tight as they considered this possibility and everything it could possibly mean. “N-no, no way,” Amethyst shook her head, refusing to believe that Stan had anything remotely to do with their lost memories. “I-it’s gotta be some kind of weird coincidence! Now, come on. Let’s just go down here already and see what’s really going on.”
Knowing that there was no point in standing around and deliberating the matter any further, the others agreed, packing into the elevator and descending down even further to what was apparently the very bottom floor. And when the doors slid open, not a single one of them was able to explain what lay before them.

Upon a first glance, it seemed to be some sort of technological lab, with strange machines and monitors of all sorts lining the walls on either side of the long, narrow room. And at the end of it, on the other side of a large glass window, was a radiant, glowing blue light, one that poured into the darkened room as the group cautiously stepped inside of it.

“W-what is all this?” Steven wondered in a muted whisper, hanging close by his equally stunned guardians as they approached the light before them.

“Guys, are we dreaming?” Mabel asked, every bit as apprehensive. “Someone wake me up…”

“I-I don’t understand,” Soos shook his head as he looked to a nearby scanning machine. “Why would Mr. Pines have all this?”

“This can’t be real…” Dipper remarked, his tone both tense and incredulous as he was still trying to soak it all in. “It’s just like that bunker in the woods…”

“B-but what on earth would all of this be doing under the Mystery Shack, of all places?” Pearl wondered, absolutely baffled.

“Everyone,” Garnet spoke up, standing at the desk at the edge of the room and looking to what lay beyond it. “Look at that…”

The others turned their attention to the room just past the apparent lab they were in, which was much more open and cavernous. However, no one paid that as much mind as its central feature: an enormous metallic structure, one that was in the decisive shape of an inverted triangle. It was the source of the piercing blue glow, which came from the large circular hole in its center and seemed to grow brighter and more blinding by the second. But what was by far most alarming was the fact that, fixated to the edges of this machine were replica gemstones, very familiar ones to everyone present.

“Guys! Look!” Steven exclaimed as he pointed them out. “There’s Pearl’s gem! A-and Sapphire’s! And Ruby’s! And Amethyst’s! A-and… and mine?” He froze upon getting a glimpse at the undoubtedly familiar pink gem resting near the foot of the device.

“No,” Pearl whispered, placing a tight hand on her ward’s shoulder as she noticed the rose-shaped symbol right above it. “Rose’s… T-that’s Rose’s gem! All our gems! W-what are they doing on that thing?!”

“What’s this thing even supposed to be in the first place?!” Amethyst asked, her hands in tight fists at her sides as she was struck by a crushing realization. All this time Stan had not only been keeping such a huge secret from her, but now it seemed as though it was a secret she was somehow involved in herself, without even knowing it. And the feeling of betrayal she got from that alone was almost enough to drive her mad.

“What’s this thing even supposed to be in the first place?!” Amethyst asked, her hands in tight fists at her sides as she was struck by a crushing realization. All this time Stan had not only been keeping such a huge secret from her, but now it seemed as though it was a secret she was somehow involved in herself, without even knowing it. And the feeling of betrayal she got from that alone was almost enough to drive her mad.

“Whatever it is, I feel a massive amount of power coming from it,” Garnet said, her tone gravely serious. “It looks like we may have just found that doomsday device after all…”

The kids all let out a startled gasp at this, but even so, Mabel in particular refused to believe it so readily. “O-ok, ok,” she cut in with a very forced smile. “L-let’s not jump to conclusions here. So
he’s got a huge underground lab and a weird glowy machine with the Gems’ gems on it for some reason. That doesn’t mean anything bad! Everyone’s got secrets!” At this, she grabbed the picture of both herself and Dipper that Stan kept on his desk, taking it as a much needed sign that the conman’s intentions were still good, despite all the evidence pointing against that. “It’s still Stan, and he loves us! A-and we love him, right?”

“…Y-yeah,” Steven hesitantly agreed with a small, supportive smile. “Yeah, you’re right, Mabel. All of this stuff is… kinda crazy, yeah, but there’s gotta be a good reason behind all of it. M-maybe we just need to get his side of all this and we can finally figure everything out! Don’t you guys think so?”

The Gems all met the hopeful, encouraging grin their young ward was offering them, but none of them bothered to return it. Garnet’s expression remained tight and stoic as she looked back to the machine, Pearl’s eyes wide and full of dread and fear as she continued glancing around the lab, and Amethyst bitterly glared down, hugging herself tightly as a sign of how hurt by the lies Stan had told her for so long she really was. Steven took pause at this, his smile faltering as he began to wonder exactly how all of this connected back to his guardians, given their apparent unknown involvement in it. However, this stilted, uncertain silence wasn’t interrupted by the young Gem’s pressing questions, but rather by Dipper as he happened to make what was by far the most startling discovery yet.

“I-I can’t believe it…” he whispered, completely shocked as he saw the two unquestionably familiar books laying on the desk right in front of them. “It’s impossible… The other two journals?!”

“What?!” the others all asked in unified surprise as they also took notice of journals 1 and 2, both of which had been unanimously thought to be lost. After all, Gideon had formerly had possession of the second one, but the general assumption had been that it had been confiscated from the child psychic at his arrest. The first one, however, had always been a mystery, its location and any proof of its mere existence always unknown until now. And yet, as Dipper pulled journal 3 out, here they were, all three journals, finally united in the least likely of places.

“All this time…” Dipper muttered, though his volume quickly grew along with his rapidly rising anger. “All this time, Stan had them! I can’t believe it! He said he didn’t want us looking into all this supernatural stuff, but then he ends up having the other two journals, and this huge machine, and this deep, mysterious past!” As a show of his severe infuriation, he kicked the nearby desk, not even really feeling the rattle of pain through his leg as it connected with the hard metal amidst his betrayed rage. “Was that just to throw us off his trail?! Was anything he said to us even real?! Why would he have those journals?!”

“Dipper, please, calm down!” Steven urged, aptly concerned. “Maybe the reason why Mr. Pines didn’t tell any of us about the journals is because he was waiting for the right time!”

“Yeah, or maybe he’s the author,” Soos suggested just as amicably.

However, as outright angry as he was over this revelation, Dipper was having none of it. “Or maybe he stole them from the author! Maybe the reason he has all those fake IDs is because he is a master criminal, and this machine is his master plan!”

“Augh! No, he’s not!” Amethyst protested fiercely. “We don’t even know what this machine does, much less why he has it or those dumb old journals!”

“That’s exactly it, Amethyst,” Garnet said tightly. “We don’t know about any of this. Stan never told anyone about any of it, not even you. He kept all of this so well-hidden for who knows how
long now."

“But one would have to wonder…” Pearl continued, a suspicious scowl crossing her features. “Why he would go to such great lengths to hide all of this in the first place?”

“I-I… I think this might be why…” Dipper said with a stunned gasp after having opened all three journals. He had arranged all of their connected center pages into what looked like the highly complicated blueprints to the very machine in front of them, and while that was alarming enough on its own, what the trio of books revealed as the blacklight was directed upon them was even more horrifying.

“I was wrong the whole time,” Dipper read from all three journals as everyone tensely crowded around them. ‘The machine was meant to create knowledge, but its too powerful. I was deceived and now it is too late. The device, if fully operational, could tear our universe apart! It must not fall into the wrong hands. If the clock ever reaches zero, our universe is doomed!’

A collective, fearful gasp rose up from the group upon hearing this, all of them taking in the journals’ dire warning at the exact same time. Clearly, whatever the machine before them actually did and what Stan or the Gems’ connection to it was, its purpose was a sinister one, meant to cause severe and absolute destruction on a very wide scale. And in everyone’s minds, the need to keep the universe safe and surviving far outweighed anything else, especially as they all looked up to the countdown timer right above them reading only one minute and thirty seconds.

“It’s the final countdown! Just like they always sung about!” Soos cried in apt terror.

“W-what do we do?!” Pearl exclaimed in sharp alarm. “How do we stop it?!”

“Like this!” Dipper pointed to another page of journal 1, which told of a manual override for shutting the machine off. “Come on! We have to shut it down!”

No one argued with this resolve as they all rushed into the massive room the machine itself was contained it. The swell of power emitting from it was becoming strong enough to result in miniature earthquakes, throwing the entire group off a bit, though that hardly deterred them from their incredibly essential mission.

“There! Quick!” Dipper exclaimed as he pointed out the override switches on the far side of the room. They were set up as a row of four keys, and as uncertain as they were in light of everything that was going on, Steven, Mabel, and Amethyst hung back from them as Dipper, Pearl, Garnet, and Soos readily ran up to them. The four of them turned the keys in exact unison, resulting in the machine’s overall switch to rise up from the ground in front of it in the form of a tall pole with a bright, glowing button resting on top of it. “That’s it! The shutdown switch!” Dipper shouted as everyone rushed over to it, knowing that they quite literally had not a second to waste. “This all stops… now!”

“DON’T TOUCH THAT BUTTON!” Everyone was quick to turn towards the door upon hearing this only to find none other than Stan himself standing there, breathless and alarmed at the sight of his nephew’s hand positioned directly over the switch that could very well end up ruining everything. For a moment, the room was filled with tense silence as the group looked to the conman none of them knew as well as they thought, their expressions mingled with distrust, anger, uncertainty, dread, and grief. Stan couldn’t help but feel somewhat guilty as he gaged all of these varying emotions, particularly those coming from his own niece and nephew, but even so, he knew there would be time to sort all of them out later. For now, the machine came first, no matter what. “Dipper, just back away,” Stan advised cautiously, taking a step forward. Dipper paid him no mind, keeping his hand poised above the switch as he sent his uncle a bitter glare, one that, at the
very least, Garnet and Pearl shared as they shook their heads at the conman disapprovingly. “P-please,” Stan continued his appeal, his tone deeply earnest as he slowly approached the others. “Don’t press that shutdown button. You gotta trust me.”

“And I should trust you why?” Dipper asked caustically, only moving his hand away from the switch for a moment. “After you stole radioactive waste? After you lied to us all summer? I don’t even know who you are?!”

“Look, I know all this seems nuts,” Stan said as evenly as he could, though he couldn’t deny his nephew’s harsh words stung somewhat. “But I need that machine to stay on!”

“And why exactly would you need that?” Pearl asked quite crossly. “So you can sit back and laugh as the entire universe falls to complete and utter ruin thanks to your little doomsday device here!? A universe that Garnet, Amethyst, and I have dedicated our entire existences to protecting?! Oh but of course you wouldn’t care about that, now would you, Stan—if that is your real name—seeing as how you don’t care about anything, not even the wellbeing of our reality itself?!”

“W-what?” Stan asked, taken aback by such bold accusations. “No! You’ve got it all wrong! That’s not why—I’m not… T-that isn’t what I’m trying to do here, I promise. I just need a chance to explain, a-and you guys gotta believe me when I do! A-Amethyst!” The purple Gem flinched as he called her out, her expression incredibly hesitant as she finally made eye contact with him. “You’ll believe me, won’t you?”

Amethyst said nothing at first, especially as the others quickly glanced over at her, clearly putting her on the spot. The purple Gem shook her head as she gripped her arm, looking away from the conman uneasily as betrayed tears started to well up in her eyes. “S-Stan… I… I don’t-”

She was abruptly cut off by the sharp beep from Stan’s watch, eliciting a startled gasp from the conman as he knew what was coming. “O-oh no! Brace yourselves!” he warned just as another gravity anomaly began, by far the most powerful one yet.

In fact, this reversal was so strong that it was felt essentially all over town as the sun set over a landscape where almost nothing at all was properly tethered to the earth, almost as if it was a sign that the end was nigh. Yet the surge was by far the most powerful near the source of this anomaly itself: the machine. Stan, Dipper, Mabel, Soos, and Steven were all completely powerless to keep themselves down as they were lifted up freely into the air without any rhyme or direction at all. However, Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl managed to maintain their footing, their gems instantly adjusting to the shift in gravity around them as they watched the chaos unfurl above them.

As the machine’s computer announced that only 35 seconds remained, both Stan and Soos were pushed towards the far wall of the room while Dipper managed to land against a support beam and Steven found himself pressed against the side of the room. As he “landed”, the young Gem happened to notice a panel right next to him, one that bore his own, or rather, his mother’s gemstone upon it, with a large hallow right below it with the pattern of his shield imprinted on it. Despite everything else that was going on around him, Steven took pause upon seeing this, his eyes widening as he realized, beyond any shadow of a doubt that his mother, that his guardians even, had been involved with this machine at some point. But exactly what that involvement meant at such an intense, decisive moment like this, the young Gem had no idea.

Meanwhile on the ground, Garnet and Pearl both gasped as they looked back to the shutdown switch, which was still right in front of them. The pair nodded with firm resolve, before the Gem leader stepped forward, raising her hand to turn it off once and for all. “It’s time to end this,” she said brazenly, however, before she could slam her hand down on the switch, it was halted in the most unexpected of ways.
“Stop!” Amethyst shouted, throwing herself between Garnet and the switch and holding her arms out wide.

“Amethyst, what in the world are you doing?!” Pearl exclaimed in utter disbelief. “Let us get to that switch!”

“I-I…” the purple Gem hesitated, glancing back to the switch and then up to Stan as he continued wildly sailing through the air above. She took in a sharp breath as she pushed her pressing tears away, her hands in tight fists as she glared up at her two teammates fiercely. “N-no! I won’t! Yeah, I don’t understand any of this, and I really don’t understand why Stan never bothered to even tell me about it, b-but I know him and I know he’d never try to just… destroy the universe like some kind of crazy supervillain! He was always there for me, even when you guys and Rose weren’t! He’s like… o-one of the only people I can actually be real with, a-and even if he wasn’t real with me about all this, I still want to trust him!”

Upon hearing this, Stan glanced over in Amethyst’s direction, his eyes wide as they met the purple Gems’. While her expression conveyed plenty of grief and anger, she still offered him a small nod of confirmation, showing that she meant what she said and that she was willing to stand against even her own teammates to prove it. And while the conman wanted to give her all of the thanks and gratitude he could for this show of loyalty, he didn’t get the chance as Garnet stepped closer to Amethyst, her imposing form towering over the smaller Gem as she spoke rigidly.

“Amethyst, move, now.”

The purple Gem shook her head slowly, her glare returning as the gemstone on her chest as she realized she had just crossed the point of no return. Still she hardly cared; she had made her choice, and even if it was one largely based off emotions and little else, she was going to follow it, no matter what the consequences might be. “Make me!” she growled, pulling her whip out and lashing it out wide enough to entangle both of them before tossing them against the far wall hard. And as confused as Garnet and Pearl were by this, Amethyst rushed forward all the same, ready to do whatever she had to to keep them away from that switch in what little time was left.

As the Gems were lost amidst their on conflict on the ground, up in the air, things were still in absolute upheaval. However, as he tried to regain some semblance of direction, Dipper happened to notice that, only a few feet above the switch, Mabel had gotten herself tangled by the ankle by a stay chord, conveniently enough putting her in the radius of the switch in place of the Gems being displaced from it. “Mabel!” he shouted over to her as she looked to him amidst trying to untangle herself, clearly alarmed. “Huh?” Amethyst glanced over her shoulder with a gasp just as Garnet and Pearl were picking themselves up off the ground. “Wait! No! Mabel, don’t!”

“Y-yeah, stop!” Stan shouted from his place in the air. “Please, Mabel, you gotta-” The conman was cut off as Soos suddenly barreled into him, pushing him back even further to keep him from reaching the switch. “Augh! Soos! What are you doing?!” Stan growled as he struggled against his rebellious handyman. “I gave you an order!”

“Sorry, Mr. Pines—if that is your real name,” Soos apologized as he continued shoving Stan back. “But I have a new mission now! Protecting these kids!”

“Soos, you idiot! Let me go!” Stan yelled, though his struggle was made even more difficult as Dipper launched himself off the wall towards him and joined Soos in restraining him. At the same
time, Amethyst turned back towards Garnet and Pearl as they stood, both of them looking to their teammate in staunch disapproval. Even so, the purple Gem kept a firm hold on her whip, returning their glare as she steeled her resolve to stand against them, no matter what.

“Amethyst, this is ridiculous!” Pearl huffed hotly, though she still didn’t summon her weapon. “You saw what the journals said: that machine could destroy the entire universe if we don’t stop it! Your friendship with Stan doesn’t matter anywhere near as much as keeping the planet safe!”

“W-what the heck do those dumb journals even know!?” Amethyst protested harshly. “Our gems are on that machine! If that’s not proof we had something to do with it, then I don’t know what is! So why would we wanna shut it down if its something we were apart of!?”

“Because it’s a mistake,” Garnet said coldly. “A mistake that should have never been allowed to get this far.”

“A mistake?” Amethyst growled, shapeshifting into her much larger Purple Puma form so she could take them both on at once. “You mean like me!?”

In her torn anger, the purple Gem attacked, launching herself at Garnet and Pearl in an attempt to pin them to the wall. The Gem leader was the first to summon her weapon, sending a brutal punch Amethyst’s way, though as furious and passionate as she was, it wasn’t enough to knock her away. Pearl nearly summoned her spear as well, though she stopped short upon noticing journal 3 lying on the ground right at her feet. The white Gem gasped as she managed to tuck out from underneath Amethyst’s hold, though she wasn’t able to fully break past her as she narrowly grabbed the journal, frantically flipping through it for any other options. Fortunately she quickly found exactly what she was looking for in the form of a page detailing a backup override switch, one that, based on her quick reading of the page, could only be activated by a certain magical shield that had once belonged to a certain pink Gem. Or rather, a shield that now belonged to said Gem’s son.

“S-Steve…” Pearl whispered, her eyes wide as she looked up amidst Garnet attempting to push Amethyst back. The white Gem was quick to find Steven, still stuck against the side wall as he anxiously watched the ongoing midair struggle between Stan, Soos, and Dipper. And, conveniently enough, he was positioned right next to the shield switch the journal detailed. “Steven!” Pearl shouted to him, still trying to break beyond Amethyst’s steadfast hold. “On the wall next to you is another shutdown switch! Use your shield and turn it off, now!”

“W-what?!” Steven asked over the growing din coming from the charging machine behind him.

“Shut it off, Steven!” Garnet ordered fiercely, landing another blow against her indignant, rebellious teammate.

“Wha—S-Steve, no!” Amethyst cried, looking to the young Gem desperately. “Don’t do it!”

“I-I… I don’t-” Steven attempted to protest, absolutely torn between the intense conflict between his guardians. However, Stan was quick to cut him off upon realizing exactly what position the young Gem was in.

“K-kid!” he yelled over Soos and Dipper pushing him away. “Listen to Amethyst! Do not throw that shield of yours into that switch!”

“Steven!” Dipper shouted down to the young Gem. “Listen to Garnet and Pearl and turn that thing off!”

“B-but… but I…” Steven trailed off, clearly afraid and distraught as he looked back to the
machine, only mere seconds away from activating at this point. The young Gem knew that no matter what choice he ended up making, no one would be left happy from it, whether he left it alone as Stan and Amethyst hoped he would, or he followed Garnet, Pearl, and Dipper’s orders to knock his shield into the switch. In fact, he was so torn that he couldn’t even think of so much as summoning his shield as he instead stared at the switch, as if it had the conclusion that he would ultimately have to reach for himself.

“Oh for crying out loud!” Dipper groaned in severe aggravation upon noticing Steven’s clear hesitance at the exact wrong time. Fortunately though, he wasn’t their only option. “Mabel! Press the red button! Shut it down!”

“No, you can’t!” Stan protested, pushing his nephew away as he looked to his niece pleadingly. “You gotta trust me!”

For a moment, Mabel was silent as she looked between her brother and her uncle, both of them fighting against each other as she found herself metaphorically caught in between. Clinging onto the switch as she was, the button was right within her reach; it would be so incredibly easy to just reach out and press it. And yet… as much as she knew she should press it, she couldn’t bring herself to do it. At least not yet. “G-Grunkle Stan…” she let out a small, choking sob, one that showed every bit of confusion and heartache she had been holding in for the past several hours. Her tears were unrestrained by gravity as they floated up, the brightness of the machine behind them making them almost glow as they rose into the open air. “I-I don’t even know i-if you’re my grunkle!”

Stan let out a small, ashamed sigh at this, hating that the kids had found out about all of this in such a way, hating that he had lied to them for so long about it all in the first place, and mostly hating himself for putting them in such a terrible, terrible spot at all. “Then listen to me,” he began, his tone firm yet clearly remorseful. “Remember this morning when I said I wanted to tell you guys something?”

Before the conman had a chance to elaborate any further a sudden burst of energy pulsed from the machine, knocking just about everyone back, save for Mabel and Steven as they managed to hold onto their respective switches. Still, the Gems were thrown against the wall, with Amethyst still keeping Garnet and Pearl held back, while Stan, Soos, and Dipper landed high against the exact same way, the lack of gravity keeping them pressed tightly against it. Upon seeing the ferocity of the machine’s power, both Steven and Mabel were quick to react, with the former finally working up the nerve to summon his shield as the latter slowly, shakily raised her hand over the button.

“Steven, please!” Amethyst begged the young Gem as she watched him position his shield near the backup switch. “You just gotta listen to me and Stan on this one!”

“Yeah, kid, just hear me out!” Stan assured as he looked between both Steven and Mabel pleadingly. “This morning, I just wanted to say that you’re gonna hear some bad things about me, a-and some of them are true. But trust me. Everything I’ve ever worked for, everything I care about, its all for this family!”

“Your family?!” Pearl scoffed harshly at this claim, glaring up towards the conman. “You put your family, this town, the entire universe in danger with this… this doomsday machine, and you expect anyone to believe an appeal like that!”

“Exactly!” Dipper readily, angrily agreed. “Mabel, Steven, what if he’s lying?! That thing could destroy the universe! Listen to your heads!”
“look into my eyes, both of you!” Stan said, far less incensed than the others as he glanced between the conflicted pair. “Do either of you really think I’m a bad guy?”

Mabel and Steven both froze as they did just that, both of them making eye contact with the conman and seeing not anger or vengeance in his eyes, but rather desperation, vulnerability, and sadness. Sadness was among the chief of these, a type of inner grief and guilt that seemed to be decades old and carried some kind of story behind it, though what story that was, neither one of them knew. Still, it was all nothing less than completely genuine, especially as they noticed, for perhaps one of the first times to their knowledge, desperate, pleading tears start to well up in the conman’s eyes. Tears that were enough to at the very least, convince Steven to go with his gut instinct rather than the command of two out of three of his guardians. No matter where that instinct might lead.

“N-no…” the young Gem whispered, his eyes wide as he kept them on Stan rather than even glancing over to his guardians as his shield dissipated into thin air. “No, I don’t…”

“Steven, you can’t be serious!” Dipper snapped hotly at such a foolish decision. “He’s lying! Why can’t you see that?”

“Honestly, Steven! You’re being just as outrageous as Amethyst about this!” Pearl exclaimed, making her disapproval quite clear though even so, Steven didn’t retract it. In fact, he didn’t say much of anything at all as he looked back to the switch, at his own mother’s insignia resting upon it, and choosing, just this once, to go with what he felt was right. Not what the Gems believed, not what his mother would have believed, but what he believed.

And as far as Steven was concerned, that was the absolute best he could do.

“There’s not much time left!” Garnet warned as the countdown clock began audibly counting down.

“10.”

“Mabel! You can still stop this!” Dipper implored his sister, hoping that she’d make the right choice where Steven hadn’t. “Shut it down, now!”

“9.”

“M-Mabel, please!” Stan begged, a few of his tears starting to fall down, or up, rather as he realized he could very well lose 30 years of tireless work in a single, sorrowful instance.

“8.”

“Hit the button, Mabel!” Pearl shouted to Mabel as her and Garnet pushed against Amethyst harder than ever.

“7.”

“D-don’t listen to them!” Amethyst yelled back, finding it harder and harder to keep her frantic teammates at bay.

“6.”

Mabel sucked in a tearful breath as she looked back to the button, knowing that everything now rested solely upon her shoulders. Once again, she looked over at Steven, who simply returned her distraught expression solemnly, not bothering to tell her what to do as he knew just as well as she
did that this was her choice to make alone.

“5.”

And so instead, she glanced back up at her brother. His hands were in tight fists and his expression was intense and hostile as the current from the machine blew his bands up just a bit to reveal his birthmark. Overall, his entire manner adamant and angry as he nodded with the silent command to hit the switch. She understood well just how betrayed and infuriated Dipper was likely feeling; after all, she felt quite betrayed herself. Yet as she looked back to Stan, she found that she couldn’t share her brother’s anger, no matter how hard she tried. Because regardless of his darkened past or his menacing machine, this was still Stan. This was still the conman who flashed tourists goofy, winning smiles and won just about everyone over with his charm and wit. This was still her uncle, who rustled her hair and laughed at her jokes and encouraged her silliness and creativity. This was still Stan, who gave her some of the warmest, most affectionate hugs she had ever known, who still beamed at her with pride of her accomplishments, who comforted her and did everything he could to make her tears stop whenever they showed up. This was still her uncle, and he still loved her.

“4.”

And if there was nothing else that Mabel knew at such a stark, intense, impossible moment such as this, it was that, and that alone.

“G-Grunkle Stan…” she began, looking to him with tearful eyes before lifting her hands away from the switch entirely, making her choice as she floated up into the open air before the machine in complete acceptance of it.

“3.”

“I trust you…”

“2.”

“Mabel! Are you crazy!?” Dipper shouted fiercely, unable to believe that Mabel would, after everything that had happened and everything they had seen, still decide to side with the lying, duplicitous conman, of all people. “We’re all gonna-”

“1.”

“No!” Garnet and Pearl shouted in unison, finally breaking past Amethyst as they rushed forward, leaving their teammate fallen, exhausted and unable to do anything else to keep them back. However, there was no time left for them to reach the switch as the counter finally hit zero.

And then, all at once, everything exploded.

Before anyone could even think, a blinding, incredibly powerful light ripped forth from the machine, one that filled not just the basement, not just the shack, but Gravity Falls entirely. Those in the room themselves only had time to let out fearful screams as they were swallowed up by this light, tossed about by its intensity to the point that none of them were even aware of what came next.

In the span of what seemed like ages, the entire world seemed to be consumed by white nothingness, with everyone hanging adrift in its sway. Still, somewhere amidst it all, a treasured photograph shattered, kids, Gems, a handyman, and a conman all floated about freely, and a machine—or rather, the very fabric of reality ripped itself apart. And yet, reality was not so easily strewn to pieces. For as quickly as it had erupted into chaos, it wove itself right back together
again, leaving only minor rips and tears in its wake as everything at last came to a standstill.

Gravity resumed its place in nature, dropping everything roughly back into their proper places. Within the shack’s basement, however, everything had been completely undone. The machine had torn itself to pieces of nothing more than battered metal and broken wires, though it was somehow still operational as its center glowed in an eerie blue light. In the aftermath of the chaos they had all just been consumed by, it took everyone a second to reacclimate themselves, but when they did, it was still something of a struggle to pick themselves up off the floor to see what was happening before them.

For within the light of the machine itself, the silhouette of a single figure soon appeared, one that steadily approached it until it finally emerged. He was consumed by the shadows of the room as well as his own heavy, dark, tattered attire, which included a mask, hood, and scarf, all of which concealed his identity completely. The entire room was held in a tentative silence as they watched this mysterious stranger walk forward, not saying anything to anyone as he walked up to the fallen journal 1. As he reached out to pick it up, he first paused, placing a six-fingered hand against the one on the book’s cover before claiming it and slipping it into the pocket of his long overcoat. The Gems shared a soft gasp as they watched it, gaining the first inclinations as to who exactly this mystery person was, but even so, everyone else was largely lost as the looked to him in apt confusion as he prepared to remove his face coverings.

“W-what…?” Dipper whispered, almost too afraid to break the ongoing silence amidst his own disbelief. “W-who… who is that…?”

“The author of the journals…” Stan answered just as starkly, his eyes wide as the figure finally unveiled his face, revealing something none of them had been expecting. He was rather old, roughly in his late 60’s or so though he hardly looked it based on his relative lack of wrinkles and rough, rugged 5 o’clock shadow. His hair was greyed and somewhat unkempt, with a lighter streak of silver near his ears and long sideburns framing his face. He wore a pair of worn glasses with a crack in one of the frames and his expression was serious, almost gravely so, though even beyond that one thing was alarmingly clear:

He was almost identical to Stan.

Which of course, the conman gave as brief an explanation for as any as he confirmed exactly who the mysterious, long-elusive author really was. “My brother…”

To be continued…
Chapter 50, Part 2: A Tale of Two Stans

Chapter Summary

In which Ford is here, the Gems are confused, everyone’s salty as hell, and dramatic backstory happens

Chapter Notes

YEEEEEEEEE HERE WE FINALLY ARE AT THE END OF ARC 5 WITH BY FAR THE MOST AMBITIOUS CHAPTER OF UNIVERSE FALLS YET! Seriously this one is monsterously long but I think it turned out GREAT. So I hope you all enjoy it a lot! (keyword is BROTHERS)

The summer sun beamed down upon the murky ocean water, making it shimmer almost as it lapped onto the somewhat dirty shore. For any other beach, a pristine day like this would have seen countless beachgoers and tourists, but Glass Shard Beach didn’t often attract too many of those.

What it did attract, however, was a pair of brothers, twins, around the age of 11 or 12, who lived in the sleepy nearby town. Whenever they could spare a few hours, the boys gladly rushed down to their favorite haunt, knowing that more often than not, they’d have the entire beach to themselves to simply run around and explore. A pastime that they were both gladly taking part in.

“Hey! Wait up!” the older of the twins called after his brother, trailing behind him a bit as they ran across the sandy shore.

“Heh, yeah, you should keep up,” the other twin retorted with a sly smirk, still taking a large lead.

“I-I can keep up!” the slower of the brothers called a bit breathlessly, though he stopped alongside his twin as they reached something neither of them had seen before: a small, closed-off cave.

“Whoa!”

“Neato!” the younger twin exclaimed, aptly excited by such a find.

“A mysterious, boarded cave!” the older twin grinned, just as intrigued as his brother. “It might be filled with lost prehistoric life forms! Or Mesoamerican gold!”

“But no body!”

“Why would you want to find a dead body?”

The younger twin shrugged, matching his twin’s rather bemused smile. “You gotta admit it’d be
kinda cool.”

“…Yeah, I guess it would be.”

“So, ladies first,” the younger twin’s grin widened as he pushed his brother forward a bit. The older of the two laughed at this, giving his brother a playful punch on the arm, one that was quickly returned as the pair moved up to the cave itself. As it turned out, the entrance was boarded up quite securely to keep any trespassers out, hence why the older twin’s attempt at pulling them away only resulted in him falling backwards into the sand, much to his brother’s amusement.

“Ha! Good thing you’ve got your smarts, poindexter. I’ve got the other thing. What’s it called? Oh right! Punching!” And he proceeded to do just that, launching his fist through the boards and breaking a sizable opening through the wood, despite the pieces of the board stuck in his hand as a result. “Cool, splinters!”

“Whoa…” the older twin remarked, shining his flashlight into the darkened cavern. “It’s so creepy in here!”

“Hey, don’t worry, bro,” the younger twin slung an arm around his brother’s shoulder as they stepped into the cave. “Wherever we go, we go together. By the way, don’t forget to leave our names so they know who owns the place.”

They both did just that, inscribing their names on the stone wall near the entrance of the cave before they ran off to continue exploring, proudly cheering their last name in unison as they left a subtle, written declaration of their close-knit bond behind:

*Stanley and Stanford Pines*

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**Present Day**

In the immediate aftermath of the complete and utter upheaval of reality as a result of the portal, the Mystery Shack was still settling back into place, though it was by far much worse for wear. The basement had by far suffered from the worst of it, the machine in complete shambles as everyone gradually picked themselves up and looked to who had just joined them from the other side of the portal, none other than the nearly-mythical author of the journals himself. Still, no one was quite sure how to react to his unexpected arrival, save for Stan as he warmly stepped forward to greet his long-lost twin.

“Finally!” he exclaimed with a smile so huge and so happy that it nearly brought him to joyful tears. And really, he wouldn’t have been too surprised if they actually fell as he opened his arms up wide to embrace his brother, not noticing the infuriated glare he was receiving from his own twin as he rushed towards him. “After all these long years of waiting, you’re actually here! Brother!”

Before Stan could even come close to hugging the author, however, he suddenly lashed out, swinging a hard and heavy fist that connected with the conman’s cheek and knocked him back brutally, much to the admitted surprise of everyone watching. “Ow!” Stan hissed in pain before looking back to his brother with confused frustration. “What the heck was that for?!”

“This was an insanely risky move, restarting the portal!” the author exclaimed in gruff fury. “What in the world were you thinking?! Didn’t you read my warnings?!”

“Warnings, schmarnings,” Stan scoffed, still rubbing his sore cheek. “How’s about maybe a thank
you for saving you from what appears to be, I dunno, some kind of sci-fi sideburn dimension?”

“Thank you?” the author asked incredulously. “You really think I’m gonna thank you after what you did thirty years ago?!”

“What I did?!” Stan retorted just as harshly, his hands clenching into threatening fists as he prepared to act on his own growing anger. “Why, you ungrateful-!” The conman didn’t finish as he launched himself at his brother, fists at the ready to strike though the author quickly and easily evaded his attack. He swiftly restrained the incensed conman, pinning his arms behind his back before slamming him to the ground, but even still, Stan showed no signs of giving up against his clearly much stronger brother. “D-don’t expect me to go easy on you just because you’re family!” he shouted, shoving the author off of him before scrambling to stand once more. The author also rose, ready to fight himself, though before the brothers could throw any more punches at each other, their blows were suddenly blocked off by a sturdy gauntlet on each side.

“Enough!” Garnet exclaimed as both punches simultaneously hit her protected palms. Stan simply backed off at this, sending a harsh glare past the Gem leader and to his brother instead. The author, on the other hand, seemed to abandon his fury as he looked to Garnet herself, his eyes wide with both surprise and recognition as he stared at her in clear amazement.

“G-Garnet?” he asked, catching a look of apt bewilderment from the Gem leader before he happened to notice her teammates standing nearby. “Pearl! Amethyst! I-I can’t believe it! You three look exactly the same as you did 30 years ago!” he exclaimed with a baffled, but still elated smile. “Then again, I suppose that’s not that surprising seeing as how Gems don’t age, but to see such partial immortality in action is downright incredible!”

Despite the author’s apparent excitement, none of the Gems shared in on it as they looked to each other in complete, dumbfounded confusion. Sure enough, Stan had confirmed that this man was indeed the author, but that didn’t mean they had much of a recollection about him given their apparent missing memories on anything remotely pertaining to him. All the same, out of anyone who could have been the elusive author, they had to admit that none of them, not even Garnet, had been expecting him to be Stan’s unknown brother, which of course, was yet another secret the conman had been hiding from them for all these years.

“Uh… do we… know you?” Pearl asked somewhat uncomfortably. After all, this was the man who had written copious notes about all three of them in his journals, despite them apparently not knowing him personally. Though based on how he addressed them, clearly he felt as though he was somehow quite familiar with all of them.

The author took pause at this, his smile fading into surprise as he looked between the trio of confused Gems. “Wha—o-of course you do! It’s me: Ford! We used to work together, remember?”

Once again, the Gems didn’t really know what to say to this claim as they looked to the author, or rather, to Ford in sincere uncertainty. “Uh… well we don’t know about all that,” Amethyst spoke up, still trying to avert eye contact with her teammates in light of everything that had just happened. “But I do know that if you really are author dude, then we’ve got like a ton of questions for you.”

“Namely, how in the world did you amass so much information about us in those journals of yours without our consent?” Pearl asked, narrowing her eyes as she looked to the author rather distrustfully.

“Without your con—what?” Ford asked, now just as confused as the Gems seemed to be. “I always had permission to document the Crystal Gems from all three of you, and from Rose! How do you not remember everything we-“
“Forget it, sixer,” Stan cut in, arms crossed as he rolled his eyes at his brother’s apparent distress over this news. “Those three don’t remember a thing about you. In fact they haven’t for about the past… oh, I dunno, 22 or so years now?”

“B-but why not?” the author pressed, sending his brother a brief glare before looking back to the Gems with much more concern.

“ Heck if I know,” the conman shrugged. “The only thing Rose told me was that somebody went and jacked all their memories about you and about all of this,” he nodded back towards the ruined portal. “She never bothered to bring up how or why in any of it. Just like her to be as shady and vague as possible, if ya ask me.”

“W-wait,” Pearl interjected, aghast at such news. “Rose really did know what happened to our memories?! T-then why did she never tell us about any of this?!”

“Well, why don’t you just ask her for yourself?” Ford suggested. “In fact, if there’s anyone who can clear all of this up, then I’m sure its Rose. Where is she? Up at the temple?”

The Gems once again fell silent at this, their expressions switching from confusion to despair upon the author’s assumption that the pink Gem was still around. At this juncture, the kids, who had only just been watching everything unfurl in silent shock, finally broke out of it enough to exchange a tentative glance, none of them really even knowing how to react to everything that was going on in front of them. But upon hearing Ford question about his mother’s whereabouts, Steven found that he could no longer really stand back in the shadows and keep the truth silent, especially given how distraught both the author and the Gems seemed to be.

“Um, actually…” Steven began somewhat apprehensively as he stepped forward. “She’s… not around anymore…”

Ford froze at this, looking over to the young Gem with wide eyes of shock upon hearing such a thing. “…What?” he asked, his voice strangely soft and shaken.

“He’s right,” Garnet spoke up, letting out a sad sigh as she adjusted her shades. “Several years ago, Rose Quartz sacrificed her physical form to bring her son, Steven, into the world.”

“She… son?” the author asked, even more bewildered by this news as he looked back to the young Gem incredulously. “But… Gems can’t… how did she… I… I don’t believe it…”

“Um… well, it’s true,” Steven said with awkward, yet polite smile as he pulled his shirt up a bit to show the Gem on his navel, something that seemed to perplex Ford even more. As a result, the young Gem couldn’t help but feel somewhat guilty, though for what reason he wasn’t entirely sure. Still, he did his best to make an effort to try to set the clearly upset author to ease. “By the way, i-it’s… really nice to meet you, Mr. Author, sir.”

Ford hardly seemed to pay this warm greeting much mind as he placed a hand against his temple, still clearly reeling from this revelation. “I… I never thought that she’d… She… she can’t be gone…” he muttered shaking his head morosely. “I didn’t even get to tell her that I’m sorry for-”

The author abruptly cut himself off at this, glancing up to notice the several pairs of eyes watching him, particularly the Gems themselves, none of whom still knew what to really make of him. Which was why he was quick to regain his composure, taking in a tight breath and discreetly wiping his nearly damp eyes dry before he quickly changed took the subject off of the now-deceased pink Gem. “Hm, w-well, it’s… unfortunate that Rose is… no longer with us,” he began with a steadying sigh of apparent acceptance as he spared another glance at the young Gem, this time offering him a slight smile of greeting. “But all the same, it’s a pleasure to meet you as well—
“er… um… what did you say your name was again?”

“Steven,” the young Gem reiterated with an amicable, patient grin.

“Right, Steven,” Ford nodded, his smile growing a bit, until he happened to notice the other pair of kids in the room, both of them looking to him in lingering amazement. As he did, his dejected manner quickly turned back into an agitated one as he glanced back over at his brother. “Stan, you didn’t tell me there were so many children down here. And… some sort of large, hairless gopher?” he frowned, glancing over at Soos.

“Heh, I get that a lot,” the handyman chuckled, hardly offended.

“They’re your family, poindexter,” Stan remarked, nodding towards his, as well as Ford’s, nibblings. “Shermie’s grandkids. The colorful one’s Mabel and the sweaty one’s Dipper. You can figure out the rest.”

This news finally seemed to be enough to lift the author’s spirits completely as he looked towards the twins with a soft, but warm smile. “I-I have a niece and nephew?” he inquired, his manner quite cordial as he stepped forward to meet them properly. Excited by the opportunity to make his acquaintance, Mabel rushed forward first, eagerly shaking Ford’s extended hand. “Greetings… Mabel, was it?” he began, working off what Stan had told him as his niece brightly nodded. “Do kids still say greetings? I haven’t been in this dimension in a really long time…”

“Whoa, a six fingered handshake?” Mabel said, clearly impressed as she counted off his fingers to find that, sure enough, there were indeed six on each hand. “It’s a full finger friendlier than normal!”

“Heh, I like this kid!” Ford chuckled, amused. “She’s weird.”

“I… I can’t believe it…” Dipper finally spoke up in a stark whisper at first. For the longest time, he had been so lost in shock, from the portal opening, to Ford stepping out of it, to the confusion between him and the Gems, that he had still been trying to piece it all together and make sense of it. But in the midst of doing so, he had nearly forgotten one very vital thing: that one of the biggest mysteries of the summer by far had just been solved in the most unexpected of ways. “Y-you’re the author of the journals!”

“Oh, you’ve read my journals?” Ford asked, still smiling as he turned to his nephew and pulled the one he had claimed earlier out of his cloak pocket.

“I haven’t just read them, I’ve lived them!” Dipper exclaimed, beside himself with elation as he began to pace around frenetically. “I’ve been waiting for so long to meet you! I-I don’t even know what to say, I have so many questions! I-” He abruptly cut himself off, so overwhelmed by his excitement that he had nearly gotten to the point where he wasn’t able to even physically handle it as he weakly doubled over. “Ohhhh, I think I’m gonna throw up,” he groaned, prompting both Mabel and Steven to rush to his aid as he briefly gagged before trying his best to calm down. “Ugh, o-ok! False alarm! Just gotta ride it out!”

“Listen, there will be time for questions and proper introductions later,” Ford advised before turning back to his brother. “But first, tell me, Stan: are there any security breaches? Does anyone else know about this portal?”

“No, just us,” Stan assured, arms crossed. “…Also maybe the entire U.S. government.”

“The what!?” Ford gasped, completely appalled to hear such alarming news. And sure enough, this
fact still rang true, for the security feed in the other room showed that the swarm of agents had already returned to the shack and were flooding inside under Powers’ command.

“Fan out!” the head agent demanded. “We’re not going anywhere until we find Stan Pines, the Crystal Gems, and those kids!”

“Geez, those guys are still looking for us?!” Amethyst asked with an aggravated huff. “You’d think they’d give it a rest already!”

“Ok, it’s alright,” Ford said with an even sigh as he stepped back towards the portal’s remains. “We’ve got a while before they find this room. In the meantime, we just need to lay low and think of a plan.”

“Yes, and maybe while we’re at it we can try and figure all of this out…” Pearl noted, her expression still filled with dread and doubt at the thought that Rose had been keeping their lost memories hidden from them for so long.

“Speaking of figuring things out…” Mabel said leadingly as she looked towards both Stan and Ford. “Looks like we’re all gonna be stuck down here for a while. So… who wants to tell us their entire mysterious backstory?”

“Yes, I have some questions about all this myself, Stanley,” Ford remarked amidst taking down a few notes in the journal he had on hand. However, what he failed to notice was how confused everyone else was upon hearing him call the conman by such a name.

“Stanley?” Dipper questioned, looking to his uncle in apt wonder.

“But… your name is Stanford…” Mabel clarified with a frown, though Ford was quickly caught off guard upon hearing this as he turned to face his brother sharply.

“Wait, you took my name?!” he asked angrily. “What have you been doing all these years, you knucklehead?!”

“Wait, hold on!” Amethyst cut in, looking to the conman in upset surprise, her former feelings of betrayal towards him all quickly rushing back. “Are you serious?! First there’s all those fake IDs and stuff, then this portal thing, and now you aren’t even who I thought you were?! What the heck, Stan?! Just how many other things have you told me and everyone else over the years that just weren’t true?!?”

Stan couldn’t help but flinch upon hearing the purple Gem’s incredibly harsh tone, but his guilt only grew upon catching the distrustful, sour glares from most of the others, including his own nibblings. “Yeah, Grunkle Stan, no more lies!” Dipper asserted firmly. “You owe us some answers. What’s the deal with this portal? Why did you keep this a secret?”

“And what exactly made you think it was anywhere near remotely safe to operate a device that could have potentially destroyed the entire universe as we know it?!” Pearl asked just as hotly, still clearly infuriated over that dire aspect of all of this.

“And what happened between you and your brother?” Mabel asked, mainly just wanting to know why there seemed to be so much bitterness and hostility between her two grunkles.

“I hope all this aligns exactly with my fanfic, Stan,” Soos said staunchly. “If not, I’ll be very disappointed. My headcanons are at stake!”

“Ok, ok,” Stan conceded, knowing that if there was any time for finally coming clean about
everything, it would be now, in the aftermath of everything tearing itself apart. “I know a lot’s happened and I have a lot of explaining to do.”

“That’s an understatement.” Garnet remarked rather dryly.

“…And it’d be a lot easier if I was able to do that explaining without any sass,” the conman deadpanned before continuing. “So, here goes nothing. It all started… a lifetime ago…”

1960s

Glass Shard Beach was a small New Jersey town, not known for much save for its rather mediocre salt water toffee. Still, despite its murky ocean, litter-ridden beach, and smog-filled city, this humble setting was home to young Stanford and Stanley Pines, nearly identical twin brothers both around the age of 12. The boys lived above the family business, Pines Pawns, located in the heart of the less than glamorous Lead Paint district, with their parents, who were both natives of Glass Shard themselves. Their father, Filbrick Pines, was, by all accounts, a strict, staunch, stoic, unsympathetic man, one had very little warmth and kindness to offer to anyone, his customers and his family alike. Ma Pines was a bit gentler than her husband, though only really when it came to her sons; her own customers, who solicited her supposed clairvoyance as an over-the-phone psychic, often called her out for overpricing and lying, claims that she had a smooth enough tongue to often easily refute.

As for the brothers themselves, they really couldn’t have been more different. Stanford was not just the older of the two, but also, for lack of a better word, the stranger, in more ways than one. His most notable oddity was by far his six fingers on each hand, a very rare birth defect that was initially visible to just about everyone he met. However, what most were quick to learn about Ford right after that was that he was smart; more than smart really, he was brilliant, with an incredibly high IQ from even a very early age. While he excelled at really every subject academically, Ford found his interest namely in the oddities of the world, in the fantastic or supernatural anomalies he read about in books or saw in movies. He was fascinated in anything peculiar or unknown, and even more fascinated in trying to solve the mysteries behind such strangeness with a passion and zeal far beyond his years. Stanley, on the other hand, wasn’t much interested in mysteries or anomalies, his academic performance was just barely average on a good day, and he only had a total of ten fingers as opposed to twelve. But even so, Stan carried other, less obvious talents, from his well-gained street smarts to his surprising haggling abilities, which served his father well in the pawn shop downstairs. Generally though, Stan was a bit more of a rambunctious troublemaker, often called out for being a slacker and a goofball, though he hardly cared about his often sour reputation. As far as he was concerned, he only needed one person by his side, and that was his brother.

And for the most part, that’s exactly how things were.

Throughout their shared childhood, Stan and Ford were inseparable, to the point that they were more than brothers, really; they were the very best of friends. No matter what the occasion, they always had each other’s backs, through thick and thin, always ready to stand up for one another or even just encourage one another when they needed it most. Their brotherly bond was practically unbreakable, something that was clear to see from just how much time they spent together. Nearly, every day, the boys set out to the beach, both of them always eager and ready for whatever adventure they came across, for they knew that whatever they faced, no matter how big or how small, they’d face it together.
On this particular day, the brothers had happened across an entirely new adventure, one that had taken them to a previously undiscovered cave on the far end of the beach. After punching through the boards blocking it off, Stan and Ford ventured inside, armed with only a flashlight as they explored the damp, darkened cavern, until they happened across something that, to the two young boys, was absolutely incredible.

“Whoa!” Ford exclaimed as he shined his flashlight over at the rather battered and time-weathered boat they had managed to find. “A shipwrecked sailboat, possibly haunted by pirate ghosts!”

“This is the greatest thing I’ve ever seen!” Stan proclaimed, equally as amazed. “And I once saw a dead rat floatin’ in a bucket!”

“Ew!” Ford chuckled, giving his brother a playful shove. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Huh, you know what this thing needs?” Stan asked, giving the downed sailboat a scrutinizing glance. Ford also looked to it just as thoughtfully, before both brothers ended up reaching the exact same conclusion.

“Flags!”

And so they acted on that idea, using their own shirts as makeshift flags for the ruined vessel as they began to pull it out onto the beach itself, proudly chanting “kings of New Jersey” all the while. It took some doing, but eventually the brothers managed to push the boat onto the shore so they could have better light to work on it by, but their plan was clear: they were going to fix it up to the best of their abilities and set sail to wherever their hearts’ desired. It was an ambitious dream, perhaps even a bit of an outlandish, childish one, but even so, the brothers were intent on making it happen, no matter what.

And so the boys worked late into the afternoon on their new pet project, scrounging up any stray materials they could find across the beach to help them patch the beaten boat back together. They hardly even noticed the hours passing by or the rather impressive sunburns they were both getting in the summer heat as they worked and laughed together, inspired by the adventures they’d someday have on the open sea when their vessel was at last completed.

“You almost done over there, poindexter?” Stan asked, falling flat onto the sand out of exhaustion after he finished haphazardly fixing one of the boat’s many lower holes.

“Give me just a second and… done!” Ford grinned as he pulled his paintbrush away from the side of the boat, looking proudly to the vessel’s new moniker. “I dub thee: the Stan O’ War!” Before the brothers had a chance to celebrate this casual christening, however, their fun was abruptly cut off by a sudden pebble tossed to hit the back of Ford’s head. “Ow! What the heck?” he exclaimed, disgruntledly rubbing the now sore spot as both him and Stan turned to see who had thrown it. Neither of them were really surprised to see that it was the notorious local bully, Crampelter and his two cronies, standing atop the nearby hill looking over the beach as he smirked down at the two younger boys smugly.

“Well, well, if it ain’t the loser twins,” he mocked confidently. “Nice boat. Ya get it at the dump. Ha!” He laughed, exchanging a triumphant high five with his equally snide friends.

“You would know, Crampelter!” Stan growled hotly as he stood, shaking his fist at the bully. “Get lost!”

“Pfft, like you scare me, runt,” Crampelter deadpanned. “Listen, dorks, and listen good. You’re a six-fingered freak,” he began, pointing at Ford, who could only glance down in embarrassment as
he tried to conceal his hands. “And you’re just a dumber, sweatier version of him,” he called Stan out next, though instead of being flustered, his harsh glare for the bully only intensified. “And you’re lucky you have each other, cause neither of you will ever make any friends!” Crampelter let out another goading chuckle as him and his friends departed, further calling the twins dorks and losers all the while. All the same, Stan ran after them a few steps, refusing to let such cruel teasing slide without getting the last word in.

“Yeah, that’s right! You better run, you jerks!” he shouted threateningly, though he put his anger on hold upon glancing back at his brother. In light of everything Crampelter had just said, the most Ford could really do was look down at one of his hands in clear shame over something he had no way of changing or fixing whatsoever. “Hey, don’t let those idiots get to you,” Stan hurried to comfort his brother, placing a supportive hand on his shoulder. “If it makes ya feel any better, I heard that Crampelter still sucks his thumb, so if that’s true, then you’ve got nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“Yes, I do…” Ford sighed rather morosely, forcing his sights away from his extra fingers. “He was right… I really am a freak… I just wonder if there’s anywhere in the world where weirdos like me fit in…”

Stan’s already sympathetic frown deepened upon hearing this, knowing that Ford being bullied for his six-fingered hands was no uncommon occurrence. Still, even though this kind of teasing happened rather frequently, Stan always hated seeing his brother so down and upset as a result of it, which was how he had gotten so good at lifting him up and comforting him from it over the years. “Aw, chin up, buddy,” he assured with a warm smile as he helped Ford up to stand alongside him. “Look out there,” Stan nodded towards the sea stretching out wide and seemingly endless before them. “What do you see?”

“Um… the ocean?” Ford ventured, not sure about where his brother was going with this.

“Well, duh, the ocean,” Stan rolled his eyes. “But you know what else is out there? The future. One of these days, you and me are gonna sail away from this dumb old town. We’ll hunt for treasure, get all the girls, and be an unstoppable team of adventurers!”

“Y-you really mean it?” Ford asked with a small, but growing smile.

“You know I do!” Stan boldly proclaimed. “It’ll be us forever, just like its supposed to be! High-six?” He offered his hand out to his brother, who gladly met it in their own special version of a high five.

“High-six,” Ford laughed, clearly feeling much better from the usual kind support from his brother. Still, the boys both took one more glance out over the open ocean before they went back to their boat, their shared resolve to set sail upon it together someday ringing as a clear, hopeful promise in both their hearts. A promise that, for as far off as it might be, seemed completely within reach for them both.

And it was a promise they continued to hold onto, even as the years went by.

Stan and Ford sticking together remained a constant throughout their middle school endeavors, their close companionship as apparent to everyone who encountered them just as much as their academic differences were. Ford consistently remained at the top of their class, with grades so high they baffled even most teachers, though despite several offers to skip a grade, or even two, he never
did. For if he had, that would have left Ford without Stan and Stan without Ford, an outcome that neither of the brothers really ever wanted to see happen. After all, the boys were both picked on by both bullies and teachers alike so frequently, singled out for a variety of reasons: Ford’s six fingers, Stan’s rebellious attitude, or even the simple fact that they were always by each others’ sides, no matter what came their way. Still, the boys hardly minded their lack of friends aside from each other, even as they entered their high school years, for as long as they had each other, they knew they could make it through just about anything. From failed attempts at romance, to surviving arduous school work, to even just continuing work on the Stan O’ War, which was progressing more and more by the day, Stan and Ford always had each others’ backs. Through good times and bad, through successes and setbacks, the brothers knew above anything else, that they could always lean on each other to get through it all. And all the while, they continued dreaming of the future, of the day when their ship could finally set sail off into the unknown, but shining horizon, where opportunity and adventure awaited them both.

Until one fatefully day during the boys’ senior year of high school, when an unexpected wrench was thrown into the close-knit bond they had always known.

It had started out like any other day, with the twins sitting in study hall as usual. And as usual, Ford was hard at work on his studies, fervently reading and taking notes while Stan casually sat beside him, hardly engaged in any sort of academics as he instead reclined back in his seat and munched on his favorite snack of toffee peanuts. He was about to lean over to his brother and make a sardonic remark regarding his current boredom, but before he could, the PA blared with an announcement neither of the brothers had been expecting: “Pines twins to the principle’s office. Pines twins to the principle’s office.”

“Aw, great, what is it this time?” Stan remarked dryly, already pushing himself out of his seat. Ford followed him a bit apprehensively, expecting them to be called on account of something that his brother had gotten himself into some kind of unknown trouble. Though when they arrived at the office, they were quick to learn that this was apparently not the case.

“Not you,” the secretary stopped the brothers just shy of reaching the principles door, motioning for Stan to remain outside and Ford to go on in. “Him.”

The twins exchanged a rather confused glance at this, both of them knowing well that rare was the occasion that Ford ever did something wrong enough to actually get him in trouble. Still, Stan gave him a reassuring shrug as he took a seat outside of the office, prompting Ford to head in on his own. Of course, he was even more surprised to find both of his parents sitting in front of the principle’s desk, their expressions all unreadable and expectant as they turned to face him. Ford took in something of an anxious breath as he took the empty seat in between his parents, folding his hands tightly in his lap as they all waited to hear what the principle had to say.

“No, Mr. Pines, I’d like to speak to you very frankly, if I may,” the principle began, his manner still just vague enough to make Ford worry about what they had all been called here for. “Very frankly is the only way I speak,” Filbrick remarked as coldly as ever. “When it comes right down to it, you have two sons here,” the principle said matter-of-factly. “One of them is incredibly gifted, the other one is standing outside of this room and his name is Stanley.”

Ford couldn’t help but frown upon hearing this, more than used to hearing others hail Stan as the lesser of the two of them by now, though that hardly meant he approved of it. But before he could say anything to correct the principle’s rather disrespectful claims, his mother cut in instead. “What are you saying?” she asked, appropriately confused.
“I’m saying your son, Stanford, is a genius!” the principle proclaimed with a wide grin. “All his teachers are goin’ bananas over his science fair experiment! Ya ever heard of West Coast Tech?” he asked, handing Ford a pamphlet to the aforementioned school. “Best college in the country. Their graduates turn science fiction into science fact! The admissions team is visiting tomorrow to check out Stanford’s experiment! Your son may be a future millionaire, Mr. Pines.”

Upon hearing this, Filbrick’s usually staunch, stoic expression lifted into what almost looked like a genuinely pleased, proud smile. “I’m impressed,” he noted, something that only amazed Ford even more than the news that he was even being considered for a college as prestigious as West Coast Tech. In all honesty, he had never really considered college much before, largely since he had always assumed that his future would entail him and Stan finishing their boat and traveling the world with it. But now, that first dream seemed to be replaced with a new one, much more exciting one, one where he could really put his excessively high intelligence into practice, where he could apply his already innate scientific knowledge, where he could possibly even figure out a way to change the world for the better. And even beyond that, perhaps West Coast Tech could be a place where he could learn to fit in, somewhere where his IQ would be appreciated instead of picked on, somewhere where he could finally belong.

By all accounts, it was far too good of an opportunity to pass up. And yet… it wasn’t all as simple as it initially seemed as he was quickly reminded of the reality of it all.

“But what about our little free spirit, Stanley?” Ma asked with genuine concern for her other son’s future. Concern that Ford felt as well as he remembered that he wasn’t all alone in this, or anything else really. After all, the promise him and Stan had made as kids still rang true: where they went, they went together. But how could they hope to do that now, when only one of them had this chance to excel while the other one wouldn’t be receiving any such offer?

“That clown?” the principle scoffed apathetically. “At this rate, he’ll be lucky to graduate high school. Look, there’s a saltwater taffy store on the dock, and somebody’s gotta get paid to scrub the barnacles off of it. Truth is, Stanford’s goin’ places, while Stanley’s not. But hey, look on the bright side; at least you’ll have one son here in New Jersey forever.”

Unbeknownst to anyone inside the office, Stan had happened to overhear just about all of this from eavesdropping on the other side of the door. And suffice to say that a vast majority of it proved to be quite the blow to not just his self-confidence, but his hopes for the future as well. As he sank down to sit against the door, he put his head in his hands, fear filling him over the possibility that Ford might actually act upon this opportunity, that he might actually jump at the chance to leave him behind and move on to bigger and better things. True, Ford had never voiced the desire to really leave Glass Shard Beach outside of their plans to set sail on the Stan O’ War someday, but still, it was a fear that Stan just couldn’t shake, no matter how implausible it might be. In fact, it was a worry he had always secretly harbored, the idea that Ford might someday want something more than what they had planned, that they might end up parting ways, that their dynamic duo would suddenly somehow fall apart. That without him, he’d be left friendless, stagnant, and alone.

Still, Stan couldn’t know for sure what Ford really intended on doing until later that evening, when the brothers finally found a peaceful moment alone on the swing set at the beach. As their parents had proudly celebrated the opportunity that had dropped into Ford’s lap after the meeting with the principle, Stan had mostly hung back from it all in apprehensive silence, something that he fretfully found his brother not even paying any mind as he instead spoke with clear excitement over everything West Coast Tech had to offer. Excitement that already gave Stan a pretty good idea about what his brother wanted to do, as much as it pained him to think about.

All the same, he forced out a small, sardonic laugh as they sat together on the swings, the crisp
warmth of the spring evening making things seem lighter than they really felt. “Ha, joke’s on them if they think you wanna go to some stuffy college on the other side of the country,” Stan remarked, the slightest hint of bitterness in his tone. “Once we get the Stan O’ War finished, it’s gonna be beaches, babes, and treasure hunting for us until we’re a pair of crusty old men, right?”

Ford hesitated upon hearing this, looking up from the pamphlet in his hands to his brother with a small, almost bittersweet smile. “Look, Stan, I can’t pass up a chance like this,” he began, deciding to be perfectly honest, though he could tell Stan wasn’t a fan of the idea based on his worried manner alone. “This school has cutting edge programs and multi-dimensional paradigm theory.”

“Beep-boop, I am a nerd robot,” Stan mocked, pulling off a robot pose to buffer his increasing aggravation with his brother. “That’s you, that’s what you sound like right now.”

Despite this teasing, Ford let out a brief chuckle, more than used to Stan’s playful joking by now. “Well, if the college board isn’t impressed with my experiment tomorrow, then… ok, I’ll do the treasure hunting thing with you.”

“…And if they are?”

“Well, then, I guess you better come visit me on the other side of the country, you knucklehead,” Ford grinned warmly, giving his brother a light punch on the shoulder before standing up to head home. All the same, Stan lingered on the swings for a bit after that, refusing to share the same hopeful manner as his brother, for he saw no hope in any of this. The only thing he really could see was something unthinkable: a future where Ford was accepted into that college, where he gladly left and stayed, likely settling roots there and creating a successful life for himself as a result of his scientific accomplishments. And on the opposite end, there Stan would be, without much of a chance to make any name for himself, much less any kind of sustainable income, stuck in Glass Shard Beach forever, stuck in lonely obscurity forever, stuck without his brother forever.

His grip on the sides of the swing tightened as he glanced over at the Stan O’ War, still sitting in its constant spot in the sand just a few feet away. For most of his youth, he had such ambitious dreams of the two of them jumping onto that boat the moment it was seaworthy, sailing wherever the wind took them and standing by each other throughout it all. Stan had always thought that Ford had shared those dreams, that they wanted the same thing: to stay together, no matter where they were. But now, that clearly wasn’t the case; they wanted different things, they had different dreams, and in the end, they were going to go their separate ways, no matter how much Stan wanted to keep them together.

And it infuriated him.

In fact, it enraged him so much that he couldn’t think of going home for the night just to hear his parents laud praise upon Ford for the successful future that awaited him. He couldn’t think of facing his brother, who had every plan of leaving him behind without so much as a second thought. He couldn’t think of going really anywhere else but school, where he knew all of these sudden troubles had first began. The gym was strangely unlocked for the night, as well as devoid of any security that the school was too cheap to hire, which allowed Stan easy access inside, where all of the science fair experiments were already set up for the following day. He had no real intentions in mind as he paced down the rows of tables hotly, bitterly snacking on his bag of toffee peanuts and seething to himself as he tried in vain to figure out how in the world Ford could even entertain the thought of breaking up their perfect, life-long team. But then, as he approached his brother’s experiment, a very impressive perpetual motion machine Ford had configured and built all on his own as a show of his vast scientific capabilities, Stan quickly realized exactly how he could. Because it was always all so easy for Ford while it had always been a struggle for Stan. Because
success had really always been dangling right in front of Ford’s face, and only now had he actually realized he could take it, but only to Stan’s detriment. Because clearly, Ford really was the better of the two, while Stan was anything but.

“Ugh! This is all your fault, you dumb machine!” he growled, pouring all of his mounting frustration into the experiment before him, the very thing that would certainly prove to be Ford’s ticket into West Coast Tech the following day. And as that frustration reached his height, Stan lashed out, slamming his fist down onto the table it was sitting on, only for the machine to react almost immediately to the blow. A small piece of metal on its side came clattering off, a slight plume of smoke rising up from its internal mechanisms as a result, showing that clearly, something was wrong with it. “Oh no!” Stan gasped, dropping his snack and instantly regretting his mistake as he frantically looked over the damaged machine. “W-what did I do?! I-I didn’t mean to-” He cut his initial panic off with a steadying gasp as he looked to the machine again, not having any idea about what to do to fix it other than simply reattaching the piece that had fallen off. “T-There,” he sighed, noting that the machine looked like it was running as it should be. “Alright, good as new. Probably.” Unsure of what else to do, Stan hurriedly put a nearby tarp over the experiment and promptly left, hoping that Ford wouldn’t notice. And really, how could he? After all, it was fixed, there was nothing to worry about. Except there was.

For the next day, Ford arrived to the gym just on time, well-dressed, ready and eager to meet with West Coast Tech’s admission board. He took in a deep, steadying breath as the stoic group approached, knowing that his entire future depended on this one, integral moment; still, he strangely wasn’t all too worried. He was certain that his perpetual motion machine would be more than enough to impress the board and grant him the highly coveted scholarship that would finally set him down a path far greater than any he had ever imagined before.

“Alright, kid,” the head advisee said, his tone rather cold as he looked to Ford, initially unimpressed. “Show us what you got.”

“O-ok,” Ford nodded, putting on the most confident smile he could muster. “Well, what if I told you that the future of technology was beneath this sheet?” His smile widened a bit as he removed the tarp from his experiment, only for the board members’ expressions to remain as apathetic as before.

“I’d say we wasted a car trip,” the head advisee remarked, glancing between Ford and his experiment in staunch disapproval.

“What?!” Ford flinched, quickly looking back towards his machine only to find that it was completely still, with not so much as even a spark of energy coursing through it whatsoever. “T-that’s impossible! It was stable yesterday! A-a fuse must have blown or something!”

“Kid, a perpetual motion machine has one job: to not stop,” the head advisee said, swiftly crossing Ford’s name off their candidate list. “I don’t think you’re West Coast material.”

Ford gasped at this, initially dumbfounded in disbelief as the board members walked off, taking his one chance for any real excellence with them. “N-no! Wait!” he pleaded desperately as he began to hurry after them. “Just give me another chance! I worked so hard! Please, I-” He stopped short as he happened to step on something lying on the gym floor: an empty bag of toffee peanuts. And while at first Ford hadn’t the faintest idea about how his machine might have suddenly malfunctioned at the very worst of times, as he picked that bag up, he had no doubts about what, or rather who had ruined everything for him in one fell swoop.
Despite his lingering worries concerning Ford and his experiment, Stan had mostly managed to push such worries out of his mind by that night. True, he was still dreading the inevitable revelation that Ford was accepted and that come next fall, he’d be gone, but even if that did happen, there was still some time. Perhaps a few months would be all he’d need to convince his brother to change his mind, a few months to finish the Stan O’ War and set out upon it, a few months for everything to return to the way it was supposed to be.

The only problem with such wishful thinking was that it was just that: wishful thinking.

For as Stan reclined on the living room couch casually paddle balling away while watching TV, he failed to hear Ford fiercely enter the house until his brother came to stand between him and the television, clearly seething with rage. “Hey, what’s the word, Sixer?” Stan asked with a smile of greeting, one that quickly faded into confusion upon seeing just how apparently furious his brother was.

“Care to explain what this was doing next to my broken project?!” Ford growled as he held the bag of toffee peanuts up, instantly telling Stan everything he needed to know about what had happened.

“Uh… O-ok…” Stan began quite awkwardly as he stood, unsure of how to really explain it all in a way that wouldn’t set Ford off even more. “So, I might have… a-accidentally been horsing around, and-”

“This was no accident, Stan,” Ford snapped bitterly. “You did this! You did this because you couldn’t handle me going to college on my own and leaving you here all by yourself! And now because of you, any chances I had for getting into West Coast Tech are completely destroyed, just like my project!”

“Look, it was a mistake!” Stan countered earnestly. “I didn’t mean to bust your thing up, I-I promise!”

“Do you honestly expect me to believe you!?” Ford argued sharply, his hands in tight fists at his sides. “Ever since I got this offer yesterday, you’ve done nothing but complain about it and try to talk me out of it! Honestly, I should have expected you to try and sabotage me like this just to keep me tied down to you!”

“Well of course I haven’t! But be reasonable, Stanley! We’re almost adults, for crying out loud! It’s time for both of us to move on and live our own lives! We can’t stay attached to each other at the hip forever!”

“Easy for you to say! You’re the one who’s actually going places! If they had let you into that fancy nerd school, then I would have been stuck here in boring, deadass New Jersey for rest of my life all by myself! But hey,” Stan let out a sigh, running a hand through his hair as he attempted to calm down. “If you think about it, m-maybe there’s a silver lining to all this, huh? Treasure hunting?”

Ford was silent for a moment upon hearing this, his expression awash in disbelief as he stared at his brother in shock over such a callous request before exploding in absolute anger. “Are you kidding me?! Why would I ever want to do anything with the person who sabotaged by entire
“You did what, you knucklehead?!” Filbrick hissed, gripping his son by the front of his shirt as he glared at him relentlessly.

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And for a moment, the most Stan could really even do in light of this was simply stand there, nearly on the verge of tears as he realized he had just lost everything in one fell swoop. Yet that wasn’t even the worst part of it all. The worst part, was that, despite his first meager attempt to stop this, in the end, Ford had still chosen everything else over him. Which meant that now, he really was all alone, just as he had feared.

“F-fine,” Stan began, forcing his grief out in place of anger as he gripped the bag his father had apparently packed for him in anticipation of kicking him out. Yet another sign of just how little he clearly meant to his own family, he assumed. “I can make it on my own! I don’t need you! I don’t need anyone!” he shouted back at the closed off house, hoping that his father and especially Ford could hear him. “I’ll make millions and you’ll rue the day you ever turned your back on me!” Without sparing any of them another word, Stan abruptly turn and got into his car, speeding away from his former home as fast as he could. All the same, before he turned off the block for good, he couldn’t help but spare one final, remorseful glance at everything he was leaving behind, knowing that despite his father’s refusal to listen to reason, despite his brother’s hesitance to stand up and defend him, despite all of the guilt he could just as easily place on everyone else, he only had himself to blame.

Which meant that the only one he could depend on to fix it all was himself.

And so, after a sleepless night spent in his car, Stan set out to do exactly that. With no real plan for sustaining himself in mind, he decided to go with the best thing he could think of: treasure hunting. Of course, the Stan O’War was still a ways off from completion, and without Ford’s help, Stan doubted that it would ever really be seaworthy. So instead, he decided to begin his search for wealth right on Glass Shard Beach itself. Armed with only a metal detector, he began combing the shore, hoping that somewhere buried deep beneath it would be the treasure that would prove to his entire family that he was so much more than screw up they thought him to be. Unfortunately, despite his thorough efforts, the most the shore really had to offer were discarded cans and other such assorted litter, things that certainly weren’t going to get him anywhere close to rich any time soon.

What did have a chance at getting him rich was something Stan hadn’t really considered before, but was instantly inspired to do upon spotting a well-placed billboard near the beach: becoming a traveling salesman. With no home or family to tie him down any longer, Stan found that he was easily able to throw himself into the on-the-go entrepreneur lifestyle as he began his very first lone business venture: Stan Co. Enterprises. He worked out of his car, going door to door at first and selling home and personal products from vacuums to coat hangers to everything in between, all made out of the cheapest materials he could possibly amass so he could make the biggest profit possible in return. After he had made a decent amount of money, Stan began advertising his wares on late-night infomercial spots, which he was glad to see boosted his sales even more. However, what the young salesman hadn’t been anticipating was that his customers wouldn’t be satisfied with the rather poor quality of his wares. One item in particular, the Sham Total, caught the ire of its users, as, instead of removing stains like it was promoted to do, its cheap dye only served to make them much, much worse. Stan quickly learned about his customer’s frustration firsthand as they swarmed his market stand on the boardwalk as an angry mob, complete with riotous demands for refunds and pitchforks in hand. Fortunately for Stan, he had sold them said pitchforks, and they were all just about as faulty and defective as any other product he offered, which allowed him to make a clean getaway, without returning any of their money to them whatsoever.

Of course, such fraud and essential theft was highly illegal in the state of New Jersey, but Stan only narrowly avoided jailtime for it in exchange for never entered the state again. The young salesman hardly even cared as he left his home state for the last time, officially banned from it as he ventured into Pennsylvania, wisely changing his name so that he could keep his still-fledgling business
intact. Still, Stan, or as he now referred to himself, Steve Pinington, had hardly learned his lesson when it came to selling defective products, for despite his Rip-Off brand bandages being advertised to *not* give users rashes, they did exactly that. After just a few short weeks, Stan was effectively driven out of Pennsylvania and onto the next state, changing his name yet again in the process.

And so things continued in a similar process for the next several years. After realizing that his attempts at playing entrepreneur weren’t working to make him much of a profit, Stan decided to try his hand at various other get rich quick schemes. From betting on horse races, to trying his hand at the lottery, to money laundering scams, to even getting involved with mobs and cartels, he tried just about everything he could think of to make his way in the world. Of course, getting a regular job would have been much easier, but he was quick to find that most places had no interest in hiring a high school dropout with a rapidly growing criminal history to his name, or rather names. It had been quite some time since he had gone by Stanley Pines, and in its place were several other conjured IDs thought up throughout his travels: Stetson Pinefied, Hal Forrester, Andrew “8-Ball” Alcatraz, and those were just a few of the false identities he fabricated, identities that allowed him to travel across the country, and in a few cases even outside of it, as he pleased. True, it wasn’t always easy; living out of his car was far from glamorous, money for food, or for anything else really, wasn’t often guaranteed, and he had made more than a few enemies in his misadventures, from law enforcement officers to thugs and gangsters. But even despite all of the struggles, he was his still own man, finally cut loose from being just “Ford’s brother” as he had been known throughout his entire youth. And while acting on his own and having to fight all his own battles carried plenty of problems of its own, Stan kind of preferred it like that.

After all, with no one in the world left to rely on, not even his own twin brother, that meant that the only one he could rely on was himself.

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*Present Day*

Seeing that the kids in particular were rather overwhelmed by the lengthy story he was detailing for them, Stan decided to take a brief break, though only really to counter the sullen scowl Ford was sending his way. Even the Gems were just as quick to notice the tension between the two brothers, but neither of them really said anything on it seeing as how they were still very eager to learn what their apparent part in all of this was. Yet even so, they had been paying attention thus far, something that, out of all three of them, Pearl was the one to prove as she spoke up, giving the conman something of a critical frown.

“So I suppose all that time ‘on the run’ explains those fake IDs of yours we found?” she asked somewhat caustically.

“Oh, gee, I dunno, Pearl,” Stan deadpanned, clearly in no mood to contend with both her and Ford at the same time. “Maybe all those IDs belong to some other guy who got kicked out of his family and had to run around all over the country for over ten years just to get by.”

Pearl simply let out a disgruntled scoff upon hearing this, one that Ford lightly echoed as he shook his head in obvious disapproval of his brother’s sarcasm. Still, Stan hardly paid either of them any mind as he happened to glance over at Amethyst, who remained in sullen silence as she glared away from him, arms crossed and expression sour. He was half tempted to address her, to apologize from everything he had harbored from one of his closest friends for long, but before he could get the chance, Steven interjected.
“Wow…” he said with a sympathetic frown for Stan and Ford after pondering all they had just heard. “What happened between you guys… it’s… it’s really sad…”

“It sure is!” Mabel quipped just as fretfully before trying her best to perk up a bit. “I know exactly what you two little broken teacups need: to hug it out!” She grinned brightly, looking between the brothers as they stood a good distance away from each other, their backs turned and their expressions petulant as the refused to do anything of the sort. “Hug it out!” Mabel tried again, this time a bit less insistently as her smile started to falter. “H-hug train’s coming in the station! Hugapalooza! Two thousand!”

“Uh… m-maybe you guys just need a good example?” Steven offered a bit less excitably. “It’s easy, all you have to do is open your arms out wide and-” The young Gem finished by pulling both Mabel and Dipper into a sudden hug, one that the former gladly welcomed, despite her surprised blush, though the latter was by far less enthusiastic about.

“Ugh, you guys, come on,” Dipper scowled as he pulled himself away from the pair, averting their confused glances rather bitterly. “Knock it off. Now isn’t the time to be messing around, ok?”

“Aw, but come on, bro-bro, we were just-” Mabel found herself abruptly cut off by the hand her brother put up, making it quite clear that had no interesting in addressing either her or Steven at the moment. And they both had a heavy hunch about what the exact reason for such staunch avoidance really was, as much as it worried them both.

Instead, Dipper turned his attention over to Ford since he was by far more curious about whatever the author’s intriguing, unknown past might have entailed than Stan’s history of lying and deceit. “So wait, what about you?” he asked curiously. “Did you end up going to your dreams school?”

Ford let out a rather frustrated sigh at this, paired with an irritated glare that was clearly intended for Stan in light of what had transpired between them years ago. “Not exactly…”

Early 1970s

Backupsmore University was far from being anything close to a prestigious college, placed in a small town only a few hours outside of Glass Shard Beach, with a subpar enrollment number and mediocre programs and facilities. However, given that his chances for getting into any ivy league school like West Coast Tech had been all but ruined, Ford had found that he really had no other choices when it came to his higher education. Backupsmore, while quite underwhelming, had at least offered him a decent academic scholarship, one that he begrudgingly took in the hopes that he could at least advance his future somehow. Besides, anything that got him out of Glass Shard Beach and out from his under father’s almost oppressively strict thumb, Ford considered to be a plus.

Still, that didn’t mean he was exactly excited about venturing off into his college career on his own. For the entire summer after Stan had been kicked out, Ford often found himself lost in a sea of unanswerable “what ifs”. What if he had been accepted into West Coast Tech? What if Stan hadn’t been kicked out? What if things between the two of them hadn’t been completely torn apart over one simple instance neither one of them could have ever really predicted?

Or more than that, what if he had the courage and the nerve to stand up to his father, to walk right out that door and join his brother in an uncertain, but still united future?
Truthfully, he’d never know. Because on that family-shattering night, Ford had made his choice, just as Stan had made his choice to take away his chances for a securely successful future out of spite. And his choice to walk alone and forge his own path to success was one he was determined to stand by, no matter what.

But all the same, forging that path was far from easy work. Ford threw himself into his studies from day one of his freshman year, relentlessly pouring over any book that came his way and acing every single exam he took. He quickly gained a reputation on campus as “the six-fingered genius”, as well as a plethora of other goading nicknames, though Ford paid none of them any mind. He had long since given up on the endeavor of a social life in favor of his academic pursuits, in which he was making great strides. It wasn’t always smooth sailing; Backupsmore didn’t often know how to handle a student as high preforming as Ford, but even so he managed to advance through his undergraduate program three years ahead of schedule, an outstanding record for anyone at the college by far. His graduate studies were every bit as successful, with tireless, sleepless days and nights spent working on his master’s thesis, one that was impressive enough to gain recognition and adulation on a national scale. By the time Ford finished his studies with multiple PhDs under his belt, the university awarded him with what was by far the highest honor he could have hoped for: a substantial grant for $100,000, intended to fund any research endeavor of his choice.

To Ford, it was like a dream come true. So much work, so much time, and so much effort, and through it all he had cultivated the means to finally go out and explore literally anything his heart desired. Excitement practically overwhelmed him in the weeks following graduation as he tried to figure out exactly what scientific pursuit he wanted to follow with this hefty grant. In all honesty, there were so many options available to him, from aerodynamic physics, to theoretical astronomy, to advanced robotics, and literally everything in between. And yet, as the fresh graduate pondered over his abundant choices, his mind often wandered back to his own six-fingered hands every time he so much as glanced down at them. Throughout his childhood and teen years, even a good portion of his college experience, his polydactylism had often been a stimulus of sour ridicule towards him from his peers. And yet… for as odd and sometimes off putting as he often say his apparent defect, Ford couldn’t deny that there was an element of unique strangeness to it, to the point that it could certainly be classified as an anomaly of sorts. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that he was far from the only anomaly out there; certainly, the world was filled with incredibly strange things, the likes of which no one had ever seen before, just waiting to be discovered and studied and reported on by someone intrepid enough to seize such a challenge. And fortunately for Ford, he was more than intrepid and dedicated enough to take on such a bold, untapped field, all on his own.

With his mission in mind, all that was really left was for Ford to pick a base of operations for his research. Ideally, it would be somewhere where reports of oddities and bizarre sightings were common, highly concentrated even, so that his research could be contained to one set geographical place. And, after some intensive investigations, Ford eventually managed to pinpoint a place that had exactly that, a small Oregonian town, one that rarely even made an appearance on most maps at all, yet by all accounts, seemed to be home to countless unknown anomalies never seen or heard of before:

Gravity Falls.

And so, that’s exactly where he went. With his grant check in his pocket and purpose in his heart, Ford set out on the long, cross-country drive to Oregon, ready to begin his search for the unknown. Upon his initial arrival, Gravity Falls didn’t seem that notable; just a little lumberjack town, nestled within a cozy little valley of deep pine forests and populated by what appeared to be average, unassuming people. However, as the young researcher drove in closer to the town, he happened to notice one particular facet about it that made him pull his car to a stop and stare in apt amazement.
From an initial glance, it appeared to be some sort of statue, rising high above the town from the
tall cliff face it was carved into. The statue was carved into the shape of a woman, massive and
stately, with several arms with palms held up towards the sky, and a mask of two stoic, yet
steadfast faces. Needless to say that Ford was completely awestruck upon seeing such a monument,
and already, his curiosity was peaked for whatever secrets it, as well as the rest of this seemingly
normal town might hold.

In fact, his interest about this statue was so peaked that he ended up purchasing a plot of land in the
forest just down the hill from it to build his new home, or rather, his base of operations on. His
grant money would be more than enough to cover the construction costs, leaving Ford to begin his
initial investigations. Of course, he didn’t have to look very far for any strangeness, for not but a
day after he had arrived, a massive, wooden hand emerged from the depths of the forest and swept
his car away entirely. While normally, he would have been distraught or even outraged at the loss
of his main method of transportation, Ford couldn’t have been any more excited by this sign that
truly, something bizarre, maybe even supernatural lurked within this odd little town.

In fact, as the days passed on into weeks, Ford only began to spot even more oddities betwixt the
forests of Gravity Falls, to the point that it was quickly becoming clear that he wouldn’t be able to
keep the reports of his findings restrained to the small notebook he had brought along with him.
And so, in order to properly document the fascinating strangeness he happened across every day,
the young researcher decided it would be best to chronicle it all within a series of journals-

Present Day

“AHHHH!”

Ford cut his ongoing narration off at this absolutely elated squeal, one that had, much to
everyone’s surprise, had come from Dipper. “The journals!” he exclaimed, heavily excited over the
mere mention of the long-unknown origin of the trio of books. His enthusiasm quickly quelled into
embarrassment however, upon noticing that the others were all looking to him rather awkwardly,
all of them apparently caught off guard by his interruption, including the author himself.

“Oh, uh… s-sorry,” Dipper quickly apologized, suppressing a flustered blush as he averted eye
contact with the others. “I-I, um, just got… kinda excited there… a-about the journals… k-keep…
keep talking.”

Another beat of tentative silence passed in light of this, but it soon came to an end as Ford
continued right where he had left off. “So as I was saying, I began to keep a journal-

“AHHHHH!” Dipper inadvertently interrupted Ford once again, unable to contain his excitement
over the books even a second time, though he forced himself to be calm as Garnet patiently shushed
him so Ford could go on.

“Just going to ignore that,” the author said staunchly as he dove right back into telling his
compelling tale.

1970s

With his journals serving as the idea way to document all of the countless anomalies he came
across, Ford finally began to investigate the unique oddities of Gravity Falls in depth, and he was far from disappointed with what he saw. From floating eyeballs, to cursed doors, to even the surprisingly large population of gnomes dwelling deep within the woods, the unexpectedly incredible little town had so much strangeness to offer, both supernatural and otherwise. And yet, for all of the anomalies he found on his frequent forays deep into the forest, there was still one mystery that baffled the young researcher as the weeks of his time there passed into months. A mystery that was only a short walk right up the hill from his very own home.

And after months of being preoccupied by smaller, more cursory explorations, Ford decided that perhaps it was finally time to look into that massive, almost ethereal statue for himself. He started his investigation by asking around town about it, but none of the rumors he heard seemed to bear much weight, including whispers of women who changed their shape and could pull weapons out of stones on their bodies. So in light of having so little to go off of, Ford decided on one crisp autumn day that if he wanted answers to this curiosity hanging almost literally right over his head, he’d just have to find them for himself.

While the young researcher wasn’t exactly sure what he had been expecting to find, what he ended up encountering during that trudge up the hill towards the statue gave him quite a scare. For as he was writing down some cursory notes in his journal on his way up to the statue, Ford suddenly found himself pushed abruptly to the ground by a creature that was quite unlike any he had encountered in Gravity Falls thus far. It was a large, lumbering monster, with multiple limbs and a semi-gelatinous form, though what was quite interesting about it was the fact that it possessed what appeared to be some kind of sparkling stone in place of where its face should have been. For a moment, the most Ford could do was stare at this creature in both amazement and fear as it stood over him, growling ferally, but as quickly as it had pinned him down, it reared up on its hind legs, ready to crash down hard. And yet, before it could, something bright, fast, and pink rammed into its side, abruptly shoving it off the frightened young researcher. As disoriented as he was, Ford only had a moment to pick himself up into a sitting position and readjust his askew glasses before looking over to his saviors, who only managed to baffle him even more.

A group of four women had descended seemingly out of nowhere, each of them bearing some form of deadly combat weapon as they fought the gelatinous creature head on. The smallest of the bunch, short and almost childlike in statue and oddly predominantly purple in coloration, lashed a spiked whip out at the beast, wrangling it down securely. This gave her supposed teammate, a lithe, limber woman with porcelain white skin and a smooth stone of the same color on her forehead, a chance to swoop in with a courageous battle cry, a spear in hand as she skewered the monster down to the ground. From there, another one of the group, a taller woman with a cubical black afro and heavily-fortified battle gauntlets, delivered a powerful right hook to the creature, further incapacitating it to allow the last member of this apparent team to finish the job. By her presence alone, it was easy to tell that she was the leader, tall yet oddly genteel in her appearance, from her elegant white gown to her mass of pink, perfect ringlet curls as she stepped forward almost solemnly, an impressive claymore of a blade in one hand and a shimmering shield over her other. And then, as she stood right before the writhing creature, she lashed out, her sword cleanly hitting its mark; with a simple twist of the blade, the monster’s form completely dissipated, leaving only its bizarre stone behind. The pink-haired woman placed her hand over it, somehow forming a small, shimmering bubble around it before making it disappear into thin air before she turned to address her teammates.

“Excellent work, Gems!” she congratulated warmly, the other three clearly soaking up her adulation as their weapons seemed to vanish in bursts of sparkles. “It hardly took us any time at all to beat that one! Like I always say, its easier when we work together.”

“It certainly is…” the pale woman grinned proudly, intertwining her hand with her leaders, much
to the smallest member’s playful annoyance.

“Aw, c’mon, Pearl, if you wanna have your ‘special time’ with Rose, then get a room,” she remarked, teasingly sticking her tongue out, much to the pale woman’s embarrassment. Still, the other two let out amused chuckles at this, though the second tallest one stopped short upon spotting Ford, who was still stuck on his spot as he started at them in immense awe and curiosity to learn more about these mysterious warrior women.

“Rose,” the taller Gem nudged her leader’s free arm, nodding in the young researcher’s direction. At this, the pink haired woman glanced over her shoulder, surprised at first, though her admittedly lovely expression soon broke out into a wide, cordial grin.

“Oh! Hello, there!” she greeted brightly as she turned to face him fully, revealing the bright pink gemstone where her exposed naval would have been. All the same, she headed over to him, her teammates following close behind as she extended a hand out to help him up. “I hadn’t noticed that monster was attacking a human! Looks like we got here just in time. Are you alright?”

For a moment, Ford couldn’t seem to find any words to say to the impressive woman before him, largely since he was so awestruck by whatever she apparently was. Of course, she had set the distinction herself that she wasn’t human, despite her very human-like appearance, which only made him wonder about her and her friends all the more as he took her hand somewhat apprehensively. “Uh, I-I… um… n-no—I-I mean, y-yes! Yes, I am,” he nodded as he rose to stand somewhat unsteadily, surprised by just how small he felt compared to the very tall woman before him.

“Pfft, doesn’t look alright,” the small, purple girl remarked with a sly sneer as she elbowed her paler teammate. “Pretty sure this one’s broken, don’t ya think, Pearl?”

“Oh please, Amethyst,” the pale woman scoffed, crossing her arms as she stole a somewhat disdainful glance at the young researcher. “Humans can’t break, isn’t that right, Rose?”

“Well, they can,” the pink haired woman chuckled. “But I don’t think this one is, are you?”

“Well, they can,” the pink haired woman chuckled. “But I don’t think this one is, are you?”

“Um… I don’t… believe so…” Ford replied, rather confused by such an odd question. In all honesty, he wasn’t entirely sure how to properly carry himself in front of such odd, yet ethereal women, but all the same, they seemed friendly enough. Which was a relief given some of the more dangerous creatures lurking in the woods around Gravity Falls.

“Could’ve fooled us,” the second tallest Gem remarked, her tone staunch and stoic.

“So, you got a name, not-broken human?” the purple girl asked quite casually, rocking back and forth on her feet.

“Oh, I-I… it’s Stanford. Stanford Pines,” he said as solidly as he could, extending a hand out for them to shake. The women were apparently not accustomed to this standard greeting practice, but the small one let out a surprised gasp as she suddenly grabbed his hand and pulled it down a bit, much to Ford’s alarm.

“Whoa! You guys, check this out!” she exclaimed, her expression awash in amazement. “This human’s got an extra finger!”

Upon being called out for this, Ford was quick to pull his hand away, his cheeks lighting up in a flustered red as he tried his best to conceal his hands, though the pink haired woman extended hers out to him, a small, eager smile on her face all the while. “Can I see?” she asked, her tone curious,
warm even. Warm enough to, for whatever reason, convince Ford to hold his hand out for her to get a better look. “Oh, wow! It’s true!” she gasped, her smile widening as she looked back up to Ford, clearly impressed. “How remarkable! I’ve never seen a human with six fingers before! This really is something special, don’t you agree, Gems?”

The smaller and the taller women both nodded with intrigued smiles, though the paler one lingered close to their leader, giving Ford a critical, almost suspicious glance until she met the pink haired woman’s bright smile, making her harsh manner fizzle somewhat. “Mm… I suppose it’s… somewhat interesting,” she remarked dryly. “For a human that is…”

While Ford was somewhat confused by her strangely cold attitude, he couldn’t deny how caught off guard he was by the other three women. Specifically by the fact that they seemed rather amazed by his polydactylism rather than put off by it, which of course, only made him want to know more about these so called “Gems”. “Um… forgive me if this sounds a bit rude,” Ford began, his stone till somewhat uncertain. “But… what exactly are the four of you?”

“Oh! I’m sorry!” the pink haired woman laughed. “I were so fascinated by you that I didn’t even think to introduce us! Well, this is Amethyst,” she nodded down to the purple girl, who smirked wryly as she waved up to the young researcher. “That’s Garnet,” she placed a hand on the taller Gem’s shoulder as she greeted him with a casual nod. “And this is Pearl,” she smiled to the pale woman clinging tightly to her, still refusing to so much as even smile at Ford for some unknown reason. “And I’m Rose Quartz,” she finished sweetly, though her expression took on a bit of resolve as she motioned to the entire group. “And we’re the Crystal Gems!”

“Crystal… Gems?” Ford asked with a confused frown, taking another glance down at the gemstone on Rose’s stomach. “As in… gemstones?”

“In a sense…” Rose nodded, prompting Garnet to hold up her gem-bearing palms and for Amethyst to pull her top down a bit, revealing the gem on her chest. Pearl huffed impatiently as she pointed to the stone on her own head, allowing Ford to see that all four of these Gems were exactly that: Gems.

“Incredible…” Ford mused in apt amazement as he pulled out his journal and hurriedly began taking down notes. “Sentient humanoid gemstones! And the four of you fight monsters like that on the regular?”

“Yes,” Garnet nodded, quite sparse with her words.

“We just so happen to be the protectors of this town, the ones responsible for keeping it, as well as this entire planet, safe from harm,” Pearl remarked somewhat snidely, casting a brief, unfavorable glance down at Ford’s journal as he eagerly continued writing. “By the way… w-whatever you said your name was, you got to ask us a question, so now it’s our turn. What exactly is that?” she nodded to the journal as the young researcher happened to glance up from it.

“Oh, this?” he smiled, somewhat oblivious to the white Gem’s dry tune as he held the book up for the Gems to see. “It’s a journal that I’ve been using to take notes of all of the supernatural oddities I’ve come across in this town.”

“Oh… why do that?” Amethyst asked, rather confused as Ford handed the journal off to Rose so she could get a better look at it. “You could just go outside and look at all the weird stuff around here; that’s way easier than writin’ it all down.”

“Well, that’s because I’m a scientific researcher,” Ford proclaimed rather proudly. “I came here a few months ago and set up shop just down the hill,” he nodded to his house, which was still in sight
at the bottom of the hill. “In order to study whatever strange, bizarre, or downright confounding anomalies Gravity Falls has to offer before one day sharing my findings with the world!”

“Hm… so that’s where that unsightly little building came from…” Pearl muttered, still somewhat cross.

“Anomalies?” Rose questioned with a soft, but enthusiastic gasp. “You’re here to figure out what makes this town so unique too? We’ve been looking into the exact same thing for over 100 years now!”

“Rose, are you sure we should-” Pearl attempted to intervene, though she was quickly cut off.

“Really?” Ford asked, very intrigued to hear that someone else shared his immense curiosity when it came to the odd facets of the town.

“Of course!” the pink Gem smiled warmly. “Come with us to our temple, its right up the hill. We’d be more than happy to tell you, or rather show you everything we’ve learned so far!”

“Rose-” Pearl tried once more, appalled that her liege would make such an offer out of the blue.

“O-oh, well I’d be honored to!” Ford complied excitedly, gladly following after Rose as she began to lead the way up to the massive statue.

“B-but Rose!” the white Gem protested once more, though her frustration fell on deaf ears as Rose and Ford had already launched into conversation about the mysteries of Gravity Falls. Pearl let out a disgruntled sigh, far from happy about having yet another human around, especially since that was a problem she hadn’t really had to worry about much during their tenure in Gravity Falls. Of course, Amethyst only managed to rub salt in the wound as she skipped past her teammate, letting out a teasing laugh as she did.

“Aw, Pearl, I dunno what you’re so upset about,” she smirked as she flipped over to walk on her hands. “Looks like we got another huge nerd around here, so you and Science Man should get along great!”

“Amethyst…” Pearl grumbled bitterly as the purple Gem ran off, though as Garnet passed by her she paused to place a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t worry,” she said, adjusting her shades. “This one isn’t going to end like you think it will.”

Pearl’s angry expression lightened into a look of both surprise and confusion upon hearing this, but Garnet didn’t bother elaborating as she continued on ahead. “G-Garnet, wait!” the white Gem exclaimed, running after her teammate, anxious and hopeful all at once. “What does that mean? Garnet!”

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Even from their initial meeting, it was easy for anyone to see that Rose and Ford had hit it off. They spent several hours sitting up near the entrance to the Gems’ obviously mystical temple, exchanging stories of the anomalies they had each encountered during their time in Gravity Falls thus far. While Pearl wasn’t initially interested in joining in on the conversation, Amethyst and Garnet did, interjecting with their own observations occasionally, all of which Ford made mental notes on to investigate further. The young researcher was so invested in this riveting discussion with these fascinating women that he found it hard to pull himself away and back down to his house, but eventually he did, though he left with the assurance that he could continue this exchange
of information with the Gems tomorrow. A meeting that he gladly showed up to the following day. And the day after that. And the day after that.

In fact, nearly every day onward, Ford and the Gems encountered each other in some way shape or form, be it formal meetings or chance encounters as they explored the supernatural oddities of Gravity Falls on their own. In light of how many times they ran into each other, Ford and Rose eventually reached a conclusion: the five of them would be much more effective working together in their pursuit of knowledge than they were apart. And so, they decided to form something of a partnership, one in which they set out as a collective force, thoroughly searching the wilds of Gravity Falls for anything interesting they might find.

Researching alongside the Gems, Ford found himself learning more than he ever had about the supernatural than he had when he had worked alone. Rose knew the valley well, and she seemed to be on generally good terms with most of the strange creatures that lived therein, who were all naturally trusting of her kind, gentle nature. The in she provided him with greatly aided the young researcher, allowing him to investigate these anomalies up close and personal, granting him with so much new information that his initial journal all too quickly filled, prompting him to resort to a second one and eventually, even a third.

Of course, the longer he studied alongside Rose and the Gems, the more variety Ford saw in the oddities Gravity Falls seemed to innately possess. From unicorns to ghosts to even the egg to a bizarre, shapeshifting creature they had found, the supernatural was abundant in the backwoods town. Practically every new discovery left Ford and Rose both besides themselves with excitement, their zeal for learning more about the world around them completely parallel and passionate.

And through that zeal and passion, a deep, genuine friendship had formed through their initial partnership, one that both of them valued highly. An undeniable bond of trust came to exist between the pink Gem and the young researcher, to the point that any time they were in each other’s company, they were essentially as content as they could be.

Though it took a bit longer for the other Gems to warm up to Ford as Rose so quickly had, in time, they did as well. Amethyst was eager and curious, particularly when it came to what she had dubbed as “human things”, to the point that every time she stepped foot in Ford’s house, he often spent most of his time explaining to her what things like a radio or a refrigerator were. In something of a bittersweet way, her rouge, careless attitude sometimes reminded him a bit too much of Stan… but every time such thoughts of his distanced brother came to mind, Ford was quick to push them away.

Garnet was a bit of an interesting case, often silent and stoic and firm in words and action. For the first few months, Ford found it rather hard to strike up a conversation with her, that is until he learned of her unique ability in foresight, what she commonly referred to as future vision. From then on, the young researcher often found himself coming to Garnet for statistics and probability, things that she was rather adept at; such scientific inquiries soon led to the occasional offhand joke or complimentary remark between the two, forming a casual camaraderie as time went on.

Of course, it took the longest amount of time for Ford to form an actual working relationship with Pearl, who continued to show her initial unexplained bitterness towards him for even up to a year after they met. The white Gem refused to explain her reasoning for it and the young researcher never really thought to ask, even despite Rose patiently encouraging that they try to work together and get along. However, if there was one thing both Ford and Pearl could agree on, it was their love of science. While there were plenty of times where they’d argue over equations and theory, on the rare occasion when they’d agree on something, they’d do so with a surprising amount of forbearing and understanding. And as time went on, that understanding only seemed to grow as
they continued sharing their mutual affinity for physics, astronomy, cryptozoology and more, to the point that something of a loose, compliant colleagueship began to form, one that, in time, eventually became a full-fledged friendship.

With such trust and companionship existing between Ford and the Gems, it didn’t take long for Rose to begin opening up on their end of things. For much like all of the other strange facets of Gravity Falls, the Crystal Gems were something of an anomaly in and of themselves, and the more Ford learned of their origins and their abilities, the more amazed he was. By far, the most incredible thing about them was the fact that they were actually essentially extraterrestrial, with origins going back to a mysterious planet called Homeworld, a place that none of them spoke too fondly of. The young researcher quickly discovered the reasoning behind this disdain upon learning the largely unknown history of the ancient war the Crystal Gems had fought against their home planet for the safety and freedom of the Earth, a battle long fought and hard won, but won nonetheless. Of course, history wasn’t all the Gems told Ford about; their biology was quite amazing, with regenerative properties and internal sustainability that set them quite apart from humans. Rose eagerly introduced the young researcher to a plethora of Gem-related concepts, from their shapeshifting abilities, to their weapon summoning, to their unique capacity to combine their forms in a process referred to as fusion, so even the various magical pocket dimensions contained within their illustrious temple. By and large, Ford found these discoveries to be some of the most fascinating ones he’d made during his time in Gravity Falls, and he readily documented everything he could concerning the Crystal Gems across all three of his journals.

Overall, Ford found the Gems’ help to be invaluable to his research, and their companionship to be more than he could have ever asked for. Amongst Garnet’s confidence, Amethyst’s playfulness, Pearl’s zeal, and Rose’s kindness, the young researcher realized he was in a place and position that made him happier than he could really ever recall being. After a whole life of what felt like unsteadiness and uncertainty, he had finally dug his roots among company that openly and warmly accepted him for who he was. Within the incredible strangeness of Gravity Falls and between the friendship of the equally amazing Crystal Gems, Ford knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was exactly where he belonged.

And yet… something was still missing.

Nearly six years and come and gone in a bright rush of new discoveries and exciting experiences since Ford had first arrived in Gravity Falls, but even despite his immense contentment there, several questions still hung at the back of his mind almost continually. Namely, why was Gravity Falls such a hotspot for the strange and the supernatural in the first place? Why did such oddities all seem to congregate to this one geographic place in particular? Where did these anomalies even originate from? And beyond all of that, were the answers to such questions even possible to find at all?

The more Ford pondered these wonderings on his own, the more frustrated he became by his own lack of any concrete answers for them. And so, one day he decided to take them to the Crystal Gems, hoping that, with their lengthy presence in the town, they’d have some useful insight on the matter.

“Why is Gravity Falls so strange…?” Rose repeated Ford’s initial question as she paced around his living room, the researcher and the other Gems all standing by expectantly. “That’s… a very good question…”

“A… question that you have some leads on, perhaps?” Ford ventured with a hopeful smile.

Rose took pause at this, taking a moment to exchange something of a stiff glance with her
teammates before responding somewhat sheepishly. “Er… not exactly…”

“We’ve been trying to figure that out for decades now,” Pearl added, crossing her arms. “But it seems like no matter how hard we look, we never get any closer to finding any actual reasons as to why Gravity Falls is so bizarre compared to any other place on Earth. It’s been… aggravating, to say the least.”

“You don’t think there’s something you all might have… missed in your investigations, do you?” the researcher pressed, driven to get answers, as always.

“Nah, we’ve looked just about everywhere,” Amethyst remarked as she dropped down from the rafters, one of her favorite places to nap. “We’re just as stumped as you are, Science Man.”

“Perhaps this is something we’re not meant to know,” Garnet remarked, leaning against the nearby doorframe.

“B-but there has to be a reason!” Ford exclaimed fervently, pulling out his recently completed second journal and flipping through its pages. “All of this strangeness can’t just come from nothing!”

“Well wherever it does come from, we haven’t the faintest idea,” Pearl said, shaking her head empathetically. “Sorry, Stanford.”

“I can’t believe this…” Ford huffed, frustrated more with himself than he was with any of the Gems. After all, it was hardly their fault that this mysterious seemed so elusive. “Six years and three journals worth of research and I’m still no closer to finding answers than when I started! How is it so hard to figure out? How are all of these anomalies connected? And why here, of all places?!”

“It’s nothing to feel bad about, Stanford,” Rose interjected, placing a steadying hand on her partner’s shoulder as she offered him a small, reassuring smile. “After all, we’ve already discovered so many incredible, wonderful things here, and that’s something we should be proud of. Something that you should be proud of. And who knows? I’m sure if we keep looking, then one day we’ll find those answers you’re looking for. Together.”

Ford let out something of a disappointed sigh at this, but he found he was unable to remain upset for too long upon meeting the pink Gem’s warm, comforting smile. One that he only halfheartedly returned as he readjusted his lab coat with a hint of renewed resolve. “Hm, yes, well,” the researcher nodded staunchly. “In the meantime, I think what I need is to clear my head for a bit. A short walk in the woods might do me some good…”

“Oh, would you like us to go with you?” Rose asked with a willing smile.

“Normally I would,” Ford partially returned her grin as he escorted the Gems out. “But I think I’ll be fine on my own. And of course, if I manage to happen upon anything new out there, then you’ll be the first to know.”

Rose beamed at this, nodded in warm acceptance as the other Gems began the trek back up to the temple. Before she joined them, however, she stopped short, turning to Ford one more time as her expression turned a bit more sincere. “I meant what I said, Stanford,” she said, firmly, yet kindly. “I know you have what it takes to figure this out. It may seem impossible now, but I’ve seen humans overcome impossible odds before. And if there’s anyone who’s capable of doing just that, it’s you.”
Ford finally smiled fully at this, his spirits lifted by the pink Gem’s clear confidence in him, as often was the case. While still worried about his chances in solving Gravity Falls’ greatest secrets, at the very least, he could trust that he’d have her help in every step of the way. Which was why he fully meant what he said as he turned to head off into the woods before him, where one of his most life-changing discoveries yet was about to be found. “Thank you, Rose.”

The Gems were rather confused by Ford calling them down to his house for a very early meeting the next day, but immediately upon arriving, they could tell he was beside himself with excitement as he rushed about, preparing everything necessary before he began. And when he did, he started off with an elated announcement that he had, through what he only described as “divine intervention”, at last come across a lead as to how they might uncover the truth behind Gravity Falls’ strange properties. The Gems listened intently as the researcher presented his theory that the anomalies the town was so highly populated with came not from Gravity Falls itself, or even from their own dimension itself; but rather, they came from some other plane of existence, a dimension of weirdness that had somehow torn into Gravity Falls and leaked its strange anomalies into the town itself. Ford purposed that the only way to truly understand the connection between these two dimensions was to access this strangeness at its source: by constructing a machine, a portal namely, that could serve as a gateway to this world of weirdness that it all seemed to come from. And fortunately, the researcher had happened to come up with blueprints for such a machine, apparently all on his own.

Upon hearing all this, the Gems were somewhat skeptical to say the least. The vast majority of the explanation went over Amethyst’s head, while Pearl wondered if such a massive endeavor would even be feasible at all. Garnet admitted that her future vision gave her no clear answers as to what might happen if they went through with this project, and even Rose seemed somewhat hesitant, voicing her concern over what might happen if the Earth tried to connect itself to some distant, unknown world, much like what Homeworld had tried to do to it centuries ago. Ford was quick to placate her worries, however, by assuring her that this was vastly different from the now-defunct galaxy warp she had shown him on multiple occasions. And with this assurance and the trust Rose placed in it, she soon readily jumped on board, the other Gems following suit as they agreed to assist Ford with this project in any way they could, all in the hopes that they’d finally uncover the truth they had so long been searching for.

Of course, even in the midst of planning, the intrepid group was quick to realize just how arduous of a task this was going to be. They would require rare, fortified materials, ones that were not commonly purchased, and even they were, they’d be more than Ford could reasonably buy with what was left of his grant money. And while the Gems presented a suitable solution to that problem, there was still the issue of engineering. Pearl was rather well versed in the subject, but not necessarily to the extent that the portal would require, and Ford found himself falling short in the field himself, even despite his extensive studies in other sciences. Fortunately though, the researcher knew exactly who to recruit for the task: a former classmate and close friend he had made during his time at Backupsmore, Fiddleford McGucket.

Despite his obvious rural southern upbringing, Fiddleford was, by all accounts, completely brilliant when it came to engineering and mechanics. After graduation, Ford had remained in touch with him, and had learned that he had moved to California with his longtime sweetheart, settling down in Palo Alto to raise a young son in a nice home. Of course, Ford questioned his friend’s apparent dream of starting a portal personal computer company, believing that such an invention would certainly never catch on and that Fiddleford was largely wasting his impressive talents. But all the same, he was delighted to hear the mechanic’s solid agreement to journey up to Gravity Falls for a
time to assist in the portal’s construction, ready to lend his skills to the effort wherever needed.

However, what Ford hadn’t made Fiddleford aware of prior to his arrival in Gravity Falls, was that they wouldn’t be alone in working on the project. The mechanic was somewhat caught off guard by the Gems at first, who welcomed him warmly as soon as they heard he was a friend of Ford’s. But as overwhelmed as he initially was, Fiddleford soon enough formed a loose camaraderie with the four of them, nothing as close as what Ford had with them, but still it was a mutually working relationship nonetheless. The researcher noticed that he worked well with Pearl in particular, the two of them passionate for their engineering craft as they collaborated on fixing up the final touches on the blueprints for the portal. And, once they had gathered the necessary supplies and everything was checked and double checked and even triple checked, the construction for the machine finally commenced.

They had decided to build it right underneath Ford’s house, in a deep, almost cavernous basement lab the Gems helped him dig out even prior to Fiddleford’s arrival, in preparation for this project. It was a spacious place, one that gave them more than enough seclusion to work on the portal unfettered by any external forces. The Gems’ physical strength was a massive asset in the physical labor of the construction, to the point that they even sometimes utilized fusions to get the bigger jobs done. Many a sleepless night was spent putting it together, the blueprints serving as their guide for what they were optimistic, almost certain even, would be their key to a world unknown. A world that certainly must have been filled with endless discoveries and possibilities just waiting to be found.

But in reality, it would be the key to a world that was anything but that.

After almost a year of tireless work and seemingly endless preparations, the portal was finally complete and functional. Of course, before anyone even thought of venturing through it to see what lay beyond its wall of radiantly glowing energy, it would need to be tested extensively to ensure everything was in safe, working order. And, despite some whispers of worries and concerns going in, the collective group met in the portal room one night, prepared to do just that.

They had wisely decided to send a dummy into the portal first, one that was tethered to their reality by a rope in the event that they could pull it back over as needed. The Gems hung close by as the portal roared to life, the mock representations of their gemstones glowing upon it as proof of their hand in its creation. At the same time, Ford and Fiddleford approached the safety line before the machine, a dummy held between them as they prepared to toss it in. There was an admirable amount of tension hanging within the room, tension that had been accumulating amongst the group for quite some time as a result of a number of current, alarming events. The one who was by far the most vocal about his anxieties concerning the project was Fiddleford, to the point that his ongoing pessimism and doubts had partially passed onto the Gems as well. Ford couldn’t help but be somewhat frustrated with their lack of resolve, including Rose’s as she had pulled him aside only a few hours prior and asked him if he was entirely certain he wanted to go through with this, a look of obvious dread on her expression clear. Of course, the researcher had quickly pushed her worries aside, assuring her that everything would go exactly according to plan and he meant it. He had come to far to back down now, when the answers he had searched so long for were finally within his reach. He wasn’t about to give up the chance to achieve greatness beyond his wildest dreams just because of a few unfounded fears and superstitions. He was a scientist; and after tonight, he’d be a great one.

And so, without any further deliberations, Ford and Fiddleford let the dummy go, the portal’s artificial gravity field pulling it forward towards its central glow. However, what none of them had anticipated was that the rope tying the dummy down would accidentally end up wrapping itself around Fiddleford’s leg just as the dummy glided towards it. The mechanic let out a fearful cry as
he lurched forward as well, one that startled Ford and the Gems as they rushed to try and rescue the
now airborne Fiddleford.

“Wait!” Ford exclaimed to the Gems as he tightly gripped the rope, noticing that they were all
running forward towards the portal to try and save Fiddleford, who was now partially within the
portal itself. “Stay back, its too dangerous!”

“For you, maybe!” Pearl retorted hotly, knowing that they couldn’t just leave the mechanic to his
doom.

“But not for us!” Rose finished boldly, instructing her other teammates with a nod. Garnet, Pearl,
and Amethyst rushed to grab the remainder of the rope behind Ford, all four of them giving it a
mighty pull.

“W-we got you, buddy!” Ford shouted to Fiddleford, whose limbs were flailing wildly as his head
remained on the other side of the portal. Fortunately, with the Gems’ help, he was able to swiftly
yank the mechanic out of the machine and back into their dimension. As he began to fall back to
the ground, Rose readily jumped to catch him, securely doing so before landing near the others and
gently putting Fiddleford down. Ford and the other Gems were quick to group around him, though
Rose held up a hand to stop them, her eyes already wet with healing tears in case they were needed.

“Give him some space,” she advised calmly, nodding down to the clearly shell-shocked mechanic
sprawled across her lap. His eyes were huge, his pupils absolutely dilated as he seemed to stare up
at nothing at all amidst his frantic, hurried breathing, near-constant trembling, and frantic, full-
body twitching. While initially quite concerned for his friend’s wellbeing, Ford quickly got to the
point that he was unable to contain his curiosity about what lay on the other side of the portal as he
inched forward a bit, leaning down next to Fiddleford as he took his hand tightly.

“What is it? Is it working?” he pressed anxiously, ignoring the mechanic’s ongoing panic attack.
“What did you see in there?!”

Fiddleford flinched at this, his twitching growing wildly out of control as he finally spoke.
However, as he did, his words were a jumbled mess of nonsense that none of them could even hope
to decipher: “VOTMZRIG IVSKRX OORY!”

“Fiddleford?” Ford asked, his worry returning as he exchanged a confused glance with Rose.
However, before of them could try and figure out what was going on, Fiddleford suddenly sat up,
his manner stark, almost robotic even as he continued staring forward, his eyes huge as he muttered
something that left them all in absolute bewilderment.

“When gravity falls and earth becomes sky, fear the beast with just one eye…”

“Beast with one eye…” Rose repeated, her brow furrowing in worried confusion upon hearing
this.

“Fiddleford, get ahold of yourself,” Ford urged, placing a steadying hand on his friend’s shoulder.
“You’re not making any sense.”

Fiddleford finally seemed to snap back to his senses at this, though he was hardly at ease as he
jerked his shoulder out of Ford’s grip and sent the researcher a bitter glare filled with nothing less
than absolute resentment. “This machine is dangerous,” he said coldly, shuddering as he glanced
back towards the portal. “You’re playin’ with fire here, Stanford. This thing could bring about the
end of the world! Destroy it before it destroys us all!”
“D-destroy the world?!” Rose exclaimed, quite alarmed by this as the other Gems let out startled gasps of their own.

“W-wha—I can’t destroy this!” Ford countered intently, knowing that Fiddleford had to be mistaken somehow. “It’s my life’s work, the key to answering everything!”

“I know what I saw in there!” Fiddleford shouted back as he stood, his hands in tight fists at his sides. “It was a nightmare, plain n’ simple! I fear we’ve unleashed a grave danger on the world. One that I’d just as soon forget. I quit! And I’d urge you ladies to do the same.”

And with that, the mechanic promptly turned and left, sparing not a single word to his former friend as he went to put as much distance between himself and this failure of a project as possible. For a moment, the most Ford could do was sit there, completely baffled by Fiddleford’s staunch departure, anger and betrayal building up within him until he happened to glance over and make eye contact with the Gems. All four of them were looking to him in apt shock, the slightest hints of suspicion and wariness filling their expressions as a beat of tense silence lingered before Rose finally spoke up.

“S-Stanford…” she began apprehensively, the portal casting looming shadows over her as she stood. “What did he mean when he said this machine could destroy the world?”

“R-Rose, I…. I don’t…” Ford trailed off, his manner somewhat shaken himself as he looked back to the portal. “F-Fiddleford didn’t know what he was talking about. After all, you know how anxious he can be.”

“That didn’t sound like mere anxiety,” Garnet remarked, her tone rather cold. “That sounded like fear.”

“What is on the other side of that portal, Ford?” Rose asked, not harshly, but very seriously all the same. “What did Fiddleford see in there that made him react like… like that?”

“I… it… i-it’s exactly what I said it would be!” Ford protested as he also stood, growing frustrated with Rose’s apparent doubt. “It’s the dimension where all of the anomalies here in Gravity Falls comes from!”

“But how do you know that for sure?” Pearl asked, raising an incredulous eyebrow. “What did you really have us build down here, Stanford? A portal to another dimension? Or something far more sinister?”

“Oh you’ve got to be kidding me!?” Ford huffed angrily. “The five of us have been working together for years now! How could you possibly think I’d ever even entertain the thought of building something that’s a detriment to mankind!? This portal is to provide humanity with answers, not senselessly destroy it!”

“Stanford…” Rose bowed her head somewhat, to the point that the shadows practically concealed her eyes altogether. “Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl, and I have been protecting humanity for centuries. I started an entire war just to protect it from our own kind. Nothing matters more to me than keeping this planet and everything on it safe. I want to believe that what we built together can benefit humanity just as much as you do… but if its true, if this machine really does have the potential to destroy this planet… then we have no choice. You have to destroy it, just as Fiddleford said.”

“B-but… but I…” Ford took in a sharp break, his hands curling into tight fists as he took in everything the pink Gem had just said to him. He could scarcely believe that Rose, of all people, was standing before him, telling him to abandon his quest for the truth for the sake of nothing more
than tawdry safety. Which was why he needed to make her see reason, even where Fiddleford hadn’t. “N-no. He was wrong. This portal isn’t dangerous! It’s a tool to gain knowledge, not a weapon of mass destruction, I know it!”

“Are you sure, Ford?” the pink Gem asked as her teammates gathered close to her, unanimously looking to the researcher with growing distrust. “Can you look me in the eyes and tell me that this machine can be used for good? That it won’t cause the kind of destruction and devastation that could potentially wipe everything on this planet out? If you can honestly stand there and tell me that, then I’ll believe you.”

Ford was prepared to do just that, though as he did, he couldn’t help but hesitate as he looked past Rose and to the portal instead. And as he did, he was unable to deny the small burst of worry growing inside of him that perhaps Fiddleford had been right, that the portal’s purpose wasn’t as pure or altruistic as he had been led to believe. It was a preposterous thought, for sure, but even so, his obviously uncertain silence told Rose everything she needed to know.

“…Right…” she sighed sadly, glancing down morosely to avoid eye contact with the researcher. Her voice was soft, almost pained even as she shook her head before finally looking to Ford, grief-filled tears welling up in her eyes as the other Gems pressed even closer to her. “Then we’re done here.”

“W-what?” Ford asked, caught off guard.

“I said, we’re done,” Rose’s tone was a bit firmer now, as was her expression. “We’re not going to lend our help to something that could very well end up destroying this planet, a planet we fought so hard for and lost so much to protect. So that leaves us no choice but to cut our ties from this… and… and from you…”

The most Ford could do upon hearing this was shake his head, sudden grief overwhelming him as he realized exactly what he was losing here. Not only were the Gems leaving, but they were taking their help, their knowledge, their friendship with them. Friendship that he had come to value so highly and would be completely lost without. “R-Rose, no… y-you…”

“Let’s go, Gems,” Rose said simply, nodding for her teammates to leave. They did so, each of them sending Ford a rather unsavory, disdainful look as they did, all three of them quite upset with him for the kind of damage his machine stood to cause and how they had been dragged into helping create such a disaster in the first place. The pink Gem was the last to leave, though she did happen to linger near the door to the lab for a moment, letting out a dejected sigh as she briefly glanced back to the distraught researcher behind her. “I’m sorry, Stanford, but… this is just how it has to be. But… I do hope that all of this doesn’t turn out as badly as I think it might… And perhaps if it doesn’t… then we can start things fresh and new. But until then… this is goodbye…”

Without another word, the pink Gem departed, leaving Ford completely alone with his machine and nothing else. He couldn’t even think of anything to say to try and stop Rose as she left, torn amidst his palpable despair and his growing anger. And, soon enough, that anger at the thought of being abandoned by those closest to him, those who refused to share the same glorious vision as he did, those who only wanted to hold him back, just like everyone else in his life, completely took over. “F-Fine!” Ford shouted hotly, even though Rose had already left. “I’ll do it without you! I don’t need you, or the other Gems, or Fiddleford! I don’t need anyone!”

Almost as soon as the researcher had made this fierce proclamation, however, Ford’s intense manner quickly snapped the moment he heard a soft, almost indiscernible whisper come from seemingly nowhere. “W-what?” he asked, glancing around for anyone else only to find that he was the only one in the lofty room. “W-who’s there? Who said that?” Of course, he received no answer,
the whispers only multiplying and growing in intensity, though he couldn’t make out a single word of what they were saying. And yet… by their tones, in a strange way, it almost seemed as though they were… mocking him. Laughing over a victory he had no clue about. Alarmed, Ford stumbled back into the far wall of the room, a hand placed against his head as he tried his best to quiet these almost deafening whispers, though to no avail.

In fact, if anything, the whispers only seemed to intensify in the following weeks, and they were far from the only thing the researcher had to deal with. His nightmares were abundant, his thoughts plagued by doubt, guilt, and terror of an unseen evil. He couldn’t so much as even look at the portal without recalling Fiddleford’s panic-stricken words or Rose’s intent, firm warnings. Warnings that he feared he had failed to listen to and now it was far too late. For as time continued slipping by, so too did Ford’s own sanity begin to slip, leaving way for intensive paranoia and practically soul-crushing dread. With the Gems and Fiddleford no longer around to keep him anchored and active, the researcher fell into a deep seclusion, desperately pouring over his notes all hours of the day and night to try and find a solution to the problem he had caused. He had abandoned the thought of sleep entirely, knowing that he couldn’t risk wasting even a single second, lest he leave himself vulnerable to the forces of darkness lurking all around him. The notes in the remaining pages of his third journal became frantic, sloppily written and completely telling of the deep fear of the man writing every single word of desperate warning and unending regret. By all accounts, he felt trapped, lost in a sea of anxiety, remorse, terror, and confusion that he was powerless to escape from. And yet, in the din of his growing mania, Ford did manage to reach one clear conclusion: that in light of the clear and proven danger that it could bring about, the portal could no longer remain operational. Even despite all of the time and work and effort that had gone into it, none of that mattered for the sake of protecting the world, just as Rose had said. Which was why Ford readily dedicated himself to undoing his grave mistake, his pride and passion all but forgotten in place of an overwhelming desire to set things right.

The researcher knew that the first and most essential step to doing so would be to separate his journals; the trio of books held not just the portal’s blueprints, but also instructions on how to get it running. Kept together, they could easily fall into the wrong hands and ensure global destruction. And so Ford hid his second journal away on his own accord, out near the local elementary school, where he assumed no child would ever be clever enough to find it and dig it up. For his first and third, journals, however, the researcher wanted to be completely unaware of their whereabouts, knowing that it would be impossible for someone to amass their locations from him if he was ever put in such a forced position. Ford knew that his research should be left in the hands of two individuals he trusted above all else; though giving his rapidly increasing paranoia, such trust was hard to find. However, he did manage to eventually come up with the only two people he could turn to amidst all this upheaval, two people that he could only hope with every fiber of his being would not fail him now.

Winters in Gravity Falls were known for being absolutely brutal and this one was no exception. The brisk, frigid, snow-filled air left Ford in quite a shock as he ventured out into it, making the relatively short trek up the hill towards the Crystal Temple. It was a voyage he had made more times than he could even count, but something about this trip up there felt so incredibly different than any other he had made before. Perhaps it was the unbearable wintry chill, perhaps it was journal 3 tucked securely into his coat, or perhaps it was his own growing dread and fear, but Ford could feel a sense of finality with every step that he took up to the temple. Even as he came to stand before its sparkling gate, he found his hand hesitating to knock upon it, knowing that doing so would, in many ways, be an admittance of defeat. The confession that he hadn’t been able to solve this problem on his own, that he needed outside help, that he had to trust someone as opposed
to trusting no one. And yet, for as much as he hated that vulnerable, constricting feeling, Ford knew he had no other choice. So he knocked.

As he had hoped, Rose’s specific door slid open smoothly, the pink Gem standing in the frame of the gate as she looked down to the researcher, clearly perplexed by his unexpected visit. Ever since the disastrous portal incident, the two of them had only seen each other a handful of times, chance encounters ranging from rather awkward to tension-filled. In each of them, Rose had noticed how Ford’s mental state was steadily falling apart at the seams, and despite her cutting her ties with him before, she had made the selfless offer to try and help him, an offer that had always been bitterly rejected. In light of everything that had happened even the researcher’s once strong trust in the pink Gem had eroded away as he blamed her for not knowing of the true dangers that lurked within the town she had called home for much longer than he had. Dangers that, had he been warned of in a more timely manner, would have perhaps been foiled and evaded altogether.

Still, it was too late to change the past now, something that Ford knew all too well as he stood before Rose, who was still admittedly quite confused even as she addressed him. “Stanford…” she said, her voice soft and sad. “W-what… what are you doing here?”

Ford took in a deep breath to steady himself, deciding to get right to the point as he pulled journal 3 out of his coat. “I need your help,” he said, presenting the book to the pink Gem. “There’s not much time left and I have to get rid of this in a secure way before its too late. I’ve already hidden the second one a-and I have someone coming to take the first one away. And so… I was hoping that you would take the third one…”

“Why?” Rose asked, her expression unreadable as she looked between the researcher and his journal.

“Keeping them together is far too much of a risk,” Ford said rather matter-of-factly. “If someone were to find the portal’s blueprints contained within them, then the entire universe could.”

“I know why we need to separate the journals, Ford,” the pink Gem interjected. “What I meant was why do you want me to take one of them?”

Because I trust you was what Ford wanted to say, but of course, his pride wouldn’t let him. So instead, he went with the easier option. “Because you have the resources to properly protect it, of course.”

“…Right…” Rose sighed, her already saddened expression growing even moreso as she took the journal out of Ford’s hands. “In that case… I… I’ll find someplace for it… A place where it will be safe from… f-from him… and from anyone else who might want it for the wrong reasons…”

The researcher only nodded at this, far too burdened by so many thoughts at once to think of much else to even say to the pink Gem at this point. But that didn’t mean she didn’t have anything to say to him. “Stanford, I…” she hesitated, pulling the third journal close to her before she continued on a different tangent entirely. “I-if you don’t mind telling me, what are you planning on doing next?”

Ford sighed, shaking his head in slight shame as he turned away from her. “After the first journal is safely taken care of, I’ll be making a trip to the caves where I first happened upon the knowledge of… of you know who… Hopefully something there will be able to give me an idea of how to vanquish him from our world, once and for all.”

“T-then let me go with you,” Rose insisted, placing a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sure that together, we can-”
“No,” the researcher remarked coldly as he pulled away. “This is my mistake. I need to be the one to fix it.”

“But you don’t have to do that on your own!” the pink Gem urged earnestly. “I can help you, Stanford, I want to help you! You’re forgetting that I care about keeping this world safe just as much as you do, especially from someone as dangerous and demented as him. But I can’t do that unless you let me in again, please. We used to be such close partners. Such close friends… I’ve lost so many humans I’ve cared so much about in the past… I don’t want to lose you too…”

“Rose…” Ford began, finally glancing back to look at her and meeting her pained expression with one of his own. As much as he wanted to take up her offer for solidarity and support, he knew that he couldn’t. Largely because he knew her kindness and caring were things that he just didn’t deserve anymore. “I… I have to go it alone. I just… i-it’s the only way…”

The pink Gem moved to protest this decision, but for whatever reason, she held herself back, instead opting to glance down morosely, tears nearly welling up in her eyes but still not falling. “Well then… at least… be careful out there…” Ford nodded once again to this, making no promises, for he wasn’t sure exactly what he was about to face, though he resolved himself to be ready for it nonetheless, no matter what might happen. However, before he could depart, Rose stopped him one last time, a few of her pressing tears finally falling as her long pink curls were gently tossed by the winter winds rather solemnly. “Stanford…” she began despondently, her tone and expression creating a tight, almost unbearable pit inside of his heart as he listened to her fretful farewell. “…I’m sorry… for everything…”

The researcher’s shoulders hitched upon hearing this, and it took everything in him to not turn around at face the pink Gem and return her sad, sincere words in full. But once again, what little logic he felt like he had left overruled his emotions, to the point that he simply left her in silence, knowing that nothing he could say could ever hope to undo all that had gone wrong between them. Still, as lost and hopeless as he continually felt, a part of him hoped that someday he’d have the chance to truly make things right with her once and for all, a chance to show her just how much he appreciated her, a chance to fix what had been broken.

A chance that, unbeknownst to him, he would never get to have.

New Mexico, 1982

In all the ways Stan had expected his life to go, this wasn’t exactly anything close to what he had been hoping for. The past several years had been a rough, wild string of scams, arrests, escapes, and almost countless near-death experiences. All of his plans to make a fortune for himself had failed completely, sometimes in quite disastrous ways, to the point that Stan had eventually given up on them entirely simply for the sake of surviving. Whatever necessities he had usually acquired by stealing them, giving him experience enough that he had practically mastered the craft of thievery, among several other illegal acts. Of course, it didn’t help that he had more than his fair share of dangerous foes and rivals who wanted to do him in as a result of him either fooling them, robbing them, or giving them the slip. Still, with so many hungry for his demise and so few willing to help him out or take him in, Stan found himself quickly running out of options as well as out of hope that things would really ever get better. After all, he had been on his own in a constant state of “in betweens” for an entire decade now and despite all of his tireless efforts to make something of himself, it seemed like he never made any hint of progress a life that wasn’t completely in shambles. There had been the occasional moment where he wondered whether or not all of his struggling to simply get by was even worth it, if there really was ever a chance, no matter how slim
that he could one day rise up from the rock bottom he seemed so deeply rooted in. And while some small voice inside his head often told him to give up on it all in those moments, another part of him, one that sounded suspiciously like a certain twin brother of his, urged him to keep on going, to hold onto his long-lasting stubborn nature and fight his way through the trials life threw at him, no matter how hard it might be.

And so he did.

Though really, Stan wasn’t sure exactly how much longer he could hold out as he sat alone in the cramped, filthy, bug-infested motel room he had somehow scrounged up enough money to afford for the night. Anything was better than sleeping in his car after all, and it also made him a little less vulnerable to all of the thugs who wanted his head. Still, that didn’t mean he was able to suppress a frightened flinch as a sudden knock sounded on the door of the room, a knock that prompted him to quickly grab his baseball bat before he even thought of going to answer it.

“J-just give me a few more days, Rico!” Stan shouted, knowing that the aforementioned cartel boss was his most recent and most dangerous foe at the moment. “I’ll pay your goons back, I swear!”

Fortunately, on the other side of the door wasn’t any murderous mafia member or belligerent brute, but rather only a mailman, who stopped by just long enough to slip a postcard through the door slot before going on his way. Of course, Stan was rather surprised by this as well, especially since he couldn’t recall the last time he had gotten any mail from anyone, especially such an odd looking postcard from some place he had never heard of called Gravity Falls. But as he turned it over, he was quickly met with a message that shocked him more than almost anything he had seen in his travels thus far:

“PLEASE COME!” – FORD

Needless to say that upon seeing such an urgent plea from his brother of all people, Stan was completely floored. Ford hadn’t tried to get in contact with him even once since he had been kicked out by their father years ago, yet all of the sudden, he was reaching out to him, seemingly out of nowhere with such a terse, mysterious request to make such a long journey out to see him? Stan could scarcely believe it and even beyond that disbelief he could hardly be happy about it. After all, Ford had just as much of the blame for the disaster his life had become as anyone else, maybe even moreso given that he could have at the very least stuck with him as opposed to leaving him lost and alone for his own selfish purposes. A years’ old anger burned within Stan’s gut as he thought about his brother’s callous betrayal, and it was almost enough to get him to crumble up the postcard and throw it in the trash without a second thought. And yet… he couldn’t deny that he was also curious. Ford must have requested him to come for a reason, one that he hadn’t the faintest clue about but wanted to know nonetheless. And as much as he knew he shouldn’t even give his brother the time of day after what he had done a decade ago, Stan ultimately knew that he couldn’t stay away.

And so with nowhere else to really go, Stan figured he might as well at least go check things out on Ford’s end. After all, what was the worst that could happen?

The drive from New Mexico to Oregon was a long, boring one, but Stan made reasonably good time, only taking stops to siphon gas from other cars at the occasional fuel station or raid an unattended check-out counter for snacks. And soon enough, he reached the backwoods town of Gravity Falls, which was completely buried by snow, much to Stan’s immense aggravation as he made it there with only a light, soiled jacket to keep him warm. All the same, the cold didn’t bother him as much as his growing dread did as he approached Ford’s door, knowing well that this meeting could be the second chance between them that he had always secretly hoped for. Either
that, or it would serve to tear them apart even more than time and distance alone already had.

“Alright, Stan,” he said to himself, trying to instill as much confidence as he could as his hand hung over the door, ready to knock. “You haven’t seen your brother in over ten years. But its ok. He’s family. He won’t bite.”

With this final self-assurance, Stan knocked on the door, only for it to partially swing open seconds later, revealing a crossbow-wielding Ford behind it. “Who is it?!?” he demanded sharply, his exhaustion-marred face awash in paranoia and anxiety as he aimed his weapon directly at his startled brother. “Have you come to steal my eyes?!?”

Stan hesitated before saying anything as he leaned away from the tip of the arrow being pointed at him, knowing that for all of the possible greetings he had been expecting from Ford, this had not been one of them. “Well, nice to know I can always come to you for a warm welcome,” he remarked, not really knowing how else to start but with dry sarcasm as he raised an eyebrow at his brother.

“Stanley,” Ford sighed in slight relief as he lowed his crossbow a bit, though he still kept a firm grip on it nonetheless. “Did anyone follow you? Anyone at all?”

“Yeesh, no,” Stan scoffed, rolling his eyes. “By the way, hello to you too, pal—whoa!”

Quite unexpectedly, Ford pulled him inside the house, slamming the door shut behind them and locking it tight before pulling a flashlight out and shining it directly in his brother’s eyes. “Ah! Hey!” Stan protested, pushing Ford away from him as he blinked the painful light out. “What’s the big idea here, poindexter?!”

“S-sorry, I just had to make sure you weren’t…” Ford trailed off, a brief look of fear flashing over his features before he quickly shook it out of his head. “Uh… i-it’s nothing. Come in, come in,” he motioned to the next room, swiftly walking into it as Stan followed, quite confused about his brother’s apparently frantic manner.

“Uh, you gonna explain what’s going on here?” he asked with something of a worried frown. “You’re acting like Mom after her tenth cup of coffee.”

“Listen,” Ford spun around intently, gripping a burgundy book with a golden six fingered hand on its cover tightly. “There isn’t much time. I’ve made huge mistakes and I don’t know who I can trust anymore. What I’ve done could end up putting the entire universe at jeopardy and for all I know it might be too late to stop even that.”

Stan paused upon hearing this, his concern turning into surprise as he looked at his distraught brother with wide eyes. While he had no real clue about what Ford was talking about, he still acted against his better judgement and placed a hand on his shoulder, hoping that he could offer him some kind of much-needed emotional support. “Hey, uh, easy there. Let’s talk this through, ok?”

Ford shook his head bitterly, almost smiling sardonically though not quite. “I’m afraid this isn’t something that can simply be ‘talked through’, Stanley… Instead… I have something to show you. Something that you won’t believe.”

“Look, I’ve been around the world, ok?” Stan remarked dryly. “I’ve seen more crazy shit in my time than you probably have sitting here in this comfy cabin of yours. Whatever it is, I’ll understand.”

“There is nothing about this I understand,” Stan said stiffly as he and Ford stood in the shadow of
the massive machine in the basement. By all accounts it looked like something out of a bizarre sci-fi dream, with its incredible metallic structure and the arrangement of various gemstones fixated to its edges. Fortunately though, despite Stan’s absolute bewilderment by it, Ford was quick to explain.

“It’s a trans-universal gateway,” he began, sending the portal something of a bitter glare in light of all it had helped take from him. “A punched hole through a weak spot in our dimension. I created it to unlock the mysteries of the universe, but it could just as easily be harnessed for terrible destruction. That’s why I shut it down and hid my journals, which explained how to operate it. There’s only one journal left, and you are the only person I can trust to take it, Stanley.” With this, the researcher handed his first and final journal off to his brother, his expression deeply sincere, pleading almost as he continued. “I have something to ask of you. Remember our plans to sail around the world on a boat?” Stan couldn’t help but smile, hope filling his expression and his heart for the first time in years at the mention of his long-lost childhood dream. A dream that Ford was all too quick to shoot right to the ground once more. “Take this book, get on a boat, and sail as far away as you can!” he demanded urgently. “To the edge of the Earth! Bury it where no one can find it!”

For a moment, Stan was completely dumbfounded, especially as Ford turned away and stepped towards the portal without sparing him another word. But after his initial shock wore off, absolute rage replaced it instead, because how dare Ford tell him to come all the way up here just to take some dumb book and hide it far away, how dare Ford hardly even consider the possibility that they could use this chance meeting to reconcile again after all these years, how dare Ford get his hopes up for them being actual brothers again, only to dash them all so openly and so completely. “That’s it?” Stan spat harshly, glaring at his brother in absolute disbelief. “You finally wanna see me after ten years and its to tell me to get as far away from you as possible?!”

“No, you don’t understand what I’m up against,” Ford rationalized frenetically. “What I’ve been through!”

“I’m selfish?” Ford scoffed, completely appalled at such an accusation. “I’m selfish, Stanley?! How can you say that after you cost me my dream school!? I’m giving you a chance to do the first worthwhile thing in your entire life and you won’t even listen!”

“Well, you listen to this: you want me to get rid of this dumb book so badly? Fine,” Stan growled, pulling a lighter out of his pocket and striking it as he held the flame right underneath journal 1. “I’ll get rid of it right now!”

“No!” Ford gasped, launching forward in an attempt to grab the book out of Stan’s hands before it could catch fire. “You don’t understand!!”

“You said you wanted me to have it, so I’ll do whatever the hell I want with it!” Stan contested, yanking the journal back from him, even as Ford continued to struggle desperately for it.

“My research!” Ford cried just as the fire started to hit the journal. Unable to bear the sight of everything he had worked so hard for go up in flames, he did the only thing he could think of. In a fit of building panic that finally rushed to the surface at that moment, Ford pounced at Stan, who easily tripped his much less physically adept brother up before taking the journal and running back
towards the nearby lab with Ford in hot pursuit. “Stanley! Give it back!”

“You want it back?!” Stan snapped as Ford roughly shoved him against the portal’s control panel. “You’re gonna have to try harder than that!” Of course, what neither of them noticed as they continued their heated physical struggle was that, in their carelessness, they had slammed against several of the key buttons that activated the portal, and in the midst of their furious fighting, they hardly even noticed as it began to roar to life in the other room. “You left me behind, you jerk!” Stan shouted as he pulled his hardest against the journal. “It was supposed to be us forever! But then you went and ruined my life!”

“You ruined your own life!” Ford shot back, acting on impulse alone as he kicked Stan squarely in the chest. It was enough to get his hands off the journal for sure, but it also inadvertently ended up knocking Stan right into the portal’s operating console. Or rather, the glowing, red hot symbol emblazoned on its side.

Stan let out a sharp howl of agony as his back slammed into the mark, which burned him instantly upon contact and branded itself heavily upon his skin. The pain felt so intense that it was practically white hot as Stan collapsed to the ground, anguished tears pricking in his eyes though he refused to let them fall amidst his continued outrage. All the same, Ford could only watch in newfound shock as his brother writhed in pain on the ground before him, knowing that he was completely responsible for this horrific accident. “Stanley!” he cried fearfully, unsure of what to even do to help him. “Oh my gosh! I-I’m so sorry! Are you alri-

Ford was abruptly cut off by a sudden left hook as Stan jumped upward, still reeling in pain from the burn on his back, though he hardly let that stop him now. After all, he had been holding back years of frustration and fury towards his brother; as far as he was concerned, there was no better time to let it all out than right there and right now. “Some brother you turned out to be!” Stan growled bitterly as Ford stumbled backwards, tripping over the portal switch, though he was quick to catch himself, ignoring its ever-intensifying glow. “You care more about your dumb old mysteries than your family? Well then you can have them!” With this outraged proclamation, Stan shoved the journal into Ford’s arms hard, not noticing as he pushed him over the line on the ground before the portal. And sure enough, as soon as the researcher was over it, the portal’s gravitational pull began dragging him up in the air towards it, much to the shared alarm of both brothers. “W-whoa! Hey, what’s goin’ on?!” Stan exclaimed as he ran forward a bit, especially as Ford let out a terrified cry of distress as he drew ever closer towards the portal’s all-encompassing light.

“S-Stanley!” he shouted, desperately struggling to tether himself back down to the ground and away from the portal, for he now knew exactly where it led. And, considering everything, it was no place that he ever wanted to go to. “Stanley, help me!”

“What do I do?!” Stan exclaimed, anxiously looking around for any way to stop this amidst his practically paralyzing shock.

“D-Do something!” Ford begged, flailing wildly in the air as his lab coat began to be sucked into the portal behind him, the rest of him quickly going right along with it. Which meant that, even if there was something Stan could do, it would be far too late. “Stanely!” he cried, knowing he had only seconds left as he threw the journal as far away from him as he could. “Please! Tell Rose Quartz I’m sor-

The researcher never got to finish this final plea. For in a blinding flash of light, the portal swallowed him completely, whisking him away to whatever nightmares awaited on the other side. The force of this explosion of energy was enough to knock Stan back towards the other and of the room, the journal flying somewhere behind him. And when the light faded and everything had
settled, he was able to gather his bearings only enough to notice two things: the portal was shutting itself off upon this great explosion of power.

And his brother was gone.

“S-Stanford?” Stan asked quietly, his entire body trembling from the lingering pain on his back as he slowly picked himself up. Indeed, the only thing of Ford that remained in the room where his glasses, which must have fallen off and landed near the portal in all of the chaos. But all the same, the realization of what had just happened was enough to shake Stan out of his initial shell-shock and right into frantic, distraught action. “Stanford! Come back! I-I didn’t mean it!” The last of the energy was fading from the portal as Stan reached it switch, and even despite yanking it as hard as he could, the machine remained devoid of any newfound activity. “I just got him back! I can’t lose him again!” he cried desperately, doing everything he could to try to get some kind of reaction from the portal, some kind of hope that Ford was still somehow within his reach. “Augh! Come on! Stanford!”

Stan froze as he heard only his own voice echo through the portal’s empty center, which Ford was now completely lost to. And at that moment, the reality of it all came crashing down at him all at once; his brother was gone, and all because of his own frustration and foolishness. For in the thoughtless heat of the moment, he had pushed Ford over that line and into that portal, launching him into whatever unknown, distant dimension it likely led to. Honestly, for all Stan knew, Ford’s life could have ended the moment he passed through the now-defunct machine, a thought that certainly terrified him, but an actual possibility nonetheless.

There was simply no way to know where or how his brother was, which was why the most Stan could really think to do was retrieve journal 1 from the floor and frantically flip through its pages, hoping that it provided some kind of answer. However, he was quick to find that its information was fractured and incomplete, the tail end of the book only referencing that its chronicles were continued in some unknown second journal. A rush of despair filled Stan as he realized he had no idea what to do about any of this, especially with only the scattered bits and pieces of instructions he had at his disposal. Yet he didn’t have much of a chance to think about what he could possibly do before the elevator in the lab suddenly burst open, a large, pink-haired woman rushing out of it and running into the portal room with wide eyes of alarm.

“Stanford!” she cried, clearly distraught as she came to stand before the portal, not even noticing Stan’s presence as he hung back towards the other end of the room, watching the woman in surprised confusion. “N-no… H-he… he didn’t… H-he said he was only going to… I didn’t think… How could he just… leave like this?”

“Uh…” The woman gasped as she overheard Stan behind her, spinning around swiftly to face him. He flinched under the tearful, wide-eyed intensity of her gaze, though the way she spoke his brother’s name, so softly and so painfully, was what rattled him more than anything else.

“S-Stanford?” she asked, her movements slow and uncertain as she approached him. “What… w-why do you look so… How did you…” she paused, bewildernent washing over her expression before stark realization and deep suspicion filled it instead. “Wait… you’re not… w-who… who are you? And why do you look so much like… like him?”

Stan didn’t answer right away, mostly since this woman’s sudden appearance and confusing line of questioning had caught completely off guard amidst his still ongoing shock from what had just happened with the portal. Nonetheless, he answered her rather stiffly and awkwardly all the same. “Who, you mean Ford? Uh, that’s cause I’m his twin brother: Stanley.”

“T-twin… brother?” she asked, apparently baffled by even the idea alone. “Stanford never… he
didn’t say anything about having a brother…”

“Ugh, why does that not surprise me?” Stan huffed, a bit of his former bitterness towards Ford returning upon hearing this. “And who exactly are you supposed to be, pinky? You can’t be his girlfriend; there’s no chance in hell a nerd like him would ever be able to land a looker like you, so what, are you like his secretary or therapist or something?”

“Wha—no,” the woman shook her head, still clearly confused. “I’m Rose Quartz, leader of the Crystal Gems. My teammates and I are— o-o-rather… we were close friends and research partners with Stanford… But now…” She trailed off as she looked back at the portal before turning back to Stan intently. “Please, tell me what happened here. Did Ford really just… walk into that awful machine willingly?! Even though he knows exactly what and who is waiting on the other side of it?!?”

“Uh, he didn’t just walk into it,” Stan remarked, scratching the back of his neck guiltily. “I-I mean, he kinda… fell into it… on accident?”

Fortunately, Rose seemed to buy this lie, though all the same, her lovely expression marred with grief and misery it fully hit her that Ford was seemingly lost forever. Tears, ones that were lightly sparkling with what looked like some kind of magic, flowed down her cheeks as she let out a broken, despondent sob. She shook her head sadly as she took a step towards the deactivated portal, looking towards the copy of the gemstone resting over her own navel that was positioned near its base. “T-this is all my fault…” she muttered morosely. “If only I had shown up sooner… I-if only we hadn’t built this… disaster in the first place, then maybe he’d still be here… But I wasn’t and we did… and now… he’s gone…”

“Uh… look,” Stan said, unable to keep himself from empathizing with the mournful pink Gem as he shared much of her heartbreak himself at the moment, though he didn’t let his show as clearly. “I… I don’t know what things were like between you and my brother, but, uh… don’t worry. I’m gonna do everything I can to open this thing back up and get him outta there, not matter how hard it is or how long it might take.”

Rose jolted at this, her tears practically freezing as she looked back to Stan in apt alarm. “W-what?”

“Um… I said I’m gonna figure out a way to get this machine working and bring Ford back,” Stan repeated, rather surprised by her suddenly intense manner. “He left one of his creepy journals here with me, so I guess all I gotta do is find the other ones and then they’ll tell me how to open that portal thing again and he’ll be as good as saved. R-right?”

The pink Gem’s expression was severe as she turned to face him fully, her sadness fading away into authority as she stood,towering over him almost menacingly. “No,” she said, her gentle tone strangely rigid and harsh. “This portal is never going to be opened again. Not my you, or by me, or by anybody else.”

“W-well what about Ford?!” Stan snapped in sudden anger and disbelief. “We can’t just leave him on the other side of that thing! I thought you said you were his friend, why wouldn’t you wanna help him?!”

“I do want to help him!” Rose retorted earnestly. “More than anything else! But we can’t. This machine is a huge risk to this entire planet! Starting it up again could result in the end of this world, of all worlds! For centuries, I’ve taken up the responsibility to protect the Earth and everything on it and that comes first. Above everything… or everybody else.”

“But that’s my brother in there!” Stan exclaimed hotly. “He may be a stubborn know-it-all who left...
me behind years ago, but he’s still my family! And I’m not about to walk out on him like he walked out on me; I’m stayin’ right here and doing everything I can to get that portal up and running again. I don’t care how risky it might be or what it might cost, I’m saving my brother! Whether you or anyone else likes it or not!”

Rose took in a deep, evening breath at this, her manner cold but not hostile as she stared down at Stan intently, firmly asserting her position as intently as she could. “I can’t—I won’t let you do this. If there was any other way to save Stanford then I would take it in an instant. But as it stands, this portal must remain shut down, it not destroyed entirely. And I’m prepared to do whatever I must to keep it from causing any more harm than it already has.”

“So what?” Stan shout back defiantly. “You’re gonna try and stop me, pinky? Is that how this is gonna be?! What makes you think you’ll even be able to keep me from blowing that damn portal wide open, huh?”

“Because,” Rose said staunchly, calmly even. “I know where the third journal is. It’s hidden somewhere safe and secure, a place only I know about. And without it, you’ll never be able to get this portal running again.”

Stan took pause at this, his jaw dropping in surprise at such a pertinent revelation. Of course, his shock only lasted for a moment before it exploded into desperate fury once again. “Y-you have to give me that book!” he shouted almost pleadingly. “It’s the only way I’ll ever be able to save him, please, just-”

“No,” the pink Gem harshly cut him off. “He asked me to keep that journal from falling into the wrong hands, and that’s exactly what I intend on doing. It’s the least I can do for him after… all this…”

“But I need it! You don’t understand, I-”

“No, you don’t understand!” Rose interupted intensely. “I’ve given up so much to keep this planet safe; I refuse to let it meet its end as long as I’m around to stop it. This portal is far too dangerous to even exist. It was a mistake to build it. We should have never tried to tamper with forces we didn’t understand, but we did. And while its too late to take that back now, its not too late to keep those forces at bay. Even if that means… even if that means we’ll never see Stanford again…”

By now, Stan’s fists were clenched so tightly at his sides that they were shaking. Still, he kept his violent urges held back against the pink Gem, though he was more than fine with letting his outraged words fly freely. “Fine! If you won’t help me, then I’ll figure out a way to do it without those other two stupid journals! You can try to stop me all you want, pinky, but I’m not giving up until Ford is back here safe and sound, even if it takes the rest of my life! And no one, especially not you, is gonna keep me from bringing my brother back home!”

Rose sighed, clearly exasperated, though for whatever reason, she didn’t react in anger as she simply walked past Stan, intending on leaving. “There really is no changing your mind, is there?” she asked, glancing back over her shoulder at him. “Well, that’s alright. Go ahead and do whatever you feel like you need to. But you should know that I’m going to do whatever I have to do to keep that journal away from you, to keep you from reopening this portal, and to keep this planet safe. And… I’m sure that if Stanford was still here… he’d do the exact same thing.”

Without another word, the pink Gem left, her resolve every bit as clear as Stan’s as he remained standing before the portal, journal 1 still held tightly in his grasp and guilt still weighing heavy on his heart.
Guilt that would linger over him like a constant shadow for the next thirty years. 

The next several weeks went by in a dreary, exhausting blur. Stan spent every waking moment down in that basement lab, pouring over every tiny piece of information journal 1 had to offer on the portal as he tried everything he could to get it up and running again. Unfortunately, even with the notes that he had, his knowledge on any of the technology or science behind the machine was next to none, making things all the more difficult. His nights were sleepless, lost to worries and anxiety and remorse and so many other emotions it was hard to keep track of them all. The one upside to all of this was that he hadn’t heard from that pesky Rose Quartz woman since their first encounter, though the thought of her alone was enough to practically enrage him. To think that she had the very information that he needed to reactive the portal and get Ford back, but she refused to relinquish it out of some nonsensical altruistic duty of hers! Certainly, Stan reasoned, that in light of her staunch refusal to so much as even offer a hint of advice in the matter, Rose must not have cared about Ford as much as she claimed to. Then again, Stan hardly felt like he was much better on that front, seeing as how the only reason why Ford was now gone was entirely because of him.

Still, Stan knew that he couldn’t give up, no matter how impossible his odds were proving to be. Because giving up meant never seeing his brother again, and despite all of the mistakes they had made and the bad blood between them, that was one thought he simply couldn’t bear.

Yet even despite his resolve, as the weeks went by, Stan grew weary. Winter was finally starting to ease up somewhat, but that didn’t mean Ford’s house was any less drab and lonely. With most of his time spent working on the portal, Stan didn’t really get much of a chance to clean the hectically cluttered place up, though it wasn’t like he hadn’t lived in squalor before. Rather, what bothered him was that the already rather sparse supply of food in his brother’s cabinets was starting to run dangerously low. Which meant that Stan really had no other choice: he’d have to make a trip into the nearby town for supplies.

Journal 1 had already made mention of the Crystal Gems’ temple base just up the hill from Ford’s house, so Stan made sure to steer clear of it as he made his way downtown. Gravity Falls was apparently a rather small community, and he knew well that rumors traveled fast in small towns, much as they had in Glass Shard Beach, which meant that he’d have to keep a low profile, lest anyone become suspicious. While he didn’t really have a criminal record in Oregon yet, the last thing he wanted was to be reported to any police and hauled away, leaving the portal forever shut down and Ford forever trapped inside it. No one really seemed to pay him much mind, however, as he arrived at a small convenience store to grab a loaf of bread, the most he believed he could reasonably afford on what little money he had to his name.

“Just the bread then, stranger?” the elderly woman at the counter smiled warmly to him as he put it down. “That’ll be 99 cents.”

Stan simply nodded, reaching into his pocket to find only to find a packet of sugar, a paper clip, and a single peso. Nowhere near enough to buy anything really, much to his disappointment.

“Hey, that’s no stranger!” Stan flinched upon hearing a middle-aged woman behind him speak up. “That must be the mysterious science guy who lives in the woods!”

“You mean the one who’s always hangin’ out with those four magical women?” a widely smiling young teenager asked. “He almost never comes around here!”

By now, a curious crowd had started to gather around Stan, who simply tried his best to conceal
himself by pulling his hood tighter. Clearly, these people were mistaking him for Ford, an idea he really didn’t want going around, considering the circumstances. “Uh, n-no, no, you’ve got the wrong guy,” he shook his head, trying his best to drive the attention away from him, though still the bystanders persisted.

“I’ve heard some strange stories about that old shack!” another teenager, and a quite awkward one at that, quipped.

“Yeah! Mysterious lights and spooky experiments,” the store’s young employee regaled, much to the rest of the crowd’s interest.

“They say it is full of magic and mystery!” a short-statured woman whose hair was in a large bun remarked brightly.

“Uh, i-it’s really not—” Stan protested, growing more and more nervous by the second.

“Gosh, I’d pay anything to see what kind of shenanigans you get up to in there,” the clerk’s husband said, putting an arm around his wife.

“Oh, me too!” the red-haired woman from before exclaimed. “Do you give any tours?”

“No, really, I—” Stan stopped short, glancing down at the severe lack of money in his hand as a newfound idea came to him. It was a risky one, given what lay buried just underneath the house, but he had find a way to be able to afford the essentials somehow. Which meant that at this point, he really didn’t have too many other options. “Um… y-yes! I do give tours! Ten, n-no, fifteen bucks a person!”

While he hadn’t expected too many takers to agree to such a high price, Stan was reasonably surprised when all of the townsfolk in the store eagerly cheered and presented their cash to him. He couldn’t remember the last time he had seen so much money, much less money that was intended for him. Money that he’d be more than happy to take if it meant keeping both himself and his mission to rescue his brother alive.

“Sir!” the first woman spoke up with an excited smile. “What did you say your name was again, you man of mystery?”

“Oh, uh, Stan…ford,” he said, somewhat uncertain at first as he quickly convinced him that he had done this before. He had taken up plenty of false names in the past, and while this particular one belonged to his brother, he knew just how much trouble it could keep him out of. So he took it. “Stanford Pines.”

With their money already in hand, Stan lead the eager crowd of townsfolk over to Ford’s house, escorting them into the foyer, which was packed with his brother’s impressive collection of scattered tech and various notes. Certainly if there was anything that would impress this excitable group, it would be found here. “Step right up, folks, to, uh… a world of, um… enchantment or whatever,” Stan said, somewhat uncertain about how to present any of this. Still, he grabbed the first thing he saw, which was some small, strange radio-like device, the functions and purpose of which he had no idea. “Behold, uh, the… nerdy science box.”

The red-haired woman leaned forward a bit to get a better look at the device, only for a sudden spark to burst out of it and strike it squarely in her eyes, making it go lazy before shutting entirely. “Augh! My eye!” she cried, reeling back in pain as the other townsfolk gasped in surprise.
“Oh! Uh, I-I can assure you that’s in no way permanent!” Stan quickly promised, though he had no real way of knowing that himself.

“I paid fifteen dollars for this?!?” the woman scoffed, sending him an angry glare as the rest of the crowd began to mumble their disapproval amongst themselves.

“Uhh…” Stan glanced around, desperate to salvage this in any way he could, especially as he heard the first whispers of refunds among the group. Refunds that he couldn’t really afford to give, all things considered. Fortunately though, quick thinking was what he did best. “Y-you’re lucky you weren’t part of the last tour group…” he began, somewhat unsteadily as he grabbed the nearby scientific skeleton and dressed it up in a tropical shirt and shades. “They never made it out alive! …R-right?”

A beat of awkward silence passed at this, but fortunately it was soon broken by the slow-starting laughter of his audience. As it steadily grew into genuine amusement, Stan couldn’t help but let out a small sigh of relief as he realized that this could work. This could be just the break in his almost constant string of bad luck he needed.

So he ran with it. It took a roughly a week for him to figure everything out, but with a little time and a little elbow grease, he began his latest, most promising business venture yet. After tying up the house, setting up ample flashy signage all around it, and using what he had on hand to create as many bizarre attractions as he could, Stan formally opened what he had decided to call the Murder Hut (though its name would eventually be changed to the Mystery Shack upon the suggestion of a certain purple Gem). The tourist trap did exactly as it advertised, luring people in from all over town and even beyond it to see the oddities put on display. Fortunately for Stan, Gravity Falls already had something of a reputation of being a strange little town, so the folklore basically wrote itself, allowing him to profit off of it even more. And profit he did. In just a matter of months, he had accumulated more money that he had to his name his entire life, money that he put to good use by paying Ford’s bills and keeping things up and running so he could continue on in his still quite tireless mission to rescue him.

If he was perfectly honest with himself, Stan found the tourist trap business to be by far the easiest thing he had ever tried his hand at; it played well to his ability to lie and scam and fool the masses into believing anything he said. After all, it was all part of the fun, so there was really no harm in it. Truly, this was a fresh start, one that came about from the very worst of circumstances, but proved to work out well enough in the end. Still, he made sure to cover his tracks well, formally burying any remnants of his harrowing former life in the remains of a faked car crash, his fake IDs and former crimes tucked away in a hidden box inside his newly created office. In fact, as time went on and his profits and his business grew, there were points where it felt like the mistakes of his tattered, poverty-stricken past didn’t even exist at all.

Still, not all was completely well. After all, Rose Quartz still resided up at the temple just a few minutes up the hill from the shack, and every single time her and Stan happened to encounter each other, tension and conflict usually ensued. Their disagreement over the portal situation was something neither of them could compromise on, to the point that their bitterness towards each other, as well as their harden resolves remained firmly in place for years. They were never able to reconcile over it, even as Stan ended up hiring a young musician who was infatuated with Rose, the other Crystal Gems somehow lost their memories of the entire ordeal, even as Stan ended up developing a close friendship with the small purple one, even as Rose herself gave up her form to bring a half-human child into the world. The contention between them always remained, just about up until the very end of the pink Gem’s existence. And really, considering all of the toil and frustration he had endured over the years as a result of having to do it all on his own, Stan couldn’t really say he held any regret over their rigid relationship. Perhaps, in different circumstances,
maybe they could have been on good terms, just Rose apparently had been with Ford, a sentiment that the pink Gem had expressed to Stan herself just a few days before her end, but when it was all said and done, mere sentiments were nowhere close to enough.

Still, even despite Rose’s opposition, Stan remained hard at work on the portal for the next 30 years, to the point that he had developed a fairly steady routine. By day, he’d operate the Mystery Shack, conning tourists and raking in profits without hitch. But at night, he’d make the trip down to the basement, pouring over Ford’s old notes, teaching himself advanced scientific concepts, and working tirelessly towards one single essential goal:

Bringing his brother home.

Present Day

“I couldn’t risk letting anyone learning the truth and sabotaging my mission,” Stan said as he finally concluded his long tale. “So I lied to everyone: the town, my family, you three,” he nodded over to the Gems, who looked less than pleased with everything he had just heard. Even so, the conman decided to deal with them later as he instead addressed his nibblings. “Your parents, even you kids. I gotta admit it’s… been rough, working on this thing all these years all by myself. But in the end, I guess it all finally came together.”

“Came together?” Ford scoffed in appalment. “You could have destroyed our entire reality with this machine! How in the world can you actually stand there and be proud of that fact, Stanley?!”

“Well I would be proud if you would just thank me for finally coming through for you after all these years,” Stan retorted, crossing his arms. “But I guess that’s not good enough for you, is it, Ford? Should’ve expected that, seeing as how nothing ever is!”

The author was more than ready to shoot just as bitter of a retort right back at his brother, but before he could, Steven suddenly interjected. “Whoa, hey, wait!” the young gem implored fretfully. “You guys are brothers! A-and you’ve been apart for so long! You shouldn’t fight; instead you should be happy finally see each other again!”

“Yeah, that’s right!” Mabel added just as fervently. “Like I said earlier, you two gotta hug it out!”

“Pfft, yeah right,” Stan rolled his eyes with a cold scowl.

“Absolutely not,” Ford added, turning his nose up at his brother.

“…Well… at least they agree on something?” Steven shrugged, exchanging a concerned look with Mabel. At the same time, the young Gem happened to glance past her over at Dipper, who had said nothing since Stan had finished his story. Instead, he sat, his gaze fixed on the ground and his expression tight with what almost looked like conflict mingled with frustration, as if he didn’t know what to really make of everything he had just heard. And of course, in light of it all, his apparently bitter silence was more than enough to make Steven worry. “Um… Dipper? Are… are you ok?”

Dipper flinched at this, briefly glancing up at both the young Gem as well as his sister who looked to him with equal concern. Concern that, considering where he currently stood with both of them in light of what had happened in the moments preceding the portal’s activation, he really didn’t want. “Uh, yeah, I’m fine,” he quickly brushed the matter aside, still not saying much to either of them as he turned his attention to Stan in slight shame. “Um… Grunkle Stan? I, uh… I’m… sorry I didn’t
believe you…”

“That’s ok, kid,” Stan nodded with a small smile of acceptance. “I probably wouldn’t have believed me either.”

“Alright, so now we know about everything that apparently happened,” Pearl interjected with an exasperated sigh. “But that still doesn’t explain we don’t remember any part of it that involved us! Right?”

“Right,” Garnet said as Amethyst simply nodded absentely. “Our memories are still missing and we still need to get to the bottom of what happened to them.”

“So it’s time for one of you to start explaining things on that front,” Pearl said, glaring between Stan and Ford. “Particularly you, Stan, seeing as how you seemed to have apparently known something about this all these years!”

“And you didn’t bother to even tell us…” Amethyst muttered despondently, still averting the conman’s gaze as she scowled at the floor. “Just like everything else, I guess…”

Stan hesitated, frowning sympathetically to the purple Gem before he addressed her teammate’s concerns. “What, you think I have something to do with what happened to your memories? Please,” he scoffed. “I wouldn’t know the first thing about who or what jacked them, and I definitely don’t know why. But if you had wanted to talk to someone who might have known about all that, then you should have asked Rose before she up and left you three on your own.”

The Gems couldn’t hold back a collective gasp upon hearing this, all three of them silent for a moment as they exchange an appalled, yet slightly nervous glance. Steven shared in their stark concern, looking to them with wide eyes as he noticed just how doubtful they all seemed to be. Doubt that perhaps wasn’t reserved for what the conman had just said, but rather for what their beloved leader might have hidden from them for so very long.

Still, the Gems had no time to even question this line of logic before the lab monitor blared out once more with a proclamation from Agent Powers from above that quickly startled the entire group below. “I heard talking! It’s coming from downstairs!”

“Oh no! Its too late!” Stan exclaimed in apt alarm. “Those agents are coming for us!”

“Aw man, I was so spellbound by your dramatic tale I forgot all about those dudes!” Soos lamented.

“W-what do we do?” Mabel asked anxiously.

“Finally Gem-up and kick their butts is what we do,” Amethyst growled, a glare still dominating her expression as she pulled her whip out.

“We can’t,” Garnet asserted authoritatively. “Remember Amethyst, they’re after us too.”

“Wait a second… remember… that’s it! I think I know a way we might be able to defeat those agents!” Dipper exclaimed with a gasp of realization, reaching into his bookbag and pulling out the memory gun they had all taken from the museum after shutting the Society of the Blind Eye down. It had been a precaution that the Gems had suggested, though they wanted really no parts in handling the device themselves so Dipper had volunteered to do so instead. And it turned out this was a wise move, seeing as how it could certainly be put to good use for getting the agents off their tail now.
“Of course!” Ford grinned as Dipper handed the memory gun over to him and smiling every bit as brightly, clearly glad for the author’s excited adulation. “I don’t know how you managed to get ahold of one of these, but this is perfect! If I can just amplify the signal to a radio headset frequency…” Ford trailed off, doing just that as he connected the device to the radio tower he knew was above ground and working quickly since he knew well that the agents were on the approach. “Alright, that should do it. Now, everyone, plug your ears and get down!”

“That won’t be necessary,” Garnet interjected quickly before looking to the young Gem beside her. “Steven, you know what to do.”

“Right,” he nodded, throwing his arms out wide as a large pink bubble surrounded the entire group. Upon seeing this, Ford paused, his jaw dropping in apt surprise at the sight of the all-too familiar sphere, though the amazement and curiosity on his expression only seemed to grow as he glanced back down to the young Gem who had created it. Curiosity that was not lost on Stan as he noticed his brother’s marveling expression, one that he instantly understood and instantly disapproved of. There was no time to address it however, as the blast from the memory gun charged up, unbeknownst to the agents still congregated outside the shack. “Sir, look! There’s a hidden door behind the vending machine!” Trigger exclaimed as he ran out of the house to meet Powers.

“Excellent,” the agent grinned in satisfaction at the near end of this lengthy game of cat and mouse. “Get me Washington on line 1! I’ve been practicing sounds of excitement for this very occasion. Hey, do you hear that?” he asked in reference to the steadily growing whirling sound, one that quickly grew to deafening levels as a heavy flash of energy poured out of the antenna hidden within the shack’s totem pole. The group in the basement was completely protected from its memory-wiping effects thanks to Steven’s bubble, but the agents above ground weren’t so lucky, as their sudden disorientation quickly proved.

“What? Where am I?” Powers asked as he placed a hand against his now throbbing head. “Why am I standing in front of some goofy, fun knick-knack house?”

“Stand down, gentlemen!” Ford ordered as he came to stand on the porch before the agents, acting on the impromptu plan they had all quickly devised in the basement. “I’ve been sent with the latest intel from Washington,” he took out the papers Mabel had handed him right before walking out, filled with zany colorful pictures she had drawn. Still, even despite their random silliness, Ford kept a completely straight, authoritative manner as he continued. “According to this very real report, the power surges in Gravity Falls were actually due to radiation from an unreported meteor shower. As for the claims of ‘aliens’ in the town, the images you apparently have on file were traced back to some young local prankster, making them completely and utterly invalid. A total embarrassment for your whole department. Luckily, I’m here to take this mess off your hands, but I’ll need all of your… floppy disks and 8-tracks… right?”

“Uh, everything about this case is contained on this drive,” Powers said, presenting said flash drive, which Ford quickly took.

“Well, what are you waiting for, a kiss on the cheek?” Ford asked quite harshly. “Get out of here before I have your butts court-martialed!”

“Oh, y-yes, sir!” Powers exclaimed, saluting as he quickly turned to his fellow agents. “False alarm, everyone!”

The rest of the squadron swiftly followed this demand, packing up into their cars and helicopters and leaving the property once and for all. As soon as they were gone, Ford disposed of the flash drive by handing it off to Gompers, who readily took it in his mouth and chewed away before
running off. With the coast clear, everyone hidden inside the shack was quick to emerge, the kids rushing forward first, all three of them in equal excitement over the impressive act the author had just put on.

“Great Uncle Stanford, that was amazing!” Mabel exclaimed with a wide smile.

“Yeah! You nearly had me believing all that stuff you were saying, and I know the truth!” Steven said just as brightly.

“Let’s not go crazy,” Stan spoke up dryly. “It was serviceable.”

Ford ignored his brother’s sardonic remark, instead taking in the kids’ praise somewhat bashfully as he let out a small chuckle. “Thank you, kids, but please, call me Ford.”

“Sure, thanks, G-Great Uncle Ford!” Dipper interjected, both anxiously and excitedly, still quite starstruck by the author himself as he pulled out a pen and notepad. “So, uh… Would you mind if I asked you a couple million questions about Gravity Falls?”

“Um, w-well, I… uh…” Ford trailed off, his smile fading as he glanced up towards the Gems, none of who were looking to him rather fondly. Luckily, before he really needed to say anything, Stan stepped in.

“Alright, kids, its been a long day,” the conman said, already starting to usher them away. “Me and my brother have a lot to talk about. Why don’t you hit the hay, huh?”

“But, it’s the author!” Dipper protested, rapidly clicking his pen. “I’ve been waiting so long to ask questions about—”

“I said hit the hay!” Stan snapped, pushing both of the twins into the house, much to Dipper’s disappointment in particular.

“The same goes for you, Steven,” Pearl said to the young Gem, gently motioning up to the temple. “A… a lot’s happened today and… um…”

“You need your rest,” Garnet finished, though it was clear her tone wasn’t as steady as it usually was. “In fact, we all do.” She placed firm hands on both of her teammates’ shoulders at this, leaving them with the implication that their night would involve much less rest and more intensive discussion on exactly what was unraveling here.

Steven wanted to say something to both his guardians and the author at this juncture, but he didn’t exactly know what. So instead, he let out a small, sad sigh, following their instructions as he began the trek back up to the temple. The Gems began to follow him, but before they could get to far, Ford hurried after them.

“Wait!” he exclaimed, pausing briefly as they turned to face him, their expressions still as distrustful and uncertain as they had been the moment he stepped out of the portal. Something that honestly didn’t surprise the author that much, given their lack of knowledge of their former friendship, though in a strange way, it still hurt him nonetheless. “Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl, I-I…” he hesitated once more before dropping his voice down into a whisper only they could hear. “Is it true? Is she really gone?”

Pearl let out a sharp sigh at this, her glare deepening as she looked away from Ford fiercely. Amethyst still didn’t have much to say at all, which was why Garnet was the one to answer with only a solemn nod. A nod that, in a way, served to confirm what he had desperately not wanted to believe. “W-well then… I suppose the apology I had intended for her all these years will just have
to pass along to all of you…” he continued with a remoroseful frown. “I truly am sorry for everything that happened between us all those years ago. I made such a momentous mistake and I dragged you three and Rose into it right along with me. B-but… I intend to make up for the wrongs of the past in the present. I know you might not have much reason to trust me now, but I promise that I’ll do whatever it takes to help you three recover your lost memories. It’s the least I can do after… well, you know…”

The Gems were still silent upon hearing this, Amethyst hardly even paying much attention as she instead set her petulant sights on Stan in the distance, who only returned her thinly-veiled glare with a look of silent apologies that were nowhere near sufficient enough. Pearl briefly glanced up at Ford before wrapping her arms around herself tighter, closing her eyes as she refused to offer him so much as even a word. Which once again, left Garnet to be the team’s anchor, even if her manner was anything but strong and steadfast as it usually was when she let out her simple, yet sincere response. “Thank you,” she said, and with that, the Gems turned and began heading for the temple, leaving Ford with age-old regrets that only seemed to weigh all the heavier on him as he watched them go.

Of course, Stan was reminded of quite a few of his own regrets as Ford turned to him, tension filling both of their expressions as they knew they had much to sort out now. Aside from them, the only one still present was Soos, though he was quick to excuse himself in favor of leaving the incoming awkwardness behind. “Uh… I’ll just… let myself out…” the handyman said, though as he ran off, he was quick to excitedly dial his coworker up in order to fill her in. “Wendy, I’ve got something amazing to tell you. Clear the next fourteen hours!”

The Gems had sealed themselves away inside the temple ever since they got back, something that Steven honestly didn’t question that much as he got himself ready for bed. Still, the young Gem’s thoughts were far from quiet as he went about his normal routine, something that felt so strange in light of just how much had changed over the past several hours alone. However, it all came to a grinding halt the moment he happened to stop short and take a glance up at the picture of his mother hanging from the wall above the door.

From Stan and Ford’s respective recollections alone, Steven had managed to learn so much about Rose that he had never really known before. Of course, both of the brothers had told vastly different accounts based on their interactions with the pink Gem, one of them clearly viewing her very highly while the other one only held disdain towards her. And based on these two incredibly conflicting viewpoints, Steven was left not really knowing what to think at all.

On one hand, Rose and the other Crystal Gems had saved the earth from Homeworld. They protected humanity and still strove to do so. They curiously explored the mysteries of Gravity Falls alongside Ford, hoping to find tangible answers that could enlighten mankind. And yet… they had also unwittingly built an effective doomsday device, one that threatened the universe’s safety on more than one occasion. Even after learning about the machine’s true nature, based on what he had heard, it seemed to Steven like Rose didn’t really make any real efforts to try and fix this major mistake she was partially responsible for. The most she had ever really done was keep journal 3 away from Stan, but even that was a very touchy issue. For in doing so, she had effectively barred the conman from the information he needed to save his brother, which was, to the young Gem, a noble, selfless pursuit by all accounts, even despite the relative risks. A pursuit that Rose had fiercely, adamantly tried to stop up until her very end.

But then there was the implication that had left even the Gems reeling, that Rose might have
known something about her teammates’ missing memories, that she might have even had something to do with their removal in the first place. It was something that Steven really didn’t want to believe, even despite the long-awaited answers it could possibly point towards if it was true. Because in all honesty, it just didn’t make sense. If Rose had cared about her fellow Gems and supported them as much as Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl always claimed, then why would she keep this part of the past hidden away from them? Why would she have left them in the dark for so long? Why would she have left them behind without even the faintest clue that a piece of each of their memories was missing, leaving them lost, confused, even fractured?

Steven shook his head, his brow furrowing in frustrated confusion as he headed to bed, finally looking away from the peaceful portrait of his mother. His mother, who always seemed to be at the center of so many mysteries that she had now become a mystery herself.

“Ugh, look at us,” Stan remarked as him and Ford stood side-by-side in front of the downstairs mirror. The author had traded out his worn, ragged portal gear for more simpler attire: his favorite old tan lab coat over a red sweater and black pants. Yet even despite this shift in clothes, that didn’t mean the brothers didn’t look any less similar, even despite all of the years that had gone by.

“When did we become old men?”

“You look like Dad,” Ford remarked with a bit of a wry smirk.

“Ugh, don’t say that,” the conman rolled his eyes, a hint of bemused disgust in his tone as both him and his brother broke out into a small bout of almost bittersweet laughter. Laughter that was, of course, all too quickly replaced with rigid formality once again.

“Ok, Stanley, here’s the deal,” Ford began with a small, somewhat tired sigh. “You can stay here for the rest of the summer to watch the kids. I’ll stay down in the basement and try to contain any remaining damage from the portal. But when the summer’s over, you give me my house back, you give me my name back, and this Mystery Shack junk is over forever. You got it?”

“You really aren’t gonna thank me, are you?” Stan asked, quite taken aback by all these rather harsh demands. Ford simply glanced downward, not even showing a hint of breaking his stoic, cold resolve on the matter, much to Stan’s frustration. “Fine,” he begrudgingly agreed, knowing that he didn’t really have much of a choice. “But on one condition: you stay away from the kids. They’ve already gotten in way over their heads getting involved with all this Gem stuff, and I don’t want them in any more danger. Because as far as I’m concerned, they’re the only family I have left.”

Stan made his point quite clear as he turned and began to head upstairs at this, though he did briefly stop short to glance back at his brother again. “Oh, and one more thing,” he said, his tone still firm and unyielding. “Don’t think I didn’t notice how you looked at Steven down in the basement earlier. Just so you know, Sixer, he’s not Rose. He never has been and he never will be, and he doesn’t need you poking and prying at him trying to figure out how that works. He already gets enough of that from the Gems. So don’t be trying to always compare him to her like they do. Because whether you like it or not, Steven’s way better than Rose ever was.”

Ford said nothing in response to this, his glare sharpening just the slightest bit, though Stan didn’t see it for too long as he turned and continued on his way. In fact, neither of them made much of an effort to say anything else at all, for really, what could be said? So much had changed over the past thirty years, but for as much as had shifted, so much of it had also stayed the same, especially between the two brothers. Even despite the years of separation and doubt, they were still back the
same place they had been when their close knit bond had fallen apart on that miserable night when they were teenagers. They were still so far away from the camaraderie and companionship they had always found in each other when they were simple, innocent children, cheerfully running across a sunny shore that now only existed in the bittersweet past.

A past that held no place in the now-tarnished present and the uncertain, unsteady future.

“Did you hear what they said?” Mabel asked Dipper as she stood near the attic door, trying her best to overhear what their uncles had been discussing. “I think Grunkle Ford said they’re gonna buy us puppies made of ice cream. Might be wishful thinking though…”

“Uh huh,” Dipper absently replied as he continued working on patching the pieces of the torn photos of himself and Lapis up, a project he had undertaken for the past several weeks and seemed quite deadest on now for some reason. “That’s nice.”

Mabel frowned at this, stepped away from the door as she noticed her brother’s refusal to so much as even glance up at her in his irritated manner. “Uh… w-well, aren’t you excited? I mean, you’ve always wanted to meet the author, and um, bam! Come to find out he’s our grunkle so… that’s pretty cool, i-isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is,” Dipper said, letting out something of a small sigh of annoyance as he continued taping picture scraps together. “It’s… really cool…”

“Um… Dipper?” Mabel began without really thinking, wanting to ask him exactly what seemed to be bothering him. Though given that she already had a pretty strong hunch as to what the problem was here, her nerves held her back as she went off on a different tangent entirely. “You… you don’t think we’ll turn out like Stan and Ford… d-do you?”

Dipper finally glanced up at this, stilling his progress on the pictures as he looked to his sister in slight confusion. “W-what do you mean?”

Mabel let out a worried sigh as she flopped down onto her bed, not hiding her growing concern this time. “I mean… they used to be best friends, but then they got all stupid. C-can… can you promise me you won’t get stupid?”

Dipper hesitated, something that alone made Mabel’s heart sink, though the flash of what almost looked like appalled anger at her question that ran across his expression did so even more. Still, whatever he might have wanted to say, he kept it to himself, instead simply looking down as he began putting the picture scraps away for the night and answered her in an unresolved mutter. “S-sure… Whatever you say…”

Mabel took in a deep breath at this, guilt filling her slowly as she kept her gaze towards him, even as he reached to turn the light out. “Uh… w-well, I’m… glad to hear that…” she said with a weak, fake smile. “Good night, bro-bro.”

“Yeah…” Dipper sighed as he lay down and purposefully turned away from her, the dejection in his tone clear. “Good night…”

Mabel sighed herself as she set her sights on the ceiling above, restlessness overtaking her amidst her ever-growing Fear. Fear that things were so incredibly possibly different now that it was almost impossible describe everything that had just changed. That tension and anxiety would wash over the tide of togetherness and fun they had known all summer. That the past would soon repeat itself
in the present, no matter how much they tried to avoid it.

And that perhaps it had already begun to do just that.
Chapter 51: Lost and Found

Chapter Summary

In which the Gems remember stuff, Ford's fuckin awkward, the kids are a mess, everyone's a mess, my life is a mess, RIP everyone.

Chapter Notes

YEEEEEE SO HERE WE ARE AT ARC 6 and we're kicking things off with a completely original chapter! WHOA! Haven't had one of these in a while, have we? But this one is pretty... big, so pay close attention to it! Either way, enjoy! (keyword is DEAL)

WLICWC YPDVS NDR CSDRGP D POE
WMMP WS RPPIMMHV WSDX TTPI FZUKOE
ZLAE RRCP ZES WRWT SDW NZZ GOXH XO WLKHE
EYT EKI QFHWTTRR RPPEIYV: HIO USSP GS WSDX WLV VIRKX?

A teardrop splashed onto the page, staining it as the hand writing the letter stilled. A tug of grief pulled at the writer’s heart, grief that prompted even more tears as they continued their letter.

“I should have told them.”

Their script was flowing and elegant, but their message was sad and solemn, though hard to make out through their pressing tears. Still, it was a message that needed to be relayed all the same, even if they weren’t sure their intended recipient would ever receive them.

“If I had just let them know about the danger we were facing from the beginning, then maybe none of this would have happened…”

They sighed, pausing to shake their head remorsefully. It seemed as though regrets of the past never really died, no matter how much time and healing passed.

“But I did what I had to... for them... for us…”

The very act of writing the letter itself was becoming almost too painful to bear, given the nature of it, but they had put this off long enough. If they didn’t finish this now, then chances are, they never would.

“If you were still here, then I know you'd understand…”

The letter was nearing its end now, but even so, it still felt incredibly incomplete. After all, there was so very much to say that a simple handwritten page couldn’t ever hope to contain it all.

“But you’re gone... and its all my fault... just like everything else…”
Another tear slipped down their cheek, just one more do add to the almost endless flow that had begun even before they had ever sat down to write this letter. A letter that could only ever serve as a forever insufficient, eternally empty way of reckoning with the wrongs of the past.

“And I’m so, so sorry... for everything I’ve done…”

Steven awoke with a gasp, his eyes wide as soon as they opened as his mind reeled from whatever it was he had just dreamt about. By all accounts, what he had just seen made no sense to him whatsoever, but what made even less sense was the fact that his cheeks were damp with tears. Apparently, the very same tears he seemed to have shed in his unexplainable, context-free dream. Yet that wasn’t all. As the young Gem slowly pulled himself up out of bed and wiped his face dry, he couldn’t help but feel weighed down by a wave of immense guilt, guilt that he couldn’t really pin the source down for. After all, the only things he had fallen asleep with last night had been worry and uncertainty given everything that had happened the previous day and all that had been uncovered, but for once, he had been relatively free of any tangible guilt. So then why did he feel like he had done something so horribly, unforgivably wrong?

For a moment, Steven simply sat on the edge of his bed, trying to sort these mysterious, almost random feelings out, quite alarmed by just how heavy they seemed to be. And yet, his focus was soon diverted away from his own confusion emotions as he overheard quiet voices coming from the front porch. Steven’s brow furrowed as he recognized these voices to be those of the Gems, and given just how shaken they had all been the last time he saw them the previous night, he couldn’t help but tiptoe down from the loft and press against the wall near the door to listen to what they were saying.

“There’s no denying that he was close to Rose,” Garnet said, leaning against the railing as Pearl hung close to her, though Amethyst was oddly somewhat distanced from them. “The journals alone are proof of that.”

Steven quickly realized that the Gems had to be talking about Ford based on this mention of the journals, and even though he felt somewhat bad for eavesdropping on them, he couldn’t resist. Especially given the apparent and now forgotten camaraderie between them that the young Gem still wanted to know more about.

“W-well even if they do, that doesn’t mean we can just take everything he told us yesterday at face value,” Pearl huffed crossly. “For all we know, he could have been fabricating any given part of all that just to... to save face or something.”

“As far as I can tell, he’d have no reason to lie,” Garnet shook her head, her manner seemingly calm, though there was still some uncertainty beneath it. “And the evidence does add up: our gems on the portal, what happened in the bunker and with the Society... Everything points to the fact that there was indeed a time that we worked together with Stanford. We just don’t remember it.”

“And that’s exactly the problem!” the white Gem moaned impatiently. She paused for a moment, anxiety filling her features before she spoke up again, her voice even softer as she clasped her hands together tightly. “G-Garnet? I... I know this is ridiculous to even bring up but... what Stan said yesterday about Rose knowing something regarding our memories... you don’t think-?”

“H-hey! Ste-man!” Amethyst suddenly spoke up with a tightly forced grin upon noticing Steven standing on the other side of the screen door. The young Gem flinched, having wanted to remain
discreet, but still, he emerged from the house nonetheless somewhat sheepishly as Amethyst continued greeting him. “H-how ya feeling? You somehow manage to get some shut-eye after, uh… everything that went down yesterday?”

“Y-yes,” Pearl chimed in, offering her young ward a placating smile. “We know that a lot happened yesterday, what with the agents, the portal and everything else, s-so if you feel like you need to talk through any of it, t-then we’re right here to listen.”

Steven frowned as he took in the warm, but ultimately fake smiles each of his guardians were offering, smiles that were merely serving as masks for much deeper, underlying dread and apprehension. “Uh… I think I’m ok…” Steven said evenly enough, though this wasn’t entirely the truth. For much like the Gems, he too was quite concerned by the accusation that his mother had some knowledge of what happened to their missing memories, an accusation that, by all accounts, he didn’t want to believe just as much as they didn’t. Still, he didn’t bring this up just yet, at least not so directly. “But um… i-is there anything you guys wanna talk about?”

The Gems exchanged a surprised glance at this, but even so, Amethyst played it off. “Uh… like what?”

“Like…” Steven bit his lip, unsure of where he really wanted to go. After all, there was so much to talk about in light of what happened in the past 24 hours alone that it felt like he’d never truly be able to cover it all. Still, he figured he’d start with at least one of his pressing curiosities. “Like, are you guys… mad at Mr. Ford for… well, for what happened back when Mom was still around?”

“Steven, we don’t remember what happened back then,” Pearl sighed, glancing away. “And even if we did, we’d be hard pressed to forgive Stanford based on everything he told us about that disastrous machine of his…”

“Well, to me it seems like he just made a mistake…” Steven said somewhat sympathetically. “And he made it sound like it was a mistake that he was pretty sorry about and that he did just about everything he could to try and fix.”

While Amethyst and Pearl didn’t share this sentiment, Garnet couldn’t help but smile somewhat at this as she placed a gentle hand on top of her young ward’s head. “Maybe you’re right, Steven,” she said, catching her teammates off guard somewhat. “But there’s only one way we can know for sure: we need to find our lost memories, once and for all. There can be no more putting this off. As of right now, it’s the only way we can finally learn what really happened for ourselves and why.”

“But how are we supposed to do that?” Amethyst asked hesitantly. “We still got like, no clues about what happened to them. Well, unless you wanna believe what Stan said,” the purple Gem scoffed harshly upon mentioning the conman, her ire towards him over his betrayal still quite apparently. “Which I sure as heck don’t.”

“Neither do I,” Pearl asserted firmly. “There’s no way Rose had any involvement in what happened to our memories. More likely than not, that was just another one of Stan’s countless lies and after everything we’ve seen and heard yesterday, I’d say he’s just about the least credible source of information out there!”

“Well… what about Mr. Ford?” Steven suggested thoughtfully. “I mean, he seems like he’s really smart; he did write the journals and he built that portal, so… maybe he might be able to help us figure this out.”

The Gems were hesitant about this idea, to say the least, their expressions alone conveying that none of them were really too keen on asking the author for help in this matter. Still, given the fact
that they had essentially no leads, none of them could deny that the assistance of a proven genius would be rather welcome in solving this long ongoing mystery. Or at least getting somewhere closer to the truth than they had ever been before. Which was why, when Pearl and Amethyst looked to her for the final verdict on this plan, Garnet simply shrugged, showing that she was every bit as clueless as they were for a change. “It’s worth a try.”

A great deal could change over the course of 30 years; this was something that Ford was well aware of, largely since it was a matter of common logic. But what exactly had changed during his absence was what the author hadn’t been able to anticipate, and as he reacclimated himself to his native dimension, he was quick to find that some changes were much more alarming than others. For example, the discovery that he now had a great niece and nephew was fitting, welcome even given that he had never really had the chance to be much of an uncle prior to the portal incident. The revelation that Rose was no longer around and the Gems bore no recollection of him, however, was much more shocking and much more disheartening, to the point that he was still largely trying to process it all himself. But at the moment, the change that Ford found the most appalling and offending was what Stan had apparently done to his home over the past 30 years, both cosmetically and functionally.

What was once his proud and stately research base had been transformed into a tacky, homely tourist trap dubbed the “Mystery Shack”, of all things. Ford scoffed to himself as he stood outside of it, sketching the changes to its exterior out in his third journal as a form of venting his frustrations. It was bad enough that Stan had embezzled his name, but to turn his property, his home into a tawdry, fabricated sideshow for mindless vacationers to pass through and sink their money into was perhaps the most disrespectful slight his brother had made against him yet. Which was why Ford had absolutely no qualms about sending Stan the harshest glare he could muster upon noticing the conman emerge from the shack a moment later.

“Mornin’, Sixer,” Stan greeted casually enough, even though he was still aware he was essentially walking on eggshells with his brother now. Which, of course, was far from what he had wanted after finally saving him after 30 years, but even so he had no choice to accept the tense state of things between them. For now, at least. “What are you up to? Makin’ up for lost time by writing more ‘nerd notes’ in those ‘nerd books’ of yours?”

Ford’s glower deepened somewhat upon hearing this teasing, teasing that he would have laughingly accepted from Stan back when they were kids, but now only saw with contempt and bitterness. Much like how he viewed his brother in general at the moment. “Two things,” he began coldly as he shut the journal. “One: my journals are not so-called ‘nerd books’. They’re important, highly detailed chronicles of my research of Gravity Falls, and after wrongfully using their knowledge for the past 30 years now, I’d think you’d have finally come to understand that, Stanley.”

“Yeesh, I almost forgot how annoying you are when you get into one of your little ‘genius’ rants,” Stan rolled his eyes at Ford’s sour scolding. Still, the author paid his callous remark no mind as he continued.

“Two: care to explain the meaning of this?” he nodded to the Mystery Shack, his expression alone conveying that he was far from supportive of it.

“What’s there to explain?” Stan shrugged. “Like I said yesterday, I did what I had to do to keep things up and running here. It gave me a way to keep your bills paid so I could stay here and keep working on your dumb portal. When you think about it, the Mystery Shack pretty much saved both our butts, whether you wanna admit that or not.”
“Did it ever occur to you that maybe I didn’t want to be saved?” Ford asked sharply. “That perhaps I was willing and ready to sacrifice my own wellbeing for the sake of protecting the entire universe by wanting the portal to remain deactivated forever?”

“Ugh, you sound just like Rose used to with all that self-righteous garbage,” Stan remarked dryly. “No wonder you two were such good friends; you two are probably some of the most pretentious know-it-alls the world’s ever seen. Well, you and Pearl.”

Ford’s reaction to this was much harsher than Stan had been expecting as he took a step closer, his expression fierce with genuine fury. “Say what you want about me, but you will not disrespect Rose Quartz like that,” he growled bitterly. “She is—was one of the closest and most trusted friends I’ve ever known, even despite everything that regrettably went wrong between us. In fact, Stanley, I’d even say that she’s done more for me than you ever have.”

It took every ounce of willpower Stan had in him to keep himself from punching his brother square in the face upon hearing this. Because how dare he uphold the honor of the Gem who had stubbornly tried to keep him trapped in another dimension for thirty years as opposed to take the side of his own brother who had risked so much and worked so hard to save him. But even if he didn’t intend to physically harm Ford, that still didn’t stop Stan from lashing out and grabbing his brother by the collar of his sweater and sending him an incredibly harsh glare. “Listen here, Sixer,” he began, his tone chillingly hostile. “You’re kidding yourself if you think that stupid pink broad was some kinda perfect saint, because she was just about the exact opposite of that. She was nothing but a lying, stubborn, selfish bi—”

“Grunkle Stan? Grunkle Ford?” Stan instantly cut himself off upon hearing Mabel’s confused questioning. The brothers starkly turned to see their nibblings both emerging from the shack, Dipper a good bit behind Mabel, though neither of the kids seemed to be in really high spirits as they looked to their uncles questioningly upon seeing how Stan was holding onto Ford rather threateningly. “What’s going on?”

Stan was quick to release Ford after a beat of somewhat awkward silence and both brothers readily scowled away from each other, giving the younger twins a pretty good impression of what was going on, despite their uncles’ attempts at playing it off. “Uh, n-nothing!” Stan remarked with a forced, fake smile. “Me and your Grunkle Ford were just, uh… we were…”

“We were just… catching up,” Ford finished, sending another critical glance Stan’s way before he turned to address his nibblings with a much softer expression. “Anyway… Good morning, children. How are you feeling? Neither of you are suffering from any sort of portal radiation from yesterday, are you?”

“Uh, no, I don’t think so…” Mabel said, innocently shaking her head. “But I am going through a bit of a sugar rush from the baker’s dozen of super chocolatey chunk cupcakes I had for breakfast!”

Ford took pause, looking to his niece with apt concern upon hearing this, though he didn’t get much of a chance to ask Stan about her nutrition habits before Dipper cut in. “Don’t worry, Mabel’s pretty much on a perpetual sugar rush,” he said dismissively, ignoring his sister’s flustered scoff as he perked up while addressing the author. “B-but anyway, Great Uncle Ford, I was just wondering… Did you really take on a Gremloblin on your own? What do you think the secret behind the bottomless pit really is? Have the Gems ever told you any huge secrets about the war or Homeworld? Do you think there are any ghosts out there above a category ten? Did you and the Gems ever try to find a way to fix corrupted Gems? What did you do when—”

“Ah, s-slow down, my boy,” Ford interrupted with something of a bemused chuckle at this round of rapid-fire, curious inquiries. “Based on all those questions, it seems as though you really weren’t
kidding yesterday when you said you read my journals.”

“Oh, several times over, at least,” Dipper said with clear pride over this fact. “Well… to be honest, the only one I’ve really gotten the chance to read is the third one, but it’s still super informative!”

“Hm…” Ford duly noted, raising an eyebrow as he flipped through the later pages of the journal still in his hands. “So I would be correct in assuming that you were the one who made all these… additions to this one, then?”

Dipper’s excited manner faltered upon noticing that Ford looked less than pleased about the notes he had compiled on his own within journal 3 throughout the summer. “Um, y-yeah, I… sorry…” he muttered, glancing down sheepishly as he realized his unintentional slight against the author. After all, he could have never even considered that when he first began recording his findings on the journal’s empty pages, but now he wished he had never written anything on them at all in light of the disapproval he had apparently garnished from his longtime unknown idol.

Mabel was the first to pick up upon her brother’s newfound fretfulness, but as soon as she placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, Dipper was quick to pull it away with returned bitterness, refusing to so much as even glance over at her. Proof that he was still just as upset with her as he had been last night, something that only served to make Mabel feel even worse about it all.

Stan readily noticed the shared, silent despondency of both his nibblings, and he was quick to blame Ford for it as he sent him a sharp, almost furious glare. The author himself didn’t really notice that though as much as he did his own tactlessness towards his nephew in particular, but before he could make an attempt to apologize for it, the informal family gathering was suddenly interrupted.

“Hey, Mr. Pines!” Soos exclaimed with a cheerful grin as both him and Wendy showed up for their shift. “And hey, Mr. Pines!” the handyman greeted again, this time to Ford as he passed him by.

“’Sup, Stan Two?” Wendy nodded to the author sardonically, already well informed of his arrival thanks to Soos’ thorough recounting of the tale. “Nice turtleneck.”

While Ford was rather confused by the pair’s arrival, Stan spoke up with something of a relieved sigh, glad that his employees unknowingly broke through the ongoing tension. “Glad to see you two are actually both on time for a chance,” he remarked, crossing his arms. “I don’t expect any customers today, but as you can tell, the shack is kinda torn up from yesterday’s fiasco, so get to work and make this place look a little less like a sci-fi portal exploded underneath it, ok?”

“You got it, Mr. Pines!” Soos grinned with an eager thumbs up as him and Wendy headed off, though he didn’t hesitate to express his excitement to his coworker in a frenetic whisper. “See? I told you, Wendy! There really are two Stans around here now! Isn’t it great?!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Wendy remarked dryly, pulling her phone out of her pocket and disinterestedly texting away. “Of course, it would’ve been better if you hadn’t kept me up until 3 AM last night telling me about it.”

“Oh yeah…” the handyman frowned briefly, though he hardly let this dim his innocent elation over it all. “Sorry! Next time we have a bunch of huge truthbombs drop on us, I’ll only keep you up till 2 AM to tell you about them!”

“…Gee, thanks, Soos,” Wendy deadpanned, rolling her eyes as the pair went about their respective tasks for the day.
“Stanley,” Ford began as soon as the cashier and the handyman were out of earshot. “Who are those two… young adults?”

“Oh, my employees, poindexter,” Stan said. “You already met Soos yesterday, and the sarcastic one is Wendy. Might as well get used to seeing them around here, just like the Gems. Speaking of which…” The conman let out an aggravated sigh as he nodded ahead to the Gems and Steven as they came down for the temple, their expressions all rather tense and uncertain as they approached the Pines, who returned their gazes just as stiffly.

“Uh, h-hey, you guys,” Steven greeted them with a small, but genuine smile.

“Hi, Steven,” Mabel said just as awkwardly, though her smile faded as she glanced to the rest of her family. Dipper still stood alongside her, but he refused to spare either her or the young Gem another glance, Stan’s expression was still set in a cold scowl away from just about everyone, and Ford was clearly apprehensive and anxious as he gave the Gems only a terse nod of greeting. One that none of them made any sort of effort to return.

“So… um… h-how is everyone after, uh… yesterday…?” Steven asked unsteadily, rather concerned that the Gems hadn’t stepped forward to address Ford concerning their memories yet, like they had previously planned.

“We… could be better…” Mabel noted, rubbing her arm as she looked over to Dipper once more. “R-Right, bro-bro?”

Of course, Dipper didn’t bother giving her any sort of response as he instead turned away from her even more, his arms crossed as he let out a small, almost bitter sigh. Steven and Mabel exchanged a silent, worried glance at this, realizing that he was still clearly upset with them from what happened yesterday. Though exactly why he was still carrying this grudge so heavily and adamantly was beyond either of them.

Even so, a bout of general uneasy silence lingered between both the Pines and the Gems, none of them quite sure of what to say in the aftermath of all that had unfolded, mostly as a result of no one really knowing where they stood with each other now. Things between the kids alone were shaken and soured, but then there was the tenuous, largely forgotten ties between Ford and the Gems, not to mention the distain still very much present between Stan and Ford themselves. Really, it was as though they were all on unstable ground with each other, friendships fractured, relationships ruined, and everything else left in just as many shambles as the shack standing before them currently was.

Still, that didn’t mean there could be no attempt at fixing at least some of it.

“Hey, uh… Amethyst?” Stan spoke up, looking to the purple Gem apprehensively as she finally spared a glare in his direction. “I, uh… um… I was thinkin’ of blowing off some steam after everything that’s happened with a good ol’ Revenge Trip tonight. Are you along for the ride or what?”

“I dunno,” Amethyst muttered, her arms tightly crossed as she scowled away from him. “I think I’m gonna be busy doing just anything but that.”

Everyone was rather taken aback by the fire in the purple Gem’s tone as she said this, especially Stan as he flinched back, as if her harsh words had actually hurt him, which in a way, they did. Fortunately, they didn’t linger in the air for too long before Ford cut in, collectively addressing all of the Gems, though not without clearing his throat somewhat awkwardly. “So, how are you three doing? Have you happened to recall any of your memories of our… time together?”
“A-actually…” Pearl began, averting the author’s gaze as she spoke tightly. “That’s… why we’re here… we… w-well, we were hoping that… we… you.”

“We need your help,” Garnet finally finished where Pearl was unable to out of pride.

“Oh, r-really?” Ford asked, somewhat surprised by this request. “With what?”

“With finding our lost memories,” the Gem leader continued just as evening. “At this point, we’re not sure who else we can go to aid us with this, and so we have no choice but to ask you.”

Ford took pause, both confused and somewhat offended by the Gems’ apparent hesitance to seek his assistance, something that Steven in particular noticed and quickly made an attempt to clarify. “Uh, I-I think what they meant is that we think you could really help us figure all this out, Mr. Ford,” he said with a warm, hopeful smile. “Your journals already proved to us how great you are at solving mysteries, so this one’s bound to be a cinch for you!”

The author finally grinned at this, clearly glad for this vote of confidence as he began to exude the very same confidence himself. “Ah, yes, well in that cause, I’d be more than happy to help in any way I can, just as I said I would yesterday,” Ford said, adjusting his glasses as he offered the Gems a genuinely friendly smile, one that none of them returned, though their expressions did soften somewhat. “Now, I suppose the best place to start would likely be… Oh! I know! The memory gun! Back when Fiddleford built that infernal contraption, I had always doubted that it would be able to work on Gems, but seems as though it could be the very thing responsible for stripping you three of your memories!”

“Uh… yeah, we already figured that,” Amethyst huffed, rolling her eyes. “And that wretched Society of the Blind Eye didn’t have our memories in their archives,” Pearl added with a frown. “So where exactly are they? And who would dare to even take them in the first place? And why?”

“…Those are all very good questions…” Ford noted thoughtfully. “We have the answer as to how, but everything else is still up in the air… Which means that we’ll need to look into a variety of possible scenarios that could have resulted in the loss of your memories. Its bound to be a lengthy process, given how many sheer possibilities there are, so we’ll have to be patient and hope for the best in analyzing each of them.”

“Ugh, we’re tired of waiting!” Amethyst groaned hotly. “We’ve been waiting to figure this junk out all summer! We want our memories back now!”

“That’s… understandable…” the author remarked, trying his best to remain tactful amidst the Gems’ mutually thin patience. “But relatively unlikely. I’m sorry to say this, but to me it seems as though finding the key to restoring your memories could take quite some time, if we can even find it at all.”

Despite their shared disappointment upon hearing this sum of probability, the Gems didn’t get to voice it as a familiar horn blared out, followed by the arrival of a familiar van. Greg sped into the shack’s lot, slamming on the breaks as he stuck his head out the window rather frantically. “Steven! Thank goodness you’re ok!” he cried, jumping out of the vehicle to rush over to embrace his son. “I wanted to come check on you as soon as I saw that huge explosion of light on this end of town, but the road here was blocked off by this huge tree and they only just cleared it out this morning! Heck, it took so long to get over here that I even managed to pick Connie up along the way.”
“Steven! Dipper! Mabel!” Connie called as she hopped out of the van herself and hurried over to her friends. “Are you guys alright? I haven’t been able to get in touch with any of you since the other day! What’s been going on?”

“I think the better question is what hasn’t been going on…” Dipper remarked somewhat dryly.

“Connie! You’ll never believe what happened!” Steven exclaimed. “We just-”

“Wait! I wanna tell her!” Mabel excitedly cut in. “So it all started when Grunkle Stan got arrested by these government agents-”

“And they tried to take me and the Gems away too-” Steven interjected before Mabel carried on.

“So we tried to prove his innocence only to find out that he-”

“That he had all these fake IDs and this huge machine under the shack-”

“Which turned out to be this crazy powerful portal that his long-lost twin brother came out of.”

“And he wrote the journals and he used to work with my mom and the Gems years ago but-”

“But they kinda hate each other now and everything’s all awkward and weird and confusing-”

“But we’re trying to sort it all out by finding the Gems’ lost memories by thinking about all the ways they could have lost them!”

“Pretty intense, huh?” Mabel finished this rapid-fire tale, one that left Connie aptly confused as she tried and failed to catch up with it all.

“Uh… what?”

“Long story short,” Dipper cut in much more calmly. “Is that Grunkle Stan’s been hiding an interdimensional portal under the shack all summer that he opened up again to bring his brother back here.”

“Ohh…” Connie mused in understanding. “That makes much more sense! Well… kind of. The whole ‘interdimensional portal’ thing is something you guys will definitely have to fill me in on later.”

“Would you believe that’s hardly even the craziest part of it all?” Dipper asked with a small, but growing smile of excitement as he dropped down to a whisper. “The craziest and the best part is that Stan’s brother, our Great Uncle Ford, just so happens to be the author of the journals himself!”

“Wait, what!” Connie gasped, completely stunned upon hearing this and knowing full well just how baffling this mystery had been to them all for the entire summer. “You guys finally met the author?! And he’s your uncle?! No way!”

“Way!” Mabel chimed in brightly. “And you gotta meet him too, Connie! Come on!” Before Connie could really even respond to this, Mabel and Steven were pulling her over to where Ford was still in the midst of conversing with the Gems, largely not paying much mind to the two new arrivals as the continued discussing matters of memory. Or at least they were until Mabel blithely interrupted. “Grunkle Ford, this is our friend, Connie!”

“I-it’s an honor to meet you, sir!” Connie said with an amazed smile as she shook the author’s hand. “Your work is so fascinating! Honestly, if it wasn’t for your journal then we probably
wouldn’t have made it out of half of what we’ve been through this summer alive!”

“Oh, well… that’s… good to hear…” Ford noted, unsure of what to really make of that, though he offered Connie a small smile all the same. “What’s really fascinating (and rather concerning) though is just how many children seemed to have read through my research over the course of this summer alone…”

“Uh, we probably shouldn’t tell him that Gideon had his second journal then, should we?” Steven whispered somewhat awkwardly.

“Wait a second,” Greg interjected, having overheard the conversation. “I-I can’t believe it… You’re him!” The former rock star’s jaw was dropped as he approached the author, clearly in a state of disbelief that nobody else really understood. “You’re Stanford!”

“Um… yes?” Ford raised a confused eyebrow, unsure of what the former rock star’s apparent amazement was all about.

“Wow! This… this is incredible! I never thought I’d ever get the chance to actually meet you myself!” Greg exclaimed with an incredulous chuckle. “After all, Rose said you were basically gone for good but then again, Mr. Pines has been working on that portal to try and bring you back all these years, so I guess it’d only make sense that he’d finally get it up and running eventually.”

“Yeah, Greg,” Stan deadpanned, not noticing the Gems’ growing expressions of absolute shock beside him over what Greg was divulging. “Told ya I’d figure it out.”

“Heh, well, I’m sorry for ever doubting you, I guess,” the former rock star grinned, flusteredly rubbing the back of his neck before he turned back to Ford. “But man, if only Rose were here! She’d be so happy to see you again! Well… happy and maybe a little upset about the whole portal thing but still, she’d—”

“Excuse me,” Ford interrupted rather stiffly. “But… who are you exactly?”

“Oh, right, sorry!” Greg laughed again as he shook the author’s hand warmly. “I’m Greg Universe; Steven’s dad.”

Ford was silent for a moment upon hearing this as he looked between the former rock star and the young Gem, his brow furrowing and his expression largely not changing as he put the pieces together. “So you and Rose were… I see…”

“Y-yeah, she… used to talk a lot about you,” Greg remarked, still grinning slightly. “In fact, she even—”

“Greg!” Pearl’s very sharp exclamation interrupted the conversation, prompting the young rock star to glance over at the Gems. All three of whom looked simultaneously dumbfounded and outraged all at once. “You knew about the portal?!?”

“I, uh… oh!” Greg gasped, his eyes wide as he looked between the angry trio in newfound fear. “D-did I say portal? I-I… I meant, um… I didn’t know anything about any… w-well, you see, I—”

“Forget it, Greg,” Stan remarked, rolling his eyes at his former employee’s hectic attempt to explain. “The jig is up. They already know about everything.”

“No, we don’t!” Pearl scoffed, completely appalled. “We don’t know a thing about what’s happened to our missing memories and we certainly don’t know why Greg, of all people would know more about all this than we do!”
“D-Dad?” Steven spoke up apprehensively. “You don’t… y-you wouldn’t know anything about what happened to the Gems’ memories about Mr. Ford and the portal… would you?”

Greg froze up at this, this question completely catching him off guard, especially as he looked to the Gems starkly. All three of them were silently demanding answers, answers that he had no idea how to give, even if he could. So instead, he went with the easier alternative. “No,” he shook his head, his voice shaky as he tried to sound as convincing as possible. “R-Rose… Rose never told me anything about that. I’m sorry…”

“What do ya mean Rose never told you about that?!” Amethyst spat harshly. “Seems like she sure had a heck of a time telling you everything else!”

“Everything she didn’t bother telling us…” Garnet added, clearly hosting a glare underneath her shades.

“W-wha—no!” Pearl exclaimed hotly. “You two can’t be serious! Rose couldn’t have known what happened to our memories! It makes no sense!”

“What doesn’t make any sense is that she would have told Greg about all of this and not us,” Garnet remarked, adjusting her shades as she tried to remain as calm and as rational as possible.

“M-maybe she just never got the chance to?” Steven offered anxiously. “L-like… maybe your memories were erased right after I was born.”

“But that wouldn’t make add up,” Dipper interested, shaking his head. “Grunkle Stan said something about their memories being erased almost 22 years ago.”

“Well, I mean, as far as I know,” Stan said with a small shrug, unwitting eliciting ire from the Gems with such a remark.

“And how exactly would you know that?” Pearl asked, glaring coldly at the conman. “Unless you happened to have some hand in all this yourself, Stan!”

“Ugh, seriously, with this whole accusation thing again?” Stan scoffed. “I already told you, I don’t know anything about what happened! And even if I did, why would I keep something like that hidden from you three for so long?”

“Oh gee, I dunno, Stan,” Amethyst growled sharply. “Maybe for the same reason you kept that dumb machine hidden from us! Or those fake IDs! Or every other stupid secret you’ve been sitting on for years now without even thinking about being honest for a change!”

“It seems as though you would have a pretty good motive,” Garnet nodded. “With us not knowing about the portal, that likely made it easier for you to work on it without us trying to stop you like Rose would have wanted.”

“A-and for all we know you probably recruited Greg back when he used to work here to help you keep all this under wraps,” Pearl huffed angrily, shooting a fierce glance over at the former rock star as well. “Both of you were in on this for all these years! You must have thought that you weren’t going to get caught, but you are, so you might as well just admit it, Stan, and tell us where our memories are already!”

“I ain’t admitting nothing because I didn’t do anything!” Stan protested adamantly. “Even if I did keep this whole portal thing under wraps from just about everyone else, I never went after your memories to keep you three from getting in my way! That’d be just stupid!”
“Well, then it sounds like it would be exactly your kind of plan, Stan,” Pearl remarked crossly.

“Oh I’ll show ya what my kinda plan is!” the conman exclaimed, beyond infuriated by these groundless allegations to the point that things quickly devolved into an all-out shouting match on both sides. With both Stan and the Gems as outright outraged as they were, they held nothing back as they argued brutally, all of them acting off emotions rather than any real logic as they held their grounds against each other. The others were all rather surprised to see things heat up so aggressively, especially the kids as they stood on the sidelines, watching in dismay as everything seemed to explode in absolute fury all at once.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen the Gems so mad before…” Connie muttered, her eyes wide in alarm.

“Me either…” Mabel agreed stiffly. “But I don’t get it. Why do they think Stan got rid of their memories? He’d never, ever do something like that!”

“Yeah, just like he wouldn’t run an incredibly dangerous portal underneath the Mystery Shack, right?” Dipper asked, his tone quite dour as he crossed his arms and largely dropped out of the conversation.

“Oh, w-well, either way, we’re not gonna figure out what really happened to the Gems’ memories with everyone arguing like this,” Steven said earnestly. “Come on, you guys, we have to do something!”

Mabel and Connie were quick to follow after the young Gem, intent on trying to make peace between the conman and the Gems. Dipper, on the other hand, hung back somewhat, his hands shoved into his vest pockets as he instead glanced over at Ford, opting to discreetly listen in on the conversation that was just striking between him and Greg.

“Hey, uh… M-Mr. Pines?” the former rock star began rather awkwardly.

“Oh, um, ok, Mr. Stanford,” Greg continued, still being as respectful as he could. “I just, uh… W-well I know the Gems aren’t really in the mood to hear this right now, but I didn’t… I wasn’t-”

“You didn’t have anything to do with what happened to the Gems’ memories?” Ford finished presumptuously, glancing the former rock star up and down. “Well, I figured that much, considering how you and Rose were apparently… ahem, together. At the same time, I also don’t think Stanley was responsible for this either. My brother may be a lying, unscrupulous cheapskate, but despite his many faults, it seems highly unlikely that he’d do something as lowbrow as outright take a person’s—or Gem’s, for that matter—memories. Then again, I suppose there really is no way to know for sure until we figure this mess out once and for all.”

“Well, of course it wasn’t,” Greg agreed. “But you know Rose; she always felt so much for everyone, especially her friends.”

“That she did…” the author remarked with a fond smile in the pink Gem’s memory. “And our friendship was one I always valued very highly. I only wish… I wish I could have had the chance
to speak to her one last time, even if it was only for the sake of saying a proper farewell… I still can’t believe she’s really gone…”

“A lot of the time, neither can I…” the former rock star glanced down sadly. “But, she always wanted one last chance to talk to you too, which was why… right before she had Steven she sat down and wrote everything she never got the chance to say to you out. She said she didn’t know if you’d ever make it back here, but if you ever did, then she wanted you to have it. So she gave it to me to hold onto, just in case, and now that you actually are back, well, you might as well have it.”

Ford was rather surprised to hear that Rose had apparently left him some sort of note, but all the same, he followed Greg over to his van, where the former rock star dug around the back of the vehicle for a bit before finally finding what he was looking for. “Aha! Here it is,” he grinned as he pulled a light pink envelope out and presented it to Ford. “And here you go. To be honest, nobody’s ever seen what it says before. I just… didn’t think it’d be right to read something that she only meant for you, you know?”

The author was silent at first, his eyes wide as he held the envelope, apparently the last message Rose Quartz herself had left for him, as though it was the most precious and fragile thing in the entire world. And given just how much the fact that it existed at all meant to him, it very well could have been. “I… T-thank you… Greg,” Ford said, absolutely genuine in this sentiment.

“You’re welcome,” the former rock star said warmly, nodding his affirmation before stepping away to give the author some privacy as he opened the envelope up. Ford wasn’t exactly sure what to expect, even as he initially glanced over the lengthy page Rose had written for him, but even so, it was as though he could hear her lovely voice saying every word to him as he read it silently to himself.

Dear Stanford,

If you’re reading this letter, then that means that you’ve finally made it home, back to Earth and back to Gravity Falls, where you truly belong. A part of me, a part that dismisses all of the danger this world would be put in if such a thing ever did happen, has spent the past 16 years hoping this day would come, and that I’d be there for it, to welcome you back with open arms. But… I know I’ll never get that chance… I’ve made a choice… I want to do something that no Gem has ever done before, to create something that this world has never seen before… But the only way I can do that is at the expense of myself… A sacrifice not too dissimilar to one you were willing to make the last time we met.

But even so, if this letter has found its way to you, then I’m no longer around, or at least I’m not around in the way you were used to. Because in a sense, I’ll forever be a part of the child I’m about to have, a child I hope you’ll hold nothing against, even despite everything that went wrong between us.

Speaking of which… I feel as though I owe you another apology for, well, everything really. Not a day goes by that I don’t regret how hard and fast our friendship fell apart… Even before you fell into that portal, there had been so many times when I wanted to go down the hill and pour my heart out to you, but I never ended up working up the nerve. Funny, isn’t it? How I had all the courage in the world to stand against my former home and fight for this planet until the bitter end, but I didn’t have enough to walk a few feet and simply tell you “I’m sorry”? You need to know that if there had been another way to bring you back, even if it was just for a second, I would have taken it. But the portal was far too risky; I knew that. That’s why I did what you asked and kept the third journal hidden safe and sound, even from your brother (You never told me you had a brother, by the way). I tried everything I could to right our wrongs and fix our
mistakes…

And in the process, I only ended up causing so many more.

Its much too… risky to divulge everything here, but… something happened several years ago. Something that none of us were prepared for, though I should have been prepared. It was a threat I knew, a threat we both knew… a threat swept through our lives and nearly took everything away in the process. And I wasn’t able to do anything to stop it.

I Can only myself to blame for what happEned that awful night. I should hAve told them. If I had just Let them know about the danger we were faCing from thE beginning, then maybe none of this would have haPPened… But I did what I had to… for them… for us… If you were still hEre, then I know you’d undeRstand… But you’re gone… and iTs all my fault… just like everything else… And I’m so, so Sorry… for everything I’ve done…

I need, need you to know that, Stanford. I need Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl to know that. I need my child to know that. I need everyone I’ve wronged because of this to know that. I never wanted to hurt any of you, I promise that. I just wanted to save you, my friends, this planet, everything I truly care about. But it seems I’ve only managed to hurt them all instead. Which means I suppose the key to healing them lies not with me, but with whoever comes next… And I have the upmost confidence that they’ll succeed where I have failed.

There are so many more things I want to say to you, Stanford, but I know there would never be enough time to write it all out. I had thought to offer you one final apology but that just didn’t seem right, as sorry as I truly am. So instead of lingering on the shadows permeating our past, I’ll leave you with a reminder of the light that once shined through it instead.

Do you remember the first time we met? Amethyst had pointed out your six fingers to the rest of us, and at the time, I had thought that was the most spectacular thing about you. Little did I know that I’d quickly find out that there was so much more to be amazed when it came to you, Stanford. Your intelligence, your determination, your passion, all these things and more made me realize that you were by far one of the most special humans I’ve ever had the privilege of getting to meet, and believe me, I’ve met plenty. There were times when I saw it: you underestimating your own brilliance and abilities, but those were things I never once doubted. Which is why, despite how impossible things might seem right now, I encourage you to hold onto the words you wrote at the start of the journal you entrusted to me years ago, words that I hope will inspire you and comfort you, even when I can’t:

“Ad astra per aspera”: To the stars through difficulties.

Yours truly,

Rose Quartz

Ford had never been one to get too emotional, but he was unable to stem the silent flow of tears as he finished reading Rose’s final words to him. Up until that point, the author hadn’t put too much thought into the pink Gem’s absence; of course, he knew that she wasn’t around anymore in place of Steven existing, but some small, irrational, yet persistent part of him still wanted to believe that it wasn’t true. That Rose would make her long-awaited appearance and that everything would go back to the way it was supposed to be. And yet, upon reading her last message intended for him himself, the truth of it all finally sunk in once and for all: Rose Quartz really was gone, most likely never to return. Even after 30 seemingly endless years of longing and remorse, he’d never get to speak to her, laugh with her, apologize to her, to simply see her ever again. It was a crushing reality, to the point that it was almost unbearable, to know that he’d be forever separated from one
of his closest and most cherished friends, left with only a page of ultimately unfeeling letters to remember her by.

Yet at the same time, three of his other most invaluable friends were still there, still present and still alive and well. The only problem was they held no recollection of the bond they used to share, the camaraderie they used to uphold. A deep sense of loneliness filled Ford as this wave of realization washed over him yet again, a kind of loneliness that he hadn’t even ever felt traversing the empty voids of the multiverse. The author truly wanted to help restore the Gems’ memories to them, to the point of near desperation almost, but if he was perfectly honest with himself, even he didn’t know where to start with such an arduous task. By all accounts, the chances of things ever returning to even a shadow of how they used to be seemed incredibly slim, to the point that Ford was beginning to lose hope that such a thing was even a possibility at all.

Despite the still-ongoing argument between Stan and the Gems, Ford paid none of them any mind as he looked down to Rose’s letter again, its ending catching his attention in particular. “Which is why, despite how impossible things might seem right now, I encourage you to hold onto the words you wrote at the start of the journal you entrusted to me years ago, words that I hope will inspire you and comfort you, even when I can’t: “Ad astra per aspera”: To the stars through difficulties.”

“To the stars through difficulties…” Ford muttered to himself, taking in a steadying breath. It was a Latin phrase he had always been very fond of, one he had heard during his college years and kept close to his heart throughout his studies, both academically and in Gravity Falls. He had always seen it as a call to greatness, an affirmation of aspiration, no matter how daunting circumstances might seem. But now, the author began to realize that perhaps it held another meaning as well; perhaps it wasn’t just a message of upwards inspiration. Perhaps it was also just what Rose had said: a message of hope, of comfort, a promise that even though the road ahead seemed dark and uncertain, the stars of something better could still be reached regardless if one only worked hard and persevered enough to get to them. And while this was only a mere small spark of hope, it was one Ford decided to hold onto nonetheless, as the final piece of encouragement Rose had to offer for him. Encouragement that could perhaps at last lead them towards the answers they were all looking for.

Ford couldn’t profess to understanding everything concerning what Rose had spoken of in her letter, but several parts of it came across as somewhat bizarre to the author, to the point of being downright cryptic almost. Ford had never known Rose to be so indirect; the pink Gem, with her relative lack of understanding when it came to human subtlety, had always been very literal and forward in her conversations with him. Yet the vagueness in her letter threw the author off, especially when she sparsely described whatever apparently disastrous event had transpired quite some time ago. Certainly there must have been a reason that Rose hadn’t just written it all out if it was so significant and horrific; because instead of transcribing it all, the pink Gem had left only clues, breadcrumbs really to something that already seemed to lead to something so much more.

“I’ve only managed to hurt them all instead. Which means I suppose the key to healing them lies not with me, but with whoever comes next… And I have the upmost confidence that they’ll succeed where I have failed.”

“Whoever comes next…” Ford read once again, initially confused by what this meant until he happened to finally glance up from the letter and over to the still-brawling group just a few feet away. Or more specifically, towards Rose’s son, Steven.

The author was somewhat hesitant, knowing that he was really just working off mere conjecture alone as he approached the young Gem, Rose’s letter still in hand. In truth, Ford was still rather confused about exactly how the pink Gem had managed to reproduce at all, much less with a
human, but his curiosity about Steven’s no-doubt bizarre hybrid biology would have to wait. After all, a far more pressing question needed answers now.

“Excuse me, um… Steven, was it?” Ford addressed the young Gem, placing a hand on his shoulder to pull his attention away from the ongoing fight between Stan and the Gems. Despite the tension behind them, Steven offered the author a friendly smile and a nod of patient confirmation, prompting him to go on, even as the other kids took notice of this almost random interaction. “Rose —I mean, your mother left this letter behind for me before she-” Ford cut himself off tightly; just because he had accepted the reality that Rose was gone didn’t make it any easier for him to admit it out loud. “Anyway, the nature of this note implies something that I’m rather unclear of, something that she made it sound like only you can figure out.”

As Ford handed the letter off to Steven for him to see it, the quarrel between Stan and the Gems gradually fizzled out as they glanced over to the exchange between the author and the young Gem. An exchange that just about every single one of them disapproved of on some level, especially Stan. “Ford, what did I say about-” the conman’s sour callout was interrupted by his brother, who put a silent hand up before patiently turning his attention back to Steven. The young Gem himself was focused on his mother’s letter, his eyes wide as he skimmed over it and tried to make sense of its more mysterious parts, though he did glance back up at Ford as he slowly knelt down to his level.

“Steven, this-” Ford stopped short, his brow furrowing, almost as if he wasn’t entirely sure how to put this, though he continued on a moment later anyway. “I should be honest… I have reason to believe that this letter might hold our first real, tangible clues about what’s happened to the Crystal Gems’ memories.”

Upon hearing this, Pearl was more than ready to speak up in heated protest against it, though Garnet quickly stopped her. “Wait,” she urged, keeping her sights trained on the conversation unfolding before them, one that could prove to be very helpful in their most pressing cause.

“Which is why I feel compelled to ask…” Ford continued, hesitantly but earnestly. “Would you be willing to help me decode the clues your mother left behind and uncover the truth behind this mystery once and for all?”

Steven didn’t answer this right away, instead taking a moment to glance back at his guardians somewhat apprehensively. Amethyst’s expression showed a general sense of apathy towards the situation at large, while Pearl intently shook her head in staunch disapproval over such an idea. Garnet, on the other hand, looked to the young Gem expectantly, with a air about her that told him that this was his choice to make alone. And as Steven turned to the author once more and took in his sincere, solemn, almost sad even, he found that it wasn’t that hard of a choice to really make.

“W-well, I’d love to help, Mr. Ford, I really would,” Steven said with a small but fretful smile. “But… I’ve never met my mom before. She stopped, uh… being around when I was born, so I didn’t get the chance to really know what she was like which means I might not be the best person to figure out what she tried to say here…”

“Oh…” Ford’s expression fell in slight disappointment as he rose to stand. “Well, I suppose that… does make things complicated, doesn’t it?”

“Well… even if I don’t know a lot about Mom myself, that still doesn’t mean we haven’t figured anything out about her,” Steven ventured, taking a glance over at Dipper, Mabel, and Connie. “In a way, we’ve… kinda been learning more about her all summer in some… pretty crazy ways.”

“Yeah, that’s right!” Mabel spoke up brightly. “Like the time we found her light canon out here
near the shack and used it to blow that Red Eye to smithereens!"

“Wait, you… you kids found the light canon Rose asked me to hide away years ago?” Ford asked, aptly surprised.

“Yeah and we’ve been to hear healing fountain,” Dipper added intently.

“And her hidden armory,” Connie said with a nod.

“ Heck, we even found her sword and its scabbard!” Steven’s smile widened with confidence. “And we’ve solved a bunch of other huge mysteries too!”

“And that’s why they call us the Mystery Kids!” Mabel chimed daringly.

“So I think that between the four of us,” Steven went on. “Maybe we can figure out what the deal with Mom’s letter is and if it has anything to do with the Gems’ memories!”

“Oh well, are you sure you kids are really up for a task this… daunting?” Ford asked, not entirely convinced of their merit.

“Oh believe us, we’ve been up against plenty of daunting odds this summer,” Connie assured with a bit of an ironic laugh.

“Yeah, nothing stumps us as long as we’re working together!” Mabel boldly proclaimed. “Right, you guys?”

“Right,” Steven and Connie affirmed with clear resolve, though Dipper was noticeably silent as he glared away from the rest of the group. The young Gem in particular took notice of this, his heart sinking a bit as he realized that part of his impromptu plan still wasn’t working; the Mystery Kids were still fractured in some way, and as long as they were, then chances were, they wouldn’t be getting anywhere to any degree. Including fixing the past and moving forward into the future, things that all needed to be done sooner rather than later, as far as Steven was concerned.

“Uh, Dipper?” he began with a small, anxious smile. “You’re on bored with us in this too, aren’t you?”

Of course, Dipper didn’t respond to this right away, instead looking to the young Gem with a rather incredulous scowl, one that said everything that words didn’t really need to about how he was feeling about both him and Mabel at the moment. In truth, the pair was surprised that he was carrying this apparent grudge out for so long, neither of them really understanding why the decision they had made in the heat of the moment before that blinding portal still upset him so much. But at the same time, it was something of a small relief when Dipper let out a relenting sigh, even if his manner didn’t lighten up at all as he made it very clear on where he stood in all this. “Fine, whatever,” he complied sourly. “But only until we figure out what happened with the Gems’ memories.”

“Well… i-it’s a start…” Mabel said to Steven as Connie looked between her three friends in confusion, not knowing where this apparent tension between them all really came from.

“Uh… what’s going on with you guys today?” she asked with a concerned frown.

“It’s a… long story…” Steven whispered to her. “We’ll fill you in later.”

“Well,” Garnet spoke up, her hands on her hips and a hint of a coy smile on her face as she looked from her teammates to the kids. “I don’t know about you two, but for me, there’s no one I’d rather
trust with a mystery like this than the Mystery Kids themselves.”

“Yes, well then,” Ford said, still somewhat uncertain about this plan of action. “Reasonably the best thing to do first would to be to carefully analyze Rose’s letter for any of its more subtle, possibly leading details. Then depending on whatever we uncover, we can work from there to—”

“I said,” Garnet interjected, crossing her arms. “We were going to trust the kids with this one.”

“Oh …r-right…” the author cleared his throat as he backed off, somewhat flustered as he let the kids investigate the matter on their own.

“Uh, well actually, Mr. Stanford’s plan seemed like it’s a pretty good one,” Connie shrugged, reading Rose’s letter from over Steven’s shoulder.

“Yeah, there does seem to be something off about this letter…” Dipper noted, putting his bitterness aside as he became invested in this mystery himself. “Like this paragraph right here. Some of the letters are just… randomly capitalized for some reason. Why would Rose do that?”

“Well, normally she wouldn’t,” Pearl cut in pointedly. “Rose’s handwriting was impeccable, just like everything else she did.”

“So… that probably means she had a good reason to do that,” Steven mused. “And in only this part of the letter too… weird…”

“Maybe she was just really tired when she wrote that part?” Mabel suggested, though even she didn’t really buy into such a theory too much.

“Or maybe…” Dipper trailed off as a newfound idea came to him, one that he was quick to act on. “Quick, someone write this down!”

Connie was quick to do so, pulling out a piece of paper and a pen as she recorded all of the letters that Dipper read out, each one of them bizarrely and improperly capitalized within Rose’s letter. Everyone else watched this work with baited breath, hoping that perhaps it would lead them to some kind of answer, though by the time they were done, the results they had gotten were… less than conclusive.

“Ok, so it all adds up to… CEALCEPERTS…?” Connie read, raising a baffled eyebrow as she did.

“Uh… I’m pretty sure that’s not a word…” Mabel frowned before quickly perking up. “Though it does kinda sound like seal-experts! Oh! What if Rose wanted to tell everyone that she was secretly a seal expert!?”

A beat of doubtful silence passed at this bizarre limb before Steven went off on another one. “CEALCEPERTS…” he repeated, looking to the letter once more. “Does that mean anything to any of you guys?” he asked both Ford and the Gems collectively.

“No,” Ford said, equally confused by this odd clue.

“Not at all,” Garnet remarked as the other two Gems shook their heads.

“Dad?” Steven ventured, hoping that perhaps the former rock star might have some kind of idea.

“Sorry, kiddo, I got nothing,” Greg shrugged. “What about you, Mr. Pines?”

“Ugh, heck if I know,” Stan rolled his eyes impetuously. “I think I’ve had enough of dealing with
And with that, the conman turned on his heel and headed for the shack, not bothering to spare another glance back at either the Gems or at Ford as aggravated as he was with them both. “Just as well,” Ford scoffed, rolling his eyes at his brother’s attitude. “Stanley wouldn’t have been much help in this anyway. Or much help in anything else, really.”

“I heard that!” Stan shot back crossly, though he didn’t bother to stick around and protest it any further.

“Hm… what if this CEALCEPERTS thing isn’t really a word…?” Connie theorized, tapping her pen against the page thoughtfully. “What if it’s… something else?”

“Oh yeah!” Dipper exclaimed in realization. “For all we know, it could be a message written in code, or an acronym, or heck, even an anagram!”

“What’s an anagram?” Steven asked curiously.

“It’s when the letters of a word are all mixed up and out of order,” Connie explained, sitting on the ground so she could work properly. “Like, for instance if we took CEALCEPERTS here and tried to turn it into something else using just the letters it has in it.”

“Oh I think I got one!” Mabel said, looking over the bizarre word once more. “Maybe this is supposed to be two words? Like… CASTLE CREEP?”

“Or… LACE SCEPTER?” Dipper tried, though he was quick to denounce the result. “No, that can’t be it….”

“Um… what about CREPE SELECT?” Steven guessed with a shrug.

“Or it could be ELECT RECAP…” Connie mused. “But none of these make any sense… There’s got to be one that-”

“Wait,” Dipper interrupted, his eyes wide with realization as he worked through this in a different way. “PACER… PLACER… PLACE… It’s some kind of place… And then what’s left makes… ERECTS or…” he trailed off with a stunned gasp before revealing what he had uncovered.

“SECRET… SECRET PLACE! That must be what its supposed to say! Secret place!”

“Secret place?” Amethyst asked dubiously. “Uh… like what?”

“Maybe its talking about some place that was a secret to Mom?” Steven purposed thoughtfully. “Like… oh! I know! Mom’s secret armory!”

“Steven!” Pearl quickly chastised upon mention of the pink Gem’s hidden sanctum. A sanctum that she would much prefer to keep the relative secret that it was.

“Oops… sorry, Pearl…” the young Gem rubbed the back of his neck. “I kinda forgot about the whole secret part of it…”

“Wait… Rose’s armory…?” Ford asked knowingly. “The one buried under the town cemetery? I’ve been there before. Rose took me to see it years ago after I asked her about advanced Gem weaponry. It’s really quite impressive!”

“What?! She took you to—oh… that’s right…” Pearl grumbled, crossing her arms with a scowl as
she recalled the journals’ mention of the armory.

“Armory?” Amethyst asked, confused. Confusion that Garnet mirrored as well. “What the heck are you guys talking about?”

“Well… why don’t we all just go there together?” Mabel suggested. “After all, it does sorta seem like it’s the place that anagram thingy in Rose’s letter is talking about, so it’s probably worth checking out, right?”

“Wha—no!” Pearl protested adamantly. “We can’t all just go to Rose’s private sanctum like it’s some kind of… field trip! It’s already been defiled by far too many intruders already! We should just leave it well enough al—”

“Pearl,” Garnet interjected calmly, placing a hand on her frustrated teammate’s shoulder. “We know this place, whatever it is, was special for both you and Rose. But if there’s anything there that could possibly lead us towards the whereabouts of our memories, then we have to go investigate it.”

“B-but…” the white Gem’s argument weakly fizzled out as she realized Garnet was right. If Rose’s letter indeed pointed towards any leads in particular, then the armory was most likely the exactly that. And as much as she wanted to preserve that special place’s sanctity, she wanted to reclaim her and her teammates’ lost memories even more. “A- alright…” she sighed reluctantly as she began to lead the way towards the cemetery, feeling as though she was breaking something important and cherished between herself and her former liege as she did. “Then… let’s go…"

Since there was no warp pad leading to Rose’s armory, the collective group of the kids, the Gems, and Ford had to walk across town to get there, in a trek that was spent mostly in stiff, awkward silence. Along the way, however, Steven, Mabel, and Dipper all managed to fill Connie in on more of the details of what had happened over the past two days, each of them telling her disconnected accounts that both confused her and allowed her to understand the newfound division among them at the same time. A division that, for all intents and purposes, she found wise not to take a clear stance on, lest that create even more of a rift between them all than there already was.

Things were still in a relative state of silence even as the group ventured into Rose’s armory, the vast, cavernous hold still just as pristine and stately as ever. And while the kids, Pearl, and Ford were largely unphased by its familiar, sparkling interior, Garnet and Amethyst were quite amazed by it, seeing as how they had never once step foot into this secret sanctum that belong to their longtime leader.

“Well, uh… here we are,” Steven announced as he stepped up onto the central platform. “Mom’s armory.”

“ Incredible…” Garnet murmured, adjusting her shades amidst looking around the cave.

“Seriously…” Amethyst agreed, her eyes wide and her jaw dropped. “Why didn’t Rose ever tell us about this place? It’s not like we would have went and blabbed about it to anyone.”

“M-maybe because it was just… really special to her,” Steven ventured with a bit of a reassuring smile.

“Then why’d she show it to these two?” Amethyst nodded over to Pearl and Ford.
“Well she showed it to me because I was her most trusted confidant!” the white Gem proclaimed with a proud smile that quickly disappeared as she glanced over at the author. “Or at least… I thought I was…”

“Rose brought me here purely for the sake of historical research, I can assure you,” Ford clarified conclusively.

“Oh, right, research…” Pearl scoffed coldly. “Research about her private sanctum that you went and liberally recorded in those infernal journals of yours for the entire world to see, right?!”

“T-that was never my intention!” Ford protested earnestly. “I only wanted to-”

“That’s enough,” Garnet interrupted staunchly as she wisely stepped between the pair. “We are not getting into another argument today. We need to focus on finding answers, no matter where and what they might be.”

“Well then, this is as good a place as any to start looking,” Steven said as he tapped his hand down onto the central switch, which instantly lit up the moment he made contact with it. Ford and the Gems all watched in apt amazement as the young Gem cycled through each of the weapon collections the armory had to offer, with Mabel and Connie both helping him out by poking him in the right places to get them to appear. However, none of the armory’s contents seemed to point towards any further clues, from the Armor of the Fallen, to the Axes of Ages, to the Heretic’s Anguish, to even the Quatizine Trio. Even some of the collections the kids themselves had never seen before were ultimately fruitless in anything that told of missing memories or untold secrets, aside from the existence of the armory itself. And by the time they had been through everything, the majority of the group was starting to get quite frustrated by the lack of any real, tangible hints they were still facing.

“Ugh, this is stupid,” Amethyst groaned impatiently as Steven began going through the weapons once more, just to make sure there wasn’t anything they had missed. “Wherever our memories are, it’s pretty obvious they’re not here, so why are we still wasting our time doing this?”

“Because Rose’s letter pointed towards a secret place,” Garnet reiterated. “And, given the fact that so few actually knew about this armory, I’d say it was exactly that.”

“Well even if this place was a secret, I don’t see any reason why our memories would have been stored here anyway,” Pearl said pointedly. “Especially since, as we’ve said multiple times, Rose had nothing to do with their erasure!”

“No, of course she wouldn’t have,” Ford agreed with complete sincerity as he looked over the pink Gem’s letter to him again. “However, she did imply that she might have known what happened to them after they were taken. Which means that the leads she’s offered for us are the best we have to go off of for right now.”

“If those leads are even pointing towards our memories,” Pearl countered. “Which, for all we know, they not be at all.”

Based on this bout of speculation, a round of heated debating broke out between Ford and the Gems, one that wasn’t quite an argument, though given how on edge they all were, it could have very well been mistaken for one. The kids watched in unanimous dismay as the adults bickered, knowing that such contention seemed to be a running theme today, one that didn’t show any signs of breaking any time soon.

“Ugh, more fighting…” Mabel sighed with an exasperated frown. “How are we ever gonna figure
any of this stuff out if everyone just keeps getting mad and yelling at each other?”

“I guess it’s because everyone’s just a little tense…” Steven noted sympathetically. “Especially the Gems; they won’t really tell me a lot about it but… its sorta like everything’s just been turned upside down for them and they don’t understand why or how. It can’t be easy for them.”

“Well… do you think finding their memories will really fix that?” Connie asked worriedly.

“I… don’t know… Maybe?” Steven replied, honestly. “I think what’s bothering them the most right now is the chance that Mom might have actually known about what happened to them, but… that doesn’t make any sense… Why would she keep a secret like that from them for all those years?”

“Well, she did keep this whole armory thing a secret from Amethyst and Garnet for a whole bunch of years, it sounds like,” Mabel pointed out.

“Yeah, but… this is different,” Steven frowned fretfully. “This armory was hers’. But the Gems’ memories belonged to them. If she knew all this time, then why would she keep something that’s theirs hidden from them, especially something this important? Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl were her best friends, so why wouldn’t she trust them with their own memories?”

“Oh gee, I don’t know, Steven,” Dipper spoke up, his tone quite cross and sardonic as he glared at his sister and the young Gem. “Why wouldn’t Rose trust her friends on something really important? Then again, its not like you and Mabel really know anything about putting your trust in the right people, now would you?”

“Oh… what are you talking about, bro-bro?” Mabel asked, exchanging a confused, but still concerned glance with Steven upon hearing this.

“Are you serious?” Dipper asked in harsh disbelief. “You guys still don’t get what the problem is here?”

“W-with the Gems?” Steven guessed, though even as he said it, he knew that wasn’t the focus of this conversation anymore.

“No, with us!” Dipper exclaimed in unbridled frustration. “With what you guys did yesterday! You two saw what the journals said; that portal could have torn the universe apart and killed us all! And you both were in the perfect places to put a stop to it and save us all but you just… didn’t!”

“B-but everything turned out fine!” Mabel protested, not understanding her brother’s perspective on this. “We’re all still ok and now we even have Grunkle Ford around! Aren’t you happy about getting the chance to meet him seeing as how he’s the author you’ve been just about dying to find all summer?!”

“Well, of course I am!” Dipper snapped, his hands in tight fists at his sides. “But that’s not the point! The point is that you guys knew something really bad could have happened, and who did you decide to trust about it in the end? Not me, you know, your twin brother, one of your best friends? No, you decided to trust Stan, a literal conman who we just found out had been lying to us about basically everything all summer!”

“Dipper, we didn’t decide to trust Mr. Pines over you,” Steven clarified gently. “It was just a really intense, heat of the moment sort of thing and we were being pressured on both sides and things just sort of… happened.”

“Things just ‘sort of’ happened?” Dipper repeated with a cold scoff. “Oh what you mean like how
you guys ‘sort of happened’ to go have a little ‘chat’ with Peridot even after the Gems and I told you not to? Or, Steven, like how you ‘sort of happened’ to keep me trapped in a fusion with you just so you could feel good!? Or, Mabel, how you ‘sort of happened’ to not help me with the laptop which left me with only a psychotic, sadistic demon to turn to for help!? Or how you guys just ‘sort of happen’ to always do stuff like this! You always have to do what works for you guys, what you guys think is right. Well maybe what’s right for you two isn’t always right for everyone else, did you ever think about that?! Oh, well, of course you didn’t because you two just hate thinking about anything even remotely unpleasant, don’t you!?”

“Whoa, hold on-” Connie attempted to intervene upon seeing how heated things were getting, though Mabel quickly, angrily interrupted her.

“Dipper, none of that is fair and you know it!” she exclaimed sharply. “I thought we already settled all this! What happened with the invasion or with Bill is none of our faults and neither is what happened yesterday! Don’t you get it?! If we had shut down that portal yesterday, then Grunkle Stan would have never gotten to see his brother again! He wasn’t trying to destroy the world; he was trying to save his family! I totally would have done the same thing if you were the one trapped in some nightmare dimension like Grunkle Ford was!”

“Would you have, Mabel?” Dipper asked dubiously. “Because if we’re being perfectly honest here, I don’t think you would. After all, I’m always the one who has to end up sacrificing the things I want and need for you, not the other way around! If Bill was right about one thing, it was that. And you pretty much just proved that completely yesterday by not hearing me out about hitting that shutdown switch! The one time I ask you to do something that could have potentially saved the entire world and you don’t even listen to me!”

“Dipper, I—we wanted to listen to you!” Mabel argued back intensely, and by now, Ford and the Gems had start to take notice of the effective shouting matching that was unfolding pretty much between just the twins at this point. “But your problem is that you think way too much with your head and never with your heart! Because me and Steven went with our hearts yesterday and they turned out to be right! Why can’t you just accept that!?”

“Because you didn’t trust me!” Dipper reiterated fiercely, clearly upset enough that he was almost to the point of tears, though he held them back nonetheless. “How many times do I have to say it?! A few weeks ago you guys made such a big deal about how important it was that we stand together and listen to each other, but then you two turned around and did the exact opposite of that! Do you guys even know what that felt like to me? It was like you guys just… shut me out, like you-”

Steven suddenly interrupted with a sharp gasp of realization upon hearing this, his eyes growing wide as he finally hit what very well could be a breakthrough in everything. “Like what Mom did to the Gems…” he muttered, his eyes wide as he stared up to the nearby pink platform.

“Steven?” Connie frowned in confusion, the twins doing the same as they wondered how any of this related back to the argument at hand.

“Pearl,” Steven began, looking to the white Gem as he started to work of this realization. “You said that Mom used to keep a lot of secrets because she wanted to protect everyone?”

“W-well… yes…” Pearl nodded, unsure of where her young ward was going with this. “But what does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, if that’s true, then that means Mom didn’t keep secrets from you guys because she didn’t trust you…” Steven continued, pacing around in the shallow water of the cave as he continued thinking thins out. “She did it to keep you guys safe from… something…”
“Something…” Amethyst repeated, raising an eyebrow. “Like… what?”

“I… don’t know…” Steven shook his head. “But I don’t think that’s the important thing here anyway. What’s important is that she did trust you guys, and she trusted you too, Mr. Ford, didn’t she?”

“W-well, I’d like to think that she did,” Ford remarked, glancing down in slight shame. “For a time anyway…”

“Well, she trusted you enough to show you armory, and a bunch of other things too!” Steven assured thoughtfully. “But… what if there were things that she still kept secret from everyone, things that she didn’t ever tell anyone about ever, because she wanted to keep her friends safe from something really bad.”

“Well what kinda secret would that be?” Amethyst asked, hands on her hips.

“It would be something like… hm…” the young Gem had to take pause from his ongoing line of reasoning here, knowing that he was still missing one essential piece out of this growing puzzle. A piece that had to be something that neither the Gems nor Ford had any prior knowledge of. A piece that could very well lead to the answers they were all still so desperate to find. A piece that, as it finally dawned upon Steven in another burst of sudden realization, was much more pinker and fluffier than he thought it would be. “Lion!”

“Lion?” everyone save for Ford asked rather incredulously, all of them now completely lost by the young Gem’s newfound, bizarre conclusion.

“We gotta get back to the temple, right now!” Steven implored, splashing loudly through the cave as he ran towards its exit, the others all curiously following after him. “Come on!”

No one really understood what Steven had in mind for his impromptu plan as they arrived back at the temple, save for the fact that it apparently involved Lion. Almost as soon as they all stepped inside, however, the young Gem wasted no time in frantically rushing forward and urgently calling for his pink pet, knowing that time was of the essence in solving this longstanding mystery now.

“Lion!” he shouted, glancing around for the pink beast as the others filed in behind him. “Lion! Come on out! We need you to-”

The young Gem was interrupted as the pink beast suddenly leapt down from the loft above, nearly knocking him down in the process. As Steven re-steadied himself, he let something of an exasperated huff out upon seeing his comforter draped over his pet’s head. “Ugh, Lion!” he groaned, pulling the blanket off of him. “How many times do I have to tell you!? My bed is for me to sleep on, not for you, even when I’m not here!”

“By Tesla’s coil…” Ford muttered in amazement as he stepped forward to take a better look at the pink beast. “That lion is pink!”

“Uh, yeah, tell us something we don’t know,” Amethyst rolled her eyes.

“What a scientific marvel!” the author continued with an impressed smile. Lion sent him an unenthused glare but surprisingly didn’t growl at him as he curiously approached him. “And he’s so tame too! Certainly, he has to have some sort of magical or supernatural origins! Where on earth did you find him?”
“In the desert, a few months before this summer started,” Steven replied, stroking his pink pet’s fur. “But… he has this huge tree inside his mane, it’s a little hard to explain, but there are a whole bunch of stuff in there. Stuff that I think used to belong to my mom… Its where we found her sword and this tape she left for me, and there’s a lot of other things in there too. A-and…” he turned to the Gems as he briefly paused, clearly nervous as he purposed his latest idea to them. “Maybe it’s the ‘secret place’ Mom’s letter talked about. Maybe… its where your memories are.”

“Oh, Steven, don’t be ridiculous,” Pearl scoffed. “The chances of our memories being hidden inside Lion’s mane are even lower than them being at the armory.”

“It’s a good guess,” Garnet assured, placing a hand on her young ward’s shoulder. “But it just doesn’t seem very likely.”

“No!” Steven protested, pulling his shoulder away. “Garnet, you said that we have to investigate anything that could lead us to where your memories are. Well I really do think that whatever’s inside Lion’s mane could at least help us get closer to finding them! Please, just… trust me on this, ok? It’s worth a look, isn’t it?”

The Gems said nothing to this, instead exchanging an uncertain glance before they all backed off to allow Steven the room to do what he needed to. The young Gem himself took in a deep, steady breath as he nodded to Lion, who simply tilted his chin up, granting his master access to the pocket dimension tucked away inside his pastel mane. And, taking in a deep breath and letting go of any reservations about what he might find, Steven jumped right in.

The grassy fields of Lion’s mane were just as calm and peacefully silent as Steven always knew them to be, though unlike the countless times he had visited them before, this time, something felt different. It was as though the very atmosphere, or lack thereof rather, that covered the seemingly boundless space was filled with something ominous and unsettling, almost as if it knew what he was there looking for.

And it wasn’t happy about it.

Even so, Steven forced himself to ignore the growing dread in his own heart as he pressed forward through the tall grass, the large, pink tree still afar off in the distance, though it loomed closer with each step he inched towards it. As he ventured closer, his breath dutifully held and his eyes focused on his destination, the young Gem couldn’t help but think about his mother. Rose Quartz, the leader of the Crystal Gems, who saved so many and gave so much. Who harbored so many secrets, both big and small. Who had left so much confusion and uncertainty behind. Who, the more he learned about, the more he seemed to know nothing about at all.

“She was more than just nice,” his father had told him with a warm, earnest smile of deepest affection and love. “She was sweet, and selfless, and funny, and brave, and beautiful, and amazing…”

“Your mother always believed that trust was something that shouldn’t be given away so easily,” Garnet had said, but Steven couldn’t help but question that supposed belief now, in spite of it all. “She believed it was something that should be earned, and that everyone should be given the chance to earn it.”

“I don’t know what kind of sweet, little fluffy lies the Gems have been feeding you, kid, but your mom was far from the amazing, perfect, flawless goddess those three thought she was!” Stan had harshly criticized, with a kind of disdain that the young Gem now understood the reasoning behind. Disdain that, in a way, he even saw as somewhat reasonable, at least from the conman’s perspective.
“She was always, always thinking of humanity, of the earth, of her fellow Crystal Gems over herself.” Pearl had said with a loving sigh of adoration, one that perhaps, Steven started to realize, carried some biases to it all their own.

“I was always able to bear my secrets to her, just as she often entrusted her own secrets to me,” the journal had read and Ford still echoed his sentiments of deepest respect for the pink Gem even now. Sentiments that, much like the Gems’ refused to be shaken. “I can only hope she’ll understand. She has to understand. She’s the only one I still completely trust…”

“Then again, I’m hardly surprised,” Bill had said during a moment of such high intensity that it had barely even registered again in Steven’s mind until now. “After all, your mom did the exact same thing way back when before just making everybody forget about it later on!”

Steven had to take in a sharp gasp of realization upon recalling this callous remark, to the point that he was forced to stick his head outside of Lion’s mane ever so briefly to catch it. He didn’t even bother sticking around to answer anyone’s pressing questions as he quickly shoved himself back inside, his mind absolutely reeling by what the dream demon had said several weeks ago no. There was no way, no way Bill could have been right about that; certainly it had to have been just another one of his infamous lies and deceitful ploys. The idea that Rose had known where the Gems’ memories had been all this time was bad enough; but the implication that she had been the very one to take them in the first place was something else altogether. Certainly, it wasn’t true. It couldn’t be. Because…

“Take care of them, Steven…” Rose had said herself to him in a tape made years ago. A tape filled with so much warmth and love and sincerity that it usually pushed all thoughts of his mother’s shadowed secrets away. But not this time. Because as Steven scaled the hill leading to the tree, the only thing left in place of that warmth was a bitter chill, in place of that love was fear, in place of that sincerity was doubt, more doubt that he had ever really felt before. She had entrusted him with the Crystal Gems, with the protection of the earth and everything upon it. Those were burdens he could handle, burdens that were heavy yes, but manageable. But she had also left him with her secrets, with the ghosts of her past still unreckoned in the present, with all the horrible mistakes she might have made. With all the things that he knew he wasn’t strong enough to carry, even if he wanted to.

And as he finally reached the tree and happened to peer just beyond the chest resting near its base, he found just about the heaviest burden she could have left him with.

His heart sank with a feeling of absolute woe as he caught sight of it: an unassuming glass tube, the very same kind the Society of the Blind Eye had once horded en masse. It lay gently in the low grass, a label pressed to its side that bore a very simple designation written in a deceptively beautiful script:

“Crystal Gems’ Memories”

Steven’s hands were shaking as he reached down to pick the tube up, grasping it ever so gently as he pulled it into his grasp. Tears had started to well up in the young Gem’s eyes as the realization crashed down upon him all at once that it was all true. That Rose really had been keeping this momentous secret from her teammates, from her friends all this time. That she had barred them from the truth, truth that they had agonized over missing for so very long now, truth that she could have very well stolen away from them herself. Truth that he had finally, finally found, and truth that he had every intention of returning to who it rightfully belonged to.

Something that his mother had apparently never bothered to od.
Since he was starting to run out of air, Steven quickly bounded down the hill, practically leaping out of Lion’s mane and back into the house as he landed on the floor clumsily. As tense as everyone was, no one really bothered to give him too much of a chance to catch his breath as they all crowded around him, eager to hear his findings.

“Steven, are you ok?” Mabel asked with concern upon noticing the tears streaming down the young Gem’s face.

“Did you find anything in there?” Connie asked, equally worried as Steven slowly pushed himself up to sit.

“Uh… y-yeah…” he muttered morosely, looking down to the memory tube held tightly in his arms. “I… I think I did…”

Steven let out a sad sigh as he held the tube up for the Gems to see, a unified gasp of shock escaping them as they realized what it was. The young Gem had always imagined this to be a moment of immense relief and joy for his guardians; the long awaited reunion with their lost memories should have been exciting and liberating. But instead, it only felt like a betrayal of the absolute worst kind.

“T-those are… they can’t be…” Pearl whispered, wrapping her hands around Garnet’s arm tightly.

“T-they are…” the Gem leader said weakly, not even hiding the dismay in her tone.

“B-but… but why were they… in there all this time?” Amethyst asked, shaking her head in disbelief.

Garnet took in a deep breath, steadying herself for her teammates as resolve filled her expression. “There’s only one way to find out,” she said, looking to the memory tube first, and then to her teammates. “Gems?” she offered, though neither Amethyst nor Pearl seemed very keen on taking the initiative. “Alright then, I’ll go first.”

The others all watched in tentative silence as Garnet took the tube, placing her palms against both of its end tips. However, the moment she did so, a spark of energy rushed from the tube to the two gemstones making contact with it, eliciting a gasp of surprise from the Gem leader as she went rigid and still. For a moment, her expression only conveyed shock; her jaw dropped and her eyes unreadable underneath her shades. No one else had any idea what she could have been seeing, what memories she was recalling, what secrets she was learning, but in the end, it all proved to be too much for her as she let out a sharp, distraught cry, her hands flying away from the tube as she stumbled backwards. The tube itself nearly shattered on the ground, but fortunately, Pearl managed to catch it just in time as the others all looked to the compromised Gem leader in concerned alarm.

Garnet said nothing as she backed against the far wall, her shades disappearing to reveal her trio of eyes, all huge with terror and oncoming tears in an expression of unabridged fear that none of them had ever seen on her before. Her breathing was shallow and uneven, a hand pressed tightly against the side of her head as she shook it repeatedly, as sign of how unable she was to comprehend what she had just seen.

“G-Garnet…” Steven asked, taking a small, hesitant step towards her. “A-are you… ok?”

The Gem leader didn’t respond, her eyes darting downward as she remained in her state of silent, frantic panic, completely unresponsive to everyone else around her. Pearl and Amethyst in particular were quite stunned to see their usually steadfast leader so shaken, and as they looked to the memory tube again, they were both left wondering if reclaiming what she just had was even
worth it at all. “W-what did she see just now?” Amethyst asked quite apprehensively.

“I-I don’t know…” Pearl said, warily eyeing the tube once more. “Whatever it was, it couldn’t have been that bad, right?”

Amethyst simply shrugged in response to this, something that Pearl took with a readying sigh as she began to lift the tube up to the gem on her forehead, knowing that was how Garnet had absorbed the memories contained therein. And much like Garnet, Pearl’s expression went completely blank as she touched it to her gemstone, though it only took a moment or two for the same kind of horror to fill her eyes as she let out nothing short of a scream of anguished fear. The white Gem practically threw the memory tube away from her, though Amethyst managed to nab it with a well timed stretch of her arm before it could hit the wall. All the same, Pearl let out another heartbroken cry as she quickly collapsed to her knees, choking on several sobs all the while as she wrapped her arms tightly around herself.

“H-how could we… w-we were tricked, we didn’t… what have we done?!” she cried miserably, her voice rising in yet another agonized shriek before she broke down into the same, tearful, inconsolable state Garnet was still in. The kids, Ford, and Amethyst could all only watch their absolute breakdowns with apt alarm, none of them having the faintest idea about what apparent horrors their previously lost memories could hold. The purple Gem in particular looked down at the tube anxiously, knowing that if she were to gain those memories herself, then she’d likely fall apart just as her teammates had. And yet…

“Amethyst, wait,” Steven stopped her as she began to pull the tube towards the gem on her chest. “Y-you don’t have to…"

The purple Gem’s expression turned grave as she heard this, shaking her head solemnly as she spared another pitied glance towards Garnet and Pearl. “Yeah… I do…” she muttered despondently, taking in a deep breath before she placed the tube against her gem. Just like her teammates, it took a moment for Amethyst to really respond to whatever secrets the tube held inside it, but when she did, her reaction wasn’t one of shock or grief. It was anger. The purple Gem let out an appalled gasp, her eyes igniting with furious fire as she ripped the memory tube away from her, letting out a fierce shout as she slammed it hard into the ground, shattering it into hundreds of irreparable pieces.

“She lied to us!” Amethyst practically screamed with fury, her fingers tightly knitted into her messy hair. “All this time! All these years and she couldn’t even bother to tell us anything just so she could hide her own mistakes!? How could she do this to us?!”

“Do what?” Ford asked, both immensely concerned and immensely curious as he addressed all three of the Gems. “What happened? What did you see?”

As soon as the author asked this, the Gems all snapped their gazes over to him, each of them wearing some variation of a hostile scowl, something that Ford was genuinely caught off guard by. “W-what did we see?” Pearl began coldly, wiping her tears away and replacing them with anger as she stood. “I’ll tell you what we saw! We saw-”

“Pearl,” Garnet quickly cut in, still against the wall, though her expression had hardened somewhat. Her shades were still gone as she sent an intentful glance towards the kids, silently telling her teammate that what they had witnessed was something that didn’t need to be discussed in front of them.

The white Gem heeded her leader, though all the same, she turned to Ford briefly, whispering only two words that none of the kids were able to hear, though they left the author completely in shock.
“W-what?” he stammered, hoping he had heard Pearl wrong, though she didn’t bother to repeat herself as she abruptly turned on her heel and marched towards the temple, letting out another remorseful, bitter sob as she did. Amethyst followed soon after, grumbling hotly to herself as she stormed into her room, not even sending another glance back at the stunned group behind her. Garnet lingered just a moment longer, her three-eyed sights fixated on the broken remains of the memory tube on the ground before her, as if it held any of the answers she was failing to find.

“G-Garnet?” Steven spoke up apprehensively, taking a step towards the shaken Gem leader. Garnet briefly glanced up at him, her eyes filled with pain, regret, fear, and a million other things at once as she prepared to speak to him, only to end up saying nothing at all. Instead, she simply summoned her shades once again, standing upright as she too retreated inside the temple, unable to even begin describing the horrors her and her teammates had just seen.

“W-wait!” Ford called after her, rushing up to the temple gate just as it closed. “Please, just tell me what happened! W-what did he—what did Rose do to…” The author trailed off, stilling his knocking on the door as he let out a defeated sigh and hung his head in shame, knowing that, based on the incredibly small amount of information he had so far, he couldn’t help but blame himself for it all.

“G-Grunkle Ford?” Mabel spoke up anxiously. “Are the Gems… ok?”

Ford hesitated in turning back to face the kids, but when he did it was with a small, largely fake smile of reassurance. “Ah… um… t-they will be. There’s no doubt that whatever memories they just recalled were… somewhat intense. It’s understandable that they’d need a little time to… adjust, so to speak…”

“It was Mom, wasn’t it?” Steven asked, his back turned to everyone else as he instead stared at the portrait of his mother rather coldly. “She was the one who erased their memories. That’s why they were hidden in Lion’s mane; she put them there. Like Amethyst said, s-she lied to them…”

“I-I… I’m not sure if she… M-maybe she just… She…” Ford stammered, clearly unsure of what to say as he looked to the serene portrait of the pink Gem himself. The author knew there was much that he could have said, not just to the kids, but to the Gems, to himself really, in a moment like this. Unspoken regrets, unkept promises, unabashed guilt; but in the end, he said none of it, opting to take the same route of silence as the Gems had by making a swift retreat of his own. “I… don’t know…” he mumbled to the kids as he passed by them, his tone and his manner both low and remorseful. Yet all the same, he did stop briefly as he began to step outside, offering the kids something of a bittersweet smile as he left them with a few genuine words of affirmation. “You know, despite how everything turned out, you kids really did come through and figure this conundrum out, and that’s something to be proud of. The four of you really make quite an impressive team.” Ford let out a small, somewhat sad laugh as he finally left, though not before muttering one final, wistful statement to himself. “Just like myself and the Gems did back in the day, I suppose…”

And with that, the author departed, leaving the kids alone in a state of heavy silence as they all tried to wrap their heads around everything that had just happened. There was no doubt that something significant had changed with the restoration of the Gems’ memories, but exactly what that something was was largely unclear. However, Steven hardly even thought of this apparent change as he instead continued staring at the picture of his mother, his hands slowly clenching into tight fists at his side as his despair started to grow into frustration. Which in turn, quickly grew into a rare kind of anger he was powerless to control.

“I can’t believe it…” he began, quietly at first, though his volume quickly rose as the others all
looked to him in confusion. “All this time, *all* this time we’ve been trying to figure out what happened to the Gems’ memories, and the answer was always *right here!* Mom took their memories! They were her friends and she *stole* from them without even thinking about how much it might hurt them!”

“Oh, Steven…” Connie frowned, wanting to comfort the young Gem amidst his upset anger. “M-maybe she *had* to erase their memories. Whatever the Gems saw… it looked like it really scared them. Maybe that was her way of helping them deal with that.”

“But why couldn’t she think of another way?!” Steven exclaimed, distraught as he began to intensely pace back and forth. “Why did she have to go and take something that was so important to them and just… just *hide* them for so long without telling anyone?!! She didn’t give them a choice or anything, she just *did* it to try and fix whatever happened, but it didn’t fix *anything* at all! It wasn’t fair! It wasn’t right! It’s just like-!” The young Gem cut himself off with a sharp gasp, his eyes widening as he realized he had no right to be upset with his mother for such a momentous mistake. After all, he had nearly done the exact same thing to one of his own friends just a few mere days ago.

Steven’s eyes welled up with tears, a guilty sob escaping him as he looked to Dipper, who, up until that point, had only been watching the young Gem’s outburst in concerned alarm. However, his surprise only grew as Steven suddenly rushed towards him, pulling him into a tight, sorrowful hug that admittedly caught Dipper completely off guard.

“S-Steve, what-”

“Dipper, I—I’m so sorry!” the young Gem cried morosely. “I finally understand why you were so upset with me and Mabel about what happened yesterday! Its because *we didn’t* trust you! B-because *I* didn’t trust you, a-and that’s why I almost erased your memories back when we were dealing with the society! I thought you couldn’t handle it all but I was wrong! I was only thinking about how bad *I* felt then, about how *scared* I was yesterday that I didn’t even *think* about how… about… about *anything* else! You’re right… I-I… I’m selfish… Just like my mom was…”

Dipper had to take pause upon hearing all this, still lost in surprise as he felt the young Gem sob miserably while still maintaining their embrace. For the first time, he couldn’t help but feel guilty himself for the grudge he had been holding onto so tightly ever since that portal blew open. A grudge that, in light of everything they had uncovered and everything that they had been through together, seemed far too petty and unimportant to really hold a place in his heart any longer.

And yet, before he could let it go, Mabel spoke up, her tone shaken yet sincere as she managed to join in on the hug between the boys herself. “Dipper, I… I’m sorry too…” she said, much softer than Steven had, though tears were starting to fill her eyes as well. “You were right… we really did shut you out. We broke our promise to stick by each other and be a team, and then we—I guess I just thought that things would get better on their own, so I didn’t even *try* to make it right… I-just like I always do, right?”

“Mabel, no…” Dipper protested softly, gently pulling himself out of Steven and Mabel’s shared embrace. “Y-you guys didn’t… I was just…” He trailed off, trying to focus everything he wanted to say to them both down to something concise, meaningful. And once he did, he couldn’t help but do so with a remorseful sigh. “I… I was wrong. About Stan, about the portal, about… well, just about *everything*. In fact, when it comes to the big things this summer, there’s probably about only a handful of times when I’ve actually been right. And I guess I was just so *tired* of being wrong about everything *all* the time that I wanted to blame it on someone other than myself so… maybe I sort of just… pinned it all on you two. Which is something else that’s wrong, when you think
about it, because you guys totally don’t deserve that. You did what you thought was right. And… in the end, it turned out for the best. I mean, it brought Great Uncle Ford back to where he belongs, it led to us finding the Gems’ memories—for better or worse—it gave us the answers to so many of the questions we had this summer. So… I’m sorry for holding it all against you guys. What happened yesterday… it changed pretty much everything. But the one thing that it shouldn’t change because of any of it is us.”

“And it won’t,” Mabel assured with a small, but steadily growing smile. “Remember what we talked about last night? About not getting all stupid like Stan and Ford, and heck, even the Gems did? Well, we’re not gonna turn out like them. We’re better than that, all four of us are!”

“That’s right!” Steven agreed as they welcomed Connie into their quickly developing group hug. “Because we’re…”

“The Mystery Kids!” they all chimed in together, laughing warmly as they all pulled together, both physically and symbolically. The past few days, the past few weeks really had been tumultuous for all four of them, through trials ranging from Homeworld invasions to battles against demons both external and internal to even interdimensional portals and hidden memories sealed away. But even despite all the strain it had been put under, their bond was a resilient one, built to last under the pressure stacked against it without crumbling apart. What was lost between the kids had been found, and as long as they kept sight of it, so it would remain.

And yet… even despite the comforting assurance of their newly-secured friendship, the kids still had their worries. Worries of the past they still knew nothing about, about the mistakes and terrors laying dead but not buried somewhere years before any of them were even born. Anxiety about the present, about how things were now as shaken and shattered as they were in light of everything they had learned.

And most of all fears of the future, of what they’d find as they moved onward into the unsteady, uncertain darkness ahead, where literally anything or anyone could lie in wait.
Chapter 52: Cry for Help

Chapter Summary

In which Pearl and Garnet fuse, Sardonyx is the best, Stan and Steven have a heart to heart, and shit gets even worse than it already is.

Chapter Notes

Oy, it's been a while, hasn't it? Well sorry for the delay, I've been pretty busy as of late. But for now, I hope you enjoy my take on Cry for Help all the same! Enjoy! (keyword is Sardonyx)

With the metaphorical roller coaster ride of events and emotions they had been consistently on for the past several days, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel all readily welcomed a break from this torrent of essentially earth-shattering revelations and aftershocks. However, the “break” that Steven and Mabel had formulated was one that Dipper wasn’t exactly fond of, but was ultimately outnumbered on, which was how he ended up being sandwiched squarely in between the enthusiastic pair as they turned in for the ongoing Crying Breakfast Friends marathon.

All the same, two thirds of the trio were thoroughly enraptured in the depressing escapades of Sniffling Croissant, Sad Pear, and Bawling Bacon all weeping inconsolably over some sort of ‘shocking’ reveal concerning their mysterious family members. “Wow…” Steven mused in amazement in light of this turn in the show. “What a great plot twist! I can’t believe Sniffling Croissant’s dad was actually one of the Angry Lunch Enemies all this time!”

“I know, right!?” Mabel exclaimed, just as stunned. “And that they finally found Sad Pear and Bawling Bacon’s long-lost aunt! It’s like everything’s unraveling all at once and its so crazy! I wonder how everyone is gonna react to all these huge drama bombs!”

“You guys are kidding, right?” Dipper interjected dryly. “Those ‘plot twists’ were totally predictable. I’ve only seen a few episodes of this show and from what I’ve seen, they’ve foreshadowed all that stuff so much that just about anyone could have figured it out from basically the beginning.”

A beat of somewhat awkward silence passed at this callout, until Steven found a silver lining in it and quickly perked up. “Aw, Dipper! You really are invested in Crying Breakfast Friends after all, just like me and Mabel!”

“…Believe me, Steven, I’m really not,” Dipper deadpanned, rolling his eyes at the over the top cartoon on TV.
Not long after this exchange, the temple doors began to open and instantly, all three of the kids directed their attention away from the TV and in that direction instead. After all, none of them had really heard anything from any of the Gems since the return of their apparently tumultuous memories the other day. Suffice to say they were all immensely curious to know both how they were coping with what they had discovered, as well as whatever it was they had remembered in the first place. But given how sensitive of a subject it likely still was for the Gems, the kids knew they were in no position to pry about any of it; the last thing they wanted was to set Garnet, Amethyst, or Pearl off again so soon after the solid ground they once stood on abruptly crumbled apart underneath them.

But still, that didn’t mean the trio didn’t want to know they answers they themselves were still missing even after it was all said and done.

So they watched in somewhat tense silence as Amethyst trudged out of the temple, silent and clearly sullen as she kept her rather embittered gaze downward on her way over to the fridge. She didn’t bother to spare a glance up to the kids on the loft, much less make an effort to speak to them as she dully searched for a snack. The purple Gem’s distracted distance continued only until Steven hesitantly spoke up with a small smile, one that was filled with plenty of concern for Amethyst in light of what had happened just a few days ago.

“Uh… hey, Amethyst,” he greeted with slight uncertainty, exchanging a brief glance with the twins before continuing. “You, uh… you wanna watch Crying Breakfast Friends with us? There’s an all-day marathon going on.”

The purple Gem’s shoulders hitched at the offer, but she didn’t turn to face the trio as she muttered out her response. “Nah… I’m… I’m good…”

“A-are you sure?” Mabel asked, trying to be just as encouraging as Steven. “We’re in the middle of a really good one right now!”

“Not really,” Dipper remarked, though he was quickly corrected by a sudden elbowing from his sister. “Ow! Uh, yeah, I-I mean, it’s really, um… great…”

Amethyst hesitated for another moment or two before finally glancing over her shoulder at the kids, briefly taking in their warm, hopeful expressions before letting out a relenting sigh. “Yeah, alright,” she complied, heading up towards the loft herself before plopping down on the floor in front of the TV. “But only for a little while. I’m sorta… busy dealing with some… stuff.”

None of the kids bothered to ask what that “stuff” might have been, largely since they already had a pretty good guess about it. Even so, another bout of tentative silence took over the room, filled in only by the overdramatic wails of the breakfast characters on screen. But when it was finally broken, Steven was the one to do it, interrupting the show somewhat apprehensively as he addressed the purple Gem on the ground below him.

“Um… Amethyst?” he began, unsure of how to really phrase what he really wanted to ask, so instead, he went in another direction instead. “H-how are you feeling after the whole, um… you know… memory thing that happened the other day?”

“W-what, that whole thing?” Amethyst quickly replied, flinching as she forced a scoff out. “Pfft, I don’t even care about that junk anymore. I-I mean, its really messed up stuff, yeah, but uh… its fine, its whatever. It happened a way long time ago anyway, so its not like it even matters anymore anyway.”

“Uh… no offense, Amethyst, but it sure didn’t seem like it doesn’t matter based on how you guys
reacted to getting those memories back in the first place…” Dipper noted truthfully.

“Ugh, well it 

doesn’t!" the purple Gem snapped, frustrated. “I don’t know about Garnet or Pearl, but I’m over it, so we don’t need to talk about it anymore!”

The kids exchanged a glance, rather doubtful of this claim based on Amethyst’s heated reaction, but none of them were too keen on continuing much further when it came to asking her anything related to the formerly missing memories. After all, it didn’t seem like they’d be getting too far along with the purple Gem when it came to getting answers about them anyway. “Well then, if the memory thing isn’t what’s bothering you, then… what does have you so down?” Mabel asked, still wanting to cheer the obviously discouraged purple Gem up.

Amethyst started at this, her eyes growing wide before her cheeks flushed in dark purple embarrassment, which she was quick to play off with another harsh scoff. “Nothing! I’m fine! I don’t know why you guys are grilling me with so many questions anyway, I thought you guys just called me up here to watch your weird cartoon with you and—” The purple Gem cut herself off as she nodded towards the TV, only to notice that the program had cut out into loud, bizarre static largely out of nowhere.

“Aw, hey! What’s the big idea?” Mabel asked with a pout. “Steven, did you forget to pay your cable bill or something?”

“My dad’s usually the one who does that, and he’s always pretty on top of getting it paid on time…” Steven mused thoughtfully as he looked to the snowy screen. “But this is pretty weird. It was doing this yesterday too…”

“Well, then maybe it just something wrong with your TV,” Dipper guessed. “Still, its not like you really need to rush to fix it or anything. It’s not like we were missing much anyway…” He finished his last statement in a sarcastic mutter, one that Steven and Mabel readily disagreed with.

“Are you kidding, bro-bro? The entire show could be turning itself upside down right now, and all we’re seeing is a bunch of static!” Mabel huffed impatiently. “We gotta figure out a way to fix this!”

“Ugh, hang on, I got it,” Amethyst said as she stood and stepped beside the TV. The purple Gem then proceeded to give it a few soft kicks, though they did little to change the ongoing flow of endless static. “How about now?” she asked, glancing to the TV herself. She jumped back in surprise, however, as the static suddenly shifted, the television itself vibrating wildly as an unintelligible bout of odd gibberish began bursting from it.

“I-it’s never done that before,” Steven remarked, keeping a close eye on the screen along with the twins to see what might happen next. Soon enough, the screen soon changed again as an image gradually began to take shape upon it along with a voice. And as soon as both of these things became clear and distinguishable, the entire group present let out a startled gasp upon seeing exactly what, or rather who was interrupting the scheduled programming.

“This is Peridot,” the green Gem began with her prerecorded message, her manner clearly aggrivated and rather frantic as she continued. “Transmitting on all frequencies from abandoned Crystal System colony planet Earth, to Yellow Diamond. My mission has been compromised; my escort and escapee informant are gone and I am now stranded! Please send help!” With this desperate plea, the message repeated itself, with Peridot once again making her anxious appeal to the mysterious Yellow Diamond. Based on this alone, it took almost no deliberation between Amethyst and the kids for them to reach the decision to call Garnet and Pearl out of the temple so they could this troubling transmission. And upon hearing it for themselves, both of the other Gems
were quick to place their own lingering remorse from their recalled memories aside, just as Amethyst had, for the sake of the brand new problem at hand.

“I don’t get it…” Mabel remarked, aptly confused as they all watched Peridot’s message over again. “Why would anyone give Peridot her own weird commercial? It’s not like she really has the kind of personality meant for television.”

“She probably just took over the airwaves, Mabel,” Dipper remarked, rolling his eyes as he cast another disdainful glare at the Gem on TV. “Though who knows how she managed to do that. I guess she might be smarter than we give her credit for. Maybe.”

“Doubt it,” Garnet said, her manner stoic as she rose to properly stand.

“Ok, thanks,” Steven finished his conversation on the phone before hanging up and addressing the others. “Connie says its on her TV too.”

“But where could Peridot be broadcasting a signal that strong?” Pearl asked with a concerned frown.

“There’s only one place,” Garnet said, taking in a deep, resolved breath before looking to her uncertain teammates. “Amethyst, Pearl. I know a lot has happened these past few days. And even more has changed as a result of everything we’ve learned. But… despite it all, its time we pull ourselves together and get back to doing what we do best: protecting the Earth from anyone who wants to harm it, including Homeworld. Now,” the Gem leader paused her bold, reassuring, and inspiring speech as she gracefully hopped down from the loft, putting on a small, somewhat unreadable smile as she looked up to the group still gathered above and encouraging them to follow. “Let’s get going. We have a transmission to interrupt and certain green Gem’s plans to thwart.”

The warp pad to the Gem communication hub located far off in the distant desert had been destroyed near the beginning of the summer courtesy of Sugilite. This meant that the only way the Gems and the kids could get there was on Lion, which was a pretty cramped ride, even as the pink beast roared a temporal portal there from Gravity Falls. Still, the night air was cool and crisp as they all arrived, Lion quickly plopping down in exhaustion underneath them as they all disembarked from his back. “Lion, are you ok?” Steven asked with concern, giving his faithful pet a comforting pat on the head as he allowed him some rest.

At the same time, Dipper and Mabel let out a simultaneous gasp of awe as they got their first glimpse of the towering communication hub before them, a Gem locale neither of them had been to since they had not been present for the Gems’ previous venture there. “Whoa… this place is amazing!” Dipper exclaimed, already immensely curious about it as he took a step closer. “I can’t believe something like this just… exists in the middle of the desert like this! What’s it for?”

“Well, it used to be used to transmit messages between the Earth and Homeworld…” Pearl began her brief explanation before Amethyst interjected.

“Before we busted it up a few weeks ago, just like we do with all of Homeworld’s old junk they got lying around here,” she remarked, playfully punching her hand and ignoring the white Gem’s exasperated huff.

“Well… it doesn’t look so busted up now…” Mabel noted, glancing back towards the hub.
“No, it doesn’t…” Garnet agreed, looking up to the tall beam of light emitting from the top of the tower up into the clouds above. “It’s as I feared…”

“Peridot must have somehow repaired the communication hub…” Pearl ventured with a frown as she surveyed the haphazard job the green Gem had apparently done. “Well, at least some of it. I suppose we really did underestimate her…”

“So… we just gotta wreck it up again, right?” Steven asked before letting out an excited gasp of recollection as he looked between Garnet and Amethyst. “You guys should form Sugilite!”

At this suggestion, Dipper adamantly shook his head, remembering well the aforementioned fusion’s violent rampage several weeks ago. “Uh, Steven, that might not be the best-”

“Oh my gosh, yes!” Mabel interjected brightly. “I didn’t get to meet Sugilite the last time around and I’ve always wanted to see how super tough and strong she is! Can you guys form her? Please, please please?!”

While Garnet didn’t provide much of a reaction, especially when compared to Pearl’s expression of silent fear, Amethyst smiled awkwardly, stretching casually as she cast a glance over at the Gem leader hopefully. “Er, y-yeah… its up to Garnet, I guess…” she said, a hint of anxiousness in her tone, one that was mingled with a certain amount of eagerness as well. “W-what do you say, G? Shall we mash it up…?”

“No,” Garnet staunchly replied, instantly shutting the purple Gem’s already wavering hopes down before they could even try to grow.

“B-but… don’t we need to be huge like last time?” Amethyst asked, her expression falling as she thought of the practically countless reasons for such a rejection. Reasons that were all rooted in things she had done and mistakes she had made.

“Last time was a disaster,” Garnet said, her tone steady and calm. “Last time we fused, Sugilite went berserk. Its because of her that we can’t even warp here anymore, not to mention how we nearly took out all those manotaurs.” The Gem leader paused, sighing softly as she took her shades off and looked down to the disheartened purple Gem sympathetically. “I can be brash, and you can be reckless. And we can both get carried away. So for the time being,” Garnet put her shades back on, her authority on the matter clear as Amethyst saw her reflection in them. “Sugilite is benched.”

“O-oh… yeah… o-ok…” Amethyst let out a sad sigh of acceptance, averting Garnet’s gaze out of shame as she knew that certainly wasn’t all there was to it. Certainly, the Gem leader wouldn’t say it out loud while the wound was still so fresh, but the purple Gem believed that her foolish, senseless bout of rebellion against the team before that portal just a few short days ago had everything to do with this. A rebellion that she could feel nothing but regret for now that it had all but ruined whatever trust the Gem leader might have once held for her.

“What we need now…” Garnet continued, turning to Pearl, who up until that point, had been standing off to the side in silent observation. “Is to be careful.” While Steven and Mabel let out a shared gasp of excited realization at this, Pearl starkly froze, her eyes wide with surprise and wonder as Garnet placed a hand on her shoulder and offered her a bold grin. “It’s you and me, Pearl. Let’s fuse.”

Upon hearing this offer, tears immediately welled up in the white Gem’s eyes, a huge smile claiming her features, perhaps the first one she had worn since recovering her lost memories. Garnet’s smile faded upon watching Pearl let out a choked, joyous sob, her formerly calm manner completely compromised for happiness and elation she couldn’t hope to contain. “Don’t cry,
Pearl,” the Gem leader advised and the white Gem complied, sucking her tears in as she nodded, her lip still quivering all the while. “Come on, let’s do this.”

“I-I’m right behind you!” Pearl readily exclaimed, hurrying after Garnet as she claimed a wide open space for them to preform their fusion dance in.

“Woo-hoo!” Steven cheered, rushing ahead as well to watch as Mabel quickly followed, joining in his excited chanting. “Fusion! Fusion! Fusion!”

“Huh. You know, its pretty weird that its taken us this long to see Pearl and Garnet fuse,” Dipper noted inquisitively. “What’s their fusion even like?”

“Oh believe me,” Amethyst huffed, crossing her arms as she begrudgingly joined the group. “You’re sure as heck about to find out…”

A bright glow sparked through Garnet’s gemstones as she smirked, putting aside all thoughts of painful memories or frightening revelations as she looked to Pearl with renewed confidence. “I’m ready.”

“H-hang on!” Pearl quipped, hurriedly stretching herself out as she continued buzzing with obvious excitement. “It’s been such a long time…” The white Gem’s smile deepened as he own gemstone began to glow, and with an elegant bow, their fusion dance began. The entire thing was slow and elegant, with both Gems slowly, smoothly strutting towards one another. The group on the sidelines watched as the pair met, Pearl linking her arms with Garnet as she stood in front of her, both of their expressions intimate, seductive almost. And then, in a movement so fluid that it barely even registered, the Gem leader suddenly lifted her partner up as though she weighed nothing at all, tossing her incredibly high up into the air in a daring, deft maneuver. The kids jaws’ collectively dropped as Pearl preformed a midair spin high above them, before spreading herself wide, a smile still bright on her face as gravity began to pull her back down towards Garnet’s outstretched arms. The moment she landed, the bright glow of an oncoming fusion enveloped them both, their combining forms steadily growing in size as they reshaped and united. The white light soon turned into a pale orange sheet, the silhouette of a new being appearing behind it until she broke that curtain of light herself.

“Gooooooooood evening, everybody!” the new fusion bombastically declared as she made her debut. Her appearance was surprising to say the least; like most of the Gems’ fusions, she was tall, roughly about 30 or so feet in height as she stood with an air of elegance and self-importance. Her attire and mannerisms carried an air of natural showmanship to them, with a stately black tailcoat and leotard, dark leggings, and a large, bright orange bowtie. Her skin was a deep shade of vermillion, her short, rounded, somewhat triangular hair pale orange, and the rounded shades covering both sets of her bright, expressive eyes dark pink and transparent in coloration. Aside from an extra pair of eyes, the fusion also sported two pairs of arms, one from her poofed sleeves and the other from her slender torso, each of them bearing a pair of long white gloves. The fusion’s effervescent, toothy grin widened even moreso as she caught sight of her captivated audience, which she didn’t hesitate to saunter forward to cheerfully greet. “This is the lovely Sardonyx, coming to you live from the soon-to-be-former communication hub! How are ya’ll doin’ tonight?”

“Greaaaat…” Amethyst deadpanned, far from fond of Garnet and Pearl’s rather over the top fusion. The kids, on the other hand, were completely awestruck by her, Steven and Mabel in particular as they met her appearance with huge matching grins of excitement. “Giant woman!” the young Gem exclaimed, stars in his eyes as he craned his neck up to look at the massive fusion.

“Oh my stars!” Sardonyx exclaimed, putting three of her large hands down in front of the kids and
silently beckoning them to hop on. While Mabel and Steven readily did so, Dipper was somewhat more hesitant, though even so, he climbed onto one of them before the fusion raised all three of the kids up to her level. “If it isn’t Steven Universe, Dipper Pines, and Mabel Pines, all in the flesh! We finally meet. So, what do you think?” Sardonyx smirked as she spun her torso completely around, the arms connected to it somehow remaining in place as she preformed this surprising illusion. “Was I worth the wait? What am I saying? Of course I was! Ohohohoh!”

The fusion’s excitabale laughter echoed throughout the desert, eliciting similar chuckles from all three of the kids, though Amethyst refused to join in on the merriment from her spot on the ground. “Oh my gosh, Sardonyx, you’re so funny!” Mabel quipped, bouncing up and down on her heels on the fusion’s large palm. “And so stylish too! I love your bow tie!”

“Oh, why, thank you, Mabel darling!” Sardonyx beamed happily, using her free hand to adjust the aforementioned bow. “It really is quite the trendsetter, isn’t it? Then again, I’m really quite the trendsetter in general, so its not that surprising, is it?”

Mabel let out an amused chuckle at this, thoroughly charmed by the fusion’s apt sense of humor. “Nope! I guess its not!” she laughed, Sardonyx briefly joining in before Dipper interjected.

“Hey, so uh…” he began somewhat awkwardly as he caught the fusion’s attention. “Just a quick question: are you guys always so… theatrical when you’re fused?”

“Theatrical! Now there’s a million-dollar word!” Sardonyx exclaimed with a dramatic gasp of amazement. From there, the fusion suddenly caught Dipper off guard by pulling his hat off his head by the brim with just a single finger, playfully grinning back down at him as she spun it casually upon said finger. “And what an absolutely perfect one to refer to someone as showstopping as I am! Of course, I would expect nothing less from someone as well-read as you, Dipper. Excellent observation, as usual!”

“Oh, w-well, uh-” Dipper was interupted as Sardonyx suddenly returned his hat to him, and at this, he couldn’t really hold back something of a bashful grin as the fusion offered him a proud wink of approval. “Heh, thanks.”

“But of course,” Sardonyx chimed as warmly as ever.

“Wow, Sardonyx,” Steven mused, stars still in his eyes as the fusion looked over at him. “You’re so articulate!”

“Well, aren’t you just the sweetest little charmer!” Sardonyx gushed, playfully and gently pinching the young Gem between the fingers of her free hand as he laughed brightly. “I could literally squash you right now. It would not be hard!”

“Ah, n-no!” Steven chuckled, loosely wriggling out of her grip before the fusion pulled all three of the kids a bit closer to her face.

“Sorry,” she laughed herself with a zealous smile. “I’m just so excited to be here! You see, I haven’t exactly been myself lately. Ohohohoh!”

The kids were all quick to understand Sardonyx’s playful quip and join in on her laughter as she gently set them back down on the ground. “Ha! Fusion joke!” Steven chuckled, glancing back over at Amethyst, who simply groaned in aggravation as she averted the fusion’s attention.

Still, Sardonyx hardly payed her any mind anyway as she once again rose to her full, towering height, a coy grin still playing on her features. “And jokes aren’t the only thing I’ve got,” she
began, the gem on her forehead flashing as Pearl’s spear emerged from it. The fusion caught it with one hand, though one of her lower ones tapped her on the shoulder, momentarily ‘distracting’ her. “Hm?” Sardonyx kept her act up as she tossed her spear high into the air, gasping in faux surprise at its disappearance until it came back down towards her. The fusion grinned daringly as Garnet’s gauntlets formed over both her hands, and as the spear approached her, Sardonyx punched her fists together on the lithe weapon, forming an entirely new one altogether: a massive, powerful hammer.

“Whoa…” Dipper mused in amazement at this display as Mabel let out a squeal of elated excitement. “That’s… so cool!”

“Cool is only the tip of the iceberg,” Sardonyx playfully remarked, spinning her hammer as she slung it over her shoulder. “An iceberg that, much like the troublesome hub that stands before us, is about to be completely raised, right along with your expectations.”

“Are you gonna smash stuff with your giant war hammer?” Steven asked the fusion in immense curiosity.

“Hm…” Sardonyx thoughtfully paused. “‘Smash’ is the word one would use to describe what… someone else might do.” Upon hearing this, Amethyst couldn’t help but let out another disgruntled sigh, knowing that this very pointed remark was clearly aimed at both her and the fusion she shared with Garnet. One that couldn’t have been any different from the one that was currently present. “Now,” Sardonyx continued, taking a high, graceful leap into the air, her hammer in tow as she pounced towards the communication hub. “The proper words to describe yours truly are… specific!” The fusion shouted boldly as her hammer swung down on one of the pillars, knocking it out of alignment as she plunged through the gap it had made to tackle another one. “Intelligent!” Her hammer landed once more, taking over several columns at once. “Accurate!” She proved this claim by hitting one of the pillars perfectly before launching herself over the hub. “Faultless!” Sardonyx continued as she took a high leap into the air, a beaming grin upon her face as she sailed through the air in front of the moon. “Elegant…” As more pieces of the hub fell, the fusion continued her list, each descriptive word punctuating another hit of her dependable hammer. “Controlled! Surgical! Graceful! Theatrical,” she flashed a bright grin down at the kids, who all cheered her on in light of this cordial shout-out. Even so, Sardonyx took a grand leap up to the very top of the hub, preforming an impressive flip as she claimed her upmost perch. “Aaaaaand…. Powerful!” She stopped her hammer right before it could land upon the most essential pillar, her manner turning thoughtful once more as she finished her ongoing proclamation. “But yes, occasionally, I am known… to smash.”

With a single, almost gentle tap from the end of the fusion’s hammer, the primary column came crashing down, the light emitting from the hub instantly going dark as Peridot’s message ceased its transmission. The kids’ unanimously applauded Sardonyx’s impressive preformance as the fusion easily landed before them once more, none of them noticing Amethyst’s bitter ongoing pout. “Now, just remember, everybody,” Sardonyx said, spinning her hammer out before it disappeared in a burst of glittering dragonflies. “If you ever have need of the lovely Sardonyx again, just let Pearl and Garnet know. I’ll be there in a flash,” the fusion grinned jokingly once more as she lowered herself down to her audience’s level before taking her leave. “Literally!”

In a burst of light and dragonflies, Sardonyx disappeared, leaving Garnet and Pearl intimately holding each other in her place. In the aftermath of their fusion, the pair of Gems took pause, looking to each other with wide eyes briefly before they both simultaneously exploded into a burst of absolute elation and cheer. Before they even exchanged any words at all, they burst out into a shared gale of warm laughter, especially as Garnet picked Pearl up and easily spun her around in a round of delighted victory. In that moment, after such a round of triumphant fusion and mission execution, thoughts of dark, disturbing, newly-remembered memories couldn’t have been the
furthest thing from either of their minds. The pain and woe of the past several days seemed to have evaporated into nothingness, taken away by the uplifting, exciting experience they had just had the privilege of sharing together. And given that this was the happiest the kids had seen any of the Gems since the portal incident, they were all more than eager to join in on this celebration.

“Woo!” Steven cheered as him, Dipper, and Mabel ran up to the ecstatic pair. “You guys, that was great!”

“Yeah!” Mabel readily agreed. “I always hoped you guys’ fusion would be awesome, but Sardonyx was even more awesome than I could have imagined!”

“O-oh, really?” Pearl smiled with a warm, flustered blush. “Well, that’s good!”

“We were awesome!” Garnet proclaimed with a bold flair, eliciting shared laughter from the others.

“I’d say we were,” the white Gem’s grin widened upon hearing such adulation from the Gem leader herself. “Why don’t we do that more often?”

While the others continued happily praising Sardonyx’s most recent ‘preformance’, no one really noticed as Amethyst intentionally hung back from the group, her arms wrapped tightly around herself as she turned away with a disappointed sigh. She had never really been too fond of the bombastic, prideful fusion to begin with, but in light of recent events, she couldn’t help but feel even more disdain towards her than usual. But really, Amethyst knew that her bitterness didn’t completely lie with Sardonyx; a large portion of it was reserved for herself, for the foolish, reckless, borderline stupid decisions she had made. To go overboard with Garnet during Sugilite’s last appearance, to take Stan’s side over her teams’, to even go as far as to physically oppose them all because of a feeling and little else. A feeling that, in the aftermath of it all, had only brought her perhaps more shame than she had ever even known before.

Shame that seemed to tower over her, just like the showstopping fusion she always seemed to stand in the shadow of.

Given that Crying Breakfast Friends had an effective plethora of episodes, its marathon continued over the course of several days, and to avoid any further possible broadcast interruptions, Steven and Mabel had opted to continue watching it down at the Mystery Shack instead of the temple. In doing so, they managed to rope both Dipper and Stan into joining them, and while they weren’t too keen on watching the bizarrely depressing cartoon, but unfortunately neither of them were able to think of any good excuses to get out of it. So the group congregated in the den, which was still somewhat in shambles from the portal incident and the government invasion a few days prior, to watch the show with varying levels of interest.

“Why won’t you say thank you?!?” Grumpy Pancake wailed somewhat angrily to Glum Glass, who answered in an expectantly mournful manner.

“B-because! I don’t know how!”

“Aww…” Mabel mused with a sympathetic frown. “Poor Pancake! He just wants to feel appreciated for all his hard work!”

“Yeah, but I can see Glass’ point too…” Steven said thoughtfully. “That’s just the thing with this show! All of its characters are so realistic and relatable!”
“You guys do realize you’re talking about a pancake and a cup here… right?” Dipper asked rather sardonically.

“Yeesh, I can’t believe you kids are actually into this sappy show,” Stan remarked just as dryly. “This thing is so far out there that it puts the cartoons that me and Ford used to watch when we were kids about animals beating each other over the heads with mallets to shame.”

“Oh yeah, how is Mr. Ford?” Steven asked, glancing away from the TV with newfound concern. “He seemed like he was really worried about the Gems the other day after they, uh… um… a-after they got their memories back and everything…”

“Pfft,” Stan scoffed, rolling his eyes at the mention of his brother. “Heck if I know. Sixer’s holed himself down in the basement for the past several days, probably working on some sort of nerd project or something. He’s barely even come up here at all and anytime he does he’s all mopey and depressed, acting like I didn’t just rescue him from some sort of nightmare dimension, the ungrateful jerk.”

“Aw, Grunkle Stan, you don’t mean that!” Mabel protested. “You and Grunkle Ford are brothers! You two love each other, just like me and Dipper do!” At this, she startled her brother by wrapping a playful arm around his shoulder, though unlike a few days ago, he didn’t push it away this time.

“…Kid, me and Ford aren’t as… uh… w-well, we used to be… um… ugh… never mind…” the conman let out a sigh of defeat, glancing away from the kids almost remorsefully. And, before any of them could pursue the unsavory manner any further, Stan quickly changed the topic to something a bit more manageable. “Uh, s-so anyway, how are the Gems doing? I heard that whole memory thing was… kinda rough for them.”

“Actually, they seemed mostly ok yesterday,” Dipper pointed out.

“Yeah, we went to the communication hub in the desert and Garnet and Pearl fused into Sardonyx and she took the entire thing out with her huge hammer!” Steven explained with a bright smile. “You should have seen it, Mr. Pines! It was incredible!”

“Sardonyx?” Stan questioned, raising an eyebrow before letting out a huff of a scoff. “That over the top broad? Yeesh, it’s been a while since I’ve heard anything about her.”

“Wait, Grunkle Stan, you’ve met Sardonyx before?” Dipper asked, rather surprised at this.

“No, but I’ve heard plenty about her from Amethyst,” Stan said, rolling his eyes. “Any time Garnet and Pearl turned into her, she would want to vent to me about how pompous and annoying she was. Always seemed to be a sore subject for her if ya ask me, but what the heck do I know about all that Gem drama anyway? Seems like every other day those three are…” The conman suddenly stopped short upon noticing that all three of the kids were looking to him with concerned confusion, prompting him to realize he was treading on rather uncomfortable ground in light of recent events. So once again, Stan diverted away from the matter, even if he did want to discuss it further, just in a different way. “Hey, uh, I-I just remembered, I need to grab something from the kitchen,” he said casually enough as he rose from his chair. “One of you kids wanna lend me a hand?”

“Sure, Grunkle Stan,” Mabel volunteered with a smile. “I’ll-”

“No, not you,” Stan quickly rejected, much to his niece’s confusion. “You,” he snapped his fingers as he pointed at Steven instead. “Come on.”

“Oh, uh, ok,” Steven got up, somewhat confused, though he still followed Stan into the kitchen.
nonetheless. “So, what do you need help with, Mr. Pines?”

Stan paused, taking a beat to briefly glance back at the den, where the twins were still apparently distracted by the TV, before getting to the matter at hand. “I need you to tell me how Amethyst’s really doing,” he said, trying to act as disinterested as possible and coming across as anything but.

“Huh?” Steven frowned, caught off guard by this somewhat strange request.

“Ugh, listen, kid,” Stan began with an exasperated sigh. “Ever since the whole portal thing, Amethyst’s barely said a word to me. I know she’s pi—ticked off with me for keeping all of it a secret from her for all these years and I understand why, but whenever she gets mad at me, she’s usually pretty quick to get over it and move on. But this time is… different.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, she hasn’t even come down here to rant to me about this whole Sardonyx thing!” the conman exclaimed, somewhat frustrated as he began to pace. “I’m usually the first person she comes to to blow off steam with, especially about something like this, or heck, even that memory thing, but she hasn’t and it—it’s just… ugh, forget it!” Stan let out another aggravated groan as he slammed a hand down on the counter hard as he pinched the bridge of his nose, clearly upset.

Steven was silent for a moment upon seeing the conman’s outburst, concern filling his expression as he glanced down thoughtfully before tentatively speaking up. “You’re… worried about her… aren’t you?” Stan didn’t turn around or even offer a verbal response, but the way his shoulders hitched at this question was more than enough to give the young Gem his answer. “Mr. Pines, if you’re really worried about Amethyst, why don’t you just go up to the temple and talk to her yourself?”

“But whatever, it’s fine. I’m sure everything will work out, j-just like it always does…” The conman’s already thin layer of confidence wavered as he turned to head back into the den, a small, defeated sigh escaping him as he spared not another word. After all, what could he really say to explain just how much guilt and regret he had felt ever since that confrontation in the portal room days ago?

However, before he could escape back into the den, Steven hesitantly stopped him. “M-Mr. Pines, wait, I-” The young Gem stopped short, part of him wanting to continue on this tangent concerning Amethyst, though he ended up acting on another part of himself instead. “Y-you… Did you know?”

“Uh… know what?” Stan turned, genuinely confused as he looked back at Steven.

The young Gem paused, faltering as he looked to his feet and remembered the glass tube resting so innocently inside of Lion’s mane, the Gems’ reactions to regaining every painful memory they had lost. He wasn’t sure if he was ready to hear the admittance of the bitter truth from yet another adult he genuinely trusted, but if that truth was there at all, then Steven had to know. “M-my… my mom took the Gems’ memories about Mr. Ford and the portal from them… she hurt them…” he said, his voice so quiet that it was practically a whisper. “I still don’t know why she did it, but… it hurt them. She hurt them… And I… I just was wondering if you ever… knew anything about that…”

Stan was quiet for a moment upon hearing this, his expression softening as he happened to notice the tears starting to well up in Steven’s eyes. For a brief moment, the conman didn’t really know what to say to help ease the young Gem’s obvious pain; so instead, he did the easiest thing he
could: he told the truth. “I… No, I didn’t know,” he said, a hand placed against back of his neck as he glanced to the side. “But… to be honest, it’s… kinda not that surprising to hear. No offense to you, kid, but your mom… she was… shady, to say the least.”

“Tell me about it…” Steven muttered, rubbing his arm as he let out a wavering sigh. “Mr. Pines, I… I think I get it now. Why you never liked my mom that much, I mean. All you wanted to do was save your brother… You never wanted to hurt anyone. But my mom… she hurt so many people… Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl, Mr. Ford… and you.” The tears welling up in the young Gem’s eyes finally reached their tipping point as they finally fell, a tight, pained sob escaping him, one that he had been holding back ever since he had first come across that memory tube. “And… I’m so, so sorry about what she did, Mr. Pines. I know she thought she was doing the right thing, but she wasn’t and no one even knew and Mr. Ford could have died in there, but it was like she didn’t even care and she didn’t even see how much you missed him and wanted him back, and I’m so sorry that she-”

“Whoa, kid, hold on!” Stan interrupted, unable to hide his concern as he unceremoniously knelt down to Steven’s level. “What the heck are you apologizing for?”

“F-for what my mom did…” Steven sniffled, weakly wiping a few tears from his cheek. “For what your mom did…” Stan repeated with a knowing nod, his expression conveying that he understood, at least on some level, what the young Gem was feeling. “Not anything you did. You know, kid—I mean… Steven,” The conman let out a sympathetic sigh as he placed a hand on the morose young Gem’s shoulder. “Your mom was no saint. From what I’ve seen and from what I’ve heard, she screwed up a lot. But I’m not lying when I tell you that nothing that she did was your fault. I don’t blame you for any of this mess, I’m pretty sure the Gems don’t blame you for any of it, and Ford better not blame you for any of it, because if he does, I’ll knock him senseless. Same goes for anyone else who tries to pin any of the nonsense Rose caused on you.”

Steven paused, rather overwhelmed by everything the conman had just said as his tears continued silently falling. “B-but… but Mr. Pines, I-”

“But nothing,” Stan interjected, shaking his head as he tightened his secure, almost comforting grip on the young Gem’s shoulder. “I know what it feels like to carry that kinda blame around, but the difference between you and me when it comes to blame is that I deserve it. You don’t. And you better stop thinking that you do, otherwise I’ll sic Mabel and her aggressive positivity on you.”

Steven was unable to hold back a laugh at this, one that was filled with a type of relief that he hadn’t felt in quite some time. While he wasn’t sure if he was ready to hold onto what the conman had just assured him of, namely the idea that he held no guilt in the mistakes his mother had made, he still wanted to believe that nonetheless. And, perhaps with a little time and a little effort, it was something that he could come to believe. Eventually.

Even so, in light of his newfound happiness, Steven ended up startling Stan by launching himself towards the conman in a sudden, warm embrace. Stan flinched, caught off guard by the burst of affection, though he was even more surprised by what the young Gem said next. “Thanks, Mr. Pines,” Steven whispered, tears drying on his cheek amidst his genuine, gentle smile.

For a moment or two, Stan allowed this unexpected hug to continue, recognizing that the young Gem likely needed this and realizing that in a way, maybe he needed it too after the events of the past several days. Still, the conman had to keep up appearances, hence why he didn’t let this embrace linger for too long, regardless of admittedly how welcome it was. “Alright, alright, that’s enough,” Stan remarked with faux exasperation as he pulled away and stood. “I swear, kid, you’re about as schmaltzy as that soppy cartoon you’re so into.”
Steven let out another small chuckle at this, but before he could, they were interrupted by Dipper and Mabel as they briefly stuck their heads into the kitchen. “Uh, Steven?” Mabel began with an anxious frown. “You might wanna see this.”

Everyone returned to the living room to find a sight that all three of the kids found to be disconcertingly familiar: the TV’s normal signal had cut out, replaced nothing but noisy, blank static. An all-too familiar echo of what had dominated the air waves the previous day. “It’s the signal again!” Steven exclaimed, aptly surprised.

“Peridot must still be trying to get in touch with Homeworld,” Dipper mused with a resolved scowl. “But how’d she manage to fix that communication tower so quickly?”

“Well, one thing’s for certain,” Mabel said with a grown smile. “No matter how many times she puts it back together again, there’s one fusion we can count on to smash it to pieces! Let’s go get the Gems!”

“Yeah!” the boys readily agreed, the three of them starting to head out to go to the temple. However, Steven stopped short near the door, even after the twins had already gone through it, pausing briefly to glance back at Stan. The conman didn’t say anything as he stood near the static-filled TV, his hands on his hips as he watched the kids go. He did, however, spare Steven a bit of a wry, yet reassuring smile and nod, almost as if to solidify the newfound solidarity between them. Solidarity the young Gem couldn’t help but deeply appreciate in light of how almost everything he thought he knew had been so harshly uprooted as of late. Which was why he returned the conman’s smile before going on his way, hoping to hold onto the thought that no real blame rested with him someday.

Even if that day wasn’t quite today.

As soon as the kids made it to the temple and reported the signal’s return to the Gems, they all collectively set out back to the communication hub, knowing that they had to put a stop to Peridot’s plans before they could ever hope to come to fruition. With the hub obviously repaired, there was little deliberation amongst the group (save for a small, relatively unnoticed sigh of disappointment from Amethyst) to bring Sardonyx back to break the tower apart once more.

“I hope you’re ready,” Garnet smirked as she stood apace from Pearl, beckoning her forward as the kids and Amethyst stood on the sidelines to watch once more.

“You know I am,” Pearl grinned as she finished stretching out before emerging into an elegant pirouette, dancing Garnet’s way before they met, just as they had the previous night. And, just like last night, the warm glow of fusion surrounded the pair and from that glow, Sardonyx rose to the occasion once more.

“What’s this?” the bombastic fusion asked with faux surprise upon breaking her curtain of light once again. “An encore performance? Just couldn’t get enough of me, could you?” She smirked down at the group below before breaking out into her iconic uproarious laughter. “Well, what are we waiting for? Let the show begin!” And with this proclamation, Sardonyx boldly leapt into action, her hammer materializing in her hands as she pounced for the tower and got to work tearing it apart. The kids were more than ready to cheer the showstopping fusion on once more, though their excitement was soon broken through as they heard Amethyst’s dejected sigh right behind them. The purple Gem didn’t notice as all three of the kids turned towards her in confusion, her back turned to them as she wrapped her arms tightly around herself. And then, as she looked back
up towards the hub, or more specifically, towards the graceful fusion deftly breaking it to pieces, she did the only thing she really could think of to finally let some of her heavy, ever-accumulating emotions go: she sang.

“Maybe you’re better off with her,” Amethyst began, her melody and manner both sad as she hunched her shoulders away from the tower. “I think she’s better for you.”

This was a truth the purple Gem knew she couldn’t really deny as she looked towards Sardonyx once more, realizing just how level-headed, just how skillful, just how stable the fusion was compared to the wild, rowdy, out of control, Sugilite. Just another bitter reminder for Amethyst that when compared to Pearl or even Garnet, she was always, always the odd one out, the runt of the litter, the mistake.

“I forgot how great it felt to be us,” she continued, closing her eyes as she tried to recall that feeling. That strength, that power, that freedom she felt any time she fused with Garnet. They were all things that she cherished, things that she valued, more than the Gem leader likely even knew. But now, because she had taken them all for granted and had been reckless and foolish, she wasn’t sure when she’d ever get to experience those things again. “Guess I got… carried away…”

“I had to use you to make me feel strong, but I don’t care about that now,” And indeed, she didn’t. Because what had happened with Sugilite was already dead and buried in the past. What wasn’t buried, however, was a slight far worse than the unruly fusion’s outburst. A brash, dangerous choice she had made in the heat of the moment, an act of rebellion so momentous and so uncalled for that she doubted her teammates would ever really forgive her for it. And as far as she was concerned, maybe forgiveness wasn’t something she deserved for her actions before that wretched portal in the first place. “I see a tower built out of my mistakes,” she sang, fighting to hold back tears as she watched Sardonyx dismantle the physical tower rising high before her, wishing that she was strong enough to tear her own shadowy tower apart herself. “And it all comes crashing down…”

“Is there something I can do?” she asked, her hands in tight fists at her sides as she wished she could take it all back. She wished she could undo the past, that she could fix what she had broken, that she could rise above the faults she constantly seemed to be drowning in.

“Is there something I can do?” she sang again, practically begging for something she knew she’d never get. Because when it came right down to it, her actions in that portal room weren’t something she could blame on Stan or Ford or even Rose. They had been solely her own. And of course, that only made the sting of their consequences even worse.

“Is there something I can do?” she pined one more time, knowing that it was hopeless. There was nothing she could do. Nothing to undo her mistakes, nothing to regain her teammate’s trust, nothing to be any more than what she had always known herself to be: a failure.

“Can I make it up to you?” she finished with a solemn sigh of defeat as Sardonyx finished her work, landing before the dimmed tower triumphantly before disappearing in a flash. She turned her back on Garnet and Pearl as they shared a warm, harmonious laugh over their second victory together, a victory that she knew she’d never get to share. No, instead, the only thing she’d get to have was the heavy, suffocating weight of her mistakes, bearing down on her brutally and crushingly, just like they always did.

Or so she thought. For while Amethyst had poured her heart out through song, she failed to notice the trio that had served as her audience rather than Sardonyx’s. And despite how much they enjoyed the dramatic fusions’ theatrics, they all unanimously sympathized with the purple Gem. After all, it was clear from her song and her reactions to Sardonyx alone that she was feeling left
out, excluded from her team to the point that it made her feel devalued and unimportant. In light of everything else that the Gems had gone through lately, that alone made all three of them want to do anything they could to help lift Amethyst’s lowered spirits in the hopes of returning some sense of much-needed normalcy once more. And so, almost as soon as they returned from the communication hub, the kids began to formulate a plan, one that would hopefully serve a twofold purpose: help Amethyst out of her funk and stop Peridot’s plans once and for all, all in one easy, fell swoop.

Night still presided over the vast desert sands as Lion emerged onto them, toting a smaller group of passengers than usual as he leapt out from the portal he had created with a mighty roar. The kids and Amethyst all dismounted the pink beast, the trio stepping forward first to find that the communication hub was still down, just as they had hoped, a sign that their newfound plan might just end up working after all.

“Uh… so are you three gonna tell me why we came here again, or not?” Amethyst asked, her arms crossed as she glared towards the downed tower.

“Well, the way we see it, Peridot seems pretty determined to get that message of hers to Homeworld,” Dipper explained. “After all, she’s already been here to fix the communication hub twice now.”

“Which means the odds are pretty good that she’ll come back a third time when she realizes its all busted up again,” Mabel added with a knowing grin.

“So all we gotta do is wait for her to show up and bam!” Steven slammed his fist into his palm. “That’s when we’ll get her.”

“Oh, yeah!” Amethyst perked up upon hearing this plan, a grin spreading across her face as she also playfully punched her palm. “Bam! She won’t know what hit her.”

“Garnet will be so impressed when she finds out that you caught Peridot all on your own,” Mabel winked to Amethyst, implying that they fully intended on giving the purple Gem all the credit for this group effort.

“And then she’ll think I’m cool again!” Amethyst surmised excitedly, fully understanding the kids’ intent here. “But, uh… are you guys sure you’re up for this? Peridot may be a nerd, but she’s kind of a tricky nerd, if ya haven’t noticed.”

“I think we’ll be just fine,” Dipper smirked as he nodded back to the sword strapped to his back. Likewise, Steven readily summoned his shield while Mabel took out her grappling hook andcocked it, proving to the purple Gem that the trio was more than prepared for anything Peridot threw their way.

“Heh, yeah, should have figured you dorks would come prepared,” Amethyst chuckled, genuinely glad for their help. “Now, let’s catch us a nerd.”

To remain discreet and unseen, the group tucked themselves away behind an outcropping of rock not too far away from the communication hub, one that gave them an ideal vantage point to keep a lookout for any signs of Peridot’s approach. Steven’s telescope made the task a bit easier as they sat and waited, taking shifts of looking out of the spyglass, hoping to catch a glimpse of the green Gem as she snuck through the open desert towards the tower in what would hopefully be a failed
attempt at repairing it.

“Hm… nothing… more nothing…” Steven mused with a frown as he surveyed the desert surrounding the hub. Amethyst and the twins were sitting nearby, their backs against the rock as they waited for any new developments in slight boredom. They were all quick to perk up, however, as the young Gem let out a warning gasp upon finally spotting something through the telescope. “Oh! I think I see her!” he exclaimed, quickly zooming in to get a better look only to find that it was a false alarm. “No wait… that’s just a weird cactus.”

The others all groaned in exasperation at this, but even so, they maintained their vigil, even as the hours of the night seemed to drag on without any hint of an appearance from Peridot whatsoever. Most attempts at conversation had drifted off quite some time ago as they all grew collectively more weary and exhausted by the hour. Even so, at some point roughly after midnight, the ongoing round of sleepy quietness was broken by a loud, tired groan from Mabel.

“Ugh, this is so booooori…” she huffed, crossing her arms as she slouched against the rock. “It feels like we’ve been waiting forever.”

“Its only been a few hours, Mabel,” Dipper remarked, glancing away from the telescope briefly. “Still, I guess this plan isn’t really working like we thought it would…”

“You can say that again,” Amethyst sighed in disappointment. “I don’t think she’s coming, you guys.” The purple Gem paused for a beat, her expression filling with confusion as she glanced over at Steven beside her, only to find that he was oddly focused on his fingers as he moved them close together, but never allowed them to touch. “Uh, what are you doing?”

“I just figured out something really cool,” Steven grinned as he continued his newfound trick. “If you make your eyes blurry, it looks like there’s a little magic sausage between your fingers.”

“Wow…” Mabel mused as she tried it out for herself. “You’re right, Steven! Man, I can’t believe I’ve never tried this before, its great!”

“Pfft, this is stupid,” Amethyst rolled her eyes as she positioned her fingers close together. “It doesn’t even work—whoa…” The purple Gem cut herself off in amazement as Steven pulled the hair covering her other eye away, allowing her to see the aforementioned imaginary “sausage”.

“Heh, well, even if we didn’t catch Peridot, at least I taught us all a fun way to pass the time,” Steven concluded with a satisfied grin.

“Well, maybe we’d have a better chance at finding Peridot if we tried something else,” Dipper said, nowhere near as bemused as Steven, Mabel, and Amethyst currently were. “Like, I don’t know, actually hunting her down and capturing her instead of waiting for her to come to us, which she might not even do?”

“But what if she comes while we’re out looking for her?” Mabel asked with a frown. “Wouldn’t it just be easier to see if she shows up here again?”

“Actually, for once, I’m with Dipper,” Amethyst remarked, flipping her hair back into its usual place over her eye. “The sooner we nab Peridot, the sooner she’ll stop fixing the hub, and the sooner I won’t have to deal with Sardonyx anymore.”

The kids paused for a brief beat at this, exchanging a worried glance as they remembered what Stan had told them concerning the purple Gem’s opinions on the theatrical fusion. Still though, the conman had never mentioned exactly why Amethyst felt that way, hence why Steven was
prompted to figure that out firsthand. “Uh… Amethyst? Why… why don’t you like Sardonyx?”

“Yeah,” Mabel joined in just as curiously. “She’s a lot of fun, and she has a cool hammer, and
she’s-”

“And she’s graceful, and smart, and controlled, and ugh!” Amethyst finished with a groan as she
flopped down into the sand onto her back. “She’s basically everything Sugilite isn’t. Everything
I’m not… No wonder Garnet wanted to fuse with her instead of me… She doesn’t even trust me
anymore, and why would she? I’m nothing but a backstabbing screwup!”

At this, the purple Gem slammed her fist into the rock behind her, her eyes tightly shut in her
remorseful frustration, startling all three of the kids. As Amethyst let out a bitter sigh and placed
her head in her hands, none of them were really sure about what to say to reassure her, mostly since
they were still somewhat confused by this heated outburst in the first place. “A screwup?” Steven
questioned gently. “Amethyst, what are you-”

“I’m talking about what happened with that stupid portal!” Amethyst snapped before the young
Gem could even finish. “How I tried to stop Garnet and Pearl from shutting it down! How I
basically fought them away from it! My friends, my teammates, I just… turned against them all
because I thought it was a good idea to listen to Stan, but it wasn’t! Because now we know, we
remember what that machine was for, what it could have done, who it could have-” The purple
Gem cut herself off sharply, sucking in painful tears before she continued. “I was stupid. Reckless
and stupid, just like I was the last time me and Garnet formed Sugilite, only this time it was with
something even worse. And that’s why she won’t fuse with me anymore… Because I nearly ruined
everything…”

As Amethyst buried her head into her arms and pulled her knees to her chest, she let out a small,
broken sob, one that wasn’t lost on any of the kids as they silently searched for some way to
comfort her. The source of her ongoing bitterness and despair the past few days was now clear, and
it was obvious that it had more to do with just the memories she had recently recalled. Those
painful feelings came from a place of guilt, of remorse so deep and so profound that she obviously
didn’t know how to really reconcile it for herself. Which was why perhaps she needed some help
when it came to doing just that.

“A-Amethyst,” Steven began softly, ready to place a steadying hand on the distraught purple
Gem’s shoulder. “What you did wasn’t-”

“Whoa! Hold on!” Dipper suddenly interjected as he looked through the telescope once more.
“Guys! I think I saw something!”

“Huh?” the others all quickly questioned, rising to stand as they congregated around the telescope.
Upon peering through it, they were able to see a small, distant light gliding across the far off
horizon at an impressive speed as it readily approached the communication hub. And, as Steven
took his turn and zoomed in on this light just a bit, he gasped in surprise upon seeing exactly what
it was.

“P-Peridot’s escape pod?!” the young Gem exclaimed, allowing the others a chance to see. “She…
fixed it somehow?”

“But I thought we had it!” Amethyst protested, knowing that they had apprehended the broken pod
when it had been found by the kids and the teens in the abandoned field several weeks ago.

“You don’t think she could have stolen it from the temple, do you?” Mabel asked fretfully.
“I wouldn’t put it past her…” Dipper muttered scornfully, a hand already on the hilt of his sword as they watched the pod easily scale up the side of the tower.

“Whoa…” Steven whispered upon watching the pod’s tractor beams begin to piece the broken hub back together again. “She’s lifting the pillar guys and she’s fixing the hub.” The young Gem paused as the escape pod did, coming to a stop at the very tip of the hub as an indiscernible figure, presumably Peridot, emerged from it to inspect her handywork. Steven zoomed in once more, trying to get a better look, only to notice that the silhouette standing high above them really didn’t look much like Peridot at all upon a second glance. “Hey, y—you know for some reason, Peridot kinda looks like—” He gasped, his jaw dropping in shock as the figure on top of the hub finally came into clear view, revealing something that sent him absolutely reeling as he relayed it to the others. “Pearl?!”

“What?!” Amethyst and the twins exclaimed in dumbfounded unison, none of them able to believe such an admittedly unbelievable claim.

“Let me see!” the purple Gem was quick to push Steven away from the telescope to look for herself, only to find that sure enough, Pearl herself was standing on top of the hub, a smile of satisfaction on her face from her successful repair of the formerly downed Gem tech. And despite how alarming this unexpected revelation was, Amethyst was very quick to put the pieces together as to exactly what had been going on all along, including the white Gem’s very impressive deception, as well as the no doubt incredibly heavy fall out that would result from it all in the end. “Oh no…”

Needless to say that in light of their discovery the previous evening, Steven, the twins, and Amethyst were all quite unnerved as they sat in front of the TV up at the temple the following morning. The television hadn’t even been turned on, mostly because they all already knew static would inevitably await them as a result of the communication hub’s repair. A repair so strangely yet so discreetly done by Pearl of all people, which was a mystery none of them, save for Amethyst, could really figure out.

“Why would Pearl rebuild the hub?” Steven wondered aloud, voicing what they were all thinking.

“Maybe she’s trying to study how it works?” Dipper theorized, hopeful for the white Gem’s innocence, even if it seemed like she really wasn’t. “T—that way we could come up with a plan to keep Peridot from fixing it again.”

“No…” Amethyst shook her head glumly. “I don’t think that’s it…”

“Maybe she just wanted to get everyone more TV channels,” Mabel suggested with a bit of a forced smile as she turned the TV on, only for, as expected, static to fill the screen once more.

“Oh my! This is no good!” The group gathered on the loft all jolted in surprise as Pearl joined them, putting on an apparent front of surprise as she noted the ongoing static.

“W-what’s wrong?” Steven asked nervously, exchanging an uneasy glance with the others as Pearl readily kept her act up.

“It’s Peridot,” the white Gem surmised instantly. “She must have fixed the communication hub again!” As much as the kids and Amethyst wanted to voice that they knew that this claim was, in fact, far from the truth, they didn’t get that chance as Garnet entered the house, and much to their dismay, Pearl didn’t hesitate to grab her attention. “Garnet, it’s the hub again,” she reported with faux worry. “We’ll have to hurry back to the desert and tear it down once more!”
“Hm, Peridot’s evading my future vision…” Garnet mused with a hint of frustration in her tone, clearly not suspecting anything. “No matter how many times I try, I can’t see us finding her. Oh well,” the Gem leader shook her head clear as she led the way back outside. “Come on, team.”

“Oh, yes! Let’s be on our way!” Pearl sang brightly, a wide, excited smile on her face as she followed Garnet out, more than ready to form Sardonyx with her once more. Amethyst and the kids however, were the last to leave, all four of them bearing the same exact secret that Pearl did. A secret that, they all knew, only had a matter of time before Garnet discovered it. And once she did, there was no telling what might happen.

“I can’t believe Peridot is causing us so much trouble!” Pearl huffed in showy annoyance, though she was quick to perk up once again as her and Garnet prepared to fuse. The communication hub stood tall and repaired once again, just as the white Gem had left it the previous night, and all the while Amethyst and the kids stood by, unsure of what needed to be done to put an end to the white Gem’s bizarre façade. “But it hardly matters, right, Garnet?” Pearl quipped, clasping her hands together happily as the Gem leader gave her a smile of confidence. “We can disable this tower as many times as we need to, together! Okay? Ok. I’m ready! Are you ready?”

As the white Gem continued to cheerfully ramble on, Amethyst wrapped her arms around herself tightly, wishing that Pearl hadn’t conceived this awful plan in the first place. But she had, and the purple Gem knew that remaining silent on the matter would only make her as guilty as her own teammate in all of this. “I know what she’s doing…” Amethyst muttered to the kids, hating that things had come to this even if she understood. Oh, did she ever understand. Because if she had been in the same place as Pearl was, she wasn’t entirely sure if she wouldn’t have done the exact same thing too.

“Y-you do?” Steven glanced over at her, the twins sharing his worry as Garnet and Pearl prepared to fuse behind them. That is, until Amethyst decided to finally put an end to this deceitful charade once and for all.

“Stop!” she shouted, taking a bold step forward and already regretting it the very moment she did. Garnet and Pearl froze at this, clinging onto each other though their dance was stalled as they both looked to their teammate, startled. “I-Is something the matter, Amethyst?” the white Gem asked, clearly caught of guard.

“G-Garnet… I…” Amethyst bit her lip, averting the Gem leader’s gaze out of guilt, though even so, she knew this had to be done. “I know you might not trust me after… w-what happened the other day, but… y-you… you shouldn’t fuse… i-it… it’s not…”

As Amethyst trailed off, the kids quickly leapt in, hoping to explain the matter more than she was currently able to. “Uh… Pearl… we saw you…” Mabel admitted with a hesitant frown.

“W-what?” Pearl asked softly, her eyes wide as she began to follow, though she only really understood as Dipper elaborated.

“Last night,” he began, a bit more firmly than Mabel as he looked to his sword teacher with clear disappointment. “We were out here waiting to see if we could catch Peridot if she came by again but… she didn’t… And instead you did…”

Pearl sucked in a sharp gasp at this, her breathing short as she looked between the group before her
and Garnet, who was still holding onto her, staring at her for answers she couldn’t possibly give.

“Pearl,” Steven spoke up, his tone sad and imploring. “What you’ve been doing… it’s not right. You have to tell Garnet it was you!”

“I don’t understand,” Garnet finally spoke, her shades catching Pearl’s reflection in them as she stared back up at her nervously.

For what seemed like ages, the white Gem said nothing, her form trembling slightly at the horrific realization that she had been caught. That her nearly perfect plan had fallen to pieces right in front of her. Just like everything else as of late, so it seemed. “…I’m sorry…” she began, her voice so soft it could barely even be heard as tears started to well up in her eyes. “It’s just… so much happened these past few days and… after what we learned, I… I felt like… I felt broken… And when we fused it was like… it all just… disappeared… You don’t know how much I needed that, Garnet… It was… so much fun being Sardonyx with you…”

Garnet’s reaction to the truth was immediate. With a harsh gasp of shock, her hands quickly flew away from Pearl, almost as if touching her in light of her trickery had physically burned her. The white Gem quickly righted herself, her eyes still wide and tearful as she looked to the Gem leader standing over her, her eyes still covered by her shades, though her expression was filled with obvious surprise and hurt as she shook her head in disbelief. “That’s why I couldn’t see us finding Peridot…”

“W-wait! Let me explain!” Pearl pleaded, shakily rising to her feet.

“You’ve been fixing the hub!” Garnet snapped, her shock turning into rage as she took an aggressive step towards the startled white Gem.

“It really was Peridot! T-the first time…”

“You tricked me!”

“No, no, no! W-we just needed a reason to fuse!” Pearl tried to rationalize, though now that what she had done was out in the open for everyone to know, she couldn’t help but feel rather terrible for her actions now herself. “All I wanted was to feel… whole again! I just wanted to share a few more victories with you!”

“Those weren’t victories!” Garnet shouted, her hands in tight fists as she seemed to tower over Pearl, her anger fiery and fierce. “I can’t believe you’d lie to me like this, after everything we’ve just discovered! I thought you’d know what it’s like to be deceived like this, Pearl, but clearly you’ve learned nothing! Because as far as I’m concerned, you’re no better that he was!”

Pearl sucked in a shrill gasp at this, her hands flying over her mouth as her tears finally fell at such a vicious proclamation. Upon hearing it, Amethyst acted on a whim, knowing that even despite Garnet’s justifiable anger, even Pearl didn’t deserve to be part of such an awful, unfitting comparison. “W-wait, Garnet!” the purple Gem threw herself in between her quarreling teammates. “You know, we’re so much weaker than you! Fusing with you is like, our one chance to feel… stronger!”

“Don’t defend her!” Garnet yelled harshly, making the purple Gem flinch back in fear at the harshness of her tone. “Peridot is still out there somewhere and Pearl’s been distracting us with… nothing!”

“G-Garnet…” Pearl tearfully tried to interject, only for Garnet to instantly cut her off.
“That’s enough!” Garnet ordered, refusing to hear anymore of the white Gem’s desperate excuses. Despite how clearly furious she was, the Gem leader was still mindful of the task at hand, her outraged glare still apparent as she turned to Amethyst instead. “Amethyst, fuse with me!”

Amethyst balked at this, her eyes wide in surprise at this unexpected invitation—no, rather this demand to fuse with the Gem leader at a time like this. “W-wha… b-but I—”

“How’s just get this over with…” Garnet hissed, her hands still in tight fists as she grabbed the purple Gem’s arm almost roughly. Pearl quickly scurried away from the pair as they preformed a rushed, inelegant fusion dance, one that the white Gem and the kids all watched in apt fear in light of the Gem leader’s still very prevalent fury. In fact, that fury was still incredibly present in Sugilite as she formed, her massive presence far more aggressive and abrasive than it had ever been before as she didn’t even bother summoning her weapon. Instead, the rowdy fusion took the hub down with a single two-fisted punch, one that slammed hard into the tower’s pillars, shattering them in a way that would ensure it would never be repaired by anyone ever again. As the glow from the hub faded and its remains came crashing to the ground, Pearl could only watch with wide eyes of terror as the last strand of comfort and stability she thought she had left in light of how much had already fallen apart come crashing down right in front of her yet again.

And just like the last time, she only had herself to blame.

A feeling of solemn sadness filled the temple the following day, to the point that the overdramatic wails of the characters of Crying Breakfast Friends only seemed to lower Amethyst and the kids’ spirits even more as they sat up in the loft to watch it. None of them were really that invested in the show, however, in light of what had happened the previous day and how rattled it had left them all. Though one scene in particular did seem to ring somewhat true to how things were going in reality as Crying Pear begged Sad Spoon for forgiveness over a wrongdoing.

“Oh please, forgive me!” the pear wailed tearfully.

“Of course, I forgive you!” Sad Spoon cried in response, both of them bawling as they warmly embraced over their repaired relationship.

Amethyst let out a small, sad sigh upon watching this exchange, hoping for something similar between Garnet and Pearl, though nothing of the sort had transpired yet. Because as things were now, the Gem leader was still simmering with unspoken anger towards her teammate, the betrayal clear to read on her face as she warped into the temple. Ironically enough, Pearl also stepped into the house, her expression remorseful, tired, and sad as she approached the temple gate. Her eyes were red from recently shed tears, tears that looked like they were on the verge of returning once more, especially as Garnet passed by her. Neither Gem made eye contact with each other, though Pearl did briefly stop in the middle of the room, almost as if she wanted to say something to Garnet. She didn’t get the chance, however, as the Gem leader walked out the door, not even willing to give her teammate even a single moment of repose. With a soft sigh of disappointment, Pearl’s shoulders drooped as she continued on to the temple gate, disappearing inside of it for what would surely be yet another round of mourning over things she couldn’t change now.

The purple Gem shook her head as she watched this entire exchange, or lack thereof, unfold before her, guilt weighing heavy upon her shoulders as she realized she had yet another regret to add to her ever growing list of them. Perhaps she shouldn’t have said anything to Garnet about Pearl’s deception at all. Maybe things would have been better off if she had just decided to grin and bear it and left it all well enough alone. True, Pearl had lied and tricked Garnet, and based on the
memories they had just reclaimed, it was grave mistake on her part. But still, Amethyst knew that anything would be better than the rift that had torn her team apart at the very worst of times.

“Man, it sure would be nice if things worked out the way they do in cartoons,” Steven spoke up quietly, the twins nodding their silent agreement as they had all noted the very same tension between Garnet and Pearl that Amethyst had.

“Yeah…” the purple Gem sighed morosely as the young Gem turned the TV off. “It would…”

And indeed, it would be better if things could so easily repair themselves like that, or if nothing else go back to the way they were before. Because at least before, amidst the portal opening, amidst Ford returning, amidst their memories being returned to them, the Gems could all lean on each other for some kind of support in their mutual confusion and eventual sorrow. At least they could find solace in the fact that they did not have to suffer alone, that they had solidarity in the unbearable pain they all shared. And perhaps if they had depended on that solidarity to heal them more than searching for their own ways of fixing the unfixable past, maybe none of this would have happened. But it had. Another storm, one just as big and powerful and destructive as the last one, swept through their lives once again, ripping apart some of the last few strands of support holding the Crystal Gems together.

Which meant that once those final strands were inevitably broken, it would only be a matter of time before they fell apart completely.
Chapter 53: Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons

Chapter Summary

In which Dipper, Ford, and Pearl are nerds, arc 6 finally gets a breather chapter, and I roast UF, its readers, and most of all, myself.

Chapter Notes

Ah boy so this one was a long time coming. Sorry for the delay! But anyway, I hope you enjoy my take on D, D, and More D as this one has a lot of fun parts to it. Enjoy! (keyword is Unattainabelle)

QVTA IEV NNE TLAIL, FHBXLL NNE WHZVX,
GHXBR YHETX DSEFY BX MHMVR KYDE VYJAKW
BCG WIY ELY TAFX IA FAJH LYH XBNX
T MWEE EMCP SHR HTL NWJ BFKFY

Though several days had passed since the portal’s opening had effectively raised the Mystery Shack and damaged it’s interior and exterior immensely, the tourist trap was still closed for repairs that were at last nearing their completion. Even so, its continued closure gave the Pines family a good enough excuse to take a day off and spend it however they pleased, which meant that it was being used for some proper rest and relaxation. Things that were more than welcome after the upheaval and drama of the past few days alone.

So Stan, Mabel, and Dipper had taken to hanging around the otherwise unoccupied gift shop, knowing that no business would be coming through it. While Dipper intently read journal 2 and Stan broadly leafed through the newspaper, Mabel lay sprawled on the floor, an empty bag of cheesy snacks by her side and the orange dust of their remains smeared across her face.

“I just ate an entire bag of Cheese Boodles without using my hands!” she announced with a wide, contented grin. “Lazy Tuesday, you are delivering in a big way! Almost makes me forget about all that crazy drama with the portal, and the Gems memories, and Sardonyx, and—” Mabel stopped short as she briefly glanced over at Dipper, who peered over the top of the journal to give her a staunch look of disapproval for even bringing such tension-ridden matters at all. Fortunately enough though, Stan didn’t bother to comment on any of them, despite the look of concern that briefly flashed across his face before he spoke up.

“Heh, yeah,” the conman reclined back in his seat with a casual enough smile. “Its nice to finally have a day where nothing interesting happens whatsoever.”

Of course, no sooner had Stan said this than the vending machine door leading to the portal room in the basement suddenly burst open. Ford boldly stepped out of it amidst the smoke pouring out around him, his manner fierce and resilient as he tried to subdue the small, strange, octopus like creature entangled around his wrist.
“Get down!” the author ordered above the startled gasps of his family members, especially as the creature launched itself off his arm. “Don’t let it taste human flesh!”

The kids were quick to comply, narrowly dodging the bizarre creature as it scurried around the gift shop frantically, angrily hissing all the while. “W-what is it?” Dipper asked as he climbed onto a chair, both alarmed and curious by such a strange sight.

“Can we keep it?” Mabel asked with a genuinely fascinated grin.

“Kill it! Kill it!” Stan shouted, swatting the monster with his newspaper as it skittered past him.

Ford paid none of them much mind as he deftly pursued the creature, electricity sparking from the futuristic gauntlet on his right hand as he finally managed to corner the beast. “Patience… and…” the author muttered, his movements slow and calculated as he made his approach on the still-growling monster. When it finally seemed like the monster was about to make a move, however, Ford countered it first, pouncing at the beast and easily shocking it into submission using his gauntlet. “Gotcha!” he proclaimed with a triumphant grin as he held the monster’s limp, tentacled form up for the others to see. “Haha! Now that I’m back in this dimension, I’ll have to thank Garnet for inspiring the design of the design of my electro-gauntlet. It works even better than I expected it to!”

“Great, now get that thing outta here,” Stan remarked with an impatient scowl as Ford passed him. “It smells like if death could barf.”

“Wait! Great Uncle Ford!” Dipper hurried up to the author with an eager smile, still holding onto journal 2. “Do you need any help with that? I’ve read all about these creatures in your journal and I think I know how to-”

“No!” Ford quickly interrupted, his manner firm but fair as he addressed his nephew. “I’m sorry, Dipper, but the weird, dark road I travel, I’m afraid you cannot follow.” A beat of stark, rather ominous silence followed this, though the author was quick to break it a moment later with an upbeat smile as he retreated back into the basement. “Well, call me for dinner!”

“Oh, maybe next time then?” Dipper offered, though his smile quickly faltered as the vending machine closed up once more, Ford disappearing behind it. “Or not. Or never…”

“Aw, Dipper, don’t take it so hard,” Mabel attempted to comfort her brother by placing a hand on his shoulder, only for Stan to callously interject.

“No, do take it hard!” the conman snapped coldly. “Take it hard and serious. My brother is a dangerous know-it-all, and the stuff he’s messing with is even worse. I’ve been pretty lenient about letting you kids hang around the Gems all summer, but Ford is where I draw the line. Do yourself a favor and stay away from him, ya hear me?”

“But Grunkle Stan,” Dipper protested intently, not about to let himself be deterred from asking Ford his abundance of accumulating questions any longer. “All summer long I’ve wanted to know who the author of the journals was. Now the guy lives in our basement and I can’t even talk to him. How is that fair?”

“Life’s not fair, kid,” Stan remarked, rolling his eyes. “Don’t worry about what’s in the basement. I’d say you saw more than enough of it the other day… Anyway, you belong up here with me and Mabel.”

“Yeah! Besides, this Friday is the epic made-for-TV movie crossover event of the century,” Mabel
smiled brightly as she held up the TV guide ad for said crossover. “Dogcopter Meets Ducktective! Steven’s coming over to watch it with us, we’re all gonna wear our official Dogcopter propeller hats, its gonna be great! It’ll be all the mystery and adventure you’ll need this week!”

“You bet it will be!” Stan remarked, just as eager for the special as his niece was. “For years we’ve been wanting to see that duck and that dog cross paths and now our dreams are finally about to come true! It better live up to our expectations or else I’ll… I, uh… huh. What do kids nowadays do when they wanna complain about something?”

“Usually they just do it online and make long whiny posts about how things didn’t turn out the way they wanted to and why the writers are wrong for not doing things their way,” Mabel noted with a shrug.

“Really? Geez, how pathetic.”

As Stan and Mabel continued commiserating over their excitement about the upcoming crossover, Dipper had all but checked out of the conversation entirely in favor of turning his attention back towards the vending machine. Unknown, but intriguing light sparked through the cracks behind it, no doubt part of whatever mysterious invention or project Ford was likely working on down in the basement below. Whatever was going on on the other side of that door, Dipper couldn’t help but want to be a part of it, or at the very least finally get the chance to finally ask Ford the questions he had been asking all summer. To finally be on the same level with someone who understood just how important and vital it was to ask those questions in the first place. To finally have the opportunity to get perspective on the elusive and exciting mysteries of Gravity Falls from someone who had spent years studying them firsthand and was enthralled by their bizarre uniqueness as much as he was.

And yet… as it stood, he couldn’t. Because just as he had been all summer, the author of the journals, or rather, his very own great uncle, was still so close but so far out of his reach.

Whenever Mabel wrote a letter home to her and Dipper’s parents, she made sure to spare no expense when it came to the finer details of their fantastical, often rather harrowing summer escapades in Gravity Falls. Of course, given Mabel’s infamously active imagination and how bizarre and flowery her accounts of such misadventures usually were, their parents never showed any signs of taking too much stock in believing her stories in their responses. Even so, that didn’t stop her from writing about them all the same, and in her latest letter to them, she had much to tell indeed.

“Dear Mom and Dad,” Mabel began, dictating the letter aloud as she sat on the living room floor to write it out. “We’ve been in Gravity Falls for the few months and so much has happened! Just the other day, gravity reversed itself, almost destroying the whole universe and wrecking the whole town!”

At that moment, Mabel happened to glance up at the TV, which was playing a fitting report on the damage the portal’s opening had caused throughout Gravity Falls as a whole. “Well, they say it was just an earthquake,” Lazy Susan said as she stood outside of Greasy’s Diner as a crane was attempting to set it back into its normal position. “But you know what I think? I think I’m gonna have to start serving pineapple upside-right cake! Haha, am I right? …Am I right?”

As the crane ended up clumsily dropping the diner, the shot cut to Mayor Dewey giving a speech downtown. “Good people of Gravity Falls!” the mayor addressed the crowd before him somewhat
 anxiously. “I-I know that throughout this summer, our fair town here has been plagued by a serious of, er… uh, mishaps. Like this recent mysterious earthquake… or that giant hand-shaped spaceship coming a few weeks ago… or that giant robot ordeal a few weeks before that… or the lake being stolen a few weeks before that… or that scary red eyeball appearing in the sky a few weeks before that…” Dewey paused, a concerned frown crossing his features as a beat of awkward silence passed through the crowd in light of this derailment off topic. “Wait, what was I talking about again?”

As the news report continued, Mabel turned her attention back to her letter, eager to detail the most recent happenings to her parents. “But the coolest part of the summer was when Grunkle Stan’s twin brother came out of this portal-thingy. Now we have two grunkles for the price of one! And they are adorable together!” Upon finishing her letter, Mabel drew a sketch of both Stan and Ford, their expressions surly and grumpy though they were still peacefully holding hands all the same.

“Hi, Mabel!” Steven greeted with a smile as he entered the shack a moment later. “What are you up to?”

“Hiya, Steven! I was just finishing up a letter to my parents about all the stuff that’s been going on around here,” Mabel explained, holding said letter up. “Though at this rate, with so many huge things going on lately, I think its gonna be longer than I anticipated…”

“Yeah, things have been… pretty intense lately…” Steven noted, his smile dissipating as he rubbed his arm and looked to the side. “Garnet and Pearl still haven’t talked to each other after the whole… ya know, Sardonyx thing, and I’m pretty sure none of the Gems are still really over getting their memories back… I just hope that everything will sort itself out and things can finally get back to normal again soon…”

“I’m sure they will,” Mabel reassured with a bright smile, one that was soon accompanied by a newfound rush of warmth in her cheeks as she glanced down at the young Gem’s hand, which happened to be right within her reach as he stood not too far away from her. Really, it would have been so very easy to reach out and take it in an act of solace and comfort given his downcast manner. And perhaps she would have worked up the nerve to do so too… if her brother hadn’t ended up rushing in right before she could get the chance.

“Mabel! Steven!” Dipper exclaimed as he entered the room, carrying a rather large box. “You’ll never guess what I found at the store today!”

“It looks like… a box,” Steven ventured, his small smile returning.

“Dogs!” Mabel exclaimed, forcing herself to perk up. “Dogs with hats!”

“No,” Dipper shook his head, opening the box up only to reveal another, much more decorated box inside of it, which he held up for the pair to see. “It’s my favorite fantasy-talking, level-counting, statistics and graph-paper involving game of all time: Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons! Do you guys wanna play it with me?”

“Well… I do like unicorns,” Mabel noted as she looked over the game’s intricate fantastical box art. “And that hot elf looks promising.”

“Yeah, it looks like it’s a lot of fun, like Sugar Country, or Hint!” Steven chimed in. “How do you play?”

“The rules are super simple,” Dipper assured as he opened the game’s surprisingly large instruction booklet. “First you roll a 38-sided die to determine the level of each player’s statistical analysis
poweroid. These orbs relate directly to the amount of quadrants your team as dominion over, which is inverse to the anti-quadrants in your quadrant satchel.”

A beat of stilted silence passed in the aftermath of this rather daunting explanation as Steven and Mabel exchanged an equally bewildered look, neither of them needing to communicate to each other that they had next to no idea what Dipper was talking about. “Uh… w-well that… that sounds, uh…” Steven’s uncertain stumbling soon devolved into exactly what he really felt. “…I’ll be honest, I have no idea what any of that meant…”

“Ok, ok, so after we do all that confusing stuff,” Mabel interjected with a wave of her hand. “Then so we get to ride unicorns?”

“Yes!” Dipper nodded, much to his sister’s excitement, which dissipated almost immediately after he continued. “And… no. First, we make a graph.”

“Ugh, this is like Homework the Game…” Mabel groaned, any interest she might have had in the game completely gone upon hearing this.

“Oh come on, you guys, its not that bad,” Dipper retorted. “Just try it for a round or two. You never know, you might have fun.”

“Ew, how can you even mention fun in the same sentence as all that gross math you gotta do just to play the dang game?” Mabel asked, sticking her tongue out in disdain.

“Well, I’d try it, Dipper, but I think it’s just a little too… complicated for me,” Steven said with sincerity. “And by complicated I mean I’d probably get a headache just trying to figure out how to set the game up…”

“I think most normal people would, Steven,” Mabel remarked, crossing her arms.

Dipper let out a small huff of aggravation at this slight, but even so, he persisted in trying to convince them. “W-well once you get going, its easy,” he assured, even if that wasn’t exactly the truth. After all, Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons was notorious for taking an extensive amount of time and dedication to learn how to play properly, but as far as Dipper was concerned, neither Steven nor Mabel needed to know that. “Besides, I need at least two people to play, so could one of you just-”

“Oh, would you look at that!” Mabel exclaimed with faux surprise as Soos happened to enter the room, giving her leeway to flee to the other side of the den. “Two people!”

“Well wait, with Steven standing here, doesn’t that technically make three?” Soos asked, unaware of the previously unfolding conversation. “Or are we using some kind of new counting system here that I don’t know about.”

“Uh, no…” Dipper frowned, slightly confused before getting back to the matter at hand. “But anyway, Soos, is there any way you’d be up for a little game of D, D, and More D?”

“Aw, sorry, Dipper,” the handyman said, truthfully apologetic. “But I don’t really go for that pen and paper kind of stuff. I’m more of an FCLORPer.”

“…A what?”

“FCLORP,” Soos reiterated with a proud grin. “Foam and Cardboard Legitimate Outdoor Role Play. It is where a passionate brethren of craftsman bring their dreams to magical reality!”
“Oh, I think I’ve heard of that,” Steven spoke up, intrigued. “Isn’t that where everyone dresses up in cardboard costumes and fights each other with foam swords? Now that sounds like fun!”

“It totally is, dude,” Soos readily agreed. “You should see us when we break the plastic ball pit balls out. That’s when things really get intense!”

“Uh… well, thanks anyway, Soos,” Dipper said, still rather disappointed that he had no one to play with. Or so it seemed, until Stan walked in.

“Say,” the conman began with an already goading smirk as he noticed the game box his nephew was holding. “Is that the game that’s mostly math and writing and isn’t anything like the picture on the box?”

“Yes, it is!” Dipper said with newfound excitement. “You wanna play it with me, Grunkle Stan?”

“Ha, as if!” Stan laughed rather mockingly as he grabbed the rule book. “Look, kid, I prefer to do my dice rolling in Vegas. Besides, only a game designed by nerds would have ‘charisma’ as a fantasy power. Heh, and check this out,” he turned to a random page in the rule book and began reading out loud callously. “When facing yon adversaries, shield thyself under an elfin buttress.”

“Ha!” Mabel chuckled, thoroughly amused. “Say it again!”

“Buttress!” Stan repeated before both him and Mabel broke down into a round of teasing laughter over the game’s rather self-indulgent manner.

“Hey!” Dipper protested petulantly, taking the rule book back amidst his somewhat flustered embarrassment.

“Aww, come on, you guys,” Steven interjected, clearly sympathetic for Dipper, though he still didn’t really get the jist of the game himself. “Just because this game isn’t really for us, doesn’t mean you have to be so mean about it.”

“Yeah, what Steven said,” Dipper staunchly and crossly agreed. “Heck, maybe you guys just aren’t smart enough to understand it.”

“Uh… actually I think that kinda undermined what I was just trying to say…” Steven noted, though both him and Dipper were overpowered by more bemused laughter from Stan and Mabel.

“Heh, sorry, dude,” Soos remarked to Dipper, somewhat caught up in the round of levity himself. “But it is kind of nerdy. Well, I’m off to lay siege to a goblin fortress.” At this, the handyman girded himself with a sloppily made cardboard helmet and sword before boldly running off to begin his FCLORPing quest. “To my grandma’s backyard!”

Since Dipper had been unable to find any human opponents to play Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons with, he decided to resort to the next best thing he could think of. Which was how he ended up setting the game board up outside the shack facing off in a less than exciting round of the game against Gompers the goat.

“Oh nice! You rolled a 17!” Dipper said with something of a forced grin after he himself rolled the die for the goat, who only let out a dull bleat in response. “Aaaand… this is sad. Maybe I should just go back to obsessing over Wendy again…”
Dipper let out something of a defeated sigh as he leaned back away from the board, unable to keep himself from feeling just the slightest bit lonely. True, he had reconciled with Mabel and Steven following the portal incident and they were all once again on even ground with each other, as they should have been. And yet, for whatever reason, he still felt somewhat distanced from the pair, almost as if remnants of that unsavory tension were lingering behind even still. Their unanimous rejection of his invitation to play Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons with him did make sense; after all, Dipper knew just how complicated the game must come across to the outsider looking in. And yet, the fact that neither of them really seemed very interested in learning how to play it, even if for nothing more than his sake, spoke volumes to him about exactly how much support they were willing to give him. It was abundant in times of tribulation, when they all found that they needed to lean on each other to remain standing strong; but in the smaller, quieter moments, that solidarity was, disappointingly enough, nowhere to be found.

As lost in pensive thought as he was, Dipper didn’t even notice that Gompers had gotten ahold of his 38-sided die until the goat attempted to munch down on it, much to his sudden alarm. “Hey! Give that back!” Dipper ordered, attempting to retrieve the die only for Gompers to maintain his surprisingly firm hold on it. “C’mon, Gompers, let go!” With another heavy pull back, the goat finally released the die, only for it to go flinging back past Dipper and roll under the nearby porch instead. “Ugh, seriously?” Dipper muttered to himself in exasperation as he crawled over to retrieve it. However, right after he had slipped under the porch and began reaching around for the die, the loose soil near the base of the house unexpectedly shifted, crumbling apart right underneath him. Before he could even think to catch himself, Dipper suddenly found himself falling through the newly created opening, passing through several beams and cobwebs before roughly hitting the basement floor. While somewhat shaken, fortunately he didn’t seem to be injured as he began to slowly pick himself up and finally reclaim the elusive 32-sided die, which just so happened to be sitting right next to the now-contained monster Ford had defeated in the gift shop earlier. Even so, Dipper made sure to take care in reaching for the die, lest he aggravate the dangerous creature, only to be abruptly halted right before he could reach it.

“Dipper! Stop!”

“G-Great Uncle Ford!” Dipper exclaimed, startled as he spun around to face the author, who looked far from pleased to see his nephew down in his off-limits lab.

“What did I say about coming down here?” Ford admonished, hands on his hips. “My work is far too dangerous for a single living soul to spend even one second—Wait! Is that a 38-sided die from Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons?”

“Oh, yeah…” Dipper frowned, somewhat bewildered as he reclaimed the die and held it up for the author to see. “You know that game?”

Ford briefly smirked at this, his manner turning bold as he began to recite the game’s iconic tagline. “With pen and paper, shield and sword—"

“Our quest shall be our just reward!” Dipper joined in just as excitably before joining his uncle in a bout of bemused laughter.

“This is my favorite game in the whole multiverse!” Ford exclaimed, still grinning brightly. “I can’t believe they still make it!”

“They do! And I’ve been looking all day for someone to play it with me,” Dipper said, though his enthusiasm briefly turned to hesitation out of fear of pressing his luck with the author like he had a few days ago. “But uh, i-if you’re too busy to, I totally understand. In fact, I should probably just—"
“Dipper, my boy,” Ford interjected, placing a hand on his nephew’s shoulder before he could depart. “Do you know what this means? We must stop everything I’ve been working on at once… and play!”

Upon hearing this, Dipper couldn’t hold back a small gasp of excited surprise, knowing that the last person he had expected to gain as a welcome opponent for Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons was the author of the journals himself. However, before the pair could get to playing, the octopus creature suddenly broke free from its containment unit, launching itself at Ford and latching onto his face. The author upheld his chipper smile though as he simply tore the creature off is face, which had received a rather alarming series of burns from the monster’s somewhat toxic touch. “That’s… going to leave a mark.”

Seeing as how Steven was just as big of a fan of both Ducktective and Dogcopter as Mabel and Stan were, he eagerly joined them in preparing for the long-awaited crossover between the two properties the following day. All three of them wanted to make sure that they had the ultimate viewing experience; after all, it wasn’t every day that two such incredibly loved characters and universes came together in such a unique and exciting way.

"Ok, so it looks like we’ve got everything we need to watch the Ducktective/Dogcopter crossover tomorrow,” Mabel said as her and Steven looked over the massive mountain of snacks they had accumulate. “I even made mouth-ramps so we can pour food into our mouths without taking our eyes off the screen!” She showed one of the mouth ramps she had created off, a cardboard box filled to the brim with food with a small ramp stuck onto the side, before readily demonstrating how it worked, which was surprisingly well.

“I brought my Ducktective and Dogcopter collectable figurines down here with me so they can be part of this historic event!” Steven proclaimed as he held the figures up. “Ironically enough, I already had these two sitting next to each other on my shelf, so in a way its kinda like I almost predicted them meeting up for real like this!”

“And I used some spare taxidermied parts to mash the two of them up together the flying mystery solver: Dogtectuckcopter!” Stan proclaimed, holding the rather nightmarish amalgamation of fake duck and fake dog he had created up.

“Whoa! Its like a fusion…” Steven mused in amazement.

“Only a super messed up one!” Mabel laughed, amused. “Dipper would love that!”

“Heh, yeah, where is the little squirt anyway?” Stan asked, briefly glancing around for his apparently missing nephew. “I haven’t seen him all afternoon.”

Completely unbeknownst to the group upstairs, Dipper was merely in the basement below them with Ford, just as he had been ever since he had accidentally fallen down there. Since both of them were very well acquainted with the intricate rules of Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons, they had wasted no time in setting the game up and getting their campaign started. And as was usually the case with the fast-paced high fantasy game, it didn’t take very long for said campaign to build up to the epic (albeit imaginary) intensity it was known for.

“Alright,” Ford began, deftly passing the 38-sided die between his fingers as he laid out the ongoing scenario for his nephew. “You’ve entered the chamber. Princess Unattainabelle beckons you. But wait! It’s a trap! An illusion cast by Probabilitor the Annoying.”
“You know his weakness, right?” Dipper asked with a knowing smirk before they both proclaimed said weakness in unison.

“Prime statistical anomalies over 37 but not exceeding 51!” The pair exclaimed in unison as Dipper rolled the die, fortunately landing on exactly that.

“Aha! Yes!” he cheered brightly as he progressed along in the game past Probabilitor. “Take that, you cardboard wizard!”

“Hm. The old boy looks quite a bit different than he did back in my day,” Ford noted with a nostalgic smile as he looked over the wizard’s in-game artwork.

“Yeah, they change the art every few years,” Dipper said. “Thankfully you missed the period when the creators of the game tried to make it ‘cooler’ by painting everything neon and making the characters rap spells instead of just saying them. It must have been dark times, those 90s.”

“Yeesh,” Ford remarked with a bemused grin as he rolled his eyes. “Sounds like a good time to be stuck between dimensions.”

Upon hearing this, Dipper took pause, his focus on the ongoing game waning somewhat in favor of something he hadn’t really thought much about since him and Ford had begun playing. Something that was admittedly a good deal more important than scouring fake dungeons and defeating fictional wizards. “Great Uncle Ford,” he began evenly enough, hoping that would help him finally answers this time. “I’ve been meaning to ask you… Where were you before you came out of that machine? And… what have you been doing down here these past few days? Are you working on something behind that curtain?” he nodded towards the curtain covering the window that led to the portal’s cavernous chamber, which was now intentionally kept out of sight for whatever reason.

A bout of uneasy hesitation crossed the author’s expression at such pertinent inquiries, and upon that alone, Dipper’s hopes for getting any concrete answers abruptly sank. Of course, they only ended up sinking even further when Ford all but confirmed he had no intentions of giving any. “Dipper, it’s best if you and the family stay away from that subject…” he replied, casting a brief, somewhat worried glance behind him. “Honestly, I’m not sure any of you could handle the real answer.”

For a moment, Dipper wanted to argue that he could handle it. That, based on everything he had been through during the past several months alone, he could understand and comprehend whatever was lying in wait beyond that curtain. That he wasn’t just the naïve, innocent kid that Ford no doubt took him for upon a first glance. But in the end, he knew that arguing the opposite would likely prove exactly that, which was why he decided to pursue an entirely different tangent instead.

“Well… what about the Gems?” he asked, glancing aside. “You guys did use to work together way back when, right? Does that mean you’re gonna let them in on, um… everything?”

Once again, Ford hesitated, his manner clearly remorseful and conflicted even as he answered, despite his relative discomfort with the topic in general. “Under normal circumstances, I… might have, but my current relationship with the Gems is somewhat… uneasy, so to speak,” he explained as eloquently as he could. “It’ll take some time before things between all of us will even remotely resemble how they used to be, especially since Rose is… no longer around. In a way, I suppose that the falling out between us all was my fault…” The author paused, his expression sad as he let out a small sigh before shaking his head to clear it. “B-but even if everything was smooth sailing between myself and the Gems, to my understanding, now really wouldn’t be the best time to bother them with external affairs. I hear they’ve been having plenty of problems all their own lately…”

“Oh yeah…” Dipper agreed with a concerned frown. “Things have been pretty tense between the
Gems ever since they got their memories back, but Pearl lying to Garnet so they could fuse into Sardonyx really didn’t help anything.”

“So that’s what happened,” Ford mused thoughtfully. “To be perfectly honest, I can’t really blame Pearl for going to such… extensive lengths. I can only imagine how losing Rose might have affected her in particular.”

“From the way she always talks about Rose, it seems like the two of them were pretty close,” Dipper noted.

“They were very close,” the author smirked somewhat nostalgically at this. “It’s part of the reason why Pearl didn’t really care for me too much for me when Rose and I first became research partners. That is, until…” Ford trailed off as he glanced down at the gameboard still sitting between them, a small, brief chuckle escaping him before he diverted away from it. “Well, never mind. I’ll save that story for another time. Certainly things between the Gems will work themselves out in the end.”

Though it seemed as though Ford intended on getting back to the game, Dipper didn’t exactly want to leave it at that, especially as he happened to remember something, or rather someone, that he had regretfully not thought too much about since before the portal opened. And now, given that he was sitting right across from the wise author of the journals himself, he figured now was a good a time as any to finally, hopefully, get some help with it. “Uh… speaking of things working out…” he began rather tentatively. “Great Uncle Ford, you’ve studied a lot of Gem stuff, right?”

“But of course,” Ford said with a somewhat proud grin. “The mysteries of Gemkind were always a highlight of my research. In fact, if I had had the time, I would have started a fourth journal completely dedicated to Gem-related topics. And… depending on how things turn out, I might still run with that idea in the future perhaps… hm…”

“Um, yeah, s-so… did you ever figure out a way to, uh… split a really unhealthy, really dangerous fusion up?” Dipper asked anxiously, trying his best to mask how desperate he really was for a ‘yes’ to this longtime question.

Yet a ‘yes’ wasn’t what Ford gave him, at least not right away as he instead looked to his nephew with slight concern. “Why do you ask?”

“W-well…” Dipper began, unsure of how to really explain this story in a way that wouldn’t remind him of how painful it really was. But upon realizing that was nigh impossible, he decided to just get on with it anyway, knowing that if Ford really did hold a solution, then that pain would be more than worth it in the end. “Near the beginning of the summer, Steven, Mabel, and I met this Gem named Lapis Lazuli. We helped her out and then she went away for a while, but when she came back, me and her hung out a lot and… well I guess you could say we became pretty close friends. But then… these two Gems from Homeworld showed up: Peridot and Jasper. They tried to take Steven and the Gems back with them, but we ended up stopping them and crashing their ship near the lake, and it seemed like everything was going to be ok, until…” Dipper trailed, off hesitating as he stared at the ground in front of him as he realized that, even though weeks had passed since that fateful, awful dawn on the lake’s shores, the reality of what had happened there still hadn’t gotten any easier to swallow. “U-until Jasper… forced Lapis to fuse with her so she could take all of us out. So they fused into this huge, powerful monster of a fusion named Malachite, b-but before they could attack us, Lapis took control and dragged them both into the lake, a-and… and she’s been stuck down there ever since. She’s keeping herself trapped down there and fighting Jasper pretty much every second of every day just to keep us safe… to keep me safe…”
Though Ford had been silent for the sake of intently listening to his nephew’s solemn tale up until this point, upon noticing the tears just starting to well up in Dipper’s eyes, he found he could keep quiet no longer. “Dipper…” he began gently, only to be quickly interrupted.

“It’s all my fault…” Dipper muttered, the guilt in his tone palpable as he wiped his eyes dry. “And the worst part of it is, I have no idea how to save her, but I have to. I owe it to her, and even besides that, she doesn’t deserve to be trapped again. And that’s why… I-I was hoping maybe you could maybe help me with that?” he asked, looking to Ford with almost pleading sincerity. “The Gems have been too busy with trying to track Peridot down to do anything about this, b-but if you know how to split a fusion like Malachite up, then we could finally free Lapis!”

Ford’s expression was already full of both sympathy and remorse before he even said anything. And when he speak up on the matter as his nephew eagerly awaited his response, he decided to be completely honest; after all, there was really no point in being anything else on a subject as sensitive as this. “Dipper, I… I’m sorry,” the author began evenly, yet sincerely. “Most of my research concerning Gem fusions tended to focus more on how they were formed and functioned rather than how they fell apart. So… suffice to say my knowledge on the topic is rather… limited, at best.”

“O-oh…” Dipper was unable to hold back a disappointed sigh upon hearing this, knowing that, as usual, he was right back to square one when it came to freeing Lapis from her watery prison. “Ok, I understand… thanks anywa-”

“However,” Ford interjected with a small smile of reassurance. “That doesn’t mean I wouldn’t be willing to figure the solution to such a complicated problem out. After all, I’d like to think that working through the impossible is something I have a certain knack for.”

“So… you’ll help?” Dipper asked, a sense of rising hope filling him.

“Yes,” the author confirmed, his smile widening. “It might not be an easy task, but I promise, I’ll do anything I can to help you rescue her.”

“Oh my gosh! Thank you so much, Great Uncle Ford!” Dipper caught Ford quite off guard with an unexpected hug, one that the author awkwardly returned as he realized just how important this matter apparently was to his nephew. Which was why, for whatever reason, he felt a strong obligation to keep the promise he had just made, no matter how difficult doing so might prove to be. “Oh! Uh, s-sorry!” Dipper exclaimed, clearly flustered as he broke away from the hug.

“Don’t be,” Ford assured with a small laugh. Even so, the author paused for a beat, knowing that while they couldn’t exactly do much to save Lapis at that very moment, there was perhaps something he could do to help raise his nephew’s no doubt still lowered spirits, even if it would be a rather small attempt at best. “You know… while I can’t tell you much about where I’ve been the past 30 years, I can show you something I brought back with me.” The author’s grin turned wry as he reached into a small pouch tied to his belt and fished out a tiny, unassuming black box, which he opened to reveal something quite incredible. Upon a first glance, it seemed to be a many-sided die, the same kind that was often used in Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons, yet this one was quite different in many ways. Firstly, its crystalline surface emitted a faint, almost magical glow, but even more fascinating was the fact that the various cryptic symbols on its many sides seemed to be in a state of continual flux, constantly shifting and changing on their own accord to the point that the same symbol rarely ever appeared twice. “An infinity-sided die,” Ford proclaimed, quite proud of such a rare interdimensional find.

“Whoa…” Dipper gasped, his eyes wide with amazement as he looked to the special game piece. “That’s so cool! And… impossible!”
“These things are outlawed in 9,000 dimensions,” Ford explained, clearly just as excited as his nephew was. “You wanna know why? Look at those symbols. Infinite sides means infinite outcomes. If I rolled it, anything could happen. Our faces could melt into jelly, the world could turn into an egg, or… you could just roll an 8. Who knows? That’s why I have to keep it in this protective cheap plastic case. Now, let’s get back to the game! You’ve got Probabilitor on the ropes, though his power level ranks far above yours. You’d need to be accompanied by a level 19 paladin at least in order to get past him.”

“Ugh, of course,” Dipper groaned in exasperation. “If only we had one more player. That would make this so easy!”

“Hm…. Another player, you say?” the author mused, glancing down to the game board, or more particularly, an image of a knight in the background of its artwork. He had considered this idea earlier, when Dipper had first invited him to play Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons with him, in fact, but the author had put the thought aside for obvious reasons. Though now, after giving it a little more thought and with the opportunity that had just presented itself, perhaps it wouldn’t be such a bad idea after all. “I think I know just the Gem…”

Pearl let out a small, sad sigh as she sat on the living room couch, her hands folded neatly in her lap as she stared down at them solemnly. Only about a day had passed since Garnet had discovered her deception, and as far as the white Gem knew, nothing had changed concerning her leader’s disposition concerning the situation. Or rather, concerning the massive, rather inexcusable mistake she herself had committed against her. A mistake that, despite Pearl’s best efforts, she had been completely unable to distract herself from. Not that she thought she really deserved to have a break from the memory of her wrongdoing anyway; as far as she was concerned, she deserved to carry the oppressive weight of this guilt around with her. After all, it was only fair after she had absolutely betrayed the trust of someone she respected and cared for as much as Garnet.

And so, in light of the unsteady relations between the team and a lack of any pressing missions, Pearl expected that her day would be rather uneventful as a whole. What she hadn’t been expecting, however, was for both Dipper and Ford to suddenly show up at the temple quite out of nowhere.

“Uh, hey, Pearl,” Dipper greeted somewhat tentatively as he entered the temple first.

“Oh, hello, Dipper!” Pearl replied with a warm smile that quickly fell as Ford followed in after him. “And… Stanford… What a surprise…”

“G-greetings, Pearl,” Ford offered a somewhat awkward smile and wave, one that Pearl met rather coldly, as he had honestly been expecting she would. “I simply came by to—I mean, we came by to see if you wanted to… o-or rather, if you had the time to join us in… I mean—”

“We wanted to see if you were up to playing a game with us,” Dipper interjected, getting the point across much more concisely than Ford could in his apparent discomfort in interacting with the white Gem in light of recent events.

“A game?” Pearl tilted her head in confusion as she looked between the pair skeptically. “… What kind of game?”

Ford was quick to properly collect himself at this, a small grin crossing his features as he took a small step forward and presented Pearl with a 38-sided die. “You wouldn’t by chance happen to remember Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons, would you?”
Pearl was unable to contain a gasp of surprise at this, a brief smile of excitement coming along with it, though she was quick to press it away. “I-I… I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she claimed, crossing her arms as she sharply glanced away. “I’ve never even heard of… what was it again? Dungeons—something? W-well, whatever it is, I’m sure its completely ludicrous and not at all engaging or immersive or anything of the like.”

“Oh, but don’t you remember, Pearl?” Ford asked, raising an eyebrow. “30 years ago, you and used to spend many a night embroiled in epic rounds of slaying ogres and challenging each other with labyrinthine dungeons and quadratic equations. I always used to think it was a treasured pastime between the two of us. You know, after you stopped thinking I was competing against you for Rose.”

Upon hearing this lightly teasing jab, Pearl let out an appalled scoff, her cheeks lighting up in a blue blush as she glared away hotly. Dipper on the other hand, was quite surprised to hear this news. “You guys used to play D, D, and More D together?” he asked curiously.

“No!” Pearl exclaimed, though at the very same time, Ford offered his own enthusiastic response.

“All the time!” the author assured brightly.

“Well…” Pearl protested crossly.

“W-well, I certainly don’t remember anything of the sort!” the white Gem protested crossly.

“Perhaps you just haven’t managed to recall those memories yet?” Ford theorized thoughtfully.

“Yeah! Maybe playing the game will end up jogging your memory of it!” Dipper suggested, offering the white Gem a hopeful smile.

“I… don’t think so, Dipper,” Pearl denied gently enough, not wanting to upset her pupil, though it seemed as though she didn’t have the same consideration for the author. “After all, I have much more… important matters to attend to… You can see yourselves out.” And with that, the white Gem abruptly turned on her heel to head towards the temple gate, her arms still folded as she resisted the urge to turn back around, even as Dipper and Ford continued conversing.

“Aw man… how am I gonna get past Probabilitor now?” Dipper asked, clearly disappointed by Pearl’s rejection.

“I’m sure we’ll figure something out,” Ford reassured, placing a hand on his nephew’s shoulder. “Still, it really is a shame… Pearl is one of the best players I’ve ever met. After only a few hours of me explaining the game to her, she had already managed to catch up to me in almost all of her categories. And don’t even get me started on her incredible strategic abilities! One time, we were cornered against four ice dragons with essentially no magic left between either of us, and she managed to beat them back and get us out of that dungeon in only seven rolls! It was spectacular!”

“If I recall correctly…” Pearl suddenly interjected, glancing over her shoulder with a hint of a wry expression on her face. “It was five ice dragons in six rolls… Though of course,” the white Gem turned fully, finally cracking a bit of a sardonic smile. “I could be wrong. After all, my memory might still be a little hazy…”

“Well, regardless of the specifics, your tactics still were always very impressive back in the day,” Ford professed with a fond, genuine smile.

“But of course they were,” the white Gem shrugged, smirking. “After all, I learned such tactics in the uproarious intensity of an actual battlefield thousands of years ago. Applying those strategies to
theoretical monsters and warlocks really isn’t that different when you think about it.”

At this, neither Pearl nor Ford could hold back a shared warm laugh, one that seemed to spark up the playful camaraderie they used to share in the past, one that they now both fully seemed to remember. And upon seeing things starting to repair themselves between the pair, Dipper felt inspired enough to present his initial offer to the white Gem yet again. “So… does this mean you’ll play with us?” he asked, hopeful.

Pearl took pause, hesitating briefly as she remembered that she deserved no such distraction from the mistake she had made against Garnet. Which meant that she didn’t deserve to enjoy herself in a pastime that she now remembered she really did enjoy quite a bit. And yet… upon meeting her young pupil’s expectant glance, she found that it was just about impossible for her to say no. “Oh, alright,” she chuckled softly. “I suppose I can join you two for a little while…”

“Pearl, I think we all know that a ‘little’ while is rarely ever little when it comes to Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons,” Ford remarked rather coyly.

The white Gem let out a genuine laugh at this, rather happy to follow after Dipper and Ford as they lead the way down to the Mystery Shack for what was bound to be an intense afternoon of dungeon spelunking and equation solving. “I can’t argue with you there.”

Sure enough, a little while had turned into an all-day campaign as Dipper, Ford, and Pearl hypothetically set out on their grandiose, mathematical quest. True to the author’s recounting, the white Gem was surprisingly skilled at the game, her recollection of its intricate rules returning to her memory practically the moment she sat down to play it. And with that recollection came a renewed enthusiasm for the playful pastime her and Ford used to share, one that showed itself in every roll of the die and move across the board she made. Seeing as how both Ford and Dipper already had plenty of enthusiasm towards the game themselves even before Pearl had joined them, this made for an air of genuine excitement as they all congregated in the basement lab to carve out their intrepid victory.

“Excellent work, Dipper! You finally managed to defeat that troublesome fire golem!” Pearl proclaimed with a congratulatory grin.

“Yeah,” Dipper said with a slightly exasperated sigh. “Now if only I could have stopped those woodland imps from stealing all my healing potions…”

“Heh, speaking of imps,” Ford remarked, sending Pearl a wry, reminiscent smirk. “That reminds me of the time Amethyst snuck down here and attempted to steal just about every morsel of food I had in the house.”

“Oh, that was a mess,” Pearl chuckled heartily upon hearing the familiar tale. “I remember there was a trail of food leading all the way between here and the temple! No wonder that horrific moth man creature attacked us that night when we were trying to clean it up!”

“A moth man?” Dipper asked, quite intrigued. “Like the one in the journal?”

“The very one,” Ford nodded in confirmation. “It was so dark that we barely even saw him coming until he jumped at me out of nowhere to try and get my lantern.”

“Oh, you should have seen it, Dipper!” Pearl laughed openly. “The bold, brazen ‘author of the journals’, cowered in fear against a tree, crying for mercy against a cloud of moths, of all things. It
“I-in my defense, that ‘cloud of moths’ just so happened to be in the shape of a man, and a very intimidating one at that!” Ford protested, clearly flustered.

“Ah yes, so intimidating that it only took one toss of Rose’s shield to completely dispel it and save you, yet again,” the white Gem remarked, her tone still coy and playful. “Then again, I suppose it wasn’t entirely your fault, Stanford. After all, you were rather danger prone back in those days.”

“Well, if I was, then I suppose I was able to consider myself lucky to have such reliable friends like you, Rose, and the others,” Ford remarked with a warm, genuine smile, one that seemed to carry an underlying layer of unspoken remorse to it as well.

Pearl seemed to mirror this, her own expression somewhat sad and hesitant before shifting into a soft, nostalgic smile, a smile that she didn’t try to chase away this time. “Friends… right…” she muttered, glancing away briefly before quickly perking up and returning her attention back to the game once more. “Now, where were we? Ah yes! Chasing down those pesky imps…”

At this sudden change of gears, Dipper and Ford exchanged a brief glance of confusion, but even so, they were quick to follow Pearl’s lead and get their heads back into the game. After all, from where they stood now, they were bound to have an entire untold adventure ahead of them.

While Mabel knew from over 12 years of firsthand experience that Dipper usually kept rather late hours, most of the time that fact didn’t upset her own normal sleeping routine too much. However, this particular night was an exception to that, as she was finding it just about impossible to fall asleep with her brother intently plotting out his ongoing Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons strategy only a few feet away from her.

“Ok, so if I had a dragon here…” Dipper muttered to himself as he sketched out his plans amidst several pieces of graph paper. “Oh, and then a plus the fire mode over here-”

“Dipper, are you ever going to sleep?” Mabel asked as she rolled over in bed to face him, finally exasperated to the point that she couldn’t keep silent on it any longer. “You’ve been saying dork words for hours…”

“Sorry, Mabel, but I’ve got to finish this dungeon,” Dipper countered, not even bothering to glance up as he continued working. “It’s gonna totally stump Pearl and Great Uncle Ford tomorrow, I can’t wait to see the look on their faces!”

Mabel took pause upon hearing this, her already present frown deepening as she sat up. “You’ve, uh… been spending a lot of time with old Fordsy lately, huh?” she asked, her tone innocently curious enough. She didn’t see much of a reason to mention Pearl in her question, namely because she knew that Dipper already spent a good deal of time with the white Gem through his sword lessons, which meant that this was nothing really new. His recently developed comradery with Ford, on the other hand was. And for whatever reason, Mabel wasn’t quite sure how to feel about it.

“You have no idea,” Dipper said with an enthusiastic smile. “I knew the author must have been cool, but he’s better than I imagined! And… he doesn’t make fun of me like you and Grunkle Stan do.”

“Ha! Give him time!” Mabel teased, though she instantly wished she hadn’t upon seeing her
brother’s expression sour at this remark. “Nah, you got me,” she faked playfulness, though once more Dipper offered her no response. Her own brief smile faded as she lay back down, letting out a small, worried sigh while staring up at the ceiling. True, the painful gap between them torn asunder by the portal had been mostly repaired, but that didn’t mean there weren’t still holes left behind all the same. Holes that she was only now starting to notice and had essentially no idea how to fix. “You got me…”

The Mystery Shack was abuzz with excitement the following day, all in anticipation of the long-awaited, massively hyped-up Ducktective/Dogcopter crossover that was set to air that evening. Steven had already arrived about an hour ago, and in that span of time, him and Mabel had gone through just about every theory and wish they had for the special, both of them more than eager to finally get a chance to see it. It was easy to say that they had sufficiently prepared themselves emotionally and mentally for this grand crossover by the time Grenda arrived to view it with them.

“Thanks for coming over to watch the crossover with us tonight, Grenda,” Mabel smiled as her and Steven greeted the larger girl at the door.

“Of course!” Grenda exclaimed in her usual boisterous way as she held up her Ducktective and Dogcopter flags. “I feel like I’ve been waiting for these two characters to meet my entire life!”

“Same here,” Steven nodded in agreement. “Or, ya know, at least ever since they announced the crossover last month.”

“Hey hey, look at you!” Mabel smirked as she noticed Stan coming downstairs, wearing his finest suit and tie. “Someone’s all dressed up.”

“It’s a big night,” Stan remarked as he adjusted his tie. “I never thought I’d live to see the day where a dog with a propeller on its back meets a duck who solves murder mysteries for a living. It really is a wonderful time to be alive.”

No sooner had the conman finished speaking than the alarm on Steven’s phone suddenly went off, eliciting an excited gasp from everyone. “It’s time!” the young Gem announced happily.

“Viewing positions, everyone!” Mabel ordered, pointing to the living room as they all began making a mad dash towards it. However, the entire group stopped short just as they passed into its threshold, surprise and disappointment hitting all of them as they caught sight of the graph paper and extensive notes regarding Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons strewn about all over the room. And, sitting in the very center of the den, Dipper, Ford, and Pearl were all completely engrossed in their ongoing game, all three of them clearly having a fun time as they were all but oblivious to the group that had just walked in on them.

“Ah! Graph paper! Kill it!” Grenda shouted, furiously stomping on the nearest piece of it.

“Uh… what’s going on in here?” Steven asked, much more calmly. “And wait, Pearl? What are you doing here?”

“Oh, you know…” Pearl began, sending her young ward a casual smile. “Just completely *decimating* these two in a duel for the mystical forbidden treasure of old.”

“Not for long, you won’t,” Dipper challenged brazenly as he rolled the die, though Mabel interrupted before the game could go any further.
“Uh, Dipper? Could you guys maybe move this to another room?” she asked, only thinly veiling her annoyance.

“No dice!” Ford said. “We ran out of room in the basement and we’re going for a world record. Now… dice!” And with that, the author rolled, landing exactly the number he had been hoping for to advance. “Ha! 32, yes! 7,000 points damage!”

“Oh man! You got me!” Dipper laughed, accepting this setback gracefully.

“Hm… lucky roll…” Pearl mused, offering Ford a coy grin of defeat.

“Ugh, why? Why with this?” Stan groaned, not bothering to hide his aggravation with the trio as he sent Ford and Pearl an irritated glare in particular. “You two wanna break some records? You’ve already broken two for world’s nerdiest old man and world’s nerdiest… rock person?”

“Ugh… why am I not surprised that you don’t understand, Stan?” Pearl crossed her arms.

“Amethyst used to crack her sarcastic little remarks about myself and Ford back in the day when we used to play this game together, just like you are now. You and her really are two of a kind.”

“Yeah, I can’t say I really blame her,” Stan retorted just as dryly, though he did briefly glance away at the remembrance of how much things had soured between him and Amethyst recently. “It’s not like you two don’t have it coming.”

“Hey, at least we’re not all keyed up to watch some kid’s show,” Ford countered, meeting his brother’s unimpressed expression evenly.

“Hey! I’ll have you know that this Ductective/Dogcopter crossover is gonna be legendary!” Stan snapped defensively. “People will be talking about how hilarious and tragic it is for decades! Or at least for a week or something.”

“I don’t get a lot of either of them, but I like animals in human situations,” Grenda pointed out.

“Plus, the music is really good,” Steven added. “And don’t even get me started on those crazy plot twists in both shows! They have so much in common, its like they were made to be together!”


Stan complied, letting out an exasperated huff as he reached to remove the graph paper covering the television, only for Ford to intercept him by suddenly grabbing his wrist to stop him. “Move that and pay the price,” the author warned, his tone surprisingly grave. Startled, Stan took pause for a moment, only to instantly regain his previously sardonic attitude.

“Oh what? Fifty magical elf dollars?” the conman deadpanned, rolling his eyes.

“Don’t mock our fantastical monetary system!” Ford snapped fiercely.

“Honestly, Stan, you’re just being childish about this whole thing!” Pearl said just as sharply.

“Yeah, I’m the one being childish, not you guys and your game about knights and fairy princesses and unicorns,” the conman remarked coldly. “And you know what? I’ll mock it all I want; it’s my TV room.”

“It’s my house!” the author argued, clearly angry by this point. However, he did make something of an attempt to calm down by letting out an evening sigh as he relinquished his brother’s hand and instead pulled his bag of many-sided die out instead. “Listen, Stanley, did it ever occur to you that
if you joined us, you might have fun?”

“What?” Stan scoffed, clearly caught off guard by this offer. Despite his brief surprise regarding it however, he was quick to reject it, refusing to let his brother have his way, which, as far as he was concerned, always seemed to be the case. “Now you listen to me!” the conman began, snatching the bag right out of the author’s hand. The bag that, as both Ford and Dipper knew, contained something potentially very dangerous inside. “As long as I live I will never—”

“G-Grunkle Stan!” Dipper attempted to warn, though by this point Stan was far too incensed to really listen.

“Ever—”

“Stanley! Don’t!” Ford gasped in alarm as he saw the conman raise the bag up high.

“Play your smartypants nerd game!” Stan finished his harsh proclamation by throwing the bag down onto the ground hard. Unfortunately, out of it rolled a plastic black box, and out of that rolled a glowing die with ever-changing sides.

The infinity-sided die.

For a single, anxious moment, the die was still in motion as it rolled across the carpeted floor, but once it finally came to a stop, it did so on a symbol that had only just appeared: the outline of a powerful wizard. And, just as Ford had said would happen, the die’s power instantly brought its outcome to life. In a flash of blinding light, four mystical figures materialized right out of the box art of Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons, brought to life and to reality in front of the shocked group who could do nothing more than watch as this impossibility unfolded right before their eyes. The assemblage of characters consisted of a massive golden griffon, a lumbering, bulky ogre, a attractive, bow-wielding elf, and finally, a cackling, bearded magician, clearly the leader of the crew as he spoke up first.

“Mortals of dimension 514÷Y! Kneel before me and—” the wizard interrupted himself to roll his own die to see what threat he should dole out. “Snivel! I am Probabilitor! The greatest wizard in all of mathology! Give or take an error of 0.4.”

“Eh? Is this… normal?” Stan asked, aptly confused.

“Probabilitor?” Pearl also questioned, bewildered in a different way. “As in the one from the game? How is this even possible? Stanford, what did that die of yours do?!”

“That’s a… long story that there may or may not be time to explain all the details of later,” Ford said, his manner stiff and defensive as he kept a hand tucked away inside his trench coat. Just in case.

“Uh, are you here to send us on the quest of a lifetime because we’re the smartest players you’ve ever met?” Dipper asked the intruding wizard, hoping that his intentions weren’t as sinister as his sudden appearance came across.

“You are the smartest players I’ve ever met!” Probabilitor acknowledged with a sinister grin. “That’s why I’m going to eat your brains to gain your intelligence! Its what I do.”

“It’s his thing,” the wizard’s ogre companion added pointedly.

As everyone reacted to this news with alarmed surprise, Probabilitor took advantage of the moment as he ordered his mythical cohorts into action. “By the power of math, seize them!”
“Your math is no match for me gun, you idiot!” Ford retorted, finally pulling out the powerful laser gun he kept tucked away inside his coat. The author readily took aim, paying no mind to Pearl as she summoned her spear beside him or Dipper as he discreetly slipped away to retrieve something, fortunately without the wizard taking notice.

“Math ray!” Probabilitor shouted, a burst of mathematical power shooting out from his staff. The blast was more than enough to knock the gun clean out of Ford’s hands, leaving him essentially defenseless and opening things up for Pearl to take charge.

“Looks like I have to come to your rescue yet again, Stanford,” the white Gem remarked confidently as she rushed forward. She swung her spear widely, aiming for Probabilitor, though before her strike could land, Pearl suddenly found herself heavily pushed to the ground and pinned there by the griffon and its large, sharp talons. Her spear fell out of her hand and disappeared in its usual burst of sparkles, and with her arms as restrained as they were, summoning another one was nigh impossible.

“You were saying?” Ford remarked much more harshly than he had intended to, though given the circumstances, such stress was reasonable enough.

However, before either the author, the white Gem, or anyone else for that matter could try to thwart Probabilitor’s intentions, Dipper suddenly dashed forward seemingly out of nowhere, the Ancient Sea Blade tight in his grip. Ford in particular was rather startled to see his young nephew not only wielding such a weapon, but to see him running headfirst into obvious danger with a fearless battle cry. Unfortunately, much like Pearl, Dipper’s valiant attempt to cut the hostile wizard was ultimately put to a swift end as Probabilitor lashed out, a burst of his mysterious, dangerous magic spiraling right towards the sword-wielding boy.

“Dipper!” Mabel cried fearfully, though luckily, her brother reacted accordingly. At just the right moment, Dipper twisted his sword in front of him, pulling off a rather risky block that only worked to partially protect him. The Ancient Sea Blade took the brunt of the hit as Dipper was knocked back, and in practically an instant, the wizard’s magic destroyed the elegant sword, causing it to explode in an array of sparkles and mathematical symbols until nothing was left of it at all.

“Enough of this!” Probabilitor exclaimed hotly, pointing his staff in a commanding gesture as the griffon spread its wings and quickly worked to gather Pearl, Ford, and Dipper in its talons. “I’m not here to play games!” With this, the wizard sent another blast of magic out, this one towards the nearest wall of the shack, which he easily blew a massive hole into. With an insane cackle, Probabilitor flew out through the hole, his band of companions following right behind with their captive trio in tow. “Now to the forest, for the ultimate game!”

“Oh no! Dipper! Pearl! Mr. Ford!” Steven cried worriedly as he rushed up to the hole along with Mabel as they both watched in dismay as they all disappeared into the forest, out of sight and out of reach.

“So…” Grenda spoke up after a beat of worried silence. “The room’s free now. Who wants to watch Ducktective and Dogcopter?” Another moment passed, this one much more awkward as Steven and Mabel looked to her in appalled disbelief at such a callous suggestion. “Nobody? Oh well! More couch for Grenda!”

“Oh, this is really bad,” Mabel said, both her tone and expression very fretful. “That crazy wizard is gonna eat Dipper and Ford’s brains! And… Pearl’s? I think? Isn’t that technically her gem?”

“W-we have to save them!” Steven interjected with a much more pertinent concern.
“Eh, maybe let ‘em get a couple of bites in Ford’s brain first,” Stan remarked, leaning against the side of the hole casually. “Even things out smart-wise.”

“Grunkle Stan!” Mabel scolded, nowhere near as accepting of this alarming kidnapping as he seemed to be.

“Alright, alright,” the conman quickly folded upon meeting his niece’s troubled manner. “I guess if we have no other choice, we’ll go on a… ugh, epic wizard quest.”

“Yay!” the trio of kids exclaimed in unified excitement, all more than ready for such a harrowing adventure if it meant saving their family and friends.

“Now before we hit the road, everyone grab a weapon,” Stan said, still far from enthused from having to go on this journey. After all, he wasn’t particularly excited about having to rescue Ford again, only to no doubt be denied proper thanks once more.

Everyone easily found whatever they had on hand to use as a weapon in their quest. Steven already had one on hand in his shield, as did Stan as he pulled out the baseball bat he kept tucked away in the porch couch’s cushions. On impulse, Mabel grabbed a rake, though Grenda was by far the most heavily equipped as she hoisted a recliner up, more than ready to use it as a weapon if needed.

“We’re coming for you, Dipper!” Mabel boldly proclaimed as everyone prepared to set off on their daring, magical rescue mission. “And Grunkle Ford! And Pearl! And possibly that hot elf, if he’s got anything to do with this.”

“Let’s go!” Steven exclaimed, leading the way as they all rushed headlong into the forest, unsure of what they’d encounter on their journey, but ready to face it all the same.

Probabilitor and his companions had wasted no time at all in setting up a camp deep in the magical forests of Gravity Falls. While the elf and the griffon stood guard in the event of any unwanted intruders, the wizard took the time to taunt his three captives, all of whom were attempting to struggle out of the rather tight bonds that kept them restrained to the large tree in the middle of the clearing.

“With each brain I eat, I shall increase my enchantelligence!” Probabilitor chortled as he used a magical tape measurer to get a count on Ford, Dipper, and Pearl’s heads.

“If my hands were free, I’d break every part of your face!” the author threatened fiercely.

“Not if I get to it first!” Pearl added just as sharply as she sent the wizard a cold glare.

“Squabble all you want,” Probabilitor chuckled darkly. “Either way, the time has come! Hot elf! Ready the brain-cooking pot!”

The elf let out an exasperated sigh, flipping his hood off to reveal his luminous silver hair. “Yes, Probabilitor,” he groaned, rolling his eyes as he took aim at the nearby caldron and ignited it with a flaming arrow.

“Haha! According to my calculations, your brains shall be a delicious part of my balanced wizard breakfast,” the wizard concluded to his captives with a triumphant smirk. “Or lunch. Or dinner. Or whatever mealtime it currently is.”
“Hmph, then clearly it seems that you’ve *miscalculated,*” Pearl retorted, turning her nose up haughtily. “Even if your ridiculous plan succeeded, you’d only have *two* brains to snack on anyway since I’m a Gem. Which means, I don’t *have* a brain.” A beat of curious silence passed at this as both Ford and Dipper sent Pearl questioning looks before she realized what she had just said. “Wait… I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Oh believe me, I’m *well* aware of your relative brainlessness,” Probabilitor remarked with a knowing grin.

“Again, *not* what I meant!”

“Which is why I plan on grinding up that pretty little gemstone of yours into the perfect seasoning for brains *à la carte!*” the wizard finished before breaking down into yet another round of wild laughter.

“Well that’s… dark,” Dipper noted exchanging a concerned look with Pearl.

“You know, I’d almost rather be back at the temple, moping about how upset Garnet is with me…” the white Gem groaned, slumping against the ropes restraining her to the tree. That is, until she remembered just how unbearably tense things actually were between her and the Gem leader in light of what she had done. “Then again… maybe not…”

Though the mystical forest was quite dense, Mabel, Steven, Stan, and Grenda didn’t have a particularly hard time finding their way through it, mostly since they were easily able to follow the trail of griffon feathers that had unintentionally been left behind. So far, the group hadn’t encountered any obstacles or threats along the way, but even so, they were all still on high alert in the event that they did, their makeshift weapons at the ready to defend themselves from any dangers Probabilitor might put in their path.

“We must be getting close,” Stan noted, flinching as he slapped a past on his back. “These fairy bites are getting more frequent.”

“H-hey! Look! Listen!” the now squished fairy cried in pain as she lay crushed against the conman’s shoulder in a pile of glitter.

“I hope we’re not too late,” Steven said fretfully. “I’m not really sure how I’d be able to go back to the temple and explain to Garnet and Amethyst that Pearl got eaten by a crazy board game wizard. A lot of bad things have been happening lately, but I have a feeling that would probably take the cake…”

“Halt!” The group came to an abrupt stop as the massive, threatening ogre suddenly emerged from the nearby greenery, stomping down in front of them and barring the path ahead. “Yon interlopers are trespassing on the ancient forest of Probabilitor the wizard! If ye wish to pass, first, ye must complete seven unworldly quests, each more difficult than the-”

“NO!” Grenda suddenly shouted, brutally hitting the unsuspecting ogre with her heavy chair. The monster fell to the ground with a mighty thud, easily defeated and apparently unconscious, though based on his lack of breathing, he could have possibly been worse off than that.

“Is he… dead?” Mabel asked, poking the downed ogre with her rake.

“He’s magic, sweetie, I’m sure he’s fine,” Stan assured casually enough before turning to Grenda
with a serious whisper. “There are no cops in the forest, we take this to our graves.”

Grenda nodded in agreement with this resolve, but even so, Steven and Mabel pressed onward, still clearly worried about their primary mission. “Well… I guess that’s one way to clear a path,” the young Gem noted as they passed by the supposedly unconscious ogre. “Maybe not the best way, but still, a way.”

It was clear from the increasing frequency of Probabilitor’s manic chuckles that his preparations for cooking his captives’ brains were nearly complete. Unfortunately though, despite their skill in Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons, Dipper, Ford, and Pearl had yet to think of a way out of their very real plight, one that could very well cost them all their lives if they didn’t escape from it soon.

“W-what do we do? What do we do?!” Dipper asked in a sharp, panicked whisper, hating how relatively defenseless all three of them were in this situation.

“Stop thinking, Dipper!” Ford retorted, trying to be as calm as possible, something that Pearl also tried to maintain, despite her own dread in this tight spot. “The more wrinkly your brain gets, the more he’ll want to eat it!”

“And now, a little math problem,” Probabilitor said as he stepped up to his trio of captives, a hungry grin claiming his face. “When I subtract your brains from your skulls,” he began, tapping both Dipper and Ford’s heads with his staff. “Add salt,” he lightly poked Pearl’s gemstone at this, causing the white Gem to cringe from the unexpected vibration. “And divide your families, what’s the remainder?”

“Your butt!”

“What?” the wizard asked, startled as he turned to face this unexpected voice. “My butt isn’t part of this particular equation!”

“And neither are we!” Mabel boldly proclaimed as her, Steven, Stan, and Grenda suddenly jumped out of the bushes, all of them still wielding their makeshift weapons brazenly.

“But here we are!” Steven chimed in before waving to the trio tied to the tree. “Hi, Dipper! Hi, Pearl! Hi, Mr. Ford!”

“Well, at least someone came to rescue us…” Pearl noted, though her tone alone conveyed her uncertainty about the group’s effectiveness in actually saving them.

“Drat! How did you get past my one guard?!” Probabilitor scowled, gripping his staff tightly. “Very well… There is one way you can save your family. You must defeat me in Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons: Real Life Edition!”

With a wild cackle, the wizard raised his staff, magic pouring out of it as a large, ornate game board, one that floated just a few feet off the ground just as Probabilitor himself had begun to.

“What? Oh come on!” Stan groaned, knowing that him trying to avoid having to play the complicated, rather boring game was what started this mess in the first place.

“I choose my characters…” Probabilitor continued, snapping his fingers to create three miniaturized, identical ogres on the game board. “Vs… yours!” Upon another burst of
mathematical magic, the wizard pointed to his trio of captives, all of whom disappeared from their spot against the tree as he did. They reappeared an instant later, shrunken down themselves as they stood upon Probabilitor’s outstretched palm, unanimously startled by this unexpected shift. However, their size hadn’t been the only thing to change; each of them was now clad in the archaic attire befitting Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons characters, with Dipper and Ford both dressed in earthy adventuring clothes while Pearl had received something of a sparse knight’s armor.

“Ah! My ears! They’re so pointy!” Ford exclaimed, flicking his now elfish ears.

“T-there better be something protective under this tunic,” Dipper remarked before briefly turning around to check. “Oh no, there isn’t!”

“I don’t know what you two are complaining about,” Pearl smirked as she looked over the crimson cape her armor came equipped with. “I could get used to this…”

“Aw, you guys look so adorable!” Steven gasped with delight upon seeing the tiny trio.

“I know, right?” Mabel agreed just as brightly. “Makes me wish I had me camera on me to get a pic of how cute you guys are in your little fantasy outfits!”

“Ok, seriously, you guys, now is not the time!” Dipper scolded, sending a petulant look up at them.

“I’m with the kid, can’t we just arm wrestle or something?” Stan asked, far from enthused.

“Come on, this game is a lot of fun!” Probabilitor urged. “I even had my mom pack me a lunch,” he continued, pulling some apple slices out of his paper bag lunch. “Ew, apple slices? I’ll eat you last.”

“Ugh, just make with the rules already, ugly,” the conman rolled his eyes as him, Mabel, and Steven took a seat on the other side of the game board.

“The game is a battle royale,” the wizard began to explain. “We help out characters by casting spells determined by rolls of the dice. If you win, I’ll go back to my own dimension.”

“Hooray!” Steven and Mabel chimed in unison, hoping for such a peaceful outcome.

“But if I win, I eat their brains/gem!” Probabilitor grinned as he let Dipper, Ford, and Pearl down into the game board itself.

“Well,” Pearl remarked, crossing her arms. “That certainly seems like a risky gamble that only an absolute fool would-”

“Deal!” Stan exclaimed daringly.

“Oh boy…” Dipper sighed as Ford and Pearl shook their heads, all three of them quite concerned about their fate in what would no doubt be a dangerous game.

“Then let the game… BEGIN!” Probabilitor proclaimed, raising his hand before bringing it down and letting his dice roll out of it. The wizard landed a 13, giving him the perfect opportunity to dole out his first move. “Attack!” he ordered his trio of ogres as large, spiked clubs appeared in each of their hands. The creatures rushed towards Dipper, Ford, and Pearl, more than happy to swing their weapons at the group as they narrowly managed to dodge the heavy strikes.

“Oh come on!” Pearl exclaimed in severe annoyance as she tried to summon her spear, only for
nothing to emerge from her Gem as a result of Probabilitor’s spell. “As if this entire thing couldn’t get any more aggravating!”

“Oh no!” Steven exclaimed worriedly as he watched this chaos unfold across the game board. “We have to help them!”

“W-what do we do? What are our moves?” Stan asked just as frantically.

“There are no moves!” Dipper shouted up to them as he barely managed to jump out of the way of one of the ogre’s bats. “You make them up!”

“What? Really?” the conman asked, surprised.

“But wait, isn’t this game super complicated?” Mabel asked, just as confused.

“No!” Pearl informed as though it was obvious. “Dungeons, Dungeons, and More Dungeons is actually quite simple once you get the hang of it!”

“That’s what I tried to tell you!” Ford added just as intently. “This game involves math, yes, but also risk, enthusiasm, and imagination!”

“Risk?” Stan asked as a smile slowly started to spread across his face.

“Enthusiasm?!” Steven asked, already quite pumped up.

“Imagination?” Mabel finished with a cheerful gasp. “Grunkle Stan, make something up! It’s just like lying!”

“Uh, then I cast, um… shield of… shielding?” Stan ventured, rolling the die and miraculously getting a 14. It was just enough to counter Probabilitor’s roll, and as such, a large, magical shield materialized in front of Dipper, Pearl, and Ford. The ogres’ clubs bounced cleanly off its sturdy surface as the trio crowded behind it, fully protected from any and all harm. “Ha! We’re doing it!”

That triumph was short lived, however, as Probabilitor quickly made his next roll to cancel Stan’s out. “Shield of shielding reversal spell!” he shouted, and just like that, the magical shield disappeared into thin air, leaving the trio defenseless yet again. They scattered as one of the ogres brought his club down, but fortunately, Steven wasn’t about to leave them unprotected for long.

“I cast, uh… Crazy Fast Lightning Roller Skates!” the young Gem exclaimed, coming up with something off the top of his head as he rolled. Almost as soon as he did, Dipper, Pearl, and Ford all received their own pairs of electrically charged skates, ones that instantly propelled them forward at lighting-fast speeds. The skates were more than enough to get them past the slow, lumbering ogres and their bulky weapons, giving them ample space to prepare themselves to go on the offence as opposed to defense.

“Hot Flamey Sword!” Mabel proclaimed as sharp, fiery swords materialized in the trio’s hands. “Super Hot Flamey Sword!” she added a moment later, and each of the blades extended and the flames surrounding them grew even hotter and brighter.

As the swords solidified themselves, the trio skidded to a stop, their electrified skates still at the ready to send them zooming forward once more. The ogres charged towards them, their expressions fierce as they raised their clubs once again, ready to attack. Only this time, their assault would not go encountered.
“Dipper, stay behind me and Pearl!” Ford ordered his nephew, concerned for his safety amidst this massive beasts. “We’ll handle—” The author was cut off by Dipper’s own battle cry as he swiftly skated forward, flames bursting from his blade as he lashed out in a bold, fast move as he zoomed past one of the ogres. His attack struck true as the creature let out a sharp cry, disappearing into a puff of smoke mere seconds after the flaming sword sliced through it.

“Excellent form, Dipper!” Pearl exclaimed to her pupil brightly. “I can see you’ve been practicing!”

“Thanks!” Dipper called back as he prepared to take on one of the other ogres. “I have!”

“H-how… where did he learn how to fight like that?” Ford asked, rather amazed at his nephew’s impressive skill with a blade.

“Where do you think?” Pearl asked with a proud smile. “I taught him everything he knows. Now, come on. Dipper can certainly handle himself against those brutes, but it just wouldn’t be fair to let him have all the fun, now would it?”

The author didn’t get much of a chance to respond as the white Gem hurried on ahead, jumping into the fray alongside her pupil. Ford wasn’t far behind and Steven, Mabel, and Stan cheered them on as they worked together to take out the remaining two ogres in record time, much to Probabilitor’s fury.

“No! Drat you! You’ll never outrun my—” the wizard paused as he rolled the dice, grinning wickedly as he made his next move. “Ogre-nado!” With this spell, a massive, spiraling tornado struck up, disembodied ogre heads flying around it as it chased after the trio and blew their swords away. “Ha! It is what it sounds like!” Probabilitor guffawed, watching with twisted delight as the trio ran from the monstrous storm.

“I cast: CENTAURTAUR!” Mabel shouted out of the blue, tossing the dice down onto the board to conjure up a rather nightmarish creature: a centaur with another horse for its head.

“G-goodness! That’s… alarming…” Pearl remarked, rather put off by such a bizarre amalgamation.

“Mabel, I am so confused and so proud right now,” Stan said, sending his niece a bewildered, but warm smile.

“Come on!” Dipper shouted to Pearl and Ford as they all ran for the centaurtaur. Though it was a bit awkward getting onto its double backs, they managed to get a good hold onto the creature long enough for it to carry them away from the approaching ogre-nado as Stan, Mabel, and Steven cheered them on all the while. As the centaurtaur passed into a smaller chamber on the board, both it and the ogre-nado abruptly fell apart, leaving Dipper, Ford, and Pearl safe once more. Or so they thought.

No sooner had the trio picked themselves up off the ground than they suddenly found themselves all pinned to the wall once more, this time by a large, grotesque winged creature with several limbs, tentacles, and two intensely fanged mouths. “Haha, yes!” Probabilitor laughed over his latest move. “I was saving the worst for last!”

“The Impossibeast!” Ford exclaimed in apt surprise. “Hey, I thought they banned this character!”


“W-well this is ok!” Steven reassured as he prepared to roll the dice again. “We’ll just come up
with some new weapons and-"

“It’s not that simple,” Pearl interjected fretfully, struggling to break free from the Impossibeast’s iron grip. “From what I remember, this monster is the most powerful creature in the entire game!”

“He can only be defeated by rolling a perfect 38,” Ford added, his tone just as grave. “But the odds of that are-”

“Hey, long odds are what you want when you’re a world class gambler,” Stan cut in with a sly smirk as he took the dice and shook them in his hands. “Alright, Stan, you can do this… Papa needs a new pair of… twins!” With this, the conman tossed the die onto the board, the others taking in a collective deep breath as they hoped that luck would be with him, as the entire game depended on this one singular roll. In an instant that seemed like ages, the die struck the board, rolling across it before finally, fortunately landing on that sought after 38.

“NO!” Probabilitor cried, dumbfounded by disbelief over this effective turn of the tide.

“Ha! Sorry, nerd wizard!” Stan laughed in triumph as Dipper, Pearl, and Ford all let out a shared sigh of relief. “But all your smarts are no match for dumb luck!”

“We cast DEATH MUFFINS!” Mabel and Steven proclaimed in excitable unison, knowing that this move would certainly be for the win. At this, glistening muffins with an explosive edge to them appeared in each of the trios’ free hands. They didn’t even have to think twice about what to do with them as they simultaneously launched them into the Impossibeast’s wide-open maw, watching with anticipation as the creature swallowed all three of them whole. The effect was almost immediate, for mere seconds later, the death muffins exploded, taking the Impossibeast out along with them in a blinding flash of light.

“Yes!” Stan, Mabel, and Steven cheered in elated unison at this hard-earned win as the game concluded. In a flash, the board disappeared and in its place, Dipper, Ford, and Pearl all reappeared, restored to their normal sizes and clothing with only non-explosive death muffins remaining. An air of celebration rang throughout the group, especially as Steven and Mabel both caught Dipper off guard in a sudden, but welcome hug, glad to have finally rescued him as well as Pearl and Ford.

“The game is, like, over,” the hot elf remarked, shutting the rule book amidst Grenda hugging him tightly, as she had been doing for most of the game. “Excelci-whatever.”

“No!” Probabilitor cried in defeat as him and his companions began to dematerialize. “I’m returning to my own realm! I’m turning into pure math! What are the ooooooooodds?!” The wizard’s final cry hung on the air as he disappeared into equations and grids until nothing remained of him or his wicked intent at all.

“Hmph, serves him right,” Pearl remarked with a satisfied smirk as Steven caught her legs in a sudden embrace, which she gladly returned. “Wanting to crush my gem is one thing, but wanting to use it as a mere seasoning? That was simply absurd.”

“Grunkle Stan, that was amazing!” Dipper exclaimed with a wide smile. “How’d you know you would win?”

“Heh, a gambler never reveals his secrets,” then conman winked as he retrieved the 38 sided die, which he had happened to stick a bit of gum to the side of in order to ensure his perfect 38 roll.

“Man, that really was fun for ages 8 to 80!” Mabel noted with a grin. “Or a million. Or however old you guys are.”
“Yeah, I wish we had tried actually playing the game earlier,” Steven agreed. “I didn’t know what we were missing out on! Electric skates and centaustaurs and death muffins… What more could anyone want?!”

“Indeed…” Pearl chuckled, though her smile faded somewhat as she turned to Ford. “Er, um… Stanford? I, uh… well I just wanted to say… thank you. Things have been rather… difficult for me lately, but… your offer to pick up our old past time again gave me a much-needed distraction and a reminder of how much fun we used to have together back in the day. I have to admit… I missed this.”

“As did I,” Ford returned her warm grin with complete sincerity. “By the way… I’ve heard about… what happened between you and Garnet. And if there’s anything I can do to help, anything at all, then please, don’t hesitate to ask.”

The white Gem sighed somewhat sadly at this, wrapping her arms around herself as she looked down briefly. “I’m not sure if there’s anything anyone can do but… I appreciate the thought.”

“Oh, Dipper,” Pearl laughed once more, her tone gentle and reassuring as she placed a hand on her young pupil’s shoulder. “I’m not angry about the Ancient Sea Blade. I’m just that you’re safe. And that you managed to fend off those ogres as skillfully as you did.”

“Well, I learned from the best,” Dipper shrugged, glad that the white Gem didn’t take the loss of her sword harshly whatsoever.

“You certainly did,” Pearl smiled proudly. “Though of course, this means we’ll have to outfit you with a new sword at some point, but we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it, right?”

Dipper happily nodded in agreement with this, though unbeknownst to him or Pearl, Ford was already busy at work pondering on what the white Gem had just said. “A new sword…” the author muttered to himself, an idea striking him as he thought of what would be an excellent way to show his nephew his genuine appreciation.

“Y’know…” Stan began somewhat sheepishly as he garnished his nephew’s attention next. “I’m sorry to you too, kiddo, for making fun of your game. Sure, it might be too nerdy for me, but its just the right amount of nerdy for you and my brother. And Pearl, I guess, but we all already knew she was a huge nerd.”

“Oh wow, thank you, Stan,” Pearl deadpanned, though all the same, she had a smile on her face.

“Anyway,” the conman continued after sending the white Gem a brief cursory look. “If you wanna hang out with Ford sometimes, I won’t get in your way.”

“Actually, after all that, I think I could use a little mindless fun,” Dipper remarked with a small laugh, more than ready to rest after such a harrowing adventure.

“Guys! We can still watch the second showing of the Dogcopter/Ducktective crossover!” Grenda interjected boisterously. “It’s not too late! Now let’s GO!”
Sure enough, everyone made it back to the Mystery Shack just in time to catch the start of the crossover’s second airing. Steven, Mabel, Grenda, Dipper, Stan, and Soos all crowded into the den, disregarding the hole still present in the wall as they watched Ducktective and Dogcopter get into a heated argument as the third act of the special began.

“Oh no! Dogcopter and Ducktective shouldn’t fight!” Steven cried fretfully as he watched the animals’ subtitled quarrel. “They were getting along so well, what happened?!”

“The usual late in the game misunderstanding,” Soos shook his head disapprovingly. “Ya see it all the time in just about everything these days.”

“Ugh, I can’t believe they’d do something so cliché and predictable!” Mabel huffed, unwittingly spilling her snacks all over Stan’s lap. “We waited so long for this?!”

“What a rip off!” Grenda exclaimed, far from pleased.

“Seriously, what kinda two-bit hack wrote this junk?” Stan asked, though even despite the collective anger in the room, they all still watched the rest of the special intently, all of them secretly curious to see where it might lead.

Later that evening, after the thoughts of insane mathematical wizards and zany animal crossovers had been put to rest, Dipper ended up finding himself down in the basement lab once more as per Ford’s request. While everyone else had been watching the crossover, the author had apparently been collaborating with Pearl on something, but whatever it was seemed to be a surprise that Ford didn’t reveal, at least not immediately. Instead, he greeted his nephew warmly and presented him with the infinity sided die once more before sealing it tight in its case and locking it away in one of the many compartments of the basement’s large glass cabinet.

“Well, this ought to be safe and sound now,” Ford concluded with a satisfied grin. “It’ll be here if you ever need it.”

“Really?” Dipper asked with a frown. “Even after it got us into that huge mess earlier?”

“Eh, we both got carried away,” the author remarked with a hint of warmth in his tone. “I guess we’d both gone a while without a friend.”

Dipper couldn’t help but smile upon hearing this, feeling genuinely grateful for the solidarity and camaraderie that had been unexpectedly given to him by none other than the author of the journals himself. In light of the apparent hints of distance he had been feeling between himself and Mabel and Steven as of late, he appreciated the chance to be in the company of someone who not only shared similar interests to him, but truly respected him for his intelligence and verve. And in the end, not only had he gotten what he had wanted in finding a place for himself under the author’s wizened wing, but he had managed to form a solid, comfortable bond with his newfound great uncle. A bond that he had no intentions of ever trying to break any time soon.

“Speaking of which…” Ford continued after a beat of silence, a small, sly smile spreading across his face. “I must say I was quite impressed with your surprising ability with a blade that you demonstrated earlier.”

“Oh, w-well, its nothing,” Dipper remarked somewhat bashfully, not really liking to play up those aforementioned abilities too frequently. “I’m still sort of a beginner after all…”
“Well, from what Pearl told me, you’ve progressed marvelously,” the author said, now holding something he had retrieved from his desk behind his back. “Which is why I asked her to help me put a little… something together for you. And the result of our craftsmanship is something I think you just might like.” Ford could no longer contain his full smile as he held out what he had been hiding for his nephew to finally see. Even upon a first glance, Dipper let out a surprised gasp at the sight of the beautiful falchion sword laid across the author’s outstretched hands, its blade covered by a simple sheath as its hilt presented a comfortable-looking grip and a curvaceous, well-designed guard. Ford noticed his nephew’s hesitance in taking such an exquisite gift, which was why he let out a small chuckle before nodding him on ahead. “Go on, my boy, take it. It is yours after all.”

Dipper mostly let go of his hesitance at this, finally taking the sword and carefully unsheathing it to find that its sharp, metallic blade contained hints of intricate technology to it, with bright lines of circuitry running across it in neat, organized lines. “Whoa…” he mused, his eyes wide with amazement as he looked over it. “It’s… amazing…”

“It certainly is, and in more than just looks too,” Ford remarked proudly, his hands behind his back. “Do you see that small dial on the pommel?” He pointed to said dial, which was divided between four vibrant colors: red, blue, yellow, and green, with the first of those being the one it was apparently set on. “Press down on it and see what happens.”

Curious, Dipper did so, only to gasp in alarm as the circuitry on the sword suddenly lit up, the blade igniting itself in bright, hot flames. “W-whoa!” he exclaimed, holding the fiery sword far out from him. “I-is this supposed to be happening?!”

“Yes, it works exactly as intended!” Ford chimed as he reached to turn the knob to the next setting. As soon as he did, the fire quelled itself, the blade glowing blue as its heat was replaced with a bitterly cold aura of misty frost. “You could say that I was a bit inspired by our rather… fantastical adventure earlier today when designing this. Those ‘flamey swords’ Mabel came up with in particular helped me envision the direction I wanted to go in with this invention. As did Steven’s ‘electric skates’.” With another turn of the dial, the sword burst into bright yellow sparks, lightning cackling from it, but fortunately never leaving the immediate surface of the blade itself. Ford turned the dial one last time, shifting the sword’s color to green as a powerful gust of wind, almost akin to a controlled tornado, struck up around the blade before it ultimately dissipated into nothing as the author pressed the pommel again, shutting the sword down. “It was quite an interesting project to take on in such a short notice, but I think I did a rather exemplary job, if I do say so myself,” Ford continued brightly. “The modifications were entirely of my design, but I do have Pearl to thank for giving me the base sword, as well as thinking up a name for it: the Sword of Seasons. Fitting, isn’t it?”

“The Sword of Seasons…” Dipper repeated with a smile as he looked to his new blade with immense satisfaction before properly sheathing it. “Yes, it is. And thank you so much, Great Uncle Ford. This thing is seriously so cool!”

“Yes, well, I’m glad I could equip you with a new one after what happened today,” Ford said, still beaming. “And of course, I’m sure you’ll use it wisely, so it was more than worth the trouble.” A beat of warmth passed between the pair, one that the author felt was far too short lived as he took the smallest glance at the curtain-covered window behind him. Behind which were secrets that he knew he finally had to come clean about, at least to someone. “Dipper… can I tell you something?” he ventured, his manner turning serious, almost grave even.

“Y-yeah, of course,” Dipper nodded, noting the author’s sudden shift in behavior, his own shifting right along with it.
“You asked me what I was working on earlier. Well…” Ford began, hesitating for a moment before finally pulling back the curtain to reveal the portal on the other side of it. Or rather, what little now remained of it. “I dismantled the portal. To be honest, I should have done this from the very moment Rose told me to years ago… An interdimensional gateway is too dangerous for the world it feeds into. That’s why I was mad at Stan for using it. He saved me, but as I feared, the instability of the machine created this:” The author pulled out a small, spherical glass globe, its appearance fortified but rather unassuming. What was contained within the globe, however, was much more fascinating: a formless, shapeless cloud of what almost looked to be the radiant depths of space itself, swirling within its petite containment unit without any sort of rhyme or reason. It was in a state of constant change, its glow casting light throughout the dimly lit basement as it seemed to pulsate with an unknown power. A power that felt both intriguing and catastrophic all at once. “Its an interdimensional rift,” Ford explained, keeping his voice low as he held onto the base of the glob tightly. “I’ve contained it for now, but its incredibly dangerous, which means it must remain safe and secure and most of all, secret. Dipper, I don’t want you to tell anyone about this. Not Stan, not the Gems, not even your sister. Understand?”

For a moment, the most Dipper could do was remain silent in light of the incredibly heavy weight Ford had just unexpectedly put upon his shoulders. Sure enough, the author had let him in on an incredibly guarded secret, one that could, as far as he knew, put the town, maybe even the entire world at risk if not well kept. But to keep such a secret from those he trusted most, to hide something so monumental and so important from his family, his friends, his sister? If he was perfectly honest with himself, Dipper wasn’t sure if he could withstand that kind of pressure to uphold such a vow of untold silence. And yet… he knew that he would ultimately have to. The amount of genuine trust and reliance Ford was placing in him, to tell him and no one else, not even his old research partners, the Gems, about this rift could not be betrayed. In fact, Dipper refused to let himself betray that trust out of sheer conviction alone. It wasn’t a matter of trying to prove to the author that he could handle this; it was a matter of protecting this incredibly important, incredibly fragile object before him. And as far as he knew, the only way he could really protect it, was to remain silent about it, just as Ford had said.

“I—uh, o-of course,” Dipper nodded a moment later, putting as much resolve into his tone as he could as he met the author’s expectant gaze squarely.

Ford nodded in acceptance at this, letting out a small sigh of relief as he pulled the rift a bit closer to him. “Thank you,” he said with genuine gratitude. “In my time, I’ve made many powerful enemies, but I trust you with this secret. Now, get to bed. I have much research to do. And as I said before, take care with that new sword of yours!”

“I will,” Dipper promised just as sincerely, gripping the Sword of Seasons tight to his chest as he turned to head back upstairs, as if it alone could protect the immense secret he had just sworn to keep. “Goodnight, Great Uncle Ford.”

“Goodnight, Dipper;” Ford called back with a warm smile, one that disappeared as soon as his nephew left the room. The author let out a tired sigh, looking down to the rift in his hands once again, its relative weightlessness seemingly making it feel all the more heavy in a way. He knew he ran a risk telling just about anyone at all about this dimensional tear that could just as easily rip its way through existence itself, but he firmly did believe that Dipper would keep this secret well. Just as he readily believed Rose could have if she were still around today, though Ford figured he’d just have to make to with whom he had.

So, the author put the rift away, tucking it safely back in its hidden place in the compartment at his desk, hoping to get some peace of mind with it put out of his sight. But even so, the rift continued radiating its hauntingly beautiful glow, its ever-shifting clusters of stars carrying the fate of
existence itself upon them. An existence that could just as easily come to a violent, destructive end if it ever fell into the wrong hands…
Chapter 54: Evergreen Inn

Chapter Summary

In which tourist traps are pranked, Ruby and Sapphire fight, and spider ladies are better at flirting than you'd think.

Chapter Notes

Ehhhh so this chapter is very bleh in my opinion, mostly because its sort of the low part of this arc but whatever I guess, its fine. Gotta get through it to get to the good stuff after all. Now you'll notice I only utilized parts of Roadside Attraction in it, well, that's mostly because I'm not a huge fan of that episode to begin with so meh. But yeah anyway, here's my take on what's mostly just Keystone Motel. Enjoy! (keyword is ETERNAL FLAME)

Though the Crystal Temple had been permeated by an unshakable feeling of tension the past several days following Garnet and Pearl’s bitter falling out, Steven had, interestingly enough, found that tension somewhat more bearable when his friends were there to help alleviate some of it. Hence why, awash in thoughts of all of the anguish, heartache, and betrayal he had been witnessing from his guardians as of late, he inevitably ended up calling Dipper, Mabel, and Connie over to hang out in the hopes that they could take his mind off of the ongoing stress he had been experiencing ever since he found that memory tube in Lion’s mane.

And so the kids crowded up onto the loft, all of them engaged in different activities, from reading, to watching tv, to drawing. Since Mabel had already been hanging out with Candy and Grenda earlier that morning, she had brought them up to the temple along with her, something that Steven readily welcomed. After all, the more the merrier when it came to distracting himself from all of the burdening thoughts he truthfully wanted to avoid.

“I can’t believe this is the first time me and Candy have had a chance to hang out at your house, Steven!” Grenda exclaimed loudly as she looked up from the picture her, Candy, and Mabel were working on. “It’s so cool!”

“It is cozy, yet mystical all at once!” Candy noted, equally impressed as she leaned back against Lion. “Complete with magical, fluffy pink lions and all!”

“Heh, yeah, thanks, guys,” Steven said with a halfhearted smile, his gaze focused on the temple gate rather than on the TV in front of him. “It’s… pretty great…”

“Steven, are you ok?” Connie asked upon glancing up from her novel and easily taking note of the
young Gem’s melancholy.

“Huh? O-oh, uh yeah, I’m fine,” Steven quickly assured, forcing a smile.

“Are you sure?” Dipper asked, sharing Connie’s newfound concern. “You seem a bit… distracted.”

“Distracted? Me?” the young Gem scoffed as he turned his attention back to whatever was on TV. “I-I don’t know what you’re talking about, I’m completely-”

“Are you… worried about the Gems maybe?” Mabel ventured, taking note of how Steven had been looking to the gate earlier. Needless to say that her getting right to the heart of the matter however, managed to catch the young Gem quite off guard.

“N-no! I…. I mean, yes! I mean-” Steven cut himself off tightly, realizing that now everyone was looking to him with both confusion and concern. “I…. I’m—I don’t-”

Fortunately, the young Gem didn’t have to explain himself any further as the warp pad suddenly lit up, startling all six of the kids as they quickly turned to see Pearl unexpectedly arrive. The white Gem’s expression was awash in dread and woe, her hands held close to her chest as she looked down to her feet. However, before she could even really take a step off of the warp pad, she was quick to discover that she wasn’t as alone as she had hoped she’d be upon her return.

“Pearl!” Steven exclaimed, hurriedly rushing down from the loft and up to the white Gem. Though the other kids were still somewhat worried for Steven, given how strange he had been acting just a moment ago, they all soon followed after him to meet up with Pearl as well. “Where have you been? I haven’t seen you since the other day.”

“Oh, w-well, I’ve just been looking for Peridot!” Pearl informed, wringing her hands anxiously. “For… a few days straight…”

“Did you have any luck in finding her?” Connie asked.

“Er… n-not really…” the white Gem sighed, shaking her head morosely as her tone turned sad, yet sincere. “Kids, I know I might have… disappointed all of you. I know Garnet is very upset with me, but I’m going to prove to her that she can trust me again, no matter what it might take!”

Of course, the kids harbored nothing against Pearl for the obvious mistake she had made in deceiving Garnet, especially since the white Gem truly did seem to be very remorseful about her wrongdoing. And yet, before any of them could really reassure her in her admirable mission to win back the Gem leader’s favor, said Gem leader herself happened to enter the temple through the front door. Garnet’s expression was stoic and unreadable as she walked inside, offering neither the kids nor Pearl any sort of greeting as she instead silently passed by them en route to the temple, clearly in no mood to converse.

“Oh! Garnet!” Pearl exclaimed with as much of an amicable smile as she could muster. “I was just looking for Peridot! She’s bound to be somewhere, r-right? Any new ideas?” Much to the white Gem’s despair, Garnet said nothing as she simply continued on ahead, staunchly ignoring her teammate just as she had been doing for the past several days. Which left Pearl with only one idea to try and bridge the unbearable gap still between them. “I-I’m sorry,” she said, her tone genuine and rife with guilt as she looked down shamefully. Much to her surprise, Garnet did stop at this, though she didn’t turn around, leaving the white Gem with essentially no idea as to what her reaction to her sudden apology was. Even so, Pearl was prepared to continue and finally voice her earnest appeal for the Gem leader’s forgiveness. Or at least she would of if an unexpected intrusion hadn’t happened at the very worst of times.
“Who wants to go on a ROAD TRIP!?” Greg exclaimed excitedly as he burst into the house, brochure in hand. Stan burst in right behind him, packed suitcases in tow and his manner every bit as bombastic as Greg’s.

“You kids do, that’s who!” the conman proclaimed. “Whether you want to or not!”

“Aw, come on, Mr. Pines,” the former rock star chuckled, amused. “They gotta have some say in this-” Greg cut himself off upon glancing over to the group before him, taking note of how caught of guard the kids were as well as the palpable tension between Garnet and Pearl that just about anyone with eyes could clearly see. “Uh… is this a bad time?”

“No,” Garnet finally spoke up, turning to face Greg and Stan. “Please continue.”

“Well, like we were saying, Greg and I are headin’ upstate for a few days on some… business,” Stan began to explain.

“Business?” Dipper raised a suspicious eyebrow. “What kind of business? Are you on the run from the law again?”

“Pfft, no,” Stan rolled his eyes. “At least not this week I’m not. Besides, I’ll have you know this trip is a tradition. Every year, my tourist trap competitors prank the Mystery Shack, and every year, I set out to prank them right back. Last year, those hooligans duct taped Soos to the ceiling for 78 hours and then there was that year when they covered everything in the shack in plastic wrap!”

“And he means everything…” Greg remarked, shuddering at the memory from his days of employment at the shack.

“Which means I gotta hit them back fast and hard this year,” Stan said with stark determination. “We’re gonna visit every tourist trap along the Evergreen Highway and I’m gonna prank every single one!”

“And I’m going because I met a guy on an internet message board who’s selling car wash brushes for real cheap!” Greg said with a wide grin. “And the place where we arranged to meet is right along the same route Mr. Pines is taking, so we figured we’d make things easier by riding together.”

“I don’t like those brushes…” Steven said with a frown. “They feel weird on your fur.”

“Fur?” Connie, Candy, and Grenda all asked in confused unison.

“It’s a long story,” Mabel quickly whispered to them.

“Well, do like inns?” Greg asked his son.

“Probably!” Steven ventured, having never really stayed in one before.

“Think you’d like to stay at an inn with your favorite dad?”

“I don’t know if you’re my favorite…” the young Gem teased, his spirits raising as his father let out an amused laugh.

“Oh, you kidder! Come here!” the former rock star laughingly accepted his son into his arms, hoisting him up onto his shoulders.

“I can’t wait to get room service!” Steven exclaimed, stars in his eyes.
“You’re thinking of a hotel,” Greg corrected. “We’re going to an inn. It’ll have a pool, and free ice, and its right down the road from the best diner in the world!”

“Oh my gosh, this is so exciting!” Mabel chimed in, sharing Steven’s elation and passing it onto Candy and Grenda as well. “Maybe if we’re lucky, it’ll be one of those inns that has free cold bagels for breakfast every morning!”

“Why cold bagels, specifically?” Dipper asked, confused.

“Well, cause they probably can’t afford toasters to warm ‘em up, duh!”

“Whoa, there, eager beavers,” Stan shook his head. “First of all, an inn with continental breakfast is way too fancy for my blood. Second of all, we’re only staying there one night. For the rest of the trip, I’ve rented out an RV for a cut rate price, one that’s guaranteed to not explode or I’ll get half my money back!”

“Good luck getting that money back if it does explode…” Pearl remarked sardonically, crossing her arms.

“Can we go too, Mr. Pines?” Grenda asked with an eager smile.

“Eh sure, the more the merrier,” the conman shrugged, pulling out a stack of legal forms. “Just sign these non-disclosure agreements. None of your parents are lawyers, right?”

“Well… my dad is a cop, so… we should probably be careful…” Connie advised with a worried frown.

“Bow wow!” Grenda cheered after she finished signing the papers. “Time to let the road dogs bark!”

“That is us, we are the road dogs!” Candy quipped, cheerfully joining Grenda and Mabel in bouncing up and down in unshakable elation.

“I’m coming too,” Garnet said, instantly cutting through the ongoing excitement over the trip as everyone paused to look at her in apt confusion.

“W-what?” Pearl spoke up first, bewildered by the Gem leader deciding to leave at a time like this.

“Oh my gosh! That makes it even better!” Steven gasped, delighted to see that Garnet wanted to come for more reasons than one. After all, not only did it mean that he would get to have a fun trip with one of his beloved guardians, it was also a sure-fire sign that perhaps she wasn’t as upset over the Sardonyx incident as she seemed to have been the past several days. Or at least, he could only hope that she wasn’t.

“Hey, uh, Garnet?” Greg spoke up in a whisper. “I know me and Mr. Pines are talking this whole RV/inn thing up, but… it ain’t exactly the ritz…”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” the Gem leader remarked with a hint of a smirk.

“Eh, I guess you can come along, shades,” Stan crossed his arms. “Just be sure you don’t cramp my pranking style.”

“I didn’t ask for your permission, Stan,” Garnet deadpanned, though she was still grinning all the same. “But don’t worry, I won’t.”
“Well, in that case…. Road trip!” Greg exclaimed with renewed vigor.

“Road trip!” Steven, Mabel, Candy, and Grenda all cheered, eliciting amused chuckles from Dipper and Connie.

“Road trip,” Garnet nodded, much more calmly as her smile faded.

“Um… that’s… wonderful!” Pearl quipped, clasping her hands together anxiously. “I’ll make sure that Amethyst knows that—” The white Gem didn’t get a chance to finish as Garnet succinctly walked past her once more, not sparing her a single word as she instead headed outside, leading the way for the others to do the same. “Uh… f-fine,” Pearl said with a forced smile as she waved the others off before letting out a small, remorseful sigh. “Well… goodbye…”

“This is gonna be fun! Right, Dad?” Steven asked, still perched on Greg’s shoulders as they headed out.

“Uh… sure, Stu-ball!” the former rock star assured, even if he was a bit wary now that Garnet had volunteered to come along. Normally, he wouldn’t have minded her company at all, but given how unsteady things had apparently been amongst the Gems lately, he wasn’t so sure what bringing one on a trip like this would end up entailing. But even so, Greg didn’t want to spoil Steven’s excitement, and so he said nothing else, hoping that the trip would turn out to be just as fun and peaceful as the young Gem was clearly looking forward to.

But of course, as usual, it would end up being anything but.

It wasn’t very surprising that the RV Stan had rented for the road trip had seen better days. Its exterior was ridden with dents and dings and was in desperate need of a good washing, while its interior was cramped and cluttered and barely enough to contain its nine passengers. Even so, they all managed to find space as they set out on the road, everyone taking shifts in sitting up front in the less crowded passenger seat as Greg and Stan took shifts in driving down the long yet lovely Evergreen Highway.

“Man, RVs are amazing!” Grenda exclaimed as her and the other girls sat at the table near the back. “I can’t believe we’re sitting at a table in a moving vehicle.”

“Ooo, and look! Informational travel pamphlets!” Candy quipped, pressing a pile of said pamphlets to her cheek. “I want to read them all and gain their travel knowledge.”

“Uh… I’m pretty sure all these pamphlets are from the 1970s…” Connie noted as she leafed through a few of the dusty handouts.

“Whoa… they’re vintage!” Mabel remarked with genuine fascination. “That means they’re probably super accurate!”

“Oh, this is the life, kid,” Stan said to Dipper, who was currently sitting up front alongside him. “The open road, the clear blue skies, the fumes comin’ from the RV’s engine…. What more could anyone want? It’s no wonder me ‘n Amethyst always call this yearly trek the ‘mother of all Revenge Trips’, huh?”

“Oh yeah, I’ve been meaning to ask you, Grunkle Stan,” Dipper said with a curious frown. “Why didn’t you ask Amethyst to come with us? This whole thing with pranking all these tourist traps seems like it’d be right up her alley.”
The conman flinched, realizing he had let his nostalgia get the better of him, something that only made things awkward in the present. “Uh… usually she does tag along.” Stan began, not meeting his nephew’s gaze in favor of keeping his eyes on the road. “But this year, I just… uh… d-didn’t get the chance to ask her, that’s all.”

“More like you you haven’t had the chance to talk to her in general since what happened with the portal, right?” Dipper asked somewhat knowingly.

“I’ve talked to her since then!” Stan snapped defensively, his grip on the steering wheel tightening. Even so, Dipper hardly believed him.

“Which is why you asked all of us to come along on this trip,” he continued his line of rather accurate reasoning. “So you wouldn’t feel lonely going around and pulling off a bunch of pranks without Amethyst. Am I somewhere in the ballpark of being right about all that?”

“I’ll tell you what you are in the ballpark of: moving out of the front seat!” Stan growled, catching Dipper off guard with how suddenly angry he was. “Now, get back there and get your sister, its her turn to sit up here.”

“But I just got up here-”

“Well you should have thought about that before you started asking a bunch of annoying questions,” the conman huffed, sending his nephew a sharp, warning glare. “Now, scoot before I toss you out and leave ya for a pack of wild hitchhikers.”

Dipper begrudgingly did as his uncle said, getting up from the front seat with a frustrated sigh to go switch places with Mabel. Things seemed much more peaceful in the furthest back seat in the RV, where Garnet and Steven both sat; the young Gem had been keeping himself occupied by enjoying the scenery go by through the window and occasionally pointing out what he saw as well as his ongoing excitement about the trip in general, to the Gem leader. Who, much like the past several days, didn’t have much to say in response.

“Whoa, check it out, Garnet!” Steven exclaimed as he pulled a coin out from under his seat. “Another penny! I guess someone must have spilled a whole bunch back here too. And probably some grape juice at some point based on this big stain right here. Still, between the pennies and the RV and the inn we’re gonna get to stay at, I’d say this trip is already turning out to be pretty great, wouldn’t you?”

“Mmm…” Garnet responded, her lips pressed into a thin line and her hands laying heavily upon her knees. Though there was plenty of room in the small back quarters of the RV for Steven, the Gem leader was admittedly a bit cramped, though that was hardly what was bothering her at the moment. In fact, what was agitating her lay far beyond this trip at all, but she was hardly about to let Steven, or anyone else for that matter, in on her internal conflict. As far as she was concerned, this was something she could just as easily sort out solely by herself.

“Look alive, everyone!” Stan announced roughly an hour later as he pulled off the highway. “We’re coming up on an attraction run by the most black-hearted proprietor in all of Oregon: Granny Sweetkins’ Yarnball.”

“Uh, Mr. Pines, are you sure about this?” Greg asked, rather concerned as they arrived at the unassuming, rather welcoming attraction, its main feature being a massive ball of soft, colorful yarn.

“Don’t let the face fool you,” Stan glared up at the nearby sign depicting Granny Sweetkins
herself. “This woman lit my car on fire on two non-consecutive occasions.”

As soon as the conman parked the RV, everyone filed out, taking a moment to be amazed by the yarnball’s quite impressive size before leaping right into action. “Girls, I’m going in,” Mabel said with determination, brazenly leading the way before Candy and Grenda eagerly followed after her directly into the ball of yarn.

“Wait for me, you guys!” Steven laughed, jumping in after the trio as Dipper and Connie watched on in bewilderment.

“Why do I have this terrible feeling that we’re gonna get caught vandalizing this thing?” Connie asked, anxiously glancing around for any signs of incoming security.

“Eh, I wouldn’t worry,” Dipper shrugged. “Whenever we do something mildly illegal like this, Stan usually makes sure we end up making a clean enough getaway. Usually.”

“Yeah, Mr. Pines does have a knack for pulling off daring escapes,” Greg added with a chuckle as he watched Stan supervise the other kids in taking the yarnball apart from the inside out. “Right, Garnet?”

The Gem leader offered no answer as she simply stood alongside the group in silence, apparently paying little attention to what was going on before her. Greg, Connie, and Dipper all looked over to her in slight concern over her lack of any sort of response, but even so, Garnet still said nothing, almost as if she was lost in her own thoughts entirely. However, before any of them could try to properly garnish her attention, Stan suddenly rushed past them, Mabel, Candy, Grenda, and Steven following hot on his heels as they all carried sizable clumps of yarn from the gradually shrinking yarnball.

“Everyone, book it! Now!” the conman ordered, prompting the rest of the group to flee back into the RV. No sooner had the door shut behind them than Stan floored it, the camper taking off at a surprising speed despite its age. As the group made their hasty retreat, Granny Sweetkins herself rushed after it, outraged as her world-famous yarnball unraveled right before her eyes.

“Why, you gall darn, no good, son of a-!” the elderly woman cut herself off, taking the knitting needle that had once held the yarnball together out of the ground and tossing it after the speeding RV with a vicious vengeance. “I’ll get you, Stan Pines!”

This incensed sentiment was shared across all of the owners of all of the tourist traps that Stan pranked across the next several days, his route meticulous and his methods always quite destructive towards whatever attraction was involved. The gang’s visit to Upside-Down Town resulted in all of them working together to flip the overturned house rightside up, essentially taking away the main thing that set it apart and turning it into a normal home. At Log Land, they untied the spectacular stack of wood the attraction was known for, resulting in a potentially deadly logslide that fortunately no one was injured in (save for the tourist trap’s revenue and reputation). The Corn Maze was easy enough to ruin simply by taking away the plentiful scarecrows positioned throughout it and waiting for the mass of crows to fly in and eat just about everything in sight. And in a similar fashion, the rest of the tourist traps they stopped in at fell, Stan raking in the sheer delight of taking his competitors down several pegs, the kids getting to join in on the exciting, rather morally ambiguous mischief, and Greg cautiously supervising to make sure none of them got hurt. The only one amongst the group who seemed completely adverse to participating altogether was Garnet, who usually barely moved away from the RV when they stopped, if she left it at all.
And yet, with as much fun as they were having, no one really seemed to notice the Gem leader’s lack of engagement, even as she grew more and more closed off as the days rolled by. For the most part, they all just assumed that it was her usual stoic manner; but in reality, what it really was, was something much more concerning.

The group had been on the road for roughly three days when they finally arrived to their stopping point for the final night of their trip: the supposedly legendary Evergreen Inn. Still, despite Greg’s fanciful description of the motel, it was admittedly anything but impressive. Tucked just off of the Evergreen highway, the inn was a small, two story establishment with apparently plenty of vacancies as the clearly bored front desk receptionist implied. Still, the inn did have a decently-sized, mostly clean swimming pool claiming most of its tiny parking lot, which presented Stan with something of a challenge in finding a place to park the RV when the group arrived. They had ended up checking into two rooms right next to each other, one for Garnet and the girls to stay in and one for the Stan, Greg, and the boys. But since they had made it to the inn rather early in the evening, the kids all decided to congregate in the boys’ room first in order to enjoy what few amenities the inn had to offer.

“Another great thing about inns,” Greg said to the kids as he unlocked the door to the room. “You can drive right up to your door!”

“Or at least we could if that ol’ rust bucket out there didn’t take up three parking spots,” Stan remarked sardonically, though the kids were hardly paying much attention as they got their first glimpse of the room. By all accounts it was nothing special, a simple two bed setup with a standard bathroom, TV, desk, and décor. But even despite its almost dull normality, most of the kids were instantly taken with excitement over it.

“It’s so beautiful!” Grenda proclaimed dramatically.

“Yes! Two beds!” Mabel cheered, readily hopping up onto one of them before jumping across to the other. “You guys gotta try this! It’s just like a trampoline, only with a huge, potentially dangerous gap in the middle!”

Candy and Grenda both rushed to join Mabel in her bed-hopping campaign, the three of them clearly enjoying themselves despite how simplistic their form of entertainment was. “Well, they’re easily impressed…” Connie remarked to Dipper and Steven with something of a bemused grin.

“Can you blame them? This place is amazing!” Steven exclaimed, stars in his eyes as he rushed forward into the room to better explore it. “I’m gonna swim in the pool, order a movie, get free ice, it’ll be great!”

“N-not before we check for bed bugs, it isn’t!” Greg cautioned, hurrying to do just that as Stan also properly entered the room. Garnet came in behind them, easily toting everyone’s bags, though no one really heard the somewhat burdened groan come from the Gem leader as they each took a look around the room for themselves.

“Good news! We’re bugless,” Greg let out a sigh of relief upon lifting one of the mattresses up before Steven, Mabel, Candy, and Grenda all landed squarely on top of it.

“Then that puts this place above 90% of the motels I stayed in back during my drifting days,” Stan remarked with a wry grin before briefly checking his watch. “Oh, Greg, looks like it’s about time for us to get those… what were they again?”

“Oh that’s right! The brushes!” the former rock star exclaimed as he quickly stood. “Hey, Garnet, do you mind holding down the fort until Mr. Pines and I get back?” Garnet responded to this
simply in the form of a rather shaky thumbs up as she sat on the opposite bed, her other hand twitching rather erratically and her expression tight and terse. Even so, this was good enough for Stan and Greg. “Great!” the former rock star grinned as him and the conman headed out the door. “We’re going to see a man about a tunnel brush. An internet man… If we’re not back in an hour, call the police.”

“Pfft, please, Greg, we’re not gonna need any pansy police,” Stan rolled his eyes. “If we run into any trouble with this guy, all it’ll take to shake him off our backs is one good slug in the jaw with these babies.” The conman smirked as he pulled his infamous brass knuckles out of his suit pocket before quickly slipping them back into hiding.

“Mr. Pines, we can’t just beat the guy up.”

“Ha! Try tellin’ that my old parole officer.”

“Bye!” Steven called after the pair as they left, leaving the kids behind with Garnet, not that she was really paying any of them much mind to begin with.

“Oh my gosh, you guys, wait!” Mabel gasped, halting the ongoing barrage of jumping between beds. “What if this inn has vending machines?!”

“Inns can have vending machines too?!” Steven asked in amazed surprise. “Seriously, how could this place get any better?”

“We should go see if they have one, and if they do, we should get a bunch of candy!” Mabel exclaimed, hopping up and down in place on the bed.

“Call me crazy, but for some reason I feel like candy is the last thing any of you guys need right now,” Dipper pointed out with an exasperated frown.

“He is right,” Candy conceded with a small, steadily growing, wry smirk. “After all, I’m already here!”

“Oooo! I see what you did there!” Grenda laughed, Steven and Mabel readily joining in as even Dipper and Connie managed to get a bit of a chuckle out of this joke.

“Garnet!” Steven called over to the Gem leader with another small laugh. “Did you hear what Candy just-”

The young Gem cut himself off upon hearing a rather tense, rather loud groan that came from Garnet herself. The levity in the room was all but shattered as all the kids looked to her with apt alarm, though she largely ignored them in favor of carrying on what seemed to be a quite intense argument with herself. “Calm down…” she advised, her voice shaking as it quickly hitched with anger. “I don’t feel like forgiving Pearl! Y-you don’t understand, we must. Augh! If you’re not going to listen, then you can just GO!”

On this harsh, sudden proclamation, a sudden, bright light overtook the Gem leader, though it only lasted for a brief second before, without hardly any warning at all, she quite literally fell apart. Ruby and Sapphire both let out startled cries as they fell onto the floor, though their surprise was quickly replaced with the still strong sentiments left over from their internal struggle, even as all six of the kids stared at the couple in shocked, silent awe.

“We must move past this, Ruby,” Sapphire began, her voice stoic and steady as she sat elegantly on the floor, facing away from the red Gem.
“No! She lied to us to form Sardonyx!” Ruby snapped harshly, practically shaking with rage. “She tricked us! Don’t you feel used?!”

“Oh my gosh!” Mabel squealed amidst the couple’s ongoing squabble as she looked to Candy and Grenda, who were clearly still in shock over what they had just seen. “See? Garnet really is a fusion, just like I was telling you guys!”

“Ruby! Sapphire!” Steven greeted the pair brightly. “We—”

“You’re just choosing to take it personally,” Sapphire said to Ruby, neither of them paying any attention to the kids amidst their own conflict.

“It’s fusion, Sapphire!” Ruby hopped to her feet hotly. “What’s more personally to us than fusion?!”

“I know you’re still upset—”

“Oh, so it’s just me then, huh?”

“Of course not,” Sapphire turned to face her partner, her expression completely dour and emotionless. “Can’t you see I’m engulfed with rage?”

“Well, it doesn’t feel like it,” Ruby growled, impatiently tapping her foot. All the while, the kids continued watching on, none of them quite sure what to say to interrupt this rather intense argument, if it was even a wise idea to do so at all.

“The sooner we forgive Pearl, the better it will be for all of us,” Sapphire assured, finally lifting herself up off the floor to, oddly enough, levitate just above it. Ruby only glared at the blue Gem as she gracefully lifted herself up onto the bed to take a placid seat upon it.

“You’re not as above this as you think you are!” the red Gem shouted fiercely, her rage coming out in the form of visible steam that rose up from her.

“Yes,” Sapphire hummed, gently placing her hands in her lap. “I am.”

“Grr… Why doesn’t this bother you?!” Ruby groaned, slamming her fist onto the lower end of the bed.

“I never said it didn’t,” the blue Gem countered evenly. “I’m just choosing to be reasonable about it. Something you should do too, Ruby.”

“I don’t have to be reasonable about anything!” the red Gem barked, though she quickly paused upon realizing what she had just said. “W-wait! That’s not what I meant! I just… I… AUGH!”

“It’s like I said,” Sapphire continued calmly. “You can’t stay angry with Pearl forever.”

“Wanna bet?” Ruby scowled, clearly not retracting her firm, angry position.

“Ruby, the carpet,” the blue Gem nodded down to the floor, which her partner just so happened to be burning a hole into simply by standing upon it.

“You… can’t even… augh!” Ruby cut herself off with another frustrated shout before she ended up storming out of the room altogether, brutally slamming the door behind her. A beat of rather awkward silence passed as the kids, who had all been largely spectating the argument between the two Gems, slowly all looked towards Sapphire, who was still sitting on the bed, her gaze fixated
solely in front of her and her expression as unmoving and seemingly unfeeling as ever.

“Nice to… see you again?” Steven was the first to break the silence, offering the blue Gem something of a small smile that she didn’t return.

“Nice to see you too,” Sapphire replied, her tone and manner quite stately.

“So…” Mabel began innocently enough before rather bluntly getting to the heart of what they had just seen. “Does that fight you and Ruby just had mean you guys are getting a divorce?”

“O-okay!” Dipper quickly interjected almost as soon as his sister had voiced this awkward question, not even giving the rather confused Sapphire a chance to answer it as he abruptly pushed Mabel towards the door. “I think its about time that the six of us get some fresh air! Like… right now.”

“Aw…” Steven frowned in disappointment as Connie helped pull him, Candy, and Grenda after the twins. “But we just-”

“Now,” Dipper insisted as he finished shooing everyone out of the room before exiting himself.

“You know, I gotta admit,” Connie began as soon as they were all congregated outside of the room. “Based on what you guys have told me about Ruby and Sapphire and their relationship, what happened in there was… pretty unexpected.”

“Well, the first time we saw them together, they actually got along really well,” Steven shrugged. “Yeah, they did!” Mabel chimed in brightly. “They hugged and kissed and danced until they fused back into Garnet, augh! You guys should have seen it!” she quipped to Candy and Grenda, who were clearly taken by this romantic recounting. “They were so adorable!”

“Aw, man! I wish we could see them being adorable together!” Grenda pouted, crossing her arms in disappointment.

“Yes, but at the moment, it seems as though they are having… relationship issues,” Candy noted just as solemnly.

“Seriously, you think they’d at least be willing to talk to each other about this whole thing instead of arguing about it,” Dipper said.

“Wait a second…” Steven mused, a sudden idea coming to him. “That’s it! If Ruby and Sapphire won’t talk things out on their own, then maybe we can help them instead!”

“Oh my gosh, that’s a great idea, Steven!” Mabel readily agreed. “And it makes perfect sense too! Garnet’s always helping us without our relationship problems, so its about time we return the favor and help Ruby and Sapphire work theirs out!”

“You know what this means?” Candy asked with a growing grin. “It is our turn to be-”

“Romance experts!” Mabel and Grenda chimed in alongside Candy, all three of the girls more than excited to be taking up this rather daunting undertaking.

“Uh, I don’t know, you guys,” Dipper interjected much more rationally. “Maybe getting in the middle of Ruby and Sapphire’s, uh… disagreement isn’t really the best idea. We should probably just let them patch things up on their own.”
“But who knows how long that could take!” Mabel said with an impatient huff. “We all saw that lil’ spat they just had; those two need some serious relationship help STAT! So here’s how its gonna go down: it’ll be easier if we all split up to talk to them first so we can convince them to talk to each other.”

“Huh, that… actually makes sense,” Connie remarked, realizing that this idea wasn’t as bad as it had originally sounded.

“Of course it does! Now, me, Steven, and Grenda will go try to cool Ruby down,” Mabel continued explaining. “Meanwhile, Dipper, Connie, Candy, you three go see if you can do anything to get Sapphire to warm up. Ya see what I did there? Cool? Warm? It’s a-”

“Yeah, we get it, it’s a pun,” Dipper interrupted, rolling his eyes. “By the way, I still don’t think this plan is gonna work, but… I guess anything’s better than listening to those two argue all night so, its probably worth a try.”

“Don’t worry,” Steven assured before the respective groups split up to carry out their missions. “All we gotta do is convince Ruby and Sapphire to hear each other out and then I’m sure everything else will work itself out. Or at least… I really hope it will…”

Despite her abruptly storming out of the room earlier, Ruby wasn’t all too difficult to find thanks to the trail of ashy footprints she had left behind, one that Steven, Mabel, and Grenda found led towards the pool. And so, for the sake of being discreet in their goal as well as to have a little fun at the same time, the trio quickly changed into their bathing suits and hurried out to the pool, hoping to get the incensed red Gem to simmer down somehow.

Upon slipping through the pool’s open gate, the trio found that, sure enough, there Ruby was, pacing angrily around the parameter. A plume of steady steam rose up from her all the while as her hands remained in tight fists at her sides and her expression set in a bitter downward glare. For a moment, the kids simply watched her, all of them noting that she apparently hadn’t noticed their arrival at all, at least until Steven spoke up to greet her.

“Uh… hey, Ruby,” the young Gem began with a tentative smile and wave as he put his towel down. “You wanna swim in the pool with us?”

“And, I dunno, maybe we can all talk about our feelings?” Mabel suggested innocently enough. “They say pools are the best place to work your pent up anger out, after all.”

“Whoa, really?” Grenda asked, apparently amazed by this fact. “Wow… and all these years, I was doing that by hitting things!”

“Oh… yeah…” Steven said as both him and Mabel looked to Grenda with confused frowns before he turned back to Ruby, who was still pacing intently. “Anyway, we-”

“It’s fusion, Steven!” Ruby suddenly snapped, her manner every bit as hostile as it had been back in the room. “It’s like Sapphire doesn’t even care! And we’re supposed to be ‘the bigger Gem’ about this. We’re always the bigger Gem! Well, not this time! Not about this!”

“Uh… well… y-you could always try talking to Sapphire about it,” Mabel mused somewhat awkwardly, knowing that it probably wasn’t wise to push the red Gem too far. “You know… calmly?”
“I did that already!” Ruby retorted hotly. “You three were there, you saw how she just refuses to admit that she could ever be wrong about anything just ‘cause she can see the future. But I can see plenty of things myself, and I can see that she’s wrong this time, I know it!”

“Um, right…” Steven said somewhat nervously before throwing on a reassuring smile. “Well, why don’t you come cool down in the pool with us?” At this, the young Gem promptly cannonballed into the pool, Mabel following right after him. Grenda was last and the earlier pair was rather caught off guard by the large splash her jump created, one that ended up splaying Ruby with water that quickly turned to steam as it evaporated off of her very warm form.

“I don’t need to cool down,” the red Gem grumbled, crossing her arms as she glared away from the pool.

“Aw, come on, Ruby!” Mabel urged brightly. “The water’s niice!”

“And there’s only like 4 or 5 bugs floating around in here, which makes it cleaner than most hotel pools I’ve been to at least!” Grenda added just as exuberantly.

Ruby paused, taking another sour glance over at the pool before finally relenting and stepping down into it, continuing her ongoing rant all the while. “Why does she always act like I’m being ridiculous!?” she huffed, walking straight to the bottom of the pool and staying grounded there as she resumed pacing. “Just because she wants to pretend like she doesn’t have feelings?! Oh yeah, I don’t have any feelings, well I…” Ruby continued her frustrated ramblings, though much of it was muffled by the several gallons of water she was under, though apparently not hindered by whatsoever.

“Wow, Ruby’s a really good swimmer,” Grenda noted, duly amazed as they all watched the red Gem pace about.

“Is she… ok down there?” Mabel asked with a slightly worried frown.

“Yeah, I think so,” Steven mused, even as Ruby continued to pay none of them any mind amidst her ongoing venting. “Uh… Ruby? Oh!” the young Gem gasped as the water around them began to bubble with sudden warmth. “Heh, you made a warm spot!”

“Hey, yeah! It almost feels like a hot tub in here now!” Mabel chuckled along with Steven and Grenda before the water’s temperature unexpectedly spiked from comfortably warm to unbearably hot. “Ah! O-OK, now it’s a really hot tub!”

“M-more than hot! Boiling!” Steven cried as him, Mabel, and Grenda all frantically scrambled to get out of the piping hot water. The pool was still largely bubbling over even as they hurriedly climbed out of it, sitting on the dry edge as they all panted in a desperate attempt to cool down from the near-burns they had almost received. A beat of awkward silence passed as they tried and failed to spot Ruby amidst the rapid bubbles she was unwittingly creating from her quite literally burning rage. Even so, in the end it was rather clear that as stubborn as someone like Ruby was, it would take more than just a few apprehensive words of convincing to get her to hold anything close to a civil conversation with Sapphire at this point.

Or at least this fact was clear to Steven and Mabel, since Grenda turned to the pair with a rather satisfied grin just a moment later. “Ya know, I think that went pretty well!”

Upon splitting up from the others and reentering the inn room, Dipper, Connie, and Candy all immediately noticed that the room itself seemed a bit chillier than it had been when they had stepped outside mere minutes ago. Even so, the trio didn’t really put too much thought into this
apparently coincidental change as they greeted Sapphire casually enough.

“Uh… hey, Sapphire,” Dipper began with a tentative wave as him, Connie, and Candy moved to take a seat on the other bed.

“Hello, Dipper, Connie, Candy,” Sapphire nodded in return, her tone flat as she maintained her spot on the bed, her hands folded neatly in her lap.

“Are… you doing ok in here?” Connie asked, not really sure where to start in convincing the blue Gem to talk things out with her significant other.

“I’m… fine…” Sapphire said somewhat tightly, a bit of frost creeping up on the wall behind her. As it did, the kids happened to notice the room’s temperature fall from refreshingly cool to blatantly cold in almost an instant, most likely as a result of the blue Gem’s tranquil dissatisfaction. Even so, none of them decided to address that fact to Sapphire herself, lest doing so result in the room growing somehow even colder than it already was, which was quite an unsavory thought given how frigid it was already becoming.

“H-how about we watch some TV?” Candy suggested with a shiver, unceremoniously pulling the bed’s blanket up and wrapping part of it around herself before offering the rest to Dipper and Connie.

“Sure,” Sapphire remarked, as unexpressive as always.

“Oh, uh, l-look at that, the TV channels are different here than they are in Gravity Falls,” Dipper said upon turning the television on before addressing Sapphire. “M-maybe you could use your future vision to point us to a good one?”

“Hm… 43,” the blue Gem replied after only a brief moment of thought. “But there’s not much on.”

Even despite this, Dipper switched to the aforementioned channel and all three of the kids burrowed themselves deeper into the blanket, which admittedly offered them little warmth amidst the still ever-dropping temperatures of the room. For a moment or two, the doldrum sounds of the TV filled in what would have otherwise been awkward silence as frost continued climbing up the walls, particularly behind Sapphire, who didn’t really seem to have much to say regarding her and Ruby’s falling out at all. Which meant that perhaps all she needed was a bit of good prompting towards the subject.

“H-hey, Sapphire-” Connie ventured to begin, but the blue Gem succinctly cut her off before she could continue.

“Even if I do, Ruby won’t listen.”

“H-huh?”

“You’re going to say that I should talk to Ruby,” Sapphire correctly predicted. “But it won’t help. At least not right now.”

“A-are you sure?” Dipper asked, shuddering from the bitter chill that seemed to have no relief in sight. “Cause she seemed pretty upset earlier.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Sapphire concluded firmly. “She’s simply overreacting. It’s a longtime
habit of hers, one that usually doesn’t cause too many problems. But in the off chance that it does, she always comes around eventually. She can’t stay mad at Pearl forever and she can’t stay mad at me forever, and then she’ll come back and see that I’m right.”

“B-but don’t you think talking to her might smooth things over between you two… I-I don’t know, sooner?” Connie attempted, her eyes widening as she realized she could see her breath in the apparent icebox they were now in.

“There’s no need to rush this,” the blue Gem shook her head. “I can see the path of fate as it stretches on the horizon. The rift between us isn’t destined to last. Ruby can’t avoid the inevitable. She’s just letting her emotions get out of hand.”

“N-not you though, right?” Dipper asked, rolling his eyes rather knowingly as he realized they weren’t really getting anywhere with the practically immovable blue Gem.

“No,” Sapphire said, even as the bed she was sitting on completely froze over, not that she paid it any real mind at all.

By this point, while Dipper and Connie were trying to come up with a last ditch attempt to convince Sapphire to speak to Ruby, Candy had apparently decided that the frigid conditions had become too much for her to bear. “I-I must use the bathroom!” she cried, hopping off the bed and rushing for the smaller room that she hoped would be just a bit warmer.

“Also inevitable,” Sapphire noted dryly.

“O eoseo!” Candy shouted in frustrated Korean before poking her head outside the bathroom door. “T-the toilet is frozen!”

“Such is fate,” the blue Gem said, completely apathetic to the trio of practically frozen kids, none of whom could really stand the subzero conditions any longer.

“So I guess its our fate to pee outside in the grass too, then?” Dipper huffed in annoyance as him and Connie began to follow Candy out of the room, all three of them more than frustrated by how little progress they had made with the supposedly sensible blue Gem.

But all the same, Sapphire kept up her “calm” composure, barely even effected at all as the kids left her behind in the effective tundra of a room she had created. “…Yes.”

Coincidentally enough, just as Steven, Mabel, and Grenda were trudging back from the pool, fanning themselves off all the while from the heat Ruby had unwittingly subjected them to, Dipper, Connie, and Candy emerged from the frozen room, all three of them more than glad to be out in the balmy summer night’s air after their frigid stint with Sapphire.

“H-hey, you guys,” Steven panted as the two groups converged, all of them taking a seat on the curb near the room. “How’d it go with Sapphire?”

“N-not so great,” Connie admitted, still largely chilled to the bone. “She’s pretty dead set on thinking that Ruby the wrong one here and that she’ll eventually realize that which means they don’t need to talk things out.”

“And then she froze the entire room over!” Candy added fretfully. “Including the toilet…”
“That’s… basically what Ruby said about Sapphire…” Mabel frowned worriedly.

“Before she accidentally boiled the three of us in the pool!” Grenda huffed hotly.

“Well, that’s… not really that surprising,” Dipper remarked dryly. “You know, despite basically being opposites with the whole fire and ice thing, those two really are pretty similar, especially when it comes to how stubborn they are. No wonder they usually get along so well.”

“Well, I wish they were getting along now…” Steven sighed sadly as he flopped onto his back. “What are we gonna do, you guys? We can’t just… let them stay mad at each other like this! Its great seeing Ruby and Sapphire again, yeah, but I already miss Garnet so much! What if… what if they never make up a-and they never form Garnet again!?”

“Aw, Steven…” Connie said, placing a sympathetic hand on the young Gem’s shoulder. “I’m sure they’ll make up sooner or later.”

“Yeah, and until they do, we’ll just have to step our ‘romance expert’ game up so we can really help them get back together!” Mabel proclaimed with a daring grin.

“Or… maybe we should just leave well enough alone,” Dipper countered, rubbings his arms in a continuous attempt to warm them up. “After all, the last thing I wanna do right now is step back into ‘Antarctica’ in there.”

Despite their somewhat lowered spirits, this did manage to get something of a small laugh out of the kids, one that was all too short lived as they quickly returned to their former dejection over their failed missions. While they all figured that the squabble between Ruby and Sapphire would end eventually, the underlying fear still existed, however small it was, that this conflict between them would last, that they’d stay fixed in their positions and refuse to find some sort of compromise. That, worst of all, they’d never see Garnet again as a result.

Fortunately though, none of them had too much of a chance to stew in such unsavory thoughts as the bright, telltale headlights from an oncoming RV encompassed all of them. As soon as their eyes adjusted to the light, they were able to see that the camper had indeed returned, now with a set of brand new car wash brushes tied to the roof.

“Hey, kids!” Greg greeted warmly as he popped out of the RV, two pizza boxes in hand. “We brought dinner!”

“Hey, Dad,” Steven replied with a halfhearted smile. “How’d it go?”

“Well, he wasn’t an axe-murderer,” the former rock star said, joining the kids on the curb. “And I didn’t have to use these babies,” Stan added as he got out of the camper, letting out a disappointed sigh as he held up his brass knuckles. “At least not this time…”

“…Which was probably a good thing,” Greg remarked, scratching the back of his neck. “Anyway, what are you kids doing outside anyway? And why are you three in your bathing suits?” he asked Steven, Mabel, and Grenda in particular before turning to Connie, Dipper, and Candy. “And why do you three look so cold? And where’s Garnet?”

“You… don’t wanna know,” Dipper deadpanned in clear exasperation.

“Uh, yeah, we kinda do,” Stan remarked, his hands on his hips. Prompted by curiosity, both Greg and Stan took a tentative peek inside the boys’ room, only to find it largely frozen over, ice and frost coating the walls, the floor, and just about everything else. And of course, Sapphire still
remained sitting on the bed, still completely unmoving, though she did briefly turn to the pair, her expression completely unmoved as she offered them a bizarre, almost ominous prediction. “They’re not gonna like that its square…”

At this, the conman and the former rock star quickly closed the door, leaving the blue Gem to her privacy as they both turned to the kids, slightly baffled. “Oh great…” Stan grumbled, rolling his eyes knowingly. “Those two again…”

“Uh… where’s the other one?” Greg asked worriedly, glancing around for any sign of Ruby.

“She’s pacing around in what used to be the pool,” Grenda informed, pointing over to the now completely dried up pool, where the red Gem was still marching around and muttering angrily to herself.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Mabel interjected, her eyes wide with newfound curiosity as she looked between Greg and Stan. “You guys have both met Ruby and Sapphire before?!”

“A… few times,” the former rock star admitted. “Its not like they’re really around that much seeing as how Garnet’s usually pretty steady.”

“Then how come you never bothered to tell us that she was a fusion all that time?” Dipper asked, giving Stan in particular a critical glance.

“Cause it never came up,” the conman shrugged with a bit of a scoff. “What were you two runts expecting me to tell you when you got off the bus at the beginning of the summer? ‘Hey, kids! Welcome to the Mystery Shack! Keep your fingers away from the goat! The tall, square-haired lady who lives up the hill is actually just two small fries in a trench coat!’”

“Eh, yeah I guess that would probably have ruined the surprise,” Mabel noted in agreement.

“Something pretty serious must be going on if it made Garnet split up,” Greg said, getting the conversation back on track. He was quick to change gears, however, upon noticing his son’s rather forlorn expression over this fact. “B-but hey! All of us can still have a good time!” The former rock star smile as he finally opened up one of his pizza boxes, revealing something that made just about all of the kids groan in exasperation.

“Square pizza!” Steven cried fretfully. “What’s wrong with this crazy place!?”

“Son, there will come a time in your life when you learn to accept all pizza,” Greg said with a hint of sagely wisdom in his tone.

“Besides, it could be worse,” Stan remarked dryly as he grabbed a slice. “Could be street pizza from an overworked delivery guy who ya snubbed a tip to.”

Despite the conman’s attempt at bringing some levity, it didn’t really work as most of the kids still looked just as downtrodden as they had been before, especially Steven as he decided to earnestly voice his ongoing concern. “Why can’t Ruby and Sapphire just… make up?”

“Aw, Steven…” Greg frowned sympathetically, putting a hand on his son’s shoulder. “Sometimes people that love each other can hurt each other’s feelings without meaning to. We should probably just give them some space.”

“Aw, but who knows if they’ll ever talk to each other again if they don’t have help from a bunch of romance experts like us?!” Mabel asked, deeply worried.
“A bunch of what?” Stan asked, raising a confused eyebrow.

“I’m sure everything will be better in the morning,” Greg reassured warmly.

“You bet it will be,” the conman remarked with a daring smirk. “Tomorrow’s our last stop on this route of revenge against all these lesser tourist traps. Everything up until now has been a walk in the park compared to our next attraction.”

“Is it a walk in the world’s biggest park?” Candy asked curiously.

“Eh, sort of, actually,” Stan shrugged. “But I’m not saying any more about it until we wreck the place tomorrow.”

“But before that,” Greg interjected, holding a brochure he had picked up earlier. “We’ll all go to the best diner in the world, which just so happens to be right inside this place! And there, all of us, including Ruby and Sapphire, will have the best brunch in the world, which is bound to smooth things over between them!”

“You really think that’ll help?” Steven asked, hopeful.

“Nothin’ like a little breakfast to bring people together,” the former rock star nodded firmly, finally garnishing much needed smiles out of all of the kids, including his son.

“You really are my favorite dad,” Steven sighed happily, finally partaking of the square pizza as he leaned against his father.

“Heh,” Greg chuckled, sincerely hoping that he was right about his assumptions concerning the bickering Gem couple, if for no one else’s sake than Steven’s. “I knew this pizza would put me over the top.”

The next morning saw the entire group rising early to get a head start on their nearby final stop of the trip. Since Sapphire had frozen one of the rooms over entirely, Stan, Greg, and the boys had resorted to sleeping in the RV, which was fortunately much more temperate, though perhaps a bit balmy thanks to the incredibly warm aura put off by the nearby pool, or rather, the red Gem who had spent the entire night hotly pacing around in it. While the staff of Evergreen Inn were far from happy about the messes the couple had unknowingly made, Greg and Stan managed to smooth things over enough that they were able to check out without too many complications. And soon enough, they were on the road again, though fortunately it didn’t take too long for their penultimate destination to peak over the forested horizon.

“There she is, kids,” Stan scowled, gripping the steering wheel tight as a tall, mist-covered mountain loomed in the distance. “Mystery Mountain. Five times the size of the Mystery Shack, and what’s worse: she actually has real attractions.”

“Oh! I have read about this place,” Candy remarked, unfolding the brochure about the attraction she had picked up at the inn earlier. “It has a sky tram. And a mummy museum. And sightings of half human, half spider people.”

“Ooo, and a gift shop!” Steven chimed in as he took a peek at the brochure for himself.

“And that diner I was telling you kids about last night,” Greg added with a smile as he glanced over his shoulder to the rest of the passengers. “Who’s hungry for some brunch?!”
At this, all of the kids excitedly raised their hands, leaving only Ruby and Sapphire out as they sat beside each other on the couch wordlessly, both of them averting each other’s gaze as they instead devoted their attention elsewhere and maintained a noticeable distance away from each other. Still, no one made any real note of that as Stan continued showing his quite apparent envy of everything Mystery Mountain had to offer.

“Enjoy that brunch while ya can,” the conman said with a growing, vengeful smirk. “Because today, that mountain falls!”

After Stan recklessly pulled into the attraction’s parking lot and everyone filed out of the RV, they were all able to see that the conman hadn’t been exaggerating when it came to the scope of Mystery Mountain. The tourist trap was grand in scale and presentation, the mountain towering high above and carrying an all around aura of mystery and intrigue to it that actually almost felt genuine. A slow-moving sky tram carried guests up and down the massive hill, giving them a scenic view of the area, though many other tourists favored hiking the mountain’s fascinating trails as well. The place wasn’t lacking for any business at all either; satisfied tourists were abundant, all of them apparently enthralled by the secrets and surprises Mystery Mountain had in store, something that irritated Stan in particular as they all took a cursory look around.

“Ugh, stupid place thinks its so great just because they have a bunch of fog and mummies and free public restrooms,” the conman scoffed haughtily. “Well it won’t be after we’re through with it! Kids! I got five bucks for whoever can tip that big blue ox over there! Go! Go! Go!”

On this prompting, the kids all gladly hurried over to the large ceramic ox nearby to do just that, Greg rushing after them to make sure no one would hurt themselves as they all clamored up onto it. Satisfied with this, Stan prepared to join them, though he paused upon glancing back towards the RV only to notice Ruby and Sapphire both standing near it, their backs practically turned to each other and their expressions every bit as harsh/unfeeling as they had been the night before.

“You two aren’t just gonna stand there and look angry at each other, are ya?” Stan asked, giving the couple a critical glance as he turned to face them fully. “Cause I didn’t agree to bring you, or, uh… Garnet, or… or whoever along on this trip just for you to argue and do a whole bunch of nothing.”

Ruby was the first to let out a sour scoff at this, sending a fierce warning glare up at the conman before flames suddenly burst around her hand. “How’s this for nothin’, Stan?” she asked crossly, preparing to ram her flaming fist into the RV itself before Sapphire fortunately stopped her.

“No, Ruby,” the blue Gem chastised calmly, her hands folded neatly over her skirt.

“Oh, don’t tell me you’ve actually decided to care about something for a change like this dumb old RV!” Ruby growled, her hand still smoking even if the flames did diminish about.

“Well, it is our only ride home,” Sapphire pointed out rationally.

“What, you think I don’t know that?!”

“I know you know that.”

“Well, you always act like I don’t know anything!”

“I never once said that. Ever.”

“Well, ya might as well have!”
“Don’t misconstrue things, Ruby.”

“I’m not misconstruing anything! You’re the one who’s—”

“Alright, alright, enough already!” Stan suddenly interjected, severely annoyed by the couple’s ongoing bickering by this point. “Yeesh, and I thought you two were supposed to head over heels for each other. But if you’re gonna go at it like two rabid chipmunks, then clearly your relationship needs some serious work.”

“Stan,” Sapphire began evenly enough. “You really should stay out of—”

“What did you just say?” Ruby growled, her hands curled into tight fists as she scowled up at Stan.

“You heard me, shorty,” the conman shrugged, surprisingly nonchalant. “Seems to me like your ‘fling’ or whatever you two call it is heading downhill fast. Maybe you should go see one of those crackpot marriage counselors or something to help you work all this junk out. And maybe bring a firefighter along with you just in case you end up setting the whole place on fire.”

Upon hearing this, the red Gem let out an outraged shout, steam steadily rising from her all the while as Sapphire had to essentially hold her back from physically going after the still rather unphased conman. “What would you know about our relationship!?” she shouted hotly. “We’ve been together for thousands!”

“Oh really?” Stan asked, raising an unimpressed eyebrow. “Then I guess the spark between you guys really is gone after all that time. Maybe what you need is to see a good example of what real romance looks like.”

“A real romance?!” Ruby scoffed incredulously, practically shaking with rage by this point. “Why I oughta—”

“Before you say or do anything else, Stan, I should warn you that what you’re thinking is a very bad idea,” Sapphire spoke up, her manner quite firm, especially as she noticed the conman happen to glance over at the blonde, relatively older woman running the ticket booth a few feet away.

“Yeah, yeah, bad idea, schmad idea,” Stan remarked with an uncaring wave of his hand as he put on a wry, charming grin. “Watch and learn how a true master does it.”

“Again, Stan, you really shouldn’t talk to that woman,” Sapphire attempted to warn as the conman started heading over to the ticket booth. “She’s actually a—”

“Hey, there,” Stan greeted the woman casually enough as he leaned against the counter and searched his pockets briefly. “Oh, I seem to have lost my number! Can I borrow yours?”

Upon hearing this corny pickup line, Ruby let out a disgusted groan and Sapphire shook her head disapprovingly. The woman, however, was seemingly taken by the conman’s flirting as she let out a loud, apparently amused chuckle. “Oh, you are a riot!” she exclaimed laughingly. “What brings you here? We don’t normally get men so handsome around these parts!”

“Heh, well—” Stan cut himself off briefly to steal a glance at the woman’s nametag. “Darlene, between you and me, what I’m doing here is a little secret.”

“Oh, you seem like a man with secrets,” Darlene coed, leaning forward in intrigue. “You know, I’m going on a break. You wanna take the sky tram up to Widow’s Peak?”

“Only if I go with a looker like you,” Stan remarked coyly as Darlene got out of the ticket booth.
“Ohh, fancy!” the woman grinned wryly, taking the arm the conman as offering to her. As the pair headed off on their so-called ‘date’, Stan stole a glance back at Ruby and Sapphire, offering them a smug, triumphant grin before he left them alone for a beat of awkward silence.

“Uh… what did we just watch?” Ruby asked, still quite put off by the previous display of tawdry flirting.

“A mistake,” Sapphire deadpanned in response, her future vision making the outcome of this situation quite clear. “Trust me.”

“Well, we managed to tip that ox over without breaking any bones or getting caught,” Greg said with a relieved smile as he returned to the couple a moment later. “Uh… hey, where’s Mr. Pines?”

“He’s busy showing us what a ‘real’ relationship looks like,” Ruby grumbled, her arms crossed as she glared in the direction the conman had just left in.

“Um… ok?” Greg frowned in confusion. “I guess he’s gonna miss brunch then… Kids, come on! That diner’s right over here!”

Upon mention of a much-needed meal, the kids all readily hurried over from the remains of the now fallen ox, more than eager to follow the former rock star to the so-called ‘best diner in the world’. Of course, the place was really just a modest, run of the mill all-day breakfast joint, tucked away at the base of Mystery Mountain for its guests to have a decent meal before exploring the attraction. All the same, the group got a sizable booth, one that was fortunately large enough to accommodate everyone as they waited for their food to come in a mostly comfortable silence. That is, save for the still largely ongoing tension between Ruby and Sapphire as they sat next to each other, refusing to really even spare each other so much as a second glance. Fortunately though, the diner was quick with its service, and before anyone really had a chance to bring this tension to light, everyone’s breakfasts arrived, including the meals that the former rock star had decided to order for the Gem couple, who had failed to do so for themselves.

“Aw, an eggs and bacon smiley face!” Mabel cheered upon receiving her meal. “It’s deliciously cheerful!”

“It is almost too adorable to eat!” Candy chimed in just as brightly, even as Grenda began hungrily scarfing her own food down beside her.

“What’s the matter?” Greg asked curiously upon noticing that Ruby was simply staring blankly at the food in front of her. “Not hungry?”

“Gems don’t need to eat, Dad,” Steven reminded as he took a bite of his bacon.

“Eh… well, Garnet likes to eat sometimes,” the former rock star pointed out with a shrug.

“AUGH!” Ruby suddenly snapped, throwing herself back against the back of the booth bitterly. “Well, Garnet’s not here right now!”

“Man, and I thought last night was awkward…” Dipper remarked to Connie in a very aside whisper.

“Tell me about it…” Connie replied with a frown, one that all of the kids gradually shared as a quite uncomfortable silence settled in at the table. With the Gem couple as at ends as they were, no one quite knew what to say or do as they simply ate their breakfasts quietly, hoping that this awkward brunch would pass by soon enough. Even so, Greg couldn’t help but steal a glance over at Steven, who had pressed himself close to the table, a fretful expression on his face as he absenty
cut into his eggs, though he hardly seemed interested in eating as he devoted his worried attention to pair of quarreling Gems across the table from him. Clearly, the young Gem was quite dejected over Garnet’s split and Ruby and Sapphire’s still-ongoing bickering, or at least that’s what Greg assumed as he tried to lighten the otherwise heavy mood a bit.

“Mm! Oh boy, this really is the best diner in the world!” Greg exclaimed with a bit of a forced grin. “Mr. Pines doesn’t know what he’s missing! I wonder where he is anyway…”

Given Stan’s self-perceived talent when it came to wooing women, he had found it rather easy to keep up the flirtatious dynamic he had built up with Darlene earlier going as they ventured into the so-called “Giant Spider Forest”. Given that the trail was seeped in deep fog, dense forestation, and creeping spider webs, it carried a bit of an ominous vibe to it, though the conman attempted to play this off as romantic as he led his date to sit down on a nearby bunch to relax for a bit.

“Oh, are you sure you wanna go this deep into the forest?” Darlene asked with exaggerated concern. “It’s soooo scary.”

“Heh, don’t worry, toots,” Stan smirked, wrapping an arm around her shoulder. “That spider people stuff is just an urban legend. I can’t believe people fall for it.”

“Ooo, you’re so brave…” Darlene cooed almost knowingly.

“What can I say?” the conman shrugged obliviously. “I’m a real catch.”

“Yeah, you sure are…” the woman’s grin turned rather sinister. With a simple blink of her eyes, they turned black completely, irises completely gone as her voice distorted and dark as an alarming transformation began to take place. “The catch of the day…”

“Oh… did your contacts fall out or-” the conman’s confusion was quickly replaced with apt fear as Darlene changed completely before him, her size and number of legs tripling as her unassuming appearance turned into something truly monstrous. Something that was more than eager to trap Stan in the tightened web he had unknowingly gotten himself entangled in.

Despite Greg’s best efforts of starting up a conversation, the brunch table was still largely seeped in awkward silence. That is, until Ruby absently began bumping the bottom of the table with her impatiently tapping foot.

“You’re shaking the table,” Sapphire broke her longstanding silence to point out, her manner calm as she glanced over at the red Gem.

“OH?!” Ruby suddenly slammed her fist down on the table, growing increasingly frustrated by the second. “I’m kinda surprised you felt anything at all, to be honest!”

“I didn’t need to feel,” Sapphire countered evenly. “I saw.”

“Oh, everything’s just so CRYSTAL CLEAR TO YOU, ISN’T IT?!” Ruby shouted, now actively shaking the table out of her sheer, unabridged fury. Everyone else was quick to lift their plates off the rapidly quaking table to avoid making a mess, all of them watching the Gem couple with wide eyes out of slight fear of what might transpire next.

“This will pass,” Sapphire reassured them over Ruby’s noisy raging. “She’ll eventually just burn herself out and-”

“That’s what you think!” the red Gem snapped, summoning her single gauntlet and holding her fists high above the table. “I AM AN ENTERNAL FLAME, BABY!” And with that outraged
“You don’t know me!” Ruby shouted at the blue Gem, standing up on her seat. “You always act like you know everything.”

“How could I possibly not know you?” Sapphire retorted even as Ruby continued over her. “We always fuse. Why are you being so-”

“But you don’t even know yourself! You just wanna pretend that-”

“-Difficult, look at yourself. Look at what you’re going on about, you’re being ridiculous about.”

As this seemingly ceaseless bickering between the two Gems continued, the kids largely just watched in stunned dread, all of them knowing better than to try and intervene in such a heated conflict. Steven, however, was by far the most upset by this unexpected explosion, one that demonstrated to him that things between Ruby and Sapphire were showing no signs of getting better any time soon. If anything, it only looked like they were going to get worse.

“H-hey, it’s ok, pal!” Greg quickly attempted to reassure his son, especially as he noticed tears starting to well up in his eyes. “We can still save this! Why don’t we just bag all this up to go and-”

The former rock star was abruptly interrupted by Steven suddenly tossing his plate onto the floor, where it shattered instantly. At this, Ruby and Sapphire’s fighting came to a stark halt as everyone turned to look to the young Gem in alarm, only to find his fledgling tears finally falling as he promptly stood and rushed out of the diner without saying a single word.

“Aw geez…” Greg sighed sympathetically, scratching the back of his neck as he watched his upset son retreat.

“Should we go after him?” Connie asked, unanimously worried about Steven along with the rest of the kids.

“Eh, I think maybe we should just give him a little time by-” Once again, Greg was cut off, only this time by Ruby and Sapphire as they both darted up out of their seats, their expressions rife with concern and guilt as they hurried off after the young Gem themselves. “On second thought…” the former rock star frowned as he looked between the door and the messy remains of what used to be the table before them. A mess that he wasn’t entirely sure how he was going to deal with, if he was perfectly honest. “Maybe we should go too…”

As Steven ran out towards the nearest cluster of trees closest to the restaurant, he let out one of the several sobs he had been holding in ever since Garnet had first split up. And yet, in reality, it was likely a sob that he had been holding in much longer than that, since Pearl’s deception against Garnet was uncovered, since the Gems had recovered their lost memories. Since he had ruined the tight-knit bond between his guardians by uncovering those apparently bitter memories in the first place.

It was hardly a new thought for the young Gem, the realization that all of the tension and grief that had been transpiring between the Gems as of late was entirely his fault, but as he faced that thought now, it was perhaps the most painful it had ever been. Because Steven knew that if he had never found that memory tube, if he had never reunited the Gems with echoes of the past that were clearly better left forgotten, then certainly none of this would have happened. Certainly, Pearl
wouldn’t have felt the need to heal her own pain by tricking Garnet into forming Sardonyx. Certainly, Ruby and Sapphire wouldn’t have split apart and their usually strong relationship wouldn’t have crumbled apart as a result of this schism. Certainly, the Crystal Gems would still be the strong, healthy, inseparable group Steven had always known them to be if it wasn’t for him, for his meddling, for his reckless need to fix his mother’s massive mistakes. True, he had given them back their lost memories. But what he had taken from them in doing so was something arguably even more important than those memories altogether: their unity.

And the worst part of it all was, that unlike their memories, that precious, missing unity was something he hadn’t the faintest idea about how to restore to them whatsoever.

“Steven!” the young Gem’s mournful musings were interrupted by a simultaneous cry, one that came from Ruby and Sapphire as they hurried out of the diner to find him. Greg and the others weren’t too far behind, but unlike the Gem couple, they lingered back, knowing that this wasn’t really their place to intervene considering how poorly their previous attempts had turned out.

With another harsh sob, Steven turned to the couple as they approached, not even trying to hide his disappointment and dejection as he instead finally let it all out. “I was so happy when Garnet said she was gonna come on this trip with us!” he began sharply yet still sadly. “Home’s been awful. Here’s been awful! I thought you wanted to have a fun time but… everyone’s been acting awful too! I-it just came with us! I don’t understand!” He let out a deep breath, one that really didn’t do anything to calm him down as he instead looked to the ground in tearful guilt. “Is… is it me? Is it because I found your memories? B-because… I thought that would make things better, that you guys getting your memories back meant that you wouldn’t be so lost and confused anymore. But I was wrong. It only made things worse. I only made things worse…”

“No!” Ruby readily exclaimed, catching the morose young Gem off guard. “Steven, you didn’t make anything worse! It was all us!”

“Steven, you returned something very important to all of us when you found our memories,” Sapphire assured, her tone shaken, yet serious. “Something that we’ve been missing for years. True, what we saw was… unexpected, but what’s been happening isn’t your fault. It’s…” The blue Gem trailed off, pauseing for a moment as she looked down with dawning shame and realization before looking to Ruby with a soft gasp. “It was us…”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Both Steven and the Gem couple were caught off guard upon hearing Greg, who was suddenly quite alarmed as he stood alongside the other kids, taking on the phone to someone. “Slow down, Mr. Pines. You’re where?!”

Before Stan could explain, Greg put his phone on speaker so that everyone could hear his concerning, but oddly enough not very urgent message. “I’m sorta… tied up at the moment… literally,” Stan said, keeping his phone pressed to his shoulder as his hands were pinned in the web cocoon he was entangled in courtesy of Darlene. “Turns out the lady tried romancing to show Thing 1 and Thing 2 up is actually one of those spider people. But beyond that, the date’s been ok.”

“Wait, what?” Dipper asked with apt surprise upon hearing this.

“Oh no! Grunkle Stan!” Mabel cried with fretful concern.

“To be fair, I tried to warn him,” Sapphire remarked, having anticipated this turn of events all along.

“Yeah, it was weird,” Stan remarked, still largely not too apparently worried about his current
plight. “One minute we’re having the perfect date, and the next minute, she’s growing extra legs and encasing me in webbing. Women, right?”

“You couldn’t tell she was a spider?” Connie asked rather incredulously.

“Hey, I was blinded by flattery!” Stan exclaimed defensively as he repositioned his phone. “Also, the acid she spit in my face. Anyway, I’m up at the mountain at Widow’s Peak.”

“Uh, o-ok, we’re on our way, Mr. Pines!” Greg assured, though he was rather anxious about the idea of facing off against a spider person. “Stay put!”

“…I don’t really have much of a choice, Greg,” the conman deadpanned, glancing down at his web-encased body that was essentially stuck to the floor of Darlene’s spider cave.

“Alright, kids, looks like we better go save Mr. Pines before he gets eaten by that evil spider lady,” Greg said to the kids before pausing for a brief beat. “Huh. Well there’s something I never thought I’d say.”

Not wasting time on any further deliberation, Greg and the kids hurried off to the nearest trail, hoping to rescue Stan before it was too late. Ruby was the first to follow after them, knowing that she was obligated to help since the conman had indirectly gotten himself into this mess because he had been trying to prove a point to her and Sapphire. However, before she could really go anywhere, Sapphire suddenly stopped her by unexpectedly grabbing her hand.

“R-Ruby, wait,” the blue Gem sighed, glancing down with clear remorse. “I-I-”

“Hey, i-it… it’s ok,” Ruby assured, her tone calmer than it had been since they had split up as she placed a tentative hand over her partner’s. “We’ll, uh… we’ll figure all this out when we get back, alright?”

Sapphire hesitated, rather caught off guard by how Ruby wanted to talk things out instead of projecting her anger as she had been all this time. Still, she knew that now wasn’t the time for such discussion; now was the time for action. “R-right…” she nodded, her voice quiet as she hurried after the red Gem. Both of them still could feel the unsteadiness between them, an unsteadiness that was unfamiliar and unwelcome given how open and close they usually were. But at the very least, this newfound armistice between them was something, even if it was really nothing more than just a start.

No sooner had Stan gotten off the phone with Greg than the phone itself was snatched out of his hand by a sudden burst of sticky webbing from Darlene. The spider woman caught the phone squarely, her upper half still in her prior human guise though her lower half was completely spider-like, complete with eight legs, a thorax, and all. Even so, she seemed to be quite satisfied with her latest “catch” as she skittered forward, sending Stan a triumphant grin all the while.

“Tryin’ to escape, huh?” she asked, raising a knowing eyebrow before she ultimately tossed the phone to the ground, breaking it.

“You tricked me!” Stan shot back harshly. “I’m 80% certain you don’t really love me at all!”

“Ha!” Darlene laughed coldly. “Men will fall for anything. ‘Oh, you’re so funny, great story, I love a man with shoulder hair!’”
“Y-you didn’t mean it about my shoulder hair?” the conman asked, genuinely offended.

“Tell me, Stan,” Darlene ignored him as she stepped a bit closer. “Before I transformed, who’d you think was in charge here? You, with your cheesy pickup lines and your ‘knack’ for ‘romance’? Please. I’m the master pickup artist here, so sorry, toots! This time you’re getting used for your body! Which, to my weird species, is food. Allow me to slip into something more horrifying.” At this, Darlene used her frontmost legs to pull the remains of her human skin down, unveiling her frighteningly grotesque, full spider form, much to Stan’s apt alarm.

“A-aw, geez, all I wanted to do was show two annoying, tiny lovebirds up!” the conman exclaimed fearfully, cringing as he watched Darlene maneuver her mandibles hungrily.

“Well ya should have thought twice before you decided to get tangled up with me,” Darlene goaded smugly before fortunately turning away. “Now, I wonder what beverage pairs well with a vintage 70-something old man? Be right back!” she called, heading deeper into the cave and leaving Stan on his own, as completely trapped and vulnerable as ever.

“Please,” the conman began, glancing up pleadingly. “I don’t know if you’re really up there or not, but if you are… please save me, Paul Bunyan!”

“Mr. Pines!”

“Whoa, did that actually work?” Stan jolted as this unexpected voice called out for him, only to spot Greg, the kids, Ruby, and Sapphire all rush into the cave to rescue him. With a steady battle cry, Grenda rammed into the conman, freeing him from the stalk of webbing holding him in place.

“I realize now might not be the best time to say I told you so,” Sapphire remarked to Stan as stoically as ever. “But-

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” Stan rolled his eyes in exasperation. “The last thing I need right now is you grilling me. Or, uh, I guess… icing me? Ugh, forget it.”

“Uh, t-that spider woman isn’t anywhere around here, is she?” Greg asked nervously as the kids worked on freeing Stan from the rest of the webbing.

“No, but she will be if we don’t hurry and hightail it outta here already!” the conman exclaimed, haphazardly picking himself up off the ground and leading the way out of the cave. And the group made it out just in time too as they slipped out right as Darlene happened to notice that her hostage had been freed.

“No!” the spider woman shouted, skittering out of the cave on all eight of her thin legs. “Get back here!”

Knowing that Darlene would be hot on their tails, the group rushed for what they unanimously assumed would be the quickest way down the mountain: the sky tram.

“Quick! Everyone get on!” Candy shouted, making it to the tram first as everyone crowded into one of its cars.

“Haha! Yes!” Mabel cheered once they were all safely onboard.

“Ride like the wind, sky tram!” Stan exclaimed, glancing out the window in the hopes that Darlene wasn’t chasing them. However, instead of the tram zooming down the line to the bottom of the mountain as they had hoped, it instead began to crawl down it at speeds that were almost painfully slow.
“Welcome to Trambiance,” the tram’s built in recorded greeting announced in a calm voice, completely contrasting to the current situation. “The world’s slowest tram ride. Enjoy the sights at 0.1 miles per hour.”

“Ugh! Move! Move! Move!” Grenda shouted, slamming her foot down on the floor of the tram in an attempt to make it move.

“Seriously? Can’t this thing go any faster?” Dipper asked anxiously.

“No, it can’t,” the recording answered almost knowingly. “This is Trambiance.”

“Uh, i-it looks like she’s coming!” Connie exclaimed fearfully as she pointed out the window to Darlene, who had already hopped onto the tram line and was jumping from tram to tram, searching for the one containing her missing prey.

“Enjoying the view?” the recording asked innocently as the tram line rocked violently. “Take a picture!”

“We’re doomed!” Stan shouted, his eyes wide as he spotted Darlene drawing dangerously close to their tram.

“No we’re not!” Ruby growled, her hands in tight fists as she looked around the tram. “Cause I got a plan. But uh…” The red Gem trailed off, her confidence dissipating as she glanced over at her partner almost anxiously before she continued. “Sapphire, I-I… I know you think I don’t know a lot compared to you, but… I-I need you to trust me on this one and help me. Y-you know… if you want to…”

“Oh, Ruby…” Sapphire sighed, her manner rather sad and remorseful as she briefly glanced down. For a moment, it looked as though the blue Gem wanted to say quite a bit to her partner, but of course, given the dire straits they were currently all in, such sentiments would have to wait. “O-of course, I trust you. And I know your plan is going to work. So, what do you need me to do?”

Ruby offered Sapphire a warm, thankful smile at this, glad for the confidence and support that she hadn’t really felt from her in quite some time. But of course, despite how happy she was with it, the red Gem was quick to focus her attention back on the matter at hand. “I need you to freeze the box connecting the tram to the rail until it breaks off,” she began, her tone firm and steady. “I’ll keep 8-legs out there busy while you do. Everyone else, hold on! Things are about to heat up.”

With a smirk, Ruby summoned her gauntlet, punching through the nearest window just as Darlene launched herself towards the tram. She didn’t get far though, as before she could land, the red Gem lashed out, a bust of intensely hot flames flying out of her first and towards the spider woman with great speed. Though Darlene maundered out of its path and landed on another tram instead, she failed to notice the thick layer of frost that had begun coating the connector box on the tram.

Sapphire maintained her focus well, even as everyone else was panicking around her as the tram shook from Ruby sending out wave after wave of fire at Darlene in the hopes of keeping her repelled. Few of her flames hit their mark, but that wasn’t exactly the intention anyway. At most, they were a simple distraction while Sapphire worked away at freezing the connector, and, sure enough, it began to crumble under the intensity of the cold being pressed upon it. With a simple nod from the blue Gem, Ruby let up, allowing Darlene to finally make her approach and land squarely on top of the tram car, only for it’s frozen connector to finally give way with her added weight pressed upon it.

Everyone inside the tram did their best to maintain a hold on anything they could as the car itself began rolling down the side of the mountain roughly, Darlene following not too far behind. As it
neared the bottom, Ruby and Sapphire both reacted accordingly, with the red Gem using a burst of strong flame to launch the car one last time while the blue Gem created a sizable snow drift for it to land in. Fortunately, the car hit its mark, the soft snow cushioning its otherwise abrupt landing as it barreled into the Paul Bunyan statue near the parking lot. In one last ditch attempt to recapture her pray, Darlene shot a string of web at the now still tram car, only for the large statue to end up falling squarely on top of her right as she zoomed by it. The spider woman let out a surprised cry as the statue’s foot pinned her down, and despite her best efforts to wriggle free from its firm hold, she found that she was ultimately unable to do anything to escape from under it.

“Augh! My only weakness! A giant boot!” Darlene grumbled in defeat. “A giant newspaper or a giant cup would’ve also been pretty bad.”

After making sure no one was injured from the fall, everyone climbed out of the fallen tram car, tumbling through the snow drift and back onto solid ground as the recording offered one final farewell. “Thank you for riding Trambience sky tram. Tell your friends it was a boring, boring ride!”

“You guys, that was amazing!” Steven exclaimed to Ruby and Sapphire, stars in his eyes. “The way you two worked together back there, I gotta admit, it… it was really nice to see that again.”

“Yeah, who knew you guys could kick just as much butt apart as you can when you’re fused?” Mabel asked with a wide smile.

“Eh, it wasn’t that great,” Stan deadpanned, hands on his hips until Greg gave him a bit of a prompting elbowing. “Ow! Uh, I mean… I guess I was wrong about the whole ‘relationship’ thing I was going on about earlier. Not that you two would know much more than I do though, what with all that all that yelling and magic you’ve been tossin’ at each other all day.”

“Uh, Grunkle Stan, I’m pretty sure its safe to say that Ruby and Sapphire know more about relationships than most people do,” Dipper remarked somewhat sardonically, to which Stan only let out a disbelieving scoff to.

“Actually… no…” Sapphire interjected, holding her hands close as she frowned morosely. “He’s right. We… we really don’t know much about keeping a healthy relationship. Or… at least I don’t…”

“S-Sapphire?” Ruby asked, suddenly concerned as she took a step closer to her partner.

“I can’t believe how blind I was this whole time…” the blue Gem said, her voice almost a whisper as she shook her head in shame. “I couldn’t even see what was right in front of me. W-we made Steven feel like… like this was all his fault…” Steven frowned as he heard this, though he didn’t interrupt, instead opting to listen with apt concern as Sapphire continued, her voice starting to choke up with clearly oncoming tears, especially as she finally looked over to Ruby. “I keep looking into the future, when all of this has already been solved… a-as if it doesn’t matter how you feel in the present.” By this point, a few of the blue Gem’s tears had already started to fall, streaking right down the center of her face as she let out a guilty sob that she was unable to suppress any longer. “No wonder you think I don’t care!”

For a moment, Ruby was starkly silent, her eyes wide as she took in her lover’s distress with growing panic that quickly rose to the surface the moment Sapphire started crying. “No no no no no!” she exclaimed, shaking her head frantically. “This is all my fault! I-I didn’t want to look for a solution! I just wanted to be mad! Y-you’re right, you’re always right! I was just being stupid-”

“I don’t think you’re stupid!” Sapphire quickly countered, deeply upset by even voicing such a
ludicrous thought at all.

A beat of unsteady silence followed after this, but when Ruby finally broke it, her voice was small, soft, perhaps even a bit sad as she finally reached out to touch her distraught lover gently. “I… I’m sorry…” she whispered, brushing the bangs out of Sapphire’s face to reveal the source of her mournful tears: a large, singular, light blue eye in place of where two would normally be. And while the kids were somewhat surprised to see this, to Ruby, this sight was perhaps one of the most beautiful she had ever had the privilege of seeing as many times as she had before.

“You honestly think I’m not upset about what happened?” Sapphire asked just as gently, her tears still streaming down from her lone eye until Ruby slowly wiped it away. “I was just… trying to do the right thing…”

“I know…” Ruby admitted as Sapphire pressed her hand against her own, letting out a small, but comforted sigh as she did. Silence lingered between the pair for a bit, one that was filled with regrets that were finally starting to lift as they at long last started to reach an understanding. It was true that the pain of the past few days had left them both in quite a painful spot, but now more than ever, they both knew that the only way they could move past such profound pain was by doing what they always did: standing together. And perhaps, through their support, through their solace, through they love, they could go on. After all, even though they were as different as fire and ice, they belonged together. They always had, and they always would, and no amount of restored memories or deceptive betrayals could ever change that fact. “You know what’s nice about being split up?” Ruby asked a moment later, a small, almost coy smirk slowly appearing on her face.

“W-what?” Sapphire asked, somewhat concerned, though by this point her tears were mostly gone.

“I get to look at you,” Ruby grinned fully, not even bothering to hide her flirtatious manner whatsoever.

“Pfft, be serious!” Sapphire laughed, pushing her lover away from her playfully, though Ruby was quick to pull her right back into a fond embrace.

“There’s my Laughy Sapphy!” the red Gem exclaimed happily, joining her partner in a warm, welcome gale of laughter.

“Shh! You’re embarrassing me in front of the kids!” Sapphire blushed deep blue, stealing a glance over at said kids, who were all still watching this exchange with apt intrigue. While Steven, Dipper, and Connie looked away upon this mention in slight flusterment, Mabel, Candy, and Grenda were all more than eager to watch the admittedly adorable interactions between the Gem couple, especially as Ruby took things in an even more romantic direction.

Without warning, the red Gem hoisted her lover up into her strong arms, eliciting a surprised, but delighted gasp from Sapphire, who laughingly accepted every single gentle kiss Ruby peppered across her cheek and neck. This bout of playful affection continued between the pair even as everyone else decided to give the couple their privacy, though not without complaint in some instances.

“Ugh, geez, get a room already,” Stan remarked dryly, though his comments were largely unheard by the still-cuddling couple.

“Well, what do you know?” Connie remarked to the other kids with a small smile. “It looks like they really did work things out after all.”

“And its all thanks to us being a bunch of awesome love experts!” Mabel concluded with ample
satisfaction.

“Love experts! Love experts!” Grenda cheered in boisterous support.

“Uh, I’m pretty sure what just happened here had basically nothing to do with us,” Dipper remarked, crossing his arms. “But if you wanna keep thinking that, then I guess nothing’s stopping you.”

“Well, I don’t care how it happened, I’m just glad to see those two finally getting along again…” Steven said with a tired, but relieved smile. “And who knows? Maybe this means things really will start to get better back home after all…”

The other kids all offered the young Gem a round of reassuring smiles at this, though they were soon interrupted as Greg joined them, having just emerged from the diner. “Well, I paid for brunch,” he reported. “…And the damage to the booth… As for that tram car, well…”

“Who said anything about paying for that?” Stan interjected with a scoff. “We’re here to prank this place, remember? Not pay for damages and tell them to ‘have a nice day’ like a bunch of armatures would.”

“…A-anywho…” Greg continued after a beat of awkward silence. “I think I’m all vacationed out. Anyone else ready to call it a day and head home?”

The kids prepared to answer this, but before they could, they were suddenly distracted by a bright, familiar burst of light nearby, one that signaled the return of a fusion that they had all sorely been missing. “Not before we get our free ice,” Garnet grinned as she stood tall and confident once more, no signs of Ruby and Sapphire’s unsteadiness or disagreement remaining as the usual harmony between them had returned in full force.

“Garnet!” the kids all exclaimed in excited unison, running up to embrace the Gem leader, who accepted them with a warm, amused hug. The levity of the moment was short lived however, as Darlene interrupted from her spot still pinned underneath Paul Bunyan’s large wooden boot.

“Staaaaaany!” she called to the conman, pulling her human guise back over her upper half as she offered him a flirtatious wave. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what came over me! You’ll let me out, right?”

“What? After all that?” Stan asked harshly. “Seriously, do I look like an amnesiac?”

“Ha! You’re so funny!” Darlene falsely complimented, pulling her pickup tricks on the conman once again. “Have you ever considered becoming a comedian?”

“You know, actually I have!” Stan grinned proudly, falling for the bait. “Comedy is too subtle these days. My style involves more over-sized props. Here, let me get you out, right?”

Fortunately, the kids managed to pull the conman away from the spider woman just before he could foolishly release her, even as she reverted back into her full spider form and reached out to take a bite out of him. “Oh yeah, right,” Stan said stiffly, remembering just how dangerous Darlene was, even despite her fake womanly wiles.

“You win this round, Stan!” the spider woman growled in angry disappointment. “But mark my words: as long as there’s men like you out there, with their dumb one-liners and pickup moves, I’ll never run out of prey!”

“Mm, actually, I think you will.” Garnet interjected, crossing her arms knowingly. “After all, Stan
only fell for your tricks because he’s *really* gullible.”

“Hey!” Stan exclaimed hotly, sending the Gem leader an offended glare. “You know, I kinda liked it better when you split up. At least then you two were too busy ragging on each other to get on my case.”

“Well sorry to disappoint you, Stan,” Garnet remarked with a hint of a wry smirk, one that grew into a genuine smile as she glanced down to Steven, who was still happily hugging her leg in lieu of her long-awaited return. “But I don’t plan on going anywhere for a *long* time.”

Though the ride was rather lengthy, the group ended up making it back to Gravity Falls before the sun even sank over the distant hills. After dropping Connie, Candy, and Grenda off at their respective homes, Stan did the same for Steven, Greg, and Garnet as he let them off at the base of the temple hill. After waving goodbye to the Pines, the trio headed up to the house, Garnet toting the bag of ice they had gotten from Mystery Mountain as Steven happily hung in between her and his father, genuinely glad to home now that he carried the belief that things would, in time, start to fix themselves. And really, that was all the young Gem could really hope for.

“We’re home!” Steven proclaimed as they burst into the house. Pearl and Amethyst both happened to be in the living room, carrying on a rather low-tone, serious conversation that came to an abrupt end as soon as the door opened.

“O-oh! You’re back!” Pearl exclaimed, somewhat startled as Amethyst removed her hand from her knee to wave at Steven and Greg. “Uh… y-you look like you all had fun!”

“Yeah!” Steven said with a smile of clear relief. “Everything worked out!”

Pearl prepared to say something more, though she stopped short upon noticing Garnet step inside behind Steven and Greg, her expression largely neutral as she began to make her way over to the temple gate. “Um… G-Garnet, how are you?” the white Gem asked, her tone anxious and tentative.

However, unlike before, the Gem leader didn’t simply ignore her. Rather, she put a calm hand up, pausing briefly as she spoke authoritatively, but fortunately, not angrily either. “Not now,” was all she said before she disappeared into the temple, leaving Pearl rather shocked by this exchange, however short it was.

“S-she… she’s speaking to me again…” the white Gem mused in both surprise and relief. “Well, kind of…”

“You know, that really *was* a great trip,” Greg grinned as he placed a hand on his son’s shoulder.

“Can we go back?” Steven asked eagerly, excited stars in his eyes.

“Uh, maybe one day… but *not* to that diner!” Greg paused for an awkward beat, knowing that they had all been effectively banned from that diner thanks to the destruction Ruby had caused. Not that he had any intentions of telling Steven that. “Oh boy…”

“This trip was so much *fun*!” Mabel exclaimed as the RV neared the Mystery Shack. “We *gotta* do
“Eh, leave the spider people outta it and I’m down,” Stan remarked with a shrug.

“You know, I still feel a little bad about wrecking all those tourist traps,” Dipper said somewhat apprehensively.

“Ah, come on,” Stan said with an unconcerned wave of his hand. “Everyone loves my pranks! And the best part is, I never have to face any consequen—SWEET LORD!”

The RV came to a screeching halt as they arrived back at the shack, only to find that it was in the midst of being completely ransacked by the proprietors of the tourist traps they had just pranked. Toilet paper was streamed all across the building, and several rather rude tags had been left on just about ever surface with spray paint. In their round of destruction, they had even ended up shattering several windows and defacing the shack’s signage by removing several of its letters entirely so that it read ‘Mr. Hack’, no doubt a direct dig intended for Stan himself.

“Oh come on!” the conman shouted fretfully as he jumped out of the RV, the twins following not too far behind. “I just got this place fixed up from the last time it got destroyed!”

Upon realizing that they had been caught in the act, the other tourist trap owners quickly began to flee, their work already completed as they all laughed triumphantly at Stan’s misfortune. Still, to add insult to injury, one of the owners used their baseball bat to quickly smash the headlights of the nearby RV out, much to Stan’s continued surprise.

“That’s what you get!” the owner shouted fiercely before following the others off into the woods. “That’s what you get!”

“I don’t understand!” Stan exclaimed to the kids, looking over the absolutely ruinous state the Mystery Shack was now in. “I completely don’t deserve this!”

Of course, matters were only made worse when Ford happened to emerge from the shack, apparently unaware of the damage done to his home as he instead greeted his family casually enough. “Oh, you’re all finally back,” he said, offering the twins a brief smile though he didn’t really bother to do the same for Stan. “Strange, for a moment I thought you had returned earlier since I heard some sort of odd banging noise a while ago, but I just figured it was—” The author sharply cut himself off upon stealing a glance at the shack behind him, one that was more than enough to shock and enrage him all at once. “Stanley!” he shouted, correctly placing the blame for this disaster.

“Kids, get back in the RV,” Stan said starkly, already pushing the twins in that direction so he could avoid Ford’s very obvious fury.

“Grunkle Stan, wha—” Mabel attempted to ask before the conman quickly interrupted.

“RV, now!” he ordered again, rushing into the camper before the author could catch him.

“Stanley, no!” Ford yelled hotly, even as Stan put the RV into reverse and began peeling backwards into the woods in what was, by all accounts, yet another daring escape. “Get back here and explain the meaning of this mess immediately! Stanley!”

“Aw, geez…” Stan muttered to himself, glancing out the side view mirror to see that Ford was angrily running after him, intent on making him answer for the destruction done to his home. “I wonder if it’s too late to go back to Mystery Mountain and have Darlene eat me. It’d be better than
having to deal with this, that’s for sure…”
Chapter 55: The Stanchurian Candidate

Chapter Summary

In which Stan runs for mayor, Amethyst is mad, the kids have some moral quandaries, and I wanna bash my brains in because we're still in the low point of this fucking arc.

Chapter Notes

Ugh yeah much like the last chapter I'm not too crazy about this one either. But hey at least we are getting ever closer to the more interesting stuff in this arc so at least that's something. Hope you enjoy this one anyway! (keyword is BURGLEBEZZLE)

Since he no longer had the portal to work on in secret each night, Stan had recently taken to falling into a much more regular sleeping schedule than he had been keeping for the past 30 years. Still, that additional sleep hardly did much to help his largely exhausted and aching bones, which was something he was acutely aware of every morning when he woke up, and this one was no exception to that.

“Ugh…” the conman groaned to himself as his eyes slowly opened. The comfort of his bed attempted to tether him down to it, but unfortunately he knew that with work to be done in the gift shop and the museum, he couldn’t just lay about all day, as much as he wished he could. “Alright, Stan, another day, another random body pain. Here we go…” With a steadying breath, Stan slowly lifted himself up out of bed, only to feel a rather tight arthritic ache in his back. Despite his small hiss of pain, the conman forced himself to move despite it, only to receive another unfortunate surprise in slipping into his bedroom slippers only to realize they were strangely soaking wet.

“Augh! What the-"

Stan stopped short upon noticing the unmistakably colorful, glittery note lying on his nearby nightstand, one that just so happened to explain exactly how his slippers had ended up becoming saturated sponges: “Dear Stan, I needed something to carry milk in, so I used your slippers. Love, Mabel.” Somewhat disturbed by his niece’s unorthodox idea, the conman shuddered but still kept his milk-soaked slippers on all the same as he tiredly trudged to the kitchen to get some quick breakfast. He soon received another unwelcome surprise, however, as he flipped the kitchen light switch on, only for the bulb to bust out as soon as he did. With an exasperated sigh, Stan went to retrieve a replacement from the nearby cabinet, but instead of finding any lightbulbs, he only discovered an empty box and another note in their place. “Dear Stan, I used these to build a planetarium suit for Soos. Sorry! Dipper.”

Upon reading this, the conman couldn’t help but let out another angry groan as he crumbled the
note, feeling quite inconvenienced as he prepared to head out to the store to buy new lightbulbs. Trying to make this trip out as short and painless as possible, Stan quickly retrieved a new box of bulbs and headed for the checkout, only to soon receive another aggravation in the form of the group of teens who had gathered in line behind him.

“Whoa, let’s not take this line,” Lee remarked to Robbie, Tambry, and the others in the group in a not very discreet whisper. “There’s an old person in it.”

“Pfft, yeah,” Robbie agreed, his arm slung around his girlfriend’s shoulder as he rolled his eyes. “He’s probably gonna pay with like, pennies, or war bonds.”

“Hey!” Stan snapped, fiercely turning around to face the impetuous teens. “For your information, I was gonna shoplift most of this!”

“Security!” the nearby cashier called out, having clearly heard the conman’s blatant confession. However, as far as Stan was concerned, he was more than ready for the trio of security guards already running his way.

“Ha! Smoke bomb!” he proclaimed, tossing one down that he always had on hand. However, the bomb didn’t end up erupting due to its long past 1996 expiration date, much to his continued frustration. “Aw, seriously!?” he exclaimed just moments shy of being tackled by the guards, who promptly forced him to pay for goods that would have been much easily stolen if not for his apparent tactlessness.

With the drive home being as relatively uninteresting as always, the conman couldn’t help but smirk even in spite of his earlier misfortune as he thought about his plans to tell Amethyst about the twins’ annoying shenanigans and his own failed attempt at shoplifting later on so that they could plot out a scheme to get even with those who had wronged them. However, those plan quickly fell through as Stan was hit was the all too harsh reminder that he hadn’t spoken with the purple Gem since the portal incident really. Based on the hints she had given him the last time they had seen each other, as well as what he heard from the kids, Amethyst was apparently still quite upset with him, but, for the most part, he didn’t quite understand. True, there had been plenty of times in the past when the two of them had had their petty differences, but never had the radio silence of anger lasted between the pair for this long. Of course, Stan knew that he could always follow up on the advice Steven had given him the other day and travel up to the temple to make amends with Amethyst himself. The only problem with that when it came to repairing their apparently tarnished friendship, the conman had no idea where to even start.

Even so, Stan put those thoughts aside as he arrived back at the shack, lightbulbs in tow and a small, relieved grin on his face as he headed to the kitchen once more. “Ugh, rough start to the day…” the conman remarked to himself as he looked down at the box of lightbulbs he was carrying. “But it’ll all be worth it when I fix that light bul-”

Stan stopped short in the kitchen doorway only to find the twins and Soos congregated around Ford, who was in the midst of, oddly enough, replacing the broken lightbulb. “Aaaaand… done!” the author proclaimed proudly, eliciting a round of relieved cheers from the kids and the handyman.

“Does anyone see this?” Mabel asked, throwing an arm out to Ford with a beaming grin. “This is what a true hero looks like right here!”

“I thought we were out of lightbulbs,” Stan noted, his already displeased frown growing at his brother’s apparent ‘heroism’.
“Oh, we were,” Ford acknowledged. “So I invented my own! It’ll last a thousand years and the light it emits makes your skin softer.” As the kids let out a round of impressed musing over this, Stan sighed in annoyance, something that the author didn’t seem to catch as he continued. “So anyway, where were you?”

The conman didn’t respond, instead making his disappointment rather clear as he dropped the lightbulbs he had just bought right into the nearby trash bin. A rather fitting place for them, he figured, since they were just as useless as he now seemed to be.

“Well, TV, at least you still appreciate me,” Stan remarked as he settled into his recliner before the television in the den. “Give me the good news.”

“This just in,” Shandra Jimenez announced on the news almost as soon as the conman turned the TV on. “The mayor is stepping down from office.”

“What?!” Stan exclaimed, startled by this very sudden news.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Dipper asked as him and Mabel entered the den, having heard their grunkle’s shocked proclamation.

“In a completely unexpected move, Mayor Dewey has officially announced his resignation this morning,” the news continued, showing the mayor himself give a speech. “In his lengthy tenure in office, Dewey was best known for the development of downtown’s “Dewey Park”, leading out in the “Great Handship Evacuation”, and putting town menace Gideon Gleeful behind bars, in actual adult prison. In his resignation statement, Dewey professed his belief that its time for Gravity Falls to be helmed under new leadership.”

“People of Gravity Falls!” Dewey proclaimed as delivered his speech to the rather bored crowd before him. “My family has been serving our fair town here for generations, ever since my great ancestor William Dewey pioneered himself as Gravity Falls’ very first mayor! His son followed in his footsteps, as did his son, and I followed after him to create the Gravity Falls we all know and love today! Now, I know how difficult it can be to say goodbye, especially to a mayor as charming and beloved as yours truly! But my days as your dutiful mayor must come to an end so I can really enjoy the finer things in life. Like spending my days practicing my swing out on the putting green or building expensive monuments dedicated to my legacy using tax-payers’ dollars. Speaking of which… I’m pleased to announce this!” The soon to be former mayor pulled the tarp off a nearby canvas, unveiling an artist’s rendition of a statufied monument featuring him and his trio of mayoral ancestors that had each presided over Gravity Falls in the past. “Mount Deweymore! Coming to a mountainside near you! Get your commemorative T-shirts, hats, and drinking mugs now!”

After this, the feed cut back to the newsroom, where Jimenez was currently leaning against her cohost, pouring out her joyous tears. “I—I’m sorry, its just… its been so long since we’ve had real news. I’m just so happy!”

As the anchor continued sobbing blissfully, her co-host was quick to fill in and finish the report. “There will be a town hall meeting this afternoon to discuss finding a replacement mayor.”

“New mayor, huh?” Stan mused thoughtfully, a smirk spreading across his face as a sudden idea came to him. One that could, perhaps, prove that he wasn’t so ‘useless’ after all. “Wonder who it could be…”

Like all news usually did, word of Mayor Dewey’s resignation spread fast throughout Gravity Falls, and as a result, most of its denizens turned up for the meeting in town hall that afternoon. By the time Stan, Dipper, Mabel, and Soos got there, there was hardly any place to sit in the rather tiny hall at all, though fortunately they found a seat thanks to Steven, who happened to notice them enter and immediately waved them over to join him and Greg.

“Hey, you guys!” the young Gem greeted the Pines as they sat down next to him. “Can you believe Mayor Dewey is retiring? It feels like he’s been the mayor of Gravity Falls since forever!”

“Well, ever since before I came here, at least,” Greg added with a small smile.

“Whoa… then that means he’s been in charge for a super long time, huh?” Mabel mused, aptly amazed.

“Uh… w-well not that long,” the former rock star chuckled, somewhat flustered by the implication.

“Dewey’s been the head honcho around here for too long if ya ask me,” Stan remarked, crossing his arms. “It’s about time someone else takes charge and starts running this town right for a change. And by right, I mean getting rid of that stupid van with that dumb giant head of his sticking up on the roof of it. Its literally the tackiest thing I’ve ever seen; and considering I run the Mystery Shack, that’s saying something.”

Almost as soon as the conman had finished his rant, Mayor Dewey took the podium up front to begin the proceedings. “Alright, everyone, settle down, its my turn to speak!” the gathered crowd quieted down at this, yet for some reason the mayor continued cautioning them to silence. “Ah ah ah! I said quiet down! And… thank you. Now, we’re here to choose a new mayor for the first time since I humbly took the position over from my father several years ago. I realize that the shoes I’m leaving behind are metaphorically very big ones, despite the fact that I personally only wear a size 8!” Dewey paused for a beat, waiting to get a reaction from the crowd to his joke, only to be met with awkward, understanding silence, prompting him to continue in exasperation. “A-anyway… According to the town charter,” the mayor pulled open a rather old scroll, one that released a good bit of dust and moths as soon as he unfurled it. “A worthy mayoral candidate is defined as anyone who can cast a shadow, count to ten, and throw his hat into the provided ring.”

Dewey motioned down to below the podium, where Sherriff Blubbs and Deputy Durland were placing a large hoop down onto the floor. Almost as soon as they put it down, however, the first hat fell into it, one that was boldly thrown in by a certain used car lot owner.

“Well now! I do believe I fulfill all the requirements!” Bud exclaimed, rising from his seat and surprising a good majority of the townsfolk by this unexpected claim to candidacy.

“Wait, Bud Gleeful?” Dipper asked incredulously.

“As in, Gideon’s dad?” Steven echoed just as concerned.

“He looks good! Ya know, considering we threw his son in jail,” Mabel noted.

“That was a good day,” Stan remarked, leaning back into his seat with a satisfied grin.

“May I, Mayor?” Bud asked Dewey as he walked up to the podium.

“Be me guest,” the current mayor backed off, far more interested in selling his ‘commemorative mayor-mobilia’ off to the side of the stage than really spearheading this meeting any further.
“Now folks,” Bud began, addressing the crowd with a flair of southern sincerity. “I know our family’s had its fair share of whoopsie daisies in the past. But I’d like to make up for it by formally announcin’ my candidacy for mayor of Gravity Falls! Any questions?”

“Yes!” Toby Determined exclaimed, standing up with a microphone and notepad in hand. “Are you still in contact with Lil’ Gideon?”

“That’s a great question—I’m givin’ you 50% off a used car!” Bud quickly diverted, essentially taking all thought away from the Gideon question altogether.

“Fifty percent? FIFTY PERCENT!” Toby cried, ripping his notepad clean in half out of sheer excitement alone.

“In fact, everyone look under your seats!” Bud proclaimed as the townsfolk did so to find half off coupons placed under every one of them. “You get 50% off a used car! And you get 50% off a used car!”

“Wow, a colorful piece of paper?” Mabel remarked in amazement as she retrieved her own coupon. “He’s got my vote!”

“Guys, I’ve got a really bad feeling about Bud Gleeful as mayor,” Dipper said, rather aptly worried.

“I dunno, dude,” Soos remarked with a shrug. “It’s not like we have a ton of good mayor options. Everyone in this town is a tad strange. Except, ironically, Tad Strange.”

“Hi, guys,” an exceptionally normal man sitting in the crowd greeted plainly. “Tad’s the name, being normal is my game.”

“Loving you, Tad!” Mabel exclaimed, pointing to him brightly.

“And I love bread,” Tad said, holding a slice of normal white bread up.

“Hm… oh! I have an idea!” Steven exclaimed, turning to Greg. “Dad, why don’t you run for mayor? You’re super wise and really dependable. I think you’d do a great job!”

“Aww, thanks, kiddo, but I don’t really know if I’m cut out for the whole mayor gig,” Greg said with a small chuckle. “Just cause I know how to play a mean guitar riff doesn’t really mean I know how to make budgets or pass bills. Plus, I don’t even have a hat to toss up there even if I wanted to.”

“Aaw…” Steven sighed in disappointment. “Well… who knows? Maybe Mr. Gleeful really does just wanna make up for everything Gideon did and help the town out.”

“I doubt it,” Dipper remarked dryly. “It’s a shame Ford isn’t here. He’d run, and win! And be a great mayor!”

Up until this point, Stan really didn’t have too much to say about Bud’s unfolding, seemingly unopposed candidacy. However, upon hearing his nephew’s sentiment that his brother, of all people, would succeed at something like this above practically everyone else, including him, he found that he really couldn’t remain silent or inactive on the matter any longer. Especially considering the stakes at hand here if Bud really did end up winning after all.

“So, since everyone’s happy,” the car salesman continued with a warm, satisfied grin. “I’ll just take the oath of office now, sound good, Soon-to-be-Former Mayor Dewey?”
“Huh?” Dewey turned away from his cart of merchandise, apparently uninterested with the proceedings. “Oh, uh, yes, we’ll get to that in just a-”

The current mayor was interrupted as another hat suddenly landed in the ring, a hat that was none other than an iconic red fez that unmistakably belonged to the conman who had just rose to the occasion. “Hold it right there, Bud!” Stan exclaimed boldly. “I’m taking you on!”

A collective gasp rose from the crowd at this, none of them having really expected any actual competition to come about, much less any from someone like Stan. Likewise, Dipper, Mabel, and Steven were perhaps the most surprised by this, all three of them knowing, despite the strengths that Stan did have when it came to things like showmanship, fraud, and lying, solid leadership didn’t seem to be among that list.

“Stanford?” Bud scoffed right off the bat as Stan marched up to the podium. “No offense, but you’re just some two-bit carnival barker! And your head is more ears than face!”

“Oh yeah?” the conman goaded crossly. “Well, your face is more fat… than… not fat!”

The crowd gasped once more upon hearing this slam, though needless to say that everyone present was quite engrossed in this newfound conflict for office, including Mayor Dewey himself.

“What do ya say, folks?” Stan turned to address the crowd brazenly. “Are we just gonna let Bud win? How about a real election for a change?!”

As opposed to a gasp, a rousing cheer arose from the audience, as several other townsfolk tossed their own hats into the ring just out of sheer excitement alone. While the conman doubted most of them would actually run, he was pleasantly surprised by the positive reaction, one that would hopefully continue as he set out on this daunting path to the mayoral office.

“Well, looks like we’ve got some competition here, folks!” Bud laughed, seemingly amicable. “Which I’m completely fine with!” However, as the crowd continued in their noisy frenzy, the car salesman’s tune quickly changed as he suddenly leaned over the podium and spun Stan around unexpectedly, his voice low and sour as he addressed the conman in almost a whisper. “I was gonna let bygones be bygones, Stan, but you just made a powerful enemy. I’ll win either way, and when I do, you might not like the Gravity Falls you wake up in!” Bud finished this rather ominous threat off by punching a hole right over the Mystery Shack in the large map of Gravity Falls hanging on the wall behind him. While Stan wasn’t that phased by this, the kids certainly were as they all let out quiet gasps of fear as the crowd began erupting into a round of wild, excited chanting.

“Election! Election! Election!”

“A-and don’t forget to buy your exclusive, limited edition Mayor Dewey pins on the way out!” Dewey attempted shouting above the crowd as they began to file out of the hall. “While supplies and my remaining tenure as mayor last!”

“Let the madness begin!” Sheriff Blubbs exclaimed as him and Durland set off the old, rusty canon near the hall’s entrance, officially signifying that the race for the next mayor of Gravity Falls had indeed begun.

“Wow, Mr. Pines,” Greg remarked, heading up to meet Stan up front along with the kids. “I never thought I’d say something like this, but good luck in running for mayor!”

“Luck?” Stan scoffed. “Please, Greg, I don’t need luck. I got plenty of charisma to carry me
through this election. At least more than some obnoxious hick like Bud does.”

“Uh, Grunkle Stan, what are you doing?” Dipper interjected, getting right to the point of his lingering concern.

“Running for mayor!” the conman reiterated. “Did I… did I not make that clear?”

“Um… yeah, you did,” Steven acknowledged with a bit of an apprehensive, but still somewhat supportive smile.

“Grunkle Stan, it’s not that we think you can’t do it,” Mabel said hesitantly. “I-it’s just-”

“No, no, its ok, Mabel,” Dipper interrupted before turning back to Stan and offering him the blunt truth. “We don’t think you can do it.”

Stan let out a bit of an exasperated sigh upon hearing this, but even so, he figured he’d be honest with his doubtful nibblings as he knelt down to their level. “Look, kids, Dewey randomly retiring like this got me thinkin’. I’m an old man, and I’m not getting any younger. My dumb brother’s research is probably gonna make him famous one of these days. And what do I have to show for my life? Do I really want ‘crooked grifter’ on my tombstone? How about ‘crooked mayor’!”

“Um, wouldn’t you want ‘honest mayor’ on your tombstone instead?” Steven asked rather tentatively.

“Come on, kid,” Stan rolled his eyes. “I may be a chronic liar while I’m alive but the last thing I want is to take a blatant lie like that to the grave.”

“Psst, you guys, we need to talk,” Dipper interjected, diverting Mabel and Steven as Stan continued detailing what few campaign plans he had to Greg and Soos. “I know Stan isn’t the best candidate. Heck, he’s even committing voter fraud right now.” He nodded back to the conman, who was currently trying to forcefully shove a large number of voting slips into the ballot box near the podium. “But Bud’s definitely up to something and we’re the only ones that can stop him.”

“You’re right, Dipper,” Mabel nodded affirmatively. “Besides, Stan has a kind-of charisma. How hard could getting him elected be?”

“Yeah!” Steven chimed in brightly. “Plus, who knows? Maybe Mr. Pines will actually make a really great mayor if he wins!” At this, the young Gem was met with a pair of very skeptical, doubtful glances from the twins, which was enough to quickly make him retract a bit of his idealistic confidence. “Or… maybe we could just get him elected and hope for the best from there?”

“That’s the spirit!” Mabel proclaimed, pulling out patriotic hats and stickers and slapping them on herself and the boys. True, getting Stan into the coveted mayor seat wouldn’t be the easiest task in the world, but considering the alternative, they had no choice but to try their hardest to see it happen all the same.

In only about one day’s time, the Mystery Shack had been completely transformed into the unofficial headquarters for Stan’s mayoral campaign. With ample help from Soos, Wendy, Greg, Candy, and Grenda the kids had produced a plethora of posters, buttons, stickers, signs, and flags, all of them bearing the same vibrant message of ‘vote Stan!’ A large part of the morning had been spent distributing these campaign promotions around town, but the afternoon had been reserved for
something even more important than any of them: a radio interview that was set to be broadcast all throughout Gravity Falls. One that, if all went well, would give perspective voters the feel they needed as to what the conman was like and prompt them to lend him their much-needed support.

“Spread the word, pig!” Wendy quipped as she finished spray painting ‘Swines 4 Pines’ and ‘Bud’s a Dud’ onto Waddles.

“Come on, Lion, you gotta keep the hat on!” Steven urged his pink pet as he tried his hardest to position a campaign hat onto his fluffy mane. Of course, Lion hardly cooperated, instead opting to knock the hat off his head and bite down on it instead as if it were just a chew toy. “Lion, no!” the young Gem protested, trying in vain to pull it away from him. “Let go of it! We only had so many of those made. Lion!”

“Alright, everybody, eyes up here!” Dipper called, drawing everyone’s scattered attention towards the rather old document he had found for this exact purpose. “Ok, Gravity Falls’ elections are based on two events: the Wednesday Stump Speech, held on an actual… stump. And then the Friday Debate, wherein townsfolk throw birdseed at the candidate they like most. At the end, they release a ‘freedom eagle’, who will fly to the candidate covered in the most birdseed and bestow a ‘birdly kiss’ upon him, appointing him mayor.” A beat of confused silence passed at this as everyone took in the town’s rather bizarre election proceedings before Dipper finished, echoing their bewilderment. “I couldn’t make any of this up if I wanted to.”

“Man, who could have guessed that even the way this town elects is mayors is weird?” Greg remarked, somewhat bemused.

“Ok, Grunkle Stan!” Mabel exclaimed, beckoning the conman over to the phone she had just answered. “Are you ready for your first big radio interview?”

“I got my mouth, don’t I?” Stan deadpanned with clear confidence.

“Ok, you’re on with the candidate,” Mabel said to the radio station on the other line just as their segment on Stan began, one that Dipper, Steven, Soos, and Wendy were readily monitoring on the air all the while.

“You’re listening to Falls Radio: 24 hour news and bear rampage alerts,” the usual voiceover announced. “And now here’s the T-Man!”

“Hello!” Toby Determined greeted as awkwardly as ever before addressing Stan on the phone. “Candidate Stan, first question: How do you feel about the American flag?”

“Meh,” Stan shrugged with far too much honesty for the circumstances at hand. “I can take it or leave it, too many stripes. Next question.”

“What would you do to help educate our kids?” Toby asked next, carrying the interview right along.

“Ha, simple!” the conman replied with a broad smile. “Put them on an island and make them fight for dominance. Also, teach kids swears. That’ll bring them into the real world.”

Upon hearing this blunt tactlessness, just about everyone else in the shack looked to each other with apt worry, all of them knowing that Stan’s incredibly politically incorrect answers couldn’t possibly be helping to bolster his chances in the polls at all.

“What would you do about the crime in Gravity Falls?”
“Wait, do you mean crime in general, or just the specific crimes committed by m-” Stan stopped short as the line suddenly went dead as a result of Dipper cutting it just in time.

“Ok, interview’s over,” he said succinctly, knowing that he had just saved Stan from making things any worse in the nick of time. “Candy, what’s the damage?”

“You approval ratings started at zero,” Candy reported, looking at a live feed of the polls on her laptop. “Now it’s a number less than zero.”

“You’re memeing fast and none of them are good,” Wendy added, holding up her phone to show a meme of Stan that read ‘one does not simply teach kids swears’.

“And the angry emails are already starting to pour in…” Steven noted, scrolling through his own phone. “Yikes, this one has just about every single word Pearl’s told me I should never say.”

“Look, Grunkle Stan,” Mabel began, calmly enough. “People are like smell markers, and you’re black licorice! Its not that you’re unsniffable. You just need to learn when to keep the cap on.”

“From now on, maybe you should just read our prepared remarks,” Dipper cautioned, handing Stan a short speech him and Mabel had collaborated on the previous night. However, despite their efforts, Stan simply laughed them off, pocketing the speech and dismissing it entirely in favor of his own charisma, or lack thereof.

“Heh, sorry, kids,” the conman remarked wryly. “I always say the words that come right outta my brain. If my head says that lady’s got an ugly baby, my mouth says, ‘hey, lady, you got one ugly baby!’”

“Oh boy… this is… pretty bad…” Mabel said to Steven and Dipper as soon as Stan had walked out of earshot. “At this rate, Grunkle Stan’s gonna lose for sure!”

“Well, we can’t just give up!” Steven persisted earnestly. “Maybe we just need to come up with a new plan to help him win! Like getting some outside help from someone who-”

At that exact same moment, both Steven and Dipper gasped, their eyes widening in timely realization with two drastically different thoughts in mind. “I have an idea!” both boys exclaimed at the same time, both of them equally excited, though their hasty unison continued even still. “Oh! So do I! That’s great! Be back in a while! See ya!”

And with that, both boys ran off in opposite directions to enact their newfound ideas, leaving an aptly amazed Mabel behind in wake of their unplanned yet almost perfect synchronization. “… What just happened?”

“And he’s insisting on speaking his mind!” Dipper finished detailing the disaster that was Stan’s campaign so far to Ford, who had been leafing through one of his journals throughout most of the story, though he had listened intently all the same.

“So, this is an emergency,” the author noted, realizing the severity of the situation. After all, if anyone knew just how callous and loose with his words Stan could be, it was him.

“The Stump Speech is in a couple of days,” Dipper continued, not even hiding how worried he was. “And if he continues like this, we’ll lose to Bud for sure!”
“Hm… it’s a shame there isn’t some device that will allow you to control someone else and stem the tide of any offensive or uninformed remarks they could possibly make…” Ford mused before reaching a quick realization. “Oh, wait. Of course there is.” The author turned to the desk behind him and pulled out something that Dipper hadn’t really expected: a patriotically striped tie with a small golden dial attached to the front of it. “A long time ago, I designed a prototype for Ronald Regan’s masters,” Ford explained, handing the device over to his nephew. “Just get Stan to wear this, and you can make him a literal talking head.”

“Whoa…” Dipper said, astonished as he peered inside the tie to see a complex array of circuitry hiding within it. “This is amazing! And ethically ambiguous!”

Ford nodded, pulling out another, much plainer tie to go along with the mind controlling one. “As long as you wear the matching one, he’ll say and do whatever you want him to.”

“This is perfect!” Dipper exclaimed, excited at the new, much more safer angle they’d be able to take with this tie factored in. “Thank you, Great Uncle Ford!”

“Yes, yes!” Ford turned back to his work as he waved his nephew off, apparently unconcerned with the somewhat concerning implications of the device he had just given him. “Use it responsibly and all that.”

“And if we don’t help Mr. Pines win, then Gideon’s dad will be the new mayor! And who knows what’ll happen then?” Steven finished his own explanation of the recent happenings, his tone quite worried as he looked desperately to the Gem he had detailed this all too. Unfortunately, she seemed to be far from worried herself as she reclined on the couch, trying her best to block the young Gem out entirely.

“And I should care about any of this… why?” Amethyst asked, her expression set in a cold scowl as she kept her eyes closed and her manner bitter.

“I just told you why!” Steven pressed. “Gideon’s dad? Becoming mayor? Doesn’t that worry you at least a little?”

“Not really,” the purple Gem shrugged. “Besides, even if I did care, why would I wanna help Stan with anything anyway?”

“B-because you guys are best friends!” Steven implored, trying his best to hide the fact that his reasoning for asking Amethyst for help was twofold. Not only did he want to get some much-needed assistance in helping Stan win the election, but he knew that the pair had been at ends for quite some time now. And perhaps a chance to work together like the infamously well-suited team they were once more would be just what they needed to repair the usually strong bond between them. The only problem was getting Amethyst to agree in the first place. “I just think you’d make a really great running mate for Mr. Pines. I mean, you’re one of the Crystal Gems, a protector of Gravity Falls! A lot of people around here really do respect you guys and the things that you do. If adding you onto his ballot doesn’t help boost his ratings, I don’t know what will!”

“Ugh…” Amethyst groaned loudly, rolling onto her stomach. “Steven, this is a dumb plan, and its not gonna work. Nobody’s gonna wanna vote for Stan because nobody can trust him. I know I don’t…” she said in a rather low mutter. “At least not anymore…”

“But… b-but…” Steven stammered, stammering as he realized his ship was sinking fast on this
and he had to do anything he could to save it. “But Mr. Pines could really use your help!”

“Oh he does, huh?” the purple Gem deadpanned harshly. “I guess that’s why he asked me to help him with that stupid portal, right? Oh wait, he didn’t. He didn’t even bother to tell me about that, did he? Cause why would he actually be honest for a change, even with me?!” With this angry exclamation, Amethyst rammed her fist into the wall closest to her, the bang rattling throughout the entire house and leaving a dense, anxious silence in its place.

It took Steven a moment to fill this silence, but when he did, his tone was solemn and sincere as he offered the purple Gem a sympathetic frown. “Amethyst… if all this is really about what happened with the portal… then why don’t you just go tell Mr. Pines about how you’ve been feeling instead of just staying up here by yourself and being angry about it? For you know, talking about it might help you both finally feel better.”

“What’s there to talk about?” Amethyst sighed, turning away from the young Gem. “Stan coned everyone for years, including me. ‘He’s the one person I really feel like I can be myself around’, ha, sure,” the purple Gem sardonically echoed what she had declared to her teammates in the portal room. “Problem with that is that he was never actually himself around me or anyone else for that matter. So why would he try and start being honest about things now, just cause he wants to be some big important mayor or something.”

“But he just wants to-”

“Forget it, Steven,” Amethyst huffed, hopping up from the couch to head into the temple. “I’m not helping him. Not now, not ever. I’m not as dumb as you think. I don’t need someone like Stan leading me on and lying to me and pretending like nothing’s wrong when just about everything is wrong. Especially now…”

Steven hesitated upon hearing this, a part of him wanting to leave Amethyst alone with her feelings that she clearly still needed to work through. But another, more persistent part of him had a feeling that getting her on board with this election campaign would help everyone in more ways than one. “Amethyst, I didn’t want to have to do this, but you leave me with no choice…” the young Gem began, his tone serious for a moment before he suddenly leapt at the purple Gem, clinging onto her leg and keeping her from making any further progress towards the temple. “Please help us!” he wailed, forcing tears as he kept his hold on her leg, even despite her attempts to shake him.

“Ugh, Steven, cut it out!” Amethyst exclaimed hotly. “Let go of my leg, you little weirdo! I already told you I’m not doing it!”

“But we need you!” Steven begged morosely. “If you don’t want to do it for Mr. Pines, at least do it for it for me, Dipper, and Mabel!”

“No, I’m not gonna do it for anyone!” the purple Gem argued back crossly.

“Pleaaaaaaase?” the young Gem pleaded relentlessly. “I’ll do anything! I’m on my knees, begging for your help, and you’re the only one I can go to for this!”

“Says who?” Amethyst grunted, struggling to continue on to the temple.

“Says me!”

“Augh, Steven!”

“Amethyst!”
“Steven!”

“Amethyst!”

“Steven!”

“Amethyst!”

The purple Gem snapped around to fire another aggravated retort at the young Gem, only to stop short upon seeing the absolutely tearful expression on his face, one that made her anger start to melt almost immediately. “Oh come on…” she groaned, rolling her eyes. “You know I can’t say no to that dumb face…”

“So… you’ll help?” Steven ventured, still keeping the waterworks on for good measure.

For a moment, Amethyst said nothing, her scowl lingering as she crossed her arms and looked away. Steven briefly thought he’d have to resort to continued begging once more, but fortunately, the purple Gem’s ongoing resistance finally folded as she let out a deeply annoyed sigh of acceptance, knowing that, as far as the young Gem was concerned, she really had no other choice. “Ugh… *fine…* I’ll be Stan’s ‘running mate’, whatever the heck that means. But *don’t* expect me to be happy about it.”

“I won’t!” Steven chimed, instantly back to a wide smile as he jumped up off the ground, no signs of his former desperate tears whatsoever. “At least not at first. Who knows? Maybe that’ll change after you and Mr. Pines get back into the swing of being a team again.”

“Yeah, no, I seriously doubt that, Steven,” Amethyst remarked begrudgingly following the young Gem out the door to head down to the shack, though not before letting out a small, wistful sigh to herself all the same. “I seriously doubt that…”

“Make sure to get my good side, Soos,” Stan said as he posed for the array of campaign photos Soos was in the middle of taking. “We’re gonna need to show it off as much as possible since apparently the kids think I bombed the radio interview earlier.”

“I think you did a pretty good job, Mr. Pines,” the handyman said earnestly as he snapped another photo.

“You’re darn right I did!” the conman exclaimed. “Those runts don’t know squat about how a *real* politician gets it done. If the people want ‘honesty’ and ‘transparency’, then I’ll knock ‘em upside the heads with both of those things until they can’t see straight and they check my name off while they’re dizzy and voting!”

“Whoa… that strategy’s gotta be ahead of its time!” Soos complimented, duly impressed.

“You can say that again,” Stan grinned. His ongoing photo session was soon interrupted, however, as Steven came bounding down from the temple, calling out for Stan all the while.

“Mr. Pines! I have some great news!” the young Gem exclaimed, coming to a stop beside Soos.

“I already won the election?” the conman guessed with a surprised smile. “Ha! I knew that bit about putting kids on an island to fight to the death would win people over!”
“Um… no, actually,” Steven frowned briefly before quickly perking up. “The good news is that I found a running mate to help you win the election!”

“A running mate, huh?” Stan raised a curious eyebrow. “Well… I guess that couldn’t really hurt anything at this point. Who exactly did you have in mind, kid?”

“Well, I-” Steven was cut off as Amethyst suddenly plopped down to the ground beside him seemingly out of nowhere.

“Yo,” she deadpanned, not to Stan, but more to Steven and Soos than anyone else. All the same, her manner was still annoyed and cross as she all but averted the conman’s rather surprised gaze.

“Aw, Amethyst! You ruined the surprise!” the young Gem pouted. “I was gonna make this big huge announcement and everything, but you came in too early!”

“Oh well,” the purple Gem shrugged, completely unconcerned as she crossed her arms and glared at the ground.

“Uh… h-hey, Amethyst,” Stan greeted almost hesitantly, offering her the sincerest smile he could muster. All the same, Amethyst didn’t really respond to it outside of a cold, apathetic nod, entirely rebuffing his meager attempt at friendliness and showing that she wasn’t really interested in it altogether.

“Um… w-well its really great to see you two talking to each other again,” Steven commented apprehensively. “The only thing we’re missing here his the whole… ‘talking’ part…”

“Steven!” Mabel suddenly interrupted, poking her head around from the other side of the shack. “Come here! Dipper wants to show us something! Soos, you come too!”

“Oh my way, dude!” Soos called, already heading over.

“Me too!” Steven exclaimed before briefly turning back to Stan and Amethyst. “Um… why don’t you guys take some time to… plan out a campaign strategy or something like that? You know, maybe put that awesome teamwork you guys are so famous for to some good use?”

“Yeah, whatever, Steven,” Amethyst huffed dryly, not even paying the young Gem’s brief concern any mind as he hurried off to catch up with the others.

“So…” Stan began with a bit of an awkward cough after Steven had left. “The kid roped you into this whole election thing, huh?”

“Guess so,” the purple Gem shrugged again, still not meeting the conman’s gaze.

“Well, uh… glad to have you on board,” Stan said, trying his very best to not step on Amethyst’s toes, especially not now. “You wouldn’t happen to know a sure fire way to get people actually like me, would ya?”

“Not when it comes to you, I don’t,” Amethyst replied, her tone completely humorless where humor usually would have been.

Even so, Stan let out a small, anxious chuckle, one that was rather forced, even though he tried to play it off like it wasn’t. “Heh, r-right…” A somewhat lengthy, somewhat uncomfortable bout of silence followed after this, one that was more than enough to prompt the purple Gem to turn and leave for the time being. However, before she could really slip away, Stan happened to stop her really only on a whim and little else. “Uh, Amethyst, wait,” he began, hesitating as she stopped but
didn’t turn to face him. While the conman wasn’t one to find himself at a loss for words that often, he certainly was now as he realized he had absolutely no idea how to convey what he’d been wanting to say to the purple Gem for quite some time now. So instead, he went with the only other thing he could really think of at the moment: callous humor. “Uh… you wanna teach some kids how to swear?”

At this, the purple Gem’s shoulders dropped as a result of not receiving what she wanted to hear and without another word, she left, leaving the still quite uncertain conman behind. “Oh, um… I-I… I guess not…”

“So wait, I still don’t understand,” Steven remarked as the handyman walked out of earshot. “How is a tie supposed to help Mr. Pines win the election?”

“Like I said, Steven, it’s no ordinary tie,” Dipper reassured, handing its matching other over to Mabel. “Flip the switch and see what I mean.”

Mabel did so, putting the tie on and pressing its button. Almost as soon as she did, Soos seized up from his spot in the yard, his expression just about completely blank until his movements began to mimic Mabel’s just about perfectly, even as she decided to experiment a bit by breaking into song. “Oh-oh-oh! I’m a dancing dude!” she sang and the handyman sang right along with her, dancing perfectly in sync as she did. “I got some fancy moves and a bad attitude!” With this demonstration complete, Mabel flipped the tie off once more, laughing in apt surprise over how well it worked. “Ha! That was amazing!”

“G-guys!” Soos shouted up to the kids, back in control of his own body once more as he panted and sweated frantically from the prior experience. “S-something weird just happened! It was like I was outside of my own head! I’m really freaked out and-”

“I am Soos-tron,” the handyman quickly interrupted himself, Mabel using the tie on him once again for another short test run. “Watch me eat this pine cone!” With that, she pretended to pick up a pine cone off the ground and eat it whole, something that Soos actually did until Mabel turned the tie off once more, resulting in the handyman going into a distraught frenzy once more.

“Oh my gosh!” Soos cried shakily, collapsing to his knees. “My entire life just flashed before my eyes! W-what’s going on?!”

“Wow! Mind control is awesome!” Mabel quipped, very impressed by incredibly technology.

“I know, right?” Dipper readily agreed. “With this, we can get Stan to say anything we want to. There’s no way we can lose to Bud now!”

“Um… I don’t know, you guys…” Steven spoke up hesitantly. “Using that tie to control everything Mr. Pines says and does… seems kind of wrong…”

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong, Steven,” Dipper countered evenly. “Letting Bud win that election. If he does, then for all we know, he could end up letting Gideon out of jail. And after the whole giant robot fiasco that nearly got us all killed a few weeks ago, that’s something I’d really rather not see happen.”
“Ditto,” Mabel added, sticking her tongue out at the mention of the child psychic who was likely still completely obsessed with her.

“I-I… I know…” Steven frowned apprehensively. “But I still think there’s gotta be a better way to get Mr. Pines elected than mind controlling him with that tie…”

“Well, I think we should use it.”

The kids all let out a shared gasp as Amethyst rounded the corner of the shack, her arms crossed and a hint of a sly grin playing on her expression. “A-Amethyst!” Dipper exclaimed, quickly hiding the mind control ties behind his back. “Uh… how much of that did you see?”

“Enough to get the gist of you guys’ plan,” the purple Gem remarked casually. “And I want in.”

“What?!” All three of the kids looked to her in surprise, none of them having expected her support on this idea given her usual camaraderie with Stan.

“B-but why?” Steven asked fretfully, alarmed that Amethyst would be alright with this.

“Cause its like you told me,” the purple Gem leaned against the side of the shack. “Stan needs all the help he can get to win this mayor thing, right? Well then, the way I see it, if ya got some weird tie that’ll take control of him and keep tabs on that runaway mouth of his, then we might as well use it.”

“That’s the whole idea,” Dipper nodded in stern agreement. “This tie is our best bet to getting Stan voted in as mayor. There really better route to go here, at least not one I can think of.”

“B-but-” Steven attempted to interject but Amethyst cut in first.

“No more buts, Steven, except Stan’s in that tie,” the purple Gem remarked dismissively, apparently seeing nothing wrong at all about all control away from her once longtime friend like this. “We’re goin’ through with the plan and its gonna work great.” Though Steven was still largely against the idea, Dipper and Mabel both let out excited cheers, relieved to know that they could save the sinking ship that was Stan’s campaign after all. As they celebrated, however, the purple Gem tucked herself back into the shadows, her brief smile turning back into a petulant scowl, one that hinted at her true intentions for agreeing to this scheme in the first place.

“And who knows?” she muttered to herself. “Maybe it’ll finally be enough to get Stan to admit he was wrong… even if it is technically against his will…”

Since Gravity Falls had had few mayoral elections in general, much less any in recent years, it was no surprise that many of its residents showed up for the “General Mayoral Stumpston Speeches”, which, as the town charter dictated, were indeed held on a large stump near the edge of the forest. As the early proceedings of the meeting were underway, Stan gathered backstage with his ‘campaign team’ consisting of Dipper, Mabel, Steven, and Amethyst, who seemed much more eager about serving as the conman’s running mate as she inconspicuously handed the mind-control tie over to him.

“Here,” she said, practically throwing it at him. “Wear this. It’ll make you look less like a chump. Slightly.”

“Ugh, I dunno, do I really have to wear this?” Stan raised an eyebrow as he begrudgingly put the tie on. “It looks like a flag threw up on me.”
“Grunkle Stan, just trust your lucky tie,” Mabel assured with a sly, knowing wink.

“And now, Stanford Pines!” the call from the main stage, and with it, the twins were quick to push Stan towards the curtain.

“You’re on, Grunkle Stan!” Mabel encouraged. “Break a leg!” As soon as the conman had made his way up to the podium, she quickly slipped the other controlling tie on, though as the group had planned, she refrained from turning it on, at least for the moment. “Ok, we’ll only jump in if he starts doing badly.”

“W-well, maybe he’ll do fine and we won’t have to jump in at all!” Steven said, still clearly anxious about this plan as a whole.

“Hiya, there!” Stan greeted the large crowd before him a bit too casually as he leaned against the podium. “Stan Pines here. Let’s get real. Do you think the women of Gravity Falls wear *too* much makeup?”

“Y-yeah, no, jump in! Jump in!” Dipper quickly urged, especially as a round of disapproving mutters rippled through the crowd.

Mabel quickly did so, switching the controlling tie on and using it to turn Stan’s rather disastrous opening completely around. “Uh, what I meant to say is… you ladies all look great! And have you done something to your hair?” the conman pointed to a specific woman in the crowd. “Girl, you are workin it!” At this, the spectating women in particular nodded their approval of Stan’s apparently genuine compliments, none of them knowing that they weren’t exactly coming from him even as he continued. “Anyway, I’m Stan Pines. You may know me as the guy who accidentally let all those bees loose in that elementary school a few years back.” As a result in Mabel’s relatively tactfulness in revealing that alarming anecdote, Dipper was quick to take action and swipe the tie away from her, putting it on and giving Stan’s ongoing speech a much safer, more patriotic stance. “But I believe in things: America, freedom, Ameri-freedom!”

A few sparse applause came from the crowd at this encouraging statement, and by now everyone was at apt attention as Stan continued, or rather the twins continued for him. “Like my opponent pointed out, I may not have a pretty face, but if you want a candidate that will listen to you, well, I’m proud to be *all* ears!” The audience erupted into supportive cheers at this, ones that only amplified as Mabel in particular decided that Stan was going to give the crowd a show. “Now, watch me break it down!” From there, the conman busted into an impromptu break dance, one that got the crowd even more excited to the point that they continued cheering even as Mabel turned the tie off and Stan wandered behind the curtain in apt confusion over what had just happened.

“Grunkle Stan, that was amazing!” Mabel exclaimed as the group received him backstage.

“Uh, y-yeah, I guess it was,” Stan shrugged, still somewhat out of the loop. “I just… sorta opened my mouth and spoke from the heart, or… gut or something. And what’s that sound? Why are people jamming their hands together?”

“Oh, that’s applause, Mr. Pines,” Steven explained with a bit of an apprehensive smile. “It means that people like you and what, uh, *you* said…”

“They… *like* me?” Stan asked, peeking out of the curtain onto to find that the crowd was cheerfully chanting his name in nothing less than unbridled support. Support that the conman didn’t exactly remembering garnishing, but was more than glad for all the same.

“There he is!” Toby Determined exclaimed, running up to the group backstage with a camera in
hand. “Mr. Pines, can we get a picture?”

“Yes, we Stan!” the group exclaimed in bright unison, all grouping together and posing for a photo for the paper. However, as soon as Toby had left and no other passerby were in the vicinity, Amethyst casually leaned over to Mabel and made sure Stan couldn’t hear her as she dropped her voice down to a whisper. “Yo, Mabel, lemme see that tie for sec.”

“Oh, Stan!” the group exclaimed in bright unison, all grouping together and posing for a photo for the paper. However, as soon as Toby had left and no other passerby were in the vicinity, Amethyst casually leaned over to Mabel and made sure Stan couldn’t hear her as she dropped her voice down to a whisper. “Yo, Mabel, lemme see that tie for sec.”

“Ok,” Mabel shrugged, seeing nothing wrong with letting the purple Gem test the tie out as she handed it over to her. A mischievous smirk crossed Amethyst’s features as she slipped it on, using it to instantly take control of Stan amidst his satisfaction for how well his speech had gone. And from there, the purple Gem saw no reason to hold back from the lowkey revenge she had been craving for quite some time now.

“Heya, kids! Its me, Stan!” Amethyst mocked and the conman followed perfectly along with her overexaggerated tone and movements. “I smell weird, my hair cut’s gross, and I gotta eat a ton of ‘fiber’ and ‘vitamins’ cause I’m super old and crusty and lame. I got a bunch of freaky secrets cause I think it makes me look cool but it really just makes me look like a shady creep.”

“Uh… Amethyst?” Steven attempted to interject, sharing a concerned glance with the twins at what they were hearing the purple Gem make the conman say, but she outright ignored their worry as she simply continued her string of outright embarrassment.

And now its time for my shady old man dance!” Amethyst continued, barely holding back laughter as she guided Stan along in a haphazard, wild frenzy of a dance, one that was nothing really more than a reckless lash of limbs that ultimately ended in a jump that the conman likely wouldn’t have been able to pull on his own accord. But to the purple Gem, the best part of it all was the resounding rip that came from the conman’s pants as she made him land in a clean split, one that elicited a wild gale of laughter from her while also prompting the kids to intervene.

“Amethyst, what are you doing?” Dipper asked in apt confusion over the purple Gem’s odd behavior. “That tie isn’t a toy! We’re only supposed to be using it to help Stan win the election!”

“And we already did that, ya dork,” Amethyst huffed, her laughter dying down a bit. “Since it worked so well, I figured I’d just play around with it for a second. There’s no harm in that, is there?”

Uh… there might be seeing as how I’m not sure Grunkle Stan can really move like that anymore…” Mabel noted with a frown, nodding towards the conman who was still in a controlled split much like Amethyst was.

“Amethyst, its bad enough that we’re using the tie to control Mr. Pines at all,” Steven said quite seriously. “But using it to make him say mean things about himself is even worse. You’re one of his best friends! Why would you wanna embarrass and hurt him like that?”

“I dunno, Steven, maybe cause I just do, ok?” Amethyst shot back crossly. “You guys need to lighten up. This is the most fun I’ve had since Garnet and Pearl got into that big Sardonyx fight. Everything’s been a total drag since then, and this is the only time I’ve actually gotten to enjoy myself since it did and I at least deserve that after all this junk’s been going down, don’t I?”

The kids looked to each other hesitantly upon hearing this harsh question, all three of them knowing that they couldn’t very well argue against her on that point. With Garnet and Pearl at continued ends as they were, Amethyst was very likely the one most caught in the middle of a conflict she really had no part in, and as a result, things couldn’t be easy for her. But as she playfully, albeit mockingly controlled Stan, it seemed as though she found some sort of odd
catharsis, one that lifted her spirits higher than they had been in quite some time. Would it really be right of any of them to deny her the levity she so clearly needed, even if it was rather crass and shameless and questionable on all accounts?

“Uh… w-well, we-” Steven began, but once more, Amethyst was quick to cut him off.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” she abruptly concluded before launching Stan into another round of embarrassment, this time in the form of using the tie to make him comedically walk into a nearby tree over and over again. All the while, however, the kids watched on in growing worry, all three of them sharing the slightest feeling that perhaps Amethyst’s sudden barrage of mind-controlled pranks on Stan had less to do with a sudden need for arcane fun… and more to do with something else entirely.

Throughout the rest of the week, the election continued onward, and with it, Stan’s popularity steadily rose as the twins continued using the tie to maintain every one of his public appearances. The conman’s ratings in the polls skyrocketed as the kids made him spout out patriotic and positive morale, morale that was more than enough to garnish the support of the somewhat dim-witted residents of Gravity Falls generously give him their unbridled support. While it was true that after each debate and speech was said and done, Amethyst always made sure to have her fun in using the tie to discreetly embarrass Stan in some way, for the most part the conman was none the wiser, and neither was anyone else for that matter. The uneasy start to Stan’s campaign was all but forgotten as he quickly took the lead in the election, and by most projections it was clear: the conman was going to pull a miraculous win and more likely than not become Gravity Falls’ new mayor. A very real possibility that some took much worse than others.

“Augh! Darnit! Gosh hand huckleberry honeysuckle darnit!” Bud shouted as he slammed down the latest newspaper proclaiming Stan’s growing popularity among voters. The other members of his campaign team sitting at the table around him were all rather startled by the car salesman’s frustration, though given his rapidly sinking chances, it was rather understandable. “Erm, excuse my language,” Bud quickly apologized, using a pamphlet he had on hand to wipe the sweat from his brow. “Oh, this is bad! This is real bad! I-I need to speak with my campaign manager, please excuse me for a moment.” With that, the car salesman hastily retreated into the other room of his lot, locking the door tightly behind him as he anxiously turned to face the bright television screen before him. “L-look,” he began nervously, gripping his hat tightly in his hand. “I’m sorry about all this. This is a minor setback, but… w-we’ll win. I’m sure of it.”

“Minor setback?!” Bud flinched as his ‘campaign manager’ on screen swiftly spun around to reveal none other than the incarcerated child psychic himself: Gideon. “MINOR SETBACK!? You listen, daddy, and you listen good! Prison is a nightmare!” He shouted petulantly, throwing his fist down harshly on the table before him. “I eat the same slop every day! They have no hair products in here! I can’t sleep cause my cellmate took my pillow for a wife! You think I’ve been havin’ fun in here?!”

“Hey, best friend!” another prisoner cheerfully greeted Gideon as him and another inmate stepped into the frame.

“Don’t be late for friendship bracelet class!”

“I have finger painting at the same time!” Gideon fiercely shot back, tossing a book on the table at the prisoners and prompting them to quickly flee. “The mayor resigning is my one ticket outta here,” the child psychic continued addressing his frightened father. “Which is why you’re gonna
win this election, pardon me outta prison, and we’re not gonna let the Pines OR the Crystal Gems get in my way again!”

“B-but you don’t understand!” Bud protested earnestly. “Stanford’s doin’ great in the polls! Its almost like magic!”

“Hm… magic, you say…?” Gideon mused as a sly, sinister smirk crossed his features. “Well, maybe its time to fight fire with fire! I’ve been savin’ this for a long time…” The child psychic said as he pulled a withered old page out of his large pompadour, one that he had managed to hold onto from journal 2, even after the book had been confiscated from him at his arrest. The page itself was an ancient incantation for possession, one that would allow the one who spoke it to magically and easily take control of someone else entirely. “I’ve just been waitin’ for the right moment to use it…”

“Now, boy, we’ve discussed this,” Bud cautioned as firmly as he could. “No more spooky spells.”

“Well, Daddy, maybe you just need to have more of an open mind…” Gideon smirked, not bothering to hear any more of his father’s legitimate concerns as he began to read the incantation. “Lleps live ykoops, lleps live ykoops, live ykoops!”

As the child psychic continued chanting, not only did his volume steadily rise and his eyes start to glow stark white, but the lights in the room Bud was in began to ominously flicker on and off before the bulbs busted entirely, much to his alarm. “Boy, s-stop that!” the car salesman pleaded, though he was unable to really resist the spell as he fell back and grabbed his head in pain. “A-anything but that! Augh!” Unable to fight back against the possession his own son was pushing upon him, Bud’s eyes began glowing the exact same white as Gideon’s, one final fearful scream escaping him before the child psychic took full control, finally ready to exact his vengeance upon both the Pines family and the Crystal Gems once at for all.

“Alright, team, listen up,” Dipper began, his tone quite serious as he addressed Mabel, Steven, and Amethyst as they gathered at Greasy’s Diner for one final campaign meeting. “Today’s election day which means we have to be at the top of our game at the debate this afternoon. I was thinking that I start things off by appealing to the voters’ sense of logic before Mabel comes in with a round of encouraging promises and politically correct jokes.”

“Ugh, do we really need to plan all this junk out?” Amethyst huffed impatiently as she put her head against the table. “Stan’s basically already won, we got this in the bag. Why don’t you guys just let me have the tie and I’ll give that crowd a real show for a change?”

“Considering how you used the tie on Stan after yesterday’s speech and made him break a pickle jar against his head, I think that’s… a pretty terrible idea, Amethyst, no offense,” Dipper countered sternly.

“Uh… I have an idea!” Steven hesitantly raised his hand. “S-since this is the last debate, maybe we don’t have to use the tie anymore. Its like Amethyst said, Mr. Pines is already gonna win, so… m-maybe we could just… not mind control him against his will this time?”

“Oh what, so he can just be free to ramble on about how he thinks handicap parking spots should be outlawed or how he wants to round up a task force to run every 3rd grader out of town?” Dipper remarked rather caustically.
“We really should keep using the tie, Steven,” Mabel rationalized much more evenly. “Just to play make sure Grunkle Stan actually wins this.”

“And to make Stan shove a bunch of leaves down his pants,” Amethyst added wryly. “Cause that’s my idea of winning.”

Steven let out a small, disgruntled sigh at this, his general uneasiness towards the tie idea still ever rising as he received an all too blunt reminder that none of the others seemed to really care just how wrong this all was. All week long, they had been wrenching control that was rightfully Stan’s away from him, all without at least letting him in on the truth of their deceit, and in the process, they were tricking not only him, but the innocent voters of Gravity Falls as well. Their entire campaign was built on lies and facades that had only been accumulating more and more with each passing speech. And as a result, Steven was getting to the point that he could no longer idly stand by his friends and accept this trail of trickery. Yet as outnumbered as he was against the twins and Amethyst on the idea, the young Gem wasn’t sure if there was really much he could do to change their minds, or really even put a stop to it at all. Unless…

“Hey-o!” As if right on cue, Stan burst into the diner, clad in a more casual suit than his usual one as he sauntered in with apt confidence for a soon-to-be-elected candidate.

“Stan!” the diner customers all greeted him back brightly, his popularity among them needing no introduction.

“Now just the ladies!” the conman called playfully.

“Stan!” the women in the restaurant chorused warmly.

“Now just the ladies my age!”

“Stan!” a single old woman cheered, much to Stan’s chagrin.

“Woof! Never mind!” the conman cringed before taking a seat at the table where his campaign team was gathered.

“On the house, Mr. Big Shot!” Lazy Susan exclaimed sweetly, setting a pile of complimentary pancakes before Stan before heading off with a supportive salute.

“Now this I could get used to,” the conman smirked, preparing to dig in to his free breakfast before Mabel hastily stopped him.

“Grunkle Stan, what’s with the outfit?” she asked, noting that his tan suit wouldn’t easy be accompanied by the mind control tie. “You’re missing your lucky tie.”

“Power tie, gotta wear it,” Dipper added succinctly and seriously.

“Aw, come on, have you seen the polls?” Stan asked, rolling his eyes. “I could debate naked and still win!”

“Huh, now there’s an idea…” Amethyst muttered to herself with a mischievous smirk.

“Heh, seriously though,” Mabel countered with a nervous laugh. “We need you to wear the suit and tie, Grunkle Stan.”

“Suit and tie, gotta wear it,” Dipper punctuated once again, this time more insistently.
“Ugh, why do you kids have to constantly tell me what to do?!” Stan exclaimed hotly, clearly annoyed by their badgering. “You don’t see Amethyst doing that, and she’s my running mate, for crying out loud! It’s basically her job to boss me around!”

“I’d try but it’s not like you’d actually listen anyway,” Amethyst remarked dryly, letting out an exasperated huff as she did.

“Besides,” Stan continued just as admantly as before. “Everyone in this town is finally showing me some respect! Maybe it’s about time you kids should too.”

“Well, maybe we’d respect you if you took things seriously for a change!” Dipper argued rather crossly.

“I am taking this seriously!” the conman shot back, slamming his fist down on the table. “If you haven’t noticed, everything that’s come out of this golden mouth has put us on top. With or without your dumb advice!”

“Uh, actually, that’s not… completely true…” Steven interjected, much to Dipper, Mabel, and Amethyst’s shared alarm.

“Uh… S-Steven? What are talking about?” the purple Gem said with a forced, anxious laugh, one that quickly turned into a disapproving scowl.

“Yeah, kid, what are you talking about?” Stan asked, raising a genuinely confused eyebrow.

For a brief moment, Steven hesitated under the scrutiny of the twins and Amethyst, but even so, he wasn’t about to harbor this immoral secret any longer, especially since he was actually under pressure to finally reveal it. “W-we’ve been using a special mind-controlling tie invented by Mr. Ford to control you during every one of your speeches and that’s how you’ve been winning so far!”

“Steven!” Dipper, Mabel, and Amethyst scolded in unison, their well-kept secret now completely out in the open.

“What?!” Stan exclaimed, looking to the trio with apt shock and dawning anger. “You mean to tell me that you four have been stringing me along like I’m some kinda puppet all week?! And you weren’t even planning on at least telling me about it?!”

“No, we weren’t,” Amethyst answered coldly and honestly. “At least until somebody decided to blab about it.”

“I’m sorry, guys, but Mr. Pines deserves to know,” Steven said, not regretting his sudden reveal. “I know you just want him to win the election, but what you guys have been doing isn’t right, especially you, Amethyst.”

“So I used the stupid tie to pull a few pranks,” the purple Gem scoffed. “It’s not like it’s really worse than anything I’ve done before, right, Stan?”

“A few pranks?” Stan repeated, quite confused before he let out a gasp of realization. “Wait a second… that rip in my pants the other day… that pickle juice that got spilled all over my suit last night… that was you, wasn’t it, Amethyst?!”

“I dunno,” Amethyst shrugged, unconcerned by her mischief. “Might’ve been. It’s not like you have any proof.”

“I have the fact that you just up and admitted to it a second ago!” the conman exclaimed harshly,
sending the purple Gem in particular a bitter glare. “You know, it’s bad enough that my own niece and nephew don’t have any shred of respect for me, but I never would have expected something like this from you.”

“Oh yeah?” Amethyst countered, sitting upright as her manner turned even more hostile. “Well I never would have expected you to keep so many huge secrets from me, so I guess we’re both pretty disappointing, huh?!”

“Yeah, I guess we are!” Stan shouted back, standing up from his seat.

“Well, if I’m such a disappointment,” Amethyst began, jumping onto the table so she could be face to face with the conman. “Then why don’t you just go ahead and find yourself another running mate?!”

“I might as well seeing as how you’ve done pretty much nothing to actually help me in this election or with anything else for that matter!” the conman exclaimed with brutal honesty before addressing the kids as well. “In fact, I don’t need any of you! You can tell that know it all Ford that he can keep his fancy light bulbs and magic ties! I’m gonna win this debate on my own, without any of you!”

As Stan began to storm off out of the diner, Amethyst hopped off the table, shouting angrily after him. “Yeah, go ahead and do everything by yourself without letting anyone else in! Its not like that’s a huge change for you after the past 30 years, is it?!”

“A-Amethyst, where are you going?” Steven asked with apt concern as he noticed the purple Gem beginning to leave as well.

“As far away from Stan as I can get,” Amethyst growled bitterly. “I hope he loses that dumb election for all I care. Maybe it’ll finally be enough to take him down a peg for once.”

And with that, the purple Gem made her exit, leaving the kids behind in a state shared of worry and dread over just how sour things had turned, not just between Stan and Amethyst, but for their hopes of salvaging the election as well. “This is bad…” Dipper remarked with an apprehensive frown. “Really bad.”

“I know! Amethyst and Mr. Pines were really upset with each other,” Steven said fretfully. “I’ve never seen them yell at each other like that. It was terrible!”

“No, not that,” Dipper shook his head before pausing for a beat and correcting himself. “Ok, yeah, that was bad, but I’m talking about the election! If we want to beat Bud now, then we’ll need to find another candidate, fast!"

“What we need is a blank slate,” Mabel mused. “Someone totally suggestive! An empty piece of clay we can mold to our whims.”

“Hey, a little help, dudes?” Soos interjected as he came out of the nearby bathroom, a large sweater stuck to his head by the sleeve. “I accidentally got my head stuck in my shirt sleeve. Guess this is my life now.”

Upon the handyman’s entrance, both Dipper and Mabel exchanged a knowing grin, confirming that they had indeed found their new impromptu candidate to take Stan’s place. Steven, however, was not so immediately on board with this idea. “Uh, hold on a second, you guys,” he cautioned earnestly. “Before we repeat this whole mind control tie disaster, I think we should at least let Soos in on the plan first.”
“What plan?” Soos asked curiously as he peeked out from his sweater at the kids.

“We wanna use this mind controlling tie on you so we can make you say what we need you to so we can beat Gideon’s dad in the mayor election,” Mabel explained plainly and succinctly, holding said tie up.

“Is that all?” the handyman asked rather casually. “Sure, I’d be down for that, dudes.”

“Wait, really?” Dipper asked, exchanging a confused glance with Steven.

“Yeah, I got nothin’ else going on today,” Soos shrugged. “I could spare a little time to become the new mayor.”

“Uh… well, its… good that you’re ok with it, I guess,” Steven said with something of a relieved, albeit bewildered smile. Really, all three of the kids were quite relieved to have found a spare candidate at such a short notice to fill in for the now rouge Stan. Only time would tell if Soos would actually be enough to carry them to the sought-after victory that, by all accounts, they needed to get.

In order to capitalize on his currently under construction “Mount Deweymore”, Mayor Dewey had ordered that the final election debate would be held directly under the progressing monument. The soon to be former mayor himself was in the process of selling commemorative merchandise for the half finished mountain while other preparations for the debate were underway. Voters filed into the stands, picking up handfuls of election birdseed on the way in that they would eventually throw at their favored candidate to guide the ‘mayor picking eagle’ in deciding who would win and who would lose.

Among this large group, Amethyst discreetly slipped into one of the higher stands, making herself rather scarce as a result of not really wanting to be seen here. In truth, the purple Gem wasn’t quite sure why she had even bothered to show up to watch the debate in the first place. She honestly had very little investment in the election as a whole, and after her recent falling out with Stan, she really had no interest in offering him any signs of her support, at least not outright. At the same time, she hadn’t really shown up to watch his entire campaign inevitably crash and burn as a result of his own infamous tactlessness either. The reason for her attendance here was really just as much of a mystery to Amethyst as it would have been to anyone else, but she had shown up all the same which meant that the most she could really do was wait and see whatever was about to unfold here, however successful or disastrous it might be.

“Welcome to the final debate in what is sure to be, on a cosmic scale, a forgettable blip in human history,” Shandra Jimenez began to announce the debate both live and to her camera news crew. “Here come the two most popular candidates!”

Sure enough, both Bud and Stan climbed up on stage and to their respective podiums, the latter’s manner oddly cutesy and charming, even as he brightly addressed the conman next to him. “Oh, hello there, Stanford! Long time, no see! Tee hee!” he chuckled, playfully nudging Stan with his hip.

“Don’t you ‘tee hee’ me,” Stan scowled coldly. “I’ll debate you into the ground.”

“Oh, but I have a widdle twist up my sweevy-weeves,” Bud remarked coyly, his eyes glowing the faintest blue though the conman didn’t really notice.
“You are making me very uncomfortable right now,” Stan remarked, eyeing his opponent suspiciously.

“But what’s this?” Shandra Jimenez questioned as the crowd ‘ooed’ in interest. “One new candidate has entered the ring!”

“Wait a minute, what?” Stan turned to see Soos sauntering up onto the stage, the mind control tie fixed around his neck as he blankly smiled and waved to the audience. The conman stole a brief peek backstage to find the kids there, obviously using the other tie to control the handyman just as they had been doing with him thus far, much to his fury, especially now that they were using it against him like this. “Why, those backstabbing little-”

“Let the debate begin!” Shandra announced, ringing the nearby bell as the open round of questioning began.

“First question,” Manly Dan said as he rose to stand. “What’s your opinion on axes!?” The lumberjack paused, squinting to read what was on the question card before correcting himself. “Wait, I mean… taxes!?”

“Easy,” Stan began confidently enough. “Taxes are the worst! I propose we stimulate the economy by waging war on neighboring cities. We have the canons!” Upon hearing such an unsavory idea, the crowd wasn’t afraid to show their disapproval of it through a round of loud booing, much to the conman’s worried confusion. “Uh, I-I mean…” he trailed off, looking through his notecards for help only to find none as the crowd continued reacting coldly. From her high up seat, Amethyst cringed somewhat at the poor reception, shaking her head as she realized that Stan really was quite terrible at it in the first place, but still, he had apparently surpassed even her own low expectations.

“I don’t know much about taxes,” Soos started next, the kids taking turns controlling him backstage. “But I can promise you a kitten in every pot. That doesn’t make any sense, Mabel. You don’t make any sense, Dipper! Guys! Stop fighting!”

Though a ripple of confusion filled the crowd at this bizarre display, Bud was quick to fill it with a much more appealing rhetoric. “Friends, friends!” he addressed the crowd warmly. “Can’t you see what’s happening on this stage? These ‘politicians’ are dancin’ around the issues! Well… I can sing around the issues!” With this, the car salesman tore his normal clothes off to reveal a loud, sparkly leotard underneath it, one that had a small screen bearing the American flag attached to it. With a showy flare, Bud caught the guitar that was thrown to him and quickly jumped into an upbeat song and dance that easily garnished the excitement of the crowd. “Oh crime is bad! Crime is oh so bad! Vote for Bud and there ain’t gonna be no crime! Crime’s bad! Vote Bud!”

As the car salesman ended his song with a flashy wink, the crowd cheered happily, throwing their round one birdseed right into his bin, showing their approval, much to Stan’s concern, as well as the kids’ backstage as the debate went into a short intermission. “We’re getting eaten alive out there!” Dipper exclaimed fretfully, pacing in front of Mabel and Steven. “Since when is Bud… creepily adorable?”

“Widdle ol’ me.” All three of the kids spun around with a gasp to find Bud standing right behind them, completely out of it as a result of the child psychic on his screen, who was controlling his
every word and action even as far away as his prison cell. Gideon smirked smugly as he regarded
the trio, all three of whom were immediately on guard as soon as they caught sight of him. “Aha!
Hello there, Pines twins, Universe. Long time no see! Except in my revenge fantasies where I see
you three on an hourly basis.”

“Gideon! I knew you were somehow behind this!” Dipper exclaimed admantly. “You’ve been
controlling Bud!”

“And it seems you’ve been controlling Stanford!” Gideon countered knowingly. “I figured it was
the three of ya. You’ve gotten much eviler since the last time I saw you.”

“Oh, I’d be happy to spare you, Mabel,” Gideon said, sending her a flirtatious smirk. “If you agree
to be mine. I even made you this wedding dress in crafts class!” The child psychic held up
something that vaguely resembled a dress, though it could have easily been mistaken for anything
else given its incredibly shoddy craftsmanship. “Don’t ask what its made of.”

“Ew, I’d rather die, you creep!” Mabel cringed, her longstanding disdain for the child psychic just
as apparent as it had always been.

“Fine, have it your way!” Gideon exclaimed, resuming his formerly triumphant attitude. “Once I
win, they’ll hit the plunger for the fireworks display, finishing the mountain’s construction and
trappin’ ya’ll inside. I’ve been trapped behind concrete all summer; now let’s see how YOU like
it!” The child psychic let out a sinister laugh as the kids let out a shared gasp of fear over the very
present danger they were in. Say hello to the next mayor of Gravity Falls!” Gideon proclaimed
with a final wicked laugh as he commanded Bud to leave the kids to their grisly fate. A fate that, by
all accounts, they had no idea how to escape from, at least not on their own.

Everyone down at the debate itself, however, was completely unaware of the trio of trapped kids
far above them, including Stan as he tried his best to salvage what little goodwill he had left with
the visibly displeased crowd. “A-and that’s why, um… the Statue of Liberty is our hottest
landmark,” he ventured, only to receive a resounding boo from the audience. “Alright, alright,
she’s kinda manish. What do you want from me?”
As a result of Stan’s plummeting approval, the crowd readily tossed even more of their birdseed into Bud’s bin. The car salesman sent a smug smile at the conman, who still had no idea as to who was really pulling the strings behind his opponent’s campaign whatsoever. Even so, Stan let out a worried sigh as he pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket, wiping the sweat from his pocket as he took a much needed breather. “Ugh, you’re dying out there, Stan,” he muttered to himself, knowing that the chances of him winning now were next to none. He did take pause for a moment to look towards the audience again, hoping for any single show of support at all, only to find none.

Or at least, none upon a first glance.

Because as the conman looked again, he happened to spot a certain purple Gem who had almost managed to blend seamlessly into the crowd. In fact, he only managed to notice her due to the solemn, almost sympathetic look she was sending him, one that startled Stan quite a bit given how harsh their falling out earlier had been. Amethyst was quick to look away upon being spotted however, crossing her arms and glancing down with renewed bitterness and also what appeared to be a hint of embarrassment, though it was hard to say given how far away she was. Even so, Stan sighed again, finally realizing just how much of a mistake he had made in his own stubbornness and folly. Because certainly, without the aid of the kids or even the purple Gem, there would certainly be no winning this election on his own. “You kids were right all along…” he remarked to himself, looking down at the speech the twins had written for him. “I should have listened to you when I had the chance. To all of you…” His expression was a bit sadder as he looked up towards Amethyst again, who actually managed to meet his glance with slight confusion, but plenty of sadness and remorse all her own.

However, whatever moment the pair might have had was abruptly interrupted as a familiar, frightened cry suddenly rang through the air. “Help! Help us!”

“W-what the-?” Stan was the first to hear this cry that conspicuously sounded like it had come from Mabel. The conman swiftly spun to face the mountain towering over the debate, only to have his worries confirmed when Dipper cried out next.

“We’re strapped to a bunch of fireworks!”

“A-and they’re about to go off!” Steven added amidst the trio trying their hardest to shuffle out of the mountain cave through the one opening in the floor they could find. However, unbeknownst to them, it was actually one of the statue’s nostrils, and below it was nothing but a massive drop to the ground far below them. They were quick to discover this however as they slipped out of it, only managing to remain tethered to the inside of the cave by the rope that had tied them all up, though it was clear that it wouldn’t support their shared weight for too long. The townsfolk watching the debate were quick to notice the kids’ peril high above them as a round of fearful gasps and screams rose up from them all, including Stan and Amethyst.

“Kids!” the pair exclaimed in horrified unison at the very obvious danger the trio was in. Danger that was only amplified as the rope holding them up continued towhittle down more and more, much to their immense fear.

“L-Listen, everybody!” Stan quickly turned back to the tense crowd before him. “This debate is over! I gotta go save my family!”

“N-now calm down, everyone!” Bud tried to smooth things over, “Those, uh… those are just some… demolition dummies! Nothing to see here!”

“Can it, Gleeful!” Stan shouted harshly, fiercely tearing the sleeves off his suit jacket as he let out a fearless yell. Without a second thought, the conman rushed backstage, but he was soon stopped by
none other than Amethyst as she raced behind the curtain after him.

“Stan, wait!” she exclaimed, every bit as worried as he was. “What the heck’s going on?!”

“It’s it obvious? The kids are in trouble!” Stan pointed up at the trio hanging by practically a thread above them. “Now come on, we gotta go save them!”

“…We?” Amethyst took pause, raising a suspicious eyebrow at the conman. “What, you mean you actually want help this time?”

“Ugh, seriously, Amethyst?” Stan groaned in exasperation. “We don’t have time for this!”

“No, of course, you never have time for this,” the purple Gem huffed, crossing her arms. “But you always had time for lying and sneaking around and pretending to be something you’re not, huh?”

“Uh, Amethyst, we can’t be doing this right no-“

“I just wanna know why,” Amethyst continued, growing steadily more incensed by the moment. “Why you thought it was ok to keep the whole twin brother—fake names—portal thing from me all these years! Did you really think I was like the kids and I couldn’t handle the truth? Because you and I both know I know a lot more messed up things than that. Did you even once think about telling me, or did you just plan on keeping me in the dark forever like I’m some dumb old rock who doesn’t deserve to know what’s really going on?!”

“Of course, I thought about telling you the truth!” Stan countered with equal harshness, knowing that he simply couldn’t let such an accusation go. “A bunch of times! You were the only person I ever even considered telling everything to before that portal opened! But… I couldn’t risk it.”

“Couldn’t risk what? Me telling Garnet and Pearl? You really think I’m that stupid?!” Amethyst was shouting by now but she hardly cared. She had been bottling all of this anger up for far too long now and it desperately needed to finally come out. “I wouldn’t have told them, you know I wouldn’t have! I kept our Revenge Trips a secret from them and from Rose for 8 damn years! And during all eight of those years and even up until just last week, I was dumb enough to think that you were the one person who actually played it straight with me, who didn’t leave me out of the loop or who didn’t lie to me around every turn. But it turns out I was wrong about that too since you were the one who lied to me more than anyone else.”

Stan was silent for a moment upon hearing this outburst, a small, remorseful sigh as he tried to think of some way to respond to it. In the end, however, he decided to go with the best thing he could think of: the truth. “I meant… I couldn’t risk putting all that on your shoulders.”

Amethyst flinched at this, not having expecting such rare sincerity from the conman. “H-huh?”

“Like I said, there were a bunch of times I had thought about telling you the truth,” Stan explained. “About the portal, about the fake names, about Ford, about everything. But… I knew you had lost your memories about all that stuff, and even if I didn’t know how or why, I guess… I guess I just… thought you were better off not knowing. That if you learned about all that, then… you’d fall apart, just like I did back when I first lost Ford. And after a while of running the road and wreaking revenge with you, I guess I thought that you just… didn’t deserve to carry the same weight around that I’ve been lugging for years. I’ve gotten us into a lot of messes over the years, but this was one mess that I wanted to keep you out of.” The conman shook his head morosely. “Guess that didn’t really work out the way I wanted it to in the end though, huh?”

“No, it didn’t,” Amethyst remarked, her tone still bitter though it softened up somewhat upon
hearing Stan’s genuine, almost caring explanation. “Because now, everything’s even worse than it was back then. We finally got our memories back only to find out we made this huge mistake that was so bad that Rose pretty much had to take it away from us to help us survive. And then Garnet and Pearl get into it because neither of them knew how to handle the truth and now they won’t even talk to each other! And I didn’t even mention how I basically fought against both of them just to protect your sorry ass! It’s awful at home! I feel trapped and the worst part is it’s like there’s no way to escape it all! And its all your fault for keeping this whole damn portal thing going to begin with!”

The purple Gem finally let several of her pent up tears of bitter anger go at this, a harsh sob escaping her as she kept her gaze hard on the ground. Once again, Stan hesitated, immense guilt filling him as he realized just how much his own effective mountain of mistakes had ended up hurting one of his closest friends. For years, he had never even considered the possibility that the secrets he had kept so well guarded would have harmed Amethyst so much and so deeply. But clearly they had, in more ways than he could even really count. And while he wouldn’t have put forth the effort for too many others, Stan knew that he owed it to Amethyst to make amends. If that was even a possibility at this point. “A-Amethyst, I… I’m sorry…” he said, his tone deeply earnest and apologetic.

“W-what?” the purple Gem glanced up, quite surprised to finally hear what she had been looking for from him for quite some time.

“I’m… I’m sorry about all the lies,” Stan sighed, rubbing his arm remorsefully. “And about making you choose between me and your friends in the heat of the moment. A-and for what’s been going on between you three ever since all this mess happened. I really didn’t expect any of this to happen, and I’m sorry that its put you in such a rough spot. Believe me, I know more than anyone else what that’s like and, well… it sucks, plain and simple.”

“You better believe it does…” Amethyst sniffled, wiping her tears away as she sent him a terse glare.

“You know, I don’t expect you to forgive me right away,” the conman shrugged fretfully. “Honestly, I probably wouldn’t either after all the shit I pulled. But if you ever decide you want to, well… I’d… i-it… it mean a lot to me. I-I guess,” Stan finished with an awkward cough, trying to off play his sentimentality as much as he could. Amethyst, however, didn’t respond with the laugh or smile he had been expecting, but rather a pensive, uncertain look, one that the conman found admittedly hard to read. And in the end, her response was every bit as cryptic as well.

“I… I dunno,” she remarked, looking away from him briefly as she shook her head. “I’ll… have to think about it. But, uh, for now? We should probably get back to saving the kids!” The purple Gem quickly picked up her tone as she glanced upwards to see that the rope the trio was dangling by was just about to snap in two.

“Amethyst, you know what to do!” Stan shouted, getting back into action as the purple Gem nodded sternly.

“Right!” she exclaimed, recalling a move they had pulled off a number of times. In an instant, Amethyst shapeshifted herself into a large slingshot, one that Stan swiftly loaded himself into as the purple Gem took aim at the hole in the mountain that the kids were about to fall out of.

“Ready?” Stan asked, preparing himself for the launch with fierce determination to save the endangered trio. “Fire!”

Amethyst did so with a loud shout, shooting the conman straight upward at an alarming speed. As
soon as she shapeshifted back into her normal form, she followed after him with a bold leap, ready
to help the rescue effort in any way she could. The spectating crowd below quickly caught sight of
the conman as he seemed to soar up the mountain on his own accord, prompting a round of very
impressed cheers from them as they began tossing their support and their votes in birdseed toward
him without a second thought.

“Augh! No, stop it!” Stan shouted as the seeds pelted him on his way up. “Thank you, but stop it!”
As a result of the birdseed being thrown on him, a flock of stray eagles began to crowd around
Stan, pecking at him as he zoomed upwards towards the kids and no doubt slowing his momentum
as a result. “Augh! Get back, you terror birds!” he exclaimed, fiercely punching at the eagles until
Amethyst came to his rescue, finally reaching his level and shapeshifting her hand into a large
flyswatter to swat them all away. Stan offered her a thankful nod, which she returned just shy of
them making their harrowing, but ultimately safe landing in the hole just above the kids. The trio
themselves were in a state of paralyzed panic, unable to do anything else but scream in apt terror as
the final strands of the rope suddenly snapped, leaving them to freefall to their dooms. That is, until
Stan and Amethyst both grabbed onto it in the nick of time.

“Grunkle Stan!” Dipper and Mabel exclaimed, relieved as the pair began pulling them up to solid
ground.

“Amethyst!” Steven cheered just as happily. “Wait, you guys are… working together again?”
Stan and Amethyst exchanged a brief glance, seizing each other up for a moment before the purple
Gem shrugged in acceptance. “Yeah, I guess we are. N-not that that’s a big deal or anything.”

“Y-yeah, don’t read into it cause its really no big deal,” Stan said, just as flustered as Amethyst
was. “A-anyway, I’m sorry for being so stubborn, kids. I guess being the town hero wasn’t
enough. I wanted to be yours too.”

“Aw, we’re sorry too, Grunkle Stan,” Mabel said, sincerely apologetic. “We should have supported
you, win or lose.”

“Probably lose,” Dipper deadpanned truthfully.

“Hey, I can still drop you, ya know,” Stan remarked, though of course he didn’t as him and
Amethyst finished pulling the kids up to safety. As soon as they were up, the pair didn’t hesitate to
pull them into a tight, secure hug, glad to see that they were all unharmed. It didn’t take long for
the pair to untie the kids’ ropes, finally freeing them and allowing the group to venture out on top
of the statue’s nose so the townsfolk could see that they were all alright. The audience erupted into
a frenzy of relieved and excited cheers, all of them liberally tossing their remaining birdseed into
Stan’s bin on the stage until it had easily beaten out the amount Bud had previously accumulated,
much to a certain child psychic’s fury.

“No! No! No! No!” Gideon shouted through his possessed father, quickly utilizing his control pull
out the primed remote detonator he had managed to get his hands on earlier, just in case. “Time to
take care of you, once and for all!” With that, Bud pushed the remote, prompting the fireworks
inside of the monument to begin to tick down from thirty seconds, much to the alarm of the group
standing on top of it.

“Oh no! We have to get out of here!” Steven shouted fearfully, especially as the time on the
countdown ticked away ever faster.

“Pfft, that’ll be easy,” Amethyst remarked confidently. “Though, it may involve one of our more…
daring stunts, Stan. If you’re up to it, that is…”
“You know I am,” the conman countered wryly, though his daring did decrease somewhat upon seeing just how high up they really were. “Kids,” he addressed the twins, his tone suddenly solemn as a result of the stakes they were facing. “If I die, make sure I get a bigger tombstone than Ford.”

While slightly concerned, Dipper and Mabel nodded nonetheless as Stan pulled them and Steven into his arms. With another nod of confirmation, Amethyst hopped up onto his shoulders, holding onto her perch tightly as Stan rushed forward, leaping right off the statue just as the timer ran out. In a massive, singular blast, all of the fireworks denoted at once, completely destroying Mayor Dewey’s section of the statue, much to the current mayor’s abject horror.

“No! My statue!” Dewey cried, only for his terror to spike as a large piece of the statue’s rubble landed squarely on the memorabilia cart behind him. “My merchandise!” he sobbed as he collapsed to his knees in misery. “My legacy!”

As other pieces of the statue’s remains began raining down, the crowd scattered out of fear, none of them really noticing as Amethyst shapeshifted into a large parachute, one that allowed Stan and the kids an easy landing into the huge pile of birdseed accumulated on stage. At the same time, another large rock landed right next to Bud, knocking him to the ground and breaking both Gideon’s screen, as well as his possession over his father, much to his severe outrage.

“No!” the furious child psychic screamed from his prison cell, tearing the journal page on possession in half as a result of his failed revenge. “NO!” He shouted once more, grabbing his own receiver screen and tossing it across the room in his continued temper tantrum that lasted quite some time while his fellow prisoners watched on in apt alarm.

Back at the debate, however, things were only just starting to settle down from the explosion, and with the calm down came the release of the freedom eagle. The great bird readily soared out of its cage, not wasting any time in regally settling down near Stan, who was practically submerged in the pile of birdseed along with Amethyst and the kids. Even so, the eagle made its choice, gently kissing the conman’s forehead before flying off into the sunset, having preformed its duty in picking Gravity Falls’ newest mayor.

The townsfolk were quick to catch onto the eagle’s choice, one that they all easily supported in light of Stan’s blatant show of heroism in rescuing the kids. In fact, even as him and Amethyst were pulling the kids out of the pile of birdseed, their joyful shouts of “Mayor Pines!” rose up into the air, rising even over the sound of the remaining fireworks launching into the air from what was left of Mayor Dewey’s ruined statue.

“Well, I guess we know who won,” Dipper noted, sending the conman a satisfied smile.

“Congratulations, Mr. Pines!” Steven chimed in warmly.

“Heh, guess I actually gotta start ‘respecting’ you now, don’t I?” Amethyst remarked, her tone genuinely playful as she elbowed Stan in the knee.

“You haven’t before and I don’t expect you to start now,” Stan countered just as sardonically before both of them shared a much needed laugh. True, it didn’t mean that everything between them had repaired itself just yet, but even so, it was a start. And for now, a start was more than enough.

All the same, the crowd continued their show of overwhelming support for their new mayor elect, who had managed to claim the most unlikely of victories out of what had seemed like a certain loss cause. Even so, Gravity Falls seemed ready to receive its new mayor in Stan, or at least it would have been if not for one minor, or rather, major complication.
“This just in: Stanford Pines LOSES!” the news reported that night, its headlining story showing that Stan had somehow been disqualified from the election altogether, even after his triumphant turnaround victory. While most of Gravity Falls was surprised by this news, none were more shocked than the Pines, Steven, and Amethyst as they gathered to watch the official results of the election at the Mystery Shack later that evening.

“What?!” the group exclaimed in startled unison, all of them leaning in to hear exactly why this was.

“Despite winning an overwhelming 95% of the vote,” Shandra Jimenez reported. “Election officials had to disqualify Stan due to the discovery of an extensive criminal record.”

“Ohhhh, ok, that makes sense now,” Amethyst concluded, sending the conman a knowing look.

“Oh boy…” Stan sighed, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly.

“Grunkle Stan, what did you do?” Mabel asked, bewildered.

“What didn’t I do?” Stan remarked, nodding back to the TV.

“Said crimes include shoplifting, teaching bears to drive, a new crime he invented called… ‘burglebezzelment’?; first degree… llamacide?”

“That llama knew too much…” the conman growled darkly.

“Due to this shocking development and the fact that none of the other candidates properly filed their paperwork, acting Mayor Dewey has decided to resume his mayorship position for the foreseeable future, rendering this entire election effectively pointless.”

From there, the shot cut to Dewey, back on his old podium before the new ruined Mount Deweymore as he delivered a mournful speech. “Since my… b-beloved Mount Deweymore is no more and it’ll take quite some time to accumulate the funds to rebuild it, I have no choice but to step back into my former role as your mayor… and to sell my once-commemorative merchandise at half price since none of its worth anything anymore…” At this terrible thought, the mayor broke down into another round of miserable sobs as he leaned against his podium, his aids giving him comforting pats on the back before the newscast cut back to Shandra in the studio.

“We will dedicate the rest of this broadcast to listing Stan’s crimes,” she said before she began to read off from an extensive stack of papers detailing the conman’s various misdeeds. “First degree thermometer theft, pug trafficking, snacks evasion, pickpocketing…”

As the list continued on, the group watching quickly turned out, all of them knowing more than well that the conman’s crimes were quite numerous indeed. “Whew, well, at least they didn’t list any of the bad ones,” Stan remarked casually. “On an unrelated note, I have a lot of cheap pugs and I need to move them fast.”

“Hey, you know I’m always down for some illegal pug selling,” Amethyst remarked, elbowing the conman with a grin. “Or anything else you got up your sleeve for that matter, old man.”

“Y-you… you really mean it?” Stan asked, understanding what the purple Gem’s teasing was really shorthand for.
Amethyst hesitated, blushing somewhat before finally letting out a relenting sigh, knowing that harboring her anger towards Stan really only harmed herself in the end. After all, if nothing else, then it would at the very least be a welcome change to finally have someone to talk to openly and honestly in light of the ongoing schism between her teammates. And Amethyst could think of no one else she’d rather confide it all in than Stan himself. “Y-yeah, I guess so… but only if you start playing it straight with me. For real this time… ok?”

“I think I can manage that,” Stan smirked, knowing that he didn’t really have any more secrets left to hide. “Only if you don’t use any mind control ties to make me run into trees again.”

“Oh, yeah…” the purple Gem chuckled awkwardly. “Sorry about that… Like I said, I was… kinda ticked off at you. But I probably won’t do anything like that again. Probably.”

“Fair enough,” the conman accepted with a warm nod, the longstanding bond between them at long last repaired, much to the relief of the kids who had happily watched the entire exchange.

“Aw, this is so sweet!” Steven chimed brightly. “Still, it’s a shame you didn’t actually win the election, Mr. Pines.”

“Yeah, we’re sorry, Grunkle Stan,” Dipper said sincerely. “I actually think you as mayor would have been fun.”

“Oh, maybe its for the best,” Stan shrugged. “I got close to the dream though, so that’s enough.”

“Hey, uh, I knit you something,” Mabel interjected with a small smile, pulling out the knitted sash she had been holding behind her back, one that read ‘Our Hero’ in colorful letters. “It’s not official or anything, but… I think it fits.”

Upon receiving such a genuine memento from his niece, the conman couldn’t help but tear up ever so slightly, his heart warmed by the sentiment, not that he’d ever really admit it. “Grunkle Stan, are you crying?” Dipper asked, having noticed the building tears all the same.

“Ha! He totally is!” Amethyst goaded with a laugh. “Aw, Stan, ya big softie!”

“Hey! I’m not a softie!” Stan protested, though it was clear from his tone that he was indeed a bit choked up as he stood and put the sash on. “I just got campaign confetti in my eyes. Come on, kids. Wanna go vandalize Mayor Dewey’s house?”

“Yay! Vandalism!” the kids and Amethyst cheered in unison, all of them more than ready for a bout of wild and reckless fun. As the others ran out first, Stan took pause for a brief moment, glancing down at his sash with a satisfied smile. True, he hadn’t won the election, but what he had gotten far surpassed any office or title. He had solidified the admiration of his nibblings, had salvaged his treasured friendship with Amethyst, and, perhaps had gained a bit more self respect in the process. And in the end, despite the win and loss and ups and downs, that was all the conman could ever really ask for.

In light of his most recent failure against the Pines and the Gems, Gideon found that he really had no other plans for his evening other than arts and crafts with the other prisoners. Though the rowdy gang of crooks and criminals all deeply respected the child psychic and did just about anything he asked of them, Gideon himself often found their adoration annoying and suffocating, especially at a moment as low as this.
“I’m sorry the election thing didn’t work out for you, bro,” one of the larger prisoners, a man with bizarrely empty eyes who, coincidentally enough, went by the moniker of Ghost Eyes, said with sincere sympathy as him and Gideon crocheted together. “But if it makes you feel any better, we’re gonna throw a riot tonight! Does someone wanna throw a riot?”

“Thanks, Ghost Eyes,” Gideon sighed tiredly. “But I’m just not in the mood…” With this, the child psychic got up and headed back to his cell for the night, lying on the hard slab that was his bed as he stared up at the pale, moonlit ceiling. While most in his position probably would have given up hope for revenge and retribution, Gideon wasn’t one to let things like this go so easily. Especially since he still had at least one more trick up his sleeve.

“This poster is the only thing keepin’ me goin’,” the child psychic remarked to himself, glancing over at the motivational poster on the wall beside him that depicted a cat hanging from a tree and read “hang onto that branch or die, cat!” And while its message was darkly encouraging, it was what lay behind the poster that was of the most importance to Gideon.

Upon making sure no one was watching him, the child psychic tore the poster off the wall, revealing the chalk drawing he had been harboring behind it for weeks: an elaborate effigy of two interconnective wheels, each wheel bearing ten symbols each, some of them recognizable and others not. The center of the inner wheel itself was empty, but Gideon was quick to fill it with the drawing of a familiar triangular being, one that he had worked with before, and for the sake of finally vanquishing his enemies once and for all, he was more than ready to work with again.

“I’m finally ready to make a deal, Bill…”
Chapter 56: Friend Ship

Chapter Summary

In which there's a bunch of tension, Ford is a nerd, Pearl is a dork, and we reach UF's halfway point.

Chapter Notes

So like I just said, this is the halfway point in UF's story. Only 66 more chapters to go! Woo boy... But yeah anyway, this one is kinda meh. Mostly I'm really looking forward to what comes after it, so I kinda just had to get through this one. Either way, I hope you like it all the same! (keyword is FOOT)

Like most Gem locations across the Earth, the Galaxy Warp didn’t often see too many visitors, much less any outside of the Crystal Gems, who only really stopped by the warp pad hub for routine checks now and again. However, that wasn’t currently the case as a certain green Gem was hard at work at the mostly downed warp hub, hoping to get it back to some semblance of working order again without garnishing the detection of her irksome enemies.

“Stupid broken warp…” Peridot grumbled to herself. She didn’t even hide her immense aggravation as she used her tractor beam to collect the scattered pieces of rubble that used to be the Homeworld warp and compile it all together to try and repair it somehow. “First my attack robinoids, then my escape pod, then the communication hub, and now this is busted again…” The green Gem sighed, shaking her head as the fingers of her free hand formed her touchscreen so she could make a report. “These Crystal Gems and their human allies are a menace… But no matter; I’m getting off this ticking time-bomb of a planet, whether they like it or not!”

Of course, as if right on cue, no sooner than a moment after Peridot had said this, the Crystal Gems themselves arrived on one of the few still functional pads the Galaxy Warp had to offer, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel accompanying them. The green Gem gasped in shock at their timely, yet still unexpected appearance as she froze in place, instantly dropping the pieces of the Homeworld warp her beam had been toting out of sheer surprise alone.

“Aha! There she is!” Pearl exclaimed, excitedly pointing to Peridot afar on the other side of the warp. “I was right! My plan worked perfectly!”

“Wow, and it only took five minutes to find her this time too!” Mabel said, duly impressed. “That’s a new record.”

“Good,” Dipper said with resolve as he drew the Sword of Seasons and set it to its flaming setting.
“That means we can use the rest of our time actually catching her instead of looking in all the wrong places like we usually do.”

“Well, yeah, we can do that, but don’t be rude, you guys,” Steven frowned briefly before turning to Peridot with a bright smile. “Good morning!”

Of course, the green Gem’s response to this warm greeting was anything but warm itself. “Ugh! I can’t believe this! How did you know I was here?!”

“We found a secret way to track you, and we’ll never tell you what it is, even if you ask nicely!” Steven proclaimed with bold confidence as he taunted the green Gem out by sticking his tongue out impishly.

“And this time, you’re goin’ down, Peri!” Mabel quipped, brandishing her grappling hook.

“Peri?” the green Gem raised an eyebrow, apparently confused.

“Oh, you know, its like a fun little nickname!” Mabel smiled cheerfully. “Luckily for you, you have a very nicknamable name! I’ve already gotten so many out of it! There’s Peri, Dot, Dotty, Peri-D, P-Dot, Peri-do, Per-”

“Hey, Mabel, here’s an idea,” Dipper swiftly interjected, annoyed by the inappropriate timing of his sister’s rambling. “Maybe you could not give our enemies silly nicknames? Just a suggestion?”

“Aw, but where’s the fun in that?” Mabel pouted playfully before Garnet finally interjected.

“Peridot!” the Gem leader shouted, her gauntlets already at the ready to strike. “We’re here to-”

“And you’ll never get away with it!” Pearl suddenly interrupted her apparently out of nowhere as she raised her spear high.

“Don’t you Gems and your pesky pet humans have anything better to do than annoy me?!” Peridot growled, stomping her foot down in obvious frustration.

“Nope,” Amethyst remarked, stretching out her whip in her hands. “We’re gonna-”

“Prepare to be annoyed!” Pearl cut the purple Gem off as well, quiet pointedly too, much to Amethyst’s confusion, as well as the kids’.

“Uh… ok…” Dipper exchanged a rather bewildered glance with Steven and Mabel at Pearl’s odd behavior before he turned to coldly address the still rather irritated Peridot. “Well, we’re not about to let you escape this ti-”

“Admit defeat now and maybe we’ll go easy on you!” the white Gem once again cut in, just as much verve in her manner as every before.

“Uh… Pearl?” Steven spoke up, somewhat concerned in light of his guardian’s over the top mannerisms.

“Ugh, I don’t have time for this!” Peridot seethed nonetheless, her free floating fingers forming themselves into a blaster that was rapidly charging with a ball of growing energy. “This planet has an expiration date and I’m not gonna stick around to find out when!”

At this, the green Gem let her blast fire, the unexpected force of it knocking her back as it went flying towards the Gems and the kids. The attack completely missed its mark, steering clear of the
group on the warp pad and instead smashing into the large stone pillar directly behind them. While initially disappointed by her misfire, Peridot quickly perked up as the bulk of the pillar began to fall upon the Gems and the kids, however, they were thankfully saved from its crushing force by Steven, who summoned shield large enough to cover them all just in the nick of time. Though her attack hadn’t worked completely as expected, Peridot still let out something of a small, nervous chuckle as she picked herself up off the ground right as Pearl fiercely turned to face her again.

“That’s it!” the white Gem hissed, gripping her spear tightly. “I’m taking her out!”

“Pearl, wait!” Garnet ordered, but her teammate didn’t listen. Instead, Pearl charged, her weapon at the ready, towards Peridot, intent on finally putting an end to her longstanding nuisance. Even so, the green Gem countered her with her tractor beam, easily catching Pearl in its pale verdant glow and effectively immobilizing her as she began to spin her around freely.

“Ha! Sorry, but you’re going the wrong way!” Peridot exclaimed, flinging Pearl out of her tractor beam and back towards the group on the warp pad. Before anyone could really do much, the white Gem collided with Steven, knocking him off the pad and disabling his shield altogether. Fortunately, Garnet managed to catch the pillar that had been pressed against it, keeping it steady with her impressive strength as she urged Amethyst and the twins off the pad and out of harm’s way.

“Get her!” the Gem leader shouted, struggling to rid herself from the burden of the heavy pillar. Amethyst complied first, the twins not too far behind her until the purple Gem broke into a fast, rapid spin dash, zooming towards Peridot at a frightening speed. The green Gem barely managed to leap out of the way, leaving Amethyst to crash into the ruined remains of the Homeworld warp as Peridot made her ‘escape’, skittering across the Galaxy Warp on her disjointed fingers alone.

“Ha! You missed!” she laughed triumphantly. Her levity was cut quite short as something hard and metallic latched around the fingers of one of her hands, breaking their bizarre gravity and leaving Peridot to fall face first into the ground below her.

“But I didn’t!” Mabel happily proclaimed as her grappling hook zoomed back to her. “Your turn, bro-bro!”

Dipper didn’t even respond as he instead rushed forward, the Sword of Seasons charged with strong electricity in his grip. Peridot gasped in apt fear at the sight of the electrified blade and quickly scrambled to her feet, dashing as fast as she reasonably could to get away from it, but even so, Dipper was relentless in his pursuit to take the green Gem out once and for all.

At the same time, Pearl and Steven were both finally regathering their bearings after their rough landing off the warp pad. The white Gem herself was a good bit more dazed than her young ward, even as he began to quickly pick himself up and get back into the fight. “Pearl!” Steven exclaimed, somewhat exasperated as he nudged her weight off of him.

“O-oh, sorry!” Pearl exclaimed, flustered as she hurriedly stood as well, though by then, Steven had already taken off to peruse Peridot right alongside Dipper. The green Gem had managed to reach one of the relatively unscathed warp pads, only to receive the frustrating news that, much like all of the other pads throughout the worn-down collection, it would also be getting her, completely nowhere.

“Augh! Doesn’t anything work on this cruddy planet?!” she shouted, incredibly vexed by her very bad luck.

“I do,” Dipper said with a very satisfied grin as his ice-enhanced sword suddenly rammed into
Peridot’s lower legs, not only knocking the green Gem off balance but effectively freezing her feet to the ground.

“And so do I!” Steven chimed in, summoning another shield as he ran forward. The young Gem tossed his weapon like a frisbee, and much to his luck, it hit its mark, striking Peridot squarely in the face hard amidst her trying to break free from the ice encasing her.

“Ow!” the green Gem cried, rubbing the sore spot near her nose and failing to notice Steven and Dipper wisely pull back as Garnet carried out the next attack.

“Amethyst, catch!” the Gem leader grunted, finally lifting the pillar she had been holding onto enough to send it flying at the purple Gem. Right on cue, Amethyst lashed out, her whip coiling tightly around the massive rock, which she wasted no time in hurling it towards the warp pad Peridot was currently frozen to.

“Destroy!” the purple Gem roared, the whip’s hold on the rock breaking as it crashed down almost directly on top of Peridot. As a result, the ice on the ground shattered and the green Gem was sent freely flying into the air, much to her noisy alarm.

Given Peridot’s vulnerable position, Pearl saw this as the perfect opportunity, which was why she wasted no time in rushing forward to catch her when she inevitably fell. “I got her!” she exclaimed, almost excitedly, the hope in both her voice and expression clear as she kept her sights on the green Gem and nothing else. “I got her! I got her!”

Unbeknownst to the white Gem, Garnet had the exact same plan as she did as her gauntlets disappeared and her arms stretched out to apprehend their green foe. As focused as they both were in catching Peridot, neither Garnet nor Pearl noticed each other, however, until they ended up ramming into each other, knocking them both to the ground roughly.

“Pearl!” Garnet snapped angrily, especially as, right above them, Peridot narrowly avoided landing on top of them by converting her floating fingers into rapidly moving helicopter blades. “Get off me!”

“Ah!” Pearl gasped anxiously, quickly getting up after Peridot swiftly flew away from them. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” Knowing that her footing was still unsteady with the Gem leader, Pearl attempted to do her a kindness by helping her up, help that Garnet coldly refused as she sent her a fierce, frustrated glare, one that only deepened as Peridot safely landed on the warp pad they had all arrived on.

“Wow, this is just sad,” the green Gem remarked smugly, confident in her escape, even as the kids tried one last effort in rushing forward to catch her. “I almost feel sorry for you… Not!” Peridot let out a triumphant snicker, mimicking Steven’s teasing expression from before as she warped away, leaving a defeated, downcast group of Gems and kids behind in her wake.

“…Have a great weekend!” Steven called cheerfully after her after a beat of silence, only to quickly take it back as the twins and the Gems gave him a shared glance of annoyance for his amicability towards such an aggravating foe. A foe who, for whatever reason, seemed all but impossible to finally catch. “I mean… I hope her weekend is… not so great?”

“Ok, I realize that was a bit of a… fiasco…” Pearl huffed as everyone warped back to the temple, collectively disgruntled by the fact that Peridot was somehow still at large. “But, there’s still a
silver lining to all this!” The white Gem’s manner was rather forcefully upbeat as she stepped off the warp pad and over to Peridot’s commandeered escape pod, which had only just been recently hooked up directly to the pad itself. “Now we know for sure that we can track her every movement! Whenever she uses the warp system, her escape pod will instantly detect where she is! Its only a matter of time before we capture her, and when we do, we’ll finally be able to close this chapter in our lives and move on! R-right?” she asked, turning to Garnet in particular.

The Gem leader didn’t respond, her arms crossed and her expression flat as she simply looked to the white Gem rather emotionlessly. Her lack of a response only made Pearl even more anxious as she offered her a wide, eager, yet also somewhat fearful grin, clearly eager to please Garnet in any way she could. A task that seemed much easier said than done, given how she had made essentially no real progress in smoothing things over between herself and the Gem leader since her foolish deception had all but ruined the bond of trust that had once existed between them.

Of course, such ongoing tension was quite easy for anyone to see, including Amethyst and the kids as they stood by on the sidelines as this bout of awkward, uneasy silence lasted for quite some time. However, as much as they all wanted to see everything finally be resolved between Pearl and Garnet, none of them really knew how to try and expedite that much-needed resolution. Well, save for Amethyst that was, as she hesitantly spoke up, starting with a heavy sigh to break through the veil of uncomfortable silence.

“Look,” the purple Gem began, looking back and forth between her teammates somewhat pleadingly. “Isn’t there something that maybe the two of you might need to talk about?”

At this, Garnet and Pearl took pause, both of them somewhat caught off guard as an uncertain, unreadable glance was passed between them. For a brief moment, it seemed as though one of them was about to finally fold and speak to the bitterness between them, perhaps even to the point of trying to rectify it. And yet unfortunately, they didn’t quite get the chance to as the gathering was unexpectedly interrupted.

“Alright, Pearl, its finally finished!” Ford announced as he entered the house, carrying a small, round, metallic device. “It took some doing to configure something that could temporarily disable a warp pad, especially without one to test it on myself, but I’m at least 85% confident that it won’t explode and vaporize us all when we test it ou-” The author cut himself off as he glanced up from his invention upon noticing that the group present was larger than he had been expecting. “Oh… you’re all here…”

“Er, y-yes! Yes, we are!” Pearl exclaimed before either Garnet or Amethyst could even say anything as she rushed over to the author. “I’m very glad you could make it, Ford! Amethyst, Garnet, I asked Ford—I-I mean, Stanf— to help in our endeavors to capture Peridot, and I must admit that so far, his assistance has been quite invaluable! He already helped me link the escape pod up to the warp pad-”

“And, as I said just a moment ago, I also made this,” Ford proudly held his latest invention up. “I call it the warp destabilizer. It can take down any warp pad for as long as necessary. Probably. Like I said, I haven’t had a chance to test it out yet. B-but, Pearl’s well informed me of your ongoing problem with this Peridot, and so what better way to test it than by using it to corner her so she can’t escape from you anymore?”

After outlining all of this, Ford and Pearl presented the other two Gems with eager, hopeful smiles as they presented the plan they had formulated together, a plan that would hopefully service them both when it came to getting them all back on equal footing. While Pearl very much wanted to impress Garnet in an attempt to get back into her good graces, Ford’s motives were rather similar,
though they included Amethyst as well. After all, since his return to his home dimension, the author had only really had the chance to smooth his once cordial relations over with Pearl, and even that had happened out of sheer serendipity more than anything else. And even though Rose was gone and things had irreversibly changed from the past he had once shared with the Gems, a large part of Ford still very much wanted to at least make amends with his former close friends, if not repair their now-broken bonds altogether. And as far as the author was concerned, the best way to start doing just that would be to freely offer whatever aid to their cause that he could, an idea that Pearl had agreed with and even had decided to implement for herself to an extent.

In fact, the pair was so transparent in their desire to make a good impression that the kids were quick to pick up on, and, seeing no reason to not want to help them out in their earnest appeal, they decided to give them a much-needed boost. “Uh, wow!” Steven interjected, sending Pearl and Ford an impressed smile. “You guys really came up with a great plan to catch Peridot!”

“Um, y-yeah!” Dipper added just as intently. “I bet with that warp destabilizer of yours, Great Uncle Ford, we’ll finally be able to trap Peridot and beat her at her own game once and for all.”

“And Pearl, your idea to plug her escape pod into the warp pad was a super one!” Mabel chimed in enthusiastically. “Peri wishes she was as smart of a cookie as you are!”

“Oh, well, thank you!” Pearl blushed with a chuckle, Ford nodding his gratitude to the kids as well. “S-so… what do you two think?” she turned to her teammates, though it was rather clear her question was more directed to Garnet instead.

“Eh, it might work out,” Amethyst shrugged, eyeing the warp destabilizer in Ford’s hands somewhat skeptically. “I guess its worth a shot seeing as how nothing else we’ve tried has gotten us anywhere close to catching that green dork. Right, Garnet?”

Even as the purple Gem lightly elbowed her in the leg, the Gem leader’s unfeeling expression remained unchanged as she seemed to almost stare both Pearl and Ford down silently. The pair exchanged something of a nervous glance under her scrutiny, which only seemed harsher as she continued to not even offer them so much as a word of approval, disapproval, or anything else for that matter. Which of course, only made it all the more difficult for either of them to guess where they might have stood with her, if she even still wanted either of them to stand with her at all.

Fortunately, it didn’t take too long for this uncertain silence to be broken by the escape pod of all things, which began to flash and beep as its touchscreen materialized. “It’s Peridot,” Pearl announced, placing her hand upon the screen as her eyes filed with lines of data and code. “She’s using the warps right now. Look!” The white Gem projected a holographic image of the globe, honing in on the exact location Peridot had supposedly just arrived at, which was likely somewhere in the northern parts of South America. “This is where she is. We’ve got her for sure this time.” Pearl pulled away from the escape pad, standing confidently beside it before leading the way to the warp pad. “If she thinks she’s got the upper hand, then she’s got another thing coming. And that’s us!”

While nowhere near as enthusiastic as Pearl, Garnet followed nonetheless, letting out a small, begrudging sigh that the others tried their best not to take note of. Even so, Amethyst simply shook her head somewhat sadly as she watched her teammates interactions, or lack thereof. The tension between them had bothered her ever since it had began, and though she had lately finally been able to vent some of her lasting concerns about it to Stan, the purple Gem still wanted to see it finally come to an end and for things to finally go back to the way they should have been. The only problem was, with the way things were now, it seemed as though that much-needed return to the status quo was never going to come about.
“Well,” Steven suddenly broke through Amethyst’s pondering, a small hopeful smile crossing his features as he watched the white Gem head to the warp pad. “At least Pearl’s optimistic.”

“Yeah, who knows?” Mabel asked, also smiling. “Maybe this just the swashbuckling, Peridot-catching adventure that Pearl and Garnet need so they can finally make up and be friends again!”

“It won’t work,” Amethyst concluded, crossing her arms doubtfully.

“Uh… why wouldn’t it?” Dipper asked, somewhat confused.

“Cause its not gonna be enough,” the purple Gem continued, looking towards her distant teammates on the other side of the room. “Pearl can hand Peridot over on a silver platter, but it won’t make up for the stunt she pulled to get Garnet to fuse with her.”

Before the kids could ask Amethyst to clarify on this, they were suddenly interrupted by Garnet, who was just shy of standing on the warp pad alongside Pearl. “Let’s go, you four,” she ordered, the slightest hint of impatience in her tone. The purple Gem and the kids complied, somewhat anxiously as they bunched together on top of the pad, but before they could depart, they were interrupted once again by Ford.

“Um, actually…” he began, apparently apprehensive, which was rare given the author’s usual confidence. “I was hoping that I could… accompany you all on this mission. As I said, it would be an ideal opportunity to test the warp destabilizer out, a-and… perhaps you’d appreciate another hand to help in capturing that Peridot Gem. R-right?”

While Pearl was about to speak up, offering Ford something of a worried, warning glance, Amethyst beat her to the punch first, her tone rather dry as she raised a rather caustic eyebrow at the author. “I dunno,” she said, her tone oddly not playful at all. “We already got Pearl and Dipper; I don’t think we have anymore room for another huge nerd on this trip.”

“Hey!” both Pearl and Dipper exclaimed in annoyed protest, sending the purple Gem flustered glares.

“Besides, ‘science man’, Amethyst continued, her hands on her hips. “If I remember right, you used to be… kind of a pushover back in the day, what with us always havin’ to save you from monsters and ghosts and fairies and stuff. And we kinda don’t really have time to be doing that while we’re trying to tail someone like Peridot.”

“If you’re worried about me holding my own, don’t be,” Ford insisted firmly. “Believe me when I say that thirty years of traversing countless danger-filled dimensions has certainly plenty of experience in getting myself out of tight spots.”

“Pfft, I’ll believe it when I see it,” the purple Gem remarked, her tone still quite sardonic.

“Well, I think we should bring Stanford along,” Pearl said to her doubtful teammates.

“Oh! So do I!” Steven chimed in supportively.

“Me too,” Dipper said with an agreeing nod.

“Make that four votes for Grunkle Ford, cause I think so too!” Mabel proclaimed excitedly.

“Uh… well, I guess that leaves it up to you, G,” Amethyst frowned, glancing up at Garnet. The Gem leader was still as silent as ever as she stared directly at Ford for a moment, who shifted somewhat uncomfortably under her obscured gaze. In the end however, she surprisingly ended up
relenting, her expression unchanged as she simply nodded her allotment and nothing else.

“Excellent!” Ford grinned, eagerly finding space on the warp pad with the rest of the group. “You three won’t regret this, I promise.”

“I-I’m sure we won’t!” Pearl cut in before either Garnet or Amethyst had the chance to say anything in edgewise. “Now, with all that out of the way, let’s get Peridot once and for all!”

Sure enough, the warp link had sent the group to where Peridot had supposedly arrived likely just a few minutes prior. It was a densely forested area, resting just on the outskirts of what was likely a jungle, though what was nestled only just a few feet away was much more interesting than the tropical foliage by far.

It was a spaceship, one that bore almost a passing semblance to a traditional flying saucer, massive in both size and scope. The vessel had clearly been there for quite some time, based on its obvious state of disrepair. Moss had claimed a good portion of its lopsided form as its three legs were set askew entirely. Regardless of its advanced dilapidation, the kids, and even Ford to some extent, were all amazed by the historic ship before them, even though, for the Gems, this sight was rather mundane at best.

“Ha! She’s desperate!” Pearl exclaimed, eagerly pointing to the ship. “Look at this! She’s cornered herself in there! We’ve got her right where we want her!”

“What is-”

“Excellent question, Steven!” the white Gem interrupted her ward before he could even get his actual question out. “What we see before us is an ancient interplanetary Gem vessel,” she explained, projecting a hologram of a similar ship touching down on Earth. “Homeworld Gems used these ships to travel across the cosmos and land here on Earth before the warp pads were built.”

“Ah, so then its just like-” Ford abruptly cut himself off as all three of the Gems sent him very sudden warning glances, almost as if he was about to say something they didn’t want him to. And, upon briefly looking away from them down to the curious trio of kids beside him, kids who weren’t quite ready to hear something like that yet, the author wisely decided to refrain. “Um, i-it’s just like… a Sorbian freight saucer from Dimension Q-49! C-certainly not like any other alien ship that might still be hidden away on some unknown corner of the Earth!”

As Ford played his near slip up with a bit of an awkward laugh, Amethyst simply groaned in annoyance while Garnet let out an equally exasperated sigh, and as Pearl continued, it was clear that her exasperation was only about to grow. “Err, y-yes, well,” the white Gem perked up once more. “This ship before us landed here so long ago, that there’s no way it can be functional anymore. Peridot’s running out of options!”

“Pearl,” Garnet finally spoke up, her manner quite impatient. “We can’t waste time. We need to focus on the task at-”

“Ah, yes! The task at hand!” Pearl interrupted, much to Garnet’s continued aggravation. “No more dawdling! Let’s go get Peridot!”

“After we set up the warp destabilizer,” Ford interjected, setting the device down onto the warp pad and pressing a small button on it after everyone had gotten off. The invention hummed to life
and, after a brief flash from the pad itself, it seemed to lose its usual shine altogether. “Aha! It worked! Now, not only has Peridot trapped herself inside that ship, but even if she does manage to slip out of it, she’ll still have nowhere to go!”

“Uh, you do know we gotta use that to get back too, right?” Amethyst asked, raising a dubious eyebrow as she looked to the inactive warp pad. “Unless stranding us here was part of your ‘plan’ too.”

“Oh, there’s no need to worry about that,” Ford remarked with a satisfied grin as he held up a small button. “I can remotely reactivate the warp at any time using this remote.”

“Whoa, Great Uncle Ford, you really did think of everything when it came to that warp destabilizer,” Dipper said, thoroughly impressed along with Mabel and Steven.

“Well, I tried to,” the author smiled proudly. “It is still in its beta phase, however, so I’ll still need to work a few of the kinks out in the-”

“Ok enough with the nerdy science talk already,” Amethyst huffed impatiently. “Can we just go inside the stupid ship already?”

“Yes,” Garnet said authoritatively, leading the way inside the derelict ship’s wide-open entryway.

“Oh boy… this is bound to be… fun,” Dipper remarked somewhat dryly as the kids trailed after Ford and the Gems.

“I know! I can’t wait!” Mabel grinned innocently, hurrying after the others as the boys exchanged something of a worried glance before catching up to the rest of the group as well.

The interior of the ship itself was dark and musty, yet oddly enough, full of life in the form of unkempt flora just about everywhere. Clinging vines crept across the metallic walls, large patches of thick moss dotted the floor, and browning rust had taken its toll on the once pristine vessel, providing a testament to just how long the ship had been abandoned and forgotten until now.

“It’s more like a greenhouse than a spaceship…” Steven commented, amazed as he looked over the ship’s weathered entry deck.

“Looks like Earth won this battle,” Amethyst agreed as they all approached the ship’s large control panel. However, before any of them could so much as touch it, the panel started to active all on its own, glowing to life as a projected screen rose up from it. And of course, on that projector was none other than the green Gem herself, smiling smugly down at the startled group before her as she let out a triumphant snicker.

“Ha! You Gems and humans really are as dull as dirt,” Peridot mocked, acting as though she had the upper hand.

“You’re the dull one if you think you can fly this wreck!” Pearl exclaimed boldly.

Peridot, however, didn’t provide much of a reaction to this proclamation aside from a brief expression of confusion. “…What? Can you speak louder? Some of these communicators are gunked up.”

“So, that’s Peridot?” Ford whispered to the twins during this exchange. “Hm. You know, for some reason I expected her to be a bit more… intimidating.”

“We all did,” Dipper remarked, his tone and expression both completely deadpan.
“Pearl said,” Steven reiterated, picking up one of the nearby diamond-shaped mics and speaking directly into it. “You’re the dull one if you think you can fly this wreck!”

Once again, Peridot didn’t answer right away, waiting for the message to relay to her clearly before she let out another mocking laugh. “Fly?” she scoffed, rolling her eyes. “I’m not using this vessel to fly. I’m using it to trap you!” With this, the ship’s entryway suddenly slammed shut, locking itself tightly as the group collectively spun around to realize that they were indeed trapped inside. An ironic twist of fate, seeing as how their original intention had been to trap Peridot herself. “Isn’t this nice?” the green Gem continued wryly. “No more Crystal Gems and their annoying human allies running around, messing up my plans, destroying my things… Looks like I’ve got you right where I want you. How does it feel to be so easily outsmarted, you clods?!”

“No!” Pearl gasped, her eyes wide with alarm at how fast the tables had been turned against her. Against all of them really, but when it came to her own plan, she could see just how quickly it was falling apart right in front of her in light of Peridot’s unexpected trap.

“Hey, uh, this is Amethyst,” the purple Gem said dryly, taking the communicator from Steven to address Peridot. “I don’t appreciate being called a clod, ya clo-”

“Enough talk!” Peridot cut in fiercely. “Prepare yourselves for annihilation! Hya!” With clear bravado, the green Gem pressed some sort of button or switch right off screen. The group before the control panel froze, unsure of what she had activated, but apparently it didn’t do anything as nothing seemed to happen at all, much to Peridot’s severe aggravation as she tried once more. “Hya!” Her second attempt actually worked, as the ship’s interior defense system readily began to activate. Before anyone could really think, a rain of laser blasts began pouring down upon the unsuspecting group, all of whom scrambled to dodge the resounding small explosions. “Ha! Yes, it works!” Peridot cheered, eagerly watching her under-attack foes. “Die! Die! Die! Die! Die!”

Amidst narrowly avoiding the lasers, Steven managed to take the initiative, thinking and acting quickly as he summoned a very large shield above him, one that effectively served as an umbrella against the blasts. “Everyone, over here!” he called to the others, who were still in the midst of fleeing from the seemingly endless barrage. Still, no one hesitated to rush over to the protection the young Gem was offering them, and somehow, they all managed to crowd together in a momentary attempt at taking shelter from the still ongoing lasers.

“This way!” Garnet ordered, spotting a small crevice in the nearby wall that would hopefully take them out of the line of fire. The entire group hurried over to it, all of them still managing to remain under the safety of Steven’s shield before cramming in through the opening to a long, straight corridor. As soon as it was apparent that they were out of harm’s way, the young Gem’s shield dissipated as he fell backwards in exhaustion, clearly worn out from the energy he’d been exerting through simply maintaining his weapon alone.

“Way to go, Steven!” Mabel cheered as she offered a hand to help Steve up.

“Three shields in one day…” the young Gem panted with a small smile. “Not too sha-”

Steven was abruptly cut off by a large, sharp spike that came jutting rapidly out of the wall right beside him. Several more appeared in quick succession, pushing out from both the walls and ceiling in an attempt to hit anything in their path.

“Move!” Garnet commanded and that’s exactly what everyone did as they rushed down the hallway of spikes, narrowly avoiding each one as they tried to find another safe haven. And of course, all the while, Peridot continued to taunt them, her twisted laughter echoing out of the ship’s intercom system.
“SPIKES!” the green Gem shouted zealously, though hardly anyone heeded her amidst trying to simply survive. “How do you like my spikes?!”

“She’s got the entire place rigged!” Amethyst exclaimed over the sounds of the rushing spikes. “What do we do?!”

“Let me handle this!” Ford answered, pulling a blaster out of his coat and taking aim up at the ceiling just behind them.

“Wait!” Garnet shouted in warning, knowing what was likely to happen, but it was ultimately too late. Ford fired, the blast hitting its mark in the ceiling directly and quickly compromising the practically ancient metallic surface. The entire corridor shook as a rather large fraction of the ceiling began to collapse, set to land directly on top of Ford and the kids. Fortunately, Garnet acted quickly, shapeshifting her arm out just in time to lasso it around the group and pull them out of harm’s way right as the heavy ceiling fell upon the ground where they had just been standing.

Luckily enough, in the aftermath of this collapse, the barrage of spikes seemed to come to an end at the end of the hallway. And yet, despite this momentary cease-fire, it seemed as though they weren’t entirely out of danger just yet, for at the very edge of the corridor, standing just a few feet away from them with her arms crossed and a triumphant grin on her face, was apparently none other than Peridot herself.

“There she is!” Pearl shouted, wasting no time in summoning her spear and rushing forward to attack.

“Pearl, don’t just-” Garnet cut herself off with a frustrated growl as the white Gem discovered the truth for herself. Pearl’s spear slashed its way cleanly through “Peridot”, only to discover that it actually wasn’t the green Gem at all. Rather, it was a mere holographic projection of her, one that resumed its pervious unchanging form just as soon as the weapon tore through it.

“Ha!” Peridot’s smug laughter echoed through the corridor, making it quite clear that she was watching her enemies’ every move. “You idiot! Only a Pearl like you would fall for an old trick like that!”

While Pearl was already quite frustrated, this comment in particular especially set her off to the point that she continued attacking the hologram once more, swinging and slicing at it repeatedly even though she knew it wouldn’t really do any good. The others watched her onslaught of aimless attacks worriedly, save for Garnet, who could only really respond to it with a disgruntled sigh and face palm before finally putting an end to it.

“Pearl, stop,” the Gem leader said firmly and the white Gem complied, panting heavily out of exhaustion. “This isn’t helping.”

“I have to do something!” Pearl exclaimed, her tone distraught as she kept her back turned to her leader. “I can’t believe I walked us right into Peridot’s trap. This is all my fault!”

In light of this morose proclamation, the corridor fell into abrupt silence, everyone looking to Pearl, who still refused to turn to face any of them, even as he spear dissipated and she hugged herself tightly. The kids exchanged a worried glance, all three of them readily wanting to reassure the white Gem, only for Garnet to halt any attempts at doing so whatsoever.

“…Let’s just keep going,” the Gem leader said stoically, her hands clenched into fists at her sides as she pressed on into the next room. Amethyst hesitated for a brief moment, looking between Garnet and Pearl before ultimately following the former, unsure of what to even say at this point.
As her teammates moved on, Pearl remained where she stood, her head hung in despair to the point that she didn’t even regard Ford and the kids still standing behind her. That is, until the author apprehensively decided to speak up.

“Pearl, I… I’m sorry,” he began, his tone genuinely sympathetic as he took a step forward. “It’s not your fault that we’re trapped here, it’s mine. If I hadn’t been so focused on that confounded warp destabilizer, then maybe I could have anticipated Peridot’s intention to trap us and found a way to work around it. I suppose that’s why I always relied so much on you three in the past: I always did have a foolish tendency to overlook the obvious.”

“There’s no way you could have known, Ford,” Pearl said, shaking her head as she finally turned slightly. “But I should have. I should have known better! I just keep… doing this! I keep making these mistakes and ruining everything, even my own attempts to set things right! No wonder Garnet’s disappointed in me. Even if I hadn’t tricked her into fusing with me, I’m still a failure all the same…”

While Ford wasn’t really the best at providing comfort, he did very much want to reassure the white Gem that this wasn’t the case. However, someone else beat him to the punch first. “You’re not a failure, Pearl!” Steven exclaimed earnestly as he stepped up to his mournful guardian. “You made a mistake, yeah, but that doesn’t mean you can’t try and fix it.”

“I’ve been trying to fix it, Steven…” Pearl sighed sadly. “But nothing’s worked… Sometimes I feel things between Garnet and I will never go back to the way they used to be…”

“Well, then I’m in the same boat as you are,” Ford said, just as remorsefully. “I understand why Garnet and Amethyst are both still upset with me, especially in light of… their formerly lost memories, but I never thought that picking up where I left off with them would be this difficult…”

“Awww, well you shouldn’t give up on making up with them yet!” Mabel urged encouragingly. “Neither of you should! I bet all it’ll take is a little more time and a little more work and who knows? By the time we get outta this rusty old ship, you guys could all be best friends again, just like you were before!”

“Yeah, I mean, at the very least things can’t really get any worse between you guys at this point, can they?” Dipper asked, trying to be reassuring, though the question didn’t really help either Pearl or Ford too much.

“Goodness, I hope not…” the white Gem muttered, cringing at the thought of things souring even more between herself and Garnet.

“Hey! Are you guys coming or what?!?” Amethyst called, poking her head out from the corner her and Garnet had rounded a moment ago. The others simply nodded, knowing that, in light of the circumstances, they didn’t really have a lot of time to focus on repairing broken bonds. Escaping Peridot’s trap and netting her in their own had to be of the utmost importance now.

The next room the group found themselves in was surprisingly small and empty, having likely been a storage area at some point. Upon a first glance, it seemed as though it was a dead end, however, meaning that there really wasn’t any way to go but back. Garnet nodded to the others to turn around, however, before any of them really had a chance to, the entire room itself began to shake. In an instant, the ground gave out from under the group completely, a trap door opening itself wide as everyone fell through the narrow shaft to whatever awaited down below. Fortunately, Amethyst had the wits about her to summon her whip and toss it upward in an attempt to stop the fall. Its end found a low hanging branch grown in through one of the walls and coiled itself around it, giving the purple Gem enough time to summon a second whip to catch Steven, Dipper, Mabel, and even
Ford as they fell past her.

“I-I got you guys!” she exclaimed as they all stopped in midair, though it was clear she was struggling under the weight of holding the four of them and herself up.

“Thanks, Amethyst!” Steven called back up to the purple Gem, even as pressed up against the twins and the author as he was. However, upon taking a glance at the ground very far below them, he was able to see that Garnet and Pearl had landed, mostly unharmed, in what appeared to be a small, deep, narrow chamber beneath them. “Garnet! Pearl! Are you guys ok?”

“We’re fine!” Garnet called back up, though she was almost immediately proven wrong as the floor, or ceiling rather, of the pit there were trapped in suddenly closed itself up without warning, trapping the pair inside.

“… Crud…” Amethyst whispered, her eyes wide as she realized what had just happened. However, matters were only made worse as her load-bearing whip suddenly snapped from the pressure put upon it, leaving the remaining group to fall the rest of the way down. Fortunately, with the pit covered as it was, this actually wasn’t all too dangerous of a drop as everyone landed rather safely in a larger room, one that, coincidentally enough, contained a surveillance screen that showed the very pit Garnet and Pearl were currently trapped in. Both of them had summoned their weapons and had frantically begun beating at the close walls keeping them trapped on all sides, though it was clear that doing so wasn’t making any progress in breaking either of them out.

“Oh no!” Mabel exclaimed worriedly. “We gotta get them out of there!”

“Amethyst, what should we-” Steven cut himself off upon glancing over at the purple Gem, who was transfixed on the screen. Or rather, on what the white Gem had just said to their leader on the other side of it.

“Garnet… I’m sorry…” Pearl sighed, her spear disappearing as she pressed a weak hand against the nearest wall. “Things weren’t supposed to turn out this way…”

“We’ll get out of here somehow,” Garnet replied, landing another brutal, but ultimately useless punch against the wall before her.

“T-that’s not what I mean…” the white Gem frowned, glancing over her shoulder apprehensively. “I really wanted to catch Peridot to make up for what I did… I wanted to prove to you that… that everything could go back to normal…”

Garnet was silent for a moment at this, her gauntlets held at the ready at her sides though she made no move against the wall upon hearing this. When she did speak, her tone was firm, almost cold even. “Catching Peridot won’t make things go back to normal. This isn’t about Peridot.”

As Pearl turned to face the Gem leader fully, the group above all found themselves rather surprised, especially Amethyst, who knew that this conversation had been a long time in coming. “Hey! They’re actually talking to each other!” she exclaimed with newfound relief.

“Who could have guessed that all it took was to trap them together in a cramped pit?” Dipper asked, also quite taken aback by the ongoing dialogue.

“Now maybe they can finally work things out!” Steven chimed in hopefully, more than ready to see the tension between his guardians finally be resolved.

However, it seemed as though they wouldn’t get a real chance to as the large set of crystalline gears above the screen suddenly began to turn rapidly. As a result, the walls of the pit the pair of
Gems were trapped within suddenly began to press in, making the already tight space grow smaller and smaller by the second.

“Not if they get crushed!” Amethyst cried, alarmed just as much as the kids were by this sudden turn of events. Ford, on the other hand, opted to save his fear in favor of thought as he instead glancing around the room for what options were available to him in developing a plan to rescue the pair. And, after looking to the constantly turning gears once again, he managed to come up with exactly that.

“I have an idea,” the author announced, remaining somehow calm and levelheaded, even despite the frightening circumstances. “Amethyst, I need to see your whip.”


“Because,” Ford began to explain, prying open a loose panel on the nearby wall to reveal an array of aged circuitry and wires. “If I understand the layout of this room correctly, then the charge from these wires could in theory connect to those gears to form a failsafe shutdown mechanism that might be able to keep the walls from moving in any further.”

“Uh… care to explain all that in English, science man?” Amethyst deadpanned, raising a caustic eyebrow.

“What I mean is that we need a way to connect these wires to those gears,” the author explained succinctly. “And I think your whip might do the trick.”

“And what makes you so sure that-” Amethyst cut herself off upon noticing the urgent glances all three of the kids were sending her, reminding her that this really was no time to be doubting Ford’s methods. “Ugh, fine…” she sighed, summoning a long whip from her Gem. She lashed its tip out, coiling it around one of the smaller gears before handing its other end off to Ford. The author quickly got to work, sifting through the wires in the panel before singling out the ones he needed and tying them to the end of the whip. All the while, Amethyst and the kids continued exchanging nervous glances back at the screen, watching as Garnet and Pearl pushed hard against the walls closing in on them, threatening to crush them both.

“P-please!” the white Gem cried, clearly desperate in more ways than one. “Tell me! How can I make you forgive me!”

“You can’t!” Garnet shouted back over the loud noise of the walls surrounding them. “You lied to me! You need to learn that there are consequences to your actions!”

“I-I’m sorry!” Pearl pleaded, tears starting to stream down her cheeks. Tears that she had been holding back from even before this mess even started. “I… I couldn’t help myself! I needed to feel better again so much, especially… especially after-”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses!” the Gem leader snapped fiercely, throwing her leg up against the wall in a futile attempt to keep it in place.

“But its true!” the white Gem sobbed morosely. “I just… can’t stop thinking about what happened that night all those years ago…” Pearl closed her eyes tightly, a tinge of distant horror in her tone. “The things I said… the things I agreed to… I knew better from the start but I still went through with it anyway… I was weak…”

Before Pearl could get anything else out, the walls surrounding the pair of Gems suddenly stopped moving, much to their shared relief. Unbeknownst to them, in the room above them, Ford had just...
finished establishing the link between the wires and the gears, the charge effectively managing to cut off power to them and keep them from rotating any further.

“Huh…” Amethyst remarked, impressed as she looked to the screen before glancing back at Ford. “I didn’t think that would actually work…”

“Well, what can I say?” the author remarked with a satisfied smile. “Over the past thirty years I’ve become something of an expert when it comes to hotwiring alien vessels.”

“Huh, no kidding,” the purple Gem said with the hint of a smile. “That’s actually kinda cool.” Amethyst took pause, her eyes widening briefly as she realized what she had said before rolling her eyes playfully. “Ugh, I can’t believe I just used the word ‘cool’ to describe you…”

“I’d like to think I have my moments,” Ford replied, offering Amethyst the same roguish grin she was offering him. A sure fire sign that maybe, just maybe things were starting to smooth over between the two of them after all. “Now all we need to do is figure a way to get them both out of there and-”

“Shh!” Mabel interjected, her eyes wide as her and the boys continued watching what was transpiring between Garnet and Pearl on screen. “This is getting really good!”

“We were all weak that night, Pearl,” Garnet said, glancing down amidst the new relative calm surrounding them. “You, me, and Amethyst. We all did something we regretted, something that could have ruined us all. And that’s why Rose took it all away from us in the first place.”

“But she never would have had to do that if I had just said no!” Pearl exclaimed hotly, her tears still flowing intently. “I… I gave in… I let that happen… I let him trick us all… And even now, I’m no better than I was back then… No matter how hard I try to be strong like you… I’m just a Pearl… I’m useless on my own… I need someone to tell me what to do…”

“Pearl…” Garnet said, her tone somewhat gentler upon hearing just how hard the white Gem actually took the massive mistake from their past. Yet even so, Pearl continued, knowing there was no point in holding back the truth now.

“When we fuse, I can feel what its like to be you…” the white Gem said with a small, wistful smile. “Confident and secure and complete. You’re perfect, you’re the perfect relationship. You’re always together, always supporting each other. I just… wanted to be a part of that…”

“You’re wrong!” the Gem leader exclaimed, her unsteady tone catching her teammate off guard. “I’m not as strong as you think. I fell apart over this. Ruby and Sapphire were in turmoil over how you deceived me… I-I… I came undone…”

“Whoa, that actually happened?” Amethyst asked the kids, having only heard sparse details about the disastrous road trip a few days ago. Steven confirmed it with a nod, surprising both the author and the purple Gem, who both knew Garnet to be the kind to only split up in the most severe of circumstances. Which meant that truly, Pearl’s trickery had hurt her on a level that even the white Gem herself was only starting to comprehend.

“It’s not easy being in control,” Garnet admitted truthfully, her manner solemn, almost sad even. “I have weaknesses too. But I choose not to let them consume me. I struggle to stay strong because I know the impact I have on everyone. Please understand, Pearl,” her tone turned earnest as she looked directly at the white Gem, who was still pressed against the wall close to her. “You have an impact too. There are times when I look to you for strength. You are your own Gem. You control your destiny. Not me, not Rose, not Steven, and not even the mistakes you made in the past. But
you must choose to be strong, so we can move forward. So I can trust you again.”

Pearl was silent for a long moment upon hearing all this, tears still brimming in her eyes as she met the Gem leader’s steady gaze. For the first time since all of this began, the white Gem realized that it was her own weakness that had gotten her into this mess, that had prompted her into tricking Garnet and had been what tore their entire team apart. From the moment her long lost memories of the darkened past had been returned to her, she had been sinking, drowning in her own remorse and guilt, the mistakes she had made and the problems she had caused threatening to crush her completely. And in her grief and her reckless attempt to free herself from it all, she had hurt someone she truly cared about, one of her closest and longest friends, to the point that she truly didn’t feel deserving of her forgiveness in the first place, as much as she desperately wanted it.

And yet now, in light of Garnet’s inspiring yet still very pained words, Pearl began to realize something else: she realized that despite all of the weakness, remorse, and guilt she carried upon her shoulders, none of those things really defined her. None of those things made her who she was. Because in the end, Garnet was right; despite all the flaws of her original programming and all of the fallacies she had been hardwired with since her formation, she was still her own Gem. She had to decide what she was going to do and who she was going to be. And from here on out, that’s exactly what she was going to do.

“…I understand…” Pearl finally said, her voice gentle at first before filling with renewed resolve. “I can’t give up anymore!”

“Good,” Garnet nodded, a ghost of a smile on her face. However, before any further resolution could unfold between the pair of Gems, a sudden, sickening snap was heard from up above. Ford, Amethyst, and the kids all gasped in startled unison as the purple Gem’s whip connecting the wires and the gears unexpectedly snapped, resulting in the trap room’s enclosing mechanism to boot up once again. Down below, the walls once again began pressing against Garnet and Pearl, who were already practically pressed up against each other as it was. If they didn’t act quickly, then they would both certainly be crushed in just a matter of seconds. “Pearl, there’s only one way out of this!” the Gem leader exclaimed, not even needing to explain her idea.

For a brief moment, Pearl gaped at her in surprise that she’d even consider such a thing after everything that had happened. But even so, she knew there was no time to ask her myriad of questions now. “Only if you’re ok with it,” she said, knowing that she never wanted to do this under false pretenses ever again.

Garnet simply nodded in response, outstretching her hand as much as she could for Pearl to take. The white Gem hesitated for the briefest moments before giving her own hand over, only barely holding back a sigh of immense relief over the fact that, even if this wasn’t all over yet, they had finally set themselves on the path to that point.

Back up above, Amethyst and the kids were essentially in an all-out panic, all of them at a complete loss about what to do to save Garnet and Pearl in the mere seconds they had left. Once again, Ford tried his best to remain calm amidst the increasingly dire straits of the situation, but as he looked between the now broken wires and the rapidly spinning gears, he quickly realized that he was searching for a solution that he had absolutely no time left to find.

Fortunately though, it turned out he wouldn’t have to find that solution after all as Garnet and Pearl discovered one on their own. The entire group above was startled stiff as the covered ceiling of the pit busted open, pierced by what seemed to be a massive drill that revealed itself to be a familiar war hammer as it suddenly stopped spinning. And, out of what was left of the compressing tunnel emerged none other than Sardonyx, her larger-than-life form jumping gracefully out of the trap her components had succumbed to. The fusion didn’t stick around, however, not outstaying her
welcome this time as Garnet and Pearl harmoniously unfused. As amazed as all the others were by this miraculous escape, the pair of Gems simply exchanged a brief glance of understanding, neither of them needing words at a moment like this. The newfound bond of trust building between them already spoke volumes enough on its own.

“Garnet! Pearl!” Steven exclaimed happily as he rushed to embrace the Gem leader’s leg. “I’m so glad you guys are ok!”

“And that you used Sardonyx to bust out!” Mabel chimed in excitedly. “I only wish she could have stuck around a little longer. She’s so cool and—”

“Mabel!” Dipper chastised in a harsh whisper, giving her a warning look to remind her that the topic of the flashy fusion was likely still somewhat touchy to the pair of recently reconciled Gems.

“It’s quite alright,” Pearl laughed warmly as Garnet herself smirked. “Actually, I have a feeling that the next time we form Sardonyx, she’ll be even cooler.”

“She certainly will,” Garnet affirmed, her smile growing a bit as Pearl blushed slightly under her now accepting gaze. The Gem leader’s tone was still cordial as, for the first time all day, she finally addressed the author as he stood patiently nearby. “Stanford,” she began, taking a step towards him. “I saw you plan through my future vision. That was some quick thinking, using Amethyst’s whip to connect the gears and the wires like that. And even though it only worked for a bit, it was still a worthy effort. Thank you.”

Upon hearing this sincere gratitude, Ford was admittedly stunned into silence for a brief moment, however, he was quick to recollect himself, perking up quite a bit as he adjusted his glasses and smiled. “Y—you’re welcome!” he exclaimed brightly, more than glad to be on speaking terms with the Gem leader once again. “After all the times you three have saved me in the past, I figured it was only fair to try and do the same for you. Even if my attempt could have been a bit more polished…” the author frowned, glancing back at the mess of ripped wires sticking out of the wall behind him.

“Well, I know what will be polished this time,” Pearl said with a daring grin. “Us finally tracking down Peridot and getting out of here. Because this time—”

“We’ll do it together,” Garnet finished boldly, sharing this resolve along with the rest of the group as they prepared to finally move on to finish this mission. “Now, let’s catch ourselves a Peridot.”

The ship’s central control bridge served to echo the low grumblings and frustrated rantings of the green Gem standing before it, pressing various buttons in a frantic attempt to continue monitoring the interior of the ship. Of course, given the age of the vessel and its current deteriorated condition, she wasn’t really having much luck as all of the monitors before her showed nothing but static and none of her inputs on the panel seemed to be doing anything to bring any of them back up online.

“Ugh… stupid button here, I don’t know where anything is!” Peridot growled, slamming her fist down onto the aged panel angrily. “Blast this old Gem tech! Where’d they go?! Why isn’t anything working?!” The green Gem suddenly cut herself off with an aptly startled gasp as the wall right behind her was blasted cleanly through, courtesy of Ford’s blaster. The Gems, the kids, and the author didn’t hesitate to barge in on Peridot, who froze defensively near the panel, clearly having not expected the intrusion, especially considering her well thought-out trap.
“Surrender, Peridot!” Garnet ordered, her gauntlets at the ready to attack as everyone else grabbed their respective weapons as well. “You have nowhere to run!”

“We’re gonna get yooou!” Steven sang with a bright grin.

“And this time we mean it!” Mabel added, cocking her grappling hook. “Not that we didn’t mean it all the other times, but now we really mean it!”

“Ha! You really think this is the end?” Peridot asked, quickly resuming her former cockiness as her fingers formed into a blaster, which she took aim at the group before her with. “This is just the beginning… of my escape!” With this, the green Gem pointed her blaster upwards, firing instantly up at the ship’s ceiling above her, creating a large gap that would be more than enough to allow her to make a clear getaway. And for a moment, it seemed like that was what she was going to do as her fingers reshaped themselves into helicopter blades again, propelling her upward as she laughed manically at her foes still tethered to the ground. “Well, I’d love to stick around and watch another one of your pathetic attempts to capture me, but I guess I’m just too smart for the likes of your lumpy, clumpy clods!”

The green Gem continued to revel in her apparent victory, though it was ultimately short lived as something, or rather someone managed to latch on to her foot before she get too high out of reach. “I caught a Peridot!” Steven cheered, clinging onto the green Gem, even as she began to rise higher into the air with him in tow.

“Hey! Get your touch stumps off me, you Steven!” Peridot growled, trying her best to shake the young Gem off of her. In retaliation, Steven simply bit down on the green Gem’s oddly metallic toe, which only served to frustrate her even more as she tried flicking him this time to get him off. “Hey! You… you persistent little… whatever exactly you are! Release me this instant!”

“Not a chance!” Dipper shouted as he rushed to grab Steven’s foot before Peridot could drag him up too high.

“Yeah, consider yourself ‘anchored’!” Mabel added enthusiastically, grabbing onto her brother as well. All the same, the weight of all three of the kids combined still wasn’t enough to keep Peridot down as she continued to rise, albeit slowly, into the air.

“Y-you can’t stop me! None of you can!” Peridot shouted back down at the resilient trio. “When are you going to realize that, no matter how much you clods try to stop me, I’ll always come out on top?!”

“Maybe when you realize that you’re goin’ down!” Amethyst exclaimed, jumping up to catch Mabel’s foot and weigh the rising group down somewhat. Pearl was quick to join in, doing her best to pull the purple Gem down as she kept her nerve this time, knowing that losing it again would result in the green Gem’s continued escape.

“Don’t let her go!” she called up to the kids before briefly grinning down at Ford, who had added himself to this ever-growing chain.

“L-logistically speaking, this has to be enough to keep her weighed down,” the author said, somewhat strained from trying to pull all the others back.

“Not quite,” Garnet said, catching Ford’s ankle as he began to rise into the air as well. The Gem leader proved strong enough to keep herself tethered to the ground, holding the entire group and finally preventing Peridot from making any further progress in her upward escape. “Peridot! Your flight’s been cancelled!”
“Augh! No!” the green Gem growled, beyond vexed by her enemies practically successful attempt at stopping her. Even so, Peridot wasn’t about to let herself be captured so easily, and, although she hated to do it, she knew she had no other choice. With another frustrated groan, the green Gem pressed a seamless spot on near the foot that Steven was still clinging tightly onto. At once, the appendage detached itself from the rest of her body, finally freeing herself from the young Gem’s hold as she shot upwards drastically as a result. The chain of Gems and humans that had been keeping her grounded quickly collapsed as a result of this, though fortunately none of them were harmed in any way as they landed, except for perhaps in pride as they had to watch Peridot slip away from them yet again.

“Augh, this is just great!” the green Gem snapped, clearly upset at her now missing foot as she began to fly away. “You’ll pay for this, Crystal Gems! And you too, you meddlesome humans! I don’t care what I have to do, I’ll get you all back somehow! Just you waaaaaait!”

And with that, Peridot disappeared into the sunset skies above, narrowly escaping her long-awaited capture yet again, much to the mixed feelings of the group she had left behind in the ship. “Aw, come on, she got away again?” Mabel pouted, clearly disappointed.

“Ok, but it totally wasn’t our fault this time,” Dipper clarified. “We can all agree on that, right? I mean, she totally cheated with the whole detachable foot thing.”

The others nodded in agreement as the rose to stand, most of them in states of varying levels of disgruntlement in light of the unfortunate fact that their quest to bring the green Gem down had to continue. Steven, however, was mostly just concerned as he looked to Pearl, whose gaze was set in a determined expression towards the hole Peridot had just slipped out through. “Pearl?” he asked, coming to stand beside her only for her to smile back down at him warmly.

“Don’t worry, Steven,” she said confidently as she held up the remains of Peridot’s foot that had fallen with the rest of them. “Next time… we’ll get the rest of her. Right, Garnet?”

“It’s a good step forward,” Garnet nodded with a smile, one that only grew as the white Gem and the kids shared a laugh over this clever quip.

“Ha! Foot jokes!” Steven chuckled, spirits still high all around even as Ford curiously interjected. “Hm… you know, I might be able to come up with some way to keep her from escaping again if I had a chance to study the specs of her technology up close…” the author mused, eyeing the green Gem’s foot thoughtfully before glancing up at the pair of Gems hopefully. “W-with your permission, of course.”

At this, Garnet and Pearl exchanged something of a wry glance before the Gem leader freely handed the foot over to Ford. “Knock yourself out.”

“Yes!” the author cheered, readily taking the foot and looking it over, more than excited to analyze such advanced technology. “Finally, a chance to investigate the inner workings of a piece of Homeworld technology firsthand! Just think of all the notes and blueprints I’ll be able to-”

Ford cut himself off as Garnet and Pearl both broke down into gales of laughter at his almost childlike wonder with something as simple as a mechanical foot, of all things. “Uh, looks like your nerd is showing, science man,” Amethyst remarked playfully, eliciting a bout of good-natured laughter from the kids as well. Despite the author’s slight embarrassment, even he wasn’t really able to hold back a flustered chuckle, one that soon turned into a full on laugh as he was caught up in the newfound wave of levity the entire group was soon caught up in.
The only one who didn’t join in on this merriment was Amethyst herself as she stood just on the outskirts of the group, though she still shared everyone else’s high spirits all the same. Because at long last, after what felt like an eternity of uncertainty and uneasiness on all sides, after a barrage of revelations and upheavals, after worry, dread, anger, and everything in between, they had finally reached the end. They had all made it through the storm and came out on the other side of it, perhaps reaching an even better place than where they had started from. True, things had changed as a result of that portal opening wide, as a result of long lost memories being found, but that didn’t mean they had to change. Because friendships as strong as theirs, both between the Gems and Ford and even amongst the Crystal Gems themselves, were destined to whether out any storm that came their way.

Which was why Amethyst finally let out a much-needed sigh of relief as she fell back onto the ground, smiling contentedly all the while. “Finally…” she sighed to herself as the group nearby continued in their reformed camaraderie, hoping that things would stay like this now and for a long time to come.
Chapter 57: Chille Tid, Part 1

Chapter Summary

In which everyone is tired, Steven dreams about Lapis, and Bill is the biggest dick ever.

Chapter Notes

Woooo boy here we go with another big two part chapter! As for why Chille Tid needs to be a two parter... you'll find out why soon enough ;) Even so I hope you enjoy this one its... its a LOT. So get ready and enjoy! (keyword is MALACHITE)

The deep blue waters of Lake Gravity Falls were a calm, serene sight under the pale glow of the moon of any given night, including this particular one. Even so, the apparent peace of the lake’s reflective surface was a deceptive one, for buried far under its murky depths lie something far more mysterious and deadly than just mere schools of ravenous fish or elusive lake beasts. Unbeknownst to most of the oblivious townsfolk of Gravity Falls, their iconic lake served as the aquatic prison for a monstrous amalgamation that had both willingly and unwillingly trapped itself in the water below several weeks ago.

And that amalgamation was the very thing that the Gems and the kids were on the hunt for as they floated upon the lonely moonlit lake.

The group had set out several hours ago upon a small inflatable raft that barely had enough room to hold all of them, yet somehow it managed to carry them across the lake to its center just fine. With Peridot’s location currently unknown, the Gems had concluded that it was time to focus their efforts on the other massive threat that had resulted from the hand ship invasion several weeks ago: Malachite. As soon as the kids caught wind of their plans to try and release the massive fusion from her self-imposed prison and finally split her up, they didn’t hesitate to come along, all three of them more than eager and willing to do anything they could to help Lapis out of her ongoing miserable plight.

And so the collective group had been sitting out on the open lake for hours now, though unfortunately, they had little to show for their stalwart efforts. There was no question that Malachite was still chained to the lakebed far below, but the main problem they faced now was getting to her. As Garnet had discovered quite some time ago, the fusion was keeping her trapped deep below the surface with an apparently impenetrable layer of ice that spread across the entire lake. Which meant that their primary mission at the moment was trying to break through the ice
themselves or somehow get Malachite to do the job for them in the hopes of breaking the toxic fusion up and putting an end to the menace she posed from there. A goal that, by most accounts, they hadn’t really gotten any closer to since they started in the early evening and as time sluggishly wore on into the dead of night.

“Ugh!” Pearl groaned loudly, breaking through the longstanding silence as she peered over the side of the raft impatiently. “This isn’t getting us anywhere!”

“What’s the matter, pierogi?” Amethyst asked just as crossly as she dunked Steven underwater for the tenth time. “You tired?”

“I don’t get tired,” the white Gem scoffed, annoyed. “I get results.”

“Hmph,” Amethyst rolled her eyes, far too exhausted to come up with a witty comeback as she continued holding Steven over the side of the raft. “You know, I’m surprised you two dorks haven’t clocked out yet,” she said, glancing over her shoulder at the twins on the other side of the raft.

“When we’re this close to finally freeing Lapis? Not a chance,” Dipper remarked, his manner cold and serious even though the darker than usual bags under his eyes told a different story. Even still, he wasn’t about to let his own growing exhaustion, or anything else for that matter hold him back from rescuing the blue Gem; not again. Not after the momentous disaster that had spiraled wildly out of control the last time he had foolishly tried to take the easy way out.

However, upon stealing a glance over at Mabel, Dipper was quick to discover her resolve was perhaps not as strong as his was given the fact that she was slumped against the side of the raft, fast asleep. “Mabel! Wake up!” he scolded, shoving her shoulder a bit until it finally succeeded in rousing her.

“Huh? I—I—I’m up!” Mabel shot upright, disoriented even as she met her brother’s disapproving glare. “I’m up! I’ve been up for… hours…” She inevitably trailed off into a tired yawn as she thoughtlessly leaned back onto the side of the raft, that is until Dipper abruptly snapped her awake again.

“Mabel, this is serious!” he chastised resolutely. “Do you want to help save Lapis or not?”

“Of course, I do, bro-bro,” Mabel frowned, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes as she sat up properly. “But you gotta admit, Dipper, you can get kind of… on edge when it comes to trying to help Lapis.”

“On edge? On edge?! Who’s on edge? I’m not on edge. What would make you even think I would ever be on edge?! I can tell you who is on edge and it’s not me!” Dipper ranted harshly, his eye slightly twitching from oncoming anger that Mabel was quick to try and defuse.

“Yikes, that’s… kinda what I mean…” Mabel shrugged diffidently. “I know you really wanna save her, but… maybe you should try to relax a bit. I don’t really think you need a reminder about what happened the… last time you got like this… do you?”

Dipper froze, his eyes widening slightly as he glanced between Mabel and Pearl and Amethyst, both of whom weren’t really interested in the ongoing conversation as much as they were in keeping an eye out for Malachite. “N-no…” he muttered, glancing down bitterly. “I don’t…”

Even so, the unspoken promise all the kids had made to each other to keep their last encounter with Bill under wraps from just about everyone, including the Gems, still stood. After all, how could
they even possibly begin to detail to anyone the horrific waking nightmare that had come about when the dream demon had cruelly stolen Dipper’s own body from him and used it to nearly kill Steven, Mabel, and Connie alike? Certainly, the Gems wouldn’t believe them, and even if anyone did, there was no telling how would they even react to the kind of peril the had been in right under their noses. Which was why the kids had unanimously decided to not speak a word about any of to anyone save for each other; as far as all of them were concerned, it was better and easier for everyone that way.

Up until that point, Amethyst had only half been listening in on the twins’ bickering, though her attention was soon diverted as Steven began flailing about in the water as she continued to hold him under. “Uh… guys? Was the sign for ‘pull me up’ one wiggle or two?” she asked, looking mostly to Pearl for confirmation.

“Amethyst, stay focused!” the white Gem exclaimed hotly, still not glancing away from the lake for even a second, something that Dipper joined her in doing even as Mabel discreetly started to doze off again.

“Oops,” Amethyst shrugged, casually dropping Steven fully into the water completely.

“For all we know, Lapis and Jasper’s fusion could break out from the bottom of the lake at any moment!” Pearl continued scolding the purple Gem. “And we need to be ready in the event that she-” The white Gem cut herself off with the gasp as a Steven suddenly broke the surface of the water right in front of her, gasping for air as he spit out a majority of the water he had accidentally swallowed, including a small fish.

“This is why we wear life jackets,” the young Gem frowned after letting out another small cough and some more water along with it.

“Ah! Are you alright?!?” Pearl asked, quite concerned that her young ward had almost apparently drowned.

Before Steven had a chance to answer, Garnet suddenly emerged from the water, having been down below its surface for quite some time. In a single swift movement, the Gem leader leapt out of the water and onto the raft, gently tossing Steven up onto it as well. “No luck…” Garnet sighed, her gauntlets dissipating as she shook her head in muted exasperation.

“You mean you weren’t able to break through the ice trapping her down there?” Dipper asked, somewhat frustrated. “Why not?! Its just ice!”

“Its very thick ice,” Garnet said calmly. “Malachite’s probably restoring the entire sheet each time I so much as put a dent in it. Its pretty obvious that Lapis wants to keep them stuck down there, no matter what.”

“Well… what if we try telling Lapis that she doesn’t need to keep doing that and that we’re just trying to help her?” Mabel suggested, putting a supportive hand on Dipper’s shoulder as she heard his dejected sigh at this news.

“We’d have to find a way to break through to her first, literally,” Pearl pointed out, disgruntled. “Which at this point, who knows how long it’ll take. It feels like we’ve been at this for light years!”

“Uh, light years measures light, not years,” Amethyst pointed out sardonically as she absently poked Steven’s stomach, prompting him to spit what lake water was still in him out.
“Augh! And I’m sick of these… *life diapers!*” Pearl fussed, glaring down at her restraining life jacket.

“Safety is no punchline, Pearl,” Steven reminded, handing a life jacket over to Garnet, who simply tossed it into the water in favor of summoning her own.

“Safety is our job,” the Gem leader said. “Which is why we have to break Lapis and Jasper out before they break themselves out. As it stands, their fusion is a ticking time bomb.”

“Uh… because if we don’t, then Malachite will bust out and attack the town like some big scary sea monster?” Mabel ventured a guess with a worried frown.

“Not just that,” Garnet replied evenly. “They’ll also be putting *themselves* in grave danger as well.”

“W-what!?” Dipper asked, immensely more concerned upon hearing such an alarming implication.

“…I—is Lapis gonna be ok?” Steven asked, also quite worried for the blue Gem’s unknown fate.

“She had control when she used her power to drag their fusion into the lake,” Garnet began to explain, adjusting her shades. “*But*, a fusion like theirs is unstable, bound together by anger and mistrust. If that bond snaps, their anger will take over, and destroy them both.”

At this disturbing possibility, all three of the kids exchanged distraught glances, all of them absolutely dreading the thought of Lapis meeting her untimely end in her self-sacrificial mission to protect them all. While Mabel apprehensively bit her lip, Dipper frantically glanced around the lake, desperate to come up with any solution to penetrate the icy layer below and save Lapis before it was too late. Yet in the end, Steven was the one to voice this shared concern, though not before letting out a small, tired yawn as he did. “Don’t worry, Lapis…” he said, leaning over the edge of the raft a bit. “We won’t let you sleep with the fishes…”

“You better believe we won’t!” Dipper exclaimed sharply, rushing to push up against the side of the raft. “I knew what Lapis was going through was bad, but I could have never imagined there was a *time limit* to saving her! This means we have to keep looking; we can’t stop, even for a minute, until we break through that ice and break them up once and for all!”

“I agree that we’ll have to keep looking,” Garnet mused, glancing over at the kids. “But first, we need to take you three home.”

“What?! No way!” Dipper exclaimed in appalled disbelief, instantly waking Steven and Mabel as they propped against each other, snoozing behind him. “We can’t just leave now!”

“Huh—wha?” Steven asked groggily, stumbling to stand. “Uh yeah, I—we’re fine!”

“Y-yeah…” Mabel nodded, her head dropping somewhat as she began to nod off again before she snapped herself awake again. “Totally ‘wake… Not… thinkin ‘bout sleep… at all…” Despite her best efforts to stave conscious, Mabel was quick to drift back to sleep, something that Steven was close to as he sleepily headed for the side of the raft.

“You guys are absolutely no help at all,” Dipper concluded dryly, knowing that their visible exhaustion was not helping his case in continuing the search.

“W-we can… help…” Steven trailed off into another sleepy yawn. “Let—let’s go fishing! First one to… catch something… wins…”

The young Gem finished by essentially sleepwalking right off the edge of the raft, only to be
caught by Garnet right before he could land in the water. “I win.”

By the time the group made the lengthy trek from the lake back to the temple, everyone within it was some mixture of disgruntled or exhausted, especially since it meant that their mission to take out Malachite would have to be put on an unfortunate hold. Even so, it seemed as though that hold would be a necessary one, as even the Gems themselves seemed to be quite fatigued from their ongoing, exhaustive—or rather, exhausting—campaign.

“This is a waste of time,” Pearl was the first to complain as the collective group trudged into the house. “We should be out there, trying to break through the ice, not here… not trying to break through the ice.”

“‘Sleep is a curse, yet a curse I need to live’—Steven Universe,” Steven quoted himself somewhat dramatically.

“Wow, that’s so…” Mabel trailed off into another yawn before finishing. “Deep…”

“We can get plenty of sleep after we help Lapis,” Dipper concluded, stubbornly crossing his arms and scowling.

“I’d beg to differ,” Garnet said authoritatively. “You kids aren’t like us. You need rest.”

“Don’t you guys need rest too?” Steven frowned at the Gems. “You look exhausted.”

A beat of silence passed at this, all three of the rather disheveled, clearly just as worn out and on the verge of passing out as any of the kids were, as much as they tried to pretend like they weren’t. “We look awesome,” Garnet assured, her voice tight with her own apparent weariness.

“Look, you can’t really knock sleep until you try it,” Steven said as he began pulling pillows off the nearby couch. “And maybe we can throw a little fun into the mix with a… slumber party!”

“…Fun?” Pearl asked, rather appalled from the very suggestion alone.

“Did somebody say slumber party?!” Mabel instantly perked awake upon hearing this, letting out an excited gasp.

“Yeah! All of us together, dozing off,” Steven smiled as he set the pillows on the ground before plopping down onto them himself. “It’ll almost be like there isn’t a vengeful fusion boiling the lake with hatred.”

“And we can eat popcorn, and tell ghost stories, and play truth or dare, or put someone’s hand into a cup of water while they’re sleeping!” Mabel added brightly.

“…Are you guys serious right now?” Dipper asked, sending both Steven and Mabel a serious glare. “Lapis is stuck in a fusion with Jasper, of all Gems, that’s been chained to the bottom of the lake for weeks now and that could end up destroying them both if we don’t split them up soon enough and you guys want to have a slumber party?!”

Mabel and Steven exchanged an equally anxious glance in light of this, both of them rather surprised at just how angry Dipper seemed to be over the matter, anger that only seemed to amplify as a result of his own pressing exhaustion. Even so, the young Gem was the one to answer it as he let out a small, sympathetic sigh as he stood up once more. “Dipper, we all know how much you
wanna help Lapis, but… you need to take care of yourself too. I don’t think she’d want you or any of us to wear ourselves out trying to save her. Besides, I’m sure with a little rest, we’ll all be raring and ready to go to try again out on the lake tomorrow!”

“Steven’s right,” Garnet said astutely, putting her hands on Pearl and Amethyst’s shoulders to imply that this message applied to them as well. “You all should stay here and relax. But I’m going back to the lake. Because I’m always relaxed,” she finished between clenched teeth, her manner harsh as she began to make her way over to the front door, though not without an adamant follower.

“Garnet, wait!” Dipper exclaimed, hurrying after the Gem leader. “Please, you gotta take me with you! Maybe I can figure out some way for you to break through the ice, or… or… or something! Either way, I want to keep trying to save Lapis, sleep or sleep.” He paused briefly, slowly realizing that what he had said had made no sense amidst his own exhaustion. “I-I mean, sleep or no sleep! W-which is something I definitely don’t need right now! O-or ever! Especially if it means helping Lapis sooner!”

Garnet couldn’t help but crack a small, somewhat amused smirk as she placed a gentle hand on top of Dipper’s head, catching him off guard somewhat, especially amidst his growing grogginess. “Dipper, I appreciate your determination to help your friend,” she began, her smile fading as she spoke. “But the truth of it is… there’s just not much you can do for Lapis right now. In fact, the most you can really do is let me handle this on my own. I promise, I’ll do my very best to bust her out so the two of you can finally be together again. Which, in case you’re wondering, is a future I can see happening at some point, even if takes a while to come true.”

For a moment, Dipper said nothing in response to this, not bothering to hide his blatant disappointment with Garnet’s albeit non-condescending refusal to let him come along on this mission. However, his expression did soften somewhat as he glanced back to Steven and Mabel, both of whom were looking to him with shared concern, concern that almost seemed to be pleading, as if they were silently begging him not to fall into the same sort of downward spiral that had ultimately led to a certain ill-fated deal with a certain conniving demon once more. It was a grave reminder that Dipper didn’t like to admit that he needed, but given his still quite firm resolve to save Lapis somehow, he begrudgingly took it all the same as he let his argument die out. For now, at least.

However, while Dipper had accepted Garnet’s assertion to go it alone, Pearl wasn’t so keen on the idea as she tried trailing after the Gem leader herself. “But Garnet, you couldn’t possibly breach a hole in ice that thick by yourself,” the white Gem reasoned, hoping to be allotted to go on a mission with her leader in light of their recent reconciliation. “Let me—let us,” she nodded over to the drowsy Amethyst behind her pointedly. “Go with you! We’re a team!”

“No, right now, you’re a party,” Garnet said, her manner quite firm and unmoving on the matter as she opened the door to leave. “A slumber party. Steven, Mabel! Put these Gems—and Dipper—to bed. Don’t stay up too late. There’s snacks in the fridge. Bye.”

And with that, Garnet departed, leaving the remaining Gems and kids behind to start their so-called slumber party, even if feelings about the entire endeavor were mixed overall. Even so, Mabel and Steven were eager to get things started as they led the way up to the loft, extra blankets and pillows in tow as they set up a comfy sleeping area on the floor for everyone to lay out on.

“Now, before we get our slumber party started, would anyone care for a slumber companion?” Steven asked, presenting a tray filled with a diverse array of small stuffed animals.

“No,” Dipper said somewhat crossly as he leaned against Steven’s bed tiredly.
“I’m good too,” Amethyst yawned as she stretched out. It took her almost no time at all to fall asleep on her spot on the floor, her hair drooped messily over her eyes as she began to snore peacefully.

“Pearl?” Steven asked, holding out the tray to the white Gem.

“I’ll pass on the slumber pals, Steven,” Pearl shook her head in calm rejection.

“More for me, then!” Mabel interjected, gladly scooping up all of the slumber pals as she plopped down onto the floor, burying herself in a pile of stuffed animals and going right to sleep.

“Um, ok then,” Steven grinned, setting the tray down as he went to claim a spot for himself on the floor. “Sleep tight, everyone!”

“Yeah, right,” Dipper scoffed as he let out an exhausted yawn. “Like I’ll be able to… get even a… a minute of sleep… while Lapis is still…” Inevitably, he ended up trailing off as he ended up nodding off himself, leaving only Steven and Pearl awake, though likely not for very long.

“Uh… aren’t you gonna go to sleep too, Pearl?” Steven asked the white Gem with a frown upon noticing that she was the only one still sitting up.

“Oh, right,” the white Gem complied, readjusting her position as she closed her eyes halfway, still upright. “Is… this right?”

“…No, you should lie down,” Steven explained.

“I get it now,” Pearl nodded, grabbing a pillow and laying down on it, though her eyes remained half-lidded all the same. “Am I doing it?”

“Well… that’s way better than before,” the young Gem frowned, knowing that she really wasn’t quite familiar with the concept of sleep since she apparently rarely ever did it. “But close your eyes all the way.”

“Ok,” the white Gem did so, though even still, she made no signs of actually falling asleep.

“Well, I’m sleeping now. I’m sleeping-”

“Pearl, you can’t talk while you sleep.”

“Ugh, how is this even supposed to work?!” Pearl huffed impatiently.

“It’s easy!” Steven flopped down onto the pile of pillows he had made to give the white Gem a proper example. “You just lie down, get nice and comfy, don’t move… and don’t think about anything…” The young Gem began to trail off, getting steadily more and more drowsy by the second as he started to drift off into a deep, welcome slumber himself, one that he was powerless to resist, just as all the others were.

“Universe Falls was written before a live studio audience!” the usual narration played as the audience applauded and the episode began. Pearl knelt before Steven in the living room, carefully adjusting his bowtie to finish off his dashing formal apparel, knowing that he had to look his best for a special night like this one.

“Oh my goodness, Connie’s going to be here any second now!” Pearl exclaimed, glancing over at
the clock on the wall. “I can’t believe it, your first school dance! Let me just fix your tie and—”

“Stop fussing over Steven like a baby!” Amethyst cut in, riding into the house on her skateboard, much to Pearl’s chagrin.

“Amethyst! What did I tell you about riding that thing in the house?!” she chastised, quickly rising to stand.

Even so, Amethyst ignored her as she rode in a loose, messy circle around the pair before skateboarding recklessly over to the nearby stairs. “Have fun at your big dance, dude! Bunga-cowa!” she called back to Steven as Pearl began chasing after her in heated frustration as the audience howled with laughter at her antics.

“Amethyst, I’m gonna get you!” Pearl shouted after her, shaking her fist as she chased Amethyst upstairs just as the doorbell rang.

“Oh! Just a second, Connie!” Steven called as he hurried to answer it. “You won’t believe what Amethyst just—oh!” He cut himself with a surprised, but warm smile. “Hi, Dipper! Hi, Mabel!”

The audience cheered as the next two members of the cast stepped in, Dipper in his usual suspenders and glasses, though Mabel was clad in a very sparkly, very pink dress. “Heidi ho, Universe clan!” Mabel quipped brightly. “Are you ready for the big dance tonight, Steven? Word on the street is it’s gonna be biggest and bestest shindig ever!”

“Theoretically speaking, it’s almost impossible to make a determination like that,” Dipper interjected, astutely adjusting his glasses. “Since human history has yet to run its entire course, there’s a high probability that a dance could easily come along in the future that is both bigger and better. If said probability was divisible by 6 and had a marginal error of 9.12.”

“See, sciency match babble like that is the reason why you don’t have a date for the dance,” Mabel teased, elbowing her brother playfully.

“Who needs a date when you have knowledge on your side?!” Dipper asked with a bold, zealous smile.

“More like nerdledge,” Mabel quipped, sticking her tongue out at him.

“Well, to go back to your question, Mabel, yeah I’m ready for the big dance!” Steven interjected warmly. “I’m super excited. This is my first school dance ever, and I get to go with Connie, of all people!” Almost as soon as he said this, the doorbell rang once more, eliciting an excited gasp out of all three of the kids. “That’s gotta be her! Hi, Connie, I—” Once again, Steven found that his date hadn’t arrived as he opened the door; rather, another cast member stood turned away from him, though the audience went wild with excitement the moment they noticed her familiar varsity jacket. “Oh,” Steven grinned, knowing exactly who had arrived himself. “Can I help you?”

At this, Garnet finally turned around, grinning wryly as the audience applauded even more, especially as she let loose her signature catch phrase. “Chille Tid!”

“By Bunsen’s Burners! It’s Garnet!” Dipper exclaimed in awestruck amazement.

“Oh my gosh!” Mabel gasped, just as delighted to see her. “Hiya, Garnet! What brings you out here to our neck of the woods?”

“Hey, Steven, Mabel, Dipper,” Garnet greeted as coolly as ever as she stepped inside. “You gotta come to the woods tonight. There’s gonna be this huge bonfire party thing.”
“I can’t go to that!” Steven shook his head. “I’m going to the big dance with Connie!”

“Wow, the big dance,” Garnet raised an eyebrow, still smiling. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

The audience let loose a round of amused cheers and applause at this as Steven nodded, though the conversation was cut off once again as the doorbell rang for a third time. “That’s gotta be her this time!” he gasped excitedly, grabbing the door handle. “Ok, I’m ready for the big dance, Con— huh?”

Steven froze as the entire cozy, black and white, sitcom-esque atmosphere seemed to shatter completely as a result of the lone figure standing in before him, a figure that couldn’t have been any further from Connie. Rather, the one on the other side of the door was Lapis Lazuli herself, in complete color as a heavy, unending torrent of water poured from her empty eyes and open mouth like small, saddened waterfalls.

“L-Lapis?” Steven frowned, taking a step closer to her as the set disappeared behind him. The blue Gem said nothing, water still pouring from her face as it began to flood the space they both occupied. The young Gem gasped, his eyes wide as he looked back up to Lapis, only to find a large, dark wave rising up over both of them with momentous speed. Even so, Lapis herself was still completely still, as if she was entirely unaware of the peril they were both in until, of course, it inevitably ended up crashing down upon them both. Even so, right before the unstoppable torrent struck Steven in full force, an imagine, incredibly brief and blurry as it was, flashed right before his eyes: the silhouette of a hand, holding up a strange, vaguely familiar device, that was aimed directly at three prone, vulnerable figures. And then, just as the device let out a blinding flash of empty white, the young Gem woke up.

Steven gasped, darting upright, a cold sweat claiming most of him as his mind raced to make sense of whatever it was he had just seen. However, he didn’t get long to ponder over it before he glanced beside him, only to gasp once more, this time out of fear at just how closely Pearl was sitting next to him.

“Are you ok?” the white Gem asked, genuinely concerned upon noticing her young ward’s startled pallor.

“Uh… y-yeah…” Steven let out a diffident breath as he leaned back, trying to relax. “I just… I fell asleep and had this really weird dream. I opened the door, and Lapis was there, and—”

“What?!” Dipper instantly snapped awake upon hearing mention of the blue Gem, sitting upright as he looked to Steven with wide eyes of both alarm and confusion. “You saw Lapis?! Where? H-how? When?!”

“What?!” Dipper instantly snapped awake upon hearing mention of the blue Gem, sitting upright as he looked to Steven with wide eyes of both alarm and confusion. “You saw Lapis?! Where? H-how? When?!”

“I-in my dream…” Steven said, flinching sympathetically as Dipper let out a disappointed sigh upon hearing this.

“Of course…” he grumbled, leaning back to fall asleep once more. “Should have guessed.”

“But Steven, that doesn’t make any sense,” Pearl pointed out matter of factly. “Lapis is fused with Jasper at the bottom of the lake. You couldn’t have seen her here.”

For a moment, Steven simply stared at the white Gem, quite baffled amidst his own still quite pressing exhaustion. “…You’ve… never had a dream before, huh?”

“Uh… I don’t think so…”

“Well, Pearl,” Steven began, slumping back to his previous spot on the floor. “Dreams don’t
always make sense. When you dream, the thoughts in your head get all mixed up into a weird movie. And they’re really hard to explain, which is why they’re boring to listen to. Like… this one time, I had a dream where, like, these things… were being sold at the Big Donut, right? But the front door of the Big Donut led to the back of my dad’s van…” As the young Gem continued explaining his dream, it was clear he was growing more and more tired by the second, and even Pearl eventually began to tune him out amidst her own pressing tiredness as he went on rambling. “So, I go into the van, and… Lion is driving for some reason, but he’s driving really well. And… and then I say to him… I says… Lion… How’d you learn to drive you… a… a van… Y-you can’t even… you can’t bring… me my… my…” Steven finally ended up trailing off as his eyes slipped shut, his recounting of the dream left unfinished as he drifted back into the realm of slumber once more.

The open skies were bright blue and filled with puffy white billowing clouds as Steven sailed through them, the propeller on his back steadily keeping him afloat as he laughed brightly. His open-air freedom seemed to get even better as a familiar character soared alongside him, none other than the legendary Dogcopter himself.

“Whoa, Dogcopter!” the young Gem exclaimed in apt amazement as they flew together. “Mr. Copter! I’m one of your biggest fans! Can I please have your autograph?!”

Dogcopter’s sole response was in the form of a terse, rather curt meow before he flew away, leaving Steven alone in apt confusion as he tried to call him back. “Hey wait! Where are you going?” The young Gem sighed as Dogcopter disappeared into the sky at breakneck speeds, leaving him essentially in the dust. “I hope the rumors in the tabloids about Dogcopter aren’t true…”

Steven’s musings were soon interrupted, however as a large shadow loomed over him. He gasped briefly before the cloud following him slowly morphed into Pearl’s disembodied head, which smiled widely at him as it drew ever closer. “Oh, hi, Pearl!” he greeted brightly, only for his cheerfulness to turn to alarm as the white Gem opened her mouth wide as she neared him. “Wait! Don’t eat me!” he cried, only for the head to do right that. Fortunately, Pearl didn’t keep him in her mouth before too long before she spit him out, replacing his propeller with rocket powered sandals, much to the young Gem’s delight.

“Oh, man! Thanks for the upgrade, Pearl!” Steven shouted back to the white Gem as he raced forward, breezing past various floating visages of Garnet, Dipper, Mabel, Stan and Connie until Amethyst suddenly emerged from the clouds below, majestically riding a small humpback whale. “Whoa! Amethyst?” The purple Gem simply offered Steven a playful wave before she rode off, taking the blue skies along with her as everything drifted off into an inky blackness that the young Gem soon found himself coming to a floating stop within. “Hm…” the young Gem mused in concerned confusion as he regarded his sparse surroundings. “This is… getting really weird…”

“This is weird…” a distant voice said, one that caught Steven by surprise by its familiarity alone as he glanced around for its source.

“Hey… that sounds a lot like…”

“Steven?!”

The young Gem gasped, his eyes wide with shock as he glanced behind him to find that he was no longer alone in the darkness. Rather, he had company, though it was in the form of the last Gem he
could have ever expected to see in such a place. “Lapis Lazuli!” he exclaimed in disbelief, rushing to glide over to her as the blackness surrounding them began to slowly replace itself with what almost looked like ocean depths.

“Steven, w-what are you doing in here?!” Lapis asked, her eyes wide with alarm and concern as she looked the young Gem over.

“Uh… I know its weird, but… eh, I’m just dreaming, so don’t even worry about it,” Steven assured with a relaxed smile.

“What? No!” the blue Gem exclaimed, apparently distraught by his mere presence alone. “Steven, I’m trying to concentrate! H-how are you even here??!

The young Gem’s calm manner dissipated as he realized just how frantic Lapis seemed to be, though for what reason, he wasn’t quite sure. “O-oh my gosh, are you ok?” he asked, reaching a hand out to comfort her, one that she completely refused.

“Steven, please, I-” the blue Gem was cut off as a sudden, amused laugh cut through the void, one that seemed to break everything up all at once. In an instant, Lapis disappeared and Steven found himself tossed back into complete, lonely darkness as the vaguely familiar laugh continued, growing louder and almost mocking as a flash of something danced across his vision for the faintest instance: a hand, reaching out towards a bright blue flame, almost as if whoever was offering it held the answer to every problem that ever was and ever could be.

Once again, Steven shot upright with a gasp, his breathing short for a moment as he looked around and found himself back in his room. He was rather confused, however, upon still hearing amused chuckles, though this time, he could tell they were coming from both Amethyst and Mabel as them and Dipper seemed to be watching something as they sat all around Pearl, who was finally in a deep, peaceful slumber.

“You guys?” Steven asked with a frown as he crawled over to them. “What are you laughing at?”

Amethyst simply continued laughing as she pointed up, revealing the projection coming from Pearl’s gemstone that showed her current dream. Within it, the white Gem rode atop a large slice of pizza through a vast ocean, holding onto Rose as she gracefully stood in front of her as Pearl laughed brightly. “Ah ha ha ha! Oh, Rose, this is wonderful!” the white Gem quipped happily, leaning against her beloved liege. “I’m just having so much fun with you, Rose! Forget about Greg! Let’s go travel the galaxy together!”

“Pearl…” “Rose” said, her voice oddly low and deep as she continued. “Thank you so much… for fixing my van!” Suddenly, “Rose” turned around, revealing “her” face to be Greg’s, much to Pearl’s horror. The white Gem let out an appalled scream as a slice of pizza began to slide out of the former rock star’s mouth, and with that, the dream abruptly ended as Pearl work up and sat upright, gagging in disgust as Amethyst let out a rowdy laugh all the while.

“Oh my gosh, that was hilarious!” the purple Gem chuckled as Mabel lightly joined in.

“More like disturbing…” Dipper remarked, cringing somewhat.

“It was so cool that we could just watch her dream like that!” Mabel exclaimed brightly before quickly falling back into her previous exhaustion. “And with that, I’m goin’ back to sleep. Mabel out!” And just like that, she flopped back down onto the floor, falling asleep almost as soon as she
did, even as Steven hurriedly addressed the still mortified white Gem.

“Pearl!” he exclaimed, pressing a bit closer to her.

“Uh… y-yes, Steven?” Pearl asked, quickly composing herself as she glanced over at her young ward.

“I had… another dream about Lapis…” he said, glancing down apprehensively.

“Another one?” Dipper spoke up, raising a curious eyebrow. “Man, and I though I dreamt about her a lot…”

“O-oh, that’s ok!” Pearl quickly reassured Steven, her tone rather flippant amidst her remaining embarrassment. “Dreams aren’t real! They’re just ‘mixed up movies’!”

“B-but… I think I was talking to her…” the young Gem frowned, not taking note of the surprised glances Pearl, Amethyst, and Dipper sent his way.

“Wait… how do you know?” Pearl asked cautiously.

“I don’t, but… I could just… feel it,” Steven said earnestly. “She was yelling, and… she seemed really freaked out.”

“What did she say?!” Dipper interjected intently, leaning forward with immense interest to know more about the blue Gem’s current status. “Is she ok? Is she hurt? Is she still in control? Why is she still keeping herself trapped down there?! Why won’t she-”

“I-I don’t know any of that,” Steven cut in, shaking his head sadly. “She only said that she was trying to concentrate on… something…”

“Hm…” Pearl mused as she rose to stand. “Steven, you could be using your dreams to connect with Lapis mentally…”

“Whoa… is that… something I can do?” Steven asked, bewildered by the possibility.

“Possibly…” the white Gem nodded, still pondering it herself.

“Can you do it again?” Amethyst asked. “Maybe you can get Lapis to just tell you how to bust them out from that ice.”

“Yes, that’s it!” Dipper exclaimed, turning to Steven almost pleadingly. “Steven, just tell her she doesn’t need to do this anymore! That we’re all safe now and she doesn’t have to keep herself trapped down there with Jasper. That she can come back and we can… t-that she can finally be free again. Just…” He trailed off with a small, sad sigh as he looked down, the desperation and heartache in both his eyes and his entire manner quite clear. “I-if you really can talk to her, please, just… tell her I miss her. A… a lot. O-ok?”

For a moment, Steven said nothing in response to this, as he was rather taken aback but just how mournful and morose Dipper seemed to be, to the point that he had no qualms about showing those things now that there was even the slightest chance that he could get a message passed along to Lapis at all. Which was why the young Gem didn’t hesitate in pulling his friend into an unexpected, but still welcome and comforting embrace, hoping that it could help ease at least some of the pain that the blue Gem’s sacrifice had left him with for quite some time now. “Ok…” Steven whispered earnestly as he maintained the warm hug. “I’ll tell her, Dipper. I promise.”
“T-thank you, Steven…” Dipper muttered, fighting back tears as much as he could as the two of them pulled away.

“Alright,” Steven said, steeling his resolve and knowing that he couldn’t let either Dipper or Lapis down now. “I guess I’ll have to go back to sleep then. Quick, Pearl!” he exclaimed to the white Gem as he lay back down on the floor. “Tell me about your dream so I can fall asleep!”

“M-my dream?!” Pearl asked, her cheeks flushing in embarrassment once again as Amethyst chuckled teasingly.

“Heh, come on, Pearl! Its for the greater good!” the purple Gem goaded with a wide, playful grin.

“Ugh, very well, if I must…” the white Gem begrudgingly complied, though only after catching a brief glance of the silently pleading expression Dipper was sending her way. “In my dream, I was-”

No sooner than a few words in, Pearl stopped upon hearing snoring coming from Steven as he lay, fast a sleep in a matter of just a few seconds alone. Amethyst laughed once more as the young Gem continued slumbering, hopefully making some sort of contact with Lapis even as they all watched on anxiously. “Wow… he been sleep.”

Much like in his previous dream, Steven found himself free floating through a bizarre grey void, one that seemed sparse for anything really as he glided through it. “Oh! I know this is a dream now!” the young Gem exclaimed to himself as he began to fly past a number of random objects and people, from the Gems, to the twins, to food, to even Dogcopter. “So this means I can imagine anything I want,” Steven said, reaching into his pocket to test this theory out. “Uh… mashed potato!” Of course, instead of pulling said mashed potato out, the young Gem ended up producing a small fish instead, one that he put back in his pocked with a somewhat dissatisfied frown.

“Oh, now, how do I find Lapis?” he mused to himself as the grey surrounding him began to darken. “Not Lapis…” he noted as Amethyst floated by on her skateboard. “Not Lapis…” he said as he soared past a small whale. “Not Lapis…” he continued gliding past a sleeping Mabel. “Not Lapis—oof!” The young gem cut himself short as he suddenly ran into something, a mass of white, flowing fluff that carried a strange green tint to it. “Lion!” Steven scowled, though upon a second glance, he realized that whatever this was couldn’t have been the mane of his pink companion. “Wait… You’re not Lion! Whoa!” He gasped as he began sinking into the swath of hair, unable to free himself from it until he fell through it completely. The area Steven made his rough landing in was dark, with an ominous, sickly green pallor to it and a wide, seemingly endless surface composed of darkened water that he never seemed to break, even as he fell squarely on top of it.

“Ow…” Steven rubbed his head as he sat up, bewildered by his strange surroundings. “W-what is this place?”

“AUGH!” The young Gem jolted, startled by this familiar groan as he quickly stood, spinning around to find Lapis herself standing only a few feet away. The blue Gem was clearly struggling with something, her hands enclosed in thick orbs of water that were chained down to the aquatic surface below her. Sweat beaded on her forehead as she did her best to hold her hands up, the exhaustion and desperation on her face clear with each and every single pull of the chains.

“Lapis!” Steven cried, rushing over to aid her in any way he could.

“S-Steven?!” Lapis gasped, shocked to see him as her grip faltered, though only for a moment. “W-
why do you keep coming back here?! I can’t get distracted, I–I’ve got to hold us down with the weight of your planet’s lake!” The blue Gem let out another tight, almost pained groan, her voice strained as she continued her brutal vigil. “I’ve got to keep her—!” Lapis cut herself off with a harsh cry, one that intensified as she pulled up on the chains as much as she possibly could while Steven worriedly watched her struggle all the while.

“Wait, Lapis! Tell us how to break through the ice in the lake!” he pleaded anxiously. “We can help you! We want to help you! Dipper said–”

Upon hearing mention of Dipper, Lapis froze, a sharp gasp escaping her that was enough to cut Steven off as she looked back at him with wide eyes. “D-Dipper?” she asked, her tone softening as untold grief flashed across her expression. “W-what did he–” The blue Gem left her question unfinished as whatever force she was holding back pulled down roughly, forcing her to back into her previous intense, agonized focus. “I-I told you! No!”

Steven gasped as Lapis released an intense, ragged scream amidst suddenly being pulled under the surface of the water altogether. He had no time to search for her, however, for the moment she disappeared out of sight, another entity broke through the surface several feet behind him, one who was none to happy to see the young Gem standing before her.

“You!” Jasper growled, her manner fierce as she lay doubled over on the watery ground. The Gem warrior looked exhausted, painting heavily amidst her disheveled hair and intensely angry eyes. Wrapped around both of her wrists were aquatic manacles, tightly secured by likely the very same chains that Lapis had been upholding mere seconds ago.

“J-Jasper!” Steven exclaimed fearfully, stumbling backwards as the fearsome orange Gem began crawling savagely towards him, hungry for vengeance.

“You!” she shouted again, her scowl alone terrifying the young Gem to his core as he tried to think of a way to escape from her wrath. “YOU!” She practically screamed with hatred, reaching a shaking hand out to attack Steven, who was by all accounts defenseless against her. That is, until nothing short of a miracle happened. “Augh!” Jasper cried as she was suddenly jerked back violently, the chains binding her pulling her back to whence she came from. “No!” she yelled, fiercely clawing at the ground below her, which offered her no hold whatsoever before she was inevitably dragged back into the unfathomable dark depths below.

With Jasper subdued once more, Lapis remerged from the water, her wings outstretched and her entire appearance disheveled and rough. She collapsed to the watery ground, gasping for air as she continued holding Jasper back, even still, despite how much of a strain it was clearly putting upon her.

“Lapis!” Steven cried, running back over to her, even though he really had no idea how to help her out of a plight this severe.

“C-can’t you see?” Lapis hissed, glaring at the young Gem intently. “I can’t stop, not for a second! I put that ice in the lake for a reason, Steven! Don’t look for a way to save me. I don’t want your help!”

“B-but–”

“Just let me do this for you, Dipper!” Lapis shouted fiercely, though she let out a sharp gasp as she opened her eyes to find that it was still Steven standing before her, not Dipper. “I… I mean–”

“Lapis…” Steven said softly, his heart aching with sympathy for the struggle the blue Gem was
putting herself through for the sake of keeping Dipper safe. For the sake of keeping them all safe, really, a burden that should have never been hers in the first place, but she selflessly chose to take on all the same.

“No… I’m not Lapis anymore…” the blue Gem looked away from Steven, her voice tight as she rose to stand. Her wings enshrouded her, covering her entire upper half as she maintained her cold, unfeeling resolve, knowing that she couldn’t carry anything less than it now. She couldn’t show weakness, not now, not ever again. “We’re Malachite now…”

“Lapis, no!” Steven pleaded, trying his best to grab onto the blue Gem to try and save her somehow but he was ultimately too late. Lapis slipped back below the water once again, this time on her own accord as a massive whirlpool swallowed her up, leaving not a trace of her behind. Once again, Steven had no time to even process this as a large, looming shadow began rising up out of the water behind him, a deadly, monstrous fusion that he had only ever seen once, but was all too familiar with all the same: Malachite. As the fusion continued emerging from its own mindscape, dark, icy water began to flood it, covering both Steven and Malachite completely until the fusion slowly turned, her four misshapen eyes opening as she stared at the young Gem piercingly, before letting out one harsh final warning.

“GO!”

“Lapis!” Steven gasped, his eyes opening wide as he panted to catch his breath. However, amidst his shaken shock from everything he had just seen, it still took him a moment to realize he wasn’t back in his room like he thought he would have, surrounded by the Gems and the twins to tell inform them about Lapis’ frightening condition. Rather, the young Gem found himself back within a pitch-black void of empty darkness, one that seemed to only be populated by himself alone. “W-what…?” Steven trailed off breathlessly, quickly glancing around for a sign of anything at all amidst his ongoing anxious panic. “W-where am I? What’s going on? Am… am I still dreaming?”

While the young Gem didn’t get an immediate answer to any of his questions, he was quick to realize that he wasn’t as alone as he originally thought as a sudden golden glow fell upon him from behind, seemingly out of nowhere. Yet before Steven could even turn to face the demon, he froze as a dreadfully familiar, pitchy, malicious laugh rung out across the void, one that, after a certain ill-fated and almost deadly puppet show, the young Gem had hoped to never hear again.

And yet, sure enough he was, just as much as the dream demon was somehow hovering directly behind him.

“Oh, you’re not dreaming anymore, Rosebud!” Bill Cipher quipped, his tone as manically cheerful as ever. “But by the time we’re through here, you’re probably gonna wish you were!”

Steven flinched at this, recognizing a threat when he heard one. Even so, the young Gem wasn’t foolish; before even turning around to face the demon, he quickly summoned his shield, holding it steady as he spun around to see Bill’s imposing triangular form towering over him.

“What, are you serious with that whole shield thing, kid?” the demon laughed tauntingly, especially as he noticed Steven fearfully trembling while trying to uphold his weapon. “Gimme a break!”

“H-hey!” Steven exclaimed with a gasp as Bill easily plucked the shield right out of his grasp, though the demon hardly paid his protests any mind.
“Still, I gotta hand it to ya,” Bill remarked as he playfully spun the shield around on his finger. “Kudos on finally learning how to summon this thing. Too bad its about as useful as a glorified trash can lid against someone like me.” And with that, the demon cleanly snapped the shield right in half, easily crushing what was left of it in his hands before carelessly tossing its shimmering remains upon Steven, who was aptly horrified by this destructive display. “Aw, look, Rosebud! Its broken, just like all your hopes and dreams are gonna be someday!”

Steven simply shook his head in disbelief as what was left of his own shield dissipated into nothingness before him, his heart racing with dread as he realized he was essentially cornered against the menacing, sadistic dream demon, completely alone. “I… W-wha… what are… w-why-”

“Hey, what’s the matter, kid?” Bill interrupted Steven’s nervous stammering as he shrunk down in size quite a bit and began circling the young Gem loosely. “Gem got your gut? Ha! Not for too much longer, if I have anything to do about it!”

Upon hearing this disturbing remark, Steven quickly regathered his bearings, forcing his obvious fear to the sidelines for the sake of asking the first of his many pressing questions about this unexpected intrusion. “W-what are you doing here!? Why are you in my dream? What do you-”

“Ah, lemme stop ya right there, Rosebud,” Bill interupted callously. “First of all, we’re not in your dream. You dropped outta your dreamscape the moment you ended up barging into ol’ Water Stripes’. Then, after she scared you stiff out of her mind, you ended up dropping in here, to one of the infinite nooks and crannies in between the mindscape! Cozy, isn’t it? The whole ‘endless void of soul-crushing darkness’ really spruces the place up, don’t ya think?”

“Wait, but… I don’t understand…” Steven shook his head as he glanced out across the seemingly endless darkness surrounding him. “How’d I even get here? I was just trying to talk to Lapis and-”

“Well, there’s your answer, kid!” Bill quipped knowingly, circling the anxious young Gem once more. “Looks like, when you were trying to reach out to poor Water Wings, you’re the one who landed yourself here, in one of my personal favorite in-betweens this side of your dimension! Not that I’m complaining; after all, I’ve been meaning to have a little chat with you, Rosebud…”

Steven was unable to keep himself from jolting with fear as the demon’s voice dropped low and ominous, reminding him of exactly who he was dealing with here. Which was why his voice was much smaller and shakier than he had wanted it to be when he spoke up again. “A-about what?”

“Well, let’s see, there’s a lot of things you and me could talk about, Rosebud…” Bill began rather leadingly, holding his hands behind him as he turned away from the young Gem. “For starters, why don’t we talk about that bad little habit you Mystery Twerps have for GETTING IN MY WAY?!”

A startled gasp escaped Steven as the dream demon’s angry, booming shout rattled the entire in-between. All the same, the young Gem did his best to remain calm, even if he knew from experience just how hostile and deadly Bill’s wrath could be. “W-what do you mean?”

“What do I mean?” Bill repeated incredulously, sharply turning around to face Steven as his triangular form flashed red. “WHAT DO I MEAN?! Are you damaged or something, Rosebud?! I can’t believe you really need me to remind you! But if you really do need a reminder, then I’ll be MORE than happy to give you one!” In a bright flash of blue flame, the dream demon disappeared, though Steven found no relief in this fact, for as the flames disappeared, they revealed a sight that he had never hoped to see again.
“D-Dipper…” Steven choked, though almost as soon as he did, he knew he was actually wrong. Because sure enough, Dipper was standing before him, though it wasn’t him really, based on the torn and bloody clergyman’s suit, the smug, vindictive smirk, and unnatural, glowingly yellow, slitted eyes alone.

“Well, well, isn’t this a fun little blast to the past, eh, Rosebud?” Bill asked with a sinister smile, speaking through Dipper just as he had on that nightmarish day weeks ago. “Of course, it would have been even more fun if you, Shooting Star, and Sword Swinger had just backed off and let me have that journal. But noooo, you just had to ‘stop’ me and ‘save’ Pine Tree here, didn’t you?!”

Upon hearing this, Steven was quick to shake himself out of his ongoing terror to counter the demon’s cold callousness with righteous anger. “Yes, we did!” he exclaimed boldly, his hands curling into fists at his sides. “You were hurting him and I—and we couldn’t just let you get away with it!”

“I don’t see why not?” Bill shrugged carelessly as he walked past Steven. “After all, its not like Pine Tree’s life really even matters in the grand scheme of things. He’s just another boring, insignificant little meatskin out of millions of other boring, insignificant meatskins out there. And if you don’t believe me, then just watch this!”

“Wha-” Steven’s confusion turned into a sharp, horrified as he watched Bill conjure up a long, sharp, deadly knife out of nothing. And, before he could do anything to stop him, the dream demon gleefully plunged the tip of the knife straight into his chest. Or rather, the chest of the person he was apparently possessing.

“Dipper!” Steven cried, agonized tears already slipping down his cheeks. However, he found that he couldn’t rush towards his friend’s possessed, already heavily bleeding body, no matter hard he tried, as, for whatever reason, his feet were planted firmly in place.

“See what I mean, Rosebud?” Bill asked, showing no signs of pain whatsoever, despite his own likely deadly, self-inflicted wound. “Snuffing out a dim ol’ light like Pine Tree’s would have been so easy its not even funny. Well, ok, it is pretty funny, mostly ‘cause you’d have gotten so torn up over it, like you are right now!” The dream demon let out a sadistic, mocking laugh as Steven let out another heartbroken sob, still unable to say or do anything in response to Bill’s horrific actions against one of his best friends. But even so, the demon wasn’t done rubbing salt into the wound, emotionally or physically, quite yet. “In fact, the same goes for all of your annoying pals, from Pine Tree…” Bill smirked as blue flames engulfed him yet again, only this time, when they cleared, Steven was both alarmed and distraught to see Mabel now standing there rather than Dipper, even if she did bear the exact same bleeding wound on her chest. “To Shooting Star…” Steven gasped as the demon changed forms yet again, this time into Connie, broken and bleeding and taken by the malicious demon speaking through her. “Oh, and how could I forget about Sword Swinger? Face it, Rosebud,” “Connie’s” eyes flashed with ill intent as Bill maintained his wicked grin, leaning closer to Steven, who could only really weep morosely as he thought of just how much the demon could so easily take away from him. “Your friends are nothing. No matter how much you try to tell yourself otherwise, they’re all just a bunch of dumb, useless humans who are all gonna die someday, whether you like it or not. So, ya might as well stop fooling yourself into thinking that you’re anything like them, cause in case you haven’t noticed, Rosebud, you’re not.”

As anguished as he was, Steven couldn’t help but give the demon a somewhat curious glance as he tried to make sense of what he’d just said. “W-what… what do you mean?”

“Boy, am I glad you asked, kid!” At this, Bill snapped his fingers, reverting back to his usual, triangular form in an instant and fortunately alleviating Steven of having to look at any of his
injured friends any longer. “Though I figured it’d be kinda obvious for you. I mean, half Gem, half human? The way I see it, you’ve got the worst of both worlds and the best of none. You can’t do even half of what Fuse Box, Bird Brain, and Half Baked can do, but at the same time, you aren’t exactly ‘normal’ like Pine Tree, Shooting Star, and Sword Swinger are. You’re about as in between as the in-between we’re standing in is! Basically, what I’m trying to say here, Rosebud… is that you’re a freak!”

“W-what?” Steven asked, startled and appalled. “No, I’m not!”

“Aw, there’s no shame in admitting it, kid!” Bill goaded callously. “You can’t tell me this is the first time you’ve ever thought about this. You can run around with your fellow Mystery Twerps as much as you want, but that doesn’t change the fact that you’ll never really be one of them. Same thing goes for you and those Crystal Chumps! As long as you got that rock in your gut and that human meatskin to hold it in, you’ll never really belong anywhere! And not to mention all that drama for your mom caused all those years ago. Good ol’ Quartzy left quite a messed up little legacy behind for you to deal with, didn’t she, Rosebud? No wonder ya got Homeworld mooks like Stripes and Greenie breathing down your neck. And I’d be willing to wager there’s a lot more space rocks out there who are even angrier about the stunt your dear mom pulled back during that war. And guess who has to deal with that mess now that she’s gone? Yep! That’s right! YOU do, Rosebud! I hope you enjoy vengeful Gems comin’ out of the wazoo, all trying to kill you for something that happened way before you were even thought of, because that’s basically the future you have to look forward to until one of them finally does end up offing you! Fun, huh?”

“Wha—n-no,” Steven quickly, stanchly denied, mostly out of fear that it could all somehow be true more than anything else. “H-Homeworld is… m-my… my mom saved the Earth! She just wanted to keep this planet safe! She didn’t want to hurt anyone! If I could just find a way to tell Gems like Jasper or Peridot that, then they’d—”

“Ha! What a riot!” Bill laughed mockingly. “Are you seriously that delusional, Rosebud? You really think that anyone from Homeworld would listen to a word you have to say? They’d just as well shatter you and those Crystal Chumps to bits the moment they get you in their sights! Yep, seems like things are lookin’ pretty bleak for you, kid. Unless…”

“U-unless what?” the young Gem asked, aptly anxious in light of everything Bill had just detailed to him.

“Unless you call this whole ‘Gem’ thing quits… if ya know what I mean…”

“…No, I… really don’t,” Steven replied honestly, shaking his head in genuine confusion.

“Fine…” Bill grumbled in aggravation. “Then let me put it a different way. You wanna keep yourself and your friends safe from all those hostile Homeworld lackies? You wanna be a normal human being for a change instead of only half of one who has to deal with his mom’s HUGE amount of baggage? Heck, you even wanna finally free Water Wings from that prison of a fusion she has going on with Stripes? Then I can do all that for ya, kid, easily!”

“Y-you… you can?” Steven asked, unsure of what to make of such a hefty offer, especially since it was coming from Bill, of all beings. Certainly, based on everything he’d seen thus far, the demon was powerful enough to make good on all three of these momentous promises. But at what price?

“Sure can, Rosebud!” Bill quipped cheerfully. “And all I’d need from you is one teeny, tiny little thing: your gem!”

The young Gem froze at this, his eyes going wide with alarm and confusion as he looked first to
the demon, before lifting his shirt up slightly to reveal the aforementioned pink stone. “M-my Gem?” he asked, uneasy by the very fact that Bill seemed to want it at all. “But… why?”

“Eh, mostly just for business,” the demon shrugged casually. “Let’s just say I got a client who’s really interested in… collecting a rock like the one you got there on your gut. In fact, I’d even say that seeing gem of yours would make them one of the happiest beings in the cosmos, and I know how much you like making people happy, Rosebud…”

Despite Bill’s obvious goading, Steven didn’t offer him anything other than a distrustful glance as he kept his hands close to his gemstone, just in case. “B-but… who would—”

“Ah, don’t worry yourself with all the unimportant details, kid,” Bill interjected with a wave of his hand. “Instead, think about just how great of a deal this could be for you! Not only do you get rid of that annoying rock and every headache that comes with it, but I’m even gonna throw in saving Water Wings for you, for FREE! I know you care about her and about Pine Tree (for some reason), so just imagine how happy those two will be when you bring them back together again!”

Steven couldn’t help but smile softly somewhat as he watched the aforementioned meeting play out in silhouettes on Bill’s flat surface. The young Gem stood by, happy and relieved as Dipper and Lapis met in a long-awaited, warm embrace, a promise kept and friends reunited, just as it should be. “Really, kid, this deal would be a win-win for everyone!” Bill continued his pitch, casually floating behind Steven to put an almost assuring hand on his shoulder. “Water Wings will be off the hook and out of the lake and you’ll finally get to be a plain old human without any huge, impossible destiny weighing ya down every second of every day! If I were you, I’d be jumping at a chance like this since its one you’re not gonna get anywhere else. So… what do you say, kid? Do we have ourselves a deal here?”

Steven flinched as Bill stretched a hand out in offering, blue fire surrounding it as he waited for the young Gem to take it. However, Steven didn’t do so, at least not right away, as he took a moment to consider this rather surmountable offer. In truth, it did sound tempting at least to some extent; the thought of rescuing Lapis alone was really almost enough to make him say yes, especially considering how long the blue Gem had been unfairly trapped for, not to mention just how much he knew Dipper missed her. Likewise, Steven missed her quite a bit as well, and to be able to free her from her aquatic prison and bring her back to the safety and security she so rightly deserved sounded like a dream come true, especially given the complete lack of progress any of them had made in rescuing her on their own.

But then came the other half of what Bill was offering to him, a thought that he had always discreetly wondered about but had never really voiced or acted upon. Namely, what would his life be like if he wasn’t a Gem? As much as Steven loved being both a Crystal Gem and a Mystery Kid, he was acutely aware that he acted as the medium between the two, being half of both and all of neither, just as Bill had said. A part of him had always thought that made him unique, but perhaps it really only served to set him apart, to ostracize him from his friends, family, and guardians alike. He stood alone in a group that only he was apart of, for as far as he knew, no other Gem/human hybrids existed whatsoever. And while Steven didn’t want to believe it, he knew, deep down, that Bill was very likely right about him; he was a freak, a freak who could never really belong anywhere, who would always be saddled with a destiny and powers and a legacy he had never even asked for and wasn’t sure if he wanted to begin with, who would always be a step apart from both his friends and his guardians, with no one to even remotely understand exactly what it was like to be both Gem and human, while really being neither at the same time.

Which was why the thought of finally being all of something instead of simply half seemed so enticing. To be completely human, to experience life just as his friends did, to truly be able to relate
to them in a way he didn’t feel he properly could as a Gem, all of these possibilities seemed to comfort Steven in a way that actually surprised him. True, he would lose his powers and his status as a Crystal Gem, but he knew that Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl would still love him for who he was, just as much as Dipper, Mabel, and Connie would. Giving up his Gem would change so much and so little at the same time; it would restrain him in some ways, but ultimately, it would free him. It would finally define him, allow him to be more than just Rose Quartz’ son. It would truly let him be his own person; it would let him be Steven Universe.

And yet… as tempting as this offer was, Steven’s desire to take it immediately fell apart as he remembered exactly who was offering it to him. He hadn’t been there when Dipper had made his ill-fated deal with Bill to know specifically what the demon had offered him, but the young Gem had seen enough of the nightmarish fallout from that deal to know that the demon wasn’t the type to stay true to his word. Steven liked to give most everyone the benefit of the doubt, but based on Bill’s deplorable, shamelessly cruel behavior, he couldn’t help but think that the demon was setting him up for something, though he wasn’t exactly sure as to what. Which was why, as much as he wanted to help Lapis and as much as he did want to truly feel as though he belonged somewhere, he knew what he had to do.

“I-I… I’m sorry, but… no,” Steven said, taking an anxious step back from Bill as he pressed a gentle hand against his gemstone. “It would be nice to see what its like to be… just a human and I really do want to save Lapis, but… not like this. My gem stays with me a-and… that’s that.”

For a moment, Steven anxiously held his breath in anticipation, expecting the dream demon to lash out with fury over this rejection. And yet, Bill seemed to do the exact opposite as his blue flame extinguished and he did something that alarmed the young Gem almost just as much: he laughed. “Ha! Oh, Rosebud, you’re hilarious!” Bill chuckled almost hysterically, much to Steven’s apt confusion. “You really thought YOU had an actual choice here? Your gem belongs to me either way! It’s been mine ever since your mom sold it away to me YEARS before you were even born!”

“W-what?!” Steven exclaimed, shocked by such a terrifying claim. “W-what are you talking about?! My mom wouldn’t have-”

“Oh, kid, you could write an entire BOOK about what you think your mom wouldn’t have done but did anyway!” Bill exclaimed, still beside himself with laughter. “Still, according to Quartzy, that gem of yours is all mine! So you might as well hand it over, kid, cause the way I see it, we can do this the easy way… OR THE HARD WAY!” With this, the dream demon shot up to massive proportions, his form glowing a bright warning red as he towered over the frightened Gem before him. Even so, Steven wasn’t about to back down, at least not that easily.

“N-no!” he protested as firmly as he could, gripping his gem a bit tighter to protect it. “You can’t have it! At least not until you tell me why my mom was going to give it to you in the first place!”

“Oh, you REALLY wanna know?” Bill asked, his blackened eye flashing maliciously as he let out a small, devious chuckle. “Well, then, I guess I can wait a little longer. Mostly because I can’t WAIT to see the look on your face when you learn about one of the two biggest screwups your dear old mom’s ever made in her pathetic existence! So if you wanna know what really happened, then go ahead and ask those Crystal Chumps of yours. After all, those three nearly helped me get my hands on that rock of yours the last time I came rolling around these parts!”

“T-they… they what?!” Steven asked, almost just as alarmed by this implication as much as he was with the demon’s previous reveal.

“Ah, you’ll learn about all that soon enough, Rosebud,” Bill said, still twistedly amused by the young Gem’s frightened confusion. “But for now, I think its time I hit the road! I got a lot more
dreams to invade, lives to ruin, you know, the usual. Just remember, that no matter where you run or what you try to do to stop me, that gem of yours is gonna be mine sooner or later, just as much as this boring little dimension you call home will be! So enjoy your gem and your friends and everything else you care about as much as you can now, Rosebud. Because before you know it, they’ll all be GONE!”

Steven barely had time to let out a gasp before a blinding light enveloped the entire in-between, one that Bill made his apparent exit on. However, in the midst of this empty glow, the young Gem bore witness to three distinct, brief images, none of which lasted longer than half a second at most, though even so, Steven was able to make them out all the same. Rose Quartz, standing poised with her sword ready for battle against none other than Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl, their eyes obscured from view and their weapons drawn against their leader in a vicious opposition. A vast, burning, battered battlefield, awash in the glow of a bleeding moon as Rose knelt looking out upon it, Bill Cipher’s ominous triangular form hovering right beside her almost as if he was there to comfort her. And finally, the dream demon’s hand extending out in blue flame to meet another hand, one obscured by a dark pink glove as they joined and shook in a binding, unknown deal.

Steven shot upright with a gasp, his eyes wide and his entire body covered in a cold sweat as his mind raced with the horrific memory of his terrifying encounter with Bill. In fact, he was so shell-shocked by it that he didn’t even register that he was back in the dark, familiar comfort of his bedroom loft until a hand happened to wave in front of his face to catch his attention.

“Uh… earth to Steven?” Mabel ventured with a curious frown, Dipper, Pearl, and Amethyst all sharing her worry as they looked to the clearly frightened young Gem with concern. “Are you ok?”

Steven didn’t answer immediately, mostly because he was trying his best to catch his breath and calm himself down, a feat which, even despite the safety he was now in, seemed quite impossible in retrospect. Even so, it took Pearl gently pulling her young ward into a comforting hug to get him to finally relax, even if he was still quite on edge in light of everything he had seen. “It’s ok, Steven, we’re here,” the white Gem assured, running a hand through his hair in an attempt to sooth him.

It almost worked, that is, until Bill’s treacherous words rang through his head once more: “So if you wanna know what really happened, then go ahead and ask those Crystal Chumps of yours. After all, those three nearly helped me get my hands on that rock of yours the last time I came rolling around these parts!”

That reminder was more than enough to prompt Steven to push away from Pearl out of sheer panic alone, much to the white Gem’s apt confusion, especially as she noted the terror in his eyes.
“Steven? What’s wrong?”

“Did you see Lapis in your dream?” Amethyst ventured, believing that to be the cause of the young Gem’s anxiety.

“I… I did…” Steven finally spoke, though he had to admit to himself that she was the least of his worries at the moment. “B-but I also… I…” He trailed off, looking to Amethyst and Pearl once more as he tried to think of what to say to either of them, or rather, what to ask. Of course, he didn’t want to believe what Bill had said to him, but even so, he had to know. He just… didn’t know where to begin.

Which was why he decided to stall, at least for a moment, largely for the sake of clearing his head
and also for the sake of garnishing support from the only other two people present who could possibly understand. “Uh… Dipper? Mabel?” he turned to the twins, holding back a sigh of relief that they were alright and well, unlike how Bill had presented them in his dream. “C-can… can I talk to you guys in the kitchen for a second? Alone?”

“Um… sure, Steven,” Dipper said, exchanging a confused frown with his sister before all three of the kids headed down the loft.

As soon as they made it to the kitchen, Steven was quick to turn his back to the pair of Gems still in the loft, though he made sure to keep an eye on them every now and then to make sure that they weren’t eavesdropping. However, before he could say a word to the twins about Bill, Dipper caught him off guard with an entirely different concern instead. “So, how is she? What did she say?” he asked, adamant to know about the blue Gem’s status. “Is she gonna break the ice so we can finally get to her?”

“I… uh… n-no…” Steven sighed sadly, remembering his tense encounter with Lapis. “She’s still fused, and she’s still in control, but I don’t know for how long a-and… I’m sorry, Dipper, but… Lapis is… she… she doesn’t want to be saved… I tried telling her what you said, but I didn’t get a chance before Jasper showed up a-and then Malachite and… and then… he showed up…”

“He?” Mabel asked, confused. “Who’s he?”

Steven hesitated, hating to bring back so many unwanted ghosts of the past for the twins, but he knew he had to. He’d need all the help he could get. “…Bill…” he finally admitted, glancing down to the floor anxiously.

When he received nothing but silence from the twins, however, he glanced up, his heart sinking the moment he caught sight of Dipper’s expression in particular. Upon mere mention of the dream demon who had possessed him and nearly killed him, his eyes were wide with a familiar kind of terror, his hands clenched into tight fists as he tried his best to steady his rapidly feverish breathing, only to fail completely. Mabel gasped fretfully upon noticing the panic attack her brother was starting to slip into, which was why she was quick to firmly place her hands on both of his shoulders in a hurried attempt to calm him down.

“Dipper, bro-bro, it’s ok,” she assured in the most gentle whisper she could muster, even as his panic continued to rise. “Bill isn’t here. He can’t hurt you, or any of us. Steven only saw him in his dream and-”

“That’s exactly it, Mabel!” Dipper suddenly snapped, breaking away from her harshly. “Bill showed up in Steven’s dream, which means he must want something from him, which means he must be planning something!”

“D-Dipper, I-” Steven attempted to interject and explain, though Dipper was far too incensed with anger and fear to stop now.

“We were stupid to think he’d just stay away after what happened the last time!” he exclaimed hotly, slamming a fist down onto the counter. “None of us are safe as long as he’s still out there somewhere! We need to do something to get rid of him for good! We need to-”

“Kids?” Pearl cut in from the loft, her and Amethyst glancing down to check in on the trio. “Is everything ok in there?”

None of the kids offered an answer as they instead exchanged an apprehensive glance, all three of them knowing this matter wasn’t one they could easily address with the Gems. Even so, Steven let
out a small sigh, shaking his head as he looked between the twins with morose resolve. “We need
to tell the Gems,” he said, rubbing his arm as he looked away sadly.

“What?” Dipper asked, taken aback. “Steven, we can’t just… tell the Gems about all this Bill stuff.
They’ll never believe us! And even if they do, what makes you think they can even do anything
against someone like him?”

“I… look,” the young Gem sighed once more, stealing the briefest glance back towards the loft.
“In my… dream, Bill said something about my mom and the Gems, something that… that has me
really scared, ok? I just… I need to ask them about it. I have to know the truth of what happened
from them, not from him.”

“So… I guess that means we gotta come clean to them about the whole puppet show thing?”
Mabel asked, quite concerned. “And that time we fought him in Stan’s mind?”

“…I… I guess so…” Steven relented, knowing that this would likely be one of the most difficult
discussions he’d had with his guardians yet. However, just as he turned around to face the pair still
waiting expectantly in the loft, the one missing from their number just so happened to return.

“This is a weird party…” Garnet remarked as she stepped inside the house and noted the kids in the
kitchen and the Gems in the loft.

“Garnet!” Steven cried, not hesitating to rush towards the most steadfast of the Gems and hug her
legs tightly for support. Likewise, the twins headed over to her as well and Amethyst and Pearl
wandered down from the loft to greet the Gem leader, who met her young ward’s almost desperate
embrace evenly.

“Steven, you’re still awake,” Garnet said, though the young Gem hardly gave her any time to get
anything else out as he frantically began detailing everything that had happened while she was
gone.

“A-Amethyst was on a skateboard and then Dogcopter meowed at me and was just not interested in
what I had to say at all—and I might have some issues I need to work out—but Lapis is still out
there and she’s still-”

“Shh…” Garnet calmed him, placing a finger over his lips as she put a calming hand on his
shoulder. “I know you’re worried, but there’s nothing we can do right now. So let’s take it easy.”

“N-no!” Steven pulled himself back from Garnet as she tried picking him up. “We can’t just take it
easy!”

“Uh… why not?” Amethyst asked with a bewildered frown.

“B-because…” Steven began anxiously, looking between all three of his guardians as he tried to
fight back his oncoming, fearful tears. “I… I saw someone else in my dreams tonight too… a-
and… and I… I need to ask you guys something… something important…”

None of the Gems said anything in response to this as they exchanged a concerned glance but even
so, Garnet nodded her young ward onward, keeping a steady hand on his shoulder amidst his
obvious tense manner. Even so, Steven hesitated, looking back to Dipper and Mabel, the former
coldly shaking his head against the idea of mentioning anything at all to the Gems while the latter
nodded her gentle support. All the same, the young Gem knew he couldn’t keep silent about this
any longer. No matter how much things might change, no matter how much his perceptions might
shatter, no matter what he was about to possibly discover, he had to know the truth, once and for
“W-what do you know about someone named… Bill Cipher?”

To be continued…
Chapter 57: Chille Tid, Part 2

Chapter Summary

In which the Gems tell a story, Bill is a dick (again), and we finally get some answers.

Chapter Notes

OOOOOOOH BOY HERE WE GO WITH PART 2. And its a HELL of a chapter let me tell you that, seriously so much goes down here, I really think you all are gonna love it. So I won't keep you too long here. Have fun and brace yourself for some serious hurt cause oh boy... does this one hurt. (keyword is POSSESS)

IVAK FSJVOAF'W GDS
O YWQ OSH GGDH
ZW ROEW XG UDZDWGL
CCCO OLSL IC WPTWUI

“W-what do you know about someone named… Bill Cipher?”

The Gems’ reactions to their young ward’s anxiously-asked question were abrupt and instant, all three of them not even hesitating to show their shock and alarm at the mere mention of the dream demon. Pearl sucked in a sharp, heavy gasp, her eyes wide with terror as she swiftly slapped her hands over her mouth, her entire form trembling with dread as she kept this frightened barricade up. Likewise, Amethyst also gasped, falling off her seat on the edge of the loft and onto the couch as her breathing picked up into a bout of panic that she was largely helpless to suppress. Garnet’s reaction was by far the most subdued, but even so, she stared down at Steven as he looked up at her worriedly, her jaw dropped in stunned surprise over a question that not even she had seen coming. An extended bout of heavy, tense silence lingered throughout the room as the kids all exchanged concerned glances, none of them knowing what to make of the Gems’ unified, undeniable fear at simply hearing Bill’s name be brought up at all.

But even so, when this lengthy unsteadiness was finally broken, Garnet was the one to do it as she slowly lowered herself down to Steven’s level, her shades disappearing to reveal the unshakable distress in all three of her eyes as she looked into her young wards’ intently. “S-Steven…” she began, her usually firm voice trembling as she spoke in what was barely even a whisper. “W-wha… w-where… where did you… h-how-”

“Steven!” Pearl interjected harshly, her entire manner stiff and anxious as she picked up where the Gem leader was unable to. “Where did you hear… t-that name?”

“I-…” Steven trailed off almost instantly, glancing back at Dipper and Mabel, who were both every bit as lost in light of the Gems’ heated response to his question as he was. While all three of them were more than eager to learn the reasoning behind such a strong reaction, they didn’t really
expect to get that reasoning without explaining themselves first. Even so, Steven hesitated for a brief moment as he looked between the twins, first to Mabel who was hugging herself rather apprehensively, then to Dipper, who gripped his shoulder, the very one that Bill had stabbed while possessing him, tightly as he glanced down to the floor, his expression bitter and harsh and largely unwilling to divulge their bloodstained history with the demented demon to anyone, much less the Gems. Still, despite this, Steven knew, even in the aftermath of his own recent horrific encounter with Bill in the realm of his dreams, that there was no more hiding this from his guardians. After all, they had all promised to trust each other; it was about time that they started keeping up their end of that promise once more.

“Um… w-well… we’ve… met him before…” Steven began, unsure if those were really the right words to use. However, before he could really continue, Amethyst suddenly interjected.

“What?!” she asked, her jaw dropping in startled shock as she jumped up from her spot on the couch. “You guys have actually… seen that… that… that triangle jerk before?! And lived?!”

“Oh… y-yeah…” Steven rubbed the back of his neck as he looked away. “T-times actually.”

“Twice?!?” Pearl gasped, completely appalled. “What exactly have you kids been doing to encounter such a… twisted being like… like him, twice without telling us?!”

“Well… we… i-it’s… complicated…” the young Gem continued with a worried frown, though thankfully, Mabel picked up the slack for him.

“The first time wasn’t actually that bad,” she began honestly. “Gideon summoned him using this weird circle thing and he had him go inside Grunkle Stan’s mind so he could get the deed to the Mystery Shack. But the three of us and Soos stopped him and beat him back and then he disappeared. Until…”

“Until I made a deal with him,” Dipper suddenly spoke up, his hands clenched in tight, shaking fists at his sides as he kept his eyes tightly shut. In doing so, he didn’t see the Gems’ already stunned expressions become even moreso, all three of them staring at him in shaken disbelief upon hearing that admission alone. However, their alarm and despair only grew as he continued detailing the events of that nightmarish day not too long ago. “I knew it was stupid and I knew it was a bad idea but… he said he’d help me figure out the laptop’s password so… so I said yes and then… then he…” Dipper trailed off with an emerging sob, trying his best to hold back his pressing tears over the painful experience, only to fail completely as he ended up breaking down and telling all. “He stole my body. He possessed it and kicked me out of it and I couldn’t do anything to stop him, even when he blackmailed Steven into keeping quiet about the whole thing just so he wouldn’t hurt me, which he just did anyway just because he thought it was funny and then he ended up ruining Mabel’s play and he nearly got her and Steven and Connie killed and it was all my fault for being dumb enough to trust him a-and I almost lost everything because of it and now its even worse because he might be coming back and we don’t know what he wants and he… he could… w-well… I was… I-I don’t know how to…” Inevitably, Dipper ended up trailing off, lost to his own grief as he buried his face into his hands and cried, not knowing how else to reconcile his anguish, anguish that, even despite the weeks that had passed since it originated, still hurt just as much as the day it all began.

While Mabel and Steven both wanted to provide Dipper with some much-needed comfort and support, both of them stopped short as Garnet spoke up, her trio of eyes set in a fierce glare at the ground as she shook her head tersely. “That play… I knew something was wrong…” she began softly, an edge of fury in her tone that only grew as she continued. “I could feel something was off, I just couldn’t see it. He blocked my future vision, just like he did the last time…”
“G-Garnet-” Pearl interjected fretfully, though the Gem leader was quick to cut her off as her voice suddenly rose into a sharp shout directed at both of her frightened teammates.

“He was right there, right in front of us!” she yelled, her hands in tight fists as an outraged blaze practically ignited in her eyes. “But we didn’t even notice! We didn’t see what he had done to Dipper, we didn’t see what he was doing to Steven! All four of the kids could have died because of him and we did nothing to stop him! We did nothing to protect them!”

“G, t-there’s… there’s no way we could’ve known that he’d-” Amethyst attempted to quell Garnet’s fury, but it was no use. She was already far too incensed against the dream demon’s trickery to reign herself back in now.

“Yes, we could have known!” Garnet snapped furiously. “I could have known! But I didn’t! And instead, I let him deceive all of us, just like he did all those years ago! Only this time, its even worse because… b-because we… we could have lost….” The Gem leader inevitably trailed off, her heated wrath fizzling out into a remorseful sob as she finally glanced over at the kids, or more specifically at Dipper, who had been watching her aggressive outburst with just as much startled confusion as Steven and Mabel had. Without even hesitating, Garnet swiftly walked over to him and knelt down to his level before folding him into a secure, comforting embrace, one that admittedly caught Dipper off guard, but he was more than happy to accept nonetheless given how emotionally vulnerable he was at the moment to begin with. “I-I’m so sorry…” the Gem leader whispered, her voice racked with more guilt than Dipper had probably ever heard from her before, even as tears continued streaming from all three of her eyes.

“S-so am I, dude,” Amethyst solemnly interjected, carefully joining in on this hug herself. “No wonder you were so janked up after that puppet show. H-he totally messed you up!”

“A-and to think…” Pearl added, also lowering herself into this collective embrace as she let out a small, remorseful sob. “I pushed you so hard in your sword training in those first few weeks w-without even noticing how much pain you were really in a-after what he put you through. H-how could I have done something so… so horrible?!”

While Dipper initially wanted to counter the Gems’ palpable guilt with his own, he found that he was unable to find the willingness to be hard on himself amidst the circle of warmth and support he was quite literally held within. In fact, the most he could do was let out another small, bittersweet sob as he leaned against the Gems, barely even noticing as Steven and Mabel joined in on the longstanding group hug. For a while, all of them remained just like that, enfolded in each others’ fond embraces, as if that alone could serve as a wall to keep the sinister dream demon haunting them all out of their lives once and for all. And yet, they ultimately knew it wouldn’t; which meant that the only thing they could do now in light of the threat that he posed, was mutually arm themselves with the truth about the past in the hopes that it could better prepare them all for the future.

Few words were exchanged as the collective hug slowly disbanded, though no one really knew what to do in its aftermath save for Garnet. The Gem leader squared her shoulders as she stood, her shades reappearing as she simply nodded up to the direction of the loft, silently commanding that everyone follow her. None of the others argued as they congregated on the floor, pulling up pillows and blankets to get comfortable, or at least, as comfortable as they could, given the solemn circumstances. The kids found that they really didn’t have to ask the Gems what their intent with this impromptu meeting was, but even so Garnet began to calmly set the stage for what they were about to discuss.

“Not so long ago, the three of us promised that we’d start being more honest with you kids,” she
said, adjusting her shades as she met their apprehensive glances evenly. “But ever since we got our memories back, there’s something we’ve been hiding from you all, something that we wanted to protect you from. The only problem was… it turns out you three have already been up against that ‘something’ for yourselves, even before we had a chance to remember him.”

“Y-you mean Bill?” Steven asked anxiously, absently bundling his blanket up in his fist upon simply mentioning the demon.

Garnet nodded, her manner grave as both Pearl and Amethyst averted the kids’ line of sight, both of their expressions marred by unquestionable shame. All the same, in light of the heavy atmosphere, Mabel spoke up, hoping to alleviate some of the despair and dread that had lingered ever since Steven first brought Bill up to the Gems in the first place. “W-well, hey, we kinda kept our, uh… ‘Bill beatdowns’ a secret from you guys too so I guess that makes us all even, h-huh?”

A beat of somewhat awkward silence passed at this, with both Steven and Dipper looking to Mabel rather dubiously until Garnet continued, her tone still surprisingly collected as she began to unwind this lengthy tale. “We were even,” she admitted with a nod. “But now you kids have come clean about your past encounters with him. Which mean… its time for us to do the same.”

“S-so… you guys really have been up against Bill before?” Dipper asked, trying to gage all three of the Gems’ reactions to such a pertinent question.

“I-in a manner of speaking…” Pearl muttered, wrapping her arms tighter around herself as she kept her gaze to the floor.

“It was more like Rose against us…” Amethyst mumbled though Pearl was quick to quiet her with a sharp shush as Garnet continued.

“We’ve encountered Bill before, yes,” the Gem leader correctly earnestly. “But as for what exactly happened, well…” Garnet paused, letting out a long, remorseful sigh as she exchanged the briefest of glances with her teammates before finally unveiling the long sought-after truth. “It was 24 years ago, on a night much like this one…”

1988

The summer night’s air was crisp and warm and full of sweet, hopeful promise as the countless stars twinkled in the deep blue heavens above. The serene beauty of this night was lost on none of the Crystal Gems as they congregated in the crystalline entryway of their temple home, just far enough out of their beloved leader’s sight so that she wouldn’t know all three of them were, for lack of a better word, spying on her date with her newest human lover.

“What do you think they’re talking down out there, Garnet?” Pearl asked, her voice in a tight whisper as she kept close to the inner wall of the crystal grotto, her sights set on a suspicious glare towards Rose, or more specifically, towards Greg. The couple sat together quite a ways down the temple hill, lying down against it as they gazed up at the stars, their hands intertwined as they laughed warmly to each other every now and again.

“What ever they want to, I assume,” the Gem leader replied simply, casually leaning against the outside of the cave with her arms crossed and her expression neutral as always.

“Ugh, all they ever do is sit around and talk…” Amethyst groaned boredly, letting herself fall off her perch of a rock and onto the grassy ground below. “When are they gonna do something fun for
a change? When Science Man and McGucks were still around we used to go on all sorts of crazy adventures, checkin’ out monsters, solvin’ weird mysteries… When are we gonna get to do cool stuff like that again?”

“Never again, Amethyst,” Pearl scoffed bitterly. “Might I remind you that Stanford is gone thanks to that… disaster of a portal of his, which means our days of gallivanting about with him and Fiddleford are over.”

“Mmm… maybe,” Garnet interjected, her tone thoughtful as she adjusted her shades.

“W-what do you mean ‘maybe’?” the white Gem asked with a confused frown. “Rose said so herself, Garnet. There’s no way on Earth Ford’s charlatan of a brother can get that portal up and running again without her help, help that she’s not going to give to him because that would endanger all life on this planet, possibly even the entire universe! Even if that means that…” Pearl was unable to hold back a sad, remorseful sigh as she finished, one that served to soften up her severe expression, though only somewhat. “T-that we never see Ford again…”

“Aw, you never know, Pearl,” Amethyst quipped, vaulting up onto her rock once again. “Science Man was always full of surprises. Maybe he’ll just end up poppin’ up outta that portal thing all on his own someday!”

“…Did you even hear a word I just said, Amethyst?” Pearl asked, her tone rather deadpan as she sent the purple Gem a cursory glance.

“Ugh, yeah, I heard ya,” the purple Gem stuck her tongue out at her teammate. “Still, Music Man may be kinda cool but he’s no Science Man, that’s for sure.”

“He certainly isn’t…” Pearl mused, shooting another critical glance towards Greg. “It’s hard to believe that he’s the human Rose decided to open up to after all of that nonsense with Stanford. He’s so… underwhelming.”

“Enough complaining, both of you,” Garnet interjected rationally. “If Greg is who Rose wants to be with right now, then it’s not our place to question their love. Besides…” The fusion dropped her voice to something of a knowing whisper as she looked away from the loving couple down below. “Based on how her attractions to humans usually turns out… I’d say it’s a safe bet that this is only going to be temporary at best.”

“Hm,” Pearl nodded with a small, satisfied smile at this reassurance. “Yes, it will be. And fortunately, I can afford to wait.” The white Gem’s smirk widened as she fixed her gaze on Rose instead, knowing that it would just take a little time and a little patience before her beloved liege would fall back into her arms where she belonged once more. “After all, I’ve done it before; I can do it again…”

Since watching Rose and Greg from afar had quickly gotten uneventful, the Gems eventually decided on disbanding to the temple for the night to let the couple have their privacy. Garnet took up her usual spot in the burning room, surrounded by the countless bubbled Gems floating high above her as she sat cross-legged on the ground, upholding a relaxed, serene position.

The fusion often took to meditation whenever she could find a few spare hours in which to do it, as it gave her a chance to unwind from her stress and allow both halves of her whole to maintain the healthy, affectionate inner communication she needed to keep herself together. Usually, Ruby and
Sapphire’s internal conversations were focused on idle, yet contented chit-chat about recent happenings or on romantic sweet nothings between each other.

However, on this particular night, both halves of Garnet’s whole were concerned with a rather odd anomaly, one that the fusion had admittedly never really experienced before throughout her lengthy existence. For when she glimpsed down the extensive, branching rivers and streams that were the future, she was caught off guard to see that they were essentially obscured from her sight altogether. It was as though a dark, stormy fog was starting to roll over her future vision, barring her from seeing ahead as she usually so easily could. And as disconcerting as that fog alone was, what concerned Garnet even more was that she could find no reasonable explanation for what might be causing it.

Which was why the fusion upped her internal focus, both of her halves puzzling together to try and solve this newfound mystery so they could gaze into the future once more. In fact, Garnet was so focused on this task that she didn’t notice that the molten lava in the pit of the room’s center slowly froze amidst its usual bubbling. She didn’t notice as all sense of color and reality began to drain out from the world around her, leaving only dull grays and dark, empty shadows in its place. In fact, she didn’t even notice, with her trio of eyes as closed in deep mediation as they were, the bright, triangular being hovered down into the space directly in front of her. That is, until said being quite rudely made his presence known to her.

“Knock, knock!” he exclaimed in a pitchy, somewhat obnoxious voice as he literally knocked on the fusion’s visor, instantly startling her out of her revere. “Earth to Fuse Box! Are you two still in there or did you decide to make like this planet will someday and split?”

Garnet jerked back with a gasp at this sudden intrusion, not hesitating to jump to her feet and summon her gauntlets as she put cursory distance between herself and this bizarre being, one that was quite unlike any she had ever seen before, even during her time in a place as infamously odd as Gravity Falls. Sure enough, he was a literal triangle, bright yellow and effervescently glowing, with only a large, singular, slitted eye, thin, wiry black limbs, and a black tie and top hat to accentuate his outright strange appearance as he floated in midair on his own accord. Though what caught the fusion off guard the most was the immense, almost overwhelming aura of untapped power he seemed to put off just by his sheer presence alone. On instinct, Garnet tried checking her future vision to determine exactly what his identity and motives were, but as she did so, an almost sharp pain reverberated throughout her entire form, further barring her from the already misty darkness the future now was to her as a whole. Which meant that she had to swallow her pride and do things the more direct way, as much as she hated doing so.

“Y-you-” she began shakily, though she quickly forced herself to be firm and authoritative as opposed to showing weakness in the face of a being that radiated so much raw energy. “State your name, purpose, and how you got in here. Now.”

“Wow, you sure don’t waste any time getting right to the point, do ya, Fuse Box?” the being laughed almost mirthfully, confusing the fusion even more than she already was. “Well then, I’ll be more than happy to meet you halfway and do the same! The name’s Bill Cipher! Bet you’ve heard of me before. After all, us one-eyed wonders gotta stick together, isn’t that right, Ice Box?”

Garnet balked at this, the half of her that was Sapphire in particular taking slight offense and bewilderment to this quip though Ruby was quick to steady her, just as she usually did. “W-we’ve… I’ve never heard of you before, no,” the fusion shook her head, trying her best to keep her guard up, despite the demon’s playful mannerisms.

“Aw, really?” Bill asked in faux disappointment. “Oh well, that’ll change after tonight! Oh, and as
for how I got in here, its not like this shiny temple of yours is that hard for a timeless, interdimensional being of pure energy who can teleport in and out of the mindscape, or in your case Gemscape at will like yours truly to break into! And what was that third thing you wanted to know again? I guess I forgot about it while I was talking about myself, but can ya blame me? I’m a pretty interesting guy, after all!”

“Your pur-”

“Oh yeah, that’s right, my ‘purpose’ here or something like that,” Bill interrupted, silencing Garnet by abruptly shoving a finger over her mouth. “Well, ya see, Fuse Box, I’ve been keeping an eye on you and your buddies for quite a while now, mostly cause you four have sorta… grown on me ever since you showed up here in good ol’ Gravity Falls over a century ago. See, before you guys showed up, I was pretty much the only one making sure this special little backwoods burg here was safe and sound. But then you Crystal Gems came along and took that heavy burden right off my shoulders without even realizing it! And I gotta say, I really appreciate it, more than you’ll ever know!”

“So… you… used to protect the town,” Garnet assumed, having no real reason to doubt the demon on this claim. After all, despite his rather blatant narcissism, he did seem to be amicable enough. Though what did confuse her was why she had never so much as even heard the slightest whisper or record of this being who had supposedly been watching over Gravity Falls for quite some time now. As far as she knew, not even their own research with Ford had uncovered any sort of details or knowledge about him. Certainly, if he had been keeping up this stalwart duty for so long now, he would have been mentioned somewhere in the town’s extensive history. Right?

“Sure did!” Bill quipped brightly. “But after you Gems took up shop, I decided to hang back and settle for keeping watch over you guys instead, makin’ sure you don’t get yourselves shattered or that you accidentally call any of those Homeworld mooks down here. Now, you don’t have to thank me or anything like that; just consider it a neighborly favor on my end! But, uh… I hate to tell you this, Fuse Box, but I didn’t just come all the way out here tonight just to give you a friendly hello…”

“Hm. You still haven’t told me what you’re actually here for, then,” Garnet remarked, crossing her arms somewhat dubiously.

“We’re getting there, Fuse Box, hold your future vision!” the demon remarked with a reassuring wave of his hand. “Actually… now that I’ve mentioned it… how’s that ‘gift’ of foresight holding up for ya? See anything down those ‘rivers of time’ or whatever it is ya call ‘em?”

“I-I…” Garnet trailed off as she down and placed a hand to her temple. Try as she might, she couldn’t even catch the faintest, fastest glimpse of any possible future; even the immediate moments to come were completely blinded from her sight. And yet, what bothered her the most at the moment was the somewhat goading way Bill had presented her with this question, almost as if he knew something was wrong with her future vision. A possibility that, given how unpredictable and wily he was, likely wouldn’t have been too far out of the question. “N-no,” she finally admitted, glancing away in disappointment. “I… I can’t see anything… but… I’m assuming you know why that is.”

“Hate to disappoint ya, Fuse Box, but I’m just as clueless about your little blackout as you are!” Bill assured and surprisingly, his tone was earnest enough to make Garnet believe him. Almost. “But hey, maybe I can help you out with it! After all, I’m a lot like you are in that I know lots of things about the future! LOTS OF THINGS…” The demon’s voice suddenly dropped low at this, startling Garnet as his triangular form seemed to flash with many different images, all of which
went by far too fast for even her to catch. “So, what do you say, Fuse Box? Want me to help you fill in the gaps? Who knows, maybe I can even find a way to hook you up with something you can’t see coming, no matter how hard you try…”

Upon hearing such a vague, somewhat ominous offer, the fusion hesitated, largely uncertain about whether or not a mysterious, downright enigmatic being like Bill could even be trusted at all. Still, with her future vision as essentially useless as it was at the moment, she really had no way of knowing for sure. And besides, it seemed as though, for whatever reason, the demon genuinely did want to help; what would the harm really be in hearing him out? “…I’m listening…”

Amethyst let out a rowdy chuckle as she let herself fall from her high perch of clutter and into one of the countless pools her room had to offer. Her messy, cavernous, crystalline residence was, in her opinion, the perfect place to let loose and have fun after a long day of protecting humanity.

Which was why she spent most of her free time there doing just that, from picking through her extensive ‘collection’ of knick-knacks and garbage she had brought back from various missions in the past, diving into pools and waterfalls, and, if she was feeling particularly antsy, tossing heavy or fragile objects around just for fun.

The best part of it all was that she could do all that and then some without anyone telling her that she couldn’t. Without Garnet or Pearl forcing her to ‘restrain herself’, whatever that meant. It wasn’t that Amethyst held any sort of disdain for her teammates; she just found them to be a bit too stifling at times, to the point that it occasionally got on her nerves. She knew well that she was the youngest and smallest of the bunch, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t contribute to the team, a fact that thankfully, Rose often reminded the other two Gems of for her. If no one else allotted the playful purple Gem any freedom, at least she could allow her leader to let her spread her wings, shapeshifted or otherwise. It was something she deeply appreciate about the pink Gem, her willingness to let her experience and grow as her own Gem, to do whatever she wanted whenever she pleased.

Which of course, included diving into any pool in her room any time she wanted, just as she was doing now.

For a moment or two, Amethyst remained underwater, letting out a relaxed sigh as the cool, sparkling liquid refreshed and rejuvenated her. However, as she broke the surface to climb out and preform her cannonball once more, she stopped short upon noticing that the usual vibrant violets and lavenders her room was known for had been replaced with dull, lifeless grays and whites. The purple Gem tilted her head in confusion as she glanced back at the waterfall that fed the pool she was wading in, only to find that it had completely frozen, its flow quieted entirely, even as she shoved an experimental hand into it out of curiosity alone.

“Hey, what’s the big idea here?” Amethyst asked to no one in particular. “Is someone pranikin’ me or somthin’? Who turned off my waterfalls? And all the color?”

“That would be me!”

With a surprised gasp, Amethyst spun around, her jaw dropping in apt surprise upon seeing the bizarre triangular being floating just outside of the pool she was in. “Whoa!” she exclaimed, amazed as she slammed her hands down on the edge of the pool and looked up at her unexpected guest. “What the hell are you supposed to be? Oops! Pearl says I’m not supposed ‘ta use words like that. I mean—what the hey are you supposed to be?”
“Oh, ya know, just your average, run of the mill, potentially all-powerful dream dweller with a penchant for a good time,” the demon remarked casually enough. “Sorta like you, eh, Half Baked?”

“Hey! What’s that supposed to mean?” Amethyst huffed, offended by the such a derogatory title.

“Aw, it’s just a fun little nickname, kid!” he exclaimed with a wave of his hand. “Don’t read too much into it.”

“Hm, a nickname, huh?” the purple Gem pouted playfully, still not finding the demon’s sudden appearance to be too alarming. After all, at least he seemed to have some kind of sense of humor, which was something Amethyst could certainly appreciate. “So do you got a nickname, Mr. Triangle Guy?”

“Nah, no nicknames for me, but you can call me Bill! Nice to meet ya!” With this, the demon amicably tipped his hat, shifting gravity itself as he did so, which ended up sending Amethyst flying out of her pool. As soon as Bill repositioned his hat however, everything restored itself and the purple Gem clumsily landed back in the water, letting out a wild laugh all the while.

“Woo! That was a blast!” Amethyst chuckled, shaking the water out of her hair. “How’d ya do that anyway?”

“Oh that? It was just a plain ol’ parlor trick,” Bill rolled his eye sardonically. “If ya wanna see something really stand out, then watch THIS!” The demon snapped his fingers and suddenly, in an instant, he seemed to split up into countless versions of himself, all of them surrounding the awestruck purple Gem as they spun around her, letting out fast, playful quips with each new version that passed by her. “Hey, Half Baked! How’s the view from down there? Pretty great, I bet? Say, you got a spare arm you can lend me? Never mind, I got SEVERAL!”

“Ha!” Amethyst let out a hearty laugh as Bill slipped back into his usual, singular form. “Oh wow, you’re hilarious, Mr. Triangle Guy! Oh! Ya know, I can pull off cool tricks like that too! Check this out!” The purple Gem smirked as she shapeshifted, deciding to take on the demon’s form as she rearranged her form into his iconic triangular shape, top hat, thin limbs and all, even if she did still keep her mouth underneath the massive singular eye. “Pretty good for a first try, huh?”

Now it was Bill’s turn to laugh as he circled the purple Gem quickly. “Ha, I’d say so! Keep practicing at it, Half Baked, and who knows? Maybe one day, you’ll be able to actually match up to the devilishly handsome level that I’m on!”

“Aw, thanks!” Amethyst grinned as she shifted back into her usual form. “So, whatcha doin’ here anyway, Mr. Triangle Guy? Did you just come to hang out and play with me, cause if ya did, I gotta say, I’m already having a great time with you!”

“Well, I love ‘playing’ a much as the next guy,” Bill began, nonchalantly adjusting his bowtie. “But right now, I’m really here on some important business.”

“Aw, booo,” the purple Gem stuck her tongue out. “Business… sounds boring. Like somethin’ Garnet and Pearl would wanna do.”

“Actually, kid, I think you’re gonna care a whole lot about the kind of business I showed up here for…” the demon remarked leadingly, turning away from Amethyst, whose curiosity was admittedly peaked as she finally got out of her pool to stand on its edge.

“Oh yeah?” she asked, raising an intrigued eyebrow. “What do ya mean?”
If the demon had a mouth, he certainly would have smirked at this admission, but even so, he began to explain. “Well, ya see…”

Pearl let out a deep, somewhat frustrated huff amidst trying to calm herself with her usual favorite pastime: dancing. Upon the central waterfall platform of her pristine, elegant room, the white Gem spun about, a sword in hand to accentuate her graceful movements. And while normally practicing her agile steps and swordsman ship in unison would have worked to soothe her frazzled nerves, the white Gem found that, on a night like tonight, it was doing anything but.

For all of the countless decades and many centuries she had been with Rose, if there was one thing Pearl had never understood about her beloved liege it was her longstanding, seemingly undying fascination with humans. Since almost her very arrival on Earth thousands of years ago, the pink Gem had made a habit of striking up an almost dizzying array of friendships, partnerships, and of course, relationships with just about any man or even woman who happened to catch her fancy. For every single human Rose had any sort of fling with, Pearl was always there, to watch with increasing aggravation as these ephemeral relationships were born, had their brief day in the sun, and ultimately met their inevitably end the moment said human did. And as much as she hated whenever Rose decided to go out on a limb and waste her time indulging someone other than her, the white Gem could at least take solace in the fact that she’d always outlast the competition every single time.

And of course, Pearl firmly believed this time was no exception.

While the white Gem had hoped that Rose’s relations with humans would have come to an end after the disaster Stanford had gotten them all into a few years ago, the last thing Pearl could have expected was for the pink Gem to wind up with someone like Greg, of all people in its wake. By just about all accounts, the young musician seemed to barely even be worth a passing mention when compared to all of Rose’s past friends and lovers. He was rather dim, innocent to a fault, largely casual and unconcerned, and in, Pearl’s opinion, the only one who rivaled him in terms of being an unmistakable goofball was Amethyst. Yet, for whatever reason, Greg had set his lovestruck sights on Rose and, even more bewildering, Rose had returned his affections in full, even after supposedly selling herself off of humans the day Ford disappeared. And as a result, for the past several years their relationship had been thriving as Pearl stood in the background, just as she always did, waiting for the day she would have Rose all to herself once more.

Even so, Pearl couldn’t help but lash out her blade somewhat fiercely, knowing that there was no real way of knowing when that day would be. She stilled her blade briefly, letting out a tired, impatient sigh as she glanced down to the surface of the aquatic platform she was standing upon to take her own dissatisfied reflection is. However, the white Gem was quickly caught off guard when that reflection suddenly began to shift and change on its own accord. At first, Pearl thought her eyes were simply deceiving her, but when she looked again, there was no denying it. She let out a gasp as her own reflection transformed into that of none other than Rose Quartz first, before that reflection also changed into someone else, someone that made Pearl stumble back with a gasp as her hands flew over her mouth in shock.

As the white Gem clumsily fell to the watery ground, her alarm grew even more as a darkened shape began to emerge from the water itself, color bleeding from the entire room as its form solidified. And, as her unexpected intruder finally made his identity known, her surprise turned to outright horror the moment she heard that grating, sinister laughter. Laughter that she would have recognized anywhere, even years after the fact.
“Haha!” Bill chuckled brightly as he completely popped out of the water, taking on his usual yellow pallor as he floated right above the startled white Gem. “Oh, now THIS oughta be fun! How ya doin’, Bird Brain? Long time no see! It’s been a while since I rattled you and Quartzy’s cages, so I figured I’d drop in, ya know, for old time’s sake!”

“Y-you!” Pearl exclaimed, aghast as she quickly reclaimed her fallen sword and rose to stand, not hesitating to point her blade at the menacing demon. “Y-you need to leave, immediately! I don’t know what you think you’re doing here, but I am not interested in anything you have to say! Rose already told you, you are not welcome on this planet, so you can just-”

“Pfft, like I care about what ol’ Quartzy has to say!” Bill rolled his eyes, his hands on his edges as he quickly glided behind the white Gem, surprising her once again. “Ya know, you really do sound like Sixer used to, comin’ in with all those ‘threats’ and ‘warnings’ like they actually mean anything to me. I gotta admit, Bird Brain, its hilarious. Almost as hilarious as you swinging that butter knife ya got there around thinking that it’ll actually land a dent on me! Speaking of which…” With a simply snap of the demon’s fingers, the blade the white Gem held tight in her grip was abruptly pulled away from her, its sturdy metallic surface quickly bending on Bill’s command as it ultimately twisted itself into a tight, bulky knot. And then, with the blade effectively useless in its ruined form, he simply let it fall to the watery ground with an unceremonious splash as he laughed in sadistic amusement all the while. “There ya go! I fixed it for you, Bird Brain!”

“Fix this!” Pearl growled, swiftly summoning a spear from her gem as she lashed out fiercely. Unfortunately, her attack did essentially nothing as it cut through Bill’s largely incorporeal form, which only fizzled out slightly as the spear tore through it before quickly reassembling itself, completely unharmed.

“Aw, come on, Bird Brain, you know better than to-” Bill was cut off as Pearl tried attacking him yet again, this time rushing straight at him with the tip of her weapon. Of course, she only ended up running clearly through him, not so much landing anything close to a blow on him, though that hardly mattered to the white Gem as incensed as she was. Before the demon had even a chance to get another word in edgewise, Pearl swung her spear again, repeating the motion over and over again in the fruitless hope that somehow, someway, she’d actually be able to at the very least, drive him away once and for all. An attempt that only served to amuse the sadistic demon, and little else. “Wow, you really are a riot, Bird Brain!”

“I don’t care!” Pearl shouted, launching towards the demon with another wide sweep of her spear. “You’re not supposed to be here! Now go away and never bother us again, or else I’ll make you never met either of us at all!”

“Hmph! I don’t know what all this harsh reception is about, Bird Brain,” Bill remarked in faux disappointment. “What’d I even do to get you this up in arms?”

“You know exactly what you did!” Pearl huffed, taking a defensive flip backwards as she held her spear close to her, lest the demon snatch that away from her too. “But if you think, even for a second, that I’m going to let you get away with it, then you’re dead wrong! Now… LEAVE!”

The white Gem stabbed forward yet again, however, this time, Bill somehow managed to actually catch her spear cleanly between his fingers, effectively freezing her in place so he could speak his piece. “Y’know, Bird Brain, as fun as it is to watch you make a complete and total fool out of yourself, I didn’t come all the way just for that. Besides, you’re being awfully hasty about this whole ‘leave us alone’ thing. Especially since I just might be able to help you out with your little...
“Problem?” Pearl scoffed as she pulled her spear away from him harshly. “And what ‘problem’ might that be, exactly?”

“Oh, ya know, just the problem that Quatzy loves that Rock Star kid waaaaay more than she loves you!”

“W-wha—No, she doesn’t!” the white Gem protested adamantly, though Bill only met her appalled surprise with another callous laugh.

“Aw, come on, Bird Brain, you can’t be THAT delusional, can you?” the demon quipped mockingly. “You really think Quartzy would be wasting her time with another human AFTER everything that went down between me, her, and Sixer if she didn’t see something special in Rock Star? I mean, you said so yourself a few years ago:” Bill motioned down to his triangular form, which began to play a projection of the night Greg and attempted and failed at fusion with Rose, only for the two of them to fall even deeper in love with each other as a result. And of course, the white Gem’s hopes sank once more as she listened to herself admit a thought that still worried her, even years after it was said and done: “I think he’s her favorite too…”

“W-well, even if he is her favorite,” Pearl snapped before Bill could play anymore mind games with her. “Its not like it even really matters anyway. This little ‘problem’ you’re suggesting is just going to take care of itself in about 50 or 60 more years and then everything will go right back to the way its supposed to be.”

“Mmm, not this time, Bird Brain.”

Pearl snapped out of her newfound confident smile at this, looking to the demon with equal surprise and suspicion. “W-what do you mean?” she ventured, knowing that someone like Bill couldn’t be trusted whatsoever, though she couldn’t help but be the slightest bit curious all the same.

“I mean, you probably shouldn’t get used to the idea of Quartzy being around for too much longer… Mostly cause she’s eventually gonna leave all three of you Crystal Chumps hanging high and dry when she abandons you guys in about a decade or so.”

While it took a great deal to ever really surprise Garnet, the bold claim Bill had just made to her was more than enough to elicit a startled gasp from her. Yet even still, despite the demon’s promise to fill in the glaring gaps of her foresight, she couldn’t help but be the slightest bit suspicious of it all the same. “E-explain,” she commanded, still trying to be steady, though given what she had just heard she hardly sounded as confident as she had wanted to.

Amethyst simply balked at Bill for a moment or two after hearing him bear this ominous message, but she was quick to laugh it off, knowing that certainly, her new ‘friend’ couldn’t be serious about. “Aw, that’s a good one, Mr. Triangle Guy! But you’re just bein’ silly! There’s no way Rose would ever leave us! …Right?”

Pearl’s eyes were wide with shock, her hands trembling at the very thought of the demon being right, the very inkling alone that it could possibly somehow be true. And yet, she was quick to anchor herself back down to reality as she remembered exactly who she was talking to and how deceptive and duplicative he really was. “Y-you don’t honestly expect me to believe a blatant _lie_ like that, d-do you?”

“Look, I’m telling ya, it’s the truth!” Bill spoke to all three of the Gems at the exact same time,
though he did so completely unbeknownst to any of them as he began to lay his appeal out. “And if you don’t believe me, get a load of this!” Once again, the demon projected an image on his surface, though this time, it seemed to be one of the future. Within it, the silhouetted forms of Rose and Greg stood together, the pink Gem’s stomach oddly larger and rounder than usual as both members of the couple gently put their hands upon it. “One of these days, Quartzy and Rock Star are gonna... get busy, if ya know what I mean, and when they do, your dear old leader will tell you three “you know, I’ve had enough of babysitting you guys for one existence, I’m gonna give up my form and my gem to have some half human brat with ol’ Gregsy here. Have fun trying to protect humanity without me!’ And then bam! Just like that, she’ll be gone, and you three will never be getting her back. Pretty lowdown of her to just flake off like that after everything you four have been through together, but eh, what do I know?”

As Garnet watched the image of Rose disappear completely, she was largely unable to anything else but shake her head in stark disbelief, even though she had just seen it happen right in front of her. “N-no...” the fusion said, her voice weak and trembling as she hugged herself closely, trying to fight back tears. “No, she wouldn’t... she...” Garnet trailed off with a groan, her hand pressed to her temple as she tried and failed once again to consult her future vision on the matter, which only served to frighten her even more in the scares possibility that it could possibly be true.

“What?” Amethyst froze, her playful manner all but gone as she watched this disheartening scene play out. “B-but... but Rose is... she’s not gonna... She... she wouldn’t leave us... She can’t... I...” Unable to contain her grief over this information, the normally upbeat purple Gem let out a small, fearful sob, the very thought of losing the kind and lovely pink Gem completely unthinkable to her.

“No!” Pearl shouted fiercely, lashing out at Bill once more, once again to no avail. “You’re lying! I know you are! That’s all you ever do! You’re a fool if you think that Rose would ever think about leaving me—I mean us—behind! I know her and I know that she’d never, ever do something like that!”

“She would and she will!” Bill affirmed with a casual shrug, clearly enjoying the rise he was getting out of all three Gems as they reacted to this news. “After all, its no secret that Quartzy is head over heels for those simple-minded meatskins you call humans. Would it REALLY surprise any of you that much if she decided to finally settle down with one of them and make one of her own, even at the cost of her own Gem, heck, the cost of her own existence and all?”

All three of the Gems were shaken into silence at this, none of them really able to tell the demon he was wrong on this point because he wasn’t. For almost as long as any of them had known Rose, they had known that she carried a deep, passionate affection for humankind, one that bled through into every single relationship she carried with one of them. In fact, she had even professed fascination on multiple occasions on humanity’s unique ability to reproduce, even to the point of wistfully admitting she could experience the incredible ‘gift of life’ like that for herself. A fact that, as alarming and painful as it might be, gave Bill’s audacious claims some weight after all.

Which meant that it really wasn’t too hard for the demon to go in with his individual appeals for each of them.

“So there’s your little glimpse into the future, Fuse Box!” Bill quipped to Garnet, his tone far too bright and cheery, given the devastating news he had just delivered to her. “Oof, but you really aren’t lookin’ like you like what you just heard... Huh, in that case, I guess I probably shouldn’t tell you that once Quartzy’s gone, you’re gonna be the one who’ll have to take over as the leader of your little ragtag team in her place. Oops! Looks like I spilled the beans on that one. Aw, but it won’t be too bad, for ya, will it, Fuse Box? All that responsibility, Bird Brain and Half Baked...
looking to you for everything, and all without Quartzy around to depend on to help you! Sounds like fun, huh?"

Of course, upon hearing this daunting bout of information, Garnet’s horror with this discovery grew even more. Both of her hands were trembling as she looked down to the gemstones resting upon them, both halves of her whole in complete and utter disarray as they thought through it all. If Bill was right, then, sometime in the future, not only would Rose be gone forever, but she’d have to take up the difficult helm of the leader of the Crystal Gems, which was a tremendous weight she felt in no way prepared to take on. The very notion alone was almost enough to split her up right then and there, but somehow she managed to keep things together. Barely.

“Yeah, sorry to break it to ya, Half Baked,” Bill said to Amethyst with faux sympathy as he slipped his long, thin arm over her shoulder. “But your time with dear old Quartzy is just about up. Damn shame too, I mean, with her gone, who’s gonna even want a defect like you around anymore?”

“W-what do you mean?” Amethyst sniffled, far too upset to even get angry over such a biting remark.

“Aw, don’t act like you haven’t seen it, kid,” the demon scoffed. “The way Bird Brain talks to you like you’re some kinda mistake, how Fuse Box treats you like you don’t know anything? Those two don’t respect you at all! But Quartzy does! She cared enough about you to pull you outta that dark and dusty Kindergarten and actually gave you a place in the world! But without here… well, chances are you won’t have much of a place here or anywhere else for that matter, Half Baked!”

While she was usually quite chatty, Amethyst had nothing to say in response to such a disparaging prediction outside of a heavy, agonized sob as she tried processing everything the demon was telling her. There was no question that the purple Gem adored Rose, that she looked up to her and listened to whatever she had to say. Her respect and admiration for the pink Gem was a direct result of the genuine warmth and affection she had showed towards her just about every single day, ever since she had first happened upon her hole in the Kindergarten years ago. But now? To be without Rose’s gentle support and loving kindness? To be cast out of the only family she had ever really known, all because she was a little bit different? It was enough to nearly drive her mad with grief.

Grief that, unbeknownst to her, her new demonic ‘friend’ was more than prepared to use to his advantage.

“Just think of it, Bird Brain!” Bill goaded Pearl, casually floating around her as her attempts at attacking him finally stilled amidst her growing despair. “All those years you’ve spent with Quartzy, groveling at her feet, throwing yourself into any danger that comes her way, and for what? For her to just end up leaving you forever for some two-bit spacy kid with a guitar and a van? Shows just how much she cares about you, doesn’t it?”

“B-be quiet!” Pearl hissed hatefully, even if tears were starting to well up in her eyes. “Y-you… you don’t know what you’re talking about! Rose does care about me! She cares about all of us! T-that’s why I know she’d never leave any of us behind!”

“Yeah, yeah, you can go ahead and keep trying to convince yourself of that, Bird Brain,” Bill rolled his eye. “I’ve seen where all this ends, and just for the record, it doesn’t end with you and her living happily ever after like you think it will. But… fortunately for you, its not too late. If you play your cards right, maybe you can still have that happy ending with Quartzy after all…”

Pearl bristled at this, her spear disappearing as she kept her hands close to her as they trembled slightly. “W-what are you saying?” she asked hesitantly, tears streaming down her cheeks as she forgot, for just a moment, who she was speaking to and the sinister history she had with him.
“Well, ya see…” Bill began, addressing all three of the Gems simultaneously as he laid out his plans. “Since what Quartzy plans on doing to you three seems so unfair, I figured I’d do you three a favor out of the kindness of my heart—or well, I guess I should say the endless black abysmal chasm that I have in place of a heart. So I came up with a clever little plan in my free time that just might help Quartzy change her mind about all this human nonsense so that she can stay here with you three where she belongs, forever! Anyone interested?”

Garnet finally looked up from her hands and to the demon upon hearing this, uncertainty and dread marring her expression as she hesitated to respond, mostly out of fear more than anything else. But as the terrifying thought of having to take up the mantle of following in Rose’s footsteps filled her mind once more, she found that she was hard pressed to say no. “G-go on…”

“Are you kiddin’ me? Of course I’m interested!” Amethyst exclaimed hotly, her hands clenched in tight, anxious fists. She had no reason to withhold her anguish at the thought of Rose leaving her, which was why she let out another morose sob as she practically begged to the demon for his aid, whatever that might be. “Especially if it’ll make Rose stay with us! Y-you gotta help us, Mr. Triangle Guy! Please!”

“A-absolutely not!” Pearl shouted, taking up a defensive stance as she backed away from Bill angrily. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten about what happened a few years ago. I’m not about to stand here and let you deceive me again! I don’t care what you little ‘plan’ might do, I have no intention of agreeing to it whatsoever!”

“And it’ll be so easy too; you barely even have to do anything! All it’ll takes is one simple handshake to keep you Crystal Gems from falling apart…” With this, the demon’s hand lit up in a vibrant blue flame, one that he extended out to each of the Gems as he made his final, very convincing appeal.

“Do we have a deal?”

None of the Gems accepted this offer, at least not right away as they all took pause to think. Even despite their varying views and impressions on Bill, none of them really knew for certain whether he could be trusted. Garnet was apprehensive at best, though Amethyst was a bit more hopeful that the demon would be true to his word, though she was still nervous all the same. Pearl, however, knew exactly what Bill was like from past experiences. She knew he was a dangerous liar with a penchant for trouble. And yet… she also knew he had power, that he was a being with abilities and magic she couldn’t even begin to understand. Certainly, if he was somehow being honest with her, it would be completely easy for him to change the futures around and keep Rose from going astray. The only problem was… she had no idea if he was actually being honest or not.
And as much as Pearl hated to admit it, she didn’t really want to take the risk of doubting the
demon on this, especially since he seemed to be giving her such a clear and present solution to this
problem, even if she wasn’t truly aware of all the details. Because at that moment, the thought of
losing Rose to anything, human or otherwise, was completely abhorrent to her. At that moment, the
thought of leading the Crystal Gems and protecting the Earth without Rose to guide her filled
Garnet with more fear than she had ever felt before. At that moment, the thought of being
abandoned by the Gem who had practically raised her, who made her feel safe and loved and
important and special caused Amethyst more sorrow than she really even knew how to handle. At
that moment, the thought of living, of going on without Rose, the very Gem that had brought them
all together and made them the team, no, the family that they were now, was so completely and
utterly unbearable to all three of them that they couldn’t stand it. And, miraculously enough, they
knew they didn’t have to.

Which was why, on a burst of sheer agony and impulse alone, each of the Crystal Gems met the
hand Bill was extending to them, solidifying this darkened deal. A deal that would only ever end
up bringing them endless regret, now and for years to come.

The temple hill echoed the warm laughter of the couple lying together upon it, the stars above them
twinkling warmly as fireflies danced freely all around them. Rose and Greg exchanged sweet
smiles as they looked to each other, deeply enjoying this picturesque evening together, even if it
was getting to be rather late. Not that it really mattered to either of them, since time itself seemed to
barely even exist so long as they were together, soaking in each other’s love and warmth and little
else.

“Heh, you know, I probably shouldn’t be staying up this late…” Greg remarked with another fond
chuckle as he glanced away from the pink Gem bashfully. “Especially since I have work down at
the hut tomorrow.”

“Oh…” Rose frowned in slight disappointment. “Right… well, then, I suppose I’ll see you
tomorrow-”

“Aw, n-no, its ok,” the young musician quickly interjected. “I’m really having a good time with
you tonight, Rose. It’d be a shame if it had to end so soon. Besides, I’m sure Mr. Pines won’t mind
me being a few minutes late tomorrow if I end up accidentally sleeping in…”

“Hm…” Rose mused, her frown deepening as she slowly sat up to gaze at the Murder Hut sitting
just down the hill from them.

“Rose?” Greg asked, confused as he sat up as well.

“What’s it like?” she asked thoughtfully, her knees pulled to her chest as her long pink curls flowed
gracefully in the gentle breeze. “Working down there with… him?”

“Oh, well, its not too bad,” the young musician scratched the back of his neck a bit awkwardly. “I
mean, sure Mr. Pines can be a bit cranky sometimes, but he’s not… that bad. In fact I think… eh,
forget about it.”

“You think what?” Rose pressed, curious.

“Uh… w-well, its just… I honestly think that you and Mr. Pines… are kind of alike in some
ways,” Greg admitted with a small shrug. “If things hadn’t, you know, turned out the way they did,
who knows? Maybe you two could have been friends like you and his brother used to be.”

The pink Gem let out a long sigh at this, one that almost made the young musician regret his words, especially as she solemnly spoke. “Greg… you know why that can’t happen…”

“Y-yeah, but maybe-”

“Stanley and I will never see things eye to eye,” Rose shook her head. “He wants to reopen that portal, and as long as he does, I can’t make peace with him. As much as I miss Stanford, I can’t allow that machine to be turned on ever again. You understand that, don’t you?”

Greg nodded gravely, remembering the pink Gem’s warnings about the potentially dangerous portal well. “Yeah, I-I… I understand…” the young musician said, glancing away sheepishly. “Sorry for bringing it up…”

“Aw, its ok…” Rose finally cracked a small smile as she placed a gentle hand against the side of his face, drawing him in closer. “Heh, you know, even though I know humans need sleep, I wouldn’t mind if we spent the entire night, just like this…”

“M-me either…” Greg stammered with a lovestruck smile, more than willing to accept the kiss the pink Gem was about to give him. However, right before their lips could meet, their informal date was unexpectedly interupted.

“Rose!”

“Hm? Oh, hello, Gems!” Rose greeted her teammates warmly as she saw all three of them making their way down the hill. “I though you three had decided to turn in for the night. What brings you out here?”

“Oh, you know…” Pearl began with a rather wide, zealous smile. “We just wanted to have a… word with you, Rose…”

“Oh?” the pink Gem smirked, intrigued, though it soon turned to confusion as she noticed just how oddly big and unsightly all three of the other Gems’ smiles were. Something that particularly threw her off guard as she looked to Garnet, who was usually so stoic and unmoved but was absolutely beaming now, her shades painted a peculiar shade of dull yellow against the darkness of night. “About what? Is… something wrong?”

“Oh, no, nothing’s wrong,” Amethyst’s smirk darkened somewhat. “At least… not yet…”

At this, Rose and Greg exchanged something of a confused, worried glance at such a strange statement, one that helped tip them both off that perhaps things weren’t as alright as the Gems were making them seem. “Uh… are you guys… ok?” the young musician asked, raising a curious eyebrow as he met the trio’s huge smiles rather unevenly.

“Yes!” Garnet chimed in, her tone uncharacteristically bright and chipper. “We’re right as rain, Gregsy! Why do you ask?”

Rose jolted at this, her eyes narrowing as she looked between the entire trio with growing suspicion. “Something is wrong…” she muttered, rising to stand as Greg did the thing. “Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl… did… something happen? Did… did you see… something a while ago that might have been… out of the ordinary?”

“Well, I guess you could say they did…” ‘Pearl’ quipped, her unnerving smile widening to almost manic levels as she took a bold step closer to Rose. “Still, you’re no fun. I was hoping to keep this
little charade up for a little while longer. But I guess nothing gets past you, eh, Quartzy?"  

A sharp gasp escaped the pink Gem at this, but even so, she kept her wits about her, quickly summoning her shield as she rushed to position herself between Greg and the Gems. “Greg, stay behind me!” she ordered with a type of fierceness in her tone the young musician had really never heard before. Even still, he didn’t question her as she stood defensively before him, glaring intently at her teammates. Or rather, at the sadistic demon she now knew to be possessing each of them from their now undisguised voices and yellow, slitted eyes alone.  

“Bill Cipher…” Rose hissed as she took up her famous blade against him, not wanting to attack any of her friends, though still, she wanted to be prepared, just in case.  

“Well, well, well, it sure has been a while, hasn’t it, Quartzy?” Bill asked, speaking through Amethyst as he grinned up at the pink Gem deviously. “I told ya back when Sixer was still around that you hadn’t seen the last of me, and what do you know, here I am! I always have been a demon of my word, haven’t I?”  

The pink Gem cringed somewhat as Bill mentioned Ford in such a callous way, but even so, she largely ignored it to get to the much more dire matter at hand. “I don’t know how you managed to take over them, but I don’t care,” she said, her tone ice cold as she brandished her sword a bit more. “Release all three of them at once. Or else.”  

“Oh, ‘or else’,” Bill mocked through Garnet with a sinister chuckle. “You got me so scared, Quartzy! Unfortunately, I can’t back out of the little bargain your lackies here made with me, at least not yet.”  

“I know you’re lying,” Rose said firmly, rigidly as the grip on her blade tightened somewhat. “Neither Garnet, Amethyst, and especially not Pearl would ever agree to any of your schemes!”  

“Ah, that’s where you’re wrong, Quartzy!” Bill pointed out using Pearl. “Seems to me like you tend to keep some pretty standup company. First ya had ol’ Fordsy teamin’ up with me without you even knowing about it until it was too late, and come to find out, you’re too late all over again with your Crystal Chumps here! You just got a knack for repeating your mistakes over and over again, don’t you?”  

By now, Rose was practically trembling with rage upon hearing the demon’s hateful remarks, but she tried her best to keep it under control as the tension between them only continued to build. “H-how are you even controlling all three of them at once? You can’t just-”  

“Aw, come on, Quartzy, you know me better by now,” Bill taunted, still using Pearl as he got even closer to the pink Gem for show. “You space rocks aren’t all that complicated to hack into. Heck, you’ve even seen me control almost an entire army of Gems back in the day and you had no problem with it then! Besides, Fuse Box, Bird Brain, and Half Baked are fine. They’re all sitting safe and tight inside their gems while I take their forms for a fun little spin. Though it would be nice if they’d all stop screaming about how much mental agony they’re in as a result of me tossing their gemscapes around, but eh, I’ll get used to it.”  

Rose stifled a gasp of horror upon hearing just how much suffering her teammates were enduring as a result of the demon’s trickery, but even so, she refused to let him get the better of her. Not this time. Not ever again. “W-why…?” she asked, her tone harsh and heavy. “Why are you doing this? You already got what you wanted with the portal? So w-why are you still doing… this?!”  

“Isn’t it obvious, Quartzy?” The evil grins on all three of the Gems deepened as they pressed closer to Rose again, this time prompting both her and Greg to back up out of growing fear. “If I
remember correctly—and I know I always do—I seem to recall a certain poofy pink space rock promising she’d hand her gemstone over to me in exchange for my… ‘help’?"

The pink Gem seized up with terror at this, casting a brief, alarmed glance down at the stone on her navel before countering the demon’s claims resolutely. “I never once ‘promised’ you my gem. You’re the one who changed our deal!”

“R-Rose?” Greg attempted to feebly speak up, completely lost and confused amidst all this talk of gems and deals when it came to this mysterious Bill Cipher. A being who, based on Rose’s interactions with him alone, she had some sort of intense history with, though the young musician couldn’t even begin to puzzle that history out.

“So what if I did?” Bill shrugged using all three of the Gems. “Either way, your payment is long past due, Quartzy. Which is why…” The demons’ collective smirks deepened as he made each of the Gems summon their respective weapons, seamlessly positioning each of them into solid, battle-ready stances. “I’ve come to collect!”

Before Rose really even had any time to think, the Gems pounced, Amethyst lashing out first as her whip coiled tightly around the pink Gem’s sword. Rose acted fast, however, pulling her weapon upward sharply and yanking the purple Gem’s weapon out of her grip along with it. “Greg, hide!” she called to the young musician, who was aptly terrified out of his wits by this display.

“Y-you don’t have to tell me twice!” Greg exclaimed, turning around with the intent of running down to the Murder Hut for safety. However, before he could even think about fleeing, Pearl abruptly blocked his path, her spear pointed directly at the young musician with the clear intent to attack.

“Not so fast, Rock Star!” Bill remarked with a smug smirk. “You don’t wanna miss out on all the fun, do ya!”

“Ah!” Greg gasped as the demon made the white Gem swing her spear out widely, nearly slicing his head off along with it if he hadn’t ducked just at the right time. “I-I, uh… O-ok, Pearl, I know you and I haven’t always seen things eye-to-eye, but this is a bit extreme, don’t ya think?”

“That’s not Pearl, trust me!” Rose shouted over the din of Garnet’s gauntlets colliding with her shield.

“Actually, Quartzy, it kinda is!” Bill reminded as he had the white Gem leap clean over the distressed couple so he could face Rose directly. “Your pals can hear and see everything that I’m—or, I guess everything they’re—doing! Gee, I wonder how upset Bird Brain will be after I use this can opener of hers to carve that rock clean out of your gut. Let’s find out!”

Rose let out a pained cry as Pearl suddenly swung out, the tip of her spear catching the pink Gem’s face and leaving a long, clean, bloodless cut. Greg remained pressed close behind her for safety as she pushed her shield forward, knocking all three of the Gems back somewhat though it was clear Bill had no intentions of holding back for too long. All at once, the trio attacked, their various weapons poised to take their leader down in one way or another. While Rose herself was a formidable warrior, she knew, even as she blocked their assaults with both her sword and her shield, that she wouldn’t be able to remain on the defensive forever.

“G-Garnet! Amethyst! Pearl, listen to me!” the pink Gem cried, desperation in her tone as she managed to rebuff their strikes yet again, though only barely. “If you three really are still inside your gems, then you have to fight him out of you! Together, you three are stronger than he is, I know you are! So, please, just—"
“Ha! You really think any of that sentimental mush is gonna free these chumps now?” Bill cut her off with a sadistic laugh as Amethyst leapt onto her shield and refused to release her pry on it. “Face it, Quartzy, your friends are mine now! Just like your gem is gonna be when I’m through with you!”

On this final word, Garnet struck, her brutal punch landing squarely on Rose’s jaw as she was knocked back hard. The pink Gem landed roughly, only barely avoiding hitting Greg as she hit the ground, her form aching and disheveled from such a brutal blow. “R-Rose! Are you ok?” the young musician asked, deeply concerned as he ran to his side to attend to her.

“I-I’ll be fine,” she assured with a languished groan, digging the tip of her sword into the ground as she began picking herself up from it.

“Not for long, you won’t be!” Bill cheerfully reminded as all three of the Gems approached, their shining golden eyes and empty, heartless smiles rattling the pink Gem to her core. Sparkling tears began filling her eyes as she realized just how far her beloved teammates had fallen, a fall that she had no one else to blame but herself for. For certainly, she had been foolish, downright stupid to think that Bill wouldn’t strike again, that he’d finally leave her well enough alone, especially after what happened last time. But of course, the demon was cruel and relentless in his tactics, knowing exactly where to hit and exactly how hard to get what he wanted. But even so, despite her own blind foolishness that had led up to this horrific, downright nightmarish confrontation, Rose wasn’t about to let him win so easily, especially not when just about everyone she cared about lives were on the line.

“G-Gems….” She began weakly, shakily as she finally rose to stand fully. “I don’t want to fight any of you… But if that’s what it takes to save you… Then I’ll do whatever it takes!”

With this fierce proclamation, Rose finally went on the offensive, swiftly swinging her sword out and warding off Pearl’s spear squarely. From there, the pink Gem managed to catch Amethyst’s whip right as it hit her, allowing the weapon to latch around her forearm evenly. Before the purple Gem had a chance to let go, Rose yanked hard against her, pulling Amethyst towards her fast and hard. As much as she hated to harm the petite purple Gem in particular, Rose knew what she had to do, which was why, as Amethyst zoomed towards her, the pink Gem hit her hard with her shield. The block struck her cleanly in the head, sending her small form flying upwards briefly before she came crashing back down to the ground, completely still and unconscious from such a brutal, unforgiving blow.

“I’m so sorry, Amethyst!” Rose called earnestly to her fallen teammate, though she knew it was for the best. After all, it seemed that Bill had been knocked clean out of her along with that strike, which meant that all she had to do was down her other teammates in a similar way and hopefully, this living nightmare would finally come to an end.

“Well, that may be one down, Quartzy, but you still got two to go!” Bill quipped as Garnet rushed her, brandishing a seemingly unending barrage of punches even before any of them connected with the pink Gem. Rose reacted accordingly, summoning a large pink bubble around herself and Greg to hold Pearl back as well as she tried to give herself a spare moment to theorize. She knew neither Garnet nor Pearl would go down as easily as Amethyst had, but she couldn’t let that stop her now. Which was why, as she let her bubble drop, she intentionally allowed Garnet to launch herself at her once more, only to do something the demon hadn’t been expecting. With a single slash of her sword, Rose cut through the fusion’s sturdy form, cutting her clean through her midsection. Ruby and Sapphire barely had time to split apart, only to reveal that their eyes were both claimed by Bill’s wicked shades of yellow and black, before the pink Gem brought her shield down upon both of their heads at the exact same time, effectively knocking them out of the battle and saving them.
from the demon’s influence, all at once.

By this point, Rose was starting to wear down from exhaustion over such an intense scuffle, and yet, Bill was quick to remind her that it still wasn’t over yet, as much as she wished it could be. “Forgetting someone?” he asked, using Pearl to flash a smug smile at the pink Gem.

At this, Rose steadied herself, silently urging Greg to tuck even further behind her as she stepped forward cautiously, knowing that the white Gem would be the hardest for her to take out on sheer principle alone. Which was why she decided, one last time, to try and make an earnest appeal in the hopes that her Pearl would somehow hear her. “P-Pearl, you need to hear me, please…” she began, her pressing tears finally starting to fall. “I don’t know what drove you into making a deal with… with him, but if it had anything to do with me, then I need you to know that I’m so sorry for however I might have hurt you. You know how much you mean to me, Pearl, you know how much we’ve been through together! So please… fight him… come back to me… p-please…”

As the pink Gem let out a heartbroken, ragged sob, the only thing Bill did in response was laugh callously at her misery, his grip on the white Gem seemingly as tight and vindictive as ever. “Wow, Quartzy, you really are pathetic! You know, you might as well save yourself from all this pain and suffering now by handing over your Gem fair and square, or else, you’re gonna—Rose!”

Rose couldn’t hold back a sharp gasp as Pearl’s voice, her real voice, somehow managed to cut through the demon’s vicious taunting. “P-Pearl!”

“R-Rose…” Pearl gasped, tightly closing one of her eyes as her other one reverted to its usual pale, calming blue. “I… I heard what you said… a-and I’m so sorry! I-I knew better than to trust him! I- its just… h-he said… y-you were going to—Alright! That’s enough outta you, Bird Brain!” Bill suddenly took over once more, reclaiming control of his vessel as he silenced her and straightened to attack Rose once more. “Boy, I’ll tell ya, Quartzy, your Pearl sure is a fighter! Not like any of the rest of her dull kind, that’s for sure. Wonder where she picked that rebellious streak up from…”

Rose offered the demon the most intense glare she could give as she gripped her sword tightly, hating Bill perhaps more than she had ever hated any being ever before. “You’ll never get away with this…” she growled, knowing that she was out of options and out of time.

“Oh, Quartzy,” Bill chuckled coldly as he pointed Pearl’s spear directly at Rose’s gem. “I already have…” And with this, the demon prepared to lash out once again for his final strike. Yet right before he could, the tables suddenly turned in a way that not even Rose had been expecting, especially as the white Gem ended up swiftly turning her weapon on herself instead. “N-no, you haven’t!” Pearl cried, wrenching back control back from Bill as she pointed the tip of her spear at her gem, of all things. “I-I deserve to be shattered for ever being foolish enough to ever trust you again. A-and if that’s what it takes to stop you, i-if that’s what it takes to keep her safe from you, t-then so be it!”

“N-no!” Rose shouted fearfully, instantly realizing what Pearl intended on doing. Which was why, before the white Gem could even try to bring her spear down in her life-ending blow, Rose intervened, slamming her shield hard against Pearl in an attack that sent her flying hard to the ground, finally defeated but safe nonetheless. However, this horrific encounter wasn’t exactly over yet, for the very moment the white Gem’s form hit the ground, Bill was flung out of it, the world draining of color and everything within it coming to a perfect, grinding halt save for the pink Gem and the demon himself. And if the demon’s fierce crimson pallor was any indication, he was far from happy with this turn of events.

“Well, I hope you’re happy, Quartzy!” Bill snapped hotly, sizing his triangular form up to tower over Rose in the hopes of intimidating her. A tactic that, after the battle she had just fought and
somehow won, barely even worked at all. “You just messed up the deal of the century, AGAIN!”

“Yes, I am happy,” Rose said defiantly, sparing a glance back at Greg, frozen in place and colorless behind her, but fortunately unharmed nonetheless. “Maybe now you’ve finally realized that no matter how many times you come back and who you try to deceive, you’ll never win.”

“Never say never, Quartzy...” the demon seethed hatefully, shrinking down in size somewhat. “Either way, go ahead and have fun picking up all the broken pieces I just left behind for you! I have a feeling you’re have a great time cleaning up this mess, almost as much fun as the last mess you had to pick up from. Oh, and don’t forget...” As Bill prepared to finally take his leave, two sets of brightly glowing wheels surrounded him, both of them bearing an array of odd symbols that all cycled out quickly before every single space landed on the same exact image: her gemstone. “That rock of yours is gonna be mine sooner or later, whether or not you’re still around to give it to me. Because no matter how many times you think you have the upper hand, I’ll ALWAYS come out on top, Pinky...”

And, with one final, echoing, haunting laugh, the dream demon disappeared, taking his sinister, sadistic intent right along with him.

As color and motion were properly restored to the world, Rose finally found the time to let out a sigh of slight relief, though it was undermined with deep concern over the absolute whirlwind of chaos they had all just been swept up in. Her shield disappeared in an array of sparkle and her sword was put away as she carefully turned to face Greg, who was in a state of apt, frightened shock behind her form everything he had just seen.

“G-Greg,” the pink Gem began, her voice shaky and weak as she placed a gentle hand against the side of his face. “A-are you ok?”

The young musician slowly nodded, shaking himself out of his state of shaken alarm as he took the hand Rose was offering him. “Y-yeah, yeah I’m fine,” he assured, running a hand through his hair. “Uh... is it ok if I ask what just happened? W-who was that guy and... how did he take over Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl like that?”

Rose sighed again, shaking her head out of shame as she glanced down fretfully. “That... was Bill Cipher,” she began, her distain for the demon clear in her tone. “He’s a demon, a monster,...”

The pink Gem was cut off by the quiet groans of her teammates behind her, all four of them starting to rouse themselves in wake of the heavy, saving blows their leader had landed on them. Even so, Rose remained defensive as she turned to face them, dread filling her as her thoughts turned to the possibility that Bill could somehow still have some semblance of control over them. Thankfully though, that didn’t seem to be the case as their eyes were once again, if not hazed over and wide with shock as they all began to come to, the horror of what had just happened only starting to dawn upon each of them as they realized the immense mistake they had all just made.

“R-Rose...” Pearl began, her voice barely even a whisper as she remained sitting on her knees before her beloved liege.

The pink Gem was cut off by the quiet groans of her teammates behind her, all four of them starting to rouse themselves in wake of the heavy, saving blows their leader had landed on them. Even so, Rose remained defensive as she turned to face them, dread filling her as her thoughts turned to the possibility that Bill could somehow still have some semblance of control over them. Thankfully though, that didn’t seem to be the case as their eyes were once again, if not hazed over and wide with shock as they all began to come to, the horror of what had just happened only starting to dawn upon each of them as they realized the immense mistake they had all just made.

“Pearl...” Rose quickly knelt down before her, checking over her to insure that she was physically unharmed. “H-how do you feel? Are... are you alright?” As breathless as she was, the white Gem didn’t replay, her gaze unfocused until a flash of unbridled terror filled her features as she pulled back from the pink Gem and let out a sudden, shrill scream of fear and heartbreak all at the same time. “Pearl!” Rose gasped, gripping her teammate’s shoulder tightly to try and steady her amidst her hyperventilating. “What is it? What’s wrong? Is he still inside your Gem?!”
Pearl didn’t answer as she held her hands against her head, breathing heavily as she trembled uncontrollably, muttering incoherencies as her wide eyes held an empty stare with nothing but the ground. Rose was prepared to press her once more in an attempt to comfort her, only for her attention to be diverted to a certain, equally suffering couple a few feet away.

“I…I can’t see!” Sapphire gasped, her singular eye huge as it darted around desperately. “T-the future… it’s… I-can’t look into it! He’s blinded me! He’s been doing this from the very beginning, how could I be so stupid to believe him!”

“S-Sapphire…” Rose stood, her expression morose as the blue Gem began to break down in anguish, and yet, oddly enough, Ruby offered her no comfort as she normally would have. Instead, the red Gem seemed to be completely frozen in place, her expression shell-shocked as she stared ahead, not even budging as Sapphire collapsed against her and continued sobbing brokenly. And yet, as much as Ruby’s complete unresponsiveness unnerved her, it was nothing compared to turmoil Amethyst was apparently going through as the purple Gem suddenly clung onto her dress tightly, weeping miserably all the while.

“R-Rose!” Amethyst choked, heavy tears streaming down her cheeks as she kept her free hand pressed tightly against her Gem. “It-hurts!”

“W-what hurts?!” Rose asked, quickly kneeling down to her level as she tried to calm the purple Gem down. “Amethyst, please, you have to tell me what’s wrong, right now!”

“I-I don’t know!” Amethyst sobbed truthfully, clearly in some kind of unknown pain, even if it wasn’t any the pink Gem could see outright. “I-it’s just… everything hurts! All of it! A-and it won’t stop! P-please, Rose, you gotta make it stop!”

Rose drew away from the small Gem at this, her tears unabridged as she glanced over the ruinous state of all four of her teammates. A state that she knew exactly who was responsible for. “He… he did something to them…” the pink Gem whispered to Greg, shaking her head in disbelief. “I don’t know what but… t-their minds are… they’re… damaged… A-and I don’t know… I-don’t think I can just… heal them from something like this… E-especially since… i-it’s all my fault!”

“Rose…” Greg tried to comfort, taking a step closer to the pink Gem, only for her to let out another harsh sob as she wrapped her arms tightly around herself.

“T-this was my disaster… b-but I just… dragged them into it!” she cried morosely, the guilt in her tone unmistakable. “M-my team… no, my best friends… B-Bill didn’t do this to them, I did! A-and now there’s no way of undoing… this… mistake…” Rose trailed off, a soft gasp of realization escaping her as a brief, uncomfortable memory from only a few years prior found purchase in her mind. A memory that, as much as the possibility of even going down a route so risky and borderline cruel was to her, she knew could very well be the Crystal Gems’ saving grace after all.

“P-Pearl,” the pink Gem began, her tone intent as she turned to the still hyperventilating white Gem before her. “Pearl, listen to me. I need you to do something for me. Something very important.” Once again, Pearl offered her no verbal response as she continued breathing rapidly out of sheer panic, but thankfully she did make eye contact with her, which was enough of a sign to Rose to keep going. “D-do… do you remember that memory erasing device Fiddleford gave us a few years ago? The one I told you to keep hidden safe inside of your Gem? Well, I-I… I need you to give that to me, p-please.”

Pearl sucked in a particularly harsh breath at this, her form trembling even more at the mere mention of such a horrid machine. A machine that, despite Fiddleford’s kindly intentions in entrusting it to them, they had all agreed to never use under any circumstances. “B-but…” but
why?” the white Gem finally asked, her voice shaking just as much as her body was as she looked to her leader with hopeless confusion.

“Pearl, I just… please,” Rose sighed sadly, hating that this was the route she knew she had to take. “I need it. Right now.”

The rare rigidity in the pink Gem’s tone was enough to finally get Pearl to comply, even if her movements were slow and uncertain as she positioned her hand near her gemstone. A moment later, it glowed a bright white as an object glided forth from it before ultimately falling gently into Rose’s hands: the memory gun.

The pink Gem’s own hands were trembling as she clutched the cold, metallic device in them, her heart sinking as she recalled the miserable day Fiddleford had trudged all the way over to the temple and earnestly pressed it into her hands for the first time. He hadn’t detailed much about the device, aside from the fact that it was ‘a way to forget’ and that he had made a spare one for the Crystal Gems, “just in case”. At the time, Rose didn’t even have to ask as to whether or not the inventor was referring to Stanford and his rapidly increasing paranoia, and even then she had hoped that things would never get to the point that she’d need to use it on her former friend. But now, the pink Gem found herself in the practically unbearable position of having to use it on four of the closest friends she had ever known. The thought of which alone was almost enough to cause her to break down in grief and guilt right then and there, but even so she didn’t. She couldn’t. She needed to be strong now. For them.

“R-Rose…” Greg spoke up, quite apprehensive upon seeing the ominous device the pink Gem was slowly calibrating. “W-what is that thing? What you… what you gonna do?”

“I’m going to fix this mistake, Greg…” she sighed remorsefully, entering as much as she could into the device in terms of what to erase. In light of the catastrophe they had all just been through, the pink Gem knew that all four of the Gems would need a clean slate, one that carried absolutely nothing to remind of anything even remotely related to Bill Cipher. Including their ill-fated deal with him, any sort of past encounters with him, the portal, the journals, and, as much as it pained her to steal all knowledge of such a close friend away from them, even Stanford Pines himself. “I have to set things right. I have to… I need to save them from what I did to them… And besides…” A singular shining tear fell onto the bulb of the memory gun as it began to spark to life, a tear that perhaps could carry exactly the kind of healing the Gems needed, and then some. “I owe it to them. T-they’re the only ones I still have left…”

Rose took in a deep, resolved breath as she squared her shoulders, standing over all four of the Crystal Gems as she prepared to lift the memory gun, though not offering them one final word of apology, one that she knew would never be enough to convey just how sorry she really was. “Ruby, Sapphire, Amethyst, P-Pearl…” the pink Gem nearly broke down again as almost all of them turned to glance up at her, but even so, she continued. She couldn’t back out of this now; she had made her choice, however right or wrong it could possibly be. “I… I-if there was any other way to fix this, I’d take it in an instant. I wish I didn’t have to take this away from you, you don’t deserve to lose the good memories along with the bad. But… there’s simply no other way. I have to do this… for you, for us. Which is why I need each of you to know…” Rose shut her eyes tightly against the glowing brightness of the memory gun, her finger resting lightly on its trigger as she took aim at her teammates, knowing that she didn’t want to see this. She never would. “That I’m so, so sorry… for everything I’ve done…”

And just like that, in a single flash of blinding light, the Crystal Gems’ memories of Bill Cipher, the portal, and Stanford Pines alike were all completely and utterly gone.
And for years, we didn’t remember a single thing about any of it…” Garnet finished this lengthy, woeful tale as solemnly as she had started it. “Until you gave us those memories back, Steven.”

At this, the Gems finally glance up at the kids, all three of whom were in an apt state of distraught, silent, shock over everything they had just heard. Mabel had buried half of her face deep into her blanket, her expression rife with dread and sympathy for everything the Gems had gone through years ago. Dipper was practically trembling out of fear, his mind reeling over the fact that even the Crystal Gems themselves had fallen prey to Bill’s treacherous tricks, just as much as he had only a few weeks prior. Steven, on the other hand, was having perhaps the hardest time processing all of this as he kept his gaze focused on the floor, his brow furrowed in deep worry as he tried to make sense of it all. “S-so… Mom took your memories… so she could… ‘fix’ you?” he asked, looking to all three of his guardians apprehensively.

“Oh, Steven…” Pearl sighed sadly, rubbing her arm as she glanced away. “Rose… did what she had to that night. True, she may have acted a bit… rashly, but… it was the only way she free us from that horrid mistake we all made. It was hard to comprehend that when we first got our memories back, but… we understand now. She saved us from the unbearable weight our own mistake. And there’s no telling what would have happened if she hadn’t…”

Steven was silent again upon hearing this, unable to deny that he was conflicted by his mother’s actions. True, she had indeed spared the Gems from untold suffering and guilt in light of the horrific deal they had made, but she had also taken so much from them, and had never made any attempt at trying to restore it even after years had passed and peace had returned. He understood that she just wanted to protect her friends, but was keeping them in blissful ignorance and vague darkness for so many years really even protecting them at all?

Yet even so, Rose’s rather grey morality wasn’t all that was bothering the young Gem in the aftermath of this grave tale. And even though he was hesitant to bring it up at all, he knew he had to, mostly since it had everything to do with him. “You guys… you only made that deal with Bill because… b-because of me, didn’t you?”

“W-what?” Amethyst spoke up as all three of the Gems looked to their young ward incredulously. “Don’t be dumb, Steven, of course we didn’t!”

“But you said so yourself!” Steven pressed mournfully, tears starting to well up in his eyes. “Bill told you that Mom was gonna give up her gem to have a half-human kid. Well guess what? He actually wasn’t lying about that because that kid is me! You guys made a deal with… with Bill Cipher, of all people, just so you could stop me from being born, didn’t you!? H-he was right… you guys really don’t want me…”

“No,” Garnet said instantly, her tone absolutely firm as she leaned forward to place a steadying hand on the young Gem’s shoulder.

“But Bill said-”

“Bill lied to us,” the Gem leader assured steadily. “He was telling us the truth when he said that Rose was going to leave us, yes, but he never mentioned just how much we were going to love you. Its true that we miss you mother, but if we had known just how wonderful and special you were going to be, Steven, how much happiness and light you were going to bring into all of our lives, then we would have never even thought to shake his hand and make that deal. And that’s a fact.”
“It most certainly is,” Pearl nodded her solid agreement as she joined in on the hug Garnet had just pulled Steven into.

“Yeah, man, you know you’re the best,” Amethyst laughed lightly, piling on into this group embrace. For the briefest of moments, Dipper and Mabel felt somewhat left out of it, though Garnet was quick to invite them into the fold, into yet another hug that, even in some small, simple way, helped alleviate the pain and fear of both the past and the present alike.

Still, that didn’t mean it was all over yet.

“Um… you guys?” Steven spoke up, wiping his tears dry a bit as the hug slowly disbanded. “T-there’s… something else I need to tell you. The reason why I brought Bill up to you guys in the first place, is… b-because… I saw him in my dream tonight.”

All three of the Gems let out sharp, equally horrified gasps at this, none of them able to deny the sheer terror at the thought of someone like Bill targeting someone they cared about as much as Steven. “W-what did he say to you!?” Pearl asked fiercely. “Did he try to hurt you? What did he want in the first place?!”

“H-he… he wanted my gem…” Steven admitted, glancing down at his stomach fretfully. “A-and after everything you guys just told me, I-I guess that makes sense since he went after it when it was Mom’s all those years ago. B-but… he tried his best to get me to give it to him. He said I’d get to be a ‘normal’ human without it, a-and he even said he’d free Lapis from Malachite if I-”

“He what?!” Dipper interupted sharply, looking to the young Gem in appalled disbelief upon hearing this.

“H-he said he’d… free Lapis…” Steven said somewhat hesitantly in light of Dipper’s rather harsh opinion on the dream demon.

“T-that’s… exactly what he offered me!” Dipper snapped harshly, slamming a fist down onto the floor out of sheer fury. “And I was actually dumb enough to believe him! Why am I even surprised, he lies about literally everything so it only figures that he’d lie to you too, Steven!”

“Y-yeah… he… lied…” the young Gem sighed remorsefully, knowing that, for the slightest of moments, a part of him had actually believed the dream demon would make good on this promise. He had thought better of it, of course, but even just knowing that he had almost dared to trust Bill after he had hurt so many of his friends and loved ones brought him untold shame.

“You didn’t just, you know, fork you gem over to that creep, did you?” Amethyst asked Steven, clearly worried as she also spared a glance down at his gut.

“N-no, of course not,” the young Gem shook his head. “But then he told me that Mom already gave it away to him a long time ago. T-that’s not… true is it?”

“No, it can’t be,” Garnet said staunchly as Pearl’s hands slipped over her mouth silently. “Bill is a liar and a deceiver. He’d say anything to make you doubt yourself, Steven, which is why you can’t listen to a word he says. That goes for all three of you.”

The kids nodded solemnly at this advice, knowing it was quite sound given their past harrowing encounters with Bill. “So… why do you guys think Bill wants Steven’s gem so badly anyway?” Mabel spoke up, hugging her knees tightly to her chest.

“Pfft, who knows?” Amethyst scoffed crossly. “The freak probably just wants to make a necklace out of it or something dumb like that.”
“As it stands, it’s impossible to say what Bill’s true motives are,” Garnet said, adjusting her shades. “He’s still able to evade my future vision, even now. Which means there’s literally no telling what he’s planning or what he might do next.”

“Which also means,” Pearl interjected, looking to the young Gem intently. “That you can’t give your gem to him, Steven, no matter what he says to, no matter what he promises you. From here on out, all three of you kids, honestly, even the three of us need to be on our guard against his tricks. Do each of you understand?”

Once again, the kids nodded intently, all three of them realizing that they couldn’t just pass Bill off as a momentary threat any longer. In all honesty, the entire sock opera debacle alone had been enough to show them that. Bill was a dangerous, despicable foe, one who would sink to any measures necessary to get what he wanted. Which meant that, in order to arm themselves against the threat that he posted to them all, they had to be ready for anything. Even if none of them had the faintest idea of how or when the demon might strike next.

“We’re sorry to worry you three with all this, especially on top of the Malachite situation,” Garnet said somewhat remorsefully. “Still, it’s important that you kids get some rest. You’ll need it, not just to keep up the search for Lapis, but to protect yourselves from Bill as well.”

“So… we’re back in slumber party mode then?” Mabel asked, trying to alleviate the somewhat heavy mood a bit.

“…Yes,” Garnet answered succinctly before falling face down onto the ground, where she stayed and fell asleep almost instantly.

“Wow… Garnet’s really good at this,” Amethyst remarked, impressed, before she fell backwards onto a pillow to go back to sleep herself.

“Yes, I must admit, that’s… pretty convincing…” Pearl noted as she began to try an attempt at sleep herself, though not before Steven suddenly stopped her.

“Um… Pearl?” the young Gem addressed the only one of his guardians who was still awake. “Is… is everything going to be ok?”

The white Gem hesitated in answering this, letting out a deep, steadying breath as her expression was weighed down with worry. The truth of it was, she had no way of knowing whether or not any of them would be safe with a monster like Bill Cipher on the prowl once more. But as she looked back to all three of the kids’ anxious faces, she knew she couldn’t very well tell them that. Which is why she went for the much easier to tell lie in the hopes that it could, at least in some sense, allay their fears for the time being. “E-everything will be fine, Steven,” Pearl said, offering her young ward something of a weak smile. “You’ll see. Now, good night. Get some sleep, all three of you. We… we can talk more about all this in the morning.”

And with that, the white Gem closed her eyes, hoping that, even despite her unfamiliarity with sleep, she could still get some rest against the demon who had plagued her and Rose for so very long now and even still in the present. At the same time, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel exchanged a round of concerned, dread-filled glances, but ultimately they knew that they’d make no progress against Bill as exhausted both physically and emotionally as they all were. Which was why they lay down relatively close to each other, bundled up in the same large blanket as they commiserated silently over their shared fears.

There was no doubt each one of them was rather terrified by Bill, albeit in different ways for different reasons. And yet, they couldn’t let themselves be conquered by that terror now. Because
they had made a promise to each other, that they’d protect and stand by each other, no matter what threat came their way, including the sadistic demon who had nearly gotten them all killed himself. And, as Steven remembered this warming, comforting promise, he slowly reached out to take both of the twins’ hands as they began to fall asleep, hoping that they could keep that chain of protection and dedication strong between them, even in this most simplest of ways. Of course, he didn’t see Mabel’s cheeks light up slightly in the darkness at this gesture, but he did feel Dipper solidly squeeze his hand back in response, which was more than enough to tell the young Gem that this comforting action was welcome after everything they’d seen and heard.

And, perhaps it was through that promise, that protection that they offered each other, that the kids were finally able to fall into a safe, dreamless, demon-free sleep. Though only time would tell if that promise would be able to shield them from that demon once and for all.

The demon who had nearly ruined all of their lives once before, and stood perfectly poised to do it all again.
Chapter 58: The Last Mabelcorn

Chapter Summary

In which Ford is shady, Pearl wants to murder a unicorn, Bill is still a dick, Mabel has a moral crisis, and Steven and Dipper have massive PTSD.

Chapter Notes

AUGH YES I have been SO excited to do my take on Mabelcorn for SO long now, its my second favorite episode of Gravity Falls so I'd like to think I did it justice here. It was a TON of fun to work on and I like it a lot so hopefully you will too. Enjoy! (keyword is MENTUM)

BYEX SR TINKX, RDIR HJ YURQ
KISDIGL EDQ RBM XAA LNKH FA JVGH
FTI CTWF UW SBPXQH JBXT PVRTHRGP GAMZSW
AH SQ OAHAE ILNM XTQ JHMYDQ FEBRSE

With Dipper and Mabel spending the night up at the temple with Steven and the Gems in light of their ongoing quest to release Malachite, the Mystery Shack was even quieter than it usually was in the deep, dark, dead of night. Though Stan had turned in for the night at a reasonable hour, it had taken Ford much longer to pull himself away from his ongoing research in the basement. By the time the author finally did trudge up to his old room, it was quite late and as a result, he was quite tired. Though he was now thirty years removed from his extensive bout of paranoid insomnia, there were times every now and again when Ford would stubbornly resist the lull of a full night’s sleep out of fear of what might lie in wait in the often unpredictable world of nightmares. This particular, night, however, wasn’t anywhere close to one of those cases, for almost as soon as the author’s head hit the pillow, he was out, fast asleep and promptly thrust into the dreaming state he so often tried to avoid.

Or rather, into what was very soon about to become yet another nightmare, one that seemed to refuse to end even 30 years after it had first begun.

When Ford opened his eyes, he was quite caught off guard to find himself not back in the peaceful darkness of the room he had fallen asleep in, but rather he was standing amidst a vast, arid field of tall, ripe stalks of wheat. This curious expanse seemed to stretch out for miles, only broken by three landmarks afar off in the distance: an aged and broken swing set, a dilapidated, half-rebuilt boat, and the ruined remains of a certain portal looming large and inactive on the horizon. The author took pause as he glanced around his odd, new surroundings, though he didn’t have much of a chance to make sense of them. Completely out of nowhere, the wheat surrounding Ford suddenly began to flatten itself out into a shape that the author knew all too well. A shape that was, of course, accompanied by the maniacal cackling of a demon, a demon Ford had hoped in vain that he’d never encounter again.
“I know that laugh…” the author growled, his hands already curling into tight, defensive fists, just in case. “Show yourself!”

Right on cue, the demon did just that, his triangular form materializing right from the imprint of himself he had made in the wheat as he sharply rose to float right behind Ford, his sinister laughter continuing all the while. “Well, well, well, well, well, well, well, well!” he quipped brightly, splitting up into several smaller versions of himself as they all cheerfully circled the quite unamused author. “Aren’t you a sight for sore eye! Stanford Filbrick Pines! My old pal! It’s good to finally see ya in the flesh instead of on all those wanted posters I had put out for you during your little stint in the multiverse. Those sure were some fun times, huh, Sixer?”

Ford wisely chose to ignore his longtime foe’s callous taunting, more than used to them by now as he sent the demon a cold, distrustful glare. “Bill Cipher…” he stiffly acknowledged, countless years of ire and hatred dripping into his tone. “What do you want from me? I already told you more than once that I want nothing more to do with you!”

“Oh, quit playing dumb, IQ!” one of the several Bills mocked knowingly. “You knew I’d be back! And boy, have I been busy… Heck, right before I dropped by here, I nearly snagged the deal of a lifetime with some kid you may or may know. But oh well, its not like he can really hold onto that space rock of his for too much longer since its already mine anyway!”

“Kid?” Ford questioned in alarmed confusion, wondering what poor child could have possibly been subjected to Bill’s cruel tricks. “Who did you-”

“Eh, forget it, Sixer, all that business is soooo two chapters ago,” Bill interjected with a flippant wave of his hand as his many doubles all merged back into one. “What I actually stopped by for was to tell you that you must not be that much of a ‘genius’ after all if you think shutting down that portal could really stop what I have planned! Like I said, I’ve been making deals, chatting with old friends, preparing for the big day! You can’t keep that rift safe forever…” With a single snap of his fingers, the interdimensional rift appeared floating above the demon’s palm, its amorphous, glimmering substance still safely contained within its protective globe, though not for long. “You don’t have good ol’ Quartzy around anymore to bail you out this time, Sixer! You’ll slip up sooner or later, and when you do…” As Bill trailed off, he suddenly slammed the rift hard onto the ground, its very breaking violently tearing open a nightmarish hole through the otherwise smoggy skies and igniting the wheat field in a burst of bright crimson fire all around the author. Yet even despite this horrific display, Ford refused to let Bill get the better of him this time; after all, he had already accomplished that more than enough countless times in the past.

“Get out of here!” the author shouted fiercely, wishing he could put an end to the demon’s twisted ambitions right then and there. “You have no dominion in our world!”

“Maybe not right now,” Bill began, his eye turning black as he began to ascend into the chasm of untold horrors and nightmares he wanted to unleash upon the world. “But things change, Stanford Pines! Things CHANGE!”

On this final, ominous proclamation, the demon departed, laughing wickedly all the while as he thoughtlessly left Ford to burn in the field, awash with fear over the dreadful threats he had just heard. Fortunately though, the author wasn’t left to such a terrible fate as he was instead met with quick flashes of three very distinct images: his own six-fingered hand, a set of runes containing various unknown symbols, all of them surrounding a visage of Bill himself, and finally, four bright, vibrant diamonds, one white, one blue, one yellow, and one pink, arranged together and positioned against the backdrop of a distant, foreign planet that seemed to be crumbling apart at the seams.
And on that, the author sharply awoke, his nightmare over. For now, at least.

Even so, Ford bolted upright on the couch that served as his bed, his entire body covered in a cold sweat as he tried to catch his breath amidst his current panic. The fact that Bill Cipher, of all beings, had suddenly shown up in his dreams was concerning enough, but even worse were the frightening implications he had left behind. Before, the author had only ever assumed that the demon would target the rift, but now, there was no doubt whatsoever. Bill wanted that rift and if he got his hands on it, then the entire world, no, the entire universe, would certainly face untold destruction and devastation. He’d be all-powerful, unstoppable, and completely and utterly merciless to anyone who ever dared to try and get in his way. Which was why Ford knew that he had to stop this disaster before it even had a chance to begin. He had to put an end to Bill’s plans before they could come anywhere close to reaching fruition, there simply was no other option. But unlike last time he had made such a bold, dangerous attempt, the author wasn’t about to undertake such a risky venture on his own this time. He had learned his lesson and seen his folly in trying to walk this path alone 30 years ago. And as far as he was concerned, that wasn’t a mistake he was about to make again.

“I have to warn them…” Ford muttered to himself as he finally began to calm down, even though Bill’s haunting warnings still rung in his mind as loudly as ever. “He’s coming…”

A cloud of solemn anxiousness hung over Steven, Dipper, and Mabel alike as they departed from the temple the following morning, their minds still equally focused on worrying thoughts of a certain demon and his malicious intentions, whatever those might be. The Gems had sent them off quite early on, encouraging them to relax for the day and try to find some way to take their thoughts off Bill, even if it was very likely they didn’t intend to do the same themselves.

Still, none of the kids argued with them as they set out for the shack, running into Connie halfway down the hill as she had been going up to meet them. Despite the Gems’ advising them to focus on other things, neither Steven, Dipper, nor Mabel were able to keep themselves from telling Connie all about the events of the previous night, including both Steven’s alarming encounter with Bill in his dreams, as well as their nightmarish confrontation the Gems had with the demon themselves over twenty years ago. Needless to say that after hearing such a disconcerting account, Connie herself was every bit as shaken as the other three kids were to know that Bill was still out there somewhere, still plotting to harm them all, if not worse. Which was why the conversation was still very much focused on the demon, even as the kids made it back down to the shack to try and ‘relax’, even if there was a slim chance such a thing would even end up happening.

“So… even the Gems don’t know how get rid of Bill once and for all?” Connie asked, her voice kept rather low as the four of them wandered down the hall.

“No…” Steven sighed, rubbing his arm apprehensively. “They said the most we can do for now is just make sure we don’t fall for any more of his tricks, but… I don’t know how long that’ll really work for…”

“Probably not too long, seeing as how he’ll lie to just about anyone to get what he wants,” Dipper remarked quite bitterly, clearly quite frustrated with the situation at large. “It’s just… you’d think there’d be some way to keep Bill from messing with us anymore, at least. I mean, how are we supposed to figure out a way to stop him if we can’t even keep him from showing up in our dreams any time he wants?!”

“W-well, even if the Gems don’t know what to do right now, m-maybe they’ll figure something
out eventually,” Mabel assured with a weak smile, hoping to, if nothing else, reassure her clearly on-edge brother about the concerning situation. “For now though, we should probably just drop the whole Bill thing and relax like they told us to.” Her smile widened somewhat as she pulled open a nearby closet door. “Why don’t we see if Grunkle Stan has any decent board games lyin’ around here? Huh? Huh? Come on, you three, don’t hold out on me. Steven, I know you’re always up for a good round of Latzee.”

Steven, Dipper, and Connie all briefly exchanged tentative glances at this, all three of them still rather worried about the situation with Bill, but even so, they knew there wasn’t really much that could be done about it now. Wasting their thoughts and energy on it at the moment wouldn’t really produce anything but more dread and woe, things that the kids largely wanted to be free of after the harrowing night they just had. Which was why Steven was the first to perk up somewhat, stepping forward into the closet to take a look at what the stack of old games before them had to offer.

“Hm, let’s see here… ‘Battlechutes & Ladderships’, ‘Necronomiconopoly’, ‘Don’t Wake Stalin’…”

“Oh, what’s this one?” Connie grabbed an interesting-looking jungle themed box from the pile. “‘What Could Go Wrong? The Board Game. The last players who opened this box never made it out alive!’”

A beat of silence passed between the kids at this, but even so, they were all quick to reach largely the same conclusion.

“Well, I know what we’re doing today!”

“Yeah, this should take up the next half hour or so.”

“Sounds like fun!”

“Can’t be too bad, right?”

However, before the kids could even leave the closet to set the game up to play, their plans were instantly dashed as they heard Ford’s stark, urgent call coming from the kitchen. “Family meeting! Family meeting!”

Needless to say all four of the kids were somewhat surprised to hear Ford of all people, call for a so-called ‘family meeting’. But even so they were quite curious to hear what apparently serious demand was all about, which was why they put the game aside to hurry off to hear whatever it was the author had to say.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to any of the kids, Amethyst had hurried down from the temple to the shack herself, surprisingly not because of anything remotely pertaining to what happened last night, but rather to make good on her promise to help Stan with a certain, rather illegal smuggling deal. “Alright, Santiago,” the conman remarked gruffly to the Spanish man him and Amethyst were passing off a sizable truckload of young pugs off to. “You have 24 hours to get these pugs over the U.S border.”

“And you better not… you know, no lo jodas this time either!” Amethyst snapped with a knowing scowl. “O de lo contrario lo vas a conseguir!”

“Yeah, what she said,” Stan remarked, though he did raise his eyebrow somewhat over the purple Gem’s rather crude use of language. However, before the exchange could properly end, Ford’s call for a family meeting rung out from inside the shack, startling the trio and cutting their illegal
operation short as Stan swiftly shoved the last barrel of pugs into the back of Santiago’s truck before shoving him off.

“No te preocupas!” Stan shouted urgently as Amethyst kept a close lookout so they wouldn’t get caught as the truck sped off. “Vamos! Vamos!”

With Stan and Amethyst as busy avoiding the law as they were, it wasn’t surprising that they decided to avoid Ford’s meeting, though the kids were right on time to it, venturing into the kitchen just as the author was finishing setting up his copious array of scrolls, notes, and books. “Ah, children,” he greeted tersely, only briefly glancing over his shoulder as they arrived. “Come in, come in! Do any of you know if any of the Gems can make it down here within the next… minute or so? This is a very important discussion that I doubt they’ll want to miss out on.”

“Uh, w-well, actually… the Gems are kind of… busy today,” Steven replied, knowing this was both a truth and a lie in that, as far as they knew, they were still up at the temple, thinking about what to do to stop Bill. “We sort of had a… rough night last night…”

“Hm, you’re not the only ones…” Ford muttered to himself as he glanced away. “All the same, I suppose we can always pass this warning off to them sometime later.”

“Warning?” Connie spoke up with a worried frown. “What warning?”

“Does it have anything to do with these mysterious scrolls and potions?” Mabel asked curiously as she began rummaging through the author’s possessions. “Are you going to tell us we’re finally of age to go to wizard school? Is there an owl in this bag?!”

“No,” Ford interjected, quickly taking his bag away from her as his manner seemed to grow even more serious than it already was. “I can assure you that if there is an owl in this bag, then he’s long dead. Now, what I have called you children here for today is by far more pressing and urgent. Do any of you recognize this symbol?” At this, the author held up a weathered old scroll, one covered in ancient script and arcane text, though the triangular being emblazoned, large and dark and menacing on its center was one that all four of the kids knew the instant they saw it.

A round of frightened gasps escaped all four of the kids at the same exact time, each of them feeling as though they had been thrust right back into that horrific puppet show weeks ago. Connie quickly tore her gaze away from the scroll, as if simply looking at it would somehow summon the demon forth from it. Steven choked out another smaller gasp, one hand against his heart as it hammered away in his chest while his other was pressed close to his stomach, or rather his gem, protectively. Mabel latched a hand down onto her brother’s shoulder so fast that it normally would have startled him but instead Dipper only stared, his face pale and his eyes wide as he barely managed to even get the demon’s name out in so much as a weak, frightened whisper. “B-Bill…”

Ford flinched, quite taken aback by the kids’ initial reaction alone as he looked back to the scroll with growing alarm. “You… you know him?”

None of the kids offered an immediate answer save for Connie, who only gave one in the form of a small, anxious, silent nod. As for the other three, Steven tightened his grip around his gemstone, the vicious threats the demon had issues against him just a few hours prior ringing in his head as loudly as ever before. At the same time, Mabel’s focus remained on Dipper as she prepared to offer him whatever comfort and support he might need but in light of both his growing distress and his growing frustration he was hard pressed to accept any such sentiments now.

“I-it just won’t end, will it?” Dipper began, his tone quiet yet harsh as he shook his head incredulously. “First there was what happened last night with the Gems, and now this? Why won’t
he just quit already?!”

“Dipper-” Mabel attempted to interject, though her brother was far too upset to back down now, especially as he got up to pace around frenetically.

“I was right last night after all,” Dipper continued, angry and anxiously as he largely talked to himself, even as the others all watched him with growing concern. “And I was right even before that! This isn’t over! Heck, maybe it never will be! He’ll just keep showing up and messing with us and lying to us and forcing us to play his games and there’s no way to stop him or get rid of him and it’ll just keep happening over and over again until he-”

“Dipper!” He finally cut himself off with a sharp gasp, stopping in his tracks under the weight of Ford’s firm, steadying hand on his shoulder. The author’s expression was initially fraught with palpable worry and dread, which quickly shifted into untold remorse before finally settling on what almost looked like grave, yet muted fury. “He… he possessed you, didn’t he?”

Dipper flinched at this, quickly averting his uncle’s gaze out of slight fear of how he might react to the truth of the matter. After all, the last thing he wanted was to admit such a momentous failure to the author he practically idolized and looked up to without question; the thought of disappointing him with his own shortcomings alone was enough to bring him more shame than he really knew how to deal with. But even despite his lack of a concrete answer, it was clear to see that Ford had inferred one anyway as he rose to stand, closing his eyes and letting out a long, almost tired sigh, one that gave really no indication of any sort of react at all.

“G-Great Uncle Ford,” Dipper began, his former frustration gone and replaced with obvious nervousness instead. “I… I just-”

“It wasn’t Dipper’s fault!” Steven suddenly interjected, tears already starting to well up in his eyes as everyone turned to look at him. “Bill tricked him! He lied to him and then he took his body and I was there for the whole thing and I wasn’t able to stop it and I couldn’t even tell anyone about it ‘cause he said he’d hurt Dipper’s body and I was so afraid and confused and we almost didn’t stop him in time but-”

“But we did,” Connie interjected as calmly as she could, taking Steven’s hand reassuringly as Mabel did the same for Dipper. “And that’s what’s important here.”

“So the four of you… ‘defeated’ him…” Ford mused, though his tone conveyed a hint of doubt in this fact. Still, he didn’t voice that doubt as he met all four of the kids’ fretful expressions evenly enough. “Even so, the fact that you kids have dealt with Bill before is gravely serious.”

“So you know Bill too, Grunkle Ford?” Mabel asked, anxiously curious.

“Too?” the author frowned, confused.

“Uh, well, I-last night the Gems told us about how Bill tricked them before too…” Steven admitted somewhat hesitantly. “Mom even had to fight them to get him out of him. I-it was-”

“Oh yes, I already know about all that,” Ford interrupted. “Pearl… told me all about that rather unfortunate encounter just a few days ago. Honestly, I can’t say I’m even really surprised; it’d only make sense that someone as mad and as power-hungry as Bill would try to target someone as dedicated to protecting the Earth as Rose and the Crystal Gems.”

The kids looked to each other again at this, their expressions all somewhat uncertain but craving to know more about whatever knowledge the author might have concerning the dream demon. “Um,
so how exactly do you know Bill, Great Uncle Ford?” Dipper asked rather hesitantly in light of his own lingering regret.

“I’ve encountered many dark beings in my time, Dipper,” Ford replied curtly. “But perhaps none as dark as Bill Cipher. All the same, the specifics aren’t important right now. What matters is that his powers are growing stronger, and if he pulls off his plans, then none of us, not this family, not the Gems, not even Gravity Falls itself will be safe!”

Upon hearing this, none of the kids were able to hold back a unified frightened gasp. In light of their past encounters with the dream demon as well as everything the Gems had recently revealed, it was obvious that Bill was certainly a threat to them all. But to hear this confirmation come from someone as wizened and well-traveled as the author of the journals himself only served to hit that alarming thought home even more. After all, if Bill really was such a severe and present danger to not just them but the town, possibly even the world as a whole, then what hope did any of them possibly have in trying to stop him?

“Fortunately,” Ford continued, as if he had somehow heard the kids’ shared worries and decided to address them. “There should be a way to shield us from his mental tricks. A way to ‘Bill-proof’ the shack and even the Gems’ temple, as it were.”

“R-Really?” Steven asked with a small but growing smile, one that was filled with relief that the other three kids equally shared. “That’s great! How does it work?”

“It’s quite simple, really,” the author began, laying a map of the shack out on the table. “All I have to do is place moonstones here, here, and here, sprinkle some mercury, and… let’s see, I always forget that last ingredient!” Ford frowned as he flipped open journal 1, briefly glancing through his notes before finding what he was looking for. “Ugh, that’s right… unicorn hair…”

“That’s not… rare, is it?” Dipper asked, picking up on the author’s disgruntled tone.

“It’s hopeless,” Ford shook his head dismissively as he looked back to the journal. “Unicorns reside deep within an enchanted glade, and their hairs can only be obtained by a pure, good-hearted person who goes on a magical quest to find them. And of course, unicorns themselves are-”

The author’s explanation was abruptly cut off from a loud, shrill, undeniably excited squeal from Mabel, one that tore starkly through the ongoing solemn manner of this meeting. “Grunkle Ford! Can I please go on this quest?!” she asked with a large, eager grin as she hopped out of her seat. “I am literally obsessed with unicorns! My first word was unicorn, I once made my own unicorn by taping a traffic cone to a horse’s head and got banned from the petting zoo for it, are you even looking at the sweater I’m wearing right now?!” She quickly pointed to said sweater, which, fittingly enough, had a colorful design of a unicorn stitched onto it. “Not to mention that I’m probably the most pure of heart person in this room. Well, aside from Steven, that is.” A round of murmured agreements arose from this, no one really dissenting to such a claim given Mabel’s very transparent sense of altruism and helpfulness. “So can I please go on a mission to get that hair?” she continued pleadingly. “Please, please, please?! I’ll give you my blood!”

Despite this concerning vow, Ford simply nodded, albeit a bit hesitantly given the nature of the quest his niece wanted to go on. “Very well,” he consented gruffly. “But it won’t be easy. Take this,” he handed off journal 1 to her, largely since it offered a map pointing to where unicorns were known to dwell. “And this,” he also gave her a fully-loaded crossbow, much to excitement, even as she struggled to properly lift it. “I haven’t been in this dimension in a while. It’s still ok to give children deadly weapons, right?”

“Pssh, come on, dawg,” Mabel remarked with a casual wave of her hand. Of course, she didn’t
notice that her other hand had accidentally squeezed the crossbow’s trigger until an arrow fired off through it, crashing through the nearby window and startling a certain pair of partners in crime outside.

“Ah! It’s the cops!” Stan shouted frantically somewhere outside. “Gun it!”

“Soy inocente, ¡lo juro!” Amethyst cried as a truck carrying a heavy load of pugs sped off.” ¡Todo fue idea de Stan!”

“Amethyst! Cut it out with all the Spanish already!”

“Heh, sorry, dude, can’t help it. Its mucho divertido.”

“Oh my gosh, yes!” Mabel gasped, cheerfully pulling Connie up out of her chair as she spun her around excitedly. “This is gonna be great! Mabel and Connie: Unicorn Hunters Extraordinaire! Ooo, wait! I got another idea! We should turn this unicorn duo into a whole unicorn party!”

“Um… on second thought, why don’t I go with you, Mabel?” Connie asked after a beat of somewhat awkward silence. “Not that I don’t think you can handle yourself, but maybe having my sword along with that crossbow will make this whole, uh, ‘enchanted quest’ thing go a little easier.”

“Get a Gem to come, got it!” Connie nodded, offering the remaining trio a thumbs up as she headed out herself. “Thanks, Mr. Ford!”

“Yes, yes, try not to come across any packs of marauding ware-fairies while you’re out,” Ford advised, waving both girls off as Steven and Dipper did the same.

“Aw, but this is Mabel and Connie we’re taking about here,” Steven said with an encouraging smile. “If anyone can get that hair, its them!”

“Well, just in case they don’t,” Dipper countered diffidently. “Is there anything else we could maybe do to stop Bill in the meantime?”

Ford took pause at this question, his expression initially unreadable as he looked between both of the boys sitting in front of him before his focus finally settled on Steven. The young Gem shifted somewhat apprehensively under the author’s scrutinizing stare, one that seemed to almost be searching for something, though he had no idea as to what that something could possibly be.

“Um… Mr. Ford? What’s-”
“Steven,” the author interrupted, his tone and manner both very serious as he glanced around rather discreetly. “Rose Quar—I mean, your mother, used to be the one person, or Gem rather, that I always felt like I could confide in. I trusted her immensely, and… I’d like to think that I can trust her son as well. So… can I?”

The young Gem was admittedly somewhat taken aback by this, but as he glanced over and met Dipper’s rather expectant expression, he found he was hard pressed to say no. “Y-yeah—I mean, yes,” Steven said with much more resolve, hoping that he could somehow honor the genuine bond that used to exist between the author and his mother even in some small, simple way. “Yes, you can. But, uh, can I ask with what exactly you wanna trust me with?”

Ford cracked something of a small smirk at this, clearly glad to have the young Gem on board. “Dipper, why don’t I let you tell him?”

“Oh, uh, ok,” Dipper nodded, immediately understanding exactly what the author wanted him to reveal. Even still, he hesitated somewhat, remembering the promise he had made to Ford himself to keep silent about it only a few days prior, a promise he devoutly intended to keep even still. And yet, since Ford was the very one telling him to make an exception to that promise right then and there, he decided to relent and do just that, knowing that if there was really anyone who he’d personally trust with such a momentous secret, it would be Steven. “So, Great Uncle Ford took the portal apart, right? But it sorta left this… what was it again?”

“An interdimensional rift,” Ford filled in, his voice low as he took another cursory glance around the room for any sort of prying eyes.

“An interdimensional rift, right?” Dipper said with a bit more confidence, which was something Steven only met with confusion as he tried to follow along. “And that’s bad because it could…?”

“It could tear our reality itself apart,” Ford finished gravely. “Especially if someone like Bill were to get his hands on it. If its power were to be unleashed, then he’d be completely free to wreak untold havoc upon this dimension, destroying everything and everyone in his path.”

“W-whoa…” Steven whispered, his eyes wide as he tried to take such a dark implication in. “And I thought everything the Gems told us last night was bad. B-but this… rift thing sounds like it could be even worse than that was!”

“Indeed it could,” Ford nodded coldly. “And that’s why the three of us have to do everything in our power to protect it from Bill. Including maintaining its secrecy from everyone.”

“Even the Gems?” Steven asked apprehensively. “B-because I-”

“Even the Gems,” the author interrupted staunchly, glancing away. “The more people who know about the rift, the more danger it could potentially be put in. I did have some reservations about telling even you, Steven, but… well, I figured I might as well fill you in since I very likely would have done the same for your mother if she were still… around.”

“Oh, uh… gee, thanks…” the young Gem said with a halfhearted smile, the comparison Ford was apparently drawing between him and his mother not lost on him. A comparison that, in light of recent revelations, Steven wasn’t sure he was too comfortable with anymore, even if he knew that it was rather fitting. After all, wasn’t keeping such a potentially earth shattering secret hidden from the Gems the very same sort of thing Rose herself did before him? Still, he knew he couldn’t exactly betray either Ford’s trust on the matter either, especially since it was of such grave significance. The author had said so himself: if Bill ever managed to get ahold of that rift, then reality itself could very well cease to be. The knowledge of that fact alone was a momentous,
massive weight, one that the young Gem feared he wouldn’t be properly carry but at the very least, he didn’t have to do it alone. For just as he began to doubt his own resolve, he was broken out of his thoughts by the comforting hand that fell upon his shoulder. Steven was unable to hold back a small smile as he met the gentle, affirmative one Dipper was offering him, one that carried the promise that, despite how daunting protecting the rift and its secrets might be, it was a task that they’d carry out together. And that alone was exactly the kind of warm reassurance the young Gem needed to hope that they’d be able to carry that untold, almost crushing weight after all. “B-but… you don’t have to worry,” Steven said as he turned back to the author. “I won’t tell anyone. I promise.”

“Very good,” Ford said, genuinely grateful as he rose to stand. “Now, both of you, follow me. We’ve much to do.”

Neither boy questioned the author any further as they hurried after him to the gift shop, watching in curious anticipation as he opened the hidden elevator behind the vending machine up. However, instead of taking them down to the basement lab, the elevator stopped on the floor between it, at an ornate wooden door that only Ford seemed to hold the key to. And needless to say that the boys were quite amazed by what they saw.

Contained between the gift shop and the underground lab was an entire floor in and of itself, one that surprisingly spacious, even despite the walls lined with full bookshelves and old, interesting artifacts and machinery strewn just about everywhere. The rather long room stretched back into a corridor with covered walls and a massive machine consisting of several large screens and a dizzying array of wires and buttons. Of course, both Steven and Dipper were absolutely amazed to discover such an impressive hideout, one that neither of them ever even knew existed before though Ford was steady as ever as he led the way into it.

“Welcome to my private study,” he began, not making much time to give the boys even a simple tour of the room. “A place where I keep my most ancient and secret knowledge. Even Stanley, Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl don’t know about this place, however, Rose did.” At this, the author briefly sent Steven a small, knowing grin over his shoulder, one that he only weakly returned as he continued following after Ford to the other end of the room. Dipper, however, detracted somewhat, curious to see exactly what knowledge his uncle might be keeping in this extensive collection, however, before he could really try to investigate, Ford urgently prompted him onward.

“Dipper, come along!” the author called as he began setting up the large machine, which was only labeled as ‘Project Mentum’. “If we can’t Bill-proof the shack, then we’re going to have to do the next best thing.” At this, Ford held up a rather old-looking metallic helmet, one that was connected to the machine by several wires and seemed to carry some sort of unknown purpose to it. “We’re going to have to Bill-proof our minds.”

Both Steven and Dipper let out a shared gasp at this, but even so, they were unable to hold back relieved smiles as they looked to each other. Because for perhaps the first time since last night, it seemed as though there was actually a way to fend Bill off after all, to keep him from tormenting them any further, from plaguing their thoughts and haunting their nightmares. And, after everything they’d been through because of the demon throughout the summer, that alone was enough to fill both boys with more hope than they had known in quite some time.

Even if such hope wasn’t destined to last.
out on their intrepid quest, gathering a motley crew consisting of Wendy, Candy, and Grenda to accompany them. And, as Ford had advised, the girls managed to recruit the first Gem they could find to act as something of a chaperone, said Gem just so happening to be Pearl, who had just ventured down to the shack to check on the kids as soon as Connie and Mabel stepped out of it. Without filling the white Gem in on much of their mission, she still decided to join the group, largely out of her lingering worry concerning the upsetting reveals made throughout the previous night. All the same, Pearl was somewhat surprised by just how overtly upbeat the majority of the group was as they ventured into the depths of the forest with only journal 1 and the knowledge contained therein to serve as their guide.

“It’s nice to finally be out on a mission, just us gals!” Mabel quipped as she led the way with a bit of an excited spring in her step.

“Well, a mission that isn’t super likely to put all of our lives in danger, at least,” Connie remarked rather knowingly.

“And exactly what the purpose of this mission again?” Pearl asked, making sure to keep an eye out for any supernatural monster that might possibly assail them. “You girls failed to really give me all of the details before we set out on this so-called ‘magical quest’ of ours.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Grenda asked boisterously. “We’re going to meet, touch, and/or become unicorns!”

“U-unicorns?!” Pearl gasped, completely appalled as she looked back to Mabel and Connie. “That’s what all this is about? Well, if that’s the case then you girls can count me out of this little venture!”

“What?” Connie asked as the collective group stopped short to look to the white Gem in confusion. “But why?”

“Why?” Pearl repeated incredulously. “Because simply put, unicorns are nuisances. They always have been, ever since we happened upon them decades ago. Even Rose couldn’t stand their self-entitled attitude and honestly I completely agree with her. I can’t even begin to fathom why on Earth any of you girls would actually want to actively go looking for such… infuriating creatures!”

“Because Grunkle Ford said that if we get a whole bunch of their hair then we can use it to make some sorta barrier thing that’ll keep the shack and the temple safe from Bill!” Mabel informed with a sense of pressing urgency.

“Wait, what?!” the white Gem exclaimed, even more stunned to her this. “Y-you mean there’s actually a way to arm ourselves against that… that monster? All this time and we had no idea… This changes everything!”

“So… does that mean you’ll help us find a unicorn?” Connie asked, exchanging a hopeful glance with Mabel.

Pearl hesitated for a beat at this, though inevitably she let out a long, begrudging sigh, knowing that she really had no other choice. “I suppose I will if I really must… Still, I wish there was another way of going about this… Dealing with those infernal unicorns almost isn’t worth the aggravation, even if it will potentially help us ward off Cipher…”

“Um… well, who knows?” Mabel said with a bit of a forced, encouraging smile. “Maybe unicorns aren’t as bad as you remember them being, Pearl. I mean, based on everything I’ve heard about them, they sound like they’re the most magical, sparkly, amazing magical horses out there!”
“I hear that if you lick a unicorn’s neck, it tastes like your favorite flavor in the world!” Candy added enthusiastically.

“Candy, I will make sure you lick that unicorn’s neck, because I care about my friends,” Mabel said with heavy resolve, remembering what Ford had said about unicorns only allotting their hair to the most pure of heart. And as far as Mabel was concerned, she was already that and then some, to the point that the unicorns very likely wouldn’t need any proof of her innate kindness and goodness at all. Or so she thought.

“Honestly, I stopped believing in unicorns when I was like, five years old,” Wendy remarked, casually swinging at low-hanging tree branches with her axe. “I’m just coming along to keep you kids from stepping into a bear trap and to make sure you guys aren’t too disappointed when you find out unicorns aren’t actually real.”

“Oh, they’re real all right,” Pearl countered, her eye twitching out of slight frustration over the thought of merely encountering any sort of unicorn alone. “Real aggravating.”

“Stop!” Mabel suddenly exclaimed as they reached a rather ethereal glade, filled with shimmering, otherworldly flora, ancient stone monuments, and the occasional fairy or sprite floating nearby. “This is the magical part of the forest! Now, let’s see…” The others gathered around her as she flipped through journal 1 before landing on a map of the mystical area they now found themselves in. “The gnome tavern is over there… the fairy nail salon is over there, but it says that to summon the unicorn, one must bellow this ancient chant droned by only the deepest-voiced druids of old.”

“On it!” Grenda proclaimed, grabbing the journal and rushing forward to the center of the glade. And from there, she got right to chanting, her abnormally deep voice carrying across the clearing as she belted the ancient non-melody out while the others stood by watching curiously.

“Ten bucks says nothing happens,” Wendy said, crossing her arms dubiously.

“I’ll take that bet,” Mabel smirked, confident that this chant would work. And work it did as suddenly, the entire glade began to violently shake. In response to Grenda’s deep, summoning chant, a massive stone structure began to rise up from the ground, one that was clearly mystical in nature based on its castle-like appearance and the shimmering golds and lush vinery decorating it.

“Here we go…” Pearl muttered bitterly to herself as the younger girls reacted excitedly, all of them rushing through the large wooden doors and into a place somehow even more dreamlike and enchanted than the magical forest it was situated in. A rainbow-accented waterfall fed a flowing stream that cut through the grassy enclosure, one that was inhabited by a pan flute playing faun and none other than an unquestionably magical unicorn, one that was practically straight out of fairytales and legends of old. Simply put, she was ethereal, lightly shimmering all over, from her pale blue skin to her bright, multicolored mane and tail, to her huge, wide, sparking eyes. She tossed her rainbow mane and let out a mighty neigh as the intruding group entered, almost all of them completely dazzled by her mere appearance alone, much less her actual existence.

“Mother of mothers!” Grenda gasped, amazed.

“Dream of dreams!” Candy exclaimed, just as stunned.

“It can’t be…” Connie whispered, shocked.

“No way,” Wendy scowled, especially as Mabel reached her hand up for the bet she had just won and the ten bucks she now had to fork over.
“Oh of course…” Pearl grumbled upon looking to the familiar unicorn poised before them. “It just had to be her…”

“Hark!” the unicorn proclaimed sharply, apparently communicating through her glowing pink horn. “Visitors to my realm of enchantment!”

“Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh!” Mabel squealed happily, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. “What’s your name?”

“I am Celestabellebethabelle, last of my kind!” the unicorn introduced herself. “Come in, come in. Just… take off your shoes. I have a whole thing about shoes.” The girls were quick to comply, all of them removing their shoes at the gate save for Wendy and Pearl, both of whom were already none too enthused about this encounter in the first place. Even so, Celestabellebethabelle was quick to notice their belligerence and even quicker to call them out on it. “Ah, ah! I’m talking to everyone!” Despite their increased annoyance at this, both the cashier and the white Gem complied, though the unicorn let out something of an angry snort the moment she caught sight of Pearl in particular.

“You! Crystal Gem!” she exclaimed hotly, slamming one of her hooves down. “I do believe I was quite clear with your leader many years ago that NONE of your kind are welcome back into my mystical domain! So please, be a dear and... REMOVE YOURSELF FROM MY PRESENCE AT ONCE!”

“Oh, believe me, I gladly would,” Pearl huffed, crossing her arms as she unapologetically at the unicorn. “After all, the last thing I want is to be in the ‘presence’ of someone as completely gaudy and over the top as yourself, Celestabelle.”

“It is Celestabellebethabelle, and I will thank you kindly to remember it!” the unicorn snapped fiercely, lowering herself as though she planned on charging the white Gem herself, though fortunately, Mabel intervened before any such altercation could take place.

“W-wait!” she exclaimed, rushing to stand between the two before offering Celestabellebethabelle a very saccharine smile. “Heh, you’ll have to forgive Pearl here, she... had a pretty rough night last night.”

“I did not!” Pearl exclaimed defensively. “I’ll have you know that I tried sleeping for the first time last night and even if I still don’t understand the functional purpose of such an activity, I’d like to think that I still did a suitable job at it!”

“Pearl…” Connie whispered, giving the white Gem something of a pleading glance. And, despite her own apt frustrations at the unicorn that was still issuing her a rather harsh look, she begrudgingly backed down, knowing that acting out was doing nothing for their much more important cause.

“A-anyway…” Mabel continued, trying to make up for Pearl’s outburst with a heavy layer of politeness. “Celestabellebethabelle, we have journeyed far and wide-

“About an hour!” Grenda chimed in.

“-On a mission to protect our family with your magical hair!”

“This is your chance, Candy…” Candy whispered to herself as she snuck to Celestabellebethabelle’s side, her tongue out as she leaned in close. “Lick the neck… lick it…”

“Very well!” the unicorn exclaimed, lifting herself up and her neck out of Candy’s reach. “Despite your rather… poor company,” she paused, briefly sending another cold scowl Pearl’s way. “I shall
allow you this opportunity out of the immense goodness of my immaculate soul.”

“Oh please…” Pearl muttered, rolling her eyes at such an exaggerated claim.

“To receive a lock of my enchanted hair, step forth, girl of pure, perfect heart!” Celestabellebethabelle called, her tone as dramatic and bold as ever.

After a round of encouraging smiles and nods from Connie, Candy, and Grenda, Mabel stepped forward with a confident grin, assured that she’d be able to win the unicorn’s favor, even despite the rather rough start of this meeting. “Presenting… bum buh da bum bum ba bum bum! Mabel!”

Celestabellebethabelle seemed to take pause for a moment, as if sizing the girl before her up for a moment before letting out a harsh, appalled gasp. “What? You?!” she asked in what sounded like offended disbelief. “A unicorn can see deep inside your heart, child, and you have done WRONG!” To punctuate her claim, Celestabellebethabelle pointed the tip of her horn directly at Mabel, sparking up a bright, heart-shaped glow on her chest, one that was quick to turn dark and black, much to her alarm. “Wrong, I say!”

“W-what?” Mabel gasped, confused and distraught as she quickly covered her heart from the unicorn’s piercing gaze.

“But how can that be?” Connie interjected, quickly placing a comforting hand on Mabel’s shoulder as she addressed Celestabellebethabelle with apt seriousness. “I’m sorry to sound rude, but Mabel really is one of the kindest, most helpful people you’ll ever meet. Right, guys?”

“Yeah!” Grenda exclaimed in rowdy agreement.

“Absolutely,” Candy said resolutely as Pearl and Wendy also nodded.

“So… maybe your magical, uh… heart-scanning magic was just a bit… I don’t know, off?” Connie finished amicably enough.

“It is most certainly NOT ‘off’!” Celestabellebethabelle scoffed hotly. “A unicorn’s tuition is never wrong! And my intuition can confirm, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that THAT girl’s heart is nowhere near pure enough to obtain the prize of my glorious hair!”

“But-”

“H-hold on a sec, Connie,” Mabel interrupted with a fretful frown. “I… s-she… might have a point… I mean, I do make fun of Dipper a lot… Plus there was that whole… puppet show thing with Bill that was kinda mostly my fault… and I did just shatter a window with a crossbow…”

“Your bad deeds make me cry!” Celestabellebethabelle let out an embellished sob, rainbow tears spilling from her eyes and burning up the grass below on contact.

“Noooo!” Mabel cried, shocked and horrified by the unicorn’s incredibly harsh reaction. A reaction that was only garnished from her own apparently unknown lack of purity all along.

“Alright, that’s quite enough!” Pearl interjected hotly, sending Celestabellebethabelle a vicious glare as she came to stand defensively between her and Mabel. “Don’t think I’m not wise to your little ‘game’, Celestabelle.”

“Again, its Celestabellebethabelle!”

“I don’t care!” the white Gem huffed angrily. “If you think I’m going to let you get away with
emotionally devastating a poor innocent child like Mabel, then you’re dead wrong!”

“Oh, well that’s just the thing,” Celestabellebethabelle remarked with a knowing smirk. “I don’t have to get away with anything. I’m a unicorn. I do whatever I want! Including kick you out of my enchanted glen like the rabble you are.”

“Oh, I’ll show you ‘rabble’ you self-righteous, pretentious, over-glorified equine snob!” Pearl yelled, more than ready to summon her spear and outright attack if not for Connie and Wendy holding her back.

“Uh, Pearl? I’m with you on this whole thing being pretty screwed up, but you should probably reign it in just a little,” Wendy remarked as they began to lead the still quite hostile white Gem out of the glen.

“Yeah, it’s not worth it,” Connie agreed. “Well, I mean, it is worth it if it means we can get that hair protect the shack and the temple from Bill, but still we shouldn’t resort to violence to get it unless we absolutely have to.”

“Yes, yes, that’s right, leave with whatever small shred of dignity you have left,” Celestabellebethabelle said, turning her nose up at the rest of the group as they dejectedly left in defeat. “Perhaps try coming back when you’re PURE OF HEART!” At this, the unicorn let out another dramatic neigh, only to pause for a brief beat of silence as the group looked to her once more rather incredulously. “Exit is that way. Oh, and shoes! Shoes! Take your shoes! This isn’t some… some shoe store!”

And with that, the collective group was shut out of the unicorn’s glen, though thankfully it didn’t sink back into the ground, just in case they all decided to actually return again. Even so, that wasn’t something any of them were too keen on after the very cold reception they had just received from Celestabellebethabelle, especially Mabel, who was practically fighting back tears over the rather biting, perhaps accurate, claims the unicorn had made against her.

“Hey, Mabel, don’t let her get to you,” Grenda said as both her and Candy put comforting hands on their distraught friends’ shoulders.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t trust a horse that wears makeup,” Wendy scoffed, rolling her eyes over the unicorns’ uppity mannerisms.

“How dare that haughty horse pull that ‘not pure of heart’ gambit again,” Pearl remarked crossly, sending a cold glare back at the now closed gates of the unicorn’s glen. “I wouldn’t put any stock into anything she said back there, Mabel. After all, she had the gall to tell Rose, of all people, that she wasn’t pure of heart around the turn of the century! True, Rose may have made… a few mistakes in the past, but even so, such a claim is completely ridiculous; I mean, Gems don’t even have hearts in the first place!”

“Oh, I think what Pearl is trying to say, Mabel,” Connie interjected much more rationally. “Is that you shouldn’t worry about what that unicorn said about you. We can always find some other way to protect ourselves from Bill. Probably… Hopefully.”

“No, girls, she’s right,” Mabel said, sucking in a deep, resolved breath. “I used to be one of the sweetest people I knew, but recently I’ve been seriously slacking in the whole goodness department. Well, today, we’re gonna fix it! From this moment forth, I’m gonna do so many good deeds that I’ll have the purest heart in Gravity Falls!” With this dedicated proclamation, she threw a first up into the air with gusto, only for it to squarely strike a low flying bird by mistake, knocking out of the air and clearly injuring it, much to everyone else’s concerned surprise. “…That…”
Knowing that time was of the essence when it came to halting Bill’s ambitions, Ford wasted none of it in calibrating his mysterious Project Mentum while the boys stood by, both of them curious, hopeful, and anxious as they mutually wondered whether or not this plan of action would truly work at all. Eager to finally be rid of the menace that was the dream demon once and for all, Dipper had volunteered to go first, with Steven patiently sitting next to him while Ford carefully hooked him up to the machine by way of its bulky metal helmet. Things had been rather quiet amongst the three of them in light of the seriousness of their shared endeavor, but when this tentative silence finally was broken, Steven was the one to do so.

“Um, Mr. Ford?” he began somewhat hesitantly as the author turned to the machine itself to finish setting it up. “Are you sure this is gonna work?”

“Yes,” Ford said, completely confident as he glanced over his shoulder. “I built this device specifically with the intent of using it as a defense against Bill quite some time ago. Which is why I have the upmost certainty that it’ll do its part in shielding you boys against his influence.”

Steven and Dipper exchanged another brief, somewhat hopeful glance at this, knowing that the promise of freeing themselves from the lingering nightmares Bill caused them even still seemed almost too good to be true. And yet, even that promise, as wonderful as it sounded, wasn’t quite enough for Dipper. Based on past encounters with the mysterious dream demon, as well as the Gems’ own horrific account given last night, he couldn’t help but still have quite a few questions concerning the looming threat that had been terrorizing them all practically all summer. “So… what exactly is Bill anyway?” he asked, hoping that, with his vast knowledge, Ford might hold at least a few answers to those questions.

“No one knows for sure,” Ford began, handing off a folder to his nephew that was simply entitled the ‘Cipher File’. Both Steven and Dipper glanced over its sparse contents, a few old documents that gave only very brief, not very detailed information concerning matters only remotely related to Bill as the author went on. “Accounts differ of his true motivations and origin. What I do know is that he’s older than our galaxy, and far more twisted. His current domain is the Nightmare Realm, an unstable place of untold horrors all crafted by Bill himself. Thankfully though, he’s mostly confined there, for now. Without a physical form, he can only project himself into our thoughts through the mindscape. That’s why he wants this,” Ford held up the rift, being ever careful with its fragile form as the boys both looked to it apprehensively. “I dismantled the portal, but with this tear, Bill still has a way into our reality. To get his hands on this rift, he would trick or possess anyone.”

“Wait, so… he wants that rift too?” Steven asked, unconsciously placing a hand over where his gemstone was.

“Too?” Ford paused, turning to glance at the young Gem at this. “What do you mean ‘too’?”

“Uh… well…” Steven hesitated somewhat, though upon receiving an encouraging nod from Dipper, he decided it was best if he spoke his piece. “Last night, Bill showed up in a dream I had. He tried to get me to give him my gem, but after I told him no, he said that its already his since my mom promised to give it to him. The Gems are pretty sure that Mom never did that, but… I’m still not sure. What do you think, Mr. Ford?”

The author didn’t answer right away, instead looking to the young Gem with an expression of
unquestionable alarm upon hearing such a claim. Yet at the same time, his reaction to the news was
every bit as vague as it was when he learned that Bill had possessed Dipper, almost as if he was
trying to conceal how he really felt about such a revelation. “So you’re the one he-” Ford quickly
cut himself off, noticing the curious looks both boys were sending him as he immediately regained
his usual scholarly composure. “Hm, yes, well, the fact that Bill is after your gemstone is
extremely troubling indeed, Steven. Even so, I agree with the Gems; its highly unlikely that Rose
would have agreed to turn over her gemstone to the likes of him, no matter what he might have
promised her for it. As for why he might want it though, that’s… unclear. It makes sense that he’d
want to get ahold of the rift, but its hard to say what he might want a gemstone—Rose Quartz’s
gemstone in particular—for. Unless…”

“Unless… what?” Steven pressed, immensely curious.

Ford jolted at this, quickly shaking his head as if to clear it before offering both boys a somewhat
forced reassuring smile. “Oh, i-its nothing, nothing at all,” he remarked with a dismissive wave of
his hand. “What matters now is that we do what we can to protect our minds from Bill.”

“So how exactly do we do that?” Dipper asked intently.

“Well, there are a number of ways,” the author said. “I personally had a metal plate installed in my
head by an otherworldly, seven-eyed oracle.”

“Heh, good one,” Dipper chuckled in response to such an admittedly outlandish claim. That is,
until Ford proved it to be true by knocking against the side of his head, eliciting a strong metallic
sound that was more than enough to get his nephew to awkwardly retract his doubt.

“But this machine is much safer,” the author continued, nodding to the several screens behind
them. “It will scan your mind, bioelectrically encrypting your thoughts so Bill can’t read them.
Now…” Ford paused, only to press the final button to set Project Mentum in motion. “Say hello to
your thoughts.”

All at once, the machine sparked to life, its various screens filling in with Dipper’s own thoughts,
putting them all on unfettered display for all three of them to see and hear as they cycled through at
a seemingly random pace: “Oh man, I can’t believe I’m actually with the author!” “Is my fly
down?” “Disco girl! Coming through!” “I miss Tyrone…” “Bill better stay away from Steven if he
knows what’s good for him!” “I have to find a way to save Lapis!” “Huh, I might be just a little
emotionally unstable… Maybe I should go get some therapy or something?”

“Um, y—you might wanna… ignore that last one…” Dipper said, quite flustered by his thoughts
being so openly and unintentionally revealed like that.

“Whoa, that’s so cool!” Steven exclaimed, stars in his eyes. “I wanna see what my thoughts have to
say! I mean, I already know what they say since they’re in my head, but I wanna see them laid out
on a screen like that!”

“And you will,” Ford interjected. “After Dipper is done. This is a very delicate process that could
potentially take hours to complete. Which means all we can do now is be patient and let the
machine do its job.”

“Oh, well, uh, maybe in the meantime you could… I dunno, maybe fill us in on what your history
with Bill is in the first place?” Dipper ventured, still quite eager to know exactly what the
apparently quite significant context for Ford’s impressive knowledge concerning the dream demon
actually was.
"Dipper, do you trust me?" Ford asked, his tone quite serious as he knelt down next to his great nephew.

"Well, yeah, but-"

"Then you’ll trust that that’s not important," the author concluded staunchly, standing as he headed back over to his desk, leaving both Dipper and Steven as much in the dark as they ever were.

"Now, focus. Its time to strengthen your mind…"

Determined to prove herself to Celestabellebethabelle, Mabel took to the town, the others following suit to do whatever they could to help her carry out the lengthy list of good deeds she had come up with. Their main objective was clear: to help as many people as they could in the hopes that no one, not even the unicorn herself, would be able to deny that Mabel was not just more than worthy enough to not just obtain that magical hair, but also that her heart was overflowing with purity and goodness beyond compare.

And so the group set out to do just that, lending their cheerful aid to any troubled soul they could find. They moved snails from the danger of the streets to the safety of the grass and planted a tree right in front of the door to the Gravity Falls' Gossiper office, unknowingly trapping Toby Determined inside of it. They helped Kiki on her pizza delivery route and fixed up several of the games at Funland Arcade. They gave Stan a literal smile in the form of a giant smiley face sticker slapped onto his face and Mabel even went as far as donating three pints of her own blood to those in need, disregarding her own lightheadedness after the fact. From there, they covered several smaller deeds on the list, like helping old ladies and ducks cross the road, to filling Lazy Susan’s tip jar, to sprucing up the town statues of Nathaniel Northwest and William Dewey with a fresh coat of glitter. Though their altruistic mission took several hours of hard, selfless work on their part, by the time they were finished, they all felt quite satisfied that they had met their goal, particularly Mabel as they began to make their way back to the unicorn’s glade.

"Boom! A thousand good deeds!" she exclaimed happily as she crossed the last item off her list. "When that unicorn scans my heart again, she’s gonna say that I’m absolutely, one hundred percent, bona-fide-"

"NOT pure of heart!" Celestabellebethabelle proclaimed after the group returned to her glen, her insistence on the matter just as harsh and firm as it was before.

"Booyah!" Mabel cheered, though she quickly changed her tune upon realizing exactly what the unicorn had said. "Wait… w-what?"

"How is that even possible?" Wendy asked with an incredulous scoff. "Mabel’s a straight up saint, you judgmental hoofbag!"

"Seriously, she just spent the entire afternoon helping people," Connie added knowingly. "Doesn’t that mean anything here?"

"Please! Tell me what I’m doing wrong!" Mabel practically begged, distraught that her efforts were apparently all for naught.

"Doing good deeds to make yourself look better isn’t good at all," Celestabellebethabelle remarked haughtily. "Not to mention you’re crushing like, ten dandelions right now. Those are basically children’s dreams. ” Mabel let out a horrified gasp at this, quickly stepping off the small
patch of dandelions she was incidentally standing on before the unicorn condescendingly continued. “I’m sorry, Mabel. It’s not my fault you’re a bad person.”

Unable to take the unicorn’s brutally harsh criticisms any longer, Mabel ran off, not even trying to hold back a heartbroken sob amidst this second, much more painful rejection. As appalled by Celestabellebethabelle’s rather cruel attitude as they were, most of the others didn’t stick around to chastise her on it as they all hurried out of the glen to make sure she was alright. All except for Pearl, who decided to hang back solely for the sake of giving the unicorn a few choice words in light of the completely shameful display she had just witnessed.

“You may have those girls fooled, but you’re not fooling me,” the white Gem said, her voice almost a vicious hiss as she glared at the unicorn unflinchingly. “I know what you’re trying to do here. You did the exact same thing to Rose Quartz about 100 years ago so if you think I’m going to stand by and let you tear someone else down like that, especially someone like Mabel, then you’ve got another thing coming!”

“Oh really?” Celestabellebethabelle deadpanned, clearly not taking the white Gem seriously. “And what exactly might that ‘thing’ be?”

“Trying to act like you’re some grand authority on the contents of a person’s character!” Pearl exclaimed hotly. “I don’t know who made you had the right to judge others like you do, but whoever they were, they probably knew as little about actually being good and kind as you do.”

“As if you really know any better?” Celestabellebethabelle scoffed crossly. “The last time you were here a century ago, the only thing I saw you do was helplessly cling to your precious Rose Quartz as if she was paradigm of perfection. But even still, all these years later, I still stand what I said. She’s not pure of heart and neither are YOU!”

Pearl simply let out a harsh scoff at this, not even bothering to dignify the unicorn with a response to this as she simply turned on her heel to leave, though not before giving a certain recent mistake of hers that had all but proved her impurities through and through. “After all…” she muttered to herself somewhat sadly. “I already know…”

However, the white Gem’s self-pity didn’t last too long as she left the unicorn’s glen, only to find the girls all gathered around Mabel, who was lying close to the nearby stream, curled up into a miserable ball as she wept quietly, even despite the comfort the others were trying to offer her.

“Come on, Mabel,” Wendy encouraged earnestly. “Don’t beat yourself up about this.”

“Let’s just forget about that dumb hair and go home,” Candy advised, though Mabel was having none of that.

“It’s not just about the hair anymore, guys,” she sniffled as she sat upright and held her list of failed good deeds close. “It’s about me. Being kind and sweet is what makes me who I am. If I’m not a good person, then who am I?”

“Well, I know who you are,” Connie interjected, placing a steadying hand on Mabel’s shoulder. “You’re Mabel; you’re fun and creative and most of all, kind, no matter what that unicorn says. And you don’t have to prove that to anyone, especially not her; because as far as we’re all concerned, that was something we all knew from the very start.”

Upon hearing this, Mabel briefly looked up at Connie, her cheeks still wet with tears as she met the
warm smile her friend was offering her. And for a moment, her encouraging, hopeful words almost managed to convince her that it was true, that she was a good person, despite Celestabellebethabelle’s claims. And yet… it still wasn’t quite enough. “I-I appreciate it, Connie, but… she’s right…” Mabel sighed sadly as she pulled her shoulder away. “It’s time I finally admit it to myself; I’m just not as pure of heart as I used to think I was… Which is why I’m not leaving this spot until I think of a deed that makes me as good as Celestabellebethabelle!”

“But Mabel—” Grenda attempted to reason before she was promptly cut off.

“Just leave me be!” Mabel snapped in morose frustration, turning her back to the group as she began pondering over her list once more. The other girls were largely at a loss over what to do to comfort her at this juncture, but even so, they didn’t get much of a chance as Pearl discreetly called them all over to her spot under a nearby tree.

“Alright, enough is enough,” the white Gem began as soon as they had all gathered near her. “It’s time to put an end to this unicorn nonsense once and for all. And the sooner we do it, the better, especially for Mabel’s sake…” Pearl frowned as she stole a sympathetic glance at the miserable girl sitting only a few feet away, desperate to find a way to make herself worthy in the eyes of a creature who clearly didn’t deserve that kind of valiant effort.

“I’m with Pearl on this one,” Wendy staunchly agreed with a deepening scowl. “If you ask me, this whole thing is a serious load. Mabel’s like one of the best people I’ve ever met. We tried getting that hair the nice way; now its time we try the Wendy way.”

“Are you suggesting violence? Sabotage?” Grenda asked, caught off guard.

“Oooo… you know, normally I’m not the kind to approve of such roguish behavior but… in this instance… that sounds… quite intriguing…” Pearl remarked, sending a daring smirk towards the nearby unicorn’s glen.

“Honestly, at this point? I’m up for trying something like that too,” Connie said, crossing her arms. “It’s about time someone puts that awful unicorn in her place, so it might as well be us.”

“But what about Mabel?” Candy asked worriedly. “She’s not going to like this…”

“Mabel doesn’t need to know,” Wendy shook her head dismissively. “Look, its time we stopped trying to be so ‘perfect’ and be who we really are. We’re crazed, angry, sweaty animals—well, except for you, Pearl, I guess. No offense.”

“None taken,” Pearl said, nodding for her to go on with her inspiring rand.

“But anyway, we’re not unicorns, we’re WOMEN! And we take what we want!” To punctuate her point, Wendy slammed her fist into the nearby tree, eliciting excited cheers from Connie, Candy, and Grenda alike as well as a satisfied grin from Pearl.

In fact, the newfound revelry was so contagious that Grenda ended up smashing a rather large rock to bits against her forehead, instantly quieting the cheers as the others all looked to her, aptly startled. “…Too much?”

“Oh,” Wendy said as the group huddled in to begin their ambitious, albeit morally ambiguous plan. “Here’s what we’re gonna do…”
Gnasty’s Gnome Tavern was by and large the most popular gnome tavern anywhere near Gravity Falls, largely since it was just about the only gnome tavern in the surrounding area. Its usual patrons were a notoriously rowdy bunch who spent their days knocking back honeysuckle shots and exchanging the regular brutal punch or kick to the face to anyone in the remote vicinity. Yet despite their renowned roughhousing, none of the gnomes occupying the tavern were quite prepared for the much larger group that rather violently burst into the bar completely out of nowhere.

“It’s the cops!” one of the gnomes cried as the tavern was immediately thrown into a panic as the group of girls forcefully pushed themselves into the hallowed-out tree. “Hit the deck!”

“We’re looking for someone who knows how to take down a unicorn!” Wendy shouted fiercely amidst the clatter of scattering gnomes. “No tricks or games!”

“We are human!” Candy yelled, breaking an empty bottle over a nearby table and holding its sharpened end up threateningly. “We take what we want!”

“I know a sure-fire way of K.Oin’ a unicorn,” a rather shady, grizzled gnome sitting in the darkened corner of the tavern spoke up. “Too bad I ain’t in the market for spillin’ that kinda info to a bunch of normal-sized girlies like yourselves.”

“Oh, I think you will,” Connie said coldly, drawing Rose’s sword and aiming its sharp tip directly at the gnome.

“Heh,” he chuckled, surprisingly not surprised by this overt threat. “I like the way you ladies operate. So, listen up. Fairy dust; a whole magic bag’s enough to put a unicorn out cold. But if I do you a favor, then you gotta do somethin’ for me.”

“Just spill it, half-pint!” Grenda roared, slamming her fist against a nearby tree stump.

“Now, now, patience,” Pearl advised much more calmly as she looked back to the gnome with solid seriousness. “Name your price.”

“Butterfly traffickin’ is illegal in this part of the forest,” the gnome began, his voice low and discreet. “But I like butterflies. They tickle my face and make me laugh. Bring me a bag of butterflies and we got a deal.”

The girls all exchanged a dubious glance at this, most of them rather bewildered by how the odd rules and regulations of gnome culture. Even so, they were quick to nod their agreement to this plan, knowing that this haggle would be more than worth it to make Celestabellebethabelle pay for what she had done.

Fortunately, it didn’t take the group but a few minutes to capture a whole bag full of butterflies before meeting up with the gnome in the designated clearing. The others all hid out in the nearby bushes as they sent Grenda in to preform the trade, her manner just as unsuspecting as the gnomes as she quietly handed him off the bag of butterflies before he produced his end of the bargain.

“Two bags of fairy dust, just as we agreed,” he said, turning over two small pouches of the glittering substance.

“How do you get this stuff?” Grenda shook her head, glancing between the dust and the gnome.

“Everyone likes sausage, but no one likes to know how it’s made,” the gnome smirked as he peeked into his bag of butterflies.
“You disgust me.”

“Hey, you got your poison; I got mine. We made a deal.”

“Yeah, well, the deal’s OFF!” Grenda shouted, blowing a whistle to summon an entire squadron of gnome policemen from the nearby woods. The arrangement with the cops had been an easy enough one to make, one that resulted in a meticulously planned-out sting operation that was already unfolding exactly as planned.

“Freeze!” the chief shouted as the first gnome was heavily pinned down by the other cops, his butterflies quickly swiped away from him. “You’re under arrest!”

“These butterflies aren’t mine! I swear I’ve been framed!” the gnome cried, sending a harsh glare to Grenda and the other girls as they came out of the bushes to join her.

“Tell it to the adorable owl we’ve dressed as a judge,” the chief scoffed as the gnome as hauled away for sentencing. “My cut?” he held his hand out to Grenda a beat later, and she handed him one of the two bags of fairy dust, just as they had agreed upon.

“Has the gnome criminal justice system always been this corrupt?” Connie asked with a somewhat concerned frown over these shady proceedings.

“Oh believe me, they have,” Pearl remarked, crossing her arms knowingly.

With the butterfly bust complete and a full bag of fairy dust still in hand, the group wasted no time in hurrying back over the unicorn’s glen, taking care to not let Mabel spot them as she remained at her spot near the stream, still trying in vain to come up with more good deeds to accomplish. With Celestabellebethabelle distracted with reading as she was, she didn’t even notice as they all slipped into her magical domain, filing in behind a row of rocks and trees so they wouldn’t be seen as they prepared to carry the final steps of their daring plan out.

“Oh, sure, I wish I could travel, but it’s just not feasible in this economy!” Celestabellebethabelle huffed to herself as she read through her copy of Whinny, Prey, Trot. However, it was only a moment later that the unicorn was struck squarely in the face with the full bag full of fairy dust as a result of Candy’s accurate aim. “W-what the hey-!?!” was all she really had time to say before the magical substance did its trick, knocking her out cold. Her attending faun witnessed all of this with apt horror, but as he tried piping out an SOS on his panflute, Grenda was quick to slip out of the shadows and cover his mouth with a towel dosed with a healthy amount of chloroform.

“Sleep now!” she hissed as the faun slowly went limp and unconscious as well. “Sleeeeeeep…”

“Alright,” Pearl said as the others hurried over to the fainted unicorn. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Right,” Wendy nodded, pulling out a pair of scissors and a sizable lock of Celestabellebethabelle’s multi-colored hair. And yet, before she could make the decisive cut, their plans all too quickly fell through when they were unexpectedly discovered by the very person they had been trying to keep their ambitions a secret from in the first place.

“No, wait!” Mabel gasped, standing in the entrance of the glen only to see the others about to outright steal some of the unicorn’s precious hair. “Stop! What are you guys doing?!”

“What does it look like we’re doing?” Pearl asked in a careful whisper, glancing over at the still unconscious Celestabellebethabelle. “We’re taking what we deserve, whether that uppity unicorn likes it or not!”
“Yeah, seriously, Mabel, keep it down!” Wendy cautioned, moving her scissors in to clip the hair. “You’ll wake her up!”

“But this is wrong, you guys!” Mabel exclaimed, swiftly taking the scissors away from the cashier.

“But protecting the shack and the temple is good,” Wendy rationalized, trying to take the scissors back. However, before she could, the unthinkable happened as Celestabellebethabelle suddenly began to stir from her momentary slumber only to spot Mabel and the scissors she was unintentionally gripping the very moment she opened her eyes.

“What?!” the unicorn gasped, quickly rising to her feet. “Doth mine eyes deceive me?! THIEF! You shall never be pure of heart!”

“N-no!” Mabel cried, instantly dropping the scissors as she looked to Celestabellebethabelle pleadingly. “Y-you don’t understand! I-I wasn’t… it was… P-please!” she ended up begging, tears falling from her eyes as she made one final, desperate plea to the outraged unicorn, even though she knew it likely wouldn’t help her now. “I-I just wanna be good like you!”

Celestabellebethabelle was more than prepared to fire off a harsh retort at this, however, right as she was about to, this intense confrontation was suddenly interrupted by a very unlikely pair.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, you’ve gotta be kidding me,” a male voice said, coming from one of the two unicorns that had just emerged from the other side of the glen, one red, one blue, and neither of them looking that amused with Celestabellebethabelle in light of what they’d just witnessed. “Yo, C-Beth, are you seriously pulling that whole ‘pure of heart’ scam again?”

“That is messed up, man,” the other unicorn added, shaking his mane disapprovingly.

“Wait… scam?” Mabel asked, exchanging a confused glance with the others.

“Listen, kid,” the blue unicorn began rather dryly. “Unicorns can’t see into your heart. All our dumb horns can do is glow, point towards the nearest rainbow, and play rave music.” To prove his point, his horn began to somehow play a bout of upbeat techno music, which he could easily switch off at ease.

“Yeah, the whole ‘pure of heart’ racket is just a line we use to get humans to leave us alone,” the red unicorn said with a knowing scoff.

“Guuuuuys…” Celestabellebethabelle whispered nervously as her entire scheme began to fall apart. “Shut uuuuuup…”

“Wait, so… it was a lie all this time…?” Pearl spoke up before breaking out into a bout of triumphant, albeit somewhat unhinged laughter. “Ha! I knew it! I knew she was a fraud! All these years and I was right! It really was just a cruel trick to tear others down all along! Oh, if only Rose was still around to hear this, I bet she’d feel just as vindicated as I do right now!”

However, despite the white Gem’s zealous excitement, not everyone was as elated to hear the truth of the unicorn’s malicious gambit. “All this time…” Mabel began, her voice low and practically shaking with rage as she crushed her list of good deeds in her hands altogether. “All this time I thought I was a bad person, but you’re even worse than I am!” Her anger reached its mounting height as she threw her notepad down hard, her hands in tight fists as she glared at Celestabellebethabelle, refusing to let the deceptive unicorn be the judge of her any longer.

“Ok, fine,” Celestabellebethabelle huffed haughtily, knowing she’d been caught. “So you learned our secret. We’re jerks, ok? We have more hair than we know what to do with, and we keep it to
ourselves just to tick humans off. So, what are you gonna do about it, huh? Huh? What are you gonna do-"

The unicorn was abruptly cut off the moment one of Mabel’s fists made brutal contact with the side of her jaw, instantly drawing some of her sparkling, rainbow-colored blood. Just about everyone gasped in shock in light of this sudden attack, and even Mabel herself was stunned by it as she looked to her own blood-covered hand, one that quickly turned back into a fist as she sent Celestabellebethabelle another hateful glare.

“Woo! Go Mabel!” Wendy cheered, already pulling her axe out of its hoister to join in on the fight.

“Join the dark side!” Grenda yelled, grabbing a nearby log to use as her weapon.

Mabel did just that as she fiercely tore the unicorn stitched onto her sweater off, making it quite clear that her former admiration and respect for the hypocritical mythical creatures was all but completely shattered right then and there. This sentiment of righteous fury carried throughout the rest of the group as well, with Wendy, Candy, and Grenda cheering for the no doubt oncoming fight as Connie swiftly drew her sword and Pearl even went as far as summoning her spear.

“You know, I usually don’t believing in physically harming any of the magical creatures of Gravity Falls,” the white Gem began as her expression slowly changed into a vengeful smirk. “But in this case, I’m more than willing to make an exception.”

“Oh, so it’s a fight you want, huh?” Celestabellebethabelle growled, digging her hoof into the soil below her as her fellow unicorns prepared themselves for the inevitable brawl. “Well, then it’s a fight you’re gonna get!”

Without any further hesitation from anyone, both sides rushed each other, meeting in a violent clash that quickly devolved into boundless chaos. Mabel was initially kicked back clean in the face by one of the unicorn’s hard-hitting hooves, though Connie was quick to swoop in for retribution, slamming the dull edge of Rose’s sword against his head in a decisive move. Grenda had landed one of the other unicorns in a headlock, repeatedly punching it in the face as Candy jumped onto his back and pulled on his hair as he let a heavy neigh of protest. Wendy was the first to get the jump on Celestabellebethabelle herself, only to be nearly trampled underfoot as she reared up high. Even so, she quickly fell back to the ground as Pearl landed a swift, elegant kick to her gut, one that was followed up by Mabel coming in for another punch to her snout. As intense and wild as this scuffle was, none of the girls could really deny that it was cathartic as could be; with each blow or beating they inflicted upon the deceitful unicorns, it felt as though there weren’t just taking out their anger in some much-needed revenge. It felt as though they were righting a grave wrong, breaking out of molds that they saw no reason to belong in any longer, and rising above unattainable standards that never truly existed in the first place. And most of all, they were proving, not just to Celestabellebethabelle, but to themselves, that the content of their characters was no one’s call but their own.

A feat that in and of itself would have been rewarding enough; though socking a sickeningly snobbish unicorn clean in the jaw only made that reward all the better.

As Ford had said, Project Mentum’s mental encryption process worked at an incredibly slow pace, something that Dipper and Steven realized more and more every time they stole a glance back at the screens behind them, which, even several hours later, still only showed its minimal progress at a mere 15%. In fact, it was taking so long that Ford had ended up falling asleep amidst pouring
over his notes, leaving the boys to keeping themselves entertained during what was certainly a very lengthy, very boring endeavor.

“Ok, its my turn,” Steven grinned as he carried on the rather one-sided game of ‘I spy’ they had playing. “I spy with my little eye something… blue!”

“My vest,” Dipper answered immediately, clearly far from invested, especially when compared to the young Gem.

“Oh yeah, you got it!” Steven cheered brightly. “Then again, that one wasn’t that tough since there aren’t a lot of blue things in here.” The young Gem chuckled lightly at this, though his humor died down somewhat as he glanced over to far less enthusiastic friend beside him. “Um… Dipper? Are you ok?”

“Huh?” Dipper sat up a little at this, glancing over to Steven briefly. “Oh yeah, I’m fine, its just… we’ve been at this for hours now and it really doesn’t seem like anything’s actually happening.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, how do we really even know that this thing is actually gonna keep Bill from messing with us anymore?”

“Well, Mr. Ford said-”

“I know what Ford said,” Dipper sighed in growing frustration, especially as he glanced over at his sleeping great uncle a few feet away. “But how does he know? Why does he have to be so mysterious about Bill anyway? The Gems told us what they know about him, so why won’t Great Uncle Ford? He knows we’ve dealt with Bill before, which means whatever he’s keeping from us, I can handle it! I-I mean, we can handle it.”

“Maybe… he’s just not ready to tell us about it yet?” Steven suggested, largely respecting the author’s call on this. After all, given just how brutal and horrific the Gems’ past was with Bill, it only made sense that if Ford’s previous encounters with the dream demon were anything of the sort, that he’d be hesitant to discuss them. Dipper, on the other hand, was not so easily allayed.

“Hm… or maybe…” he trailed off, his sights still set on the author as his thoughts, made audible by the machine he was still connected to, filled in for him. “Maybe you should just use the machine! It’ll show us his thoughts!”

“H-huh?” Steven glanced behind him, somewhat alarmed to see and hear Dipper’s thoughts once more, especially as Dipper himself hardly seemed to pay them any mind. “Dipper, I… don’t know if using the machine on Mr. Ford is such a good idea…”

“Yeah, you’re probably right, we really shouldn’t…” Dipper said in apparent agreement, though his thoughts clearly said otherwise. “Great Uncle Ford won’t have to know. He’s going to tell you anyway.”

“Y-yeah, I’m sure he will!” Steven interjected anxiously. “Which is why we should probably just respect his privacy and let him tell us when he’s ready! R-right?”

“Right, right,” Dipper nodded, closing his eyes pensively as his thoughts continuing unveiling the truth. “No, not right! The more you know about Bill, the safer you’ll be! The more you can help!”

“But then again… it could show us something really useful. You never know.”

“W-well, I do know that I think this is a bad idea,” the young Gem shook his head, his dread
growing more and more by the second in light of his friend’s rather concerning thoughts, especially as they began to take on something of a more frustrated tone.

“Easy for Steven to say, he wasn’t the one who Bill tricked and possessed and nearly killed like YOU were!” Dipper’s expression darkened at this recollection, something that made Steven’s heart and stomach both sink in worry and fear alike. And those feelings only spiked as Dipper slowly removed the helmet, his stream of consciousness finally going silent as he kept his resolved sights on Ford and nothing else. “I’m sorry, Steven,” he said, his voice almost unnervingly quiet as he rose to stand. “But I have to know.”

“B-but-”

“It’ll be just a quick peek, I promise,” Dipper assured, casting a brief final glance back at Steven before carefully and quietly putting the helmet on his still-sleeping uncle. “What are you hiding about Bill…?”

The moment that Dipper finished securing the helmet onto Ford was the moment he got his answer. And that answer was much more horrifying than anything either him or Steven could have expected. For as soon as the device began to read the author’s thoughts, none other than the menacing image of Bill Cipher himself appeared on all of Project Mentum’s many screens, floating amidst a background of his iconic, sinister blue flames and cackling like the madman he was absolutely known to be. Unified gasps of equal fear rose up from both of the boys as Steven shot out of his seat, rushing to Dipper’s side as they watched with wide eyes and racing hearts as Ford’s slumbering thoughts told a story that neither of them ever thought they’d see.

“Where are these ideas coming from?!” A much younger McGucket yelled to a younger Ford, harshly shaking his shoulders as he gave him a look of complete and utter distrust. “Who are you workin’ with?!?”

“Stanford, you HAVE to tell me what’s going on!” Another screen switched to Rose, her expression rife with worry as she spoke to the author just as urgently. “Who is ‘he’? Why won’t you let me help you instead?!”

“Because I don’t NEED you as long as I have him!” Ford shouted back, quite furious with the pink Gem for whatever reason.

The other screens were just as active as they flashed with an array of alarming images. Ford restlessly tossing and turning in his sleep, lost in an apparent torrent of unseen nightmares. Him writing “I’M LOSING MY MIND!” and “TRUST NO ONE!” into journal 3 in frantic, erratic script. The portal, sparking to life as nothing but sheer darkness and devastation lay beyond its otherworldly light. And throughout all this, several different voices joined in, weaving into this disjointed, frightening narrative each in their own unique, disconcerting way.

“My brother is a dangerous know-it-all…” Stan warned, though Ford himself soon cut him off with a warning of his own.

“He would trick or possess anyone-” the author had said and Steven and Dipper hadn’t doubted him. And yet the next scene they saw was more than enough to make them both doubt everything Ford had every said to them.

“Then it’s a deal,” Ford smiled, young and clearly confident as he held his hand out in offering. “From now until the end of time.”

Bill’s eye flashed with some unknown intent as he also extended a hand, one that was aglow with
blue flames as he spoke with faux amicability. “Sure thing! Just let me into your mind, Stanford!”

“Please,” the author’s smile widened, completely oblivious to the danger the dream demon posed as their hands met in a solidifying shake over their ‘deal’. “Call me… a friend.”

The very next thing the boys saw was the result of this deal, Ford himself possessed by Bill, his eyes dark slits against piercing yellow and his voice mingling with the demon’s as they both cackled wickedly together in perfect, awful unison.

While Steven was largely stunned into silence by all this, Dipper only managed to get a few words out himself, even despite his own immense panic as the demon’s telltale maniacal laughter rang in his ears just as much as it had when he had been pulled out of his own body weeks ago. “N-no…” he choked, his voice barely a whisper as he shook his head in disbelief, hoping and practically praying it wasn’t true. “No, i-it… it can’t be… Ford a-and… and Bill?!”

Another sharp gasp rose from both boys as a sudden clamor rose from behind them, and as tense as they already were, they quickly spun around only to find that Ford himself had finally woken up at the very worst possible time. “You shouldn’t have done that…” the author said, his voice low and dark as he slowly stood. By his expression alone it was clear he as tranquilly furious, even though his eyes were obscured by the screens’ bright reflection off his glasses, which only served to make him even more admittedly intimidating as he towered over both of the terrified boys. Even still, Ford hardly seemed to note their obvious fear as he roughly took the helmet off and tossed it aside in his anger. The helmet just so happened to strike one of the many sheets covering the walls as it landed, easily pulling them down to reveal something that only made the boys’ palpable horror skyrocket exponentially.

Hidden behind both layers of curtains and secrets was what could only be defined as an all-out shrine to Bill Cipher. Several statutes prisms and statues of the demon were tucked away into the shadows, almost like twisted idols paying homage and reverence to someone who both Dipper and Steven knew to be an absolute monster worthy of no such honor. But worst of all, the walls were covered in detailed murals depicting Bill’s triangular over and over again, all of his painted eyes seeming to stare down at the frightened boys below them.

“W-what is all this?!” Steven asked, his entire body trembling as he forced himself to look away from the depiction of the demon who had haunted his dreams just a few hours prior.

“W-why… why were you shaking hands with Bill?!” Dipper exclaimed, quickly turning back around to face Ford, quickly glancing around for some means of defending himself and Steven, just in case. Fortunately, the Sword of Seasons was sitting on a table close by, largely since Ford had been tinkering with the invention a bit earlier, and even though the thought of drawing that blade against his own uncle made him sick, Dipper grabbed it nonetheless, as well as the memory erasing gun lying right next to it. “Steven! Grab the rift!”

Steven sucked in a sharp breath at this but he didn’t argue, quickly grabbing the rift off the table next to them, though amidst his rush to summon a bubble to further protect them, he nearly dropped the precious tear altogether.

“Careful!” Ford scolded harshly, his glasses still reflecting gold as he reached out to grab the rift, though he couldn’t get too close thanks to the bubble now surrounding the pair as they began to carefully back away. “Hand me the rift! Now, boys!”

“N-no!” Dipper retorted, trying to sound as brave as he could amidst his mounting fear. “You said Bill could possess anyone so he could get this, but—but you made a deal with him! How do we know you aren’t Bill right now?!”
“Now, just calm down, p-”

“Pine Tree?!” Dipper instantly cut Ford off, finally aiming the memory gun at him as opposed to his sword as memories of constant sleeps plagued with endless nightmares where Bill taunted and teased him with that very nickname flashed through his mind. “Is that what you were going to call me?!”

“I was just going to say please, kid!” Ford rationalized, but even so, his tone was still harsh and cold. By now, the boys had essentially backed themselves up into a corner, leaving them trapped with only Steven’s bubble serving as their only real defense against what could very well be Bill Cipher.

“Great Uncle Ford told me to protect the rift!” Dipper shouted, glancing over to make sure that Steven was still holding it close and tight. “And I’m not about to let you get your hands on it or on Steven’s gem! Get one step closer and I’ll shoot!” He aimed the memory gun up a bit higher at this, with the full intent to fire it off even despite knowing full well what its effects could be. “I’ll erase you right out of Ford’s head!”

“It’s me, Dipper!” Ford yelled hotly, his severity hardly calming either of the boys down whatsoever. “It’s your uncle!”

For the briefest moment, Dipper hesitated at this, his hands shaking as he tried, so very hard to believe that it really was just Ford, that Bill wasn’t using him as his own twisted puppet just as he had been weeks ago. And yet, he knew he couldn’t; because doing so could very well put himself, Steven, and even reality itself at risk. And that was a risk he wasn’t about to take when it came to Bill. Not again, not ever again.

“Steven, drop the bubble,” he said starkly, his tone every bit as shaky as his arms were.

“W-what?” Steven’s longstanding fearful silence finally broke at this, his eyes wide as he clung onto the rift and looked to his friend in disbelief.

“I said, drop it,” Dipper repeated, still not tearing his hardened gaze off of Ford, especially as the author threw his hand down onto the bubble’s pink surface out of anger.

“But that’s-”

“I know.”

“But if you shoot him, then his memories will-”

“I know, Steven!” Dipper shouted back fiercely, finally looking to the young Gem and allowing him to see just how much panic, rage, and sorrow were all mingled into his expression all at once. “Just drop it already!”

At this final, harsh command, Steven found he could no longer argue as he instead pulled the rift even closer to his chest, closing his eyes tightly as he slowly let the bubble disappear, leaving nothing between them and Ford. Nothing that is, safe for the memory gun that was brightly sparking with its erasing light in Dipper’s hands.

“T-trust no one…” he muttered to himself, tears starting to well up in his eyes as he prepared to squeeze the trigger. The author’s own mantra rung true, certainly in a moment like this, when even the person who wrote it himself couldn’t be trusted. And while Dipper had failed before in upholding it, he knew that he wasn’t going to make the same mistake twice, not when so very many things that mattered so much to him were at stake. “Trust no one! Trust-”
“Hand it to me!” Ford demanded, and it was at that moment that Dipper knew he had no choice. On a beat of sheer terror and impulse alone, he squeezed the trigger, the bright beam firing off directly at the author as both boys were knocked back by it. Miraculously, the ray struck Ford clean on his glasses, which reflected it perfectly and sent it bounding across nearly every surface in the entire room. Steven was quick to protect himself and Dipper from it by way of his shield, though as soon as the beam struck it, it ricocheted upwards towards the many screens of Project Mentum, where it finally met its end by breaking every single one of them in the process.

And yet, this brief bout of chaos only gave way to another one. Both Steven and Dipper were quick to act on sheer panic, knowing that Bill could very well still be in control of Ford and out to get them both. Dipper quickly dropped the memory gun and took up the Sword of Seasons instead, yet before he could do anything with it, Ford suddenly grabbed him by the back of his vest, easily hoisting him up into the air. He nearly latched onto Steven’s arm as well, though the young Gem had the wits about him to pull away just in time and run, taking the rift with him. That is, until he heard Dipper’s fearful struggle against the author holding him.

“L-let go of me!” he cried, weakly swinging his sword about in moves that showed no signs of hitting Ford, as far out as he was holding him.

“Dipper!” Steven gasped, stopping dead in his tracks as he hurriedly set the rift aside and ran back towards the action. “W-wait! Stop!” The young Gem cried, completely panic stricken as both the events of a particular puppet show as well as his own haunting dreams the previous night came rushing back to him in an oppressive torrent. “I-I’ll give you my gem! Just please, don’t hurt him again!”

Both Ford and Dipper froze at this, surprised gasps escaping both of them as they looked to Steven with what seemed to be horrified shock. And yet, for as shaken as he was, Dipper used this brief distraction to his advantage, finally landing a blow on the author’s arm with the very tip of his sword. It wasn’t too large or deep of a cut, but it did cut through his coat and sweater and break the skin just enough to catch Ford off guard and force him to drop his nephew entirely. Steven quickly rushed over to him, summoning his shield and tightly grabbing Dipper’s free hand as the two of them stood together, more than ready to defend themselves against the demon who had caused them both so much pain and devastation.

Or, at least they would have been if Bill was actually present there at all.

“N-now, now, just calm down,” Ford advised, his tone much softer as he adjusted his glasses, finally allowing the boys to past the reflective glare. “Look into my eyes, both of you. It’s me, not Bill, I promise you.”

Upon seeing the lack of telltale signs of Bill’s possession, Steven and Dipper both finally let out the heavy breaths they had been holding in, yet even so, they hardly relaxed. Dipper in particular quickly picked up another round of hyperventilating, especially as he caught sight of the bleeding wound torn across Ford’s arm. A wound that he had inflicted.

“I-I… I tried to erase your memory…” he began, quickly dropping the Sword of Seasons as he pulled his hand out of Steven’s. “A-and then I hurt you! I hurt you with the same sword you made for me!”

“Dipper, it’s just a scratch, it’s fine,” Ford tried to reassure as he covered the relatively harmless injury, though his nephew was having none of that amidst his massive wave of guilt and anguish.

“No, its not fine!” he practically shouted, his tears quickly starting to return as he pressed his hands to his head in remnant terror. “I messed up so badly! I used the machine on you without even
asking you about it because I couldn’t just wait for you to tell us the truth about you and Bill for yourself! And then I just had to go and make it even worse just by being dumb enough to believe you were possessed by him!”

“Dipper-” Ford attempted to interject once more, only to be drowned out by the boy’s ongoing hysteria.

“W-what was I even thinking?!” Dipper yelled, his hand now pressed tightly against his chest as his breathing grew even more short and frantic. “How could I be so stupid?! Every time I try to convince myself that I actually stand a chance against Bill, I only end up doing is ruining everything and it just keeps happening no matter how many times I try to fix it! B-but… but there just isn’t any way to fix this… There’s no way to fix me…”

Dipper had just about broken down into a remorseful, painful sob, yet before he could fall apart again, Steven quickly rushed in to help hold him together. He stilled, letting out an almost inaudible gasp as the young Gem suddenly hugged him from behind, wrapping his arms tightly yet securely around him in a steadying, comforting embrace. “You don’t need to be fixed,” Steven assured, his voice a gentle, warming whisper as tears started to well up in his own eyes. “You don’t need to be fixed because you aren’t broken. You’re gonna be ok someday. We’ll be ok. I promise.”

As overwhelmed by his own many mingling emotions as he was, Dipper didn’t offer too much of a response to this reassurance outside of the small, somewhat weak sob he had been holding back. All the same, he did slowly reach up to place his hands over Steven’s, more than grateful for his support and solidarity in a moment such as this. While he wasn’t entirely certain that he’d actually ever truly be ok as Steven had said, what Dipper did want to believe that he did at the very least have a chance at someday moving past all of this lingering fear and dread. And, with someone like the young Gem standing beside him to keep him standing hopeful and strong, that was a belief that he didn’t have too many difficulties holding onto.

Ford let out a long, remorseful sigh as he watched the boys’ embrace slowly break apart, but even so, he largely averted eye contact with either of them, even as he hesitantly spoke up. “Dipper, Steven,” he began rather pensively, clear shame leaking into his tone as he continued gripping his injured arm. “I… deeply apologize for what just happened. I never intended to frighten either of you. But, I can say that if I really had been possessed by Bill, then you both would have done great, especially you, Dipper. I only wish I had been more like you when I was younger…”

Of course, given everything that had just happened, Dipper was quite surprised to hear such praise coming from the author himself. But Ford’s proud smile and comforting hand on his shoulder was indeed finally enough to put an end to his already fading panic attack once and for all as it gave him the realization that, perhaps this time, he hadn’t really made as momentous of a mistake as he at thought. “T-thank you…” he said quietly, somehow smiling in spite of it all.

Ford returned his nephew’s smile briefly, though all too soon it vanished into a look of shame as he glanced up at the countless images of Bill on the walls surrounding them. “I was a fool to hide all this…” he said, a hint of bitterness in his tone as he shook his head. “The reason why I’ve been trying to prepare you boys for Bill’s tricks is because Bill tricked me. It’s the biggest regret of my life. Bill wasn’t always my enemy, you know. In fact, I used to think he was my friend…”
For six years, Ford’s ongoing research of Gravity Falls and its incredible anomalies had been going strong and steady. With the invaluable help of the Crystal Gems, he had unearthed discoveries that would certainly boggle the mind and ensure him a coveted spot in the scientific community once he one day published his findings. Yet even despite this success, the young researcher still craved to know more; he wanted to know exactly why Gravity Falls was such a hotbed for strangeness, where did all of its bizarre creatures and landmarks originate from, how did such unbelievable things even exist in their world at all?

And yet, for all his wondering and all his theorizing, these were questions that Ford never seemed to find the answers to on his own.

Even despite the Gems’ vast knowledge on the oddities of Gravity Falls, they themselves were plagued by the same questions of their origins as well. Which was why, when the collective group had dedicated themselves to uncovering those answers, they all too quickly hit a stark and heavy roadblock in their research. Weeks of intensive thought and pointless leads had gotten them nowhere closer to discovering the truth, and even despite Rose’s warm encouragement and reassurance, Ford was starting to become rather frustrated by his own lack of any concrete findings. If he couldn’t discover just why Gravity Falls was so strange in the first place, then what was really the point of any of his hard-earned research at all? Without a strong and proven theory to back it all up, certainly no one would ever believe his accounts of the paranormal, downright mythical sights the town had to offer. He might as well have packed all of his things up and headed home, a thought he had considered as his hopes running dryer and dryer by the day.

Until…

In order to clear his jumbled thoughts, Ford had, almost randomly, decided to take a break from his research to go on a calming walk through the woods. Bereft of the Gems by his side as he usually was, the author casually decided to venture down an unmarked path he had never taken before, only to happen upon a mysterious, somewhat darkened cave that had never showed up on any of his maps of the surrounding area whatsoever. Curious, Ford ventured inside, with only his lantern light to guide him, only to find something that left him reeling with amazement. The entire cave was covered in ancient markings that likely dated back thousands of years; though they it was somewhat hard to make out, the writing described a powerful being who possessed the answers to all of humanity’s wonderings. And yet, despite such miraculous claims, the cave markings were also quite grave, with dire warnings against summoning this being lest impending doom and disaster strike. All the same though, Ford was desperate; certainly, if such a being did exist and was as wise as these carvings claimed, then perhaps they might be willing to finally provide him with the truth he so intently craved.

And so, with only slight trepidation, the young researcher read the summoning inscription aloud, only for nothing to apparently happen as a result. Disappointed with what he assumed was nothing more than ancient legends and folklore, Ford left the cave, eventually deciding to take a brief rest under the shade of a tree not too far away. Of course, the young researcher hadn’t expected to doze off in the warmth of the afternoon sun, but he did all the same; and as he did, his dreams provided him with what he believed, at least at the time, was nothing short of a miracle.

Needless to say that Ford was quite amazed upon opening his eyes only to find himself floating amidst a vast, peaceful space-scape, one littered with countless stars, notes, lab equipment and even journals quite similar to his own drifting all around him. The young researcher had no idea what to make of any of this as he began exploring this intriguing space, only to be met by something, or rather someone even more bewildering.

“Hiya, smart guy!” Ford spun around with a gasp upon hearing this unexpected voice echoing
through the void, but who he saw was the last thing he could have ever expected. It was a being that was, simply put, a triangle, bright yellow in coloration with only a single slitted eye to emote with and thin black limbs to over the young researcher a friendly wave of greeting. “Whoa, calm down there! Don’t have a heart attack, you’re not 92 yet!”

“W-who are you?” Ford asked, his initial alarm turning into immense curiosity at such a bizarre being.

“Name’s Bill!” he introduced himself brightly with a cordial tipping of his long tophat. “And your name’s Stanford Pines, the man who changed the world! But I’m getting ahead of myself; let’s relax! Care for a game of interdimensional chess?” With a simple snap of Bill’s fingers, a translucent chess board appeared out of midair, along with a comfortable chair on each side of it. “Have a cup of tea!” he exclaimed warmly, materializing a teapot and cup to pour into, one that floated directly over to Ford, who was more than fascinated by this point.

And thus, their friendly game of interdimensional chess was underway, and through it, the young researcher was able to learn a good bit more about his new acquaintance. According to Bill, he was a muse, one who chose to inspire one brilliant mind every century with his boundless knowledge and wisdom. And with apparent excitement in his tone and a playful wink of his singular eye, he cheerfully informed Ford that, impressed by his zeal in researching Gravity Falls, he had selected him to be the one to receive his otherworldly insight next. Of course, the young researcher was elated by such an incredible offer, and, without really thinking at all, he gladly accepted it on the spot.

From that point on, Ford wholeheartedly considered Bill to be his research partner just as much as he did with Rose and the other Gems. And yet, for as excited as the young researcher was by this new alliance, Bill gently cautioned him against informing the Crystal Gems of it, mostly to keep from arousing any distrust or suspicion on their end. While Ford was somewhat confused by this warning, he decided to uphold it nonetheless, for certainly the Gems, as stuck in their rather alien ways as they often were, wouldn’t understand the contract between himself and a higher being such as Bill.

Even so, right from the start, Ford saw the immediate benefits of his newfound deal with Bill. Not too far into their regular meetings within the dreamscape, the triangular being unveiled the very thing the researcher had been looking for: a way to finally answer his longstanding questions concerning Gravity Falls’ weirdness. According to Bill, all of the town’s strangeness leaked into it from another dimension entirely, and the key to discovering that dimension would be by way of a grand gateway, a portal to another world entirely. To this end, he even provided Ford with complete schematics to such a seemingly impossible machine, one that he gladly allowed the researcher to add his own ideas and equations onto to improve it even more. After all, it was as Bill told him: this was how genius happened, and all as a result of a little help amongst friends.

And, for the longest time, that was what Ford fully and fool-heartedly believed.

So construction of the portal began, with the Crystal Gems and Fiddleford to aid Ford on the corporeal end of things while Bill continued to provide his unseen yet very impactful assistance through his dreams. As weeks turned into months, Ford’s determination on the project grew even more determined and intent, especially as Bill regularly reminded him that the portal would certainly give him all the answers he had ever hoped for and then some. To further lend his aid, Bill even volunteered to keep work on the portal going, even when Ford himself was too physically exhausted to persist. By simply allowing his muse to come and go through his mind, possessing him as he pleased, the young researcher saw his productivity practically spike tenfold, pushing progress on the portal along even faster. What Ford didn’t notice amidst his enthralment with the
invaluable help his muse was providing him with, however, were the worried looks Fiddleford often sent his way, the confused whispers between the Gems as they wondered exactly what was going on, the general, unvoiced dread between his other partners in general as they questioned whether or not they were the only ones working with the author on his mysterious portal after all.

And all too soon, they all were quick to discover such worries were not unfounded, in perhaps the worst way possible.

The moment that Ford and the Gems hurriedly pulled Fiddleford out of the finished portal after he was accidentally sucked into it was the moment the author began to suspect something was wrong. However, his alarm only grew when the mechanic and the Gems all angrily quit the project in a huff, leaving him alone with his anxious pleas to Bill, pleas that were only answered by quiet, sinister laughter and a single, ominous message: “The door is open…”

Desperate to know exactly what went wrong, Ford ventured back into the familiar dreamscape him and Bill often met in, determined to get to the bottom of exactly what path his supposed muse had led him on. “Bill!” Ford shouted hotly, rushing towards the triangular being as he lingered before a tear in the space-scape, one filled with vague silhouettes of countless untold nightmarish creatures. “You lied to me! Where does that portal really lead?!”

“Hoho, looks like Mr. Brainiac finally got smart!” Bill laughed deviously as he turned around to face the author, no longer masking his malicious intent. “Let’s just say that when that portal finishes charging up, your dimension is really gonna learn how to PARTY! Right guys?” he asked his apparent ‘friends’ inside of the otherworldly tear, who all simply roared and cackled in a chorus of wicked triumph.

At first, all Ford could do was let out a gasp of shock as he realized just how much of a monster Bill truly was. But blinded by flattery and charming games as he had been, the author had never once considered that the demon planned on tricking him, had been using him as nothing more than a foolish pawn to meet his own destructive ends all along. “N-no!” Ford exclaimed, resolved to fix this incredible mess he had mad. “I… I’ll stop you! I’ll tell the Crystal Gems everything and together, we’ll shut that portal down once and for all!”

“Ha, as if!” Bill rolled his eyes, clearly not taking the author seriously. “You really think Quartzy and those Crystal Chumps are ever gonna trust you again after all this, then you’re gonna be sorely disappointed! All the same, a deal’s a deal, Sixer! You can’t stop the bridge between our worlds from coming, but it would be fun to watch you try! Cute, even!”

At that very moment, Ford awaked with a stark gasp, his eyes wide and his heart racing as he reeled with everything he had just heard. Bill had betrayed him, that much was clear and there was no undoing the massive mistake he had made by even trusting the insane demon in the first place. Which meant that the only thing he could do now was try to minimize the damage before things could get any worse. Acting quickly, the author shut down the portal in the hopes that it would never be active again, lest Bill gain access to the Earth as he so eagerly wanted. From there, Ford quickly filled what he could of his third and final journal with frantic and paranoid warnings concerning the demon and his tricks, even though he planned to hide his research so no one could ever finish the demon’s treacherous work.

And yet, despite these valiant efforts, Bill had been right in the fact that his deal with Ford still very much stood. No matter how much the author tried to protect himself against the demon, Bill still had complete access to his mind, just as they had agreed years ago. Just about any time Ford happened to slip into the depths of slumber, even amidst his growing panic and insomnia, Bill was more than happy to take over, littering the journal with his own inane coded ramblings and even
going as far as to injure his pawn just for fun. In fact, it was in the midst of one of these wild spells of possession that Rose herself happened to discover just how much Ford had really been hiding from her all along.

“Stanford?” the pink Gem called as she entered into the author’s secluded study one chilly autumn day months after their own partnership had ended. “Are you in here? I-it’s been a while since any of us have heard from you and I’m starting to worry if—”

Rose cut herself off with a sharp gasp as she finally spotted Ford, digging a knife into his upper arm as he slowly looked back at her with a huge, uncharacteristic grin of sheer, sadistic glee. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry about Sixer here, Quartzy!” he quipped in a voice that the pink Gem immediately recognized. A voice she had never wanted to hear ever again. “In fact…” His smirk widened as he pulled out the blood-soiled knife. “I’d say he’s doin’ A-ok!”

“I-it… it’s you…” Rose shook her head in disbelief, her voice but a stunned, genuinely fearful whisper.

“Yes, it sure is me!” Bill exclaimed brightly as he began to walk over to the terrified pink Gem. “Right here in the flesh. Or, I guess in Fordsy’s flesh, but since he did decide to let me in whenever I want, I guess you could say it is mine after all!”

“But… but how did you… when did you—”

“Oh, it looks like Sixer really did chicken out about telling you after all, huh?” Bill asked with a knowing glint in his slitted yellow eyes. “Turns out I’ve been the one pulling his strings all along! Dumb old ‘Brainiac’ here let me give him the plans to a certain gateway that I remember someone else promising to build for me way back when. A gateway that’s gonna give me a one-way ticket to your perfect little planet, Quartzy.”

“M-my… t-the portal?!” Rose gasped, overwhelmed with shame and terror at the thought. “N-no… no, you… you tricked him! You tricked all of us, just like you did before! If I had known that you were behind all of this, I would have never allowed Ford to—”

“See, that’s just it, Quartzy!” the demon interrupted smugly. “You didn’t know. No one did, and all because it was so easy to get him to do whatever I wanted. Now that I mention it, that sorta sounds like you, doesn’t it? In that case, you really do belong down here with these dumb old humans seeing as how you’re just as empty-headed as any of them are!”

Rose practically had to fight back the urge to draw her sword upon hearing such callous remarks, reminding herself exactly who the demon was possessing at the moment. “Get out of him,” she ordered as sternly as she could. “Right now.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m leaving,” Bill shrugged casually. “But only ‘cause Fordsy’s about to wake up. In the meantime, have fun dealing with the fact that you’ve basically doomed your precious planet over several times over. See you and that rock you still owe me next time, Quartzy!”

And with that the author’s eyes fell shut, his entire body growing limp as he slipped into unconsciousness. Rose barely managed to catch him before he hit the ground, healing tears already spilling down her cheeks to work on the several injuries Bill had left behind as Ford slowly, painfully awakened.

“Hm… R-Rose?” the author groaned as he opened his eyes to find the pink Gem anxiously hovering over him.
“F-Ford…” the pink Gem whispered, holding back a sob. “Why didn’t you ever tell me a-about… about him…?”

Ford quickly looked away from Rose at this, knowing exactly who she was talking about and not even having to ask how she found out about him. “B-because…” he began, deciding to finally be honest with her. “I was too ashamed to tell you about the terrible mistake I made…”

“No,” Rose corrected, offering a hand to help him up. A hand that seemed to offer so much more than that and then some. “It’s a mistake we made…”

And it was a hand that Ford only barely took. For even though he immediately came clean to Rose about his deal with Bill as well as the demon’s inevitable betrayal right then and there, he still hesitated to trust her any further with helping him in the matter. After all, he had trusted Bill and had seen where that had gotten him. How could he trust Rose, or anyone else for that matter after such a cruel and immense deception?

But in time, he did decide to trust her again, though only for the sake of helping him hide his final journal away. Later he would wish he had only trusted her more, for perhaps if he had, it could have saved him from all of the tragedy and woe that had began following him like a shadow. And yet, he didn’t, deciding to walk alone in his fear and anger and carrying one, single sole resolve all the while.

To stop Bill Cipher’s twisted ambitions. No matter what the cost.

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*Present Day*

“Bill’s been waiting for the gateway to reopen ever since,” Ford finished his lengthy tale, his tone still quite grave as Steven and Dipper tried to take it all in. “All he needs to do is get his hands on the rift. To Bill, its just a game, but to us, it could mean the end of our world…”

“Oh man…” Dipper sighed, shaking his head with immense worry. For so long now he had been preoccupied with the threat that Bill potentially posed to himself and his friends that he had never really even considered just how destructive and devastating the demon’s ends really were. But now, it was clear; if Bill had his way, then certainly nothing would survive, a fact that only served to make both him and Steven alike fear him even more than they already did, if such a feat was even possible.

“Oh man, indeed…” Ford nodded with serious agreement, briefly glaring up at one of the many images of Bill on the surrounding walls. “I know that I might never truly be able to compensate for the foolish error I made in trusting Bill, but I’d still like to think that preventing him from getting that rift is a start. Unfortunately though, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to make up for the brief time I actually decided to trust him over Rose…”

“Why not?” Steven asked with a worried frown.

“Well, simply because I never got around to making amends with her,” Ford sighed rather sadly. “I was so consumed by paranoia and dread at the time that the thought never really crossed my mind to just… apologize to her for all that went wrong between us. I chose Bill over Rose and I completely ruined our partnership and our friendship as a result. I’d easily count that as my second biggest regret because now… well, I doubt I’ll ever get the chance again.”

The three of them were quiet for a long time after this, all of them feel rather small under the
scrutiny of the eyes of the effigies of dream demon on every wall around them. In time, it was broken, again by Steven, whose voice was small, but sincere as he addressed Ford once more. “I think she would have forgiven you…”

The author couldn’t help but finally smile in spite of this, knowing that, even if that forgiveness hadn’t come from the pink Gem herself, it still felt genuine and comforting all the same. “Thank you, Steven,” he said, choosing to believe that if Rose herself was still around, then perhaps she would have said the exact same thing.

An air of solemnity hung between Ford, Dipper, and Steven as they went upstairs, largely since Project Mentum was no longer a viable option to safeguard them against Bill. Their thoughts and worries were still largely on the dream demon, even as they unanimously decided to take a much needed soda break around the kitchen table in what was initially fretful silence until Dipper ended up breaking it.

“Ugh, I’m still so embarrassed about earlier…” he said, clearly bothered by his burst of blind panic in the study. “I’m such an idiot.”

“No, you’re not!” Steven chimed in earnestly. “You were just scared, we both were! At least this time, if we really had been up against Bill, we would have been able to fight him together. Just like we will next time, right?”

“Right,” Dipper said with a small laugh, truly comforted by the young Gem’s continued reassurance.

“Dipper, I can assure you, you have nothing to be ashamed of,” Ford added just as sincerely. “From now on, no more secrets between us. We’re not the first ‘idiots’ to be tricked by Bill, boy. But if we all work together, then we could be the last. And the same thing goes for you too, Steven. For now, I suggest following what the Gems said to protect your gem from Bill at all costs. I’m still not sure how him getting his hands on it would factor into his plans, but we can only assume that if he did get it, the outcome would not be good.”

Steven simply nodded at this, still resolved to do what he could to keep his gem out of the demon’s possession. Even if he did still secretly wonder if his own mother really was the one to promise it away to him or not…

“But… what about Bill?” Dipper spoke up anxiously. “I broke the machine! Now we have no way to protect the shack or the temple!”

“Did somebody say unicorn hair?!” Mabel shouted as she suddenly burst into the room, slamming down a fistful of shimmering, rainbow-colored hair onto the table. Pearl, Connie, Wendy, Grenda, and Candy all filed in behind her, all of them looking much worse for wear with torn clothes, bruises, scratches and various multicolored unicorn fluids covering them from head to toe. Even so, they all wore bright, satisfied smiles, their mission accomplished and their vengeance against Celestabellebethabelle and her deceitful tricks achieved.

“Um… no actually,” Dipper frowned, pushing Mabel’s hand away as she playfully waved the hair in his face.

“Oh. That would have been perfect,” she shrugged before quickly perking up again. “Either way, we got some unicorn hair!”
“Also some unicorn tears, unicorn eyelashes…” Candy listed before Grenda continued, holding up a large, ornate chest.

“They finally gave us this treasure just to get rid of us!” she proclaimed, dumping the contents of the chest onto the table to reveal a massive horde of gold and jewels.

“Not to mention we got to put a very irritating, very unethical unicorn in her place,” Pearl said, crossing her arms with a smug smirk. “So all in all, I’d say it was a very successful day.”

“Also, a pretty weird one, what with that butterfly sting operation and our all-out brawl with the unicorns,” Connie added, rubbing some unicorn blood off her arm.

“Whoa, that’s so cool!” Steven exclaimed, stars in his eyes as he looked to the girls. “I knew you guys could do it!”

“It… can’t be!” Ford exclaimed, just as amazed as he looked to the plentiful clump of unicorn hair Mabel had gathered. “This is a great day, girls! With this unicorn hair, we should be able to completely shield both the shack and the temple from Bill’s mind reading tricks!”

“Is it ok?” Mabel asked, her tone hopeful as she handed the hair over to her uncle.

“It’s better than ok, its perfect!” the author laughed warmly as he placed a proud hand on his niece’s shoulder. “You’ve protected your family and your friends. You’re a good person, Mabel.”

“Aww, thanks, Grunkle Ford,” Mabel smiled, glad to hear it. After all, she’d much rather have the approval and support from those she cared about then some uptight, uncaring unicorn any day.

“But today, I’ve learned that morality is relative!”

Before anyone had the chance to question her on this somewhat bizarre life lesson, Stan suddenly rushed into the room, hurrying past the treasure-laden table and grabbing a plentiful armful of it in his wake. “MONEY!” he shouted wildly as Amethyst ran in after him, grabbing yet another load of treasure with a rowdy laugh and another bout of her somewhat botched Spanglish.

“Viva larga CHASH MONEY!”

Not wanting to waste any more time to risk subjecting themselves to Bill’s tricks any further, Ford and Dipper got to work, Steven and Pearl both volunteering to join them in erecting shields around both the temple and the shack. It was a lengthy, somewhat dull process in gluing the long strands of unicorn hair around the foundations of both structures, with the temple in particular proving to be something of a challenge given its large perimeter and odd structure. Even so, as soon as they were done, a magical shield, covered in mysterious protective runes and symbols, bloomed around both buildings before fading back into invisibility, ensuring that them and everyone within them, would be in no danger from the dream demon’s tricks.

“Perfect!” Ford grinned as they finished up on shielding the shack. “This should protect us from Bill. As long as we’re inside either the temple or the shack, our minds—and gems should be safe.”

“What a relief!” Pearl sighed as she placed a hand on Steven’s shoulder. “If only we had something like this 24 years ago. It would have saved us a lot of trouble, to say the least.”

“Well, who knows?” Steven interjected with an encouraging smile. “Maybe now that we have these barriers put up, there won’t be anymore trouble!”
“Yeah,” Dipper agreed, unable to hold back his own allayed grin. True, Ford had said that the protection spell was only a safeguard and not actually a way to vanquish Bill once and for all. But if it truly could give them a much-needed reprieve from the demon’s mental games and relentless tormenting, then for now, it would be enough. “No more trouble. I’d say that sounds like a pretty good deal.”

Unbeknownst to the group standing outside of the shack, they were all being watched by a familiar, singular eye, one that was carefully observing their every move from his home deep within the unimaginable depths of the horrific Nightmare Realm itself. Bill couldn’t help but let out a mocking laugh as the motley crew celebrated their success, success that he knew was only going to be very short lived if he had anything to do about it.

“That’s what you think, Pine Tree,” the demon remarked, hands held behind his back as he finally looked away from his peek at the shack. “Still, I guess if I can’t possess anyone inside the shack or the temple, then I’ll just have to find my next pawn… on the OUTSIDE…”

At this, the demon’s eye rolled back, a variable roulette of people and Gems alike, either in or around Gravity Falls: McGucket, Lars, Candy, Pacifica, Jenny, Tyler Cutebiker, Mr. Smiley, Lazy Susan, Manly Dan, Sadie, Soos, Onion, Peedee, Greg, Robbie, Lolph, Dundgren, Barb, Jamie, Durland, Blubbs, Kiki, Sour Cream, Preston, Priscilla, Toby Determined, Mr. Fryman, Malachite, Nanefua, Lee, Nate, Ronaldo, Blendin, Connie, Shandra Jimenez, Kofi, Kevin, Grenda, Vidalia, Mayor Dewey, Gorney, Tambry, Yellowtail, Buck, Bud, and Wendy. As far as Bill was concerned, any of them would make excellent puppets to use in furthering his sadistic schemes along.

And fortunately for him, he already had the perfect pawn in mind…
Chapter 59: Peridot in the Wild

Chapter Summary

In which Peridot pisses the magical creatures of Gravity Falls off and... yeah that's about the gist of it.

Chapter Notes

Heyooo so here's a bit of a fun, calm before the storm sort of original chapter before our big ol arc ender. This one is pretty short but a lot of fun all the same (it stars Peridot, what more could you ask for?) So yeah, enjoy! (keyword is CLOD)

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“Log date 6 20 2. This is Peridot, reporting in once more. Despite my best efforts to escape, I’m somehow stranded on this inevitably doomed planet. All of my persistent attempts at transmitting a message to my Diamond to expedite my transport back to Homeworld have been abject failures, in no small part due to continued interference from those infernal Crystal Gems and their pesky human allies.”

Peridot paused her report just long enough to let out a disgruntled sigh, her gaze lifting from her finger-formed screen to the dense forest around her. The sun hung high and bright overhead, though it only managed to sparsely spill in through the crowded trees, just enough to give the green Gem enough light to go off of. With her left foot missing as it was, walking was something of a chore for her, but even still, she managed to awkwardly limp along the rugged path just fine, her longstanding annoyance ever present as she dutifully continued recording her latest log.

“Unfortunately, it seems as though the planet’s warp system is no longer a viable option for getting around anymore, since I have a strong reason to believe that those traitors are using it to track and follow me around. As if taking down my ship and making off with my escape pod wasn’t bad enough…”

“And so I’ve found that I have no choice but to travel on foot. Literal foot since those Crystal Gems also decided to steal my other gravity connector after I forcibly had to detach it in my latest escape from them… All the same, I’m determined to press on and get off this miserable excuse for a planet before the Cluster finally wipes it from existence once and for all.”

The green Gem stopped short once more, glancing around her unfamiliar surroundings, surroundings that were not at all akin to the Homeworld she was so used to. “…I repeat, I am going to get off this planet and get back home… no matter what it takes…”

And on this assurance largely meant for herself more than anyone else, Peridot finished her report,
her screen dissipating back into her usually disjointed fingers as she continued on her way. Despite her bold resolve, she couldn’t deny that she was still rather frustrated, both with herself and with the largest obstacle that had been keeping her from getting safely back to Homeworld thus far: the Crystal Gems. No matter what she did or what method she tried, those rebels always seemed to be right on her tail, undermining her mission every step of the way in a series of interferences that had been ongoing even before she had ever stepped foot on the planet Earth. For reasons completely beyond Peridot’s understanding, those bothersome Gems and the numerous humans that often tagged along with them were intent on capturing her and keeping her from even so much as returning home. And in light of such unending aggravation, the green Gem found herself growing quite fond of the idea of eliminating the roadblock that they posed to her, once and for all.

The only problem (on top of countless other problems) was that she had no idea how to claim such sought-after revenge, even if she could.

Which was why Peridot had no choice but to forge on ahead, hoping that a long-awaited solution to her plight would come to her eventually as she continued her journey. A journey that really had no destination at all, save for Homeworld, though she hadn’t even begun her passage back there yet at all. With the warp pads no longer serving as an option for her, lest the Crystal Gems find and apprehend her, the green Gem had taken to wandering for the past several days, largely not paying much mind to her direction or location. She knew well that such aimless traveling was something of a waste of precious time, but it was really the only thing she could think of at that point. All her other options had been exhausted or ruined altogether by the Crystal Gems. The best she could hope for now was for a brilliant idea, an unexpected miracle, or both.

But, in reality what she ended up getting was even more annoyance to add onto her already palpable amounts.

“Ugh, stupid clump of a planet with its stupid minute organic lifeforms…” Peridot grumbled to herself as she attempted to shoo away the cloud of gnats that had taken to following her around. On sheer luck alone she managed to swipe one of the bugs out of midair, catching its tiny wings between her fingers as she held it close to get a better look. “What functional purpose do you even serve outside of being a complete nuisance?” When the now-dead insect offered her no response, the green Gem simply rolled her eyes and let it fall to the ground before finally chasing off the rest of its kin with a sharp, succinct blast from her finger’s laser. “And I thought humans were annoying… This place is-” Peridot cut herself off the moment her remaining foot stomped down into a rather sizable puddle of mud, splashing dirt all over her otherwise pristine leg. “Augh! Oh come on!” she yelled, hobbling out of the mud so she could clean herself up. “Why anybody would wanna preserve a planet as useless and backwards as this one is beyond me. Those Crystal Clods must be out of their Gems to think this pathetic rock is worth protecting. Well, too bad for them because once the Cluster emerges there won’t be an Earth left for them to protect!”

As caught up in her frustrated rant as she was, the green Gem didn’t even notice the forest behind her begin to shift somewhat, trees bending just the slightest bit as something, or rather reached through them. In fact, Peridot only realized what was happening when a massive hand composed of nothing but shingled tree bark launched out of the tree line only a few feet away from her, easily grabbing a deer that was wandering by before pulling it right back into the woods from whence it came. Needless to say that the green Gem was aptly startled by this, and as the hand disappeared back into the forest, she inevitably ended up tumbling to the ground as a result of the resulting heavy rumbling.

“W-what in the stars…?” she muttered to herself, her eyes wide as she shakily stood to stand. Alarmed and curious, Peridot decided to take a cursory peak into the rather sizable gap the giant hand had left in the trees only seconds ago. However, instead of finding whatever huge figure that
huge hand might have belonged to, she was struck by another bizarre anomaly altogether. Quite literally in fact as a creature resembling both a hawk and an octopus came flying at her, its several short tentacles latching onto her fact as she fell back, straight into the puddle of mud she had stepped in earlier.

“H-hey! Get off me, you freakish clod!” Peridot shouted, frantically trying to pry the hawktopus off her face despite its insistant grip as it continually pecked away at her, screeching wildly all the while. After what seemed like ages of angry struggling, the green Gem finally did manage to rip the creature away, even if it did leave several suction marks all over her face as she tossed the flailing hybrid to the ground, her outrage with its unexpected attack quite clear. “Oh, screeeee yourself!” she mocked the hawktopus as it limply picked itself up and rose to fly off with few further signs of aggression. “And good riddance, you grotesque abomination.”

Regardless of this startling encounter, Peridot was quick to pull herself back together and move past it, turning her nose up at the mysterious woods as she continued on, hoping to not come across any more bizarre, vitriolic creatures along the way. She maintained her haughty manner for quite some time, until she met yet another roadblock, this time in the form of a small wooden sign that she ended up walking directly into.

“OW! Oh, what is it this time?” the green Gem scowled, backing away from the sign to read what it had to say. “‘Now entering Gravity Falls’…” Peridot paused briefly for a moment, raising a cynical eyebrow at this before staunchly moving on. “Uh, of course it does, Doesn’t gravity fall everywhere on this cruddy planet? Why even bother putting something so obvious on a location marker like that?”

The green Gem simply shook her head, the strange logic of the inhabitants of the Earth completely lost on her as usual. Not that she really cared too much to look into them and learn about them; doing so would be an utter waste of time she simply didn’t have. The Earth’s time was running short, which meant that trying to examine whatever resources the planet might have had would certainly end up being all for naught once everything was said and done.

Once again, it wasn’t very long before Peridot was broken out of her ongoing train of thought as she ventured into the threshold of a clearing, one that forced her to stop in her tracks on how bizarre its sole inhabitant was alone. Sitting squarely underneath an inexplicable rainbow was a small, stout creature with a bright, cheery smile, a petite green hat positioned next to an ever-glowing horn, and a multicolored beard and tail as it stood upon four short and shiny hooves. Bewildered by such a sight, Peridot simply stared down at it in complete bafflement for a moment before, surprisingly enough, the creature somehow spoke up instead.

“Top o’ the mornin’ to ya, lassie!” it quipped, maintaining its effervescent, somewhat ignorant grin. “Wha’ brings ya lot out here to this neck o’ the woods, to the magical clearin’ of ye here enchanted Leprecorn!”

“…What?” Peridot asked, completely lost thanks to the Leprecorn’s nigh incomprehensible accent.

“Oy, hold that thought there, lassie, is’ time for me half-hourly trad,” the Leprecorn interjected before brightly closing his eyes and pointing his horn up towards his nearby rainbow. Against all logic, the horn began emitting a rather blaring rendition of ‘Oh Danny Boy”, to which the Leprecorn seemed to absolutely relish, though Peridot was much less amused.

“Riiiight…” the green Gem scoffed, only sparing the Leprecorn another dry glance as she prepared to move past him. “I’m just going to go then… You can just keep doing… whatever it is that’s going on right now…”
And with that, Peridot was more than ready to simply continue on her way and leave the Leprecorn completely behind. That is, until the Leprecorn decided, for whatever reason, to blithely follow after her, continuing its Irish serenade all the while. At first, the green Gem tried paying him no mind save for a brief, bitter glance over her shoulder at him every now and then. But as he went into about his seventh round of “Oh Danny Boy”, she was quickly starting to crumble underneath the immense aggravation the creature was apparently intent on giving her.

“Augh! Will you stop following me already with that incessant noise of yours, you frustrating, unintelligible, over-colorful clod!?” she shouted, towering over the Leprecorn fiercely as he finally paused his music and grinned up at her sweetly before offering a simple, terse response.

“Nope!”

With this, Peridot was no longer able to contain her mounting fury. On a sheer burst of anger alone, she lashed out, swinging her leg forward to kick the Leprecorn away from her, only to end up falling to the ground as a result of her missing over foot to steady herself. As a result, the creature only ended up flying a few feet away, seemingly unharmed and unphased as he quickly trotted right back over to Peridot to begin gnawing on her leg in apparent retaliation. Further outraged by this, the green Gem decided to not hold back, her fingers instantly forming into her laser, which she didn’t hesitate to fire at the bothersome Leprecorn.

This time, it did the trick in launching the creature up and far away from her, sending it hurdling over the trees and out of sight, though not before the Leprecorn shouted out one final Irish quip: “Butter me bagpiiiiiiiipes!”

“Hmph, I’ll do no such thing, you… something-corn!” Peridot crossed her arms as she picked herself up off the ground once more. “That was by far one of the most infuriating creatures I think I’ve ever had the misfortune of dealing with. But… look on the bright side, Peridot; the probability of you running into any similar annoyances around here is likely very low. Or at least… I hope it is…”

Even despite her high hopes, Peridot didn’t get too much of a chance to press on once more before she stopped once again, this time on her own volition as she ventured into an entirely different part of the forest, one that carried an air of magic and mystery in the very air itself. Though somewhat curious of the practically glimmering trees surrounding her, the green Gem’s attention was immediately caught upon seeing the sparkling stone structure afar off in the distance.

“Oh, finally! Civilization!” Peridot sighed in relief, hoping that this landmark could give her something to go off of as to her current location. Not wasting any time, the green Gem began hobbling over to the apparent stony fortress, paying its fancy gold accents and large wooden doors little mind as she prepared to slip in through them, completely unaware of the very disgruntled trio resting just on the other side of them.

“Be careful with that ice pack!” Celestabellebethabelle snapped at her attending faun as he anxiously positioned some ice on her very bruised back. “The last thing I need is spilt ice all over the place. The blood stains are bad enough as it is…”

“Yo, C-Beth, could we get in on some of that ice maybe?” the red unicorn asked as he tended to his own various wounds and bruises.

“Yeah, man, my hoof is KILLING me over here!” the blue unicorn exclaimed, holding up his practically broken foot as much as he could.

“No!” Celestabellebethabelle staunchly refused. “I’M the one who was injured the most yesterday,
which means I’M the one who gets the most medical attention! It’s only fair."

“Pffft, says the unicorn that ticked the pack of humans who beat the stuffing outta us off in the first place,” the blue unicorn muttered, rolling his eyes.

“I HEARD that, Maurice!”

“Ha! You just got called OUT, bro!”

“Oh, shut up, Barry,” Maurice scowled, swiftly kicking Barry right in his injured leg.

“Oh! My leg!”

“Um… excuse me?” Peridot boredly interjected as she stepped into the unicorns’ glen, overall unimpressed by the trio of mystical creatures before her. “Where-”

The green Gem was almost immediately cut off as all three of the unicorns shot to their feet, crowding around her with their sharp horns poised to attack and their shared manners fierce and hostile right from the start. “You!” Celestabellebethabelle shouted sharply. “Y-you’re one of those bothersome Crystal Gems, aren’t you?!"

“What?!” Peridot scoffed, unable to hold back a harsh laugh at the thought. “Of course, I’m not a-”

“Don’t try to deny it!” the unicorn countered hotly. “You have one of those stones on your head, just like the pale brute who came through here yesterday with that rowdy group of mannerless humans! Well, I’ll have you know that since then, we’ve established a strict ‘no Gems’ policy across our entire enchanted realm!”

“Yeah, its on that sign over there!” Maurice exclaimed, pointing over to the sign on the wall that read “Crystal Gems: DO NOT INTERACT”.

“But I’m not a-”

“SILENCE!” Celestabellebethabelle barked, edging her horn just the slightest bit closer to the startled green Gem. “We’re not about to fall for any of your shameful tricks! Now, begone from the mystical glade of the unicorns or ELSE!”

“Oh great, just what I need,” Peridot huffed, rolling her eyes. “More ‘corns’. Listen, I don’t know what you corny clods are on about, but I’m telling you that I’m not one of those infernal Crystal Gems!”

“Oh yeah? And why should we believe you, huh?” Maurice asked, glaring at the green Gem distrustfully. “Why, just yesterday, one of your buddies came in here with a whole bunch of humans, kicked our butts, and stole all our treasure!”

“Well, it was our treasure until we handed it over to them to get them to stop hitting us…” Barry pointed out.

“SHUT UP, BARRY!” both Maurice and Celestabellebethabelle snapped to their innocent companion.

“Anyway…” Peridot spoke up, her tone casual enough as she slowly pushed Celestabellebethabelle’s horn away from her. “You can believe me because I’m actually on the exact opposite side of those Crystal Clods. And by that I mean, the winning side. In fact, if anything, those Gems have been nothing but a nuisance to me since the moment I first made
Upon hearing this incensed proclamation, the unicorns couldn’t help but exchange a round of smug, knowing grins, all three of them largely having the same idea at the same time. “So… you’re seeking revenge against those unbearable Crystal Gems and their human compatriots too, hm?” Celestabellebethabelle asked, her tone much more calm and affable than before.

“Oh, didn’t you hear a word of what I just said? Of course, I am!” Peridot exclaimed, her disjointed fingers curled up into tight fists at her sides.

“Well then, it seems as though you’re in luck,” the unicorn said, shaking her mane gracefully. “From what I’ve heard, their base isn’t too far away from here. Certainly with such close proximity it would be quite easy for you to find your way there and… hm… you know, engage in some much-needed… vengeance, perhaps?”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Peridot shook her head in disbelief at this claim. “You’re telling me that the Crystal Gems’ base is somewhere nearby, completely defenseless and just waiting to be attacked by someone with the proper ambition and resources?”

“That’s EXACTLY what I’m saying.”

For a brief moment, the green Gem took pause, seeming to take such serendipitous news in before breaking down into a delighted, devious snicker. “Aha! This is perfect! All I need to do is make it to those traitors’ base and conquer it as my own like I should have done from the second my ship touched down here on Earth. And then, from there, getting back to Homeworld will be as easy as commandeering whatever resources they previous stole from me to get the Galaxy Warp up and running again! Its so simple, yet so brilliant! I can’t believe I’d never even considered it before now!”

“Yes, yes, that’s very nice and all,” Celestabellebethabelle said, her tone rather dismissive as she began pushing Peridot out of the glen using her horn. “Now run along and get that glorious ‘revenge’ of yours and don’t forget to get a few knocks on those nasty Crystal Gems in for us. And with that, you’re off, never to return to our mystical home again, goodbye and good luck!”

“But wait! I-” Peridot didn’t get a chance to finish as the glen’s gates slammed shut on her the moment she was shoved out of them. Back inside, all three of the unicorns let out a shared sigh of relief as they plopped back to their usual spots on the ground to continue tending to their still-healing wounds, glad to be rid of their unexpected and unwelcome guest.

“Hey, C-Beth, you really think that she has a chance against those Crystal Gems?” Maurice asked after a moment of relaxed silence.

“Are you kidding me? Of course, she doesn’t,” Celestabellebethabelle scoffed incredulously. “I mean, did you even see her, she looks absolutely pathetic with that missing foot and all. I just told her all that to get her to leave us alone.”

“Heh, same ol’ C-Beth,” Barry chuckled. “Once a scammer, always a scammer.”

Unamused by such a callous comment in light of recent circumstances, Celestabellebethabelle quickly retaliated it, landing yet another kick on Barry’s banged-up leg. “Shut up, Barry.”
With renewed purpose in her step, Peridot set out from the unicorns’ glen, heading off in the
direction Celestabellebellebelle had pointed to in the hopes that it would lead her to the Crystal
Gems’ base sooner or later. Despite the rather harsh reception she had received from the unicorns,
the green Gem hardly gave them a second thought, since her thoughts were now all completely
focused on the revenge she hoped was very soon in store for her. In fact, she was so excited for her
upcoming retribution, that she began plotting it out aloud to herself as she trudged along to her now
concrete destination, knowing that she had to have the perfect plan ready to carry out the moment
she arrived.

“So I’ll start by laying low with a careful surveillance operation to pinpoint any inherent
weaknesses or chinks in their defenses,” Peridot mused, tapping away at her finger screen as she
recorded her plan thoroughly. “Once I find a suitable, I think I’ll take the Pearl out first using my
blaster seeing as how she’s clearly the weakest of the group. While the other two erupt into chaos,
I’ll sneak into their base and reclaim my escape pod, using it to crush the Amethyst and that
abomination of a fusion once and for all before rewiring it to function as a proper space-faring
vessel.”

As distracted with her plotting as she was, the green Gem didn’t even happen to notice the several
sets of eyes that had been peering out through the increasing darkness of the forest as the afternoon
sun began to transition into dusk. Eyes that continued following her every move as she traversed
the path through the trees, completely unaware of their watchful gaze.

“And finally, I’ll make quick and easy work of the Steven, the Dipper, and the Mabel before
blasting their base to smithereens and taking off back to Homeworld with no further obstacles or
aggravations whatsoever,” Peridot finished, grinning in smug satisfaction as her screen reverted
back into her fingers. “Maybe if I have a little extra time, I might even track down that irksome
Stepper and make it pay for destroying my attack robinoids!”

The green Gem let out a vindictive chuckle at the thought of such vengeance, still not noticing as
the trees around her began to subtly shuffle, a handful of quiet whispers spreading throughout them,
none of which Peridot heard whatsoever. “All the same, I’m sure that the moment I step foot back
on Homeworld, my Diamond will be beyond impressed with me for taking out the last of the Earth
resistance. I might even get a promotion, my own Pearl! Or even my own squadron of lower-level
Peridots to lead! Who knows? Maybe this whole getting stuck on Earth thing could be the best
thing that ever happened to me!”

No sooner had the green Gem finished detailing her lavish fantasy to herself than she was quickly
broken out of it the moment something fell out of the woods and onto the path in front of her.
Peridot stopped short right before the small lump on the ground before her, one that she curiously
poked at with her finger before it sprang to life and hopped to its feet.

“Oh here we go again…” Peridot groaned, scowling down at the small, bearded man before her. “I
know I shouldn’t even bother to ask this but… what in the name of the Diamonds are
you supposed to be?”

“Schmebulock!” the tiny man proclaimed blithely.

“A ‘Schmebulock’, hm?” the green Gem raised an eyebrow as she picked the gnome up by the tip
of his pointy hat. “Well, at least you’re not another irritating ‘corn’. So tell me, you
‘Schmebulock’, how far away is the Crystal Gems’ base from here?”

“Schmebulock!”

“Yes, yes, I know the name of your bizarre species already,” Peridot huffed impatiently. “What I
want to know is how close I am to exacting vengeance upon my enemies!”

“Schmebulock!”

“Oh forget it!” the green Gem snapped, throwing the repetitive gnome to the ground. “I don’t know why I’m even wasting my time with any of you earth abominations! You’re all just a bunch of infuriating, exasperating, completely useless clo-”

Before Peridot could even get the rest of her insult out, she was suddenly tackled from behind, a massive force shoving her roughly to the ground without any warning whatsoever. The green Gem gasped in shock, but that was all she had time to do before her unknown assailant pulled a large sack over her head, effectively blinding her and gagging her at once. Of course, she struggled against whoever her attacker was, yet said attacker was apparently quite strong as they managed to pin her arms behind her back, tying them up tightly to the point that even her detached fingers were restrained. Peridot continued shouting unheard threats and insults out at her captors, largely believing them to be the Crystal Gems, especially as she felt not just one, but several sets of hands hoist her up into the air and begin to carry her off to parts unknown.

The journey to whatever destination she was being hauled off to seemed to take ages, but by the time Peridot was finally set down into an apparent seat, she was more than a bit miffed with her captors. In fact, she was already spewing several harsh words towards them out, even as the sack over her head was at long last removed.

“And if you think I’m going to go easy on you Crystal Clods for this then you’ve got… another thing… coming?” Peridot trailed off into confusion as she finally caught sight of exactly who her attackers were. And needless to say that as soon as she saw the large group of tiny men who had managed to so easily subdue and kidnap her, she was quite surprised.

“Well, hellooooo there, gorgeous!” the supposed leader of these small men exclaimed brightly as he stood upon the shoulders of two of his fellows. A lush, mushroom-heavy enclosure surrounded them, one that allowed just enough light in from the setting sun for them to see by.

“...What?” Peridot asked, completely lost by such a forward greeting.

“You know, I gotta hand it to you guys,” the lead gnome ignored her to grin to his many surrounding companions instead. “You weren’t kidding when you said this one was a looker. I mean, just get a load of her hair! Its almost as pointy and sharp as our hats are, which is saying something, since they’re all considered to be grade-A weapons!” To prove his point, he tapped the tip of his own pointed hat, only to instantly draw his hand back with a hiss of pain. “Ow!”

“Hey, hey!” Peridot shouted, wiggling a bit to try and get out of the tight ropes still binding her. “I don’t know where all you Schmebulocks get off with attacking and restraining me like this-”

“I DON’T CARE!” Peridot interrupted quite early on into the extensive list of gnomes. “Now, you
listen here, you ‘gnomes’, I’ve had just about enough of you meddling Earth creatures getting in my way. So either you release me this instant or I’ll make all of you diminutive beings pay just as much as I plan on making those insufferable Crystal Gems pay for what they’ve done to me, so get to it right now or suffer dire consequences!”

For a moment, the collective group of gnomes was silent upon such a direct and outraged threat, though a moment or so later, a murmur of approval stirred through the crowd, much to Peridot’s confusion. “Wow! And she’s feisty too!” Jeff exclaimed, quite impressed. “We like that in our future queens, don’t we boys?”

“Wooo!” a rambunctious cheer rose up throughout the rest of the gnomes, all of them clearly celebrating something that Peridot obviously didn’t understand, though she didn’t get a chance to ask as Jeff continued.

“But as for the whole ‘letting you go’ thing, I’m afraid that’s a no can do,” he said, his tone casual and playful as he leaned against the green Gem’s shoulder. “First off, we fixed you up with some extra strength, enchanted troll-hair rope. That stuff’s pretty much unbreakable, no matter how much you try to bust out of it. Second off, we’re in a bit of a… pinch, so to speak. A pinch that you just might be able to help us all out with, sweetheart!”

“I’m not interested,” Peridot huffed, completely opposed to the idea of helping any Earth creature, especially those who so brutishly captured and imprisoned her.

“Well, maybe you will be once you hear us out,” Jeff smirked knowingly. “See, we’ve been suffering from a bit of a queen shortage around here ever since our last one was eaten by a rabid badger. We had our eyes on a few… replacements from time to time, but none of them have really… worked out too well. So… we were wondering if…”

“If… what?” Peridot asked, still not following.

“If you’d marry all one thousand of us and be our new gnome queen for all eternity!” Jeff grinned, kneeling down on the other gnomes he was standing on to offer the green Gem a ring composed of twigs and an acorn. “Sorry this ring isn’t anything too fancy. Our nicer one got blown away in a… leaf blower incident.”

Initially, Peridot said nothing, looking between the ring Jeff was offering her to the massive group of gnomes before her, all eagerly awaiting her response. When she finally did address them, however, she posed a question that none of them had really been expecting. “What’s a ‘queen’?”

“Oh, well, ya know, its… uh… a queen is… hm…” Jeff trailed off, unsure of how to explain.

“Well, the last queen tucked us all in every night,” one of the other gnomes spoke up.

“Yeah! And she made us cookies!”

“Oh, I remember she used to put bandages on my boo-boos!”

“And she cleaned up after all of our wild and crazy game nights!”

“Pfft, you really think I’m going to do all that for you tiny clumps?” Peridot scoffed, turning her nose up at the thought. “You all must be seriously damaged then. I’m much too important to be subjugated into the role of nothing more than a glorified servant for a bunch of.”

“Oh wait! I almost forgot!” one of the gnomes interjected. “The queen also told us all what to do all the time!”
“Oh yeah, that’s right!” another gnome exclaimed. “And we’d do whatever she said, too!”

“Yep! Cause she was the one in charge!”

“….She what?” Peridot asked, suddenly quite curious upon hearing all this.

“Oh yeah, the queen was the boss, no question,” a gnome nodded seriously. “There was this one time when she ordered us to all stack onto each other to form one giant, super gnome so we could attack the neighboring fairy colony for stealing our measuring cups. That’s become one of our signature moves ever since!”

“So… your so-called ‘queen’ is essentially your supreme leader then?” the green Gem pressed intently. “The one who rallies you to battle against your enemies, whoever they may be?”

“Yep!”

“Pretty much!”

“All our queen has to do is point out who to attack and we’ll beat em’ to a pulp for her!”

With this convenient information in mind, Peridot couldn’t help but smirk deviously as she formed an immediate plan, one that would certainly serve her much better than simply trying to do things entirely on her own. “So… suppose I do decide to be your new ‘queen’,” she began, calm and confident. “Then that means I’ll be completely and utterly in charge of every single one of you, correct?”

“Yep, that’s the deal,” Jeff nodded.

“And that also means that I can command you to do anything I please, right?”

“Uh, yeah, that’s right.”

“Which means… if I order you to attack the Crystal Gems and shatter them into itty bitty bits, then you’d have no choice but to do it, right?”

“Um… I-I guess?” Jeff frowned, the other gnomes sharing his worried sentiment as the green Gem started to let out an unhinged chuckle.

“Ha! Then it’s the perfect plan!” Peridot proclaimed triumphantly, completely consumed with her thoughts of vengeance as she looked back to the gnomes with a winning grin. “I choose to accept your offer to be queen under the grounds that you help me lay siege on their base so I can take back what’s rightfully mine!”

“Uh… ok, sure, I guess?” Jeff shrugged, not too concerned with such violent intentions. “To be honestly, those three have always played hard to get with us anyway, so who knows? Getting back at them for all those years of rejection could be kinda fun.”

“Yes!” the green Gem cheered, still laughing manically. “If this works, I’ll be back on Homeworld in no time!”

“Eh, eh, eh, first thing’s first, toots,” Jeff interrupted Peridot’s ongoing revelry. “Before we can go on any sort of revenge rampage, we gotta have ourselves a wedding.”

“Wedding?” Peridot asked, unfamiliar with the concept.

“That’s what I said, and that’s what we’re gonna do!” Jeff proclaimed, snapping his fingers. “Untie
our dear bride-to-be here, boys! She can’t hold the bouquet with her hands strapped behind her back like that!”

At this, several gnomes scurried forward and did just that, finally releasing Peridot from her bonds and allowing her to properly stand once more. “Alright, fine,” she huffed, wiggling her previously restrained fingers around a bit to get used to using them again. “Let’s get this ‘wedding’ thing over with as quickly as possible so can hurry up and get those abysmal Crystal Clods already!”

“You got it, sweetheart!” Jeff winked to the green Gem. “All we gotta do is set up the podium and find a good rabbit to serve as our priest, then we marry every single one of us off to you, then there’s the reception, not to mention the post-reception party, followed by the pre-honeymoon party, the honeymoon itself, and then the *post*-honeymoon party. So I’d say all that chalks up to be somewhere in the ballpark of… 287 days? Roughly?”

“278 days?!” Peridot repeated, absolutely aghast.

“Roughly,” Jeff reiterated.

“I don’t have that kind of time to wait!” the green Gem snapped fiercely. “This planet isn’t even going to exist anymore 278 days from now! I need to attack those Crystal Gems and get back to Homeworld now!”

“Hey, that’s not our problem, toots,” Jeff shrugged apathetically. “You wanna be our queen? Then you gotta go through all the right processes and ceremonies, whether you like it or not.”

“I think I have a better idea,” Peridot scowled, pulling herself up to her full height as she towered over a majority of the gnomes. “I say, we call this pointless ‘wedding’ of yours off, you instant me as your leader and we strike the Crystal Gems’ base immediately! Or else!” To show that she was serious with this demand, the green Gem swiftly formed her hands into her blaster, taking aim at the entire group of gnomes as she charged her laser up to fire at any instant.

In light of the clear danger they were in under the green Gem, the gnomes took pause, all of them looking to Jeff for word on what to do next. And fortunately for them, their leader had a plan, as always. “Well, when you put it like that…” he smiled, snapping his fingers once more as the other gnomes quickly followed his unspoken command. “I think maybe we have an even better idea…”

“Oh yeah?” Peridot scoffed, still keeping her blaster aimed at the gnomes, even as they began to congregate close together. “And what exactly might this ‘better’ idea be, you miniature, half-wit, overly-forward bunch of clo-”

The green Gem instantly cut herself off as the gnomes finished pulling themselves together, all too quickly rising to a height far greater than her own. Together, the gnomes had indeed done as they had described, forming a massive “super” gnome of sorts, composed of the entirety of their number and controlled by Jeff from atop its exceedingly high up head.

“You were saying, toots?” he asked, sending a smug grin down to Peridot far below him.

Though the green Gem’s expression was awash in shock at the imposing monster before her, she still had enough wits about her to put a finger up and take in a breath, almost as if she was going to say something. Inevitably though, she didn’t, instead wisely opting to flee from this newfound danger almost as soon as she saw it. Swiftly turning on her one remaining heel, Peridot sprinted (or rather hurriedly limped) off in the opposite direction, knowing she was far too outnumbered and overpowered to try and fight back against the gnomes with just her blaster alone.
“Wha—Hey! Get back here and be our wife!” Jeff shouted, commanding the mass of gnomes to run after her. Peridot nearly lost her footing from the rumbling steps of the gnome monster behind her, but even so, she maintained her footing and hurried out of the cave, not even caring about her direction whatsoever as she ran and only occasionally looked back at the beast still in hot pursuit.

“C’mon! Don’t you play hard to get too!” Jeff goaded somewhat angrily from his high perch. “I promise, as soon as we get done with all of the parties and honeymoons and everything else, then we’ll go get that sweet revenge of yours.”

“If you had your way, then by time we’d actually get around to doing that, this entire planet and everything on it would be gone!” Peridot shouted back just as fiercely, though as she did, she was quick to notice that the gnomes were quickly starting to gain on her. In fact, they were getting so close that their large, collective hand soon started to swipe at her in an attempt to capture her once more, though the green Gem narrowly managed to dodge their grasp.

After another such closer call, Peridot decided that her lack of two feet was really getting her nowhere fast in this frantic escape. Which was why, as the gnomes went in to try and grab her once more, the green Gem quickly threw her arm up, her fingers starting to spin rapidly until they were moving fast enough to propel her upwards. Peridot kept herself small and scarce as she helicoptered up and away from the gnomes, finally getting higher than they were, though it was clear that they didn’t intend on giving up so soon.

“Whoa, hold on there! You’re not getting away that easily!” Jeff exclaimed, commanding the gnome monster to point directly at the fleeing green Gem. At this, several smaller gnomes shot out from the monster’s hands, their sharp, pointed hats all aimed directly at Peridot as she sailed through the air. With a panicked gasp, the green Gem haphazardly maneuvered herself out of the path of most of them, save for the one gnome that managed to directly strike her in her other shoulder, sending her flying completely haywire all over the place.

“Ow!” Peridot cried, sparing a brief glance back at the gnomes as she tried her best to right herself. “Leave me alone, you puny pebbles!”

“Not until you agree to be our queen!” Jeff shot back just as harshly. “We seriously need one, in case you haven’t noticed! Can’t you see how desperate we are for love?!”

“A bit too desperate if you ask me!” the green Gem retorted, only to be struck by yet another gnome. This one hit her directly in the back, and it was enough to send her plummeting, her helicopter fingers no longer able to sustain her as she fell directly into the thick of the woods, crying out fearfully all the while. Fortunately, as she landed, several tree branches cushioned her fall on the way down, though only barely as she still hit all of them before finally dropping into a dark, crowded clearing. Still, Peridot barely even had a moment to gather her bearings as the gnome monster’s booming footsteps echoed through the surrounding area, accompanied by Jeff’s rather grating, very persistent call.

“Future wife, are you still out here?!” he shouted from some unknown distance away as Peridot rushed to hide herself out of sight behind the nearest tree. “If you come out, we’ll let you pick our honeymoon spot! Well, as long as its not some beach or something. Sand and gnome beards to not mix!”

Peridot waited for what seemed like ages, not even daring to move an inch until the gnome monster’s rumbling sounds finally faded off into the distance. At last, the green Gem finally gave herself time to let out a sigh of relief over her daring escape, barely even noticing the several twigs and leaves sticking out of her hair, the multiple rips and tears on her bodysuit, or the copious dents in her lower arms and legs.
“Ugh… stupid gnomes…” Peridot grumbled to herself as she set off once more, limping more now than ever. “Stupid unicorns… stupid leprecon… stupid everything!” The green Gem let out another severely aggravated sigh as she brushed some of the dirt off her chest, though clearly there was still plenty left everywhere else. “Nothing on this worthless planet makes any sense! Its inhabitants, from the humans, to the Crystal Gems, to… whatever kind of creatures I’ve been encountering lately, are all completely infuriating! It will be a relief to watch the Cluster destroy this miserable place once and for all so I’ll never have to so much as think about it ever again!”

As frustrated as the green Gem currently was, she still forced herself to regain some semblance of calm as she remembered exactly what her current objective was: to find the Crystal Gems and make them pay for trapping her on this loathed planet in the first place. In her eyes, this feat alone would make all of the annoyance and toil she had been through to get there more than worth it. And yes, as she continued along in pursuit of this vindictive scheme, she gradually began to realize something alarming: the events of her capture at the hands of the gnome as well as the trajectory of her sudden, disastrous landing more than likely sent her far off the path the unicorns had set her on towards the Crystal Gems’ base. Which meant…

“I’m lost…” Peridot stopped short, her jaw dropping in disbelief as she looked around the dark woods surrounding her. Night had finally fallen in full, casting everything in dark, ominous shadows and leaving only the pale green light that the gemstone on her forehead had to act as a guide. Other than that, there were no makers telling her where to go, no signs indicating any sort of direction, no leads to off of whatsoever. And as the green Gem came to grips with that, a certain sort of despair, one that she decided to express in the only way she really knew how: through a log.

“L-log date 6 20 2… a-again…” she began uneasily, her screen materializing as she slowly moved to lean against a nearby tree. “I’m… still no closer to getting off this awful planet than I was before and… and to be honest, I’m not really sure how things could get any worse than they currently are now. I’ve wandered around this infernal forested biome for what seems like eons and all I have to show for it are a bunch of encounters with several strange, hostile creatures who, as far as I’m concerned, shouldn’t even exist, much less function as they do!”

Peridot paused for a moment, glancing up at the woods around her just as she barely spotted what she thought was a shadow, though it disappeared much too quick for her to even catch. Somewhere in the far off distance, a group of manly, rowdy shouts rose up from a group of manotaurs on the hunt, though the green Gem had no intention of going to see them for herself. In fact, she hardly even cared to acknowledge the large, rather majestic creature that was something of an elegant mix between an owl and a dragon that suddenly glided through the clearing swiftly and silently before disappearing back into the forest. Really, after the harrowing day she’d just had, it’d take a lot more than that to startle or surprise her at this point.

Of course, the dragon-owl deciding to land its droppings squarely on her shoulder as it passed by did catch her off guard quite a bit.

“Ugh…” Peridot groaned, flicking the unsavory substance off of her. “Its official. I hate everything about this planet. Still…” She sighed sadly as she brought up an image of Homeworld on her touch screen. “It seems as though I’m doomed just as much as everything else here. Why am I even kidding myself at this point? I’m never going to make it back to Homeworld in time and its all because of those enraging, interloping, despicable Crystal Gems! I would have never even came to this planet in the first place if not for their constant interference with my mission! But even I could have never guessed that they’d crash my ship and trap me here to die along with the rest of them! This is all just a game to them, and it’s a game they’ve clearly won since I’ve done just about everything in my power to leave the Earth and return home! But… nothing’s worked…”
Peridot’s finger screen split at this, her log officially coming to an end, though she still continued talking, more to herself than anyone else as she slowly slumped down to sit against the side of the tree. “My Diamond’s not coming to get me… No one is… I really am stuck here, for however long the Earth has left… And its time I finally accept that. Its hopeless… I’m finished…” The green Gem was unable to deny the hint of genuine grief mixed with fear as she leaned her head back against the tree so she could get a proper look at the clear night sky above her. She was almost on the verge of tears, completely and absolutely dejected, especially as she caught sight of the distant star she knew to be Homeworld, which, as she sat there, alone and sad in the dark, seemed so very close, but was ultimately still so very far away. “Still…” she said to herself, a single tear finally falling out from under her visor as she submitted herself to her eventual dark fate. “What I wouldn’t give to be there again, even just one final time…”

Peridot continued to stare up at that far off star for quite some time, the nighttime noises of the forest filling in for her despondent silence. For the briefest of moments, the green Gem almost felt herself relax amidst the sounds of the easy breeze wafting through the trees, the crickets chirping somewhere in the distance, and the glistening radiance of the stars up above. However, this relative calm was not destined to last. For just as Peridot was almost starting to enjoy it, she happened to steal a glance down at the ground below her, only to gasp in shock to realize that the color had all but drained from it. This odd phenomena continued as greyscale filled all of her other immediate surroundings, from the trees, to the grass, to even the night sky above. Startled, by this, the green Gem quickly hopped to her feet, spinning around to investigate the now colorless tree behind her. She didn’t get to look for very long however, before she was caught off guard once again, this time by a simple tap on her shoulder. Not wanting to take any more chances with any potentially hostile magical creatures, Peridot swiftly turned back around, her fingers already formed into her blaster as she faced whatever was behind her. Yet, as for exactly what was behind her was perhaps the very last thing she could have ever expected.

“Heya, Greenie, how ya doin’!? ” the bizarre triangular being greeted with a bright salute as he floated apace away from her. “Wait, I don’t need to ask you that since I’ve basically been watching you all day, and lemme tell you, based on what I’ve seen, the answer to that question is: not too hot. Ha!”

Needless to say that Peridot was easily caught off guard by this being’s sudden and bewildering appearance, which was why she maintained her blaster as she gave him a cold, scrutinizing glare. “And who exactly are you supposed to be?”

“Who am I?” the dream demon repeated in faux offence. “I’m none other than the one and only Bill Cipher, duh!”

“…Who?” Peridot asked, still staying on the defensive, despite Bill’s apparently upbeat tone. “Come on, Greenie, I’m shocked you’ve never heard of me,” Bill remarked as he easily circled the green Gem. “After all, we’ve got a LOT in common!”

“Oh really?” Peridot asked, eyeing him suspiciously. “Like what, exactly?”

“Well, for starters, there’s that incredibly handsome shape we both have going on,” the demon quipped, snapping his fingers to outline a glow around Peridot’s triangular hair.

“Are you referring to the uniformly angular shape of my hair?” she asked, picking a stray twig out of it.

“Sure am! Looks mighty familiar, doesn’t it?” Bill asked, pointing to his own triangular form.
“Hm… from a purely geometric standpoint, I suppose,” Peridot mused, gradually lowering her blaster. “Though even so, that’s highly coincidental considering you’re a… whatever it is you are.”

“I’ll tell you what I am, Greenie, I’m the answer to all your problems!” the demon exclaimed, gliding up a bit higher with a showy flair.

“I… highly doubt that…” the green Gem remarked, quite unimpressed by Bill’s chipper presentation thus far. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go wallow in misery elsewhere.” Peridot prepared to press on, refusing to let herself get distracted by another bothersome pest from the surrounding area given her last several aggravating encounters. However, Bill apparently wasn’t content to simply let her move past him so easily, which was why he somehow managed to shift her position entirely on simply a whim, knocking her back right to where she had started in what seemed like an instant. “W-what the-?!”

“Hey, what’s the rush, Greenie?” Bill asked, pulling his cane out of nothingness as he spun it around playfully. “It’s not like the Earth’s about to explode from the inside out or anything, is it? Oh wait, yeah it is!”

“Wha-” Peridot gasped, her eyes wide with surprise as the demon laughed callously over this grim fact. “H-how do you know about-”

“Please, Greenie, I know just about everything there is to know about this boring blob of dirt,” Bill rolled his eye. “Including that big, bad ‘geowepon’ your dear ol’ Diamond shoved into its crust centuries ago! Heck, it’s been down there so long that I’m surprised it’s not common knowledge by now, but then again, most of the meatskins on this planet are about as dense as they are easy to maim.”

“Ugh, tell me about it…” the green Gem groaned, still exasperated by her previous encounters.

“Still, kid, you’re so ready to just run off that haven’t even given me a chance to mention the OTHER thing the two of us have in common.”

“And that would be…?”

“We both wanna see a certain group of Crystal Chumps shattered right out of existence, if you know what I mean…”

Peridot stilled at this, her surprise growing even more upon hearing such a bold, yet relatable claim. A claim that she couldn’t help but seek a follow up on, even if she had no idea where that follow up might lead. “Let me get this straight,” she began evenly enough. “You want to get rid of those impertinent Crystal Clods too? Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Bill asked with a hint of genuine aggravation towards the Gems in his tone. “Because they’re a bunch of pain in the neck goody-two-shoes! Not to mention… Well, let’s just say there’s this special little… trinket one of their human pals has that I’d really like to get my hands on. Most of those chumps don’t even know about it yet, but the minute they find out about it, it’ll make getting it ten times as hard for me.”

“Hm, sort of sounds like my escape pod that they rudely decided to steal for themselves without any kind of thought or reason whatsoever,” Peridot noted, not particularly caring too much about whatever the specific ‘trinket’ Bill was describing actually was.

“Yeah, just like that!” the demon exclaimed with a thumbs up. “Good news is, I’ve cooked up the PERFECT plan to finally crush those Gems like the bugs they are once and for all. And, since
we’re both barking up the same tree with that whole goal, Greenie, I decided I might as well see if you wanted to jump in on that plan with me and knock them and their little human buddies out for good. After all, its like I always say; two triangles are better than one!”

“That is an… interesting proposal…” Peridot said, genuinely intrigued by the thought of teaming up with someone who already had a concrete plan in mind to get rid of her continual foes. “What exactly did you have in mind?”

“Well, I can’t tell you all the juicy details JUST yet…” Bill said, his tone ever cheerful, even as a hint of malice began to enter it. “But what I CAN say is that if everything goes off without a hitch, not only will we wipe those ‘dangerous rebels’ off the face of the soon-to-be non-existent Earth, but I’ll make sure you have a one-way ticket, all expenses paid ticket back to Homeworld, Greenie!”

“What?!” Peridot gasped, completely floored by such incredible news. “Y-you can get me back to Homeworld?!”

“Yep! And it’d be real easy too!” the demon assured cordially. “All I’d need from you is your help in snuffing out those Crystal Chumps, which, hey! You were gonna do anyway, right? So, its like you’ll be killing two birds with one stone! Or, I guess in an analogy, you’d actually understand, Greenie, it’d be like killing a bunch of stupid pests then making it back home just in the nick of time to watch this planet go KABOOM!” At this, a loud, violent explosion seemed to rattle the entire clearing, throwing Peridot to the ground as she shook her head to clear it from the now settling din.

“A-as… interesting as all that sounds,” Peridot began, slowly and shakily rising to stand again. “I’d still like to know what specific methods we’d be using to obliterate those traitors before simply diving right in.”

“Oh, a ton!” Bill said as though it was obvious. “Me and Yellow go WAY back, back to before you were even a pile of unformed minerals in the ground, Greenie! She trusts me for just about everything, you know. I’m sorta like her eye in the sky when it comes to this hunk of rock here. Both literally and figuratively!” The demon laughed as his singular eye flashed brightly, illuminating the entire clearing for a brief moment before retuning it back to colorless darkness.

“But that doesn’t make any sense!” Peridot shook her head dismissively. “My Diamond is flawless, a pillar of order and reason. Two things that a being like you clearly doesn’t possess.”
“Aw, thanks, Greenie!” Bill quipped, genuinely flattered.

“A-and besides! There’s no possible way you could be in alliance with my Diamond,” the green Gem staunchly concluded. “Because if you were working with my Diamond, then certainly her loyal court, which includes me would have heard about it! Which, for the record, up until now, I certainly haven’t.”

“Which is totally your loss, kid, I’m a pretty interesting guy to know!” the demon chuckled, amused by Peridot’s frustration. “Still, you’d be pretty darn surprised by all the things Yellow’s never told any of you lower level grunts. Guess it goes to prove that even Diamonds aren’t completely transparent, ironically enough.”

“But-”

“Eh, but enough about boring ol’ Yellow,” Bill interjected quickly. “Let’s get back to talking about our plan to turn those Crystal Gems into Crystal DUST. Now, this is probably the best bargain you’re gonna get anywhere around here, Greenie, what with the whole free ride back to Homeworld and everything bundled right in, so what do ya say?” The demon extended his hand at this, alight with bright blue fire as Peridot took an anxious step back from it on instinct alone. “Would you rather be stuck here on this miserable rock until it’s finally wiped clean outta this galaxy or do you wanna get even with those Chumps and finally get back to where you’re supposed to be? Its all up to you…”

At this stark, heavy offer, Peridot naturally hesitated, her gaze captivated by the azure flames before her as she took a moment to carefully mull it all over. What Bill was promising her sounded like an absolute dream come true: a chance to take out the Crystal Gems and to get off this doomed planet all in one fell, easy swoop. On that simple aspect alone, the green Gem was almost very inclined to take this deal right then and there, no questions asked. And yet… she couldn’t help but wonder exactly what the demon intended on doing on a practical level to off the Gems and send her home. By all accounts, he had been very terse and vague in his explanations, not giving her very much at all to go off of save for mere promises alone. Promises that she didn’t even know would carry any actual weight at all.

And then, of course, there was the matter that Bill was apparently in league with her Diamond. It was a bold, audacious claim, one that Peridot wasn’t sure if she completely believed, given how stern and solitary Yellow Diamond usually came across as to her. Certainly, a being as radiant, powerful, and wise as a Diamond wouldn’t need the aid of someone as rowdy, ill-mannered, and chaotic as a dream demon. And certainly, if her Diamond wouldn’t need the help of a demon, then Peridot saw no reason as to why she’d need to seek his help out either. Which was why, despite all of the lofty promises Bill had made to her, she ultimately, coldly gave him her answer.

“I… think I’ll make do on my own, if its all the same to you,” the green Gem said, pulling her hand away from the one the demon had presented to her.

“Well, hey then, no worries!” Bill retracted his own hand, his manner surprisingly still bright and amicable, despite this rejection. “After all, if anyone’s equipped enough to handle a bunch of dull ol’ ‘clods’ like those Crystal Chumps, then it’s you, Greenie!”

“Wait… really?” Peridot asked, surprised by the demon’s apparent confidence in her.

“Really!” the demon confirmed. “But still, if you DO find yourself needing a hand in breaking a few of those rebellious space rocks, then my offer’s always on the table! All you gotta do is ASK.” Bill’s tone turned startling dark and ominous at this, enough to elicit a small gasp of surprise out of Peridot before he quickly resumed his usually cheery ways. “Oh, by the way! Here’s a free tip:
that fancy temple of theirs is actually right through that bunch of trees over there.” He pointed out a thicket only a few feet away from them. “Figured I’d give you a decent head start on that good old fashioned ‘revenge’ of yours, right?”

“O-oh… well, um… that’s… much appreciated,” the green Gem nodded gruffly, unsure of how to properly thank the demon for such genuinely valuable intel.

“Anything for you, Greenie!” Bill exclaimed as he rose high into the sky above Peridot. “Well, I gotta run. Still, I have a feeling I’ll be seeing you again VERY soon. Just remember, that if you’re ever in a pinch, just call your good buddy Bill to bail you out. I’ll be there in a SNAP!”

With a swift snap of his fingers, the demon completely disappeared and the world instantly reverted back to its usual nighttime color pallet. Peridot gasped by the suddenness of it all, still largely bewildered by her rather bizarre encounter with Bill alone. Still, out of all the strange creatures she had encountered over the past several hours, he was by far the least irritating. And that was saying something, since the demon was, in fact, rather annoying on his own.

Still, the green Gem cautiously decided to heed his directions, making her way over to the small break in the nearby trees in the hopes that it would finally lead her to the Gems’ base. All the while, however, she couldn’t help but wonder exactly what might have transpired if she really had taken Bill up on his mysterious offer. Would he have really gotten her back to Homeworld, or would he have just ultimately left her high and dry like everyone else around these parts seemed to have done? Peridot supposed she’d never really get a chance to know, though she did hold onto the fact that Bill’s offer did still apparently stand. Not that she thought she’d ever really need to take him up on it but still, it was the thought that counted.

At the same time, the green Gem couldn’t really get the thought of the demon and her Diamond working together out of her mind either. The thought seemed completely preposterous and out of the question, yet some small part of her still wondered if it could somehow be true. Yellow Diamond was a reliable, logical leader, yes, but she was also known to be somewhat distant from her Gems, ruling over them with a tight, authoritarian fist, but never really engaging with too many of them on a personal level. Perhaps, as a ruler, she could harbor a few secrets or alliances she kept hidden out of her court’s sight for their own good, but why then would she hide her dealings with someone like Bill away? What would even be the point of that? Why wouldn’t Homeworld, or at the very least her own Gems, be allotted to such simple, unassuming information?

These were all questions that Peridot had no answers to, nor did she believe she needed to have answers to them because she was still quite confident in the fact that Bill had completely fabricated such an alliance from the start. Crafted it as a way to draw her into agreeing to his terms, so to speak. It was a clever argument to be sure, one that the green Gem nearly fell for, but even then she was much too wise to be fully duped by it.

Still, Peridot was quick to put such worrying thoughts aside as she finally peered through the trees, a wide, excited, admittedly relieved smile spreading across her face at what she saw. Though a small, ramshackle shack rested in the darkness immediately before her, just up the hill from it was a structure she instantly recognized from her initial landing on Earth weeks ago: the Crystal Gems’ temple itself, standing tall and proud over the surrounding area, completely unsuspecting of the intruder it was about to receive.

“Yes!” Peridot cheered to herself in an triumphant whisper, knowing that her long, aggravating struggles were finally, finally about to come to an end. She was going to eradicate the Crystal Gems and their human allies like the simple nuisances that they were, she was going to repair the Homeworld warp, and she was going to make it back to Homeworld at long, long last. And most of
all, she was going to do it all on her own, without any help from unicorns, gnomes, or demons alike. “Prepare yourself, you Crystal Clods… Because I’m about to settle this, once and for all…”
Despite the unseen, protective barriers recently erected around both the Mystery Shack and the Crystal Temple, an air of uneasiness still hung over both structures, or rather, over most of the residents therein. Though Ford had given them all the firm reassurance that the barriers would certainly keep Bill’s presence out of their minds, both the kids and the Gems still had their fair share of apprehension regarding the sinister demon’s plans and agenda, whatever they might be. In fact, since they were all so unanimously worried about what Bill might possibly do next, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel had unanimously decided to lean on each other for support and steadiness during such uncertain times. While they weren’t exactly positive that it was really doing them any tactile, proven good, the kids still found it comforting to linger close to each other, ready to both protect and relieve each other, whenever the need might happen to arise. It was for that reason that the trio had taken to alternating back and forth between staying down at the shack and up at the temple in an unofficial marathon of sleepovers, largely for the sake of warding off potential nightmares more than anything else. And as far as they knew, so far this circle of protection they had erected under the already substantial magical barriers they were secured within seemed to be working well enough.

For now, at least.

So it was that the trio had settled in at the temple, their pajamas donned and their nightly routines just about wrapped up. Steven was the last to finish, emerging from the bathroom with his usual upbeat manner more or less intact as he warmly addressed the twins. “You know, you guys, I was thinking that we should really do this whole lowkey slumber party thing more oft—um… is… everything ok in here?” he asked, stopping short upon taking in the sight before him.

Mabel was sitting on the couch alongside Lion, her face fully shoved into his fluffy pink mane, though there was nothing too out of the ordinary about that. What was rather concerning for the young Gem, however, was Dipper, who was positioned by the window, the Sword of Seasons held loosely in his grip and his thumb ready to switch the elemental dial on its pommel in an instant as he stared intently at the night sky. Almost as if he was searching for something, or rather someone. And of course, that someone was something Steven knew he didn’t even have to ask about as he slowly went over to join Dipper near the window.

“Dipper… w-what…” the young Gem trailed off, letting out a small, sad sigh as he noticed that his friend hadn’t even so much as glanced over at him. “A-are you… ok?”

For whatever reason, Dipper didn’t provide an answer right away, his thumb still only barely skimming the button on his sword as he continued surveying the darkness outside. When he finally did answer, however, he still didn’t look away from the window, his manner just as tense as it had
been for the past few days alone. “Steven, I’m–”

“Sure he’s ok!” Mabel interrupted, finally pulling herself away from Lion a bit. “If by ‘ok’ you mean he’s been staring out that window with his sword ready to whack someone pretty much ever since we got up here, then yeah, he’s just okey-dokey!”

“Mabel!” Dipper snapped, finally looking away from the window to send his sister an exasperated glare. “I’m not just staring out the window! I’m keeping an eye out for… you know…”

“For Bill?” Steven asked, his brow furrowing with worry. “Dipper, you don’t have to do that. Mr. Ford said that unicorn hair spell will finally keep us all safe from him!”

“That’s what I tried telling him,” Mabel said, flopping back onto the couch. “But as usual, he’s just gotta be ‘Mr. Paranoid’ all the time…”

“I’m not being paranoid, I’m being careful,” Dipper corrected pointedly before letting out a tired sigh. “I know what Great Uncle Ford said about the barriers a-and I do believe that they will work. But… it feels too… easy.”

“Easy?” Steven frowned, confused.

“Yeah, you know, it just feels like this whole thing isn’t over yet,” Dipper explained intently. “I find it pretty hard to believe that stopping someone as crazy and powerful as Bill only takes a few strands of unicorn hair. Even if he can’t get into the shack or the temple anymore, he’s still out there, planning… something! And if any of us so much as step foot outside of the barriers at all, then there’s pretty much nothing we can do to protect ourselves from him!”

Upon hearing Dipper’s rather pertinent fears over the matter, Steven was actually rather inclined to share them, despite his hopes that they might not carry any weight. Still, they did make sense; the barriers only protected those who were inside the safety of the temple or the Mystery Shack. Anything or anyone outside of those circles of security would still be completely vulnerable to Bill’s devious tricks and deceptions, including them any time they simply ventured outside of those barriers themselves. It was an alarming, rather disheartening thought that there were only two places where they could truly be safe from the dream demon and his dark designs, and because of that thought, Steven could certainly understand where Dipper’s palpable dread was coming from.

Yet surprisingly enough, Mabel ended up being the one to bring some much needed logic and steadiness to the boys as awash with worry and apprehension as they were.

“Well, then it looks like we just gotta do what the Gems told us to the other night and be careful,” she suggested, getting up from the couch to head over to the fretful pair. “As long as the three of us stick together, then there’s no way any of us will fall for Bill’s dumb old tricks again, right?”

A beat of uncertain silence passed at this as Steven and Dipper exchanged a tentative glance, both of them internally debating with themselves as to whether or not to hold onto such a solid reassurance. All the same, Steven was the first to accept it, deciding to believe that the support of his friends would be enough to ward off the dream demon even when spells and barriers couldn’t.

“All right,” the young Gem nodded firmly, wearing a soft, encouraging smile that he offered Dipper in turn.

Of course, while Dipper wasn’t as eternally optimistic as both Steven and Mabel tended to be, he still found it rather hard to not join in on their shared solidarity and hope. After all, they had warded Bill off before by standing together; who’s to say that they couldn’t do it again? “Right,” he said with a relenting, yet relieved sigh as he began to follow Steven and Mabel back over to the living room. All the same, he did stop short briefly once more to spare one final glance back at the
darkened window before calmly, easily sheathing his sword for the night.

With their nighttime preparations complete, none of the kids saw much of a reason to stay up any later than necessary. So Mabel nestled up against Lion on his spot on the floor, using him as a pillow of sorts as she cuddled Waddles close under her soft blanket while Dipper took up the open spot on the couch. Steven climbed up to his bed on the loft, not wasting any time getting comfy as he knew that, unlike a few nights prior, his sleep would go uninterrupted by any sort of unwelcome demonic visitors this time.

“Goodnight, Dipper! Goodnight, Mabel!” the young Gem brightly called down to his friends below.

“Night, Steven!” the twins returned as they both settled in for the night themselves.

“Goodnight, Happy Bear,” Steven quipped, continuing his usual nightly routine of bidding all his stuffed animals a fond evening. “Goodnight, Sad Bunny. Goodnight, Playful Kitty. Goodnight, ominous triangle at the foot of my bed.”

And with that, the young Gem closed his eyes to go to sleep, only for them to shoot wide open as he realized exactly what the shadow he had just seen might possibly be. In fact, Dipper and Mabel also shot straight upright, sharing a startled gasp with Steven as they all let out the same fearful exclamation at the same exact time. “Ominous triangle?!”

Before any of the kids had a chance to so much as look for said triangle in their sudden unified panic, however, a hand, or rather, series of disconnected fingers came seemingly out of nowhere, clamping themselves over Steven’s mouth as he prepared to cry out for help. The young Gem let out a muffled, frightened scream as he was roughly yanked out of his bed, though he wasn’t aware of who his unknown assailant was until Dipper and Mabel managed to spot them for themselves.

“It’s Peridot!” Dipper shouted, pointing up to the green Gem on the loft as she frantically positioned her struggling captive in her grip.

“Whoa, long time no see, Peri!” Mabel exclaimed, waving up at her rather brightly. “Good to see you’re still kicking! Ok, well, you’re not really kicking since you only have one foot left, but still.”

“No thanks to you clods!” Peridot growled angrily, her entire appearance much worse for wear than the last time they had seen her. Not only was her foot still absent, but her triangular hair was sloppy, disheveled, and ridden with leaves and twigs, and she was practically covered with dirt, mud, and scratches from head to toe. Clearly, whatever the green Gem had been up to lately had certainly put her through the ringer, though she hardly cared as she finally began to carry out her long-awaited revenge scheme. “I would have been off this wretched planet cycles ago if not for you and those infuriating Crystal Gems always getting in my way. Well, no more! I’m getting back to Homeworld whether you annoying clumps like it or not and ‘the Steven’ here is going to help me!”

“Not if we have anything to do about it!” Dipper retorted fiercely, not hesitating to draw his sword. “Mabel! Your grappling hook!”

“On it, bro-bro!” Mabel smirked, pulling said hook out as she readily took aim at the green Gem still positioned above. “Sorry, Peri, but we can’t let you off the hook just yet! Heh, get it? Hook? I’m hilari-”

“Just fire it already!” Dipper snapped impatiently and Mabel did so on a burst of impulse alone. As a result, her hook missed its mark, largely out of a result of Peridot narrowly dodging it by jumping
off the loft before she began to rush over to the warp pad with Steven till in tow.

“Don’t let her get away!” Dipper yelled, hurrying after the green Gem with his sword at the ready and Mabel not too far behind. “She has Steven!”

“Wait a minute, that’s right!” Peridot exclaimed with sudden realization, a daring grin spreading across her face as she looked down to the wriggling captive in her arms. “I do have your Steven! Which means…” The green Gem trailed off, glancing up just in time to see Dipper rushing at her, his sword brimming with powerful gusts as he prepared to land a decisive strike. A strike that Peridot cleverly warded off simply by holding Steven up alone. For the moment she shoved the young Gem into the space directly in front of her, Dipper’s sword grinded to a halt just shy of striking him, much to Steven’s alarm.

“S-Steven!” Dipper gasped, instantly withdrawing his blade, especially since it was so close to hitting the young Gem’s face that its winds had heavily tussled his hair.

“I-It’s ok, Dipper,” Steven assured, letting out something of a forced laugh, even despite his current predicament. “Good news is that the wind setting on your sword works! N-not that you already didn’t know that…”

“Quiet, you!” Peridot hissed, clamping her fingers over the young Gem’s mouth once more as she continued holding him in front of her as something of a human shield, backing her way up towards the warp pad all the while. “As for you two, listen here!” she glared at Dipper and Mabel, who still had their respective weapons poised, though much more carefully now. “This can go one of two ways: either you let me escape without any further altercations, or I’ll blast your precious Steven through the roof of this primitive dwelling before doing the same to you!”

“Hey! That’s no fair!” Mabel protested in a huff. “You’re using Steven to cheat!”

“I’ll cheat as much as I want considering that’s all you pathetic humans ever seem to do with your surprisingly enhanced weaponry and underhanded tactics!” Peridot countered, still inching ever closer to the warp pad all the while. “Still, it looks like I’ve finally gotten the upper hand. That is, unless you do want me to get in a little target practice with the Steven here…”

“No, no, no, no, no, we do not want that!” Mabel exclaimed, somewhat panicked, especially as one of Peridot’s fingers began to charge up with a blast intended solely for Steven as it pressed against the side of his head. “R-right, Dipper?”

Dipper sighed, hating that Peridot did indeed seem to be winning here, but even so, he lowered his sword all the same for Steven’s sake. “Right,” he begrudgingly relented, sending the green Gem a brutal glare. “Now, let him go, Peridot!”

“Mmm, I don’t think so,” Peridot grinned, finally stepping onto the warp pad as Steven’s eyes widened in growing alarm. “As I said before, I have need of the Steven to expedite my transport home and I don’t need you clods getting in my way. So, I suppose I’ll be seeing you some other time. Oh, wait… no, I WON’T!”

“Steven!” the twins cried in distraught unison as the warp pad began to glow, both of them ignoring Peridot’s previous threats as they rushed towards it. Ultimately though, they were only a second too late, for the last thing they saw before the green Gem disappeared with her frightened captive was the look of untold fear on Steven’s face.

And then, just like that, he was gone.
As aptly terrified as Steven was with his distressing situation, he still continued to struggle back against Peridot as much as he could, especially as they arrived at the Galaxy Warp. Throughout the entire short journey through the warp stream, the young Gem kicked and wiggled and let out as many muffled protests as he could, much to Peridot’s increasing aggravation. In fact, the green Gem was so vexed that by the time they arrived to the collection of warps adrift on the sea, she finally relinquished her hold on Steven once and for all, though not for very long.

“Augh! Enough of this!” she exclaimed, activating her tractor beam and capturing Steven in it the moment he hit the ground. With the young Gem safely frozen within it, Peridot collected herself and hovered her hostage over to the still-broken Homeworld warp, glaring coldly at him all the while.

“W-what do you want from me?!” Steven asked, frantically trying to move though the tractor beam kept him completely still, much to his continued concern.

“I want to finally get off this lousy, Gem-forsaken planet!” Peridot snapped, her patience wearing incredibly thin.

“Huh?” Steven took pause at this, confused as to the green Gem’s actual motives here. He was even more confused when she finally released him from her beam’s hold, allowing him to clumsily land on the busted remains of the Homeworld warp below him as she stepped up onto them herself.

“See this?!” Peridot asked harshly, her fingers forming into arrows that pointed down at the defunct pad below them. “You have to fix it! NOW!”

“Wait… what?” Steven asked, still not following her line of reasoning.

“You’re my last chance,” Peridot explained, still standing over the young Gem threateningly, though the desperation in her tone was clear. “I’ve got no flask or attack robinoids. I’ve got no foot! I’ve got no response from Yellow Diamond! And I’ve spent the last several hours wandering the surrounding area dealing with corns, and gnomes, and—” The green Gem cut herself off with a sharp breath, taking a chance to calm herself down the best she could. Which of course, wasn’t very much at all. “I know you fixed Lazuli’s gem. Whatever you did to that, you’ve got to do to the Homeworld warp!” To show she meant business, Peridot formed her main laser, pointing it directly at Steven and keeping it charged and ready to fire if he tried anything. “Or else!”

“Oh! O-ok! Ok!” Steven quickly exclaimed, flinching back a bit at the blaster pointed directly at his face. Still, he knew that he had to at least try; Peridot only really wanted to go home and despite her rather… uncouth, hostile methods of accomplishing that goal, it was something that the young Gem couldn’t very well refuse. Especially not with a laser aimed at him all the while. “J-just… give me a second. My mouth gets really dry when I’m scared.” After taking a brief moment to steady himself, Steven gave his palm a hearty lick, holding it up high over the warp pad before slapping it down onto its shattered surface. However, instead of instantly, magically repairing the warp, his spit didn’t really seem to be doing much of anything at all, much to Peridot’s disgruntled confusion.

“What was that?!” she asked in stark, angry disbelief, stomping her remaining foot down on the still very broken warp pad. “That didn’t do ANYTHING!”

“It… doesn’t always work…” Steven admitted, glancing away anxiously.

“N-no…” Peridot muttered, her eyes wide with growing panic as she stared down at what was very much her last real ticket off the Earth. “No, no, no, NO! It HAS to work!”
“I’m… really sorry…” the young Gem said earnestly, though he was still somewhat scared that the green Gem would react with violence against him in light of this failure. However, instead, she did something that he really hadn’t been expecting: she laughed.

It was an empty, hallow, mirthless laugh, one that easily conveyed just how distraught Peridot really was as she slowly collapsed to the ground and pulled her legs tight against her chest, looking up to the starry skies above mournfully. “This was it… This was my last shot!” The green Gem took in a sharp breath, her eyes widening slightly as she happened to remember something very recent and very pertinent. “Unless… no, no, I can’t ask him for help, it’d never work! W-which means… I-I’m gonna die here! Noooooo, oh, I-

“Hey, c-come on!” Steven interjected, crawling forward a bit towards the green Gem in the midst of her apparent breakdown. “Who said anything about dying? The Earth isn’t that bad, you know.”

“It doesn’t matter what Earth is like!” Peridot retorted crossly. “It’s not going to be like anything soon!”

“…What do you mean?” Steven asked, confused and somewhat concerned by such an ominous statement. Yet, before Peridot could so much as even offer anything resembling an explanation, their exchange was abruptly, almost rather expectantly, interrupted the moment Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl warped in with Dipper and Mabel in tow.

“Augh! You’ve got to be kidding me!” Peridot growled, not wasting any time in getting up and putting some distance between herself and this unwelcome crew.

“Steven!” the twins exclaimed in relieved unison, rushing towards the young Gem first. The Gems weren’t far along after as Pearl hurried in to give Steven a tight, securing embrace first, checking him over for injury all the while.

“There you are!” the white Gem said, refusing to relinquish her hold on her young ward as she fretted over him. “Dipper and Mabel told us everything that happened at the temple. Are you alright?”

“Y-yeah, I’m fine,” Steven nodded, still rather shaken by all of the upheaval. “But-

“I’ll tell you who’s not gonna be fine when we’re through with her!” Amethyst growled, sending a brutal glare towards a certain retreating green Gem.

“Peridot!” Garnet shouted, already summoning her gauntlets for the oncoming fight.

“Ugh! Why can’t you just leave me alone?!” Peridot groaned, more than outraged with the Crystal Gems coming in to halt her last-ditch escape efforts again.

“Funny, we could have asked you the same exact thing when you kept sending your stupid robots here day after day,” Dipper shot back sardonically, his sword drawn and aglow with flames right from the start.

“Man, those really were the good old days, weren’t they?” Mabel sighed with something of a nostalgic smile. “Back then it was like you were chasing us, and now here we are, chasing you! Isn’t it crazy how things turned out like that?”

“More like completely asinine…” Peridot huffed, still maintaining a good bit of defensive space between herself at the others, especially as Garnet cracked her gauntlets threateningly.

“Let’s go, everyone!” she commanded firmly, calling both the Gems and the kids into action.
against the green Gem.

“Wait!” Steven attempted to intervene, still wanting answers regarding what Peridot had mentioned earlier. All the same, his call fell on deaf ears as the others all raced forward, eager to finally apprehend the troublesome green Gem once and for all.

Of course, as usual, Peridot wasn’t about to go down without a fight, which was why she quickly fired three successive laser blasts at her foes, though that hardly phased them as they easily dodged them all. From there, Mabel was the first to attack, her grappling hook actually striking the green Gem squarely in her chest this time and knocking her back quite a bit. Before she could fall of the edge of the Galaxy Warp, however, Peridot acted quickly, her fingers spinning rapidly as they began to propel her into the air in what she hoped would be a timely escape. Yet even that much seemed unlikely as Amethyst’s whip suddenly coiled around her tightly, with the purple Gem attempting to pull her down all the while. In retaliation, Peridot began shooting a burst of bright electricity through the whip, though Garnet put a swift end to it the moment she solidly caught the whip with her steady protective gauntlet.

“Not this time!” the Gem leader proclaimed before sparking some of her own electricity up the whip, straight to the unprepared Peridot. The green Gem let out a sharp gasp as the shock shuddered through her, though that pain was only amplified when Garnet roughly yanked the whip downward, sending her plummeting to the ground along with it.

Steven himself gasped at such a heavy blow, still remaining on his spot on the Homeworld warp as he watched the chaotic skirmish unfold before him. Still, he had no idea how to really stop it, even as Dipper tripped Peridot up before she could even properly pick herself up by using his sword to effectively freeze her remaining foot to the ground.

“N-no!” the green Gem exclaimed, frantically trying to break out of the ice as her foes drew in close, their respective weapons poised to finally land the finishing blow. Peridot gasped, her eyes wide with genuine fear as she realized that this could very well be the end. All of her grand schemes for revenge and escape were all about to be completely for naught. There was no getting out of it, not this time. It was all over; she had lost.

Or had she?

“Just remember, that if you’re ever in a pinch, just call your good buddy Bill to bail you out. I’ll be there in a SNAP!” Bill had given her this odd promise literally only just a few hours ago, and while Peridot hadn’t thought too much on it since then, it was really the only thing she could think of now. And certainly, her current situation did indeed seem to be quite a pinch. She was cornered, trapped, with nowhere to run and nothing else to do against her enemies that were mere seconds away from taking her out. Which meant that, with no other options left at her disposal, there was really only one thing she could still possibly do to turn her dire straits around, as much as the thought alone frustrated her.

“All right, fine!” she shouted, catching the Gems and the twins off guard with her sudden proclamation, though even still, Pearl drew her spear back in preparation to strike. “I admit it! I need your help, you… you “Bill Cipher”!”

And that was all it took. For the very moment she belted out the dream demon’s name, the world seemed to perfectly freeze in place all around her, all color completely disappearing as both the opposing Gems and humans alike hung perfectly still. Peridot flinched as Pearl’s spear stopped mere inches away from piercing her clean through, effectively saving her just in the nick of time. And soon enough, she was met with the very demon who had done so as he appeared quite suddenly in the free space above her head.
“Ah, there we go!” Bill quipped brightly as he floated down to sit squarely on top of Garnet’s hair, not that the Gem leader noticed as still and unmoving as she currently was. “Now we can do this nice and private, Greenie. Better make things quick though, this entire chat of ours is happening inside that space rock of yours, so while time isn’t really moving for you, for them, it still is.”

Peridot took pause at this, deciding to not bother to try and figure out what the demon meant by this as she got right to the point. “Well, you heard me,” she scowled begrudgingly. “Against all odds I’ve found myself… in need of your… assistance…”

“Well I’m pretty ‘miffed off’ with them too!” Peridot snapped harshly. “Which is why I demand you provide me with whatever bizarre form of aid you can in eradicating all of them before getting me back to Homeworld once and for all!”

“Boy, I’ll say!” Bill laughed, flipping around to look at the frozen crowd before him. “Fuse Box, Bird Brain, Half Baked, Pine Tree, Shooting Star, and even Rosebud! The gang’s all here, huh? And from the looks of it, they’re all pretty miffed off with you, Greenie.”

“T-then… let’s get to it!” Peridot exclaimed, her desire to take her bothersome foes outweighing any sort of fear she might have held towards Bill.

“Great!” he exclaimed cheerfully. “You’re lucky I like you, Greenie. Otherwise I’d have probably grinded your gem into sparkly pencil shavings by now. But instead, I think it’d be even MORE fun if we did that to them…” He pointed down to the Crystal Gems, all three of whom were still completely unaware of the ongoing exchange taking place.

“T-then… let’s get to it!” Peridot exclaimed, her desire to take her bothersome foes outweighing any sort of fear she might have held towards Bill.

“Of course, I’m gonna need you to pull half the weight in this genius plan I have cooked up here, otherwise, its just not gonna work. Are you up for that, cause if not, I can always-”

“‘Oh, Greenie, I have a feeling this is gonna be a BLAST,’ Bill said, his own hand igniting with blue flames as he met Peridot’s squarely in a firm, solidifying handshake. Despite her prior reservations, the green Gem couldn’t help but grin as their hands came down to seal the deal, even though she really had no idea what she was getting herself into. Not that that really mattered to her as much as her long-awaited, soon to be achieved vengeance did. ‘So it looks like we have ourselves a deal. Which means its finally time to get this party started!’”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” Peridot mused, sending her foes a brief, callous scowl before looking to the demon expectantly. “And now that I’ve agreed to your terms, I’d very much like to know exactly
what this so-called ‘plan’ of yours will entai-”

The green Gem was sharply cut off as Bill suddenly yanked her hand forward hard, the rest of her form following her disconnected fingers as she stumbled forward clumsily. The demon managed to bewilder her even more when he quickly spun her out with a surprising air of something almost akin to grace. And by the time he ended up pulling her into an unexpected, full dip, Peridot was no longer able to remain silent about her complete and absolute confusion. “W-what in the stars are you doing?!?”

“Relax, Greenie, and let me lead!” Bill assured, pulling Peridot back towards him the moment she tried to wrench herself away. The green Gem flinched at the unsettling forcefulness of his movements, but she was hard pressed to resist them again as he twirled her around once more. “I can guarantee that it’ll all make sense in a FLASH!”

With that, the demon pulled the green Gem in quickly, both of their forms enveloping with a blinding, harsh yellow light. And, in what seemed like both an instant and an eternity, those two separate forms, beyond all logic or reason at least one of them knew to be true, somehow became one.

At that very same moment, the Gems and the twins were rushing in to knock Peridot out once and for all, with Pearl leading the charge with her spear aimed right for the green Gem’s chest. And yet, right before it could hit its mark and end this ongoing struggle, everything seemed to change all at once.

It began with a burst of unknown energy so powerful that it easily knocked all three of the Gems and both twins all the way back to the Homeworld warp where Steven was. The young Gem gasped in alarm, not even sparing the blinding light before them a second glance as he checked over his dazed friends to make sure they were unharmed. “Guys! Are you ok!?” he asked fretfully, helping Dipper and Mabel to their feet first before moving onto the Gems. “What was… that…?”

Steven trailed off, his eyes huge as his jaw dropped with frightened shock. None of the others understood the source of such apparent fear at first, that is until they looked back to where Peridot was for themselves. Or rather, where she used to be.

Because instead of the green Gem standing there at the edge of the Galaxy Warp, all that could be seen was an incredibly bright, beaming glow, one that took on a tight, massive, triangular shape. Whatever it was was completely unknown to just about all of them as it somehow stirred up a massive gale to go with whatever immense power was radiating from it, oddly obscuring Peridot entirely from view.

“What’s going on?” Dipper exclaimed, holding his sword tightly and anxiously. “What is that?!?”

“It’s-” Garnet cut herself off with a sharp gasp, shaking her head in disbelief as a familiar image of a familiar being flashed upon the ever increasing golden light. “N-no… it… it can’t be!”

“C-can’t be what?” Steven asked, looking to his stunned guardians worriedly before looking back to the light itself and seeing the stark, crystal clear outline of the very demon who had been haunting all of them for the past several days alone.

“B-Bill Cipher…” Pearl whispered, clinging onto her spear for dear life as her entire form trembled with terror. However, this assumption was quickly proven both right and wrong as Bill’s iconic, treacherous laughter began to echo throughout the Galaxy Warp, only for it to soon morph and mix with another laugh entirely.
“Wait… Peridot?” Amethyst exclaimed, completely confused, especially as a twinge of unmistakable green mingled with the garish yellow before them. The others simply exchanged a bewildered glance, none of them even thinking of lowering their weapons as both sets of laughter reached a wild apex, another flash bursting out from the triangular glow before it finally began to die down, revealing exactly what, or rather, who had happened.

“Actually, you’re BOTH right!” the twisted, frightening being who now stood before them smirked as the light surrounding them completely disappeared. Bill and Peridot’s voices were still evenly mixed as they spoke, creating an unsettling, downright horrific unison that carried equal amounts of enthusiasm and ill intent at the same exact time. “And you’re both WRONG too! Oh, and just in case you’re wondering, you’re all about to be DEAD soon, which is bound to be an INFINIATE amount of fun for me and an UNTOLD amount of pain for you, ya bunch of boring ol’ CLODS! Nyahahahaha!”

Initially, the entire group below was speechless, especially as this new foe rose to casually float in the air above them, their malicious grin still apparent all the while. On the surface, they looked just like Peridot in form alone, yet almost everything about her seemed absolutely off as bizarrely mixed with Bill as she somehow seemed to be. Her usual green coloration had taken on a sickly, yellowish pallor, her outfit and limbs alike accented with sharp blacks and golden triangles to replace just about every diamond in sight. Her hair had become somehow even more pointed and triangular in shape, taking on the brick-like design the demon was known for, as well as his singular eye positioned right above her how discolored gem. As for Peridot’s normal eyes, they were bright and unsurprisingly slitted, accenting their demented, seemingly unending grin as their lower set of black, thin arms reached up to tip the petite top hat now perched floating above their head.

“Oh, but I’m getting ahead of myself here,” they snickered, suddenly disappearing altogether before instantaneously reappearing behind the startled group. “Judging from the slack-jawed, awestruck looks on all your faces, I bet you’re all wondering: what do you get when you take a dashing, well-dressed dream demon and a genius, technologically inclined Gem, and fuse ’em both together? Well, I’ll tell ya what you get! The one, the only, all-powerful, unstoppable PYRITE!”

A beat or two of silence on the part of the Gems and kids persisted at this, all of them still completely floored and admittedly terrified by the alarming amalgamation before them, especially as the nightmarish realization of exactly what Pyrite was finally sunk in. “It’s… its not possible!” Pearl exclaimed, absolutely dumbfounded. “H-how could they even fuse in the first place!? Bill isn’t even a—”

“Its called making the most of a golden opportunity, Bird Brain,” Pyrite interjected, suddenly appearing in front of the white Gem to flick her spear up playfully. “Not that I’d expect a simple Pearl like you to understand it. Still, I gotta say, it really is great to see you Crystal Chumps again after all these years!” The twisted fusion’s grin widened, their third eye sparking with demented glee as they glided high over the stunned trio. “I should hand it to you, Fuse Box, I’m surprised to see you two are still together and you haven’t split under the pressure of being the leader of the crew like it seemed you were gonna do way back when I first told you about it.”

Upon hearing this, Garnet’s already tightly clenched fists grew even tighter to the point that they were shaking with rage, her fury against the sadistic demon that composed half of Pyrite burning hotter than ever before, especially in light of everything she knew he had done. Even so, the twisted fusion largely disregarded her rage as it turned its gleefully sadistic sights onto Amethyst instead. “And look at you, Half Baked! You’re still exactly like you were 22 years ago! Short, dumpy, and completely USELESS! Nyahahahaha!”
Amethyst shared Garnet’s outrage upon hearing such a callous insult, one that she wasn’t about to
take lying down as she swung her whip about threateningly. “I’ll show you useless, you stupid
piece of-”

“And last but not least, Bird Brain!” Pyrite chimed, hovering dominantly over the much more
frightened white Gem. “Boy, I bet you wish you hadn’t tried to fight back against me so you could
save your precious Quartzy now, huh? Because what do you know? She’s still gone anyway! And
her gem is still up for the taking, isn’t that right, Rosebud?”

Steven gasped, flinching back out of fear as Pyrite suddenly appeared right before him, not
hesitating to laughingly lift his shirt up a bit to reveal the stone on his navel. “Don’t act so
surprised, kid, you knew I was coming for this thing anyway!” the twisted fusion chuckled, giving
his gemstone a small, light tap. “But don’t worry; I think I’m gonna leave ripping that rock right
out of your gut for last just so you can watch me take out each of your worthless friends one by one.
And speaking of which…”

Dipper froze up instantly the very moment Pyrite set their slitted sights on him, though his breath
completely caught in his throat when the twisted fusion zoomed over to him, Bill’s voice taking
the slightest precedent over Peridot’s as they taunted him cruelly. “Well, well, Pine Tree, isn’t this
just hilarious,” they goaded, practically perching themselves to stand on the edge of his trembling
sword as Dipper remained static in his ever-growing state of panic at the mere thought of being in
such close proximity to the dream demon once again. “You get all torn up over my run with you as
my puppet to the point that you go to the trouble of learning how to stab a fancy knife around and
then when you’re finally face to face with me again, you can’t even work up the nerve to so much
as swing it at me! Honestly, I’d be laughing my sides off if it wasn’t so completely pathetic. Then
again, I’m not really surprised considering this is you we’re talking about here, Pine Tree.”

Dipper didn’t get much of a chance to react to these vicious remarks amidst both his own crippling,
inescapable fear as well as the grappling hook that came flying at Pyrite, forcing them to easily
dodge it by flying upwards. The twisted fusion’s ongoing grin finally disappeared into a bitter
scowl as the hook retracted back to Mabel, who offered them just as fierce of a glare as they were
sending her.

“Leave him alone!” she shouted angrily, completely unafraid of the fusion, even as they leered in
close to her menacingly.

“Oh yeah? And who’s gonna make me, Shooting Star, you?” Pyrite asked coldly, still bereft of
their usual smirk, though they were quick to pick it up once more with a harsh chuckle. “Don’t
make me laugh. You make act like you’re trying to be your brother’s hero here, but deep down, we
both know that if given the opportunity, you’d gladly throw him under the bus again, just like last
time.”

“N-no, I wouldn’t!” Mabel protested, her zeal replaced with a desperation to prove herself. “Things
are different now! I-”

“Oh, you’re absolutely right about that, you ‘Mabel’!” Pyrite exclaimed, finally coming to rise
above the entire collective group as the Peridot half of their voice finally took a bit of an edge.
“Things are going to be different this time, in just about every way too! Because now, I’m finally
the one with the upper hand here! You all are trembling and cowering in fear before me, and with
good reason! Because with so much unlimited combined power at all four of our collective hands,
there’s nothing standing between us and utterly obliterating each and every one of you off the face
of this miserable planet once and for all! And really, I see no reason to put your inevitable
THRASHING off any longer, do you? Not at all! Then let the show… BEGIN!”
With a wild, unhinged cackle, Pyrite let their power loose, bright, burning green flames bursting over all four of their palms, flames that they didn’t hesitate to send raining down upon their group of foes in a vengeful frenzy. Despite his still quite poignant fear, Steven managed to shield all of them from it with a well-timed bubble, but it was clear that wouldn’t protect them from too long as a long, deadly-looking cane materialized in the twisted fusion’s hand out of nowhere. Pyrite aimed the tip of this cane directly at the group below them, their smile turning wry as energy charged up at its end with what seemed to be a preparing laser blast. A blast that the Gems knew they wouldn’t be able to simply block out.

“Steven, Dipper, Mabel, hide!” Garnet ordered, pushing the kids away just as Pyrite fired their attack. Fortunately, everyone managed to dodge it, but just barely, especially as the twisted fusion began gearing up for another one.

“But what about you guys?!” Steven asked worriedly as all three of his guardians scrambled to avoid Pyrite’s next attack.

“We’ll be fine!” Pearl shouted, using her spear to bat away a stray fireball. “But this fight is far too dangerous for you kids to be a part of! Now hurry up and take cover somewhere!”

“But we want to—” Steven was cut off by Mabel suddenly grabbing his arm, as well as Dipper’s, largely since he was much too captivated by his ongoing terror to do much else. Not wasting any time in following up on the Gems’ commands, Mabel pulled both boys over to the relative safety of the opposite side of one of the hub’s tall, sturdy pillars, effectively pulling them out of the fight just as it was starting to kick up.

“Aw, don’t force those puny pebbles away just yet,” Pyrite mocked with faux disappointment as they easily blasted Amethyst across the hub. “They’ll miss out on all the FUN!”

None of the Gems offered a response to this as they tried their best to jump into the offensive against their new, deadly foe. Garnet preformed an incredible jump, her gauntlets at the ready to knock Pyrite out of the air, only for the twisted fusion to easily catch her in a golden tractor beam before flinging her far off into the nearby ocean. “See ya, Fuse Box! Hope who two enjoy the little pleasure cruise I just flew you two clods on! Now…” the fusion’s expression darkened with manic delight as they turned back to Amethyst and Pearl below them. “Which one of you two is next?”

The pair of Gems exchanged an uneasy glance at this, neither of them quite sure of how to take on the unexpectedly combined threat they were facing. Dealing with Peridot was one thing, but Bill was on a whole other level, and by merging together, they had both only made themselves even more of a challenge, a challenge that could, if they didn’t find a way to triumph over it, end up destroying them once and for all.

Even so, they weren’t about to admit defeat so soon. Amethyst rushed forward first, pulling another whip out of her Gem as she lashed both of them out at the fusion’s feet in the hopes of catching them. And catch them Pyrite did, only with their lower hands, using them to fling Amethyst high up into the air before sharply pulling her right back down with a resounding crash. The kids all flinched as it rattled even them from the safety of their hiding spot, but even still, they all remained observing the battle from a distance, terrified of what might happen if they tried to get in any closer.

With Garnet gone and Amethyst dazed and injured, Pearl was really the only one left to stand against Pyrite, and her fear at this fact clearly showed. She held her spear close to her chest, her form still trembling as the twisted fusion hovered over her tauntingly, even as the white Gem tried her best to make an anxious appeal.
“I-I… I don’t know what you think you have to gain from this little… arrangement you’ve made with Peridot, Cipher,” Pearl began, her voice shaky and nervous, even as she tried her hardest to make it firm and resolved. “But I can assure you that neither of you are going to succeed in your twisted ambitions through it!”

“Yeah, yeah, keep running your mouth like that, Bird Brain.” Pyrite deadpanned, rolling all three of their eyes as the white Gem leapt for them, spear poised to attack. “See where all that ‘noble’ talk gets you when I grind you into the glorified pile of salt you are!” Just as Pearl sent her spear flying at the twisted fusion, once again, they easily managed to catch the weapon, using a tractor bean to keep the white Gem suspended in midair all the while. “Really? Is that the best you can do?” Pyrite scoffed, looking over the spear before effortlessly snapping it cleanly in two, much to Pearl’s alarm. “You know, I really expected more out of you Crystal Clods. But I guess all your traitorous tricks and so-called ‘heroism’ are all completely pointless against someone with actual power. Someone like ME!”

With another borderline insane laugh, the twisted fusion launched Pearl hard away from them, sending her crashing into the pillar the kids were hiding behind and knocking the wind out of her entirely. Fortunately, Amethyst had just picked herself up off the ground to pick up the slack in trying to land a hit on Pyrite, but even so, it took Pearl a moment or two to recover from such a heavy blow, much to the concern of the kids right behind her.

“Pearl!” Mabel exclaimed fretfully as her and Steven peeked out from behind the pillar. “Are you ok?”

“I-I’ll be fine…” the white Gem coughed, clearly struggling to get up. “Bill and Peridot certainly aren’t making this easy for us… b-but we’re not giving up yet! You kids just stay back here where its safe.”

“But are you guys gonna do to stop them?” Steven asked worriedly, noticing well that Pearl looked much worse for wear even so early on into the battle.

The white Gem hesitated for a moment, glancing to Amethyst, who had just been slammed to the ground yet again by Pyrite. At the same time, Garnet had finally returned, soaking wet as she tiredly climbed back onto the Galaxy Warp only to throw herself right back into the fight. A fight that, by all accounts, they really didn’t seem to be winning. “Uh… w-we’ll… we’ll think of something,” Pearl assured the kids briefly, finally standing, though she nearly stumbled back to the ground as she did. “Like I said before, stay out of their sight. I know you kids want to help, but this… ‘Pyrite’ is far too much of a threat for you to handle. In fact… they might be too much for even us to handle…” Pearl muttered that last statement as she drew another spear from her gem, hurrying back into the fray herself as Pyrite continued tirelessly fending them off and attacking them at the same exact time.

“This is really bad, you guys,” Steven said, immensely concerned as he continued watching the battle unfold. Or rather, watching Pyrite toss the Gems around as if they were nothing at all to them and sadistically enjoying every single second of the brutal beating they were dishing out. “I know Pearl just told us not to help them but… I really think we should at least try to do something to-”

“Try what, Steven?” Dipper suddenly snapped quite harshly, his hands tightly gripping his arms as his entire body trembled with ongoing fear. “Have you even seen that thing out there? Its literally Bill and Peridot fused into one huge nightmare, one that not even the Gems can so much as land a single hit on! What makes you think any of us will do any better?!”

“Um… w-well, maybe we can come up with a plan to-”
“Steven, can we just… stop pretending like everything’s going to be ok for once?” Dipper asked, his panic dying down into despondency and despair as he slid down to sit against the back of the pillar, pulling his knees to his chest. “Because it’s pretty obvious that it won’t be. As long as Bill’s fused with Peridot, he’s has a physical form. Which means that he can basically just kill any of us any time he wants to, probably as soon as he’s done torturing us for his own sick kicks.”

“Dipper-” Mabel attempted to interject, reaching a hand out to console her clearly hopeless brother, only for him to completely reject it as he buried his head into his arms.

“So what’s even the point in trying to fight back anyway?” he asked, his shoulders hitching in what was likely a broken sob. “It’ll only make things even worse! T-there’s no way we can beat something like this. We need to just face facts already… i-it’s over, and we lost…”

Upon hearing this forlorn belief, Steven and Mabel exchanged a deeply fretful glance, one that was filled with worry for both Dipper and the situation at large. Right behind them, the Gems were still absolutely struggling against Pyrite’s magical might as the twisted fusion landed hit after heavy hit upon them, even despite their determined resilience to stand against such a treacherous foe. Still, it was becoming painfully clear that all three of them were truly outmatched against a being as strong and seemingly untouchable as Pyrite, to the point that Steven and Mabel themselves began to fear that Dipper was perhaps right after all. They wouldn’t be able to keep their valiant struggle up forever; sooner or later, Pyrite would overpower them and go in for the malicious, sadistic kill, starting with the Gems before finishing them off in their destructive wake. And then, after that, there would be absolutely no telling what the twisted fusion might do next.

Certainly, the Gems themselves must have realized this fatal fact as well, but even so, they persisted fighting, knowing that there was really nothing else they could do now. Garnet leapt high, hoping to finally land at least a single punch on Pyrite, only for the fusion to gleefully send out a wave of burning energy that send the Gem leader flying backward, torn, tattered, and significantly weakened by the attack. Pyrite themselves let out a smug, mocking laugh as they fired a barrage of explosive lasers from their cane down at Amethyst and Pearl, which only barely missed the pair of Gems directly as it knocked them both away, injuring them heavily, yet somehow not destabilizing them altogether. As each of the Gems struggled to recover from such damaging attacks, Pyrite decided to ease up for a moment, if only to take the chance to hold their soon-coming victory over the trio’s heads.

“Seriously, its like you three aren’t even trying here!” the twisted fusion teased, hovering over them triumphantly. “Then again, that’s not too much of a surprise. Without Quartzy around to tell you what to do, you chumps are just about completely worthless! Too bad she isn’t around to save you this time, because without her to bail you out, you three don’t stand a CHANCE!”

Pyrite unleashed an absolutely wicked laugh at this, their trio of eyes blazing with immense, sadistic delight as they poured down a massive torrent of golden flames upon the weakened Gems below. They only barely had enough strength to pick themselves up off the ground and scramble to narrowly avoid the blast, but with the very limited battle ground they had to work with, it was clear that they wouldn’t be able to outrun Pyrite’s seemingly endless barrage of deadly attacks for too long.

Steven realized this as well as he continued observing the battle from afar, a rare sort of anger building up inside of him, especially as he heard Pyrite’s vicious remarks towards his guardians. There was no question that, after all he had put them through years ago, the Gems feared Bill just as much as the kids did, if not even more. But despite that fear, they were still pushing themselves to bravely stand against him, and against Peridot as well, despite how difficult the battle was and how stacked against their favor the odds of them winning it were. And yet, Pyrite hardly seemed to
care as they simply mocked and taunted them with callous cruelty, reopening old wounds both physical and mental all the while.

And as far as Steven was concerned, it just wasn’t fair.

It wasn’t fair that Bill always seemed to have the upper hand, no matter what the occasion. It wasn’t fair that he had been the main reason why the Gems had so many valuable memories ripped away from them years ago. It wasn’t fair that he had put his friends, Dipper, Mabel, Connie, and even himself through so much torment and anguish simply to satisfy his own twisted pleasure. It wasn’t fair that Peridot had come to Earth with the intent of causing it untold harm. It wasn’t fair that she had brought Jasper along with her, and that as a result, Lapis ended up locking them both away in a horrendous aquatic prison. It wasn’t fair that tracking her down had ended up tearing a brutal rift between the Gems, a rift that, while repaired, had still hurt them all the same. It wasn’t fair that that both components of Pyrite had done so much to cause them all so much pain, so much terror and yet they still were somehow on top, working together in a monstrous amalgamation that was poised to destroy them all and everything they held dear.

It wasn’t fair… which was why Steven realized that perhaps it was time to stop fearing their foes and the havoc they could wreak upon them… and start fighting back instead.

And as the young Gem looked back to the twisted fusion once more, he finally came up with a way to do just that.

With newfound resolve, Steven turned to face the twins once more, only to find them both in rather solemn states. Dipper was still completely despondent, not even acknowledging Mabel’s earnest attempts to comfort him amidst his ongoing grief and fear. Even Mabel herself seemed to lack her usual upbeat zeal, especially as she glanced back to the disastrous battle right behind them every now and again with growing concern and obvious dread. Yet despite this, Steven knew that she would probably be his best bet at the moment, given how crippled by terror Dipper seemed to be at the moment. Still, if his newfound plan went well (and Steven desperately hoped it would), perhaps they’d finally be able to alleviate that terror in all of them once and for all.

“Mabel,” Steven began as firmly as he could as he placed a hand on her shoulder. “I have an idea. And I’m gonna need your help for it.”

For a moment, Mabel simply took pause at this, her cheeks lightly flushing as she briefly glanced over at the hand the young Gem had on her shoulder before looking back to him with wide eyes. “Um… y-yeah, of course!” she answered, almost a bit too enthusiastically. “I’m down for whatever you have in mind!”

“Well, that’s great,” Steven sighed in relief, not pulling his hand away as he also blushed slightly. “Though… exactly what I have in mind might be… kinda dangerous. I don’t want to force you into it if you’re-”

“Steven,” Mabel interrupted, acting on a bold impulse as she suddenly took both of the young Gem’s hands and held them tightly. “I don’t think you heard me before. I said I’m down for whatever crazy thing you have in mind. Especially if what you’re thinking what I think you’re thinking.”

“Um… and what might that be?” the young Gem asked with a small, bemused smile. Mabel simply whispered it to him with an excited, growing grin, one that Steven shared as he realized they did indeed have the exact same idea in mind. “Yeah, that’s it! So, I guess we should-”

“YES!” Mabel shouted happily, not hesitating to grab Steven by the hand so they could put their
shared plan into action. For the most part, Dipper had paid no mind to the ongoing conversation between the pair as lost to his own morosely panic and grim thoughts as he was. However, he was soon broken out of his revere by a sudden flash of pale pink light, one that only disappeared as he glanced up to look at it and reveal a familiar four-eyed figure he hadn’t seen in quite some time.

“Heya, Dip-bro!” the fusion greeted with a confident, winning smile. “Did ya miss me? Cause I sure missed me!”

They let out a bright, cheerful laugh at this, one that wasn’t even broken by Dipper as he simply stared up at them in absolute awe and disbelief. “M-Maven?!” he exclaimed, sitting up somewhat as he looked the fusion, clad in both Steven and Mabel’s pajamas, up and down.

“Aw, you remembered!” Maven quipped excitedly. “But as great as it is to finally be back in action after so long, I’m afraid I don’t really have too much time to chat.” The fusion held their hand out, light surrounding it briefly before their iconic grappling shield materialized in their grasp. “There are two big bullies making a huge mess out there and somebody’s gotta take care of them, so it might as well be me!”

“Wait!” Dipper interjected, grabbing the fusion’s free hand before they could go running into the ongoing fray. “Y-you guys can’t go out there! Its way too dangerous! Bill could-”

“Dipper,” Maven said, kneeling down to his level as they put a comforting, steadying hand on his shoulder. “I know you’re scared of Bill, a-and to be honest, both of us are too. And to be really honest, Pyrite is even more scary than just Bill on his own, which is probably why the Gems aren’t doing so hot out there. And that’s exactly why we want to—no, I need to help! I want to protect the Earth, and the Gems, a-and I want to protect you too! And maybe, if we work together, just like Bill and Peridot are right now, then we might just have a chance at finally stopping both of them once and for all. Don’t ya think?”

Despite his own going worries and fears, Dipper was unable to hold back a small, comforted smile upon hearing the fusion’s warm reassurance as he nodded his assent. “Ok, but… please, be careful out there you guys. If anything were to happen to you, I’d-”

“Aw, don’t worry, Dip-bro, nothing’s gonna happen,” Maven laughed as they rose to stand, spinning their grappling shield playfully in their hand. “And besides, you know me! Careful is my middle na-” The fusion was cut of as their shield accidentally fired, knocking them upside the head, though not hurting them too much at all as it came zooming right back into place. “Whoops! Heh, guess this thing is kinda touchy.”

This exchange was abruptly cut off as Pyrite’s combined, menacing laughter echoed throughout the Galaxy Warp once more. Dipper and Maven were quick to take a peek around the pillar they were still behind, only to see that the twisted fusion had captured all three of the Gems in their golden tractor beam, their cane charging up with what would surely be a devastating blast. “Oh no!” Maven gasped, not hesitating to hop up onto the warp hub to rush into the fight. “I’ve gotta help them!”

“W-wait!” Dipper called after them worriedly, half inclined to join them, that is, until he stole another glance at Pyrite hanging high above the hub. Upon hearing their horrific, sinister cackling once more, Dipper quickly shrunk back, his former terror returning in full as he thought of just how easy it would be for the fusion, or more specifically the demonic half of the fusion, to completely obliterate him in an instant. Which was why, despite all of his training and even despite his best friend and sister hurrying into this deadly skirmish themselves, he ultimately found himself unable to so much as move to stand against this nightmarish enemy for himself.
Maven, on the other hand, had the exact opposite intentions in mind. For as Pyrite continued gloating to the Gems, who were struggling in vain to try and escape their tight tractor grip, the fusion skirted around the hub, just out of their sight, with a plan of their own in mind to turn the tide of the battle. “Well, it looks like this is finally the end, for you at least,” Pyrite remarked, aiming their charged cane at the frozen trio before them. “I have to admit, this really has been fun! So, any last words before I wipe you three clean out of existence, you clods?”

“Well, shucks, I don’t have any. How about you?!” Mere seconds after this confident proclamation rung out across the Galaxy Warp, Pyrite was suddenly struck cleanly in the back of their triangular head by a hard flat surface. The blow was more than enough to catch the twisted fusion off guard, finally releasing the Gems from their grip as they looked around in complete confusion as to where such an attack might have come from.

“What the-?!” Pyrite was stopped short as the broad side of a solid pink shield hit them squarely in the face, knocking them back significantly. “Hey! What’s the big idea here?!”

“The big idea is ME!” Maven exclaimed boldly as their grappling shield zoomed back to them. The fusion stood proud and strong between the twisted fusion and the recovering Gems, making it very clear they had no intention of backing down this time whatsoever.

“M-Maven?!” Amethyst exclaimed, dumbfounded to see the fusion again at such a time as this.

“The one and only,” Maven grinned back at the Gems, two of their four eyes winking playfully to them before Pyrite caught their attention once more.

“Oh, you’ve got to be KIDDING me!” the twisted fusion barked, an expression that was a cross between annoyance and amusement blooming onto their face. “Out of all the stunts I thought you could pull, Rosebud, this one is by far the most ridiculous. Fusing? With Shooting Star, of all people or Gems? You might as well have just jumped into the ocean seeing as how you two are about as useful as any of those chumps behind you are!”

Maven cast a brief glance back at the Gems before cracking a bit of a smirk as they turned to Pyrite once more. “Mm, I dunno, seems to me like you’re the useless one around here, no offense,” they remarked with an innocent shrug.

“…What?” Pyrite asked, clearly offended.

“Yeah, I mean…” Maven began leadingly, ignoring the shocked glances the Gems were giving them as they began to walk past the disgruntled, twisted fusion. “I’m fun, and sweet, and enthusiastic, and helpful, and oh, did I mention adorable. You, on the other hand, Pyrite, well… if we’re bein’ honest here, you’re scary, and mean, and loud, and crazy, and hm… something else too, its on the tip of my tongue here, what is it…? Oh yeah! TOTALLY GOIN’ DOWN!”

Without any warning, the fusion quickly spun around, sending their grappling shield flying at the unprepared Pyrite. The force of the shield was immense, a bright, newfound kind of energy surrounding it as it clocked the twisted fusion hard in the chest, sending them flying off the edge of the Galaxy Warp entirely and a good ways into the ocean itself. “Huh, guess that goes to show which one of us is the better fusion around here!” Maven called after them with a winning grin. “It’s me, in case you were still confused or anything!”

“Steven! Mabel!” Pearl’s rather harsh exclamation abruptly cut through the fusion’s triumph, forcing them to turn to face all three of the Gems’ rather disapproving expressions. “What in the world do you two think you’re doing?!”
“Uh, taking care of you Pyrite problem for ya, duh,” Maven chuckled, tossing their grappling shield up a bit before catching it easily. “You’re welcome, by the way. This is our first time fighting all fused up like this and I’m having a ton of fun.”

“Well, that’s quite enough fun for you two for one battle,” Pearl huffed, clearly stressed as Garnet and Amethyst kept an eye out for Pyrite’s inevitable return. “I told you kids to stay hidden! You may have gotten a few lucky shots in, but Pyrite is a dangerous, unpredictable enemy, and we won’t stand for you kids getting hurt trying to fight them! Which means you two need to unfuse this instant and go back to hiding!”

“No, that’s the exact opposite of what we need to do, Pearl!” Maven insisted, looking between all three of the Gems earnestly. “Pyrite’s a fusion, right? Well, maybe instead of trying to fight them on our own, we should try fighting a fusion with fusion! Know what I’m saying?”

“You… want us to fuse?” Amethyst asked, raising a curious eyebrow. “I dunno. It’s not like we go around fusing all the time unless its for something like, super serious?”

“This is literally Bill and Peridot working together,” Maven said incredulously. “How is it not super serious?”

The Gems exchanged a brief glance at this, none of them really able to deny such a pertinent truth. And, as usual, Garnet was the one to speak to that truth with a small, supportive smile. “It’s a good plan,” she said, even though Bill’s presence was all but blocking her future vision from seeing the results of it. “Let’s do it. Gems, get ready to synchronize!”

“Um, well, we should probably do it quick then, seeing as how they’re coming back!” Amethyst pointed out the approaching green-golden figure that was Pyrite, angrily rushing back towards the Galaxy Warp at a frightening speed.

“Amethyst, Pearl!” Garnet commanded firmly. “You’re up first.”

“Right!” the pair nodded, putting all of their usual troubles fusing together behind them in light of the dire straits they were in. They were just beginning their fusion dance when Pyrite finally returned, soaking wet and absolutely furious with the clever trick Maven had just played on them.

“ROSE STAR!” the twisted fusion growled, sparking with building power as they glared hatefully at Maven and Maven alone.

“Oooo, Rose Star! I get it!” Maven grinned, flattered. “‘Rosebud’, ‘Shooting Star’, its like you fused your silly little nicknames up for us, just like how we fused ourselves up! I like that! In fact, to show you how much I like it, I got a little surprise for you, Pyrite! Isn’t that right, Opal?!”

The fusion’s grin widened as they spun around just as Amethyst and Pearl’s forms converged in a bright light, their height scaling as they merged into a tall, steadfast, four-armed giant woman, one who was more than ready to take on the ongoing battle. “Yes,” Opal said in her usual calm, deep voice as her longbow appeared in her lower hands. “It is.”

“Tch,” Pyrite scoffed, scowling angrily as they floated a bit back from the much larger fusion before them. “You clods just fuse like its nothing, don’t you? What, you’re too weak to take me on one-on-one?”

“I don’t know,” Opal pondered thoughtfully before breaking out into a daring smirk, raising her bow as an arrow of pure light formed around it. “Are you?”

Pyrite barely had a chance to dodge the arrow Opal shot their way, chuckling to themselves over
how the projectile missed before the fusion sent several more flying at them in rapid succession. The twisted fusion managed to block or evade most of them, though a few of them did skim them, much to their increasing aggravation.

“Hmph! You know, I’m surprised you’ve even managed to remember me for this long, Half Brain, what with that short term memory problem of yours!” Pyrite taunted bitterly, circling around the taller fusion, who simply laughed graciously in response.

“It’s hard to forget a face like yours,” Opal teased back, opting to use her bow as a more combatant weapon by swinging it swiftly at Pyrite themselves. Her blow landed true, sending the twisted fusion spiraling backwards, crashing hard into the pillar that Dipper was still hiding behind. He stifled a frightened gasp as he tucked even further behind the pillar, not wanting to garnish Pyrite’s attention in any way, and fortunately, he didn’t as the angered fusion was far too consumed in the ongoing battle. A battle that, against all odds, was quickly starting to turn against their favor.

Ready to make their foes pay for the few lucky hits they had managed to get in, Pyrite began zooming back towards Opal just as she started to unfuse on her own accord. However, before they could reach the Gems, the twisted fusion was suddenly launched upward, letting out a fierce cry of pain as a spiked shield rammed against their exposed backside.

“Wow, what do ya know?!” Maven quipped as they looked back to their grappling shield, which now sported an array of short, sharp spikes on its surface. “Looks like I can make it all spikey too. This thing’s amazing! Sorta like you, Opaaaaaaa—ohhhh my gosh!” Stars were in all four of the fusion’s eyes as they turned to see Garnet and Amethyst merge next, a combining to create a Gem that was almost too large for the Galaxy Warp to even contain. All the same, Sugilite let out a wild, rowdy laugh as she made her long-awaited reappearance, her shades appearing instantly as her flail also showed up in one of her massive hands.

“Now, we’re talkin!” the bombastic fusion chuckled, tossing her weapon up and down experimentally. “Where’s that Pyrite punk at? I can’t wait to pummel ’em into the ground like the ‘clod’ they are!”

“There they are! There they are!” Maven exclaimed, excitedly pointing to Pyrite as they slowly floated back down to the hub, disoriented and damaged from their previous attack.

“Ugh… huh?” the twisted fusion shook their head to clear it, all three of their eyes growing wide with surprise and slight fear as they looked to the massive Sugilite towering in front of them. “Uh oh…”

“So, you two think you’re some big hotshot just cause you’re two loudmouthed triangles smashed together?” Sugilite asked with a toothy smirk. “Ya look you’re just a big square if ya ask me. Which is why I’m gonna beat you into shape!” The fusion laughed heartily as she began swinging her flail about, and try as they might to think of a way to block or avoid it, Pyrite was ultimately too late as it struck them squarely, beating them hard and heavy into the ground before Sugilite picked it up with them still stuck to it. Knowing this, the fusion swung her weapon upward, watching with smug satisfaction as Pyrite was flung sharply upwards once more, so far into the sky that they couldn’t even be seen anymore after a certain point. “See ya, nerd!” Sugilite called after them, swinging her flail over their shoulder as she stared up into the night sky for the twisted fusion who would certainly come back down. Eventually.

“Oh my gosh, Sugilite is so dang cool!” Maven gasped, hopping up and down excitedly in light of such an impressive display.

“Eh, she’s alright, I suppose,” Pearl remarked with a small laugh, remembering just how much
trouble Sugilite had caused during one of her previous rampages. Still, in a situation like this against a foe as deadly as Pyrite, a rampage was more than welcome.

“Sugilite! Sugilite! Sugilite!” Maven shouted, eager to get the fusion’s attention. “I got an idea!”

“Oh yeah?” Sugilite asked, her curiosity peaked as she allowed the smaller fusion into her hand. “Lay it on me, half pint.” Maven did so, whispering their plan to the fusion, who let out another raucous chuckle upon hearing it. “Oh, I like the way you think, baby! So… up ya go!” And with that Sugilite tossed Maven hard upwards, sending them flying in the exact same direction Pyrite had gone, much to Pearl’s immense alarm.

“W-what are you doing?!” the white Gem asked, distraught as she watched the smaller fusion disappear from sight.

“Ah, relax, Pearl,” Sugilite scoffed, unconcerned. “We got this.” No sooner had the fusion said this, however, than a bright golden laser blast shot down from the skies above, giving the pair below no time at all to much as even react to it before it struck Sugilite squarely, splitting her up almost instantly. Garnet and Amethyst fell away from each other hard, both of them suddenly sharing Pearl’s fearful worry as they searched the seemingly empty skies above, seeing no signs of Maven whatsoever within them. Even Dipper pulled away from his persistent hiding spot a bit to look for the fusion, practically overwhelmed with fear that the unthinkable might have happened.

However, these worries were soon unfounded as Pyrite came into view once more, falling hard and fast back towards the Galaxy Warp as the result of a no doubt brutal blow from Maven. The fusion themselves was next to fall, letting out a terrified cry all the while as they had no way to break what would no doubt be quite a painful landing. Unless…

“Pearl! We need to fuse, now!” Garnet exclaimed, turning to her other teammate earnestly.

“A-Are you sure?” Pearl asked, taken aback with surprise. “I… I don’t want it to be like… well, like what happened last time…”

“It won’t be like last time,” the Gem leader assured, taking Pearl’s hand and offering her a reassuring smile. “I know it.”

For the briefest of moments, the white Gem hesitated, worried that she’d let herself get carried away on the euphoria that was fusing with Garnet yet again. But along with that worry came the memory of the resolve she had made to the Gem leader herself; a resolve to stand on her own and be stronger, regardless of the foe they were facing. Which meant that if Garnet wanted her to stand strong alongside her once again, then who was she to turn such an offer down? “S-so do I,” Pearl said with a confident nod, allowing the Gem leader to lead in their fusion dance. All the while, Amethyst continued watching the skies worriedly, paying Pyrite no mind as they made a brutal landing in the broken remains of the Homeworld warp. Maven themselves were awash in fear, absolutely clueless as how to stop themselves from falling as the ground drew closer and closer. They had hoped that Sugilite would have been able to catch them after tossing them up so far, allowing them to hit Pyrite with a quite unexpected blow in the air; however, the fusion seemed to be completely unaccounted for, much to Maven’s distraught alarm as they tightly closed their eyes and braced themselves for the inevitable. Though thankfully, it never came.

For instead, Maven found themselves being caught, not by Sugilite, but by the safe, massive hands of another fusion entirely. “Aaaaaand got you!” Sardonyx exclaimed as theatrically as ever as she began her gentle descent back to the ground. “And not a moment too soon either, darling! Why, if I hadn’t intervened when I did, then you’d likely be nothing more than an adorable, Maven-shaped splat on the ground at this very moment, which is absolutely unthinkable for a fusion as
“Ah, Sardonyx!” Maven laughed warmly, blushing at the compliment. “You’re too sweet!”

“As are you, dear, but we don’t quite have time to decide which one of us would win on that front,” the showy fusion quipped, making a graceful landing as Amethyst and Dipper both let out respective sighs of relief. “After all, we have bigger fish to fry…”

At that very same moment, Pyrite properly picked themselves up out of the Homeworld warp’s rubble, an aggravated scowl forming on their face the moment they caught sight of Sardonyx grinning down at them from high above. “Oh great…” they grumbled, rising to float once more as they glared hostilely at the showy fusion. “It’s you…”

“It’s a real treat to meet you too, Pyrite,” Sardonyx remarked with a mocking bow. “Though I must say, your sense of style does seem to be a bit derivative…” She mused, straightening her own bowtie as she looked to Pyrite’s critically. “Are you sure you’re not copying me? I can’t truly blame you if you are. After all, my aesthetic is very inspiring.”

“I HAD THE BOWTIE FIRST AND YOU KNOW IT, BIRD BOX!” Pyrite shouted furiously, though their anger only increased tenfold as Sardonyx rolled all four of her eyes at such a claim. “If you say so…” she shrugged as her giant hammer materialized in her lower hands. “Even so, I still think it looks better on me!” With this, Sardonyx swiftly twisted her torso before suddenly swinging her hammer hard, striking Pyrite clean on the side. The twisted fusion was sent flying across the hub, but Sardonyx beat them to its edge with an easy leap, using her momentum to pound Pyrite yet again. She repeated this process several times over as she knocked them about the surface of the hub, laughing mirthfully all the while as she continued to tease the twisted fusion all the while. “Oh, what’s the matter, dear? You’re looking a bit green. A bit yellow, too, but I’m not one to judge. By the way, I do believe that, in most human circles, pyrite is referred to as ‘fool’s gold’. Well, how incredibly fitting for you, since you’re composed of two of the biggest fools I happen to know! Ohohohoh!” With this bombastic laugh, Sardonyx finally came in for her heaviest swing yet, one that was more than enough to send Pyrite far out of the bounds of the Galaxy Warp and back towards the ocean once more.

As pressed against the back of the pillar as he was, Dipper was admittedly quite surprised when Pyrite went flying cleanly past him, shooting out far somewhere off into the distance. Tentatively, he peeked out onto the hub itself only to find Sardonyx gleefully accepting kudos from both Maven and Amethyst on such a successful beatdown, one that Dipper could scarcely believe had happened at all. After all, only a few mere minutes ago, Pyrite had stood poised to easily destroy them all without any sort of opposition whatsoever. Yet somehow, through some miracle, the tides of this battle had turned; once again, there seemed to be some kind of hope that they might actually win, that they actually stood a chance against someone as powerful and merciless as Pyrite themselves.

Still, Dipper knew better. Certainly, Bill must have been luring them all into a false sense of security, making them thing they had a shot at beating him before turning things right back around on them whenever he saw fit. Yet, for as much as he knew it was all a lost cause, some small part of him still wanted to believe that it wasn’t. He wanted to share the same sort of hope that Steven and Mabel did. He wanted Bill, and Peridot too, to finally, finally taste defeat, for so many different reasons. For himself and the absolute anguish, both internal and external, he had gone through and was still going through at the demon’s cruel hands. For his friends who had nearly lost their lives struggling against him in the past. For Lapis, who was stuck in yet another prison only after being chased back to Earth by Peridot and the threat she had once posed. When Dipper really thought about it, both of the components that composed Pyrite had taken so much from him in the past: his
friend, his body, his sense of security, and even still they stood to take and take even more if left unchecked. For certainly, if Pyrite won, they’d take the lives of the Gems, of Steven, of Mabel, possibly even reality itself if Bill used the twisted fusion as some sort of means of getting his hands on the rift. And it was only as this horrific thought dawned upon Dipper that he realized something important. Perhaps it was time to leave his longstanding fear behind in favor of something greater, of something far more significant than continuing nightmares or ominous threats. Perhaps it was time to stop letting both Bill and Peridot get away with taking as they pleased… and instead, pay them back for all they had stolen from him in full.

Meanwhile, back up on the hub, Sardonyx had harmoniously unfused, just in time for the group to plan out what they hoped would be their final attack on Pyrite, resolving to split the twisted fusion up once and for all. “Ok, so when they get back, you guys should all totally fuse into Alexandrite!” Maven suggested with a zealous grin. “And then, BAM! Hit ‘em so hard that POOF! They’ll have no choice but to split up!”

“Another good plan, Maven,” Garnet smirked as she crossed her arms. “But I don’t think the Galaxy Warp is big enough to hold Alexandrite.”

“Even if it was, I doubt we’d even need her to finish Pyrite off,” Pearl chuckled, unaware of the ominous shadow rising from the depths of the ocean right behind them. “We’ve already worn them down so much by this point that it’d be surprising if they even came back at all!”

“Yeah, we totally owned those two dumb ol’ triangles,” Amethyst remarked calmly. “Heck, when you think about it, maybe we really had nothing to be afraid of when it came to either Bill or Peridot, after all.”

“Oh I wouldn’t say that, Half Baked…” The entire group froze, newfound alarm sparking through all of them as they spun around to face Pyrite. The twisted fusion looked much worse for wear than how they’d started out, but by far the most frightening thing about them was the intense, hateful scowl on their face, all three of their eyes aglow with nothing less than murderous intent as they slowly walked, not hovered, towards their foes. “You really are a bunch of stupid clods if you think this is anywhere close to over yet! All of your fusions are nothing compared to my unlimited, unfathomable power! So keep ‘em coming, Crystal Chumps. Because I can keep this going for the REST OF TIME ITSELF!”

The Gems exchanged a brief, fearful glance at this, but just as before, Maven was unphased by their threats as they boldly stepped forward. “Oh yeah?” they asked challengingly. “Well, so can we!”

“YOU TWO!” Pyrite suddenly growled, their hatred seeming to flare up tenfold as the fusion made such a daring claim. With a vicious, hostile shout, Pyrite charged forward, their hands aglow with dangerous golden power, power that Maven only barely blocked with a well-timed shield formed over their arm. The twisted fusion collided with it hard and refused to let up as they kept their energy pressed tightly against the protective surface, which was starting to wear down just as much as Maven themselves were as a result of the devastating power being mounted against them. “This is all your fault, Shooting Bud! I had those Crystal Chumps right on the ropes, ready to crack until YOU came and ‘inspired’ them to ‘work together’. But I’m not about to let some mostly human runt like you stop me now!”

In an attempt to give Maven some much needed help, the Gems all quickly rushed forward, ready to provide them backup where they could. Yet, before any of them could even get close, one of Pyrite’s lower hands lashed out with a wave of fiery energy, one that knocked them all cleanly back and allowed the twisted fusion to continue pressing against Maven, who was clearly starting to
struggle to keep both their shield, and even themselves together. “Oh, what’s the matter, Rose Star? Falling apart so soon?” Pyrite taunted cruelly, their sadistic grin widening as Maven let out a small, pained cry as their energy began to wane. “Well believe me, you’ll be doing a lot worse than that by the time I’m through with you! The moment I split you pebbles up, I think I’ll start by tossing Shooting Star up into the cold, inhospitable depths of space before slowly and painfully tearing that gem right out of your body, Rosebud! Then, I think I’ll finish things off by blowing this entire hub to smithereens with all those Crystal Clods still on it! What a shame that neither of you will still be alive to see it! NYAHAHAHAHAI!”

With this loud, manic laugh, the twisted fusion came in with a sudden, brutal strike, one that was finally enough to shatter Maven’s shield entirely. The fusion screamed in agony as they caught the brunt of Pyrite’s flames, burning them slightly as they fell back and finally fell apart, no longer able to hold themselves together amidst the pain and fear that ended up tearing their fusion apart.

Steven and Mabel fell apart from each other hard, both of them weak and hurt and disoriented in light of how sudden their split had been. They only had the briefest chance to look to each other worriedly, however, before Pyrite’s dark shadow hung over them, the twisted fusion standing directly before them with their iconic merciless grin and golden flames poised to attack. “I’ll hand it to you, you kids put up one hell of a fight,” they remarked coldly, practically soaking in the terror of the two defenseless kids before them. “But in the end, it was nowhere even close to enough to stop me. So, it looks like this is finally the end…” Pyrite’s menacing smirk seemed to widen as they shifted their gaze between both the kids and the Gems, who were also completely helpless to stop the incredibly powerful attack the twisted fusion was about to send their way. “Say goodbye, you CLODS!”

With another demented cackle, Pyrite threw all four of their hands down, their flames spiraling directly towards Steven and Mabel first. The pair gasped in fear and braced themselves for the no-doubt painful assault, and yet it was an assault that never actually hit them. For instead, the flames were suddenly completely extinguished, courtesy of the steadfast edge of an ice-coated blade that had been wedged before the fire just in the nick of time.

“What?!” Pyrite yelled, dumbfounded as to how their deadly attack could have possibly failed. Yet as the smoke from the doused fire cleared, Steven and Mabel were the first to see exactly who had come to their rescue.

“Dipper!” they both exclaimed with surprised, yet excited smiles.

“What?” Dipper smirked back at them, holding his sword firmly and confidently. “You guys didn’t think I’d let you have all the fun, did you?”

The kids all shared a brief, warm laugh over this, yet it was ultimately short lived as Pyrite let out a bitter, mocking laugh behind them. “So, you finally decided to crying and cowering in the corner, huh, Pine Tree?” they asked tauntingly, their lower set of hands poised on their hips as they stood over Dipper intimidatingly.

Yet this time, he wasn’t fazed, especially as he forced himself to remain stern and steady against letting his fear of the dream demon control him any longer. “Yeah, I did,” he replied curtly. “When are you gonna stop cowering behind someone like Peridot and actually fight us yourself, Bill?”

Pyrite let out a harsh, angry scoff at this, their trio of eyes flashing with malice and hatred. “I’d watch myself if I were you, Pine Tree,” they growled darkly as flames curled around their upper hands. “You’re playing with fire here. And I’d hate to see you get BURNED!”

With a furious shout, the twisted fusion launched one of their fireballs right at Dipper, who smartly
and quickly warded them off with the Sword of Seasons, now covered in a gale-force wind. The breeze was enough to send the flames flying right back at Pyrite, who stumbled backward as the blast hit them and scorched them quite a bit.

“Believe me, I know you wouldn’t,” Dipper remarked solidly, taking a bold step forward as Steven and Mabel rose to join him. Likewise, the Gems also rejoined the fray, their weapons summoned as they stood poised and resolved to fight back. “Problem is, I’m done letting you and what you did to me burn me anymore. We all are.”

“That’s right,” Garnet solidly agreed, completely unshaken. “Which means this can either go one of two ways: you two can split up here and now and this can all be over with. Or, we’ll split you ourselves.”

“So,” Pearl smirked, her spear aimed directly at the admittedly stunned fusion. “Do we have ourselves some kind of deal, Pyrite?”

For a stark moment, Pyrite said nothing, their expression awash in angry alarm as they took in the large, dedicated group before them, a group that was, by all accounts, completely unafraid of them and ready to fight. It was obvious the twisted fusion had lost their prior edge against their foes, and as a result, they were now apparently outnumbered and outmatched. A fact that half of them fearfully recognized and a fact that the other half of them stubbornly refused to accept.

“Well? Any bright ideas about how we’re going to get out of this mess?” Pyrite muttered to themselves, Peridot’s half of their voice taking precedent before Bill’s took over again. “Hold your horses, I’m thinkin’ here! I will not hold any so-called ‘horses’! We’re about to be beaten into the ground by a bunch of rowdy traitors and you need to do something to stop it! What did I tell you earlier about demanding things from me?! I don’t care! You said you’d help me, but even after all this, I’m no better off than I was before! Oh, you want some help, Greenie? Well, I’ll be MORE than happy to give you ALL the help you need!”

Upon this rather hostile exclamation, Pyrite suddenly lurched back, all three of their eyes closing tight as Peridot’s side of their voice let out a sharp, sudden scream. The kids and the Gems all stopped short at that, watching in alarm as this scream gradually morphed into Bill’s wild, insane cackling. A bright flash of light engulfed the fusion, and when it quickly faded, Pyrite still remained, though from their glowing yellow trio of eyes alone, it was clear to see who was now completely in control.

“Sorry to shove you to the side, Greenie,” Pyrite grinned, now fully speaking in Bill’s voice with hardly a trace of Peridot’s left. “But you were starting to get in my way. Now, back to-”

The fusion was abruptly cut off by a fast and heavy punch in the jaw from Garnet, one that sent them clumsily tumbling backwards. “You talk too much,” the Gem leader remarked, adjusting her shades coolly.

“Oh, you chumps are gonna get it now,” Pyrite growled, shaking the blow off as they began to angrily storm forward. However, before they could even really take a step forward, they suddenly tripped and fell completely to the ground thanks to Amethyst’s whip coiled tightly around their leg. “Hey!”

“Whoops,” the purple Gem shrugged playfully. “Sorry, dude. Maybe you should watch your step!” With this, Amethyst swung her whip hard, with Pyrite still tied up in it all the while. The fusion was unable to free themselves from its grip as she spun them around the Galaxy Warp at a rapid pace, clearly having the time of her life in such cathartic payback.
Pyrite’s unexpected ‘flight’ came to a sharp and sudden end the moment they crashed onto the dull edge of Pearl’s outstretched spear. In retaliation, the fusion attempted to grab the spear and rip it out of the white Gem’s hands, but Pearl was too fast for them, pulling it away before going back in with a swift, accurate swing. Pyrite barely blocked it with their own cane, though the force of Pearl’s strike was enough to tear right through it, slicing it cleanly in half to the point that it abruptly disappeared in a small flash of light.

“Hm, what a surprise,” Pearl noted, pulling her spear back for another swing. “Knowing you, Cipher, I was expecting that thing to be a bit more sturdy. Then again, I suppose its just like most of your hairbrained schemes are, including this one: destined to fall apart at the seams!” The white Gem lashed out once more, hoping to take the final blow, though Pyrite leapt out of its way, opting to go back to their usual floating as they glared daggers down at the group below.

“K-keep on laughing it up, you chumps!” Pyrite hissed hotly, their manner still fierce though it was obvious they were steadily starting to fatigue. “We’ll see how funny it is when you’re all smashed into nothing more than the worthless bits of rock you really are!” The twisted fusion let out a heavy shout as they raised their upper hands high above their head, making the most of what energy they did have left to form a massive, powerful golden flame, one that they were more than ready to rain down upon all their foes in one last ditch, desperate attempt at wiping them out for good.

And yet, even that attempt was all for naught as both of their hands were suddenly caught and pulled back swiftly. Their flame diminished in its entirety as they glanced behind them, only to see Amethyst’s whip and Mabel’s grappling hook keeping both of their arms entirely restrained and leaving the perfect opening in its wake.

“Now, you guys!” Mabel shouted with a daring grin, nodding to Steven, who was the first to spring into action as Garnet threw him straight at Pyrite. A solid, sturdy shield was formed on the young Gem’s arm, and with a courageous shout, he brought it down on the unprepared fusion’s head, sending them pummeling straight into the ground. The moment Steven landed, Dipper was already right at his side, his sword drawn and electrified as he ran to the young Gem and preformed a deft, skillful jump right off the side of the shield, which gave him just enough of a boost to launch him right at the dazed fusion. Pyrite only had enough time to briefly turn to face the sword coming right at them and let out a startled gasp before it squarely hit its mark, impaling them cleanly and evenly in the center of their chest.

The entire Galaxy Warp seemed to freeze in the aftermath of this brutal blow, all of the Gems and the kids holding their breaths to see what would happen next. Dipper didn’t dare take his sword out of the twisted fusion, as breathless and adrenaline-high as he was, even as Pyrite glared down at the sparking weapon and then down at him with nothing less than burning hatred in all three of their eyes.

“Y-you shouldn’t have done that, Pine Tree…” they hissed viciously, their voice shaky, but still predominantly Bill’s as they were effectively frozen in place, unable to move due to the electricity keeping Peridot’s form in thrall. “Same goes for you, Rosebud…” They scowled at the young Gem, who had hurried to Dipper’s side, his shield still poised to defend if need be. “And here I was just gonna play nice and finish you off quick and easy. B-but thanks to this little stunt of yours, I have no choice but to make you two suffer more than you can possibly even comprehend next time we cross paths! And the same goes for the rest of you chumps too!” Their voice picked up into an outraged shout as their form began to flash warningly, a sign that they were indeed starting to fall apart. “You may have won this time, but only because I had to rely on a stupid LOSER of a space rock like Greenie here! But who knows?” Pyrite finally grinned once more, golden flames surrounding their form one final time as they closed their trio of eyes. “Maybe next time we fight, it’ll be on my terf. Then we’ll see who really gets the last laugh…” With this ominous
proclamation, the twisted fusion threw back their head and let out a wild, sinister laugh, one that gradually began to fade as Pyrite’s form was engulfed in a blinding light once more.

And then, as quickly as they had been formed, Pyrite was no more.

The light slowly faded to reveal that Bill was indeed gone, his presence no longer tainting Peridot as she solely remained, initially dazed and completely unaware of the sword still shoved into her chest. For a moment, she simply kept her sights set on the sky as she slowly blinked before she finally returned to her right mind, letting out a sharp, horrified gasp as she clutched her head tightly. “N-no!” she cried, her eyes huge with some sort of unknown terror. “L-leave me alone! G-get out of my gem, y-you… you…” Peridot trailed off, her jaw dropping in shock as she finally saw the sword running through her, as well as the group of Gems and kids all gathered around her in case she tried anything else. She sucked in a sharp gasp, clearly panicking for a number of reasons as she stumbled backwards and pulling the sword out of Dipper’s grip as it remained in her instead, her fingers shifting into a laser as she desperately tried to keep herself together. “W-wait!” she shouted fearfully, charging up one final, frantic blast. “Y-you clods need me! I’m the only one who knows about the—"

Peridot didn’t get a chance to finish as the sword finally fell out of her, which was just enough to finally destabilize her form entirely. The green Gem gasped as her form disappeared in a sharp puff of smoke, leaving not just her gemstone behind, but several other remnants as well. Alongside her gem, her lower arms and legs, as well as her disjointed fingers were all lying prone and disconnected on the ground, much to the surprise of the kids and Gems who slowly gathered around them.

“W-what on earth?” Pearl asked, baffled as she carefully picked up one of Peridot’s former fingers.

“Ugh, sick,” Amethyst gagged in disgust. “There’s bits of her all over.”

“Nope,” Garnet said with a satisfied grin as she held Peridot’s gem up and succinctly bubbled it. “She’s right here.” And with that, the Gem leader tapped said bubble, sending it off. “And now she’s at the temple.”

“So… I guess we sort of dismembered Peridot then?” Dipper asked, rather confused as he lightly kicked one of the fallen legs.

“Yes, guess so,” Amethyst remarked, scooping up all of the remaining bits and pieces before easily dropping them all off the edge of the Galaxy Warp and into the ocean far below. “Oops.”

“W-well, hey, looks like we finally beat her!” Mabel cut in brightly. “And we got rid of Bill too! So, it looks like tonight was a win-win for all of us!”

“Hm… for now at least…” Pearl mused worriedly, still rather preoccupied with the hostile threats Bill had left them on.

“You don’t think he’s actually gonna try and come back after that thrashing we just gave him… do you?” Amethyst asked, also rather concerned.

“I don’t know…” Garnet admitted, her future vision still blocked off from all things concerning Bill. “Ideally, we should try to find a way to get rid of Bill for good, but… he’s tricky, and hard to pin down.”

“M-maybe I should go talk to Great Uncle Ford about all this when we get back,” Dipper interjected thoughtfully. “He knows a lot about Bill; he might be able to help us come up with a
“You kids are all full of great plans tonight,” Garnet smirked, ruffling Dipper’s hair rather affectionately.

“Indeed,” Pearl agreed with a small smile as she put her hands on Steven and Mabel’s shoulders. “If you two hadn’t come in with that fusion idea, there’s no telling what might have happened!”

“Aww, it was nothin’,” Mabel blushed with a small chuckle. “Ok, well actually, I take that back, cause it was kinda something and that something was AMAZING! Right, Steven?”

“Huh?” the young Gem blinked, somewhat distracted as he looked towards the broken Homeworld warp behind him. “Oh, uh… yeah…” He frowned, briefly, largely unable to get his mind off of just how frantic Peridot seemed to be both before and after Pyrite, how she had tried so hard to make a hasty escape from Earth for whatever reason, how she tried to offer some sort of panicked warning in the very seconds right before she poofed. And, given the terrifying, arduous battle they’d just been through, Steven found that he couldn’t simply discount all those things as nothing. “Um, guys?” he spoke up as the others continued to celebrate their victory. “I think… I think Peridot was trying to tell us something back there…”

“Oh, like what?” Dipper scoffed with a bit of a bemused laugh. “That she realized that fusing with Bill was actually a bad idea? A bit too late for that one, don’t you think?”

“Uh, w-well I don’t think it was that exactly…” Steven said, looking aside. “B-but maybe she was trying to say that she knew something about Bill that we don’t? O-or maybe something else?”

The entire group took pause at this, sending the young Gem a round of curious, though largely doubtful glances. All except for Mabel, who had also heard the green Gem’s shortened warning prior to her destabilizing, but even so, she didn’t really know what to make of them herself, much like Steven didn’t. Even so, the Gems themselves, as well as Dipper, seemed largely dismissive of it, especially since whatever threat Peridot used to pose to them was no more.

“Those were just the desperate lies of a Gem who’s been caught,” Garnet assured, finally cracking a comforting smile. “You don’t need to worry about her anymore.”

“Yeah, and as for Bill, we can just figure out some way to deal with him later,” Amethyst remarked, stretching tiredly. “For now, all that fusion’s got me exhausted.”

“Ironically enough, same here,” Pearl smirked as she led the way back to the temple warp pad. “Come on, kids, let’s go home. Oh, I’m so glad this is finally over… Well, at least part of it is, anyway…”

The Gems all readily headed over to the warp pad, with the twins following suit not too far after them. Steven, on the other hand, hung back slightly, looking out across the battle-worn Galaxy Warp apprehensively. True, they had miraculously beaten Pyrite and as a result, won an incredible victory against not only Peridot, but Bill as well. And though that later victory was only temporary at best, it still felt well-earned all the same. Yet despite the high spirits everyone else was in, Steven couldn’t help but still feel some lingering sense of dread. Peridot’s unfinished warning had left him on edge, just as much as Bill’s vicious threats had. And while they had certainly triumphed in this one battle, there was still so much left unseen and unknown that the young Gem wasn’t quite sure what to make of any of it at all.

Which meant that, if no one else was going to try to find answers to questions only he seemed to be asking, then Steven would just have to find those answers for himself.
To be continued...
Chapter 60, Part 2: Catch and Release

Chapter Summary

In which Peridot is a little shit, copious amounts of Stebel shipteasing happens, and arc 6 finally rests in pieces (thank god).

Chapter Notes

Yay.... at last arc 6 is finally over! Though it does kinda go out with a... fizzle instead of a bang tbh. But oh well, at least it means we get arc 7 soon (which I'm SO excited about!) and so, I suppose its time to get things started. Enjoy! (keyword is BATHROOM)

Steven sighed as he plopped down onto his bed, barely even glancing up to see the Gems head back into the temple, conversing quietly amongst themselves all the while. In fact, the young Gem was so caught up in thoughts of both the now-defeated Pyrite as well as Peridot’s curtailed last words that he didn’t even initially notice Mabel casually take a seat beside him as Dipper paced around before them, voicing his many thoughts about their recent battle aloud.

“I still can’t believe it,” he began rather frantically, still somewhat unnerved despite their victory against the twisted fusion. “All this time, we thought the very worst Bill could do was possess someone, but come to find out he can actually fuse. With Gems? How does that even work? I mean, I know Gems are basically made up of solid light, but Bill’s made of… ok, well actually I have no idea what he’s made of and I’m honestly not sure I even want to know but still, how could something like Pyrite have even existed at all? It makes no sense!”

“Uh, does it really matter how it happened at this point, bro-bro?” Mabel asked with a bit of a shrug. “Pyrite’s history! Heck, you should know that better than anyone else since it was your sword that stabby-stabbed right through ‘em.”

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“‘Well yeah, Pyrite’s gone,” Dipper huffed intently. “But who’s to say Bill won’t just find some other Gem out there to fuse with to finish off what they started? I mean, just think about Homeworld; that’s an entire planet of Gems he could trick just like he probably did with Peridot. All he’d need to do is make a deal with the right one of them and then that’d be it for all of us!”

Mabel frowned upon hearing this, half expecting Steven to jump in and talk some calming sense into her fretful brother, though the young Gem himself seemed completely lost in thought as he kept his gaze trained on the ground before him. So of course, that meant the job would have to fall to her instead. “Uh… Dipper?” she began, rather unsure of how to go about this. “Not to be… touchy or anything like that, but… didn’t you just sorta get over your whole ‘being afraid of Bill

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thing’ when you ran out to help us fight him and Peridot back there?”

Dipper finally stopped short at this, his cheeks flushing red with embarrassment as he let out a forced, rather anxious scoff. “Uh, y-yeah, I did!” he protested defensively, though there were still hints of clear dread in his tone. After all, he had thrown himself into the fray against Pyrite, true, but he had largely done so on a burst of righteous anger and adrenaline. Now that such things were gone and the battle was over, logic had largely returned and with it, the sensible notion that Bill was still a dangerous being to be feared, even despite his most recent defeat. “But I still think we should be ready in case something like that ever happens again. Remember, we almost didn’t beat Pyrite in the end. If anything, we probably just got lucky.”

“Oh, no,” Mabel interjected with an annoyed pout. “‘If anything’ me and Steven totally came in and saved the day with our great fusion idea. Right, Steven?”

“Hm?” the young Gem finally blinked, glancing up, though it was clear he wasn’t really paying much attention to the ongoing conversation. “Oh, uh, y-yeah, right.” Steven took pause for a moment, almost opting to return to his unspoken thoughts, though at the very last second, he decided to take a chance and voice them aloud. “Um, actually… I know you guys are still worried about Bill and everything—a-and I am too!—but… what about Peridot?”

The twins exchanged something of a confused glance at this before Dipper crossed his eyes, far from interested in discussing the now bubbled green Gem at this point. “What about her?”

“Well… I know Garnet said we don’t have to worry about her anymore, but… I can’t stop thinking about what she had tried to say right before she was poofed…” Steven frowned apprehensively. “She seemed like she was really freaked out… like… like she wanted to warn us about something…”

Upon hearing this, Mabel tilted her head rather curiously, wanting to hear more, though Dipper refuted it with an exasperated sigh as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Come on, Steven, don’t be silly. Why would Peridot want to ‘warn’ us about anything when her and Bill were just trying to kill us seconds before that?”

“I don’t know, but maybe…” Steven trailed off, uncertain of how to even make a case for Peridot at this point. After all, the green Gem had indeed conspired with the dream demon to violently end them all, and not only that, but the entire Pyrite disaster alone had been kickstarted by Peridot forcefully hauling him off to the Galaxy Warp against his will. There was a very good chance that whatever her final words were, they could have been just a ploy, or perhaps even a result of whatever frenzied mania Bill had apparently left her with when they unfused. And yet… there was still the possibility that it had been something else, though what that something was, the young Gem had no idea whatsoever. “I… I guess you’re right…” he finally admitted in slight defeat.

“I know I’m right,” Dipper said, offering Steven a reassuring smile as he began to head down the loft stairs. “Anyway, I’m sorry I can’t stick around for the rest of our sleepover, but I really need to get back down to the shack and tell Great Uncle Ford about this whole Pyrite thing. The sooner we come up with a plan to stop Bill once and for all, the better off we all are. I’ll see you guys in the morning.”

“See ya, bro-bro!” Mabel waved Dipper off as Steven did the same, leaving the pair alone in the comfortable darkness of the house. Somewhere on the couch below, Lion’s quiet snoozing snores could be heard, but aside from that, everything had fallen into silence, something that Mabel noticed immediately more than Steven. In fact, the young Gem seemed to pay that fact hardly any mind at all as he glanced to the side of his bed, noticing a left-behind remnant from one of their final encounters with Peridot still sitting exactly where he had left it. Without a word, Steven lifted
the green Gem’s detached, discarded foot up onto the bed, sitting it beside him as he let out a long, worried sigh.

The ongoing silence persisted between the pair, even as Mabel took the time to glance between Steven and the foot beside him. She could tell just from his expression alone that the young Gem was still deeply concerned with whatever Peridot’s unfinished final words had been, and though she didn’t really know what to make of them herself, she still figured it’d be worth the effort to at least try to give Steven some peace of mind amidst his palpable uncertainty. “Um… hey, Steven?”

“Yeah?” the young Gem dully replied, still looking over at the green Gem’s foot.

Mabel paused briefly at this, taking in a deep, daring breath as she noticed Steven’s hand lying flat and not too far away from her own at the bed between them. And though she knew now wasn’t exactly the time for such things, she couldn’t resist the urge to move her hand just a bit closer to his all the same. “W-well…” she began, her cheeks taking on the faintest hint of a blush as she looked down to see her hand almost brushing against Steven’s. All it would take was one more burst of determined confidence on her part, and for all she knew, everything could change. “I-I was… I mean… I want to… I, uh… a-are you—”

“RAWUGH!” Mabel was instantly interrupted by this fearsome growl, one that came along with a familiar purple hand lightly slapping Steven against his face, startling them both. The pair was quick to turn around to see Amethyst sitting right on the bed beside them, a playful smirk on her face as she put on a mocking, faux-threatening tone. “Nyehhehe! I’m back to kidnap you before fusing with a loser jerk of a triangle!” she quipped, evoking what was clearly Peridot in her preformance before letting out an amused laughs upon seeing the kids’ frightened expressions. “What?” she grinned, casually slipping herself into the space between them. “It’s been long enough that we can joke about it now, right?”

“It’s only been about an hour,” Steven pointed out.

“Uh, hey, Amethyst?” Mabel interjected, somewhat disappointed over how her moment alone with the young Gem had been cut short. “I don’t wanna sound ‘rude’ or anything but… what are you doing out here?”

“Yeah,” Steven added, looking to the purple Gem in confusion. “I thought you were in the temple with Garnet and Pearl.”

“I was,” Amethyst said, rolling her eyes. “But they kept on going on about ‘oh Bill’s gonna do this’ or ‘yikes, Bill might do that’ even though we literally just kicked his yellow butt.”

“Heh, they’re sounding sorta like Dipper then,” Mabel said with a bit of a chuckle, though it was still something of a fake one.

“Why am I not surprised?” the purple Gem mused teasingly. “Anyway, I got so bored with the whole thing that I figured I’d come out here and see what you dorks were doing, but from the looks of it, that’s not much. So—oh, ew…” Amethyst cringed in disgust as she noticed the disconnected green foot resting on Steven’s other side. “What are you doing with her foot?”

“…Think its lucky?” Steven shrugged with a hint of a smile.

“Heh, not for Peridot,” the purple Gem smirked as she got to her feet and began to head back to the temple gate. “Well, its good to have you back, Ste-man. Even if you were only kidnapped for like… a few minutes.”
“Um… Amethyst?” Steven spoke up, largely without thinking.

“Yeah?” she paused, turning back to face the young Gem.

“Uh… do you think…” Steven trailed off again, whatever concerns he wanted to voice to her quickly falling apart. After all, even though Amethyst was by far the loosest of the Gems, whose to say she wouldn’t have just dismissed his ongoing worries just like everyone else seemed to? “N-no, it’s ok. Never mind.”

Though Amethyst did send the young Gem a brief look of confusion at this, she largely shrugged it off as she continued heading down the stairs. “Ok, weirdo,” she teased lightly. “If you guys need anything, I’ll be in my room, eating garbage.”

“Oh!” the kids called out after her, not paying too much mind as she slipped back into the temple. Almost as soon as she did, Steven flopped back onto his bed with yet another heavy sigh, still holding onto Peridot’s foot as he set it down in front of him. Mabel frowned as she turned around to face him, putting her own anxious feelings aside for the moment to help Steven with his.

“Uh… are you ok?” she asked, leaning forward just the slightest bit.

“Yeah…” Steven admitted before honestly changing his answer. “No… I don’t know…”

“Do you… wanna talk about it?” Mabel asked patiently as the young Gem rolled over.

“Heh, that depends,” the young Gem laughed mirthlessly. “Are you gonna tell me I have nothing to worry about just like everyone else seems to be doing around here?”

“Not if that’s what you don’t wanna hear,” Mabel grinned knowingly.

Steven’s smile turned genuine at this as he finally sat up, offering Mabel a warm, trustful look that made her heart stir even more than it already currently was. “Thanks, Mabel, I knew I could count on you.”

“A-anytime…” she said, her voice almost a whisper as she tried her hardest to suppress her ongoing blush.

“So, don’t get me wrong, I’m happy we stopped Pyrite and beat Bill, f-for now,” Steven began to explain, looking to the foot once again. “But… well, when Peridot first, you know, kidnapped me, she seemed like she really wanted to get back to Homeworld as quickly as possible. Then, right before you guys and the Gems showed up, she said that the earth wasn’t going to be like ‘anything’ soon. And then on top of that, there’s whatever she was trying to say right before she poofed. Why was she so scared? What was she even going to say in the first place?”

“Hm…” Mabel took a moment to muse over this before offering a reasonable possibility. “Well, she did just unfuse with Bill when we poofed her. So… maybe she was gonna say that she knows something about him that no one else does?”

“Maybe…” Steven said, holding the green Gem’s discarded foot in his lap. “Or for all we know, it could have been something else entirely!”

“Like… what?”

“Like… like…” the young Gem let out a frustrated sigh, unable to think of anything as he lay back down on the bed again, disgruntled. “Ugh, I don’t know! And now we’ll never know because she’s deep in the temple in a bubble! If only we could just talk to her for one more second…”
Mabel nodded in stalwart agreement with this sentiment, though as she did, a gentle glow filled in from Steven’s gemstone, startling the pair out of their thoughts as they turned towards the temple gate. A familiar pattern took over the door, one that smoothly slid open to reveal the vast expanse of soft pink clouds that they knew to be Rose’s room.

“...Should we?” Steven asked, exchanging a curious glance with Mabel.

“Hey, it’s worth a shot,” she shrugged, knowing that anything was better than simply sitting around and speculating.

Making sure that none of the Gems, or anyone else for that matter, was around to catch them, the pair hurried down the loft and into the open temple door, venturing into the sea of pastel clouds in the hopes of finding some kind of answers within them. “Wow, it’s been a while since we’ve been in here,” Mabel noted, spinning around to get in a better scope at all the clouds around them. “You’d think that we’d go into a room that can make basically anything you want it to more often.”

“I know, right?” Steven nodded in agreement. “This place could help us out in so many different ways! In fact... Room! We need to talk to Peridot!”

Immediately responding to the young Gem’s request, several clouds converged together to form a perfect image of Peridot in her last stable moments, her finger laser poised and ready to fire as she repeated her last few words: “I-I’m the only one who knows about the-”

The replica green Gem froze completely, her statement still as unfinished as it had been before, much to Steven and Mabel’s disappointment. “The what?” Steven groaned, exasperated. The fake Peridot repeated herself once again as a response, though even still she didn’t provide any actual answers.

“I-I’m the only one who knows about the-”

The kids let out frustrated huffs at this, both of them remembering that nothing the room made was ever actually really real in the first place. “Boo!” Mabel goaded, kicking the fake Peridot, which resulted in her dissipating into nothing more than the clouds she was made of. “That Peridot was broken. If we really wanna know what’s up, then I say we go talk to the real deal.”

“You mean... let her out?” Steven frowned apprehensively. “I don’t know, Mabel... The Gems won’t be too happy if they find out that we let the dangerous Homeworld Gem that we’ve been tracking down for weeks out right after they captured her...”

“Well, who says the Gems are even gonna find out?” Mabel winked mischievously. “If Peridot really does have something important to say, then that’s great! We can convince her to tell the Gems about it and pretend like the whole thing was an accident. But if she just ends up being a big ol’ meanie about the whole thing, then we can always just fuse again and put her right back into a bubble like nothing ever happened! It’s as easy as that!”

“Hm... well, when you put it like that...” Steven considered, hoping that this idea would end up working. True, releasing Peridot from her bubbled prison was something of a risky plan, but if the green Gem did indeed hold some sort of significant unknown information, then that risk would be more than worth it. “Room, we need to go to the basement,” the young Gem announced authoritatively. “The real basement. I know there’s a way down there!”

Fortunately, the room complied, parting away a layer of clouds to reveal a pole descending downwards. Steven and Mabel shared a determined glance at this before they rushed for it, with
the young Gem calling out his thanks to the room before they both hopped onto the pole, cheering gleefully as they rapidly slid down it throughout the temple.

“Wooo!” Steven laughed brightly as the pole began to twist and turn and defy gravity, though somehow they never fell of it so long as they held on tight. “This is awesome!”

“Yeah…” Mabel smiled down at Steven below her, paying more attention to him than their exhilarating descent. “It is…”

In what seemed like hardly any time at all, the pole ran out, dropping the pair into the burning room in an open freefall. Steven took the most advantage of it, spinning in midair as he fell and not noticing how close he was getting to the ground as a result. “Yeah! Triple 550 deluxe with no cheese!” he proclaimed mere seconds before he inevitably ended up landing on the hard ground rather clumsily. Before the young Gem really had much of a chance to recover from such a hard impact, Mabel happened to land directly on top of him, eliciting another small gasp of pain from Steven in light of how mildly hurt he already was. All the same, Mabel couldn’t help but notice as she righted herself somewhat, just how close her face incidentally was to Steven’s as she practically hovered over him. For a few seconds that felt like ages to her, Mabel didn’t move, instead staring straight down at Steven below her until he finally broke her out of her lovestruck amazement with a look of genuine confusion.

“Um… Mabel? Is everything ok?” he asked, noting her wide, wondering eyes staring into his.

In an instant, Mabel bolted upright, pulling herself to her feet before hurrying to help the young Gem do the same. “Uh, y-yeah! Everything’s fine! Great even!” she vouched with a very flustered chuckle. “I-I was just making sure you were ok after breaking my fall like that! Uh, t-thanks for that by the way, buddy!” She quipped quite awkwardly, landing a playful punch on Steven’s shoulder as she really didn’t know what else to do to divert attention away from her almost completely transparent crush on him.

“Uh sure…” Steven smiled back, though he was still somewhat bewildered as he rubbed his sore are. “Don’t mention it. Now, we just need to find Peridot’s bubble… It could take a while since there’s so many in here, but-”

“Oh!” Mabel proclaimed, pointing the recently bubbled green gemstone out amidst the rest.

“Ok,” Steven began diffidently as he came to stand beside Mabel. “So we’re about to release a dangerous Homeworld Gem.”

“Yep,” Mabel nodded, her hands on her hips.

“Who… also just got out of a fusion with Bill Cipher…”

“Yep.”

“This… could get intense…”

“Hey, well just remember our plan,” Mabel assured confidently. “If anything goes wrong, then all we need to do is form Maven and Peridot’s as good as bubbled again!”

“Yeah… bubbled…” Steven agreed halfheartedly, not too fond of the idea of having to poof Peridot all over again if she refused to comply. Still, there’d be no knowing what they’d need to do without releasing the green Gem in the first place. And so, the young Gem took the initiative, scaling up the nearest veiny pillar in an attempt to reach the bubble in question. “Aaaaaand…
gotcha!” he exclaimed, though his excitement was cut short as he slipped the moment he got a grip on Peridot’s bubble. Mabel was ready to spot him even as he fell, though inevitably, both kids ended up hitting the ground, as well as the bubble, which popped almost instant upon impact.

Steven and Mabel were quick to pick themselves up off the ground as soon as a pale green light began to surround the small triangular gemstone. Peridot’s familiar form started to take shape around it, but as she regenerated in full, the kids were left completely awestruck by what they saw, even as she finally finished her cut-off warning from before.

“-the Cluster, you insufferable, half-formed, traitor, mega-clods!” the green Gem shouted, throwing her arm forward and believing her laser was still attached to it. However, Peridot was quick to realize that her extended arms, as well as her lower legs were gone, revealing her actual, un-enhanced form for what it truly was.

“Oh my gosh…” Steven breathed in amazement as he looked the startled green Gem up and down.

“I can’t believe it…” Mabel also noted in awe before breaking out into a huge, elated smile. “You’re so… so…”

“CUTE!” both kids exclaimed brightly, rushing to stand alongside Peridot, who, without her extended limbs, was actually only about as tall as they were.

“M-my limb enhancers!” Peridot exclaimed in alarm, stretching out her arms and legs only to see that, horrifically enough, they were short and small and ultimately powerless. “Where are my limb enhancers?!”

“Aw, she’s even cuter when she gets angry!” Mabel quipped warmly. “She’s like… like a grumpy kitten!”

“Yeah!” Steven agreed with a good-natured chuckle. “Or an angry little slice of pie, right?”

“I am most certainly NOT that despicable abomination that called itself ‘Pyrite’ any longer!” Peridot snapped fiercely before letting out a frightened gasp. “W-wait… that… Cipher creature isn’t still lurking around here… is he?”

“Um… no,” Steven said earnestly, somewhat concerned upon seeing just how genuinely afraid Peridot seemed to be at the mere mention of Bill. “He’s gone, for now at least…”

“H-he better be!” the green Gem exclaimed, still clearly quite frantic. “I don’t ever want to see that monster ever again after he tricked me into that disaster of a fusion! A-and not to mention what he did to my-” Peridot once again stopped short as she finally stole a glance upward, her jaw

“Stop talking and release me from your death grip this instant!” Peridot growled, harshly shoving Mabel away from her and not even caring as she hit the floor.

“Hey!” Mabel protested with a sour pout. “That wasn’t nice!”

“I don’t care!” the green Gem shouted hotly, absolutely livid. “I demand to know what this place is, and where I-” Peridot once again stopped short as she finally stole a glance upward, her jaw
dropping in terrified shock upon seeing the countless collection of bubbled Gems right above her head. “Oh my stars… You’re going to harvest me?!”

“No!” Steven interjected fretfully. “I mean, we were just—ow!” The young Gem flinched back as Peridot suddenly lashed out, slapping him squarely on the face. “Hey! That hurt!”

“…It did?” Peridot asked, glancing down at her small, fully connected fingers.

“Yeah, a lot,” Steven frowned, rubbing the side of his face only for Peridot to suddenly strike him once again. “Ow!”

“Hey, stop that!” Mabel rushed over to the young Gem’s side in an attempt to stop the green Gem’s sudden burst of miniscule violence. “We don’t hit people around here. That’s not what— ouch!” She cut herself off as she was suddenly victim to an unexpected slap from Peridot as well, who couldn’t help but let out a small, satisfied snicker at the discovery of her newfound ‘power’.

“Yes!” she cheered viciously, letting out a barrage of quick, relentless slaps on both of the kids. “Feel my unbridled rage!”

“Ow! Ow!” Mabel cried, trying in vain to block the green Gem’s continuous small, sharp blows. “S-Steven, is it too late or too early to fuse into Maven to stop this?!”

“Oh, you will do NO such thing!” Peridot hissed, pausing her attack briefly. “That four armed nuisance was the catalyst for my defeat and I will not allow you to—”

“Hey!” Steven took his chance to grab the green Gem’s wrists to keep her from hitting them any further in an attempt to get her to calm down. “Hey… hey. What’s that on your shirt?”

“What’s a shirt?” Peridot asked, glancing down at the finger Steven was pointing at her chest only for him to swiftly bring that finger up to flick her on the nose. “Ow! AUGH! That does it!”

Fully provoked, the green Gem picked her ongoing assault up exactly where she had left it, resorting to tackling the pair with largely directionless, yet painful slaps. Despite their attempts to escape from her range, Peridot was persistent, essentially chasing them around the burning room and never letting up even once amidst her palpable fury.

“Ok, do you really have to keep hitting us like this?” Mabel struggled to ask between strikes.

“Yeah, w-why are you acting like this?!” Steven implored, holding up a hand as he ended up stumbling to the ground.

“You stabbed me into a limbless cloud!” Peridot ranted as she continued her attack. “You trapped me in your bubble dungeon! And you called me… cute!” At this, the green Gem attempted to come in with a full on punch, one that Steven and Mabel only narrowly stepped out of the way of, allowing Peridot to trip and fall on the ground nearby.

“We didn’t poof you!” Steven insisted firmly.

“You helped,” Peridot pointed out, sending them a cross glare.

“No, we—ok, well I guess we sorta did,” Mabel admitted awkwardly. “But that’s only ‘cause you were fused with Bill! We had to stop you somehow. But that doesn’t matter right now. What does matter is that we wanna help you! That’s why we let you out!”

“…Why would you make such a miscalculation?” the green Gem asked, pulling her legs to her
chest as she looked to the pair suspiciously.

“Back at the warp pad,” Steven began, kneeling down in front of Peridot as Mabel did the same. “What were you trying to say? Why do we need you? What do you know?”

“What do I know?” Peridot scoffed, as though the answer was obvious. “Only everything there is to know about the Cluster, you pebble!”

“Cluster?” Steven and Mabel both asked in unison, exchanging a curious glance before the former picked up on the latter part of what the green Gem had said. “Wait… pebble?”

“My mission!” Peridot snapped angrily. “The reason why I’m on this sad, corn-infested rock in the first place! I was to check progress on the Cluster! Just in and out before it hatches. I wasn’t supposed to get stuck here, or make ill-conceived deals with well-dressed triangles, or be forcibly ‘married’ to a bunch of ‘gnomes’!”

“Oooo, girl, tell me about it!” Mabel exclaimed with an empathetic, knowing grin.

“But I’ve been sidetracked far too many times and now its too late!” Peridot continued, genuine fear filling her frustration. “It’s going to emerge and nothing can stop it and we’ll all be shattered!”

“Oh yeah, is it a bad thing?” Mabel asked just as intently. “Cause from the way you’re making it sound, it seems like it could sorta be a bad thing…”

Peridot paused at this, looking between the kids with a rather unreadable expression before leaning in somewhat. “You wanna know?”

“Yes,” Steven said as Mabel nodded in insistent agreement.

“You really wanna know?”

“…Yes?”

The green Gem was quiet for another short beat before suddenly pointing down at Steven’s chest. “What’s your shirt?”

“Oh, these are my banana pajamas,” Steven grinned before Peridot suddenly flicked him in the nose, just as he had done to her. “Ow! Hey!”

“S-Steven!” Mabel gasped, quickly jumping to her feet as she helped the young Gem do the same. “Look!” She frantically pointed at Peridot, who had already put quite a bit of distance between herself and them as she scurried off towards the room’s nearby exit.

“W-wait! Don’t run away!” Steven called, hurrying after her.

“Don’t worry!” Mabel assured, reaching into her night shirt. “She won’t be running for too much—aw, nuts!” she huffed in disappointment as her search came up empty. “I left my grappling hook in the house!”

“Ha! Try and catch me now, you impertinent clumps!” Peridot taunted back at them, chuckling manically as she quickly climbed up towards the temple gate. Knowing that they couldn’t simply let her escape with the seemingly important information she had at her disposal, the kids gave
chase, though they were ultimately unable to stop her from rushing out of the temple and into the house itself.

“S-stop!” Steven yelled as he also hurried out through the gate with Mabel not too far behind. “They’re gonna see you!”

This warning fell on deaf ears, however, as Peridot continued gleefully celebrating her victory, unaware of the trio of Gems congregated in the kitchen, even as she passed by it. “Yes! Freedom is mine!” she proclaimed, stopping short right before the door leading outside. One single glance over her shoulder, however, made her realize this freedom might be short lived as she made eye contact with Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl, all of whom were absolutely shocked to see her free and on the run once again.

“Wait!” Steven and Mabel cried, hurrying to throw themselves between Peridot and the Gems before any kind of altercation could take place. Unfortunately for them, however, the green Gem only succeeded in making things even worse than they already were.

“L-look!” she exclaimed, pointing upwards in the hopes of diverting the Gems’ attention. “Another planet to betray!”

Needless to say this ploy didn’t work as the Gems instantly summoned their weapons, sending her a resilient glare that easily conveyed their intentions to recapture her immediately. Peridot choked out a frightened gasp but all the same, she turned on her heel, running off without any sort of delay. “Retreat!” she cried, scrambling over to the front door, only for Garnet and Pearl to block her path, weapons drawn and ready to attack.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Pearl exclaimed, taking a swing that Peridot only narrowly dodged as she ran on all fours up the loft stairs, only to find Amethyst casually waiting on Steven’s bed, her whip coiled up in her hands.

“Heeeeey,” the purple Gem greeted with a smug smile, one that sent the green Gem fleeing in terror once more.

“H-hold on a second, you guys!” Steven implored his guardians as they continued chasing Peridot around the house, even as the green Gem faceplanted flat onto the floor below.

“Y-yeah, there’s no need to resort to anymore violence!” Mabel urged, only to cringe slightly as Garnet almost punched Peridot clean in the face.

“Get her!” the Gem leader shouted, running after the green Gem as she began to make a beeline for the now unblocked door.

“You’ll never take me alive, you filthy traitors!” Peridot snarled as she leapt for the door, ripping through its lower screen and right off the edge of the front porch with a loud crash. The Gems were more than prepared to rush after her, however, they were stopped just short of the door by Steven and Mabel jumped directly in front of it.

“Wait!” Steven exclaimed, throwing his arms out wide. “You guys have to stop chasing her!”

“What? Have you guys gone totally nuts?” Amethyst asked incredulously.

“She just escaped again,” Pearl huffed impatiently. “Of course we have to chase her!”

“But-” Mabel attempted to interject, only for Garnet to intervene and gently move them both aside.
“We can talk later,” she said succinctly, tossing the door open as Amethyst and Pearl hurried out first. “But for now, don’t let her get away!”

Steven and Mabel only took the time to exchange a brief, anxious glance before they also followed the Gems outside into the night. Even from the porch, they were able to spot Peridot, who still had an impressive lead over the Gems, largely since she was mostly falling down the hill rather than running down it. The green Gem let out an array of pained, frustrated shouts as she rolled down the incline, only coming to a stop as she crashed hard into the side of the Mystery Shack. Dazed from the fall, Peridot picked herself up rather groggily, only to quickly shake herself out of it as soon as she realized the Gems were still on her tail.

“Peridot!” Garnet shouted fiercely, Amethyst and Pearl running right behind her with their weapons still at the ready to take her out all over again. Peridot let out a startled cry and took a very brief second to glance around frantically for any kind of escape, only to interestingly enough, find one directly above her head. One of the shack’s smaller windows hung partially open, just wide enough for the green Gem in her now compact, diminutive size, to squeeze through. And with the Gems mere seconds away from converging upon her and capturing her, it was an opportunity that Peridot didn’t hesitate to take.

Which was why she climbed, or rather, scrambled up the nearby trash can, nearly falling off of it entirely as she used it as a boost into the open window. However, as Peridot clumsily slipped in through the window and into the shack’s kitchen, she failed to initially notice that she wasn’t the only one in the room.

“Do do do do, gettin’ a midnight snack, do do,” Stan sang to himself as he rifled through the fridge for said snack, finally settling on a leftover sandwich and a can of Pitt Cola. However, what the conman wasn’t prepared for as he closed the fridge with food in hand, was to turn around only to find a small, green figure falling down from the window behind him and faceplanting hard onto the floor.

“W-what the-?!” Stan exclaimed in alarm as he accidentally dropped his snack. Peridot bolted upright with a gasp upon realizing she had been caught, only to let out a catlike hiss at the conman as she grabbed a pan that was resting on the nearby counter.

“Stay back, you over-aged human!” she barked threaten, holding the pan out like a weapon. “I have a… blunt force object and I am not afraid to use it!”

Upon hearing this warning, Stan simply let out an unimpressed scoff, crossing his arms as he looked down to the petite green Gem. “Yeah, like I’m afraid of some vegetable gremlin with a frying pan,” he remarked sardonically before taking a second glance at Peridot. “Wait a second, aren’t you that loudmouthed green punk who–”

The conman didn’t get a chance to finish for at that exact moment, Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl all burst into the shack through the front door, rushing into the kitchen to find none other than Peridot standing out in the open for them to catch. “Hey! Hey!” Stan interjected hotly, none too pleased by the late, unwelcome intrusion. “What’s the big idea here?! You three can’t just break into somebody’s house in the middle of the night so you can–”

“After her!” Pearl shouted, pointing directly at Peridot, who didn’t hesitate to fearfully flee once more. However, with far less space to work with this time, the ongoing game of cat and mouse between the green Gem and her trio of nemeses became even more frantic and intense. Peridot made good use of her smaller size to get the higher ground on the counter, even going as far as to climb up on top of the cabinets before jumping onto the fridge. All the while, the Gems did their best to try and wrangle her in, with Pearl tossing spear after spear as Amethyst lashed her whip out
recklessly. Needless to say that as this chase carried on into other rooms throughout the shack, it was causing quite a bit of destruction in its wake, something that set Stan off in particular, especially as they rushed through the gift shop and the museum.

“Hey! Careful with the merchandise!” the conman warned as he followed after the Gems as they pursued Peridot. “You break it, you bought it, you little green runt! Same goes for you three!”

“Not now, Stan!” Pearl huffed, swinging her spear out in the hopes of hitting Peridot only to knock over a display rack instead.

“Yeah, we gotta catch ourselves a clod,” Amethyst smirked as she tossed her whip again, though once more, Peridot narrowly dodged it.

“As if!” the green Gem shot back as she continued running around frantically. “Also, how dare you call me by my insult, you CLOD!”

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As this chaos continued to unfold upstairs, down in the author’s private study, Dipper and Ford were largely initially unaware of it amidst their ongoing discussion regarding a certain twisted fusion. “I can’t believe it,” Ford mused intently as he paced around frenetically. “Bill fusing with Gems… its completely unheard of! Not to mention utterly terrifying, all things considered.”

“I know, right!?” Dipper exclaimed, leaning forward in his seat. “We barely managed to beat Pyrite even after all of the Gems fused. Just imagine if Bill fused with a Gem whose even stronger than Peridot was!”

“Oh believe me, I already am imagining it…” the author said gravely, sparing a brief glance at the rift sitting on the desk nearby. “With his ability to both possess and fuse with Gems, all it would take would for Bill to find the right one, drag them to earth and then he wouldn’t even have to bother with breaking the barrier or stealing the rift. He could just obliterate it, the house, and all of us in an instant.”

“W-well, that’s… encouraging…” Dipper said, clearly frightened by such an alarming prospect.

“Don’t worry,” Ford assured, placing a comforting hand on his nephew’s shoulder. “Between the two of us, I’m sure we’ll be able to figure out some way to protect the rift and stop Bill once and for all.

“Like…?” Dipper ventured, hoping that the author had a rather immediate plan in mind to do just that.

“O-oh… well…” Ford glanced away, scratching the back of his neck rather awkwardly. “We can-” The author stopped short, raising a curious eyebrow as he glanced up at the ceiling, hearing a rather muted thumping clatter coming from directly above them. “Do you hear that?”

By the time Steven and Mabel breathlessly arrived at the shack, the entire building was in complete and utter disarray. Furniture had been flipped, windows broken, plates and pans strewn across the kitchen while souvenirs and attractions were tossed all about the gift shop. Yet even still, neither Peridot nor the Gems had won this frantic, ongoing chase, as the green Gem had evaded capture, though her foes were really only a few steps behind her all the while. The pair of kids gasped in alarm as the collective group rushed past them and up the stairs to the second floor, including Stan as he ran after the Gems, yelling his angry protests to the destruction they were causing all the while.
“We gotta stop them before they poof her again!” Steven exclaimed fretfully. “Come on!”

Mabel gasped in flustered surprise as the young Gem suddenly grabbed her hand, hurriedly leading the way up the stairs as they both joined in on the chase as well. However, it didn’t end up going on for too much longer as Amethyst lashed her whip out once more in a strike that Peridot only barely managed to swerve out of the way of. Inevitably, she ended up tripping as a result, though this time, she maneuvered herself to fall sideways, or rather, into the open doorway right beside her. The green Gem didn’t waste any time as soon as she realized she could cut herself off from her foes and, in one swift movement, far too quick for anyone to even try to stop, Peridot slammed the door shut tightly in all of their faces, locking it tightly behind her.

“You may have won the war, but the battle isn’t over, Crystal Clods!” Peridot laughed in her apparent ‘triumph’ as everyone was forced to stop short in front of the door. The door the green Gem had effectively trapped herself behind.

“Uh… should we tell her that’s the bathroom?” Mabel asked, nodding to the door.

“Eh,” Amethyst simply shrugged as the other two Gems honed in to listen to the green Gem muse to herself in her new “hiding spot”.

“Hm… it seems as though I discovered some sort of archaic think chamber…” Peridot speculated as she walked around the bathroom, investigating the toilet, sink, and other features. “Roomy. With a hint of Earth citrus. The perfect crossroads for my escape!”

“Ugh, its locked!” Pearl huffed as she tried to pull the door open in vain.

“Peridot! Open the door!” Garnet commanded, pounding on it heavily before Stan stepped in to do the same.

“You better get out of there you pointy little freak!” Stan threatened gruffly. “Its bad enough I have to deal with Amethyst comin’ in here and messing up the place all the time-”

“Aw, c’mom, Stan,” Amethyst smirked, elbowing the conman’s knee. “You know you love it.”

“I actually don’t, but even if I did, I’m not about to let some mouthy green midget do the same on my watch!” Stan snapped, knocking hard on the door once again only to be met with the sound of flushing on the other side.

“Oh, if you’re trying to flush yourself down the toilet, it won’t work,” Amethyst called to the green Gem, who was in the midst of sullenly doing just that in a rather lame escape attempt. “Trust me, I’ve tried.”

“Hey, what’s going on?” Dipper cut in as him and Ford arrived in light of the former din of the chase. “We just heard a whole bunch of noise downstairs. Is something wrong?”

“I’ll tell ya what’s wrong,” Stan crossed his arms and scowled at the bathroom door. “These three let some four-foot queen of the geeks lock herself in my bathroom!”

“My bathroom,” Ford corrected, sending his brother a critical look.

“Yeah, that’s what I said,” the conman said rather obliviously.

“Ugh, what really happened is that Peridot somehow escaped from the temple,” Pearl explained, exasperated. “Which makes no sense! We bubbled her and everything!”
“Yeah, we did!” Dipper exclaimed, shocked to hear such alarming news. “W-well, I mean you guys did, but I poofed her! How could she have gotten out and made it all the way down here?!”

Steven and Mabel exchanged a brief, awkward glance upon hearing the ongoing confusion, though neither of them were really sure how to explain the truth of the matter as the debate continued. “Uh, maybe we need a bigger bubble to hold that big head of hers,” Amethyst suggested sardonically.

“My bubbles are fine,” Garnet assured coolly, still leaving the majority of the group with no answers whatsoever. As this unwitting discussion went on (amidst Stan angrily interjecting every now and then to speak his piece about how he wanted Peridot out of the bathroom), Steven and Mabel couldn’t help but feel mutually guilty for the difficult spot they were now in. And, sure enough, that guilt inevitably led them to finally reveal who was really responsible for the green Gem’s escape.

“Uh… actually…” Mabel interjected into the conversation, raising her hand somewhat awkwardly as Steven glanced away. “W-we sorta… kinda… maybe… let Peridot out of her bubble.”

For a moment or two in the immediate aftermath of this stark revelation, the most anyone could really do was stare at the pair in stunned silence, their expressions awash in disbelief. That is, until Dipper finally broke it. “You did what?!” he asked, his tone and his expression harsh enough to make Steven and Mabel both flinch.

“Steven! Mabel!” Pearl scolded, just as displeased. “Why would you kids do such a thing?! Especially after how long it took us to finally capture her!”

“Because she knows something!” Steven exclaimed defensively. “Something that’s made her scared!”

“Duh,” Amethyst rolled her eyes. “Homegirl knows we’re gonna beat her into a green pancake.”

“No, not because of us,” the young Gem clarified. “Because of something called… ‘the Cluster’.”

“Cluster?” Garnet repeated, crossing her arms. “That’s new.”

“Did she tell you anything else about this so-called ‘Cluster’?” Ford asked, also quite curious.

“Uh… somethin’ about it being her mission?” Mabel shrugged. “I dunno, she talks really fast when she’s angry.”

“Her mission, hm?” Pearl mused worriedly. “Well if it’s the reason why she came to Earth in the first place, then its likely nothing good…”

“That’s right, you dirt bombs!” Peridot shouted from inside the bathroom as she climbed up onto the sink. “You don’t even know what’s coming! You’re all gonna—ooooo…” The green Gem trailed off, her train of thought all but abandoned as she noticed her own reflection in the mirror in front of her.

“Hmph, I’m tired of playing these games with her,” Garnet huffed, knocking on the door once more. “If we can’t fight her, then fine; we’ll talk. Peridot!” The Gem leader’s sudden call was enough to startle the green Gem into slipping off the sink and onto the floor. “Alright, no more fighting,” Garnet tried to rationalize as calmly as she could. “Let’s just have a civil conversation.”

“As if I’d ever negotiate with you, you filthy war machine!” Peridot yelled viciously, instantly eliciting the Gem leader’s ire.
“Ok, let’s kick her butt,” Garnet scowled, summoning her gauntlets without a second thought only for Steven and Mabel to intervene once more.

“Wait!” Mabel exclaimed as they put themselves between the incensed Gem leader and the bathroom door.

“Yeah, destroy me again and have fun talking to me when I’m in a bubble!” Peridot goaded as she hung from the shower curtain, only to bring it down with her as she fell with a momentous crash.

“Aww, come on!” Stan groaned in severe aggravation. “She already tore up the entire shack; why’s she gotta wreck the bathroom too!? I count my money in there! Among… other things!”

“Well, its not like we can very well just go in there and kick her out, Stan,” Pearl remarked dryly. “I really hate to say it, but… unfortunately, if she has information, she’s more valuable to us like… this…”

“What?!?” Dipper interjected in outraged disbelief. “No way! We can’t just let her stay out and unbubbled like this! Especially not after what happened with the whole Pyrite thing!”

“I’m afraid that we don’t really have too much of a choice, Dipper,” Ford said rationally. “None of us know what this supposed Cluster is. If it really is something dangerous, then we have to seek answers concerning it straight from the only source we have at our disposal. Even if that source is… well…” The author trailed off, nodding towards the locked bathroom door just as the bathtub faucet turned on.

“H-hot! Hot! Hot!” Peridot screamed, resulting in yet another noisy clatter as she broke something else.

“You have to turn the knob the other way for cold!” Mabel informed brightly.

“B-but this is crazy!” Dipper protested intently. “Peridot could be lying about this whole ‘Cluster’ thing for all we know!”

“That’s just it,” Garnet said, adjusting her shades. “We don’t know.”

Dipper was more than prepared to keep his upset argument against the green Gem’s relative freedom going, however, before Stan cut in crossly. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold everything!” the conman exclaimed, disgruntled. “You all aren’t really about to let that little punk squat in my bathroom, are you?”

“Again, my bathroom,” Ford said, annoyed.

“Yeah, exactly.”

“Well, what other option do we have?” Pearl scoffed. “Keep her outside on a leash?” At this, the white Gem let out a bit of a laugh, one that died out as she began to seriously consider the idea.

“W-well… what if one of us needs to use the bathroom!?” Dipper asked, trying to come up with some way to deter from what he believed to be an ill-fated plan.

“What, like right now?” Amethyst asked, leaning against the wall.

“Um… y-yeah!” Dipper asserted even though it was something of a lie. “Which means we need to get Peridot out of there and back in a bubble. Right now!”
“Pfft, just go in the woods, bro,” the purple Gem retorted with a smirk. “Pssshh. Like a beaaaar.”

“Ugh! What’s with you guys and making us pee outside?!” Dipper groaned in obvious frustration as he stormed off, wanting no parts of willingly harboring the green Gem whatsoever.

“Well, I have fun doing it…” Amethyst shrugged, not seeing what the problem was.

“I can’t believe I’m sayin’ this, but I’m with the kid,” Stan scowled petulantly. “That green munchkin doesn’t have to go home but she sure as heck can’t stay here.”

“Well… maybe she won’t have to,” Mabel interjected thoughtfully. “We could always try asking her about the Cluster nicely. Maybe if we make her feel like we’re not gonna poof her at any minute, then she might actually wanna tell us something!”

“I doubt that’s going to work…” Garnet said as Peridot continued making an unknown ruckus inside the bathroom. “This is going to be tricky…”

“No, it won’t be because you three are gonna get her outta my bathroom and deal with this stupid mess on your own!” Stan huffed hotly.

“For the last time, Stanley, its my bathroom!” Ford snapped disapprovingly. “And as far as I’m concerned, even though I’m not fond of the idea of keeping a potentially dangerous Homeworld Gem locked inside of it—even if the possibility for undiscovered research is quite enticing—that’s where she’s gonna stay. At least until she breaks her stance of silence on this mysterious ‘Cluster’.”

“Ha! I’ll never break for you pathetic CLODS!” Peridot threatened before letting out a shrill shriek as she slipped and fell on the floor once more.

“Ugh, fine!” Stan growled bitterly. “Do whatever the heck you want. But if that puny freak gets her grubby little hands on my collection of rare imported soaps I stole from the Dominican, then I’m gonna boot her outta this house myself!”

With that, the conman swiftly turned on his heel and left, grumbling angrily about this unwelcome situation to himself all the while as he headed back to bed. Ford and the Gems only briefly exchanged a beleaguered glance at this before diving right back into discussing how their current captive’s custody was going to work.

“Well, these circumstances certainly aren’t… optimal…” Pearl said with a small sigh. “It’d be better if we held Peridot somewhere closer to the temple, just in case she tries pulling any of her tricks…”

“One of us will just have to stay here and guard over her then,” Garnet concluded.

“Oh! Oh!” Steven cut in with an excited smile as he raised his hand. “I volunteer! I volunteer!”

“Now Steven,” Pearl said firmly. “That means you have to keep a close eye on Peridot when we can’t. And it certainly means that you can’t let her out again, at least until we get this whole Cluster thing figured out. Understood?”

“Um… yeah, sure,” Steven said with a bit of a halfhearted smile, not particularly fond of keeping the green Gem prisoner like this. Still, anything was better than keeping her alone and unformed in a bubble, as far as he was concerned.

“You guys got nothing to worry about!” Mabel chimed in enthusiastically. “I’ll help Steven watch
Peri to make sure she doesn’t get up to any sneaky shenanigans! Together, we’ll be the funnest bathroom prison wardens ever!”

A small, uncertain beat of silence passed as the Gems looked to each other dubiously at such a claim, though thankfully, Ford cut in to reassure them. “Not that we don’t… trust you kids or anything, but just to be safe, I think I’ll take the liberty of helping out this… surveillance effort,” he said, sparing a brief, determined glance up at the bathroom door. “Plus, in the event that Peridot does end up breaking out of there, I have about 27 different all-purpose weapons in my collection that could destabilize her form in a heartbeat so we should have all our bases just about covered.”

Upon hearing this rather alarming statement, Steven and Mabel exchanged a rather worried glance, hoping that things wouldn’t resort to such violent straits. Even so, with their plans fully laid out, Ford and the Gems gradually began to make their way downstairs, wisely discussing their concerns regarding both the green Gem as well as the dream demon she had recently fused with. As they left, Steven and Mabel mostly lingered near the bathroom, with the young Gem’s expression slowly spreading into a wide grin as he turned to face his friend.

“Mabel, do you know what this means?” he asked brightly, gripping her shoulders gently.

Mabel froze, her heart practically racing a mile a minute as she noticed this, and though she wasn’t sure where such apparent affection was coming from, she was more than ready to take it all the same. “Y-yeah… I do…” she smiled dreamily, closing her eyes and slightly poising her lips for what she had been hoping for for so long now. Only to not actually receive it after all.

“Extended slumber party!” Steven cheered, shaking her by the shoulders a bit and rattling her out of her fantasy.

“O-oh, yeah…” Mabel blushed, glancing down in severe embarrassment. “Slumber party… wooo…”

“Though, I guess this slumber party action is gonna have to wait until tomorrow…” Steven noted as he stole a glance out the nearby hall window to find the light of dawn just starting to pour in through it. “It’s already morning! Man, time really flies when you’re fighting a Gem-demon fusion and then busting that same Gem out of her bubble.”

“Yeah, I bet it does…” Dipper spoke up, his arms crossed and his expression sullen as he leaned against the railing at the top of the stairs at the far end of the hall.

“Aw, come on, bro-bro, don’t be all grumpy about this,” Mabel frowned. “We had to let Peridot out! She knows some sorta secret biz that the rest of us don’t!”

“Oh maybe she just told you guys that to convince you to let her out!” Dipper countered angrily. “Honestly, what were you guys thinking?! How could you possibly think you can trust her after she made a deal with Bill?!”

“Uh… no offense, Dipper, but didn’t you make a deal with Bill too?” Mabel retorted, sending her brother a knowing look.

“T-that doesn’t matter!” Dipper refuted, flustered and upset. “What matters is that she’s still a Homeworld Gem, whether she has any kind of information or not. Don’t you guys remember how her ship nearly destroyed the town!? Or how she interrogated Lapis and forced her to come back here just so she could end up trapped with Jasper at the bottom of the lake!? Peridot’s awful and she deserves to be defeated and she deserves to be bubbled, not free to run around just because you guys think she might know about something about would could very well just be nothing!”
“Dipper…” Steven began with a calm, sympathetic frown. “I know Peridot’s done a lot of… bad things, but this ‘Cluster’ thing does seem like its real and important. That’s why we gotta at least try to convince her to tell us what it is. And I think the best way to do that is by being nice to her!”

“…Sure, it is, Steven,” Dipper deadpanned, exasperated. “But if its all the same to you, I’m not about to take any chances with her.” At this, he rushed upstairs to the attic, hurrying back down with the Sword of Seasons securely strapped to his back. “If ‘being nice’ won’t get her to talk, I’m pretty sure this will.”

“Uh, maybe we can try talking to her without holding her at sword point the whole time…?” Steven suggested as he knocked on the bathroom door. “Peridot, can we come in? We need to get ready for the day.”

“No!” Peridot hissed on the other side of the door, firm in her stance to remain barricaded inside.

“Wait a sec, I got this,” Mabel smirked as she pulled out the green Gem’s former foot, which her and Steven had wisely decided to bring down from the temple. “Oh, Periiiii! We got a super special present for you if you let us in!”

A brief bout of silence passed at this, though sure enough, the door creaked open and Peridot glared out through the crack. Upon noticing the final remnant of her treasured limb enhancers however, she was completely unable to resist the ploy. With a disgruntled growl, the green Gem snatched her foot and pulled back, finally allowing the trio inside to see the mess she had made. The shower curtain rod had been completely torn down, towels and toilet paper were strewn everywhere and an entire bottle of shampoo had been dumped aimlessly out onto the floor. Even so, Peridot had taken to curling up in the far corner of the room as the kids entered, scowling distrustfully at the three of them and clinging tightly onto her foot all the while.

“What a great souvenir of that other time you assaulted me…” she grumbled sourly.

“Oh, right…” Steven said, looking away awkwardly. “We can always take it back if you-”

“N-no, it’s too late!” Peridot protested, pulling the foot away possessively. “You… wouldn’t happen to have the rest?”

“Uh… we… sorta threw them away?” Mabel said apologetically. “Sorry about that…”

“Ugh… figures…” the green Gem huffed in annoyed disappointment.

“Hey, be lucky that we didn’t decide to do the same with you,” Dipper remarked rather coldly, sending Peridot a harsh glower. “And honestly, if you don’t start talking soon, we still easily could.”

Peridot shrank back somewhat as Dipper nodded to his still sheathed sword, her eyes widening at the sight of the familiar blade before she forced herself to resume her ongoing deadpan attitude. “You keep that multipurposed hunk of metal away from me, you ‘Dipper’…” she muttered threateningly, though it was clear she was still somewhat afraid of the blade that had defeated her all the same.

“Yeah, for reals, bro-bro,” Mabel said, placing a comforting hand on the green Gem’s shoulder as she looked to her brother disapprovingly. “Poor thing’s already been through enough with that whole Pyrite mess. Don’t traumatize her even more!”

“Ugh! I thought I told you not to bring that shameful amalgamation up ever again!” Peridot exclaimed in genuine frustration before she curled up on herself even tighter, her voice growing
small and fearful. “Its almost like I can still hear that Bill Cipher’s insipid laugh echoing in my head… o-or feel all sense of control of my own form being ripped away from me just so he could exact my vengeance out instead of letting me do it myself! What a completely wasted opportunity!”

“Do you even realize exactly who you fused with?” Dipper asked, crossing his arms as he scowled down at the green Gem. “Bill’s a literal nightmare demon who gets off on causing people as much pain as possible and wants to destroy not just the Earth but reality itself just for his own sick kicks. And that’s the kinda guy you let trick you into fusing just so you could beat us. So you know, nice going with all that since it totally worked out for you.”

Peridot was surprisingly caught off guard upon hearing such information concerning Bill, information that she had never really suspected since the dream demon had told her so very little of himself. “W-well…” she said somewhat meekly. “That explains a lot.”

“Aw, don’t feel bad, Peri!” Mabel reassured warmly. “After all, you’re not the only one who gambled on a bad deal with Bill and lost. Am I right, Dipper?”

“H-hey! Mabel!” Dipper exclaimed hotly before he let out a thoroughly frustrated sigh. “You know what? I’m done. I’m not gonna stand around here and waste my time trying to get information out of a Gem who’s nearly killed us several times. Good luck, you guys,” he remarked to Steven and Mabel as he curtly turned to leave. “I have a feeling you’re gonna need it. And as for you…” He shot a fierce glare Peridot’s way as she raised a rather confused eyebrow at his open hostility. “If you so much as even think about hurting either of them, then you’re gonna have to answer to me…” With one more nod back to the sword on his back, Dipper left, though even as he did he was still grumbling his frustrations with this newfound arrangement with the green Gem as he did.

“What’s his problem?” Peridot asked obliviously the moment he was gone.

“Y-you’re… gonna have to excuse Dipper,” Mabel chuckled awkwardly. “He… sorta kinda doesn’t like you. And by that I mean… he hates you.”

“B-but don’t take it personally!” Steven interjected with a smile. “I’m sure he’ll come around to you eventually, sorta like we already have!”

“Hmph, like I need your futile pity…” Peridot scoffed, glaring away from them. “Just you two wait. Soon enough, I’ll break out of here and find a way back to Homeworld before the Cluster even has a chance to emerge and there’s nothing you puny clods can do to stop me!”

“…Well, for now, could you pass me that toothbrush on the ground beside you?” Mabel asked, pointing it out. The green Gem eyed it suspiciously for a moment before swiping it up, holding it towards the kids threateningly.

“Is this a weapon?” the green Gem asked, nodding down to the hairy comb on the sink.

“Nah, that’s just the comb Grunkle Stan uses to brush out his gross old man back hair,” Mabel explained, sticking her tongue out playfully.
“Is *that* a weapon?” Peridot pressed again, this time to Steven as she noticed him wiping his face off with a towel.

“Hm… well, I guess it *could* be if you get it wet and roll it up,” the young Gem said, twisting the towel up a bit. Peridot gasped in fear as he held it up somewhat, jumping onto the toilet as she shielded herself from what she believed to be an oncoming attack. Steven and Mabel looked to each other upon seeing such panicky instincts, knowing that they certainly had their work cut out for them when it came to getting any sort of genuine answers out of the frightened green Gem.

“Look,” Steven began earnestly. “I know you’ve been through a lot and that you’re scared, but neither of us are going to hurt you. And… whatever’s going on with the Cluster, we *want* to help.”

Peridot was quiet upon hearing this, her expression easing up as she sat down on the toilet lid and looked away thoughtfully. “I doubt you can help me,” she said with an apprehensive sigh as she stole a brief glance down. “But I… appreciate the offer.”

“Yay!” Mabel cheered as she suddenly barreled into Peridot with an unexpected hug. “Look at that! You’re already on your way to becoming our new best friend, Peri!”

“Ugh, *please*,” the green Gem scowled, pushing her away. “After all the trouble you irksome pebbles have caused me, the last thing I want to be is your *friend*. By the way… what’s a friend?”

“Heh, we’ll have plenty of time to tell you all about that in a bit,” Steven grinned somewhat awkwardly. “For now, do you mind moving? I… kinda have to use that,” he said, nodding to the toilet.

Peridot raised a curious eyebrow as she glanced down at her porcelain perch, not having the faintest idea of what its purpose was as she posed a rather innocent question: “For what?”

Needless to say that neither Steven nor Mabel could hold back their laughter at this, which only served to confuse the green Gem even more. Despite her past actions and surly attitude, neither of them could deny that they had taken something of a liking to her, despite everyone else’s warnings against such a thing. Even so, unlike Dipper or the Gems or anyone else for that matter, Steven and Mabel weren’t about to turn a blind eye to the plight that Peridot seemed to be presenting. The Cluster was, by all accounts, a complete unknown, the truth behind its newfound mysteries being something that only Peridot herself seemed to hold the key to. And certainly, if they were ever going to unlock that mystery, whatever it was, then, as far as they were concerned, treating the green Gem with kindness rather than coldness was the best place to start.

However, even amidst their stalwart plan, neither of them could even hope to anticipate the magnitude of the immense danger that rested deep in the earth beneath their feet. Danger that, if left unchecked was just waiting to emerge and wreak a sort of havoc that no one, absolutely *no one* would be able to survive.
Chapter 61: Split Up

Chapter Summary

In which Stan and Ford can't get along (what else is new), Ruby and Sapphire are hella gay (what else is new), and Peridot and Gideon are short and angry (what else is new)

Chapter Notes

Welp this has been a long time coming (I blame work but I gotta make that cash money somehow) but at least its finally finished. I hope you all enjoy the first chapter of arc 7 (which just so happens to be an original one!) (keyword is scampfire)

“Tents?”
“Check!”
“Sleeping bags?”
“Check!”
“Bug repellent?”
“Check!”
“S’mores supplies?”
“Checkaroo!”
“Well, that’s everything on the list,” Steven concluded with a bright grin as he finished looking over the copious pile him, Mabel, and Connie had amassed. “I’d say we’re just about ready to head out on our big camping trip tonight!”
“You better believe we are!” Mabel chimed in excitedly. “We’ve been planning this trip for weeks now and its finally here! Almost thought we’d never get to go on it with all the crazy stuff that’s been going on around here lately, but then again, crazy is sorta normal for things around here.”
“Tell me about it,” Connie chuckled as she knelt down to zip up her backpack. “Hopefully though, this campout won’t involve any of that craziness. Then again, we are going out into the middle of the woods where all sorts of paranormal creatures live… hm, you know, maybe we didn’t really think this through…”
“We don’t need to think it through!” Mabel remarked blithely. “Cause we’re not heading out there for any of that stuff anyway. We’re heading out there to bring this grumpy old sadsack,” she held up a colorful drawing she had made of Stan. “-And this sciency old sadsack,” then she lifted a similar drawing she had made of Ford before slamming the two into each other dramatically. “Back together so they can finally be brotherly old happy sacks, just like how they used to be!”

“Wait, that’s what we’re gonna go do?” Soos asked curiously as he entered the room with his camping gear in hand. Wendy wasn’t too far behind him with a surprisingly quite light backpack, though even so, her trusty axe was strapped securely to her belt for the woodland adventure ahead of them. “Cause I thought we were just going camping, dudes.”

“We are, Soos,” Steven grinned. “But we invited both Mr. Pines and Mr. Ford to come along on the trip so they can have some quality bonding time to talk things out and work out all of the bad stuff that happened between them a super long time ago! Its like my dad always says; there’s nothing like the great outdoors to bring people together! Or maybe he said it was music instead. Honestly, it could have been either or.”

“Huh, I gotta say, I’m impressed that you guys even managed to convince both of them to go camping together,” Wendy said, hands on her hips. “From what I’ve seen, Stan and Ford can barely stand to be in the same room as each other, let alone a tent. How’d you manage to pull this one off?”

“Easy,” Mabel smirked proudly. “We just didn’t tell either of them that the other one was coming along! That way it’ll be like one big, huge, great surprise for them both!”

“…Did I say I was impressed?” Wendy asked with a frown upon hearing this less than stellar plan. “Let me rephrase that…”

“I thought you guys said you told both of them,” Connie added worriedly. “What if one of them doesn’t want to go once they find out the truth? Then the whole plan will just fall apart completely! I hate to say it, but it looks like I was pretty right when I said you didn’t really think this one through…”

“Yeah, they really didn’t.” The others all turned to Dipper as he entered the den, his expression rather impatient and displeased as he aimed it solely at Steven and Mabel, who simply met it with confusion instead. “I know you guys are all hyped up to go on this camping trip, but you’re gonna have to cancel it.”

“What?” Steven and Mabel both asked in alarmed unison. “Why?!”

“Why?” Dipper repeated incredulously. “Are you kidding me? Do I need to remind you about the dangerous Homeworld fugitive locked inside our bathroom right now? We can’t just go out into the woods for an entire night and leave Peridot unguarded? Who knows what she’d do?!”

“Oh… right…” Steven said, scratching the back of his neck as he looked away. “Sorta forgot about the whole Peridot thing…”

“Yeah, well fortunately for all of us, I didn’t,” Dipper said with a bit of a disgruntled huff. “You guys were the ones who decided to let her go, which means you have to help keep an eye on her. Which means no camping.”

Upon hearing such disheartening news, both Steven and Mabel were quick to let out their own respective whines of protest, that is, until Wendy intervened. “Aw, c’mon, Dipper, there’s gotta be some way we can work this out,” she urged with a hint of a smile. “Just look at how excited those
two are,” she nodded over to Steven and Mabel, who were hugging their mountain of camping supplies defensively. “You can’t say no to those faces, can you?”

Dipper took pause at this, sparing a brief glance over at the fretful pair as they sent him devoutly pleading pouts. And sure enough, he quickly realized that Wendy was right; he really couldn’t say no to those faces. “Ok, fine,” he conceded with an annoyed sigh. “I guess we don’t have to cancel the camping trip entirely. But some of us are gonna need to stay behind to make sure Peridot doesn’t escape. I don’t mind hanging back, but one of you two has to stay too. Its only fair since, like I said, you guys let her out in the first place.”

Steven and Mabel exchanged a glance at this, uncertain about these terms before the young Gem let out a small, relenting sigh. “Yeah, I guess Peridot is kind of our responsibility. So, I’ll stay. You guys go have fun, ok?” he said, offering a warm smile to Mabel and Connie. The former of the pair however, was quick to realize the sacrifice he was making for her in particular. And, given her still quite prevalent feelings for him, it wasn’t a sacrifice that Mabel was about to let go unparalleled. Especially if it could possibly impress the young Gem of her affections somehow.

“N-no! Wait!” she exclaimed, suddenly quite flustered as she rushed to her brother’s side before Steven could get there. “I’ll stay. I know how much you’ve been wanting to go on this trip, so you go and have a great time, Steven. Make some s’mores, sleep under the stars, poke a bear with a stick, you know, all that fun stuff!”

“Whoa, really?” Steven asked, taken aback by this kind gesture. “Thanks, Mabel! That’s so nice of you!”

“I know, right?!” Mabel gushed readily, elated by the young Gem’s happiness with her. “I’m just so chock full of niceness that I can hardly even contain it all. And you know what they say, niceness is one of the best qualities to have in a best friend or colleague or business partner, or heck, even a future girlfriend or wife or soulmate or-”

“Mabel, what in the world are you even talking about?” Dipper interrupted, sending his sister a bewildered glance at such an odd train of thought. A train of thought that Steven simply shrugged off, not really following Mabel’s intentions with it, even as she quickly backpedaled out of embarrassment.

“NOTHING!” she shouted before hurriedly shoving a handful of marshmallows into her mouth to save herself from any further mortification.

Fortunately, it wasn’t too long after this that Stan entered the den, his own bags packed and ready to go on the camping trip ahead. “Alright, are you kids ready to get this night of sleeping on rocks and using leaves as toilet paper out of your systems yet?” he asked with apparent disinterest. “Cause I sure am. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m gettin’ a bit too old and pampered to do this whole ‘roughing it’ thing, so the sooner we get this over with, the sooner I can get back to where I belong: my recliner.”

“Actually, Grunkle Stan,” Dipper spoke up. “Mabel and I aren’t going camping so… yeah, there’s that.”

“What?!” the conman asked, looking to his nibblings in apt disbelief. “What do you mean you’re not going? You kids begged me to take time out of my busy schedule for some ‘quality family bonding’ time or some nonsense like that, and you’re telling me you not going all of the sudden? What, do you really expect me to take Soos and a bunch of kids I’m not even related to out into the woods for no real reason?” he asked, motioning to Wendy, Steven, and Connie somewhat caustically.
“Um… yeah?” Mabel shrugged. “But only cause we gotta stay here and make sure Peri doesn’t get into any trouble!”

“You mean the green gremlin holed up in the bathroom?” Stan asked, hands on his hips. “Well then, I guess you do got a point about that. You runts were the ones that trapped that noisy freak in there, which means she’s your problem. Though I thought Ford said he was gonna help take care of that mess.”

“Take care of what mess?” Ford asked as he stepped into the room, also packed, albeit somewhat lightly for the camping trip himself.

“Oh, you know, that little loudmouth you’re letting bunker down in the bath… room?” Stan trailed off, confusion filling his features as he noticed his brother’s camping supplies. “Uh… where are you heading, pointdexter? Some kinda nerd convention? Ha!”

The author scowled in slight aggravation at this remark, but even so, he took it in stride and tersely explained himself. “No, actually, the children asked me if I’d accompany them on a camping trip tonight and since I’m well versed in the potentially dangerous creatures the forests of Gravity Falls have to offer, I agreed to go for the sake of keeping them safe. Now, where do you seem to be going, Stanley? Hopefully not on one of those so-called ‘vengeance trips’ Pearl told me you and Amethyst occasionally go out on.”

“They’re called Revenge Trips, brainiac,” Stan rolled his eyes. “And I don’t know what you’re talking about since the kids asked me to go camping with them tonight, not you.”

“You must be mistaken, Stanley,” Ford concluded staunchly. “Steven and Mabel asked me to chaperone their camping trip just last week. Isn’t that right, kids?”

“Uh, no, you two, tell him how you asked me to come along with ya!” Stan argued as both brothers looked to the pair expectantly.

“See, this is why you guys should have told them both about your plan right from the start,” Connie whispered to Steven and Mabel, who both stiffened under the sudden scrutiny.

“Um… actually… we were hoping you guys would… both go camping with us…” Steven admitted somewhat sheepishly.

Upon hearing this, Stan and Ford exchanged a brief, incredulous glance before quickly, harshly, looking away from each other at the very thought of such supposed ‘bonding time’. “Well, that’s absolutely out of the question for a number of reasons,” the author said, shaking his head. “First of all, we can’t just leave Peridot locked in the bathroom completely unguarded.”

“Actually, Great Uncle Ford, me and Mabel are going to stay behind to keep an eye on her,” Dipper pointed out, flaunting an air of responsibility with this fact.

“Young lady, you never know what’s going to happen,” Stan said as he packed his camping supplies. “You never know what could happen… most definitely not that Peridot.”

“…Yes, well,” Ford cleared his throat somewhat awkwardly upon hearing this. “All the same, I think I should stay behind as well with you kids, just to make sure nothing… goes wrong.”

“Aww, but Great Uncle Ford, we can handle Peridot on our own!” Dipper insisted devoutly.

“Yeah, and besides, you’re always working on all your nifty sciency stuff so you deserve a break to
go out and enjoy a fun night out in the woods,” Mabel agreed. “Same goes to you, Grunkle Stan! Even if me and Dipper aren’t coming along, you guys will still have a great time, right you guys?” she asked Steven, Connie, Wendy, and Soos. However, before any of them could respond, someone else interjected to reply instead.

“Yes,” Garnet said with a simple tilt of her shades as she stepped out of her place in the kitchen doorway. “They will.”

“What the—Garnet?” Stan asked, glancing around in confusion. “How long have you been loitering around here like that? Cause you know there’s a fee for that around here.”

“Not that you’d ever actually make me pay it,” Garnet remarked with a sly smirk as she walked over to join the rest of the group. “Still,” she addressed both Stan and Ford in particular. “Neither of you need to worry about Dipper and Mabel here since I’ll be staying here to help them out with Peridot tonight.”

“Wait, really?” Dipper asked, looking to the Gem leader with apt surprise.

“Ooooooh my gosh, YES!” Mabel exclaimed, delighted by this news as she hugged Garnet’s leg. “Things are gonna be so much more fun with you around here, Garnet! We can make cookies and watch movies—just as long as you don’t spoil the endings of them for us—and if Peridot even tries acting up, then BAM! You can just bop her with your gauntlets! This is gonna be great!”

“Yeah, honestly it is,” Dipper agreed with a satisfied smile. “I mean, there’s pretty much no chance of Peridot breaking out with you around Garnet. We really won’t have anything to worry about.”

“Well, I don’t know if I’d say that just yet…” the Gem leader remarked, her smile falling just the slightest bit.

“Well, Garnet, you being here to supervise does make me feel somewhat better,” Ford mused. “Still, I should probably hang back, just to provide some extra assistance and—”

“No, you’re going,” Garnet insisted, her tone firm enough to completely silence the author’s protests altogether.

“Eh, fine, then I’ll say,” Stan shrugged, seemingly unconcerned. “I got a lotta work in the gift shop I gotta catch up on anyway after that nerdy runt ran through it last night and busted up nearly everything in sight, so I’ll—”

“No, you’re going too,” Garnet interjected just as sternly.

“But—”

“No buts,” the Gem leader said, placing a hand on each of the brothers’ shoulders as she began pushing them towards the door. “Except yours out the door and into the woods with the kids. Put on plenty of bug spray, don’t leave your food out overnight, have fun, and get along. We’ll see you in the morning.”

Seeing that Garnet apparently had them both beat on the matter, neither Stan nor Ford found it in them to continue to argue with her, largely since she was blocking the way back into the shack and had already taken the liberty of dragging their bags out after them. And so, both grunkles begrudgingly began to pack the car up, not really offering each other any sort of assistance in light of their less than ideal circumstances. Yet despite their annoyance, the kids were quite pleased with Garnet’s intervention, something that Steven made quite clear as him and Connie hurried past her.
“Thanks, Garnet!” the young Gem grinned up at his guardian. “We owe you one!”

“Eh, no you don’t,” Garnet shrugged. “I know what you kids are trying to do and I think it can work… Just as long as you don’t try to force them to reconcile. As far as I know, there’s a lot of bitterness between Stan and Ford. A peaceful night in the woods might be just what they need to make them start acting like brothers again.”

“Well, hopefully it works,” Connie said, exchanging a resolved nod with Steven.

“It might,” Garnet said somewhat vaguely. “But all the same, good luck. And be safe out there.”

“We will be!” Steven called as him and Connie grabbed their things and headed off to the car. “See you guys tomorrow! Have fun watching Peridot!”

“Bye, Steven! Bye, Connie!” Mabel shouted as her and Dipper waved the group off. “Have fun out in the woods! Together… without… me…” She paused briefly as Stan began to pull away with his rather packed car, or rather, particularly with Steven and Connie sitting quite close to each other in the back of it. “Wait! No! I changed my mind!” Mabel suddenly shouted in apt alarm as she realized her error. “Take me with you!”

“Mabel! Cut it out!” Dipper scolded, barely managing to hold his sister back. Mabel did finally calm herself however as Garnet placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder, reminding her that this night wouldn’t be so bad after all with the Gem leader’s pleasant company.

Even so, with Garnet’s assistance securing both their camping trip and their plans to bring Stan and Ford together, Steven and Connie were in relatively high spirits as the car pulled away from the shack and onto the road that lead into the woods. True, they had quite the work cut out for them; that much was clear from the bitter looks the brothers sent each other every time they so much as even glanced in each other’s direction. But even so, as long as they followed the Gem leader’s advice, then fostering some sort of reconciliation between the pair would be a piece of cake. Hopefully, at least.

It didn’t take very long after everyone else had left for Garnet and the twins to settle down in the den to begin their night in. The Gem leader’s future vision assured that they wouldn’t really have to stand guard outside the bathroom door to keep Peridot from escaping, which meant they could stay nice and cozy on the couch to watch whatever b-movie was playing on the free film channel. True, the movie they were stuck watching wasn’t really anything that interesting, but with snacks and plenty of pillows and Garnet reclining right nearby in the event of anything happening, the twins were content enough to stay put.

Well, one of them was, anyway.

Because as the movie dragged on, Mabel’s thoughts began to wander to a certain green Gem locked away in the bathroom right upstairs. Peridot had been surprisingly quiet since yesterday, her usual barrage of loud thumps, crashes, and insults kept to a strange minimum. Perhaps, Mabel theorized, the green Gem had grown bored and lonely in her largely self-imposed prison, to the point that she had stopped her fervent escape attempts altogether. And certainly, if that was the case, then there would likely be no better time than now to try and make peace with Peridot, or better get, convince her to reveal the secret that only she seemed to hold the answer to.

And so, with this train of thought in mind, Mabel slowly slipped out of her seat, making sure that
both Dipper and Garnet were watching the movie instead of her. After all, neither of them would really be helpful in smoothing things over with Peridot, given how hostile both of them had been to her in the past. So Mabel figured it’d be better if she went to visit the green Gem on her own, though not without a bit of incentive to aid in her cause. Working quickly and quietly, she managed to put together a small batch of Mabel Juice and hurried it and a plate of homemade cookies upstairs, discreetly avoiding the attention of her brother and the Gem leader all the while. She couldn’t help but let out a bit of an excited chuckle as she approached the bathroom door, cheerfully yet lightly knocking on it to gather the green Gem’s attention.

“Oh, Peri! Its meeeeee, Mabel!” she announced in a hushed whisper. “I’ve brought you some goodies! I don’t know if you’ve tried eating and drinking yet, but if you haven’t, then there’s no better way to start than on a fresh batch of Mabel Juice! Its made with love! And a lot of plastic dinosaurs!”

Mabel barely managed to contain her satisfied smile as her plan seemed to work, with the bathroom door slowly starting to creak open. As soon as it was open wide enough, she easily slipped right in, still as cheery as ever as she looked around for Peridot, who, oddly enough, seemed nowhere to be found. “Um… Peri?” she asked, her smile filling with slight confusion. “You still in here? …Peri? Oh, Periiiiiiiii!” Mabel paused, finally frowning as she realized Peridot was likely hiding somewhere, in plain sight, even though the bathroom was small enough that there weren’t really many places she could hide in the first place. “Hm, oh well, guess I’ll have to eat all these cookies and drink all this delicious Mabel Juice all by myself—AH!”

Mabel abruptly cut herself off with a loud cry as something suddenly dropped down upon her from above. That something was none other than Peridot, who had managed to perch herself on top of the medicine cabinet, just out of sight when the girl had entered in. And indeed, the green Gem had taken advantage of this opportunity as she shoved Mabel hard, knocking the tray of cookies and juice clean out of her hands and onto the floor, with her following not too far after. Amidst the confusion, Mabel was scarcely even aware of Peridot hurriedly scrambling to her feet and rushing over to the open door, not even giving her time to pick herself up off the now messy ground as the green Gem snickered deviously over her newfound triumph.

“Ha! Have fun being locked in your own diminutive room of baths, you ‘Mabel’!” Peridot taunted, not wasting any time in slamming the door hard on Mabel and running off, leaving the girl behind and quite bewildered and alarmed over what had just happened.

Of course, all of this was initially unbeknownst to Dipper and Garnet as they remained downstairs, still halfheartedly watching the movie without even having realized Mabel had left quite some time ago. “Man, this movie stinks,” Dipper remarked between handfuls of popcorn. “I don’t get why they don’t just rip the mask off that assassin guy already. I mean, its not like they’re not gonna find out who he really is eventually, right?”

“Mm… I could tell you,” Garnet adjusted her shades. “But I promised Mabel I wouldn’t spoil the movie.”

“Hmph, right…” Dipper paused for a beat at this, glancing over to where his aforementioned sister had been sitting, only to find her spot completely empty. “Uh… speaking of which, where is Mabel? She was just here a second ago, and—”

A loud, sudden crash from upstairs sharply cut through the conversation, one that immediately drew Dipper and Garnet’s attention away from the movie altogether. “I think you question was just answered,” the Gem leader mused as she stood up. The sound of a heavy slammed door followed the initial din, and that was more than enough to get Dipper to dart up from his seat as well with
immediate concern as he speculated exactly which door it had been.

“Mabel!” Dipper exclaimed in immediate concern, not hesitating to rush up the stairs towards the bathroom with Garnet not too far behind. Still in the midst of her daring escape attempt, Peridot heard them coming and, right before they reached the top of the stairs, the green Gem wisely tucked herself out of sight by slipping into the very narrow space behind the nearby grandfather clock. It was a tight fit, but it worked well enough to help her avoid detection as Dipper and Garnet ran past her, unaware of her presence as they ran towards her now former bathroom prison. And, as soon as they were gone, Peridot didn’t hesitate to make good on finish the rest of her escape out of the shack altogether, much to her elation.

Of course, no one else initially knew this as Garnet and Dipper finally burst into the bathroom, only to find Mabel, dripping wet with her own glittery pink juice, just starting to pick herself up off the floor. “Ugh…” she frowned, wringing out her sweater. “I think I may have used a bit too much juice and not enough Mabel in this batch… blegh…”

“Mabel!” Dipper exclaimed, hurrying in to help her up fully. “What’s going on? What are you even doing in here in the first place? And most importantly—” He cut himself off, quickly taking a once over glance of the bathroom before his expression turned grave. “Mabel… where’s Peridot?”

Mabel sucked in a sharp breath at this, instantly averting her brother’s questioning gaze out of guilt. “Ok, so…” she began diffidently. “Here’s what happened. I thought I’d come in here and try and get Peri to spill the beans on that Cluster dealio by giving her a peace offering. I was all sure my foolproof plan was gonna work until—BAM! She jumped on me outta nowhere and hightailed it right out the door before I could stop her. And now… she’s… kinda… maybe… probably—”

“Gone,” Garnet finished, checking behind the shower curtain to make sure that the green Gem had indeed escaped.

“Y-yeah…” Mabel frowned, rubbing her arm awkwardly.

“Mabel, are you serious?!” Dipper exclaimed in appalled disbelief. “Its bad enough that you already let her out once, but again?! I can’t believe you’d be so irresponsible! How many times is it gonna take you to learn she can’t be trusted?! Now we’re gonna have to track her down all over again! Ugh, this is a mess…”

“Aw, s-sorry, bro-bro…” Mabel said with genuine remorse for her mistake. “But… look on the bright side! Without all her fancy lasers and floaty fingers, Peri probably isn’t getting too far, right? Right, Garnet?” she whispered aside to the Gem leader, hoping to get her assurance to back her up.

“Right, actually,” Garnet confirmed with a nod. “I can’t really see exactly where Peridot intends to go, but its not very likely she’ll make it out of Gravity Falls. So at the very least, we won’t have to track her down across the entire Earth again. Probably.”

“Well even if she’s not leaving Gravity Falls, that’s still a lot of ground for us to cover when it comes to looking for her,” Dipper said fretfully. “Especially when there’s only the three of us here to go out searching…”

“Then it looks like we’ll have to split up,” Garnet concluded with a hint of a smile as she crossed her arms.

“Oh! Good idea, Garnet!” Dipper nodded as he began to pace to think his forming plans through. “You can go out into the woods to look for her while Mabel and I head into town. O-or maybe I should go with you and Mabel can—or you and Mabel can go into town and I can head into the-”
“Or,” Garnet interrupted, her smile widening somewhat as both of the twins looked to her in apt confusion. “We can split up… like this.” In an instant, the Gem leader’s form flushed white, the glow splitting her apart and gently, easily breaking her down into her two respective halves, whose hands were still tightly intertwined, even as their fusion willingly came apart.

Ruby and Sapphire.

“Hello again, you two,” Sapphire greeted the twins with a small smile.

“Its, uh, been a while, huh?” Ruby chuckled, scathing the back of her neck good naturally.

Needless to say, however, that the Gem couple’s sudden reappearance was more than enough to dumbfound both Dipper and Mabel as they stared at the pair in amazement for a moment. That is, until Mabel broke out of her shock and replaced it with elation instead. “AHHHH YES!” she squealed, rushing over to hug both smaller Gems at once. “I can’t believe it! I thought we were just gonna be staying in tonight with Garnet, but going out on an epic Peri-hunting mission with Ruby and Sapphire is even BETTER! I’m kinda starting to not regret going on that camping trip now cause this is awesome!”

“Um, y-yeah, it is,” Dipper stepped forward with a bit of an apprehensive smile. “Just as long as things between you guys are… you know, ok. I-I mean, we really wouldn’t want a repeat of what happened the last time you two split up. N-no offense.”

“Oh no, no, no, don’t worry,” Ruby quickly assured. “Everything’s A-ok between us, right, Sapphy?”

“Right, Ruby,” Sapphire giggled, accepting the small kiss on the cheek her significant other warmly. “This isn’t going to be anything like last time. We just figured you two might need some extra help in capturing Peridot again, among… other things, so here we are.”

“Um… what other things?” Dipper asked curiously.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” the blue Gem said curtly. “Though ideally, you wouldn’t, but considering how things normally go around here…”

“W-what Sapphire means is… some intense stuff might happen later on,” Ruby finished with a shrug. “Which means the more of us there are to take care of things, the better off we’ll be. So, we were thinking that that you and I would head into town to look for Peridot, Mabel, and-”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah!” Mabel interupted enthusiastically, stars in her eyes over this plan. “We’ll make a great team, Ruby! Between my grappling hook and your gauntlet thingy, Peri will be so scared of us, she’ll come running right back to the bathroom the minute she sees us!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah!” Mabel interrupted enthusiastically, stars in her eyes over this plan. “We’ll make a great team, Ruby! Between my grappling hook and your gauntlet thingy, Peri will be so scared of us, she’ll come running right back to the bathroom the minute she sees us!”

“Heh, yeah she will!” Ruby exclaimed boldly, clenching her first. “Or at least she will if her find her in town.”

“That’s why Dipper and I will be going into the forest to search for Peridot,” Sapphire rationalized evenly. “I still can’t see exactly where she’s gone or where she might end up going. That’s why it’s best to spit up to cover the most ground as we can so we can find her and bring her back as quickly as possible.”

“Well, I can’t argue with that plan,” Dipper remarked, relieved to know they had a plan in the first place. “Which means we really shouldn’t waste anymore time. The sooner we get out there and start looking, the sooner we can put Peridot right back where she belongs.”
“In the bathroom?” Mabel asked curiously.

“I was gonna say in a bubble, but since we apparently can’t do that, the bathroom will have to do,” Dipper huffed somewhat impatiently, still none to happy about Peridot’s relative state of freedom overall.

“Then let’s hurry,” Sapphire advised, leading the way out. “And everyone, stay on your guard. We’ve all seen just how tricky Peridot can be, even without her limb enhancers.”

“Hey, as long as she isn’t making anymore deals with crazy triangle demons, then we should be good,” Ruby half-joked, giving Sapphire another brief kiss as she passed her by.

“I can’t say we’re talking something that extreme,” the blue Gem remarked to Ruby and Mabel in particular. “But even so, be careful, you two. And stay focused on the mission at hand.”

“Aw, c’mon, Sapphy, you know me!” Ruby grinned. “I’m the master of focus. Second only to you of course.”

“Yeah! I’m a master of focusing too!” Mabel chimed in zealously. “Oh, by the way, do you guys think we should pack snacks for the mission? I still have some leftover cookies that weren’t ruined when Peri knocked my treat tray over. Or maybe we could take some chips instead? Or something out of the vending machine in the gift shop even! …Wait… what were we talking about again?”

“Oh boy…” Dipper sighed, exchanging a rather knowing glance with Sapphire as the pairs began to go their separate ways. “I have a feeling this can only go so well.”

“That feeling might not be too far off…” Sapphire admitted, sparing a worried glance over her shoulder at Ruby and Mabel, who were already engaged in a very enthusiastic bout of conversation as they began down the road that lead into town. “Still, as long as they stay on track, they should be fine. Especially if Peridot really isn’t the only problem we’ll have to worry about here…”

The ride out to the makeshift campsite the kids had chosen took roughly an hour, and throughout it, things had been rather tense to say the least. Stan and Ford had spent much of the trip arguing over directions to their eventual destination, and when they weren’t, any attempt at making friendly conversation made by any of the kids usually was quick to fizzle out altogether. All the same, the trip was still young and as such, neither Steven nor Connie had given up on their mission with this campout so soon. Though neither Stan or Ford seemed too enthusiastic to be on this trip together now, with perhaps just a little time and a little luck, that could soon very well change.

Needless to say that it was something of a relief when the group finally pulled up to the spacious clearing that was to be their campsite. It was a grassy patch of land, surrounded by dense foliage on all sides, though it was wide enough to provide a rather expansive view of the blue sky above. A small, clear creek ran right past the clearing, providing a good source of water for the group of campers as they began unpacking the car to settle down for the oncoming night.

“Wow, you dudes really picked a great camping spot,” Soos remarked to Steven and Connie with a smile as he helped them haul supplies out of the car. “Its got all the works: trees, and rocks, and… more trees!”

“Well, you’re right about that, Soos,” Wendy smirked as she pulled her axe out of its holster and spun it around playfully. “Plenty of trees means plenty of fire wood and plenty of materials to build a blunt force weapon in case we’re attacked by any mountain lions or rabid skunks or weird forest
hermits who only eat things from their own compost piles.” A beat of silence past in light of this as Steven, Soos, and Connie all sent the cashier amazed, somewhat dumbfounded glances over this knowhow. “What? My dad’s taught me and my brothers a lot about surviving in the wild over the years, just in case we ever need to ‘escape from the government’ or something like that.”

“Oh! I know a good bit about wilderness survival too!” Connie chimed in. “Though, uh… less from firsthand experience and more from just reading a lot of books about it… Still, I don’t think this is the kind of campout where we’ll need a whole lot of critical survival skills…”

“We won’t, so long as we don’t run into any poisonous porcupines or a ravaging pack of scampfires that are known to inhabit this part of the woods,” Ford noted as he passed by the kids, already writing away in one of his journals.

“A scampfire?” Steven asked, curious. “What’s that?”

The author turned around with a smile, more than ready to answer the young Gem’s inquisitive question, that is until his brother interjected. “Oh, probably just another one of those scary spook’ems Sixer here is always makin’ up for those nerd books of his,” Stan remarked with a callous sense of humor, tapping the side of Ford’s journal in a rather conspicuous attempt at annoying him. An attempt that worked perfectly, all things considered.

“I’ll have you know that nothing I’ve written about in my journals is merely ‘made up’, Stanley,” the author remarked quite coldly as he closed his book with a frustrated huff. “And for the last time, they’re not ‘nerd books’, they’re highly organized, factual scientific field journals that-”

“Yeah, I know, Ford,” Stan deadpanned, rolling his eyes. “Heck, I probably know better than anyone else since I spent the last 30 years pouring over those things trying to save you. But I was just joking; no need to get so bent outta shape about it like you do about everything.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t get so ‘bent out of shape’ if the joke had actually been funny,” Ford remarked just as sardonically, crossing his arms.

“Hey! My jokes are hilarious!” Stan snapped with a scowl as he looked to the group awkwardly spectating on the argument from the sidelines. “Isn’t that right, kids?”

Steven, Connie, Soos, and Wendy were all quick to flinch upon being abruptly brought into this debate, which was why some of them were very quick to duck out of it right then and there. “Nope, no way, I am not about to get stuck in the middle of this mess,” Wendy said, putting both her hands up in resignation as she hurriedly walked away.

“Um… yeah, I’m gonna go… find something broken to fix…” Soos said stiffly before suddenly kicking over a nearby camping chair, bending it in the process. “Oh look! Something broken! Better go take it over here so I can patch it up! Way over here…”

“Well?” Stan looked to Steven and Connie expectantly in light of Soos and Wendy leaving. Of course, neither of them really wanted to be involved in the brothers’ quarrel either, which was why they declined to answer, with Steven glancing down and rubbing his arm apprehensively while Connie pretended to preoccupy herself with glancing around the forest instead.

“Well, well, Stanley, I must say, I’m impressed,” Ford said, cracking the faintest hint of an amused smirk. “Turns out you can’t even get the children to vouch for your wit. Or I suppose in this case, lack thereof.”

“Oh, you wanna see wit, Sixer?” Stan scowled, rolling his sleeves up somewhat threateningly as a
sign of how genuinely provoked he was. “Cause I can show you wit, ya-”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Steven suddenly intervened before this conflict had any chance of turning physical. “You guys shouldn’t be arguing like this! You’re family! And you’re out here, in the big, wide, beautiful woods where everything’s so nice and peaceful! Shouldn’t you make the most out of the opportunity and have a little fun out here in the great outdoors?”

“Kid, we live in the woods!” the conman huffed crossly. “If I wanted to see the great outdoors, I could have just walked out onto my porch.”

“Should I even bother wasting the energy in reminding you that its *my* porch, Stanley?” Ford asked, pinching the bridge of his nose in exasperation.

“Nope, you shouldn’t.”

“W-well, maybe you both will have more fun once the ‘camping’ part of this trip actually gets into full swing,” Connie suggested with a nervous smile.

“Great idea, Connie!” Steven grinned. “I say we get to pitching some tents and starting a campfire! What do you guys say?” he asked, looking up to Stan and Ford with that same encouraging smile.

“That’s fine with me as long as I don’t have to work anywhere remotely close to Stanley,” Ford said bitterly, not even sparing his brother a second glance as he walked off to begin setting up camp.

“Ditto!” Stan called after him, before realizing his mistake. “I-I mean—ditto for me… not wanting to work near—wait… I don’t want to work close to—I—ugh, just forget it!” With another frustrated groan, the conman sulked away in the opposite direction, leaving an aptly concerned and daunted Steven and Connie behind.

“Oh, Connie, what are we doing wrong here?” Steven asked fretfully as soon as the brothers were out of earshot. “We just wanna help Mr. Pines and Mr. Ford get along again, but how are we supposed to do that when they can’t even talk to each other without fighting?”

“Hm…” Connie paused to mull over the situation for a moment before coming up with a hopeful solution. “Maybe… we just need a way to distract them from all of the bad blood between them…”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean… if we can get them to stop thinking about the whole portal thing and everything else that tore them apart back when they were younger,” Connie began, growing more enthusiastic as her idea began to more clearly solidify in her mind. “It seems like they both have a bad habit of dwelling in the past. So if we can get them to somehow stop dwelling in the bad parts of the past-”

“Then maybe they can start dwelling in the *better* present!” Steven finished with a gasp of delighted realization. “That’s it! Seriously, Connie, how do you always come up with such amazing ideas all the time?”

“Eh, maybe its just luck, I guess,” Connie chuckled with a small shrug. Steven was quick to join along in her laughter, their worries turning to resolve to carry their newfound plan out as they hurried to help the others set up camp.
The moment Peridot burst out of the shack without immediate detection, she started running and didn’t even bother to look back. After all, she wasn’t about to fumble this escape like she did the last one; even without the help of her limb enhancers, the green Gem was determined to at last evade the Crystal Gems and their human allies alike while also finding a timely way off the Earth before it was no more. And also, unlike the last time, Peridot was determined not to solicit any help from any unsavory sources.

Or at least, that was her original plan.

After darting out from the shack, Peridot was all too quick to realize she had no idea where she was going. She didn’t dare head back into the woods at the risk of encountering any more bothersome gnomes or ‘corns’, which was why she rushed in the opposite direction, towards town, instead. The green Gem hoped that her now smaller, more compact size would at the very least help her remain discreet and unnoticed by anyone, especially any of her bothersome enemies. However, what Peridot didn’t expect was to happen upon another escape attempt altogether in the midst of her own.

Because in taking a brief glance over her shoulder to make sure she wasn’t being followed, Peridot failed to notice that she had stumbled onto the grounds right outside the fortified walls of the Gravity Falls Maximum Security Prison. She was quick to realize that something was going on, however, as she ended up running smack dab into one of the rather large, orange jumpsuit-clad men gathered around the rather conspicuous hole dug just underneath the nearby stone wall.

“Huh?” the prisoner turned, confused to see the tiny green Gem who had collided with his girthy leg, which sent her tumbling to the ground as a result. “What the…?”

“Eep!” Peridot squeaked, alarmed as she tried to scramble away only for the inmate to grab her by the pack of her uniform, hoisting her up in the air as he conversed with his fellow escapee in confusion.

“What do you think it is?”

“I dunno, some kinda angry cat?”

“Hey! I am not a so-called ‘cat’, you oversized ingrate!” the green Gem growled, letting out a rather feline hiss of protest as she clawed at the inmate holding her rather unsuccessfully.

“…Mm, yeah, it’s definitely a cat.”

“Oh, for sure, and a really grouchy one at that.”

“Careful, Ghost Eyes!” a young, heavily-southern accented voice snapped from inside the nearby hole. “If even one spec of dirt gets on my perfectly white pompadour, then I will not be happy. And ya’ll know what I’m like when I’m not happy.”

“Oh… I thought that was my idea…” Ghost Eyes noted with a frown.
“Quiet, Ghost Eyes, dear, you’re ruinin’ my moment,” Gideon said with a rather forced smile as he cued the rest of his prison gang of thugs and ruffians to cheer over his success. All the while, Peridot still remained in the grasp of the prisoner who had snatched her up, absolutely confused as to what was going on, much to her gradually increasing annoyance.

“So now that I’ve taken the liberty of finally releasin’ myself from my wrongful incarceration,” the child psychic began with vigor as he paced around his circle of loyal inmates. “I think its high time I exact my long-awaited revenge on a certain group of infernal, meddling do-gooders who got me locked in there in the first place!”

Upon hearing this, most of the prisoners exchanged a confused, unknowing look, mummering amongst themselves as they tried to figure out exactly who Gideon was talking about. The child psychic was quick to pick up on their ignorance, which was why he let out an exasperated sigh before informing them himself. “I’m talkin’ about the Pines family and the Crystal Gems!” he snapped, frustrated at first before breaking out into a sinister smile. “I’ve let them get the upper hand over me for too long now, but no more! I’m gonna make them pay for thwartin’ my plans and gettin’ in my way, and nobody is gonna stop—” Ironically enough, Gideon did stop just in front of the thug who was still holding Peridot, who simply glared down at the child psychic (who, in reality wasn’t really that much shorter than she was) suspiciously. “And who, pray tell, are you supposed to be?” Gideon asked, just as warily.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Peridot scowled crossly. “Are you some sort of over-incubated, sub-form of human? Because you’re certainly smaller than any of the ones I’ve encountered on this miserable planet so far.”

“Oooo!” all of the prisoners exclaimed in stunned unison that the green Gem would be so bold to insult their adored, self-proclaimed leader like that. Gideon, however, was having no such disrespect.

“How dare someone like you call me short!” the child psychic hissed hotly. “I’m not short, you are!”

“I am not!” Peridot protested with an appalled gasp. “I’m simply lacking my limb enhancers to give me a proper boost in height. And even without them, I’m still taller than you are, you… you miniature human!”

“I am NOT miniature!” Gideon argued fiercely. “I’m—wait…” The child psychic took pause upon noticing the green gemstone on his opponent’s forehead, something that immediately rang quite a few bells based on what he had read out of journal 2 before. “You! Y-you’re one of them infuriating Crystal Gems!”

“…Oh great, here we go with this again…” Peridot deadpanned, more than tired of being compared to her irksome enemies.

“I knew those three were bound to try ‘n recruit a rookie into their treacherous lil’ group someday!” Gideon exclaimed in undeniable outrage. “So tell me, did they send you to try and stop my brilliant escape attempt and throw me right back into jail, because lemme tell you, you Crystal Gem, that I ain’t gonna—”

“For the last time, I am NOT, nor will I EVER be a Crystal Gem!” Peridot interrupted loudly, still quite offended by the accusation, no matter how many times it was thrown her way. “In fact, I just pulled off a daring escape of my own by breaking out of their despicable ‘bath room’ prison! Which means I will NOT tolerate being called either short or an ally of those lowly traitors by anyone, especially not a diminutive earthling like you.”
“Ooooo!” the prison thugs chimed in again, all of them completely engaged with this ongoing argument until Gideon sharply shushed them into silence.

“Incorrect insults aside, you’re tellin’ me the Crystal Gems were holdin’ you up as a hostage?” Gideon asked, rather underwhelmed. “Why?”

“Because I possess valuable information that I never intend on revealing to the likes of them,” Peridot said, proud of her intel. “Oh, and I also tried to destroy them. On… a number of occasions. With… varying degrees of success, but I’m not about to give up yet!”

Upon hearing this, the child psychic finally cracked a small, devious smirk as he came up with a plan to use this strange, loud-mouthed, yet still quite revenge-driven Gem to his advantage. Which was especially fortunate since he hadn’t exactly formulated a plan for taking the Pines and the Gems out yet on his own anyway. “Well then, it seems as though we have more in common than I thought…” Gideon said, his tone now smooth and easy. “Ya see, I wanna see those Crystal Gems pay recompense for muckin’ up my otherwise flawless plans as well.”

“Oh really?” Peridot asked, raising a curious eyebrow as she wondered how the Crystal Gems could possibly have made an enemy out of the tiny human standing before her.

“Really,” Gideon confirmed, his sinister smile growing somewhat. “And… I’m thinkin’ I might have a proposition in mind that could help us both accomplish that end, if you’re interested, that is…”

The green Gem didn’t answer right away, instead sending a rather distrustful glance down to the child psychic. After all, her last attempt at teaming up with someone to try and defeat the Crystal Gems had been a complete and utter disaster. Yet, given that her choices were limited to either hearing Gideon’s idea out or inevitably being caught by the Gems and their human allies and tossed right back into the bathroom all over again, it wasn’t like she could very well say no. At least not yet. “…I’m listening…”

Fortunately, setting up camp didn’t take too terribly long with it being spread amongst six sets of hands to make the work more manageable. After fixing the broken chair, Soos made quick and surprisingly efficient work in setting up the handful of tents the group had brought along while Wendy went out and chopped up a sizable stash of firewood that Ford easily ignited into a decently sized, well controlled blaze using one of the pocket-sized lasers he had brought along. Once the fire was going, Steven and Connie helped Stan roast hot dogs over it for dinner, resulting in a quite decent flame-roasted meal for everyone. In order to avoid any further conflict between Stan and Ford, the kids wisely kept the brothers apart and distracted as they went about their various camping tasks. However, as the sun sank below the trees and a pleasant summer’s evening fell upon the forest, keeping them separate was really no longer possible as everyone settled down around the campfire to relax and unwind after a hard day’s work. Or at least, try to unwind.

“Oh! Looks like they’re done!” Steven exclaimed as he pulled the unique rotisserie device Ford had offered up for roasting marshmallows out of the fire. “Mm, and they’re cooked just right too! This thing works great, Mr. Ford!”

“As it should,” the author grinned proudly, holding his invention up. “This device helped me easily and effectively cook the poison right out of the pigmy leviathans of Zebesia 86. Without it, I certainly would have died. Or at the very least I would have been very hungry for a very long time.”
“Wow, Mr. Ford, it sounds like you’ve traveled to so many interesting worlds and dimensions,” Connie remarked, impressed.

“Indeed I have,” Ford said, still smiling. “Despite the fact that a majority of my time traversing dimensions was more or less a battle to survive each day, I did make many a scintillating discovery over the course of that 30 year span!”

“Ooo, like what?” Steven asked curiously. “Did you ever find super secret treasure?”

“Did you ever have to fight off a marauding band of intergalactic pirates?” Connie asked, intrigued.

“Did you ever meet a dolphin-man?” Soos asked, his tone hopeful.

“Did you ever kill someone?” Wendy asked somewhat casually, though she did still clearly want to know.

“Plenty of it, several times, yes—he was very polite by the way—and… I’m not at liberty to answer that last question at the risk of incriminating myself but let’s just leave it at… possibly…”

Of course, the kids were all duly amazed by such rapid fire responses as they exchanged a fascinated round of murmurs amongst themselves. All the while, Stan had been sitting on the other side of the fire, his expression surprisingly sour as he snacked on several of the very sweet roasted marshmallows. Though he had been mostly left out of the conversation thus far, he couldn’t help but feel somewhat compelled to, especially since he had easily noticed that his brother had all but stolen the limelight completely. “Oh big woop,” the conman remarked rather dryly as he finished scarfing his last marshmallow down. “So you fought off a bunch of aliens or whatever; you’re not the only one who’s been all over the place, you know. I’ve traveled pretty much all around the world and have been in just as many crazy scrapes as you have, poindexter.”

“Oh really?” Ford asked, raising a caustic eyebrow. “Such as…?”

“W-well… there was… oh! I know!” Stan snapped his fingers. “There was the time I had to fight a nest of wild racoons out of the engine of my car! I nearly lost an eye to those pests and I’m pretty sure I got rabies outta the whole shebang.”

“I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t still be alive if he had gotten rabies…” Connie whispered to Steven, aside.

“And there was the time I outran border patrol after getting caught smuggling a bunch of stolen staplers out of Mexico,” the conman continued with a broad smirk.

“Wow, Mr. Pines,” Wendy teased with something of a playful yawn. “That story would almost be cool if you hadn’t been smuggling something so boring…”

“W-well I’ll tell ya what isn’t boring!” Stan snapped with growing frustration. “The time I had to square up against an entire band of Mounties that one time I ended up getting lost in Canada. I had to hide out under a hole-in-the-wall café in Quebec for about a month after that, living off spilt coffee and poutine crumbs. Though I did pick up some French outta the whole thing, alors ... pense que tu peux dépasser ça, Ford?”

“Hmph,” Ford rolled his eyes. “I don’t need to top that, Stanley, because this entire debate is pointless and childish and you know it. Besides, its clear that my near death experiences were far more severe than yours.”

“Uh, no, I had it way worse than you ever could have with your fancy machines and nerdy brains
or whatever,” Stan huffed crossly. “I had nothin’ to rely on but my own grit, and most of the time that wasn’t even worth anything out there in the real world.”

“Are you seriously implying that the dangers I constantly entrenched myself in for 30 years pale in comparison to your aimless time as a penniless drifter?”

“Well, if the chaussure fits, then-”

“Well!” Steven suddenly interjected, just in time as tensions began to arise between the brothers once again. He paused very briefly to send Connie a knowing look, ready to start putting their plan in action by diverting attention away from the pain of the past and towards the pleasant moments of it instead. “I have a question.”

“Um… what, kid?” Stan asked, raising an eyebrow in confusion. “We’re sorta in the middle of something here, in case ya didn’t notice.”

“Well… I was just wondering…” the young Gem began, innocently enough. “Have you guys ever been camping before now?”

Both Stan and Ford were initially silent at such a question, unable to not exchange a rather bewildered glance at this before the author responded first. “Well, that’s a rather… odd question, Steven, but yes, I’ve had to camp out in the wilderness many times before, both during my interdimensional travels as well as during my initial research here in Gravity Falls for field studies and up-close observations.”

“Well, and there’s been times when I’ve had to camp out in the desert and up in the mountains and pretty much any time I had to keep a low profile and couldn’t drag my car along with me and couldn’t afford to stay in a motel,” Stan shrugged, not seeing the point of this inquiry. “Which was… not gonna lie… a lot of the time.”

“No, no, no!” Steven shook his head. “I’m not talking about that stuff. I’m talking about when you two were kids! Didn’t you guys ever just head out into the woods and pitch a tent and lay under the stars, laughing together and talking about life and stuff?”

“No… particularly…” Ford frowned, still confused. “Largely since we didn’t leave near any woods when we were children.”

“Yeah, but there was that one time we did camp out on the beach,” Stan pointed out with the very faintest hint of a smile on his face. “Unless you managed to forget about that along with all the rest of the good times, Sixer.”

“Please,” the author deadpanned, crossing his arms. “How could I forget how much trouble we got in because you failed to tell Mom and Dad about our plans to stay at the beach that night like I told you to?”

“Hey, I forgot, ok?” Stan shrugged apathetically. “And can you really blame me? I was too busy listening to you go on about those dumb night crabs you kept finding all over the beach.”

“They were nocturnal crustaceans, Stanley,” Ford corrected. “And if I recall correctly, you were quite fascinated by them to. To the point that you brought an entire bucket full of them into our tent so you could read comics to them before we fell asleep.”

“'Heh, yeah, and they were pretty good listeners too,” the conman finally cracked the faintest hint of a smirk, not even noticing how captivated the kids were by this loose recounting of this amusing misadventure. “Until one of them decided to pinch down on my toes while I was asleep.”
“Oh, that’s right!” Ford exclaimed, letting out a small, teasing chuckle. “You cursed so loudly you woke half the boardwalk up! Not to mention the fact that you knocked over our tent with us in it!”

“Oh yeah, and then-”

“We ended up rolling into the ocean with the tent still on top of us!” both brothers exclaimed in unison, unable to hold back their genuine laughter at such a humorous memory.

“It’s working! It’s working!” Steven whispered in elated excitement, stars in his eyes as he shook Connie by the shoulder excitedly.

“Come to think of it, that’s probably how Shermie found us down there in the first place,” Stan remarked, still laughing. “If he hadn’t come by and dragged us out of the water, then we wouldn’t have needed the Stan O’ War in the first place, we could have just floated out to sea on that pile of busted up driftwood.”

“We probably would have drowned, to be perfectly honest,” Ford smirked, rolling his eyes. “Though thinking back to the extensive grounding we got from Dad after Shermie took us home, that might not have been too terrible of an alternative.”

“Ugh, tell me about it,” the conman leaned back with a faux expression of distaste. “I could have spent that month pickpocketing rubes or flirting with girls instead of sitting home being bored with you.”

“Says the man who spent the majority of that month having the time of his life playing discreet pranks on both our father and our older brother as ‘payback’ for ‘busting us,’” the author said with a knowing grin.

“Hey, I couldn’t have pulled off half of those pranks without you comin’ up with some sort of weird doohickey or thingamabob to help us pull them off without getting caught,” Stan said with a hint of genuine warmth.

“Well, what can I say?” Ford smiled just as earnestly. “Weird ‘doohickeys’ and ‘thingamabobs’ are somewhat my specialty.”

At this, the brothers shared another laugh, one that seemed to solidify the shift that had seemed to transpire between them all at once. A shift that all of the others easily picked up on as they watched it transpire in apt amazement, especially given how harsh things had been between Stan and Ford just a few hours prior.

“Huh, what do you know?” Wendy spoke up with a small grin. “That story you guys just accidentally told us was actually, I dunno, charming? As much as I hate to admit that anything about you two crusty old geezers is actually charming.”

“Yeah, dudes!” Soos chimed in enthusiastically. “I could totally picture you guys going on your fun little campout when you were kids in my brain and junk. I imagined you guys as like, smaller versions of Dipper and Mabel, only your both boys instead, so I guess its more like… two Dippers.”

“Heh, well then, I guess the apples don’t fall too far from the tree then, eh, Sixer?” Stan asked, sending his brother a knowing smirk. Ford seemed to hesitate for a moment before answering this, glancing aside in what almost seemed to be apprehension before meeting, and finally, returning Stan’s warm smile in full.

“No, I suppose they don’t,” the author replied, shaking his head incredulously, yet undeniably
“COULD THIS NIGHT GET ANY BETTER!?!” Steven suddenly exclaimed brightly, hopping up from his seat and startling the others. Still, he couldn’t really contain his excitement and relief at finally seeing everyone getting along so harmoniously. And since his joy was so abundant, he figured he might as well share it with everyone else too. “Wait! Actually, I think it can… with a song!” At this, the young Gem pulled out his ukulele, nodding over to Connie to encourage her to take up her violin so the pair could play a light, breezy, impromptu campfire duet.

“Isn’t this such a beautiful night? Whoa…” Steven sang with a small, content smile as everyone else settled in to listen to his song. That is, save for Soos, who decided to join in on the accompaniment with a steady, smooth beat using the log he had taken up as a makeshift bongo. “We’re underneath a thousand shining stars… Isn’t it nice to find yourself somewhere different? Whoa! Why don’t you let yourself just be where ever you are?”

“Look at this place, look at your faces,” The cheerful, relaxing melody seemed to stay in everyone’s hearts and minds as the evening continued, with even more tales being exchanged around the fire. “I’ve never seen you look like this before.” Stan and Ford regaled the kids with a handful of their other childhood escapades in Glass Shard Beach, all of them reflecting the close bond the brothers used to have when they were young. A bond that, against all odds, finally seemed to be repairing itself all on its own in the present. “Isn’t it nice to find yourself somewhere different? Whoa, why don’t you let yourself just be wherever you are?”

“Look at this place, look at your faces,” Of course, fireside stories weren’t the only fun to be had as the night drew on. With their s’mores supplies completely exhausted, the group decided to expend some of their energy through a game of flashlight tag in the darkness of the woods. Through sheer experience alone, Stan and Ford managed to claim a team victory in the game, which of course served to bolster their already high spirits even more as they exchanged a celebratory high five. “They’re shining like a thousand shining stars.” As physically worn as they were, it wasn’t long after this that the group returned to their places by the fire for hot cocoa and shadow puppet charades. Of course, given his dexterous six fingers on each hand, Ford by far outshone everyone in this game, though he surprisingly let Stan and the kids gain the upper hand, much to their elation. “Isn’t it nice to find yourself somewhere different?” With games and snacks out of the way, everyone eventually settled back into another round of contented, calming conversation as they watched the fire begin to burn low, the stars above them still shining as brightly as ever as the hours dragged on in their peaceful, lazy way. “Why don’t you let yourself just be wherever you are…”

“Why don’t you let yourself just be somewhere different? Whoa…” And indeed, they were somewhere different. For where Stan and Ford usually stood opposed and cold towards each other, through just a few hours of forgetting the present and the closer pains of the past, they were able to look back to simpler, happier times. Simpler happier times that could not be passed off or forgotten no matter how much time had passed and how many mistakes had been made. Because here, in the great outdoors, under the stars and beneath the trees and awash in memories of bright, sun-soaked, seaside days, those mistakes didn’t really seem to matter so much anymore at all.

“Why don’t you let yourself just be wherever you are…?”

With their mission to capture Peridot and bring her back to the shack in mind, Mabel and Ruby had set out on their trek towards town. Dusk was upon them as they headed down the path that led from the shack all the wait to the main square, and even though they were both keeping their eyes
open for any signs of the green Gem along the way, that didn’t stop Mabel from unleashing her huge barrage of curious questions upon the red Gem as they walked along.

“So between you and Sapphire, which one of you is the hugger?” she asked, largely wanting to know more of the Gem couple’s adorable relationship more than anything else.

“Mm, not gonna lie, that’s probably me,” Ruby grinned bashfully. “But only cause Sapphy is so huggable!”

“Yeeeee!” Mabel let out an enthralled squeal of delight upon hearing such precious sentiments but even so she continued. “Ok, so do you guys ever go on dates? Just the two of you?”

“Uh… well, we go off on our own as Garnet a lot so… I guess that counts?” the red Gem shrugged good naturedly.

“Well, do you guys ever do anything romantic when you’re alone like that?”

“Romantic… like… what, exactly?”

“Like taking long walks near the lake or hugging or kissing—well then again, I guess Garnet can’t really kiss herself but maybe you and Sapphire kiss each other in her mind or something?” Mabel frowned, confused. “You know what, scratch that, new question! Have you ever thought about proposing to Sapphire before?”

“Proposing?” Ruby asked, largely unfamiliar with the term.

“Yeah, ya know, asking her to marry you!” Mabel exclaimed enthusiastically. “You guys could have the best wedding ever! There’d be dancing, and flowers, and cake, and I could be one of your bridesmaids! Or a bridesmaid for both of you since you’d both technically be brides! Oh my gosh, I want this to happen so badly!”

“Uh… yeah,” Ruby chuckled with a bit of a flustered laugh. “Who knows? Maybe it will, uh, someday. But for now, we should probably focus on finding Peridot like Sapphire said we should. This is really serious; we can’t just let her get away from us again, especially not now.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Mabel huffed as they finally entered into town. “That Peri really is a naught little green bean for tricking me like she did just so she could escape. But as long as we stay super focused, then I’m sure we’ll—OH MY GOSH, LOOK!” Before they could even take another step forward, Mabel stopped them both in their tracks, grabbing onto Ruby’s arm as she pointed towards Greasy’s Diner, or rather, the sign hanging from its door. “Its free pie night! I love Lazy Susan’s pie, its so good! Come on, Ruby, we gotta go get some before its all gone!”

“Whoa, hold on a second, Mabel,” Ruby said, holding the excited girl back before she could rush towards the diner. “You heard what Sapphire said. We’re supposed to be looking for Peridot, not letting ourselves get distracted.”

“Aw, but come on, it’ll be super quick, just in and out to grab a slice of pie!” Mabel encouraged. “Besides, you’ve always pegged me as the half of Garnet who likes to eat. Am I right, or am I right?”

Ruby was unable to deny this as she anxiously bit her lip, glancing over towards the diner wistfully before letting out a relenting sigh. “Ok fine, but we gotta make it quick. The longer it takes to find Peridot, the more time she has to get further away.”

“Hey, quick is my middle name,” Mabel grinned confidently as she led the way to the diner. “Now
let’s get that pie!”

And so, the pair did exactly that, hurrying into the surprisingly packed diner to claim their free slices of pie. It did take them a while to get to the front of the line, but when they did, both of them, including Ruby, was more than happy to get their sweet treat. However, since the door was blocked off by the rest of the line, they weren’t easily able to take their pie to go, meaning that they were more or less forced to eat it there, cutting out even more time from their integral search. Over an hour had passed by the time they finally made it out of the diner, an hour that Ruby was ever mindful of as the sun had fully set and night had begun.

“Ok, so that took… a little more time that it should have…” the red Gem frowned as they journeyed back towards the town square. “B—but that’s fine! Peridot doesn’t know Gravity Falls like we do, so she’s probably lost somewhere just waiting to be found!”

“That’s the spirit!” Mabel grinned brightly. “And I think I know exactly where we should look next…” she said, nodding over to Funland Arcade as they began to walk past it.

“Huh, you know that’s a pretty good idea!” Ruby replied, hands on her hips as they stood before the building. “Peridot likes machines, so there’s a good chance she might have holed herself up in there trying to build a robot or something. Let’s go in and look!”

Not wasting anymore time, the pair ran into the arcade, initially staying on track as they looked around for any signs of the green Gem. However, the longer they looked, the harder the allure of the colorful fun the games surrounding them became to ignore. Mabel was the first to cave in, dropping a handful of quarters into Dance Pants Revolution while Ruby continued searching, only to turn up empty handed. Soon enough, however, she too gave in and took on Mabel’s challenge to face her in Teens of Rage, which was subsequently broken courtesy of a rather fiery punch from the red Gem. With the arcade’s fire alarms sounding off immediately after, the pair rushed out, though not before Ruby tipped over Meat Beat Mania in an angry bout of revenge for past wrongs.

From there, the pair returned to their devout search, checking storefronts and park benches to see if Peridot might have slipped under any of them. Though it wasn’t very long before they found themselves distracted yet again upon entering the mall. A number of summer sales were going on and Mabel wasn’t really able to resist at least browsing through a few of them, particularly in the crafts store. With still not even so much as a sign of Peridot’s presence anywhere nearby, the pair spent quite a long time perusing through yarn, knitting needles, and glitter bombs, both of them genuinely having a good time while doing so, even if their original mission was more or less forgotten. Still, they kept the road hot (quite literally thanks to Ruby), heading out from the mall and back into town as they went between several of the other attractions Gravity Falls had to offer, from the pool, to the Big Donut, to the museum and every other place in between. The thought to search for Peridot was more or less at the back of both of their minds as they engaged in wild, often reckless fun in each of the locales they happened to stop at, with no one to really ground them down or tell them otherwise.

And yet, all the while, both of them were completely unaware of the several sets of eyes steadily trained on them from the shadows, waiting for the perfect opportunity to exact their equally-desired revenge…

It was truly amazing how quickly and how slowly time seemed to pass out in the calm expanse of the dense forest. This was something that the entire camping group slowly began to notice as their fire slowly started to die down on its own accord and their eyes began to grow heavy, to the point
that Soos and Wendy had already started nodding off, with Connie following not too far behind. Steven was also quite sleepy, but even so, he forced himself to stay awake just a bit longer to hear Stan and Ford wrap up yet another charming anecdote from their shared childhood.

“So yeah, I ended up breaking my arm and was stuck in a cast for weeks,” Stan concluded with a bit of an annoyed huff. “It wasn’t all bad though, mostly since this guy drew a pretty bada-” the conman cut himself off as his brother shot him a sharp, disapproving look at the swear he was about to let loose in front of the children, which was why he was quick to change it to something more appropriate instead. “I-I mean… amazing dragon on it.”

“That’s more like it,” Ford nodded, crossing his arms with a smile. “And what can I say? Your cast made a surprisingly decent canvas.”

The brothers shared another warm laugh over this, one that Steven simply let out a small, contented sigh over. Sure enough, his and Connie’s hopes had been fulfilled and really, they hadn’t had to do much at all; all they did was foster some form of civil conversation between Stan and Ford and the rest followed easy enough. And now, the pair was acting exactly as they should have been all along: like the brothers they were supposed to be. Steven was more than happy with this accomplished mission, and he couldn’t wait to head home tomorrow to show Dipper and Mabel just how well their grunkles were getting along now. But of course, that would have to wait until after everyone had gotten a good night’s sleep first, a sentiment that Stan and Ford seemed to realize themselves as they both let out tired yawns of their own.

“Welp, I don’t know about everyone else, but all this camping me beat,” Stan said, stretching as he rose to stand. “I’m hitting the hay.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Ford remarked as he headed over to rouse the sleeping group on the other side of the fire awake. “Alright, everyone, its time for bed. We’ll have a full day of packing up camp and heading home tomorrow, so we should all get a good night’s rest.”

“Aw, but we’re having so much fun!” Steven protested with a slight pout.

“Yeah, dudes,” Soos chimed in sleepily. “We can totally stay up just… a bit… longer…” With this, the handyman fell backwards out of his seat, fully asleep as he landed on the ground with a thud.

“Speak for yourself, Soos,” Wendy grinned, shaking her head as both her and Connie got up to help drag Soos over to his tent.

“Good night, you guys!” Connie called with a warm smile before heading to bed herself.

“Night!” Steven grinned as he got up to go to his own tent. He did stop briefly, however, to spare a glance back at Stan and Ford, who were both preparing to head in for the night as well after the kids were all squared away and secure. “You know,” he began, addressing the brothers with a genuine smile. “I’m really glad you both decided to come camping with us after all. Its been a lot of fun.”

“Heh, yeah,” Stan smirked as Ford nodded his earnest agreement. “I guess it has. Anyway, night, kiddo, get some good sleep out here in the ‘great outdoors’ or whatever you called it.”

“Yes, good night, Steven,” the author said, waving the young Gem off. “Don’t let the bed bugs bite. And I mean that too; Gravity Falls’ bed bugs are notorious for causing radioactive poisoning.”

“Pfft, you would know what with that radioactive brain of yours,” Stan teased, elbowing his brother playfully.
“Stanley…” Ford chuckled, rolling his eyes at the conman’s goading.

Steven laughed along with the pair briefly before offering them one last farewell for the night before heading into his tent, elated and almost relieved even to know that peace had finally been made between them once and for all.

Or so he thought.

“Heh, you know, this really has been a pretty great campout,” Stan remarked as he put out the last few dying embers of the fire.

“It certainly has been quite refreshing,” Ford smiled almost wistfully. “It’s a shame that we can’t stay out here longer. But we have to return to normalcy eventually, right?”

Stan faltered at this, his smile dropping altogether as he realized exactly what his brother had implied here. That this newfound returned camaraderie between them wouldn’t last, a camaraderie he had been missing for over 30 years now and desperately didn’t want to lose. That as soon as they left the freedom of the forest and went back to the shack, things would once again be tense and hostile, that all of the warmth and brotherly love would be instead replaced with coldness and resentment. That all of the fond memories they had shared as children, memories they had brought back into the light tonight, would inevitably fade back into the forgotten shadows, never to return again. And as much as Stan wished and hoped something like that wouldn’t happen, he knew his brother all too well. Which was why the most he could do was offer him a tight, fake smile, one that carried a lie he was far too proud to unravel whatsoever. “R-right…”

“Well then, good night, Stanley,” Ford bid as he headed into his tent. “Remember what I said about those radioactive bed bugs. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Y-yeah…” Stan said with a halfhearted smile as he saw his brother off. “In… in the morning…” As soon as the author was out of earshot, the conman let out the long, dejected sigh he had been holding in out. They had come so close, so close to finally being actual brothers again after spending so many years apart. And yet, in just a few hours time, things were sure to fall apart between them yet again, just as they had had the moment Ford stepped out of the portal, just as they had when Stan had shown up in Gravity Falls 30 years ago, just as they had the night they had been torn apart for the very first time because of one dumb mistake.

A mistake that Stan refused to let keep them apart any longer.

“Who says we can’t stay out here longer…?” the conman muttered to himself, an idea forming in his mind as he glanced over at his nearby car. It was a rather risky plan, especially if any of the others were to find him out, he had been holding in out. They had come so close, so close to finally being actual brothers again after spending so many years apart. And yet, in just a few hours time, things were sure to fall apart between them yet again, just as they had the moment Ford stepped out of the portal, just as they had when Stan had shown up in Gravity Falls 30 years ago, just as they had the night they had been torn apart for the very first time because of one dumb mistake.

A mistake that Stan refused to let keep them apart any longer.

The forests of Gravity Falls were by far their most mysterious in the early hours of the night, but the fact that a runaway Homeworld Gem could be lurking anywhere within them only made them all the more mysterious as Dipper and Sapphire trekked through them. Unlike Mabel and Ruby, this pair was much more diligent in their search for the green Gem, to the point that they had hardly discussed much else outside of their attempts to find her. However, as time went on and a prolonged silence fell between them, it was becoming quite clear to the blue Gem in particular that things weren’t going to stay like that for too much longer.
In fact, Dipper was just about to speak up and break the silence before Sapphire preemptively cut him off right before he could. “Go ahead,” she said knowingly.

“How?” Dipper asked, confused.

“You want to ask me something,” Sapphire inferred as she kept up her steady walking pace. “I can’t tell exactly what that something is, but I do know you have a question. So, go on ahead and ask whatever it is you’d like.”

“Oh, uh…” Dipper trailed off somewhat awkwardly before posing the question that had been on his mind for quite some time now. “I-I was just gonna ask… what’s it like?”

“What’s like?”

“You know…” Dipper shrugged. “The whole future vision thing. I mean, I know Garnet’s told us what its like, but… is it any different when its just you?”

“It’s not too much different,” Sapphire mused thoughtfully. “Really, its just like seeing the briefest glimpse into what the future may hold before returning to the present once more. Nothing too complicated really.”

“Uh… yeah, sure, its not,” Dipper grinned for a brief moment. “But isn’t it, I don’t know, kind of unsettling to be able to see the future sometimes? Like, what if you see that something really bad might happen? And that there isn’t any way you can stop it? Isn’t that scary?”

“Sometimes it is, but I think it helps me be more prepared for what might come, no matter how bad it could be,” the blue Gem said as calmly as ever, even though a hint of dread did enter her tone as she continued. “Honestly, what does scare me are the rare moments when I can’t see what might happen.”

“Y-you mean like when… when Bill’s around?” Dipper asked nervously, not even noticing as his voice dropped to almost a whisper upon mentioning the demon’s name.

Sapphire simply nodded at this, her hands folded tightly over her skirt as she glanced down slightly. “We’ve spoke when your uncle Ford about it and… he seems to think that the reason why Bill is able to completely evade my future vision is because he doesn’t exist in time and space the way the rest of us do. Even so, the fact that I can’t even see the faintest glimpse of what he might be planning or what he could do next is…”

“Terrifying…” Dipper finished gravely as Sapphire nodded once again.

“When you’re so used to knowing what’s going to happen, suddenly having that knowledge taken away from you is like being thrust into absolute darkness…” the blue Gem said wisely as a small, affectionate smile crossed her face. “Fortunately for me, I usually have a warm and loving light to help guide me through that darkness: Ruby. Whenever I lose my way in the future, she’s always the one to bring me back to the present where I belong. She’s my anchor, my rock, both literally and figuratively. I don’t know what I’d do without her…”

“You guys really are two of a kind, aren’t you?” Dipper asked with a bit of a knowing grin.

“We are,” Sapphire’s own smile widened somewhat. “Speaking of which, the same could be said for you and Mabel, I suppose.”

“Ugh, yeah, maybe it could if Mabel would actually start listening to me for a change,” Dipper remarked with an exasperated sigh. “She said she was going to start doing that more, and then what
does she go and do? She lets Peridot out of her bubble and then she goes and lets her escape from the bathroom too! Why doesn’t she just trust me on things like this instead of just… just doing her own thing like she always does?!”

Sapphire said nothing in response to this immediately, but after a brief pause to let things soak in, she spoke with steady rationale. “Dipper, if you want her to trust you, then why don’t you try trusting her in return?”

“What do you mean?” Dipper scoffed, confused. “I totally trust Mabel! Almost more than I trust anyone else!”

“You didn’t trust her decision to let the portal stay open,” Sapphire pointed out. “And you didn’t trust her decision to let Peridot out of her bubble either.”

“Yeah, because those decisions didn’t make any sense,” Dipper countered crossly.

“At the time, they didn’t,” the blue Gem continued evenly. “But think about things again. If Mabel had shut the portal down, then Ford would have never made it back to this dimension. If she hadn’t let Peridot out of her bubble, then we wouldn’t even know that this mysterious ‘Cluster’ exists in the first place. A choice that might not seem to make sense in the moment always has a chance of turning out alright in the end. You’d be wise to remember that.”

Dipper hesitated a bit before answering, knowing that Sapphire did have a good point, though given his own pride and stubbornness over the matter, he was hard pressed to admit it. “Yeah, well, I guess we’ll just have to wait and see if this choice of Mabel’s will end up making sense in the end, because from what I’m seeing, having to chase Peridot down all over again really doesn’t,” he remarked, crossing his arms plaintively.

Sapphire prepared to reassure him further, however, before she could, she came to a sudden abrupt halt, glancing around cautiously. “We’re being followed…” she said, her voice a low, quiet whisper.

“What? By who?” Dipper asked, instantly on edge as he also stopped and put a hand on the hilt of his sword. “Is it Peridot?”

“No,” the blue Gem shook her head. “It’s—”

“Lil’ ol’ me,” the child psychic smirked as he stepped out of his hiding spot in the forest, his hands held behind his back as he acknowledged Dipper and Sapphire with a cold, goading smile.

“Gideon!” Dipper exclaimed in appalled shock, not hesitating to draw the Sword of Seasons and put himself between the child psychic and the apparently defenseless blue Gem. “What are you doing out here? You’re supposed to be in jail!”

“Perhaps accordin’ to you I’m supposed to be,” Gideon remarked somewhat sardonically. “But I don’t quite agree with that there sentiment. Which is why I decided to finally liberate myself and so, here I am! Aren’t ya’ll pleasantly surprised to see me?”

“Ugh, no,” Dipper said, point blank.

“Just so you know, your plan isn’t going to work,” Sapphire informed just as plainly, clearly not surprised to see that Gideon had broken out of prison.

“Oh, and do you know that? Cause your fancy ‘future vision’ told ya?” Gideon asked smugly, well aware of Garnet’s component Gems and their respective abilities thanks to the intel from journal 2.
“Yes,” Sapphire confirmed. “And because your plans usually end in failure anyway.”

“Well, I have a feeling this plan is gonna work like a charm,” the child psychic remarked with broad confidence.

“No, its not,” Dipper countered sternly, pointing his sword directly at Gideon. “Because we’re taking you back to prison right now.”

“Ha! Don’t make me laugh!” Gideon exclaimed, not even phased by the deadly weapon aimed right at him. “I bet you don’t even know how to how to use that thing, do ya, boy?”

At this, Dipper simply switched on the flames his sword was capable of, prompting Gideon to drop his cocky act somewhat and flinch back in fear. “Believe me, Gideon, that’s a bet you don’t want to make,” he said, his tone cold with resolve.

“O-oh, yeah? W-well…” the child psychic stammered, clearly on edge before he remembered his trump card. “Well, if you hurt me, then I suppose you’ll never find out what happened to my dear, sweet, precious Mabel and that lil’ red friend of hers.”

Dipper’s reaction to this was immediate as he let out a gasp and tightened his grip on his sword just the slightest bit. “Mabel! Where is she!? What did you do to her?!”

“Oh, ya’ll don’t need to worry about her none,” Gideon said, his triumphant grin returned. “I’ve already got someone on that ca-"

The child psychic abruptly cut himself off as a brisk and bitter chill filled the entire area, ice splintering up all across the ground from a certain very upset blue Gem. Likewise, Dipper spun around with apt surprise to see Sapphire, hovering high above the ground, her bangs blown back by the snowy gale she had created to reveal her singular eye, which was filled with both fear and outrage all at once. “Where are they, Gideon?” she asked, her tone just as frigid as the ice she had created. “WHERE IS MY RUBY?!"

Though quite unnerved by such a powerful display, Gideon forced himself to remain calm and collected as he simply smirked knowingly. “You really wanna know where they are? Well then, I’ll be more than obliged to show you myself!” With this, the child psychic swiftly snapped his fingers, prompting his group of prison thugs to finally emerge from their hiding spots in the forest, various blunt force weapons in hand.

Surprisingly enough, Sapphire hadn’t seen the possibility of Gideon having some form of immediate backup coming, which was why she promptly returned to her spot on the ground to provide Dipper with some much needed cover. Despite the fact that they were largely outnumbered, the pair still made a rather formidable force, with Sapphire’s icy powers keeping quite a few of the burly inmates at bay while Dipper fended off their weapons with the various other elements his blade had to offer. Gideon, however, was far from pleased to see that his foes were surprisingly well equipped to take on a horde of muscular, hardened convicts. Which meant that if he wanted to get the job done right, then, as usual, he’d just have to do it himself.

Gideon took advantage of his small size to skiff around the edge of the ongoing fray, picking up a crowbar one of the thugs had dropped before he snuck into the fight himself. Sapphire had occupied herself with pushing back a group of inmates using thick blasts of snowy magic, leaving Dipper without any real defense as he deftly maneuvered in and out of skirmishes with his elemental blade. Which unfortunately, left the child psychic with a perfect opportunity to strike, and that was exactly what he did.
For just as Dipper pulled his sword back to land another blow against one of the inmates’ weapons, a sudden heavy, painful strike landed right on the back of his head. Unable to remain standing amidst the sharp, shooting pain, he slowly fell forward, his sword landing out of his hand as his vision blurred and senses began to dull.

“Well, well,” Gideon grinned viciously, attempting to claim Dipper’s sword off the ground, though it was a bit too heavy for him to properly pick up. “Looks like you’re not as skilled with this doohickey as you thought, boy.”

“Y-you’ll never get away with this…” Dipper muttered languidly, essentially fighting against unconsciousness at this point.

“Oh, on the contrary,” the child psychic chuckled darkly as he dropped his crowbar squarely on Dipper, fully knocking him out this time. “I already have…”

“No, you HAVEN’T!” Sapphire yelled as she suddenly glided right at Gideon, her hands aglow with ice as she prepared to make him pay for harming Dipper. The child psychic briefly panicked before remembering the stolen weapon in his hands, and though he really didn’t know how to use it, he still struggled to lift it up and somehow ignite it all the same. Completely lacking any sort of sword skills, Gideon simply threw the flame-covered sword as hard as he could at the blue Gem, its flat, burning edge striking her hard enough to quell her ice and knock her back quite a bit. Sapphire let out a cry of pain as she landed hard on the ground, though she was given no time at all to retaliate as one of the nearby thugs took the opportunity to grab her by both arms and hoist her up into the air, effectively ending the fight right then and there.

“It’d be in your best interest to release us right now, Gideon,” Sapphire warned angrily as she struggled in against the tight hold restraining her. “Or else you will face severe consequences, I can promise you that.”

“Yeah, yeah, keep it up with all the hallow threats,” the child psychic rolled his eyes as he began to lead the way out of the forest. “If anything, you should be thankin’ me. After all, I’m about to take you right to your precious Ruby. To bad ya’ll won’t have much more time to be together before I take my revenge on you and the Pines twins once and for all!” At this, Gideon let out a wild, vengeful laugh, one that was only cut off as Ghost Eyes happened to speak up a moment later.

“Uh, boss? I’m pretty sure town is this way…” he pointed out with a small frown.

“I know which way town is!” Gideon snapped hotly, his infamous temper as hot as ever as he turned around in the proper direction. “Let’s just get this over with already…”

“Ok! I think we’re all ready to get this whole thing over with already!” Ruby exclaimed as her and Mabel left Fish Stew Pizza after grabbing a quick late night snack.

“Get what thing over with?” Mabel asked in slight confusion.

“Uh… you know, the whole finding Peridot thing?” the red Gem reminded with a worried frown. “Remember?”

“Oh, OH! That’s right!” Mabel exclaimed, slapping herself on the forehead. “We were having so much fun that I almost forgot we were supposed to be looking for her!”

“Yeah, that’s… kind of the problem…” Ruby said, scratching the back of her neck as she looked
up at the dark and starry skies above. “What time is it anyway?”

“Uh… around midnight?” Mabel said, glancing over to the nearby clock tower in the center of the square.

“What?!” the red Gem gasped in sudden alarm. “We’ve been out here for that long and we still haven’t found her yet? Ohhhhh no, Sapphire is gonna be so disappointed in me for slacking off like this!”

“Aw, come on, I’m sure she’ll understand,” Mabel reassured as she placed a hand on Ruby’s shoulder. “Now, Dipper on the other hand, he might get kinda angry at us for ‘wasting so much time’ or whatever.”

“W-well, starting right now, we’re not gonna waste anymore time!” Ruby said with newfound resolve. “We’re gonna search every single inch of this town until we find Peridot and we’re not gonna rest until we do! Now, come on!”

Just as Ruby grabbed Mabel’s arm to begin their intensive search, however, the girl stopped them both right in their tracks as she let out an excited gasp. “Wait! I think I just saw her!”


“There!” Mabel pointed towards a nearby alley, where the streetlights cast an all too familiar triangular shadow on the brick wall alongside it.

“Huh, well that was surprisingly easy,” Ruby remarked with a smile of apt relief.

“Yeah, it just goes to show what happens when we focus super hard!” Mabel added as she pulled her grappling hook out. “Now come on! Let’s go catch us a Peri!”

Ruby let out a resounding cheer of support at this as they both rushed forward, ready to finally put this aggravating chase behind them. The moment they began running towards it, Peridot’s shadow fled further into the alley, prompting them to follow it through to the other side of the street. Oddly enough, though Peridot’s shadow remained consistent, they never really caught a glimpse of the green Gem herself, which did seem rather strange, though neither Ruby nor Mabel put too much thought into it amidst their ongoing adrenaline.

“There’s no use in running, Peridot!” Ruby shouted as they rounded the next corner the green Gem had apparently just turned. “We’ve got you—cornered?”

“She’s gone?” Mabel frowned as they glanced around the dead end they now found themselves in. “Aw, phooey, we were so close to nabbing her this time too! I guess we’ll just have to keep loo-” She abruptly cut herself off upon walking smack dab into a rather large, intimidating man who had come to stand right behind the pair seemingly out of nowhere. He was accompanied by two other rough-looking ruffians, effectively creating a human wall blocking their path. “Oops! Sorry!” Mabel exclaimed with a good-natured laugh. “Wow, you’re an awfully big fella, aren’t you? Now, do you mind moving over just a bit? Me and my friend are looking for someone and it’s really important that we find her soon.” Unfortunately, the thug didn’t seem to heed her whatsoever as he simply exchanged a brief glance with his companions before simply remaining still and stoic as ever. “Uh… excuse me? Mister?”

“Alright, we don’t have time for this,” Ruby concluded as she summoned her gauntlet at stepped forward. “Hey, lug head! Move out of our way, or else!”

“Or else what?” Mabel and Ruby both gasped upon hearing this familiar voice, only to turn around
to see none other than Peridot herself, standing on top of the dumpster at the end of the alleyway behind them. The green Gem’s manner was smug and triumphant, at least until she happened to fall off the dumpster and faceplant right in front of the pair before hastily picking herself back up again.

“Peri! There you are!” Mabel exclaimed with a relieved grin. “We’ve been looking all over for you! Ok, well, sort of, we kinda did get distracted once… or twice… or a bunch of times.”

“B-but that doesn’t matter now!” Ruby interjected, clenching her first threateningly as she glared at Peridot. “What matters is that we’re taking you right back to the shack where you belong!”

“Ha! As if I’d be stupid enough to let you traitorous clods capture me again,” Peridot remarked, rolling her eyes. “No, instead, you’re the ones who are going to be captured by me!”

The green Gem held her arms out at this, glancing up at the trio of thugs before her, only for them to not do a single thing. “I said… you’re the ones who are going to be captured by me!” she snapped directly at the inmates, who all blinked in realization that she was calling them to action as per their arranged plan.

“Oh, right!” one of the thugs exclaimed. “That’s our cue!”

“I’m surprised we didn’t really hear it the first time given how loud she is,” another one of the criminals noted with a frown.

“Oh, for crying out loud, just get them already!” Peridot ordered pointing at Mabel and Ruby.

“What the—hey!” Mabel exclaimed, startled as one of the thugs easily picked her up and restrained her. They nearly did the same to Ruby, but fortunately the red Gem leapt out of the way just in time, clinging onto the nearby wall with her free hand as she tried to process how the tables had just been turned.

“What’s going on here?” she asked, sending a suspicious glare Peridot’s way. “Since when do you have a prison gang working for you?”

“Yeah, I thought you’d have learned your lesson about working with mean people after the whole Pyrite thing,” Mabel added, shaking her head disapprovingly.

“I told you not to talk about that!” Peridot exclaimed, flustered and angry. “And I’m just borrowing these humans from my new temporary partner. For whatever reason, he gave specific instructions that the Mabel should not be harmed, but no such reservations exist concerning the Ruby on the other hand…”

“Wha-” Ruby didn’t even have time to get her question out before one of the thugs swung at her, attempting to knock her off the wall. The red Gem easily evaded the attack, lunging at Peridot with her own fist poised to strike. However, right before she could strike the green Gem, her attack was suddenly cut off by one of the thugs catching her fist in midair, effectively halting her altogether.

“Hey! Let go of me, you-”

“They are most certainly not going to let you go,” Peridot said with an impertinent huff. “At least not until my long-awaited revenge is finally accomplished against you despicable clumps for dispelling my form, disposing of my limb enhancers and locking me within your bath room torture chamber!”

“Ha! That’s what you think, Peri!” Mabel said with a knowing grin. “But even if you do capture us, then there’s no way you’re gonna keep us for long since I’m sure Dipper and Sapphire are already
on their way to save us.”

“Oh yeah!” Ruby exclaimed with an equal smirk. “What are you gonna do when my Sapphy shows up to save the day, huh, ‘Peri’?”

“Oh, I have a feeling they won’t pose a problem as long as my partner manages to properly take care of them…” Peridot informed, already pushing past the thugs to lead the way to wherever they intended on taking the captured pair. “Now, enough wasting time! To my REVENGE!”

The green Gem headed onward a bit before pausing to realize the thugs weren’t following her as she hoped they would. “That means it’s time to go!” she demanded harshly, prompting the trio into action.

“Man, I wish she was clearer about what she wanted us to do,” one of the criminals muttered to his companions.

“I know, right? She’s so bossy.”

“Ugh…” Peridot groaned to herself in muted aggravation as she followed after the group. “This is what I get for working with humans…”

The next morning saw the hearty group of campers rising bright and early to a rather lovely, sunny day. Spirits were still rather high amongst everyone as they had been the previous night as they all gathered to eat a brief breakfast, knowing that they’d have to pack up camp and head home soon enough.

“Alright, everyone,” Ford said, standing as soon as everyone had finished eating. “As enjoyable as this trip as been, its about time that we begin packing everything up to leave.” The author paused for a beat, glancing around briefly before looking back to his brother in confusion upon realizing something quite important was missing here. “Stanley, where’s your car?”

“Huh?” the conman blinked, having been largely quiet most of the morning for some unknown reason. “W-what do ya mean where’s the car? Its right where I parked it last night, see?” he nodded over to the spot his vehicle had been, which was now somehow barren. “O-or at least… it had been.”

“Whoa… it like, mysteriously vanished…” Soos noted, eyes wide with amazement.

“Maybe it wanted to go on a nice drive through the woods?” Steven suggested with a shrug.

“It’s a car, Steven,” Connie pointed out, frowning.

“Well, yeah, but still.”

“Now, now, everyone. I’m sure the car was simply stolen away in the night by a group of tinkering sprites,” Ford rationalized evenly. “They’re fascinated by human technology. We’ll likely need something to trade over to them in exchange for the car. I believe this wireless computer phone will do nicely,” he said, plucking Wendy’s phone clean out of her hands.

“Hey!” the cashier protested, reaching for her phone.

“M-maybe the car just wasn’t put in park and it rolled off somewhere,” Connie suggested much
more rationally. “Which means it’s probably somewhere nearby.”

“…That’s also a distinct possibility,” Ford noted, finally handing Wendy back her cell.

“Oh, come on, the car wasn’t stolen and it didn’t roll off or anything,” Stan remarked, rolling his eyes. “It’s just gone, plain and simple. Which means we’re gonna have to stay out here for a little while longer. That’s not so bad, is it?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be if we weren’t all out of food…” Soos said fretfully as he looked through their now sparse supplies.

“Uh, that’s not a problem,” Wendy shrugged. “We can just set up a bunch of traps to catch bears and raccoons if we really need to. Anybody got any twine and a hunting knife?”

“Uh, maybe instead of hurting poor innocent woodland animals, we could try looking for the car instead?” Steven said with an anxious smile.

“Not a bad idea,” Ford mused thoughtfully. “Very well then! Come along everyone, we have a vehicle to find!”

“Wha—but its gone!” Stan protested somewhat nervously. “Vanished. Completely disappeared. What makes you all think you’re gonna find it anywhere out there? There’s no point in even looking for it, as far as I’m concerned. It’s a lost cause.”

“Well, it’s your car, Stanley,” the author remarked, raising an eyebrow at his brother. “Wouldn’t you be the one who’d like to find it the most?”

“Uh, w-well, of course I would!” the conman exclaimed almost defensively. “I’m just saying we probably won’t find it.”

“Well, we’ll never know unless we go look,” Steven said with an encouraging smile as he began to lead the way off into the forest. “Let’s go everyone!”

The others all agreed with this plan as they followed after him, save for Stan, who hung back apprehensively for just a moment. In his rather impromptu plan, he hadn’t really anticipated this turn of events, but in retrospect, he should have seen it coming. Now, as he hesitantly followed along after everyone else, he could only hope that he’d still be able to get away with it scott-free in the end.

The trek through the forest was a largely long and boring one. With no clear tire tracks or other such indicators as to where the car might have gone, the group had pretty much nothing to go off of to aid them in their search. As minutes turned into hours, just about everyone was starting to become at least a bit vexed with their current predicament, especially since they already should have been home by now, but weren’t even anywhere close to leaving yet. Stan in particular took notice of the rather sour feelings that had arisen between the group, and, remembering the camaraderie that now existed between himself and his brother once again, decided to try and raise spirits again, even just the slightest bit.

“So, uh, hey, Sixer, doesn’t this whole mess remind you of the time Dad got his car stuck in a ditch near the beach?” the conman asked with an amused grin.

“No, it doesn’t even remotely remind me of that,” Ford said somewhat crossly as he kept his sights on the sparse path ahead. “First of all, we could actually see the car in that instance, unlike right now where we have no idea where it even is in the first place.”
“Well, yeah, but-”

“Stanley, could we please just… not do this right now?” the author interjected with an impatient huff. “Can’t you see I’m trying to focus on getting us back to civilization here?”

“Oh, c’mon, Ford, I was just trying to lighten things up,” Stan countered crossing his arms. “You don’t always have to be the responsible one, you know.”

“Well, maybe I wouldn’t have to be if you tried being a bit more on top of things, Stanley,” Ford said, growing steadily more annoyed by the second.

“Hey, I’m always on top of things!”

“Sure, you are. The least of which being your own car, which you somehow managed to loose in the middle of the forest!”

“Oh no…” Connie whispered to Steven as the brothers continued this ongoing debate. “Looks like they’re at it again.”

“And they were doing so well too!” the young Gem frowned fretfully. “We’ve gotta do something to-”

“Uh, hey, sorry to butt in,” Soos spoke up, cutting off both conversations all at once. “But… do any of you dudes smell smoke?”

The others all exchanged confused glances, sniffing the air to confirm that, sure enough, the acrid scent of burning wood hung on the air all around them. Wendy was quick to skillfully scale up a nearby tree to get a better vantage point, only to spot something that nearly made her fall out of the tree in alarm.

“O-oh my gosh, you guys!” she exclaimed fearfully as she landed roughly on the ground. “There’s a-

“FIRE!” Steven shouted, pointing to the blaze that was just starting to crawl into the clearing in front of them, eating up everything in sight. However, the flames alone weren’t unaccompanied, for almost as soon as the trees began to spark up, a loud skittering noise rattled the nearby area, revealing that this fire hadn’t been started on its own.

“Wait!” Ford exclaimed, holding his arm up in front of the group defensively. “That’s no ordinary fire! That’s a scampfire!”

“A what?” Stan asked, baffled as he looked to the small creature that had finally clamored its way into the clearing. Sure enough, it seemed to be completely composed of bright, burning fire, save for its crisp, log-like set of spidery legs as it teetered around curiously, apparently not noticing the frightened group upon a first glance.

“A scampfire,” Ford repeated, backing away cautiously. “They’re usually dormant creatures that appear to be harmless campfires, unless someone makes the mistake of entering their territory. That’s when they flare up and strike, ready to consume anything even close to flammable to placate their insatiable hunger and-”

“In English, poindexter!” Stan snapped, grabbing a nearby stick for defense.

“It’s a creature that could burn us all to a crisp if we don’t get out of here right now!”
“Y-you don’t have to tell us twice!” Wendy exclaimed, urging the kids in particular in the opposite direction. “Come on!”

Just as everyone began to flee out of the scampfire’s immediate range, the creature finally happened to spot them, letting out a harsh, cackling hiss as it did. Eager to burn whatever lay in its path, the scampfire rushed forward, skittering on its several wooden legs at a surprisingly fast speed. As desperate to escape its destructive fury as they were, the group more or less ran in hopes of at the very least shaking the creature off their trail. Stan pulled up the back of the group, and, although he knew of a way that could get them to safety relatively quickly, he still wasn’t entirely ready to put it to use just yet. So instead, he pulled out his canteen of water, hoping that it would provide them with a much-needed solution to this pressing problem.

“Hey, hothead!” the conman called back at the rampaging creature. “You look like you could use a drink!”

“Stanley, no!” Ford warned just as his brother threw his full canteen back at the scampfire. “Don’t pour water on it, it’ll only make it—” The author cut himself off just as the water splashed onto the already furious creature, dousing it only briefly before its flames roared back into life even more intense and hot than ever before. “Angrier…” Ford finished with a sigh, sending his brother a frustrated glare.

“W-what do we do now?!” Connie asked, noticing that the flames were starting to spread behind them as the scampfire edged ever closer.

Unfortunately, no one had a good answer to this question as they all bunched together, trying their hardest to avoid the intense heat and smoke threatening to choke them all out. Stan, on the other hand, realized that there really was only one true way out of this mess. Of course, it was a way that would inevitably ruin just about everything else, but for the sake of saving everyone’s lives, it was a sacrifice that he was going to have to take.

“I-I have an idea!” the conman exclaimed over the sound of crackling wood. “Everyone, follow me!”

Knowing that some idea was better than no idea, the others all did exactly that, hurrying after Stan as he broke out of the scampfire’s direct path of flames. Surprisingly enough, the conman had a pretty good idea about where he seemed to be headed, something that baffled Ford more than anyone else as they ran towards their unknown destination.

“Stanley, where in the world are you taking us?” he called, taking a worried glance over his shoulder to see that the scampfire was still in hot pursuit.

“Just trust me!” Stan assured, keeping his sights set solely on the path ahead. “I know what I’m doing!”

While Ford wanted to question this, he ultimately didn’t. That is, until they arrived at a rather conspicuous pile of leaves covering some large, unknown object in a clearing not too far away from their original campsite. “And what in the multiverse is… that….” The author trailed off, his eyes wide with shock and realization as Stan quickly pulled the leaves away to reveal his supposedly missing car underneath.

“Oh hey!” Soos exclaimed with a relieved smile. “Mr. Pines found the car!”

“Uh… I don’t know if ‘found’ would be the right word for this, Soos…” Wendy said, already noticing the uneasy tension starting to build between Stan and Ford in light of this revelation.
“Stanley…” the author began, his voice filled with steadily growing anger. “What did you DO?!"

“Ugh, I’ll explain on the way back to the shack, ok?” Stan said, even though he really didn’t want to. “For now, everyone, get in, quick! Before that thing shows up and roasts like a bunch of marshmallows.”

“W-well I do like roasted marshmallows, but I really don’t wanna be one!” Steven exclaimed, slipping into the car first with Connie, Soos, and Wendy following right after. Stan was next, hopping into the driver’s seat, only to notice Ford still lingering outside, staring at him with what seemed to be both disbelief and betrayal all at once.

“Ford, come on!” Stan urged, exasperated. “I know what I did was bad, ok? But if you don’t get in here, then you’ll be-”

“Be quiet, Stanley,” Ford’s tone was harsh and bitter, enough to make the conman flinch as his brother finally got into the car and strapped himself in. “Just drive.”

Though Stan wanted to say at least something in his defense, he knew now wasn’t the time for such things. So instead, he threw his car into drive and sped off down the narrow path, practically flooring it in an attempt to shake the scampfire off. The creature was nothing if not persistent however, and it kept its chase going for quite some time, sparking up minor fires here and there, though its attention was clearly still focused on the group in the car. A group that, by all accounts, wasn’t really doing so well even now that they had a viable method of escape themselves.

“What possessed you to think it was a good idea to hide your car out in the forest like that?” Ford asked after his initial shock had turned into raw, untamed fury. “What could have possibly made you think that was a good idea?! I can’t believe you’d be so… so irresponsible, Stanley! I thought taking care of the kids for the summer would have taught you better, but clearly you’re still the devil-may-care hooligan you’ve always been. Why would you ever even think about essentially stranding us out here in the middle of nowhere just so we could-”

“Just so we could actually get along for a damn change instead of always being at each other’s throats, ok?!” Stan suddenly snapped, his grip tight on his steering wheel as he refused to so much as even glance over at his brother. “Last night, it felt like things were finally the way they used to be, back when we were kids and before everything fell apart between us. I wanted that feeling to last, but apparently you didn’t care enough, did you, Ford? That’s because you never do!”

Everyone was admittedly rather shocked to hear the conman lay things out so openly and honestly like this, especially Ford. “S-Stanley, I…”

“Just forget it,” Stan interupted coldly. “Unlike you, I actually know when to admit when I’ve messed up. Which is why I’m gonna fix it, just like I always do…”

The others were all admittedly too afraid to ask how he exactly intended on doing that, until they realized he was driving straight towards an upcoming stream. “S-Stanley, what are you doing?” Ford asked, gripping his seat nervously as he realized what his brother was planning.

“But you’re about to-”

“I said TRUST me!” the conman exclaimed in genuine anger, slamming his foot on the gas as the car sped powerfully towards the water. Fortunately, there was a small, yet sharp bluff right before the stream, one that Stan knew exactly how to use to his advantage as a ramp. For a few, brief,
horrifying seconds, the car was completely airborne as it sailed over the stream, before landing hard and heavy back down on the other side. The scampfire, still scurrying along after the group, intent on catching up to them; that is, until it slipped right over the edge of the bluff, landing directly in the water below. The creature let out a loud, whining hiss as its coal body surfaced, however, given the water it was still floating it, it was unable to regain its usual blaze, much to its immense frustration. Which was why the scampfire fortunately decided to give up as it clamored out onto the opposite bank, dully igniting itself once more before skittering off back into the forest from whence it came.

With the deadly, fiery threat finally averted, the kids all let out cheers of immense relief, glad to know that they would make it safely back to the shack after all. “Wow, Mr. Pines, that was amazing!” Steven exclaimed, stars in his eyes.

“Yeah, you really showed that little guy whose boss,” Wendy remarked, leaning back in her seat to relax.

While Stan would have usually gladly accepted the praise, instead, he remained silent, still focused on the road as he continued driving back towards the shack without a single word. Ford took notice of this, and, with a bit of genuine guilt urging him onward, he hesitantly decided to speak up.

“Um… S-Stanley?” he began uneasily, though he soon forced himself to be a bit more firm. “That was… actually quite impressive, all things considered.”

The conman simply let out a small, bitter scoff at this as he glanced out the window, realizing perhaps for the first time, that what was broken between him and his brother, couldn’t be repaired so easily. “Yeah, whatever…” he said with an almost remorseful sigh. “Don’t into it.”

“You know, dudes, we should really do this again sometime,” Soos said with a contented smile that no one else seemed to share.

“Uh… on second thought…” Steven said as him and Connie exchanged a saddened glance, knowing that their well-intentioned mission had only turned into a giant disaster in the end, much to their shared disappointment. “Maybe we shouldn’t…”

Despite the fact that their newfound alliance was rather tenuous at best, Gideon and Peridot were both quite pleased with the results of their conjoined plan. For as they both regrouped at the child psychic’s now-defunct hilltop merchandise factory, they were both pleasantly surprised to see their respective partner successfully apprehend exactly who they had gone out to capture. The captives themselves, however, were far from pleased with their current predicament.

In fact, as soon as the group of thugs led by Peridot made their way into the factory with Mabel and Ruby in tow, the former lost all sense of calm and level-headedness the moment she spotted her blue significant other securely tied to a support beam near the center of the factory. “Sapphire!” Ruby shouted, kicking and thrashing against the thug holding her to little avail.

“Ruby!” Sapphire shouted back, relieved to see that the red Gem was mostly alright, despite her current captured state.

“Dipper!” Mabel gasped in shock to see her brother also tied to the same pole, apparently limp and unconscious. Her call did fortunately rouse him out of his stupor, though he was still somewhat out of it all the same.
“Huh… Mabel…?” he muttered, weakly glancing up to see his sister being unwillingly carried over. “Mabel!”

“Alright, enough of that!” Gideon cut in impatiently. “We all know each other, wonderful. Now can you please tie them up already?”

“Whaaa? Gideon?!” Mabel asked in both surprise and disdain upon seeing the child psychic.

“Isn’t he supposed to be in jail?” Ruby asked, just as confused.

“NO, I AM NOT SUPPOSED TO BE IN JAIL!” Gideon snapped fiercely, tired of hearing what he saw as an asinine claim.

“Uh, but didn’t we just break out of jail?” Ghost Eyes said somewhat knowingly.

“Wait, Peridot too?” Dipper asked, aptly confused as he looked between the green Gem and the child psychic. “Since when do you two know each other, much less work together?”

“Since we realized we both surprisingly enough have a common enemy,” Gideon said with a sinister smirk. “I’m talkin’ bout ya’ll, by the way, i-in case that wasn’t already clear.”

“And since we devised a fool proof plan to stop you all from hindering either of our plans any further,” Peridot added, pointed at the tied up group before her. “A plan that we’re going to carry out—”

“Just as soon as we round up Stanford, Steven, and those other two Crystal Gems!” Gideon proclaimed with daring zeal.

“…What?” the green Gem asked, flatly.

“Well, I ain’t about to take my revenge on just a handful of my enemies when I could just as well do it to all of ’em in one fell swoop,” the child psychic rationalized. “That way, I’ll save much more time that I can be usin’ conquering Gravity Falls as my own at long, long last!”

“I don’t care about that!” Peridot scoffed, appalled. “I only care about getting those Crystal Clods and their bothersome human companions out of my way! And with their shameful war machine of a fusion gone, they’ll fall apart at the seams! Which is why we need to take them out now, before any sort of backup can arrive to ruin things all over again!”

“No, we need to wait until we got all of them right where we want ‘em!” Gideon urged with growing frustration.

“No, we need to defeat them now so they won’t bother either of us ever again!” the green Gem argued hotly.

“Well, I say we wait!”

“And I say we get this over with right now!”
“Wait!”
“Now!”
“Wait!”
“Now!”

As this rather petty conflict continued, most of the prison thugs opted to simply stand by and watch it unfold in genuine interest. At the same time, the twins and the Gem couple spectated on it briefly, all four of them rather baffled in retrospect over how they’d let themselves get caught by such scatterbrained enemies in the first place.

“Why is this not surprising?” Dipper deadpanned as their captors continued to argue in the background.

“Because they’re both short and loud and mean,” Mabel remarked, sticking her tongue out. “Huh, you know, with that in mind, you’d think they’d get along better than they do.”

“We’ve got to think of a way to stop them while they’re distracted like this,” Ruby said, wriggling a bit against the ropes holding them.

“Well, that’d be easy if I could get my sword back from Gideon’s goons,” Dipper noted, nodding to the rather formidable inmate the child psychic had handed the Sword of Seasons off to.

“And that’d be easy if I could take my grappling hook back from Peri!” Mabel exclaimed, looking over at Peridot, who had claimed the weapon and was spinning it casually as she argued with Gideon, that is until she happened to knock herself upside the head with it.

“Both of those are excellent ideas,” Sapphire confirmed evenly. “But of course, we’ll have to break out of this trap first.”

“Don’t worry about that, Sapphy,” Ruby grinned as smoke began to rise from her form. “I’ve already got that covered.”

“Aw, of course you do,” the blue Gem smiled to her partner. “Why didn’t I see you having a plan coming? After all, you always do.”

“Heh, w-well, its really no big deal…” the red Gem grinned, blushing. “Besides I wouldn’t even be able to think of half of the plans I come up with without you around to give me some, you know… inspiration.”

Sapphire let out an affectionate chuckle at this, one that was interrupted by a light squeal of delight from Mabel. “Seriously, how is it even legal for you guys to be this cute?!” she exclaimed brightly.

“Oh, could we maybe focus here, you guys?” Dipper interjected, somewhat worried.

“Oh, I’ve been focusing,” Ruby smirked as she finally snapped the ropes that she had been subtly burning her way through this entire time, freeing all of them at once. “Focusing on busting us out!”

“Booyah!” Mabel cheered triumphantly, loud enough to catch the attention of all of the others present. “Hey, Peri! Gideon! Try catching us now!” To taunt the pair further, she stuck her tongue out taunting at them just as the group wisely split up to take care of their foes.

“W-what the—how’d they escape!?” Gideon demanded, outraged.
“Well, let’s see, you tied a Ruby, a Gem known for having pyrotechnic powers, up with restraints that appeared to be made out of nylon, polyester, and polypropylene,” Peridot remarked with a snide scowl. “Honestly, I don’t know how you didn’t expect her to escape. Clearly, you didn’t think this plan through very well. No wonder your schemes against the Crystal Gems usually fail, you Gideon.”

“Uh, news flash, Peri!” Mabel cut in, plucking her grappling hook right out of the green Gem’s hand while she was distracted with her gloating. “Your plans don’t really turn out that great most of the time either. No offense.”

“Wha—hey!” Peridot snapped, appalled. “Give that back, you Mabel!”

“Nope!” Mabel smirked as she climbed onto a pile of boxes, out of the green Gem’s reach. “You know, you really shouldn’t take things that don’t belong to you. Oh, and speaking of things that don’t belong to you…” Her smile widened as she took aim at the group of thugs that were now scattering to catch Ruby and Sapphire in particular as the couple used their elemental powers to easily evade them. As distracted as they were, Mabel was easily able to take aim and fire at the inmate who was still holding onto the Sword of Seasons, easily prying it out of his hands and pulling it over to her instead. “Hey, Dipper!” she called over to her brother, who was currently looking for some way to fight back without his coveted weapon. “I got a present for you!”

With a shout of gusto, she tossed the sword over to him, allowing him to catch it by its handle and spark it up with a powerful burst of wind almost instantly. “Whoa…” Dipper mused, rather surprised as he looked back to Mabel with a sense of newfound respect. Perhaps Sapphire was right after all; perhaps, in a pinch, his sister and her sometimes bizarre, illogical ways of handling any situation that came her way, really was worth placing his trust in after all. “Thanks, Mabel!”

“Anything for you, bro-bro!” she winked back at him before shooting her grappling hook up at the rafters so she could swing to knock out several of the prison thugs already rushing for her.

With chaos more or less running rampant all throughout the factory, both Gideon and Peridot were quick to reach the same conclusion on their own. Though it was clear, with their respective weapons and skill at using them that Dipper and Mabel were more than capable of holding their own against the much larger prison thugs, neither of them were too keen on being caught up in such a melee. Especially when escaping seemed to be the much more viable option.

Neither of them really conveyed their plans to each other as they both rushed for the factor’s exit, their temporary alliance all but over now in favor of making a break before they could get caught with the tide turned against both of them as it was. However, they weren’t about to get off that easily, for right before they could make their escape, Ruby and Sapphire dropped down directly in front of the door, their hands intertwined and their expressions daring and ready for whatever tricks their foes might try to pull.

“Alright, that’s enough, you two,” Sapphire advised knowingly. “You’re not going anywhere except back to jail and back to the bathroom. You know which place is for who.”

“Ha!” Gideon laughed smugly. “Powers or no powers, I ain’t about to let you two get in the way of my grand getaway!”

“Yeah! What makes you clods think you can stop either of us!?” Peridot asked, glaring at the couple relentlessly.

“Well… maybe we can’t stop you guys…” Ruby mused before turning to Sapphire with a wry smirk. The blue Gem returned her smile as her partner suddenly dipped her low, spinning her
around quickly as both of their forms were engulfed in the loving light of fusion. And, in an instant, there Garnet was, strong and steady and ready to put an end to this disaster once and for all.

“But I can,” she said proudly, towering over the suddenly quite frightened pair.

“Whuh oh…” Peridot gulped nervously right as Garnet easily scooped both her and Gideon up by the collars of their clothes.

“Gotcha,” Garnet grinned at the angrily struggling pair before turning back to the twins and the large pile of unconscious convicts they had accumulated. “I trust you two have taken care of the rest.”

“Eh, more or less,” Dipper shrugged with a casual smile as he struck the only convict still left standing with the dull side of his blade, knocking him out easily.

“Man, the movies lied to me,” Mabel pouted. “They made it look like big, tough prison gangs were hard to take out, but these guys were total pushovers. Lame!”

“Well, I dunno if I’d call them pushovers,” Dipper remarked with a sly grin. “I think its more that we’re pretty great at fighting. Not to be super conceited or anything, but… you know.”

“Oh yeah!” Mabel exclaimed excitedly as she threw her arm over her brother’s shoulder. “I know! Yay for us!”

“Yay for us indeed,” Garnet chuckled until Gideon abruptly cut into the celebration.

“Ya’ll think this is over?” he asked hotly, more than outraged by his latest defeat. “This ain’t never gonna be over! You can toss me in prison as many times as you’d like, but I’m still gonna get my revenge against you Crystal Gems and the Pines family someday! I swear it!”

“You’re far too young to swear,” the Gem leader remarked stoically. “And based on your current track record… I doubt it.”

“Hey! What about me?!” Peridot snapped impatiently. “After all, I’m the true threat that you Crystal Clods really need to worry about!”

“What? No, you ain’t!” Gideon argued crossly. “I’m their greatest foe, duh!”

“No, I am!”

“No, me!”

“Me!”

“All right, that’s enough, you two,” Garnet said as she shook the pair to silence them. “I think its time we take you and all your friends back to prison,” she said to Gideon, nodding over to his defeated gang. “And we take you back to the bathroom,” she said to Peridot. “Unless you’re willing to tell us more about that Cluster already.”

“Reveal highly sensitive classified information to filthy rebels like you?” the green Gem scoffed harshly. “Never!”

“Eh, suit yourself then,” Garnet shrugged as she began to lead the way out of the factory. “Dipper, Mabel, come along. Its time to take out the trash.”
“Heh, it sure is,” Dipper laughed, more than amused by Garnet’s casual insult aimed at Gideon and Peridot.

“You know, this was a ton of fun!” Mabel quipped cheerfully as she skipped on ahead. “We should really let Peri out of the bathroom more often!”

“I concur!” Peridot exclaimed loudly.

“Uh… no,” Dipper said, giving his sister a critical look that soon turned into a playful grin. “Let’s not and say we didn’t.”

“Eh,” she shrugged easily. “Fair enough.”

It didn’t take very long for Garnet and the twins to get ahold of the proper authorities to round Gideon and his gang up and haul them back to prison. A substantial reward had been put up for the child psychic’s capture, but in the end, the trio turned it down, knowing that seeing their aggravating foe behind bars once again was a reward in and of itself. And, with Gideon and his goons out of the way for the time being, it wasn’t too much of a struggle to take Peridot back to the shack, despite her spouting out hostile threats and angry insults all the while.

“Well, that takes care of that,” Garnet concluded as they shut the bathroom door on Peridot, much to her frustration as she continued to scratch on the door in noisy protest.

“Man, I can’t wait to tell Steven and Connie about all this!” Mabel exclaimed brightly. “They’re gonna freak out when they hear how we-” She was suddenly cut off as the shack’s front door opened, signaling that a certain camping group had finally returned. “They’re back! Come on, Dipper!” she exclaimed, grabbing her brother by the arm and hurriedly pulling him downstairs.

Steven and Connie were just putting their bags down in the den, both of them still in rather low spirits given what had happened earlier. Stan had already dropped Soos and Wendy off at their homes, which meant that the right back to the shack itself had been even more stilted and awkward than ever before. Still, neither of them could stifle small smiles as the twins rushed into the living room to greet them both happily.

“Steven! Connie!” they exclaimed in excited unison, hugging the pair warmly.

“H-hey, you guys,” Steven said with a small, halfhearted smile. “Did you have fun with Garnet while we were gone?”

“You bet we did!” Mabel grinned, hopping up and down on the balls of her feet. “We went on this whole huge, butt-kicking adventure! We gotta tell you guys all about it, it was amazing!”

“Oh yeah!” Mabel exclaimed, quite interested. “How did everything go between… you know who?”

“See for yourself…” Connie sighed, nodding to the door as Ford entered in with Stan not too far behind him. Neither of the brothers spoke to each other or so much as spared a single glance, their expressions dull and bitter as they went their separate ways, with the author heading down into his study while the conman sulked away into the gift shop, the rift that stood between them just as
large and undeniable as ever.

“Whoa, what happened?” Dipper asked with apt concern upon seeing this.

“It’s a… long story…” Steven frowned, glancing downward. “We’d much rather hear yours.”

“Ok!” Mabel chimed in zealously. “So there I was, in the bathroom with-

“Mabel…” Dipper interjected disapprovingly before offering Steven and Connie a small, encouraging smile. “Aw, don’t feel bad, you guys. I’m sure we’ll find a way to smooth things over between Stan and Ford someday.”

“I’m sure you will,” Garnet said as she stepped up to the group, grinning down at all four of them.

“Garnet!” the kids all exclaimed, somewhat surprised to see her.

“Steven, Connie,” the Gem leader began, placing reassuring hands on the pairs’ shoulders. “Dipper is right. Neither of you should feel bad about what happened between Stan and Ford. It’s not your fault that both of them are pretty stubborn, especially about what went wrong between them in the past.”

“Yeah, I know, but… we really wanted to help them get along and be brothers again,” Steven said with a fretful sigh. “I guess we just didn’t do a good enough job of it.”

“Nonsense,” Garnet countered firmly. “You did the very best that you could do. Now just wasn’t the right time.”

“Then when will be the right time?” Connie asked, confused.

“I can’t say for sure,” the Gem leader replied. “I suppose we’ll just have to wait and see. And as for you two,” she smiled down at Dipper and Mabel next. “I never got the chance to congratulate you two on a job well done earlier. You kids really are becoming quite responsible. All four of you are,” She finished warmly, pulling all of the kids into a loose, gentle hug.

“Yeah! Did you guys hear that?!” Mabel exclaimed, pulling the other three into a smaller hug to add onto Garnet’s. “Responsibility squad for the win!”

Caught up in the newfound revelry, the kids all let out a unified cheer, one that didn’t go unnoticed by the green Gem locked away in the bathroom just one floor above them. “Hey! Keep it down!” Peridot shouted, banging on the floor, or rather the ceiling to the group downstairs. “I’m trying to plot my next revenge sche-AH!” She was abruptly cut off as she ended up slipping off her perch on the sink, falling to the ground with a very audible, rather comedic thud. One that was more than enough to elicit an amused laugh from the entirety of the group below.

True, their respective missions had ended in varying levels of success, but in the end, none of that seemed to matter as much as being able to come back and laugh together about it when everything was said and done. A comforting pastime that, unbeknownst to any of them, they wouldn’t always have the privilege enjoying in the very soon to come future, which of course, remained awash in the mystery of the unknown, just as it always seemed to be.
Chapter 62: To Con a Clod

Chapter Summary

In which Stan and Amethyst pull a scam, Peridot drinks coffee, and we learn the Earth is fucking doomed.

Chapter Notes

Heyo, merry late christmas everyone! This chapter's sorta late but ehhhh you know how it is when ya girl has a full time job lol. Anyway, this one's a pretty fun one, so I'll leave you to it, the last UF chapter of 2018! Enjoy! (keyword is KINDERGARTEN)

Garnet’s heavy pounding on the bathroom door echoed throughout the entire shack, her angry demands for the green Gem holed up inside of it reverberating just as much if not moreso. “Open the door, Peridot!” she shouted impatiently, Pearl and Amethyst hanging close by her to offer their support in this interrogation. “If this ‘Cluster’ is putting us in danger, you need to tell us what it is so we can stop it!”

“NO!” Peridot protested angrily on the other side of the door. “I hate you! And I’m not telling you anything about the Cluster!”

“Aw, man!” Mabel frowned as her and Dipper hung back a big, observing the ongoing unsuccessful exchange. “And I really thought she’d tell us this time too!”

“Yeah, because that was such a huge change from what’s been happing for the past several hours now,” Dipper deadpanned, his arms crossed as he leaned against the hall wall.

“Oh, come on!” Amethyst groaned, exasperated. “Is it like… a big hunk of… granola?”

“…What’s ‘granola’?” Peridot asked, obviously confused.

“Delicious, but only when you pour a bunch of other stuff into it and serve it as part of a balanced breakfast!” Mabel called, ignoring her brother rolling his eyes beside her.

“I’m sure the Cluster isn’t granola,” Pearl interjected rationally as she tapped on the door much more calmly. “Now, Peridot, I’m sure we can reach some sort of agreement. Perhaps a trade is in order?”

“Oh sure,” the green Gem remarked callously. “Why don’t you just give me back my limb enhancers and my arm attachments with screen and my log and all my information? Oh wait! You
destroyed them! So, no, I don’t think we can reach some sort of ‘agreement’!”

The Gems all let out a collective groan at this, their ongoing efforts to get Peridot to so much as even hint at what the Cluster might be still completely for naught. For as loudmouthed and arrogant as the green Gem was, she as just as equally stubborn, to say the least. And unfortunately it seemed as though she was deadest on holding her peace on the Cluster and all things pertaining to it, simply to frustrate her already aggrivated enemies even more.

“Ugh… how are we ever supposed to get her talk?” Amethyst asked, plopping down to the ground in defeat. “She’ll run her dumb mouth about how much she hates us and wants us dead, so why not this stupid Cluster thing too? It’s not like we’re not gonna find out eventually, right?”

“Perhaps I could be of some assistance?” Ford interupted as he made his way upstairs to the group. “I am versed in quite a few different interdimensional interrogation methods, so hopefully one of those is bound to work on Peridot.”

“Go ahead, give it a shot,” Garnet said as she stepped aside, clearly ready to try just about anything at that point.

The author nodded, clearing his throat as he approached the door and gave it a steady knock. “Alright, now listen, Peridot,” he began firmly. “Because I’m going to be absolutely honest with you. As it stands, you’re stranded here on Earth, with no way of returning to your home planet or contact anyone there for assistance. Your weapons and technology have all been disposed of and as you’ve said so yourself countless times now, you’re more or less our captive now. And though we’re not fond of the idea of stooping to such a low level, you should know that we have ways of making you talk.”

“Oh yeah?” Peridot asked, blatantly unconcerned as she leaned against the other side of the door. “What are you gonna do? Shatter me? Ha!”

“…I-if that’s what it takes then… y-yes, yes we will!” Ford countered as gruffly as he could manage, though it was rather apparent he hadn’t expected Peridot to be so unphased by his initial threats.

“Whoa, dude, isn’t that a little… dark?” Amethyst asked, raising an eyebrow at the author.

“W-well, we do want her to tell us what this Cluster is, don’t we?” Ford remarked, slamming his hand against the door more threateningly this time in another attempt at scaring Peridot. “So if she won’t cooperate when asked, then maybe we’ll just have to resort to more… harsher methods…”

Upon hearing this, the green Gem did flinch away from the door out of slight fear, only to jump in full fear at the loud sound of flushing behind her. “Oops! Sorry, Peridot,” Steven apologized as he finished washing his hands at the sink. “I didn’t mean to scare you! Good news is you can finally turn around now. Oh, and don’t worry, we’re not gonna shatter you. I promise.”

“Hm…” Peridot mused, scowling at the young Gem distrustfully as he stepped out into the hallway to join the others.

“Uh… sorry for interrupting your interrogation,” Steven said to the Gems and Ford as he met their wondering glances.

“Don’t worry about it, Steven,” Garnet assured as the young Gem joined the twins in watching from the sidelines.

“Its not like they were really getting anywhere with it anyway, to be honest,” Dipper remarked with
a frown.

“But we’re close!” Pearl protested resiliently. “I swear, Peridot is gonna crack any second now!”

“I’ll never crack for the likes of you, y-you… CRYSTAL CLODS!” Peridot shouted fiercely from
the other side of the door before letting out a smug, triumphant snicker.

“Ugh…” Pearl growled, frustrated by the green Gem’s stubborn resistance and petty insults. “I’ve
got your ‘clods’ right here, you little-!”

“Hold on, Pearl,” Garnet cut in, grabbing the white Gem’s raised, tightened fist. “This isn’t going
to work. And neither is threatening to shatter her, which we’re not going to do by the way,” she
said to Ford, who simply glanced away somewhat sheepishly at his own failed attempts at
negotiation. “If she’s not going to be of any help, then I say we investigate this Cluster situation on
our own.”

“Hey, yeah! That’s a great idea!” Mabel chimed in enthusiastically.

“Well, its definitely a better one than trying to get any answers out of the ‘bathroom queen’ over
there,” Dipper remarked, nodding to the bathroom door as Peridot apparently broke something else
inside of the room with a noisy crash.

“Yeah, and we can come with you!” Steven volunteered himself and the twins, only to be shut
down by Ford.

“Actually, children, it’d probably be for the best if you stayed here,” the author said with a
reasonable smile. “After all, somebody needs to keep an eye on our… guest… while we’re
gone…” His smile was quick to disappear as he cast a brief, cold glare towards the bathroom door,
aimed for the bothersome green Gem just on the other side of it.

“Aw, really?” Dipper asked, disappointed. “We have to stay behind to look after her again?”

“What if she busts out again?” Mabel spoke up with a genuine concern. “Like last time!”

“Hm… good point…” Pearl mused thoughtfully. “One of us should probably stay back to
supervise…”

“Oh, I am totally on top of that, P!” Amethyst readily volunteered, not even hesitating for a single
beat. “I’ll hang out here while you guys go off lookin’ clues or whatever, while me and these dorks
here make sure that P-Dot doesn’t try anything.”

“Now, Amethyst, this is a serious responsibility we’re talking about here,” Garnet admonished
firmly. “Which means you have to be serious about too.”

“Aw, come on, Garnet, who do you know that’s more serious than me?” Amethyst asked with a sly
grin.

“…You don’t want me to answer that.”

“Well, hopefully you won’t have too much to worry about,” Pearl remarked, even though her tone
made it clear she was apprehensive about leaving Amethyst behind with the kids herself. “Peridot’s
harmless without her limb enhancers.”

“I AM NOT HARMLESS!” Peridot snapped fiercely from inside the bathroom.
“Oh, hush up!” Pearl countered back just as harshly.

“Now, Dipper, Mabel, Steven, be sure to keep a close eye on her,” Ford advised as him, Garnet, and Pearl began to take their leave to begin their investigation. “There’s no telling what she’s capable of, especially considering the fact that one of her previous strategies involved collaborating with Bill Cipher.”

“She also tore the heads off of all the stuffed animals I tried giving to her,” Mabel pointed out, pouting. “So yeah, she’s one naughty little Dotty. Oh! I should call her that until she decides to behave!”

“Don’t you already have enough nicknames for her, Mabel?” Dipper asked caustically.

“Nope!” Mabel shook her head blithely. “Besides, she likes them. Isn’t that right, Straw-Peri!”

“No, it most certainly is NOT!” Peridot protested crossly, pounding her fist against the bathroom door.

“…Anyway…” Pearl continued after a beat of awkward silence. “We’d best be on our way. Take care, kids! And please, Amethyst, try to be responsible about this, alright?”

“Aye aye, ‘captain’,” Amethyst said, offering the white Gem a clearly playful salute.

 “…I have a bad feeling about this…” the white Gem muttered as she began to make her way down the stairs, Ford following not too far behind.

“You and me both…” the author noted fretfully under his breath. “Perhaps we should hold onto that potential shattering plan. Just in case…”

“Hm… you know, it could make a possibly viable plan b…” Pearl agreed quietly, stealing a glance back at the bathroom before it was entirely out of sight. “I-if we absolutely need it that is.”

“Alright, that’s enough murder conspiracy out of you two,” Garnet asserted firmly as she nodded them off to head up to the temple. “Let’s get going. Oh! And Steven, Dipper, Mabel, there’s one more thing I have to mention to you three.”

“What is it?” Steven asked curiously.

Garnet simply smiled as she turned to face the trio briefly, forming a heart shape with her hands as a form of a fond farewell. “I love you. Bye!”

“Byeeeeee!” Mabel called out after the trio with a cheerful wave as Steven simply blushed and waved the Gem leader’s warm sentiments bashfully. Dipper was still rather focused on keeping a careful eye on the bathroom door to pay the departing trio too much mind, while Amethyst simply leaned against the nearby wall, keeping up a front of diligence. That is, until the moment she heard the shack’s front door close behind Garnet, Pearl, and Ford.

Because as soon as it did, a broad smirk filled out across the purple Gem’s face as she properly stood, stretching briefly before she began to walk past the kids, her manner as casual and calm as ever. “Well, that’s that,” she remarked with an easy shrug. “If you need me, I’ll be sleeping up in the sascrotch display in the museum. Dude’s surprisingly comfy despite the old cat hair Stan used to make ‘im.”

“Wait, what?” Dipper interjected, confused. “Amethyst, you can’t leave! You’re supposed to be helping us keep an eye on Peridot!”
“Eh, you guys got that covered,” the purple Gem said with an unconcerned wave of her hand as she began to make her way downstairs to the den. The kids exchanged a baffled glance for a brief moment before unanimously agreeing to follow her, curious as to her rather strange motives and intentions.

“Um… so why’d you volunteer to stay here?” Steven asked as the purple Gem launched herself onto the couch. “You could have gone with Garnet, Pearl, and Mr. Ford. I’m sure they would have appreciated your help!”

“Ugh, and listen to Pearl and Ford nerd out about every tiny thing they see?” Amethyst rolled her eyes. “No thanks.”

“Hey, kids,” Stan greeted with a casual grin as he entered the room, a cup of hot coffee in hand. “What’s the word?”

“The word,” the purple Gem replied just as coolly as she reclined back on the couch. “Is nerd.”

“Oh, you mean like Pearl and Ford?” the conman asked knowingly. “Cause they’re just about two of the biggest nerds I’ve ever seen. Come to think of it, this one’s a pretty big nerd too,” Stan nodded over to Dipper before teasingly ruffling his hair up a bit as Amethyst chuckled from her spot on the couch.

“Hey!” Dipper protested, offended as he readjusted his hat and sent the laughing pair a frustrated glare.

“And don’t even get me started on that noisy green munchkin holed up in the bathroom,” Stan continued, hands on his hips. “It’s like we got a surplus of annoying know-it-alls around here! Speaking of which, Amethyst, are you finally gonna kick that punk outta here or am I gonna have to do it myself?”

“Aww, sorry, Stan,” Amethyst smirked as she sat up a bit. “As much as I’d love to throw Peridot off the shack’s roof and watch her freak out all the way till she hits the ground, I kinda can’t. Garnet and Pearl would totally freak if I let her out.”

“Yeah, and not to mention we need her to tell us what that Cluster thing is,” Steven pointed out with a frown. “The only problem is… she really doesn’t wanna tell us anything about it, no matter how many times we ask.”

“So that’s why you’re letting her shack up in our bathroom?” Stan asked, raising an incredulous eyebrow. “Cause she knows something you don’t? Pfft, please, how is this even a problem? Have ya seen that tiny twerp? She’s so short a strong breeze could knock her over. If asking her isn’t working, then you gotta force her to tell you want to hear.”

“Well, its not like we haven’t threatened her over and over… and over… and over…” Dipper said, rather exasperated. “And none of them ever seem to get to her at all.”

“Yeah, Peri’s just a tough nut to crack!” Mabel chimed in. “She wouldn’t budge even after I knitted her this adorable sweater. Its her favorite color and everything!” At this, she held up said sweater, a bright green, cozy-looking number with a miniature version of Peridot’s usually scowling face stitched into it. “I don’t know why it didn’t work. I’d be all over a sweater like this if someone offered it to me…”

“Hm…” Stan largely ignored his niece as he sat down on the edge of the couch, apparently deep in pondering over something.
“Whoa, you’re over there thinkin’ sorta hard, huh?” Amethyst asked with a wry grin. “Heh, don’t tell me you’re actually trying to come up with a plan to help us get answers out of Peridot… are you?”

“Well, it’s not so much as a plan as its something you guys should have thought of a long time ago since its so obvious,” the conman deadpanned. “If you really want ol’ greenie to spill the beans on this ‘Cluster’ thing, then you gotta scam it out of her.”

“Scam?” All three of the kids asked in confused unison, though Amethyst simply let out a knowing chuckle upon hearing such a thought.

“Now there’s a good idea for a change,” she remarked. “Which is why I can’t believe you thought of it, Stan.”

“Hey! I come up with good ideas all the time!” the conman retorted defensively. “Like…. Like that time I… uh… w-well how about… oh, um…. Well, there was that one time I… um… l-like I said, I come up with plenty of good ideas, I just… c-can’t think of any right now!”

“Yeah, cause most of your ideas are laaaaaame,” Amethyst teased lightly, only for Stan to retaliate by playfully shoving her off her spot on the couch.

“So… what do you mean we should ‘scam’ Peridot?” Steven spoke up, still not following.

“I mean we gotta pull a fast one on her,” Stan smirked somewhat deviously. “We gotta pull the wool over her eyes, call her bluff, trip her up, hustle her, swindle her, hoodwink her, but above all else, we gotta con her. And fortunately for you,” the conman’s sly smile widened as he boldly stood. “You’ve got a bona-fide, class a, top of the line conman right here who knows all the tricks of the trade.”

“Really?” Mabel asked with immense interest. “And who might that be?”

“…Me, pumpkin, I’m talking about me,” Stan said after a bout of awkward silence. “Now come on. Let’s go fleece ourselves a rube.”

“Whatever that means,” Dipper said, exchanging an uncertain glance with Steven and Mabel. All the same, the kids and Amethyst followed the conman as he headed for the bathroom, pounding on the door and keeping up a front of almost professional stoicism all the while.

“Hey, open up, ya gremlin,” Stan called to the green Gem inside. “We need to have a little… chat.”

“No,” Peridot refuted staunchly. “I will not chat with any of the likes of you lowly humans. Now leave me alone!”

“Yeah, ok, go ahead and keep being stubborn like that,” the conman replied, unconcerned as he dug around in his pockets for something. “I’ll just use this spare key I had Soos make for me and… there we go.” Without much of a flourish at all, Stan easily unlocked the door and opened it, revealing a completely baffled and surly Peridot sitting on the other side of it. The green Gem flinched upon seeing the group standing in the doorway, backing up to the far wall defensively as she surveyed her foes with distrustful scrutiny.

“And what do you want?” she asked Stan specifically, knowing that he had yet to really engage her like all of the others had.

“Oh, not much,” Stan shrugged nonchalantly. “Just wanted to see how much of a mess you’ve made in here and yeesh. Its even worse than I thought!” The conman threw his hands up,
referencing the rather ruinous, messy state the bathroom was in thanks to Peridot’s ongoing occupancy of it. “I oughta charge you up the wazoo for all the property damage you’ve caused in here, runt.”

“…Charge me?” Peridot raised a confused eyebrow. “Like a circuit?”

“Uh, no,” the conman said as though it was obvious. “As in charge you money, duh.”

“…What is… ‘money’?” the green Gem asked, still rather bewildered.

Stan took a brief pause at this, rather dumbfounded himself before he turned to Amethyst and the kids and dropped his voice down to a discreet whisper. “What’s wrong with her? Is she stupid or somethin’?”

“Eh, sorta,” Amethyst shrugged, amused. “Its kind of a mix of that and the fact that she barely knows squat about the Earth. Girl’s fresh off Homeworld, so basically everything we got down here is all new to her.”

“Really?” the conman asked, his daring grin returning. “Oh, then this is gonna be too easy. Alright, greenie,” Stan said, turning back to face Peridot. “Since you’re gonna unfortunately be staying here for a while, why don’t I give you a bit of a rundown in ‘Earth 101’? Just to get you up to speed with how things work here.”

“Please,” Peridot scoffed, crossing her arms. “I don’t have the slightest desire to learn anything about this pathetic planet. The only thing I want is to get off of it.”

“Yeah, well, we don’t got any rockets or flying saucers lyin’ around here, so you’re just gonna have to shut up and deal with it, ok?” the conman countered just as dryly. “Now, first thing you need to know about Earth is that around here, we’re really big into the practice of ‘trading’ stuff.”

“Uh, since when we we-” Dipper attempted to interject, only for Stan to succinctly shush him to continue on in his ploy.

“Really?” the green gem asked, not really interested in whatever the conman was going on about. “Like what?”

“Like…. Like this pen for instance,” Stan said, pulling said pen out of his suit pocket. “I’m gonna give it to Amethyst, and in return, she’s gonna give me….” The conman trailed off, glancing over to the purple Gem expectantly in the hopes that she’d play along.

At first, Amethyst didn’t quite catch his drift, though when she did, she quickly flinched, searching around for something she could use to keep this con going. She found that in the form of Mabel’s headband, which she snatched clean off the girl’s head, much to her surprise. “Uh… this I’ll give you this hair thingy!” she exclaimed, swapping out the headband with Stan’s pen rather unceremoniously. “Um, thanks for making such a great… ‘trade’, with me, Stan… I guess…” Her fake smile disappeared as she tossed the pen over her shoulder carelessly.

“Oh wow, you really got a great deal on that headband, Mr. Pines!” Steven exclaimed in amazement.

“Tell me about it!” Mabel added, just as enthralled. “That’s one of my favorite headbands! Totally worth its weight in pens, that’s for sure.”

“So yeah, that’s how trading works,” Stan remarked to Peridot, spinning the headband around on his wrist casually. “Think you got the gist of it, greenie?”
“I…. guess?” Peridot shrugged dully. “But why are you telling me about your archaic human bartering system in the first place?”

“Because we wanna make a trade with you, kid,” Stan said, kneeling down to the green Gem’s level. “We’ll trade you whatever your weird little heart or whatever it is you have in place of a heart desires, and in exchange, you tell us about that… what was it again?” he whispered, glancing back at the kids.


“Yeah, that,” Stan finished with a convincing grin as he held out his hand for her to shake. “So, what do ya say, half-pint? Do we have ourselves a deal here?”

Peridot took pause, her expression scrutinizing as she seemed to weigh the proposition the conman had just offered to her. And then, a moment or two later, a wide, sly smirk spread across her face, her manner turning almost amicable as she held her hand out a bit, though she didn’t date shake Stan’s just yet. “Alright, you ‘Stan’,” she began shrewdly. “I’ll ‘trade’ you information concerning the Cluster… if you release me from your ‘bath room’ confinement chamber and allow me to return to Homeworld unfettered!”

“Uh, yeah…” Amethyst spoke up. “We kinda can’t do that… Sorry, P-Dot.”

“But we can trade you anything else!” Mabel exclaimed with an encouraging grin. “I’ve got a whole set of sparkly markers upstairs you might like. They’re scented!”

“And I have a bunch a whole bag of fresh donuts from the Big Donut itself back up at the temple!” Steven offered just as warmly. “What about you, Dipper?”

“Oh, come on, Steven,” Dipper deadpanned, crossing his arms. “I’m not about to give her anythi— ow!” he exclaimed as Stan suddenly flicked him on the side of the head for almost ruining their ongoing scam. “Ugh, fine…” he grumbled, searching his vest pocket before finding something he wouldn’t mind parting with too much. “Um… I have a dollar?”

“I’ll take that!” Stan exclaimed, gladly swiping up the money as soon as it was offered.

“Hey! Grunkle Stan!” Dipper protested, only for the conman to lightly push him aside as he tried grabbing his money back.

“Quiet, kid, can’t you see we’re haggling here?” Stan huffed before addressing the rather impatient Peridot once again. “So, greenie, what’ll it be? You can pick from the markers, the donuts, or…”

The conman paused briefly, glancing at the dollar in his hand before he neatly tucked it away into his pocket. “Yeah, just those two. Which one do ya want?”

“Hm…” Peridot took a moment to ponder this offer, not really taking it too seriously. That is, until she happened to notice Stan taking a long, calm sip out of his still-steaming mug of coffee. “What are you doing?” she asked, eyeing the mug curiously.

“Uh, what’s it look like, kid?” the conman replied, raising an eyebrow at her. “I’m drinkin’ my daily cup of coffee. It’s part of my daily balanced diet, especially when I gotta deal with annoying freaks like you.”

The green Gem largely ignored the insult, still apparently wanting to know more about the seemingly piping hot liquid the conman was consuming. “What is… ‘coffee’?”

Stan merely spit his next sip of the aforementioned beverage out upon hearing such a question,
looking back to the green Gem completely baffled before dropping his voice down to a whisper aimed at Amethyst and the kids. “Well, it looks like I was right. She really is stupid.”

“No, she’s not,” Steven countered empathetically. “She just doesn’t know a lot about Earth yet.”

“Which is why we might as well teach her…” Amethyst said with a small, daring grin as an idea suddenly came to her, especially as she looked back to the conman’s coffee mug once more. Without even asking, she snatched the cup right out of Stan’s hand, ignoring his annoyed protests as she carried it over to Peridot so she could take a look at it for herself. “Coffee is this really good bean juice that humans drink so they won’t fall asleep as fast. I prefer snackin’ on the glass pots they make it in, but… eh, you might like it if you wanna… I dunno, give it a try?”

Peridot scowled distrustfully between the purple Gem and the mug she was offering to her before swiping it and sniffing it experimentally. “So… what am I supposed to do with it?”

“Just pour it down your throat hole, ya goof,” Amethyst explained, though her eyes widened in alarm as Peridot seemed to take her advice quite literally. “Uh… but maybe not that fast…” Stan and the kids watched in equal shock as the green Gem began pouring whatever coffee was left directly into her wide open mouth. And of course, the very moment it was empty, the cup slipped out of her hand, shattering onto the ground as her usual green pallor turned bright red and filled with sudden panic all at once.

“HOT!” she screamed, collapsing to her knees and pounding on the floor dramatically. “HothothothothothotHOTHOTHOTHOT HOTHOTHOT!” Peridot continued to pant wildly, trying her best to cool down as Stan and Amethyst both burst out laughing in response to her humorous outburst. The kids were all still somewhat bewildered, and even slightly concerned, until the green Gem slowly began to calm herself, her breathing slowing as her color returned to its normal verdant shade.

“So, P-Squared, what’d ya think?” Amethyst asked, still chuckling as she wrapped a playful arm around Peridot’s shoulder. “Enjoy your first taste of coffee?”

“A-are you kidding me?” Peridot asked, harsh and breathless. “That was horrid! That viscous liquid was scalding hot! I have no idea how anyone, Gem or human would willingly put such a foul substance into their body! Which is why I have to ask… do you have any more?!”

In light of her harsh initial reaction to coffee, the entire group was admittedly quite surprised to see the green Gem’s rather pleading expression for more of it. However, it was as Peridot implored them for more that Stan and Amethyst exchanged a knowing glance, both of them realizing the exact same thing at the exact same time.

“You bet we do, greenie,” Stan remarked with a wry grin as he leaned against the bathroom wall. “I just so happen to have a whole fresh pot of joe brewin’ right downstairs. Why? Do you want some more?”

“…Y-yes?” Peridot replied somewhat cautiously. “I wouldn’t have asked for more if I didn’t want more, you simple-minded human!”

“Hey now! There’s no need to be so dang rude, Peri!” Mabel interjected, shaking her head disapprovingly. “If you want more coffee, we’ll be more than happy to give you some!”

“If…” Amethyst swiftly cut in, wisely taking advantage of the green Gem’s apparent desperation.
“You tell us about the Cluster.”

Peridot’s eager expression quickly fizzled out at this, her former surliness returning in full force as
she properly stood, crossing her arms and glaring away from the group. “Nice try,” she said stiffly.
“Your admittedly cunning ploy nearly worked, but I’m still to smart to fall for such simple tricks.
Even if your so-called ‘coffee’ is… completely irresistible…”

No one was able to hold back a groan of disappointment upon hearing the green Gem’s continued
resistance, even to something as apparently foolproof as a bribe. “Aw, well,” Steven shrugged,
hoping to offer the others some form of encouragement. “We tried our best, right?”

“Yeah, you did,” Peridot interupted with a smug smirk. “And your best still wasn’t good enough!”
The green Gem erupted into a bout of teasing triumphant laughter, which only served to irritate her
already quite vexed foes even more.

“Yeah, well, I guess that means you ain’t gettin’ anymore coffee, you little chump,” Stan
remarked, taking the slightest bit of satisfaction at the green Gem’s sudden panic at such a thought.

“W-what? No!” Peridot cried, suddenly frantic. “I need more of that deliciously bitter liquid! I can
already feel my energy starting to wane without it! I demand that you give me more of it immediately!”

“Dang, one cup and you’re already hooked,” Amethyst said, raising an eyebrow at the green Gem.
“What a lightweight. Still, ya should have thought of that before you decided to keep being a
stubborn old stick in the mud.”

Peridot let out what sounded like a mix between a whine and a growl at this as she collapsed to her
knees once more, taking up a pleading stance to show just how sincere she was about this.
“Please,“ she begged, her eyes wide and desperate. “I must have more of that coffee substance! A-
and while I still refuse to tell you anything regarding the Cluster, I… I’ll do anything else you want
for it! Anything at all!”

The entire group was stunned into a bout of tentative silence at hearing the green Gem’s seemingly
earnest proposal. And though it didn’t seem like there was any direct way to get the information
they were seeking out of this strange new crossroad they had found themselves at, the conman was
quick to figure out another way he could potentially benefit from it all the same. “Anything,
huh…?”

“Steeeeeep right up, ladies and gents!” Stan proclaimed as he did one of the things he did best:
rallying a crowd of unsuspecting paying customers up to the Mystery Shack’s latest attraction. An
attraction that he couldn’t have thought up at a better time, given the tourist trap’s less than stellar
attendance and profit figures due to the endless array of ongoing recent events. Still, the conman
was certainly glad to be back in his element of scamming unsuspecting tourists through less than
honest means. And of course, his latest money-making scheme was no exception to this. “Step
right up to a world of wonders beyond your wildest dreams! Or should I say… something… out of
this world!?”

The crowd cooed with interest upon hearing this hook, prompting Stan to continue, even as he
prodded the anxiously shifting curtain behind him with his cane. “Folks, what if I told you, that
right behind this curtain was a real-life, 100% genuine article alien?!” The spectators erupted into a
round of eager cheers and gasps at this, murmuring amongst themselves with wonder as to what the
conman might possibly reveal to them. “Hold onto your socks, everyone,” Stan’s showy grin widened as he gripped the edge of the curtain. “Because I’m about to knock them clean off… with THIS!”

With a dramatic flourish, the conman pulled away the curtain, revealing a very displeased Peridot standing behind it. The green Gem’s expression was harsh as she stood, her arms crossed and her nose turned upward as she all but ignored the awestruck crowd before her, which entirely bought the rather tawdry lore Stan had set up for her.

“Behold!” the conman exclaimed, shoving a sign that read “ALIENS ARE REAL” into the ground right beside the disgruntled green Gem. “Its… uh… P.D. the Extraterrestrial! Y-yeah, that works.”

“Ugh…” Peridot groaned bitterly, rolling her eyes at this claim. “I can’t believe I agreed to such humiliation…”

“Can you now?” Amethyst asked as she passed by, toting a full pot of freshly made coffee. The green Gem perked up instantly upon seeing it, and though she tried to hurry after Amethyst to get it, she was quickly stopped in her tracks by Stan.

“Hold your horses, greenie,” the conman whispered, scowling down at her. “You want your coffee? Then you gotta put in the work for it first. Which means, you stay put and let these losers gawk at you.”

“Hmph,” Peridot growled angrily, far from content with the arrangement she had made with Stan in order to get her hands on another cup of delicious coffee. “I would have never agreed to such ridiculous terms… if that bizarre coffee substance wasn’t so bafflingly irresistible…”

“That’s right, folks! Be amazed by the Mystery Shack’s own little green Martian!” Stan called to his still quite enthused pack of patrons. “Take your picture with her (for a modest fee), get your genuine alien tee-shirts and souvenirs!” The conman pointed over at Soos, who was manning a booth created to sell hastily-made alien merchandise, which the gullible customers were naturally eating right up.

“These shirts are far out, dudes!” Soos encouraged blithely, even if he was struggling to keep up with the high demand for them.

“And, for the right price, she’ll even offer you one of her strange alien insults!” Stan finished just as a pair of tourists curiously walked up to the unamused green Gem.

“Oh, look, honey!” the woman exclaimed to her husband with genuine delight. “Her head is so weird and triangular! I didn’t even know aliens knew about geometry like that!”

“And she’s green too, just like the aliens on TV!” the man added, reaching out towards the green Gem tentatively. “I wonder if she bites…”

“Get your filthy touch stumps away from me, you CLOD!” Peridot barked, fiercely smacking the man’s hand away before Stan quickly intervened.

“Hey, HEY!” the conman exclaimed, getting in between the green Gem and the couple before holding his hand out to the tourists expectantly. “That’ll be $10.”

As the onslaught of invested tourists continued passing through to get their excited glimpses of Peridot, the kids and Amethyst mostly stood on the sidelines, spectating on the somewhat chaotic scene as it unfolded before them. “Uh, remind me again why we let her out of the bathroom and why we’re parading her around in front of a ton of people like this?” Dipper spoke up rather
caustically, making it quite clear that he was no fan of the plan Stan had come up with for the green Gem.

“Uh, cause its hilarious,” Amethyst informed, letting out a small chuckle as Peridot hissed at another bunch of customers. “And besides, just look at her? She’s super ticked off. If we can’t trick her into telling us about the Cluster, then annoying her until she talks is bound to be the next best thing. Heck, I bet it’ll only be a matter of time before she snaps and spills the beans on everything.”

“But, Amethyst, isn’t that kind of… mean?” Steven pointed out with a concerned frown.

“But… mean?” the purple Gem remarked with a scoff. “I don’t know what you mean! Ha! Get it?”

“I meant,” Steven began to clarify as he spared a brief glance over at Peridot. Amidst tourists still coming through, Stan decided to taunt Peridot to get even more of a show out of her by holding a full cup of coffee high out of her reach, prompting her to desperately try and jump for it to no avail. “Peridot seems like she’s really upset. All she wants is a little coffee. Would it really be that hard to just give her a cup instead of embarrassing her like this?”

“Well, of course, it wouldn’t be hard, Steven,” Amethyst rolled her eyes. “But if we did that, then it wouldn’t be funny like this is.”

“Uh, I don’t really get what’s so funny about it…” Mabel pointed out, feeling rather sorry for the green Gem as she let out another loud, frustrated yell over her ongoing exploitation.

“I don’t know, you guys,” Dipper remarked with the smallest hint of an amused grin. “It is sorta cathartic to see Peridot finally getting a taste of her own medicine, especially after everything she’s put us through,”

“Yeah, but… how does that make us really any better than she was all the times she hurt us?” Steven asked thoughtfully. “I dunno, I just… feel like there’s gotta be a better way to get her to tell us about the Cluster than… this…”

The conversation came to a brief pause as Peridot’s partial temper tantrum also ended, the green Gem giving up her disparaging dance for coffee only to end up collapsing to the ground in exhaustion due to a lack of it. After checking to see that the green Gem really was unresponsive, Stan begrudgingly shooed the remaining tourists away, if only to get his latest attraction back in working order. “Ugh, alright, I guess we gotta get more caffeine in the little munchkin’s system,” the conman huffed, hands on his hips. “Amethyst! Bring that pot of joe over here, will ya?!”

“Whatever you say, man,” the purple Gem shrugged casually, carrying the full, still hot pot of coffee over as the kids followed not too far behind. “Here ya go, P-Diddy,” Amethyst said as she poured out a cup, prompting the green Gem to glance up from her spot on the ground, hopeful. “Some piping-hot, fresh, coff—hey!”

Before the purple Gem could even finish, Peridot swiped the mug out of her hands, downing the entire cup in one swig. This time, she was ready for its heat and actually savored the drink, letting out a sigh of contented relief as soon as she had swallowed ever last drop of it.

“Wow, Peri,” Mabel noted, amazed. “You must really like that stuff! You know, I’ve only ever had coffee once—”

“And you dumped so much sugar into it that there was more of that in it than coffee,” Dipper finished with a knowing, exasperated sigh. “It took you an entire week to calm down from the
“insane rush you got from it.”

“Well, what can I say?” Mabel pouted slightly. “I had to put all that sugar into it. Coffee is terrible on its own!”

“No, its not!” Peridot protested with a scowl. “Your strange human stimulant nectar is absolutely rich and decadent and incredible—”

“I’m sorry, did you just call coffee stimulant nectar?” Stan interjected, baffled as he raised an eyebrow down at the green Gem.

“That’s what I said,” the green Gem reiterated sullenly.

“Uh, why don’t you just call it coffee like a normal person?” Amethyst asked with a bit of a playful sneer.

 “…B-because! That’s why!” Peridot snapped as she held her empty mug out demandingly. “Just give me more of it already!”

“Heh, sure thing,” the purple Gem grinned as a sudden idea came to her. “But first… hey, Peridot, what do you call this?” Amethyst’s smirk widened as she pointed to her nose.

“A scent sponge,” Peridot replied as though it was obvious. The kids were rather confused by this odd response as they exchanged a bewildered look, but Stan and Amethyst both let out small laughs at the green Gem’s bizarre nomenclature.

“Oh yeah? Then what’s this, greenie?” Stan continued down this line of questioning as he pointed to his eye.

“Vision sphere,” Peridot said, flatly.

“Uh, Peridot, that’s-” Steven attempted to interject to set the green Gem straight, only for Amethyst to cut him off.

“Wait, wait, Steven, let us handle this,” Amethyst said with another small chuckle as she held up her fingers. “Peridot, these?”

“Touch stumps…” Peridot growled, growing more annoyed by the second.

“This?” Stan pressed, nodding down to his foot.

“Gravity connectors!”

“This!” Amethyst laughed, pointing directly to her rear end.

“THAT’S YOUR BUTT!” Peridot shouted fiercely, refusing to be made a fool of any longer. Of course, her insistence failed as Stan, Amethyst, and even the kids all broke down into a bout of hysterical laughter, angering the green Gem even more.

“Oh man, this kid’s a riot!” Stan exclaimed, beside himself with laughter as he leaned up against the side of the shack.

“For reals!” Amethyst added with a loud chuckle. “Peridot, you’re killin’ us!”

“I am not!” Peridot exclaimed, appalled. “Well… at least not yet anyway…”
“No, no, no!” Mabel giggled mirthfully, placing a hand on the confused green Gem’s shoulder. “She means your funny, Peri!”

“….’Funny’?” Peridot repeated, not understanding the concept.

“Seriously, greenie,” Stan added, still quite bemused as he grinned down at the green Gem. “I oughta start up a comedy act with you as the headliner. You’d have people rollin’ on the floor with that weird alien language of yours!”

“Hmph,” Peridot crossed her arms, somewhat offended. “I fail to see the humor in my correct and specific terminology for the various aspect of a Gem’s (and apparently human’s) form. And furthermore, I’m through with letting you clods tout me as some sort of… sideshow attraction for simple-minded humans to laugh at and take snapshot images with!”

“Oh really?” Stan asked with a knowing smirk, clearly not taking her seriously.

“Yes really!” the green Gem exclaimed with bold anger. “And another thing! If you think that forcing me to labor at this so-called ‘shack of mysteries’ for the measly payment of a few cups of stimulant nectar is going to convince me to say anything about the Cluster, then you can just go and-” Peridot was abruptly cut off the sudden loud boom of thunder that rattled across the dark, overcast skies ahead, one that startled everyone really, though it outright terrified the green Gem the most.

“AH! IT’S HAPPENING!” Peridot cried as the thunder continued to roll on, suddenly in quite a panic as she rushed onto the nearby porch and hugged one of its posts for dear life.

“What? What’s happening?!” Steven asked, alarmed by such a distraught reaction to what simply seemed to be the start of a summer storm.

“THE CLUSTER!” the green Gem squealed, pressing even closer to the post.

“Really?!” Amethyst and the kids all exclaimed in surprised unison, and even Stan looked the slightest bit concerned upon seeing just how frightened the green Gem seemed to be.

“W-what else could be making that horrible-” Before Peridot could say anything else, another banging crackle of thunder exploded out of seemingly nowhere, a bright burst of lightning accompanying it as a prelude to the oncoming rain. The green Gem screamed, covering her eyes out sheer terror as she believed there was nowhere to run and nowhere to hide from the perceived onslaught of grave danger. “Its pounding on the Earth from the inside out! This is it! This is the END OF THE WORLD!”

Everyone’s apparent alarm quickly fizzled out upon hearing this, all of them looking to Peridot rather incredulously as she whimpered softly in miserable fear. “Uh, yeah, no, its not,” Dipper corrected rather dryly.

“Yeah, this happens all the time!” Mabel chimed in with a reassuring smile. “It’s just thunder!”

“…What?” Peridot asked, finally glancing upwards just the slightest bit from her hiding perch.

“Yeah, everything is fine,” Steven said, grinning softly. “Like Mabel said, its just thunder. It happens sometimes when it rains.”

“…Rains?”

“Yep, I’m sticking by what I said earlier,” Stan concluded succinctly as he stepped onto the porch
to avoid the oncoming shower. “This kid really is stupid after all.”

“Ok, seriously?” Dipper asked, somewhat baffled that the green Gem was unfamiliar with a concept so simple. “You really don’t know even know what rain is?”

Peridot scowled at him at first, before relenting with a small sigh of anxious defeat. “I don’t know anything without my screen…”

“Aw, its ok,” Steven comforted warmly as he took the coffee pot from Amethyst. “Here, pretend this coffee is the lake. When the sun warms it up, water evaporates into clouds, like steam.” At this, the young Gem removed the lid from the pot, allowing steam to rise up from the hot coffee. “But when the clouds get really heavy, it rains.”

“So… scalding liquid pours down from the sky?” Peridot asked, still not quite understanding. “Wait, even better, does coffee pour down from the sky?!”

“No, silly, its just water!” Mabel chuckled good-naturedly. “And its not even hot water either! A lot of the time, its really nice and refreshing and it helps the flowers grow and sometimes there’s even a beautiful rainbow and everything smells super good right after it rains and—you know what? Why don’t we just show you?”

“W-wait!” Peridot exclaimed, alarmed once more as Steven and Mabel seemed intent on remaining exposed in the yard, even as Dipper and Amethyst casually joined Stan on the porch to get out of the already sprinkling storm. “W-what’s happening?! Why is it-”

“It’s fine!” Steven assured as it finally began to rain in full force. The downpour certainly was refreshing as Mabel had said as the pair began to run around in the yard that was quickly starting to turn into sloshing mud, both of them clearly enjoying themselves. “Look, we’re ok! Its just water! This is just something that happens on Earth! Isn’t it cool?!” Almost as soon as he asked this, Steven happened to trip and fall into the mud, but even so he was laughing all the while, despite the mess he had made.

“Come on, you guys!” Mabel urged Stan, Dipper, and Amethyst in a rather loud whisper as she hurried up to the side of the porch. “We gotta show Peri that rain isn’t so bad!”

“Uh… why exactly do we need to do that?” Dipper asked, his arms crossed as he glanced over at the apprehensive green Gem, whose gaze was completely transfixed on the stormy skies above.

“Because… cause we just do, ok?” Mabel shrugged before grabbing her brother by the arm and pulling him out into the rain. “Now, c’mon!”

“Yeah, you heard her, Stan! Let’s show this nerd what earth rain’s all about!” Amethyst snickered as she shoved the conman off the porch and into the mud.

“Ugh…” Stan groaned in annoyance, sitting up in the puddle of mud he had fallen into as he began wringing out his suit, only for Amethyst to jump into the mud right alongside him, splashing him all over again. “Well, I guess what they say is true. When it rains, it really does pour…"

“See? We’re all out here having a great time, Peri!” Mabel urged brightly, looking back to the concerned green Gem standing just on the edge of the porch. “Don’t you wanna join us? The water’s fine!”

“Speak for yourself,” Dipper remarked sourly, far from enthused about getting soaking wet in the torrential downpour. That is, until Steven happened to grab both his hands and spin him around playfully, laughing all the while until both boys ended up falling down into the mud together,
which of course, was more than enough to elicit an amused laugh from Dipper as well. “Alright, fine,” he grinned over at Steven, hardly minding the mud anymore. “I guess it’s not that bad.”

“No, it sure isn’t!” the young Gem exclaimed happily before turning back to Peridot. “Come on, Peridot! You have to at least see what it’s like!”

“Mmm…” Peridot’s expression was tight as she held her hands close to her. Truth be told, the green Gem had no idea what to really expect from a phenomenon as strange as this so-called ‘rain’. For all she knew, it could have been a possible trap, set up by her captors to bring her harm in some unknown way. And yet, if that was the case, then certainly another Gem like Amethyst wouldn’t have forayed out into it so boldly and so easily. And certainly, if a Gem like Amethyst could withstand this ‘rain’, then Peridot apprehensively reasoned that so could she. Or… at least she hoped she could.

And besides, she just had to know what was so apparently wonderful about ‘rain’ for herself.

The green Gem let out a shaky, shuddering breath as she slowly began to reach her hand out of the shelter that the porch provided her with. She hesitated, just for a short, fearful second, right before the falling droplets of water could touch her. And then, on a burst of sheer impulse alone, she let the rain fall upon her.

Peridot gasped, startled as a raindrop struck the back of her hand, and though she drew it back towards her, upon an initial inspection, there seemed to be no signs of harm to her form whatsoever. A newfound sense of curiosity overwhelmed the green Gem as she hesitantly decided to step forward just a bit, reaching out into the rain once more. This time, she didn’t take her hand back as she allowed a few more drops to fall onto it, and then, craving to know even more, she decided to voyage out into it herself. Slowly and quietly, Peridot took the short, small step off the porch, a step that felt like one of the most momentous she had ever taken.

Everything else seemed to fade into the background as Peridot finally let the rain fall upon her freely, drenching her in its cool, crisp, refreshing shower. Her eyes were wide with awe as she wondered how such an event was even possible at all, much less naturally occurring as the kids had informed her it was on Earth. In those short, brief moments, Peridot’s mind was racing with so many wonderings all at once: exactly how often did it rain on Earth? Was it always accompanied by such crashing thunder and blinding lightning? Did it always soften the solid dry earth into wet, sloppy mud like this? Just how long would this shower go on for? What would happen once it was over and when would the rain return again? Did Homeworld know that such an interesting process occurred on their now-abandoned former colony? And if they did know… then why didn’t they seem to care about just how unique and amazing it truly was?

“Yeah! You did it!” Steven’s excited exclamation soon broke Peridot out of her awestruck thoughts.

“So… what do you think?” Mabel asked with a huge, eager smile as she ran past the stunned green Gem. “Isn’t it cool?”

Peridot said nothing at first as the kids, Stan, and Amethyst continued having their own fun all around her, allowing her a chance to take it all in. A chance to realize that this was unlike anything she had ever experienced before. That these humans were unlike any she had ever met before. That this planet was unlike any place she had ever been before.

And that maybe, just maybe… none of them were as bad as she had first thought.

“…Cool…”
The summer storm was ultimately short lived, as they usually tended to be. As the downpour turned into a light drizzle, everyone finally headed inside to clean up and dry off, all except for Peridot. Rather, the green Gem hung close to the window, captivated as she watched raindrops slowly, gracefully slip down the glass outside, largely ignoring the various conversations going on behind her. In fact, the only one to really notice Peridot’s revere initially was Steven as he finished toweling off, and, curious to see what she thought of her first experience with rain, he carefully approached her.

“So… that was fun, huh?” he asked, offering the green Gem an inviting smile.

“It was… something,” Peridot mused, her expression growing somewhat serious as she turned to the young Gem. For a moment, she said nothing, instead just seizing him up and down before slipping another brief glance over at the ending shower outside. “Hmmmm…. Ehhh…. errr…. Ummmm…. Sssteven?”

“Yeah?” Steven asked, rather surprised to hear Peridot call him just by his name without any “the” preceding it.

“I’m going to say something,” the green gem inhaled deep breath before speaking her sincere piece. “Thank you. Both of you,” she said, glancing over at Mabel as well.

“Aw, you’re welcome, Peri!” Mabel exclaimed cheerfully. “But uh… not to be rude or anything but… what are you thanking us for again?”

“For explaining this ‘rain’ business to me,” Peridot nodded, hands held behind her back. “It was… an enlightening experience.”

“Pfft, I don’t know why she’s thankin’ them when she wouldn’t have even been out there in the first place if it wasn’t for us,” Stan whispered to Amethyst rather dryly.

“Eh,” the purple Gem shrugged, unconcerned as she wrung her soaking hair out carelessly.

“Oh, no problem!” Steven chuckled as Mabel joined in a bit.

“Yes…” Peridot’s manner was still rather hard to read as she finally turned away from the window fully. “You two are both much more intelligent creatures than I initially thought. And certainly much more useful than those… clods…” She cast a somewhat disdainful glare towards Stan, Amethyst, and Dipper, making it quite clear that her sudden amicability towards Steven and Mabel didn’t extend to any of them.

“Oooooohhh! Did ya hear that, bro-bro!?” Mabel exclaimed with a teasing grin as she threw an arm over Dipper’s shoulder. “Peri thinks I’m smarter than you! Guess that really does mean I’m the alpha twin after all, huh?”

“Please,” Dipper scoffed sullenly as he pulled away from his sister. “It doesn’t mean anything. In fact, its-”


“About… what exactly?” Steven asked, taking a small step forward.

“I’ve decided to share some… information with you!”
“Aw, Peri, we already know you’ve been using Grunkle Stan’s toothbrush!” Mabel laughed with a wave of her hand.

“N-no…” the green Gem buffered before hesitantly backpedaling. “Well… yes.”

“I knew it!” Stan exclaimed hotly. “Guess that means I’ll have to start hiding that brush outta your reach, greenie. Fortunately for me, that shouldn’t be too hard since you’re so short.”

Peridot let out a low, aggravated grumble at this before resuming her former calm as she turned back to the curious pair in front of her. “Can we go somewhere else? I’d rather not divulge such important information in the company of your… unsavory accomplices…”

“Hey, anything you’re gonna say to them, you better say in front of us too,” Amethyst remarked, her hands on her hips.

“Yeah, Peridot, you can trust them, just like you can trust us!” Steven encouraged, prompting the green Gem on with a kind smile. A smile that, despite her many reservations, inevitably ended up being enough to make Peridot cave in on her silence completely.

“Ugh, fine,” she groaned, rolling her eyes in exasperation. “But what I say here does not leave this group. Because what I’m going to tell you all about… the Cluster.”

A collective gasp rose up from the others upon hearing this admittance, especially since none of them had expected Peridot to break her longstanding silence concerning the Cluster at all, especially not seemingly out of nowhere like this. Even so, Steven and Mabel couldn’t help but break out into excited smiles, knowing that, somehow or another, they were finally about to succeed in getting this coveted information in the first place. “You’ve cracked!” Steven exclaimed, amazed.

“I have not cracked!” Peridot gasped, appalled as she moved her hand up towards her gemstone. “As you can see, my Gem is perfectly unscathed!”

“No, Peri, he means that you finally decided to play nice!” Mabel grinned, grabbing the green Gem by both of her hands and spinning her around. “It sure took you long enough, we thought you’d never spill about the Cluster!”

“And apparently all it took was letting her stand out in the rain for a few seconds,” Dipper muttered, incredulous.

“No, Peri, he means that you finally decided to play nice!” Mabel grinned, grabbing the green Gem by both of her hands and spinning her around. “It sure took you long enough, we thought you’d never spill about the Cluster!”

“I could’ve sworn that coffee thing was gonna work first…” Amethyst added, just as baffled.

“Oh, speaking of coffee, I expect at least five entire pots of it as payment for delivering this exclusive intel about the Cluster to you all,” Peridot cut in succinctly, stepping in between Stan and Amethyst as they both sent her an annoyed glare. “But that can wait until after we get back.”

“Uh… back from where?” Steven asked.

“From the Prime Kindergarten, of course!” Peridot said as though it was obvious. “I can show you all you need to know about the Cluster, but that’s the only place I can do it. My arm attachments, my fingers, my screen, my log, its all gone! But all of my logs up to date 6-5-2 still exist, backed up in facet five of the Prime Kindergarten!”
“Whoa, hold on,” Dipper cut in, sending the green Gem a distrusting look. “Cluster or no Cluster, we are not letting you take us to the Kindergarten. For all we know, this could be some kind of trap so you can escape or—”

“Or she could be telling us the truth,” Steven interrupted earnestly. “We’ll never know unless we find out.”

“Eh, call me crazy, but I’m actually down for a trip to the Kindergarten,” Amethyst shrugged, nonchalant. “But… we gotta wait until Garnet, Pearl, and Ford get back. Just cause I’d like to have a little backup on my side in case you try anything… sneaky.”

“No!” Peridot staunchly refuted upon hearing this. “I don’t want to talk to them! And we don’t need them anyway. All we need is to go to the Kindergarten so I can tell you about the Cluster and we can devise a way to properly deal with the threat that it poses to all of our lives! So…?”

A lengthy bout of silence passed as Peridot purposed this plea to Steven and Mabel in particular, not really caring about getting permission from any of the others. The pair exchanged something of an uncertain glance before they turned to the others, noting apathy from Stan, apprehension from Amethyst, and outright disapproval from Dipper, all from their expressions alone. And yet, despite that silent input, Steven and Mabel still knew that this was their choice to make and their choice alone. And fortunately, they both happened to reach the same exact choice at the same exact time.

“Hm… ok,” Steven said with an affirming nod. “We can go to the Kindergarten.”

“What?!” Dipper asked, baffled that they’d make such a risky choice. “You guys can’t be serious! We can’t just let her—”

“We can because they said yes, you Dipper,” Peridot remarked smugly as she pushed him out of the way. “A truly wise choice if I do say so myself.”

“Buuuut…” Mabel interjected, shaking her finger at the green Gem.

“No… a catch!” she groaned. “Fine! What are your demands?”

“Well first, you gotta promise you won’t try any of your sneaky shenanigans,” Mabel said with a hint of seriousness in her tone. “And…”

“And you’re gonna have to hold my hand the entire time!” Steven picked up where Mabel had left off, taking the green Gem’s hand.

“Ooo, yeah! That’s way better than what I was gonna come up with!” Mabel exclaimed, enthused. “I was just gonna tell her she can’t call any of us clods again until we get back.”

“Heh, like I’d ever agree to a term like that,” Peridot rolled her eyes. “Those other two are fine, but not being able to call you clods what you truly are? That’s simply out of the question. All the same, we should be on our way. Oh, and Amethyst… and… you…?” she said to Stan, clearly not remembering his name. “Don’t forget my coffee on the way out! I’ll need it in order to properly educate you on all things Cluster-related.”

“Ugh… so I guess we just gotta deal with this now, huh?” Amethyst asked as her and Stan took up the rear of the group heading out of the shack.

“Not if we give her decaf, we don’t,” Stan smirked discreetly, holding up a pot of said decaf.

“Oooo… now that’s what I call mean,” the purple Gem laughed, glad to be getting some sort of
The Kindergarten was just as solemn and silent as ever, even as the stalwart group of Gems, kids, and conman warped into it. Peridot’s exact purpose for bringing them there and how it all connected back to the Cluster was still largely unknown, and the green Gem refused to divulge anything further until she was able to access her logs. Which meant that the most any of them could do for now was follow Peridot, wherever she intended on leading them.

“This place just gets worse every time we come here…” Steven noted quietly as they began their voyage through the Kindergarten’s hallowed-out walls, his hand still linked with the green Gem’s.

“Tell me about it, kid,” Stan remarked, shuddering somewhat. “It’s like some sorta nightmare out of a horror flick. N-no offense, Amethyst.”

“Eh, I’m over it,” the purple Gem shrugged, unoffended.

“Well, it certainly is poorly managed,” Peridot spoke up, unenthused. “It must have been in way better shape when you first emerged, Steven.”

“…Emerged?” the young Gem asked, confused.

“Yes, you’re some kind of quartz, right? You must have been made here, just like I’m guessing Amethyst was.”

“W-wha—how did you know-?” Amethyst attempted to ask before Peridot easily interrupted her.

“Well, its rather obvious to deduce based on the functional purpose of this Kindergarten,” the green Gem shrugged. “If I had to guess, I’d say a majority of Earth quartzes were made here, including the two of you.”

“Pfft, come on, Peri, Steven wasn’t made here!” Mabel scoffed playfully.

“She’s right,” Steven nodded. “I came from my mom and dad.”

“Are those some kind of rocks?” Peridot asked, bewildered. “Or another planet?”

“Nope,” the young Gem chuckled as he lifted his shirt up to reveal his gemstone. “My dad is from Earth, but my mom was a Gem. See?”

“So… you’re some sort of… hybrid?” the green Gem’s confusion deepened at this. “How is that possible?”

“O-ok!” Dipper cut in, flustered by the implications of the inevitably incoming discussion. “Maybe we shouldn’t really get into all that right now. Or… ever.”

“Oh, nah, its ok, Dipper,” Steven smiled rather innocently. “I can explain it all in a sweet little two part story I like to call ‘the Ballad of Rose and Greg’.”

“I don’t care,” Peridot held up an unconcerned hand to stop the young Gem before he could say anything else. “What I am concerned with is how… stylistically displeasing these old Era 1 drills are.” The green Gem pointed over at a large, broken injector as they passed by it. “The newer ones have a much nicer finish.”
“Ugh, geez, kid, could you just stop bein’ a huge nerd for like… one minute? Is that too much to ask?” Stan remarked, exasperated.

“…What is ‘nerd’?” Peridot asked, unfamiliar with the concept. Of course, this confusion was more than enough to elicit amused snickers from both Stan and Amethyst, which only served to fill the green Gem with even more questions. “Can you use it in a sentence?”

“Ahem,” Amethyst cleared her throat as she turned to the green Gem. “Nerd. You are… a nerd! Ha!”

The pair broke down into a heavy outburst of laughter, and even Dipper couldn’t hold back a small chuckle at Peridot’s continued bafflement by the insult. Steven and Mabel, on the other hand, were not as amused. “Aw, come on, you guys, that isn’t very nice!” Mabel pouted as the others continued making fun of the increasingly aggravated green Gem.

“Maybe not, pumpkin, but its hilarious!” Stan laughed, slapping his knee from the humor of it all.

“Ugh… I don’t know why I’m even bothering to do this…” Peridot grumbled sourly to herself. “This planet is annoying and everything is annoying. Amongst its transgressions are the lowly humans running rampant everywhere with their overpowered elemental-based weapons and their retractable hook blasters and their irresistible stimulant nectar…”

“Hey! I feel like I’d be offended if I understood half of what you said,” Stan remarked, scowling down at the green Gem.

“Good, you were supposed to be because nothing on this puny planet of yours makes any sense!” Peridot huffed impatiently. “Like, for instance, the need for an Amethyst to take orders from a Pearl and a permafusion!”

“Permafusion?” Amethyst asked, largely paying no mind to the first half of what the green Gem had said. “Is that what you call Garnet?”

“I could call her a lot of things,” the green Gem smirked haughtily. “I could call her… two things! Two clods! Walking around like she’s… one clod! Ha!” Peridot laughed and Amethyst joined in a bit, genuinely amused at the green Gem’s bizarre way of explaining things.

“What’s wrong with that?” Steven asked, not understanding what was so funny.

“She’s not even fame ighting!” Peridot scoffed, rolling her eyes. “She’s, you know, she’s just…” The green Gem pounded her fists together to emphasize her point, a point that none of the kids seemed to really get, even if Amethyst and Stan did to some extent. “You know!”

“Based on how lovey-dovey those two are every time they’re apart, yeah, we do know,” Stan snickered, joining in on the round of joking.

“Ha! You’re a real gem, Peri!” Amethyst added, slapping the green Gem on the back rather hard.

“Y-yes! I am… a Gem,” Peridot nodded in solid, proud agreement.

“Ok, ok,” the purple Gem continued, sobering up somewhat. “Do Steven next? And Dipper and Mabel too! What’s weird about them?”

“Come on, Amethyst,” Dipper groaned, not wanting to continue on with such a pointless conversation. “Do we really have to-”
“Oh, where do I even begin?!” Peridot interrupted, stepping in between the kids. “First of all, he’s some sort of hybrid abomination,” she motioned over to Steven first, before glancing over at the twins. “Those two look bizarrely similar to each other to the point that I highly suspect they came out of the same exit hole!”

“Ohhhhh my gosh…” Dipper muttered, completely mortified as he face-palmed over the green Gem’s accidental faux pas. “Someone please make her stop!”

“Peri!” Mabel gasped, just as flustered. “I can’t believe you! Are we gonna have to wash that potty mouth of yours out with soap when we get home?”

“What? No,” Peridot scoffed, not seeing what was wrong with her previous statement. “I’m simply saying that I don’t understand how any of you organics function! You consume so much energy that you constantly have to feed, and you spend so much time expelling that you have a whole room dedicated to it!”

“Ah! N-no!” Steven cut in, also quite embarrassed at the subject matter, even as Stan and Amethyst continued taking great entertainment in it. “S-something else! Talk about something else!”

Fortunately, the green Gem finally did take pause, only to start chuckling herself upon seeing just how hard Amethyst in particular was laughing over the supposed ridiculousness of it all. “Heh, you know, the strangest thing, Amethyst,” she began, snickering lightly all the while. “Is that you think you have to listen to them! You’re the one who should be in charge!”

“Ha! That’s your best joke yet!” Amethyst sneered, clearly not believing it.

“Yeah, the only thing Amethyst should be in charge of is getting into trouble!” Stan added, elbowing the purple Gem playfully.

“Same for you, old guy!” Amethyst quipped, elbowing him right back.

“No, really,” Peridot said, shaking her head laughingly. “The Pearl is a pearl, the so-called ‘Garnet’ is a fusion, the rest of these clods are humans, I don’t even know what he’s supposed to be!” she pointed over at Steven, who was still quite bothered by the green Gem’s implications as she continued. “Amethyst, you’re the only Crystal Gem that’s actually a Gem!”

“Ah… what?” Amethyst asked, her laughter dying down somewhat.

“You outrank everyone on your team,” Peridot explained. “They should be listening to you! You’re a strong, singular, fully-functional soldier, despite the fact that you’re defective!”

The purple Gem’s smile faded altogether upon hearing this, concerned confusion replacing it. “D-defective?”

“Well, sure!” the green Gem exclaimed, as though it were obvious. “You’re small!”

“S-so?”

“Well, you’re not supposed to be!” Peridot scoffed, before letting out a gasp and running over to the nearby Kindergarten wall. “Wait, let me guess… This!” she pointed to the lowest hole, by far the smallest of them all and the most familiar to Amethyst. “This is the hole you came out of! Too small, too low… The exit marks look 500 years newer than every other hole. Hm… this place must have been empty when you came out. No wonder you have no idea what you’re supposed to look like!”
“Peridot…” Steven cut in cautiously, especially upon noticing the rather cross expressions both Amethyst as well as Stan were wearing in light of Peridot’s thoughtless remarks.

However, before he could advise the green Gem to stop, Amethyst put a hand on his shoulder and spoke, her voice low and borderline harsh. “What was I supposed to look like?”

“Well, you’re a quartz,” Peridot explained succinctly. “They’re huge, loyal soldiers. You should be twice your size, at least. Broad shouldered, intimidating… But since you stayed in the ground too long, you don’t really look much like a quartz should at all.”

“Are you saying I’m wrong?” Amethyst hissed, glaring fiercely at the green Gem.

“Genetically speaking… yes!” Peridot laughed haughtily, not even noticing the building tension all around her. “When you think about it, it’s all so… funny! Ha!”

The green Gem continued laughing, though clearly, she was the only one taking any sort of amusement in the matter. The kids all exchanged awkward glances, none of them quite sure of what to say. Amethyst simply glanced down sourly, her arms crossed as she cast a shame-filled glare at her own exit hole, begrudging the fact that, for whatever reason, she had stayed there too long, coming out flawed, defective, small as a result. And yet, out of all of them, Stan was the one to break the green Gem’s ill-conceived humor, grabbing her by the front of her uniform and hoisting her up to his level roughly.

“Take it back,” he growled, his tone fierce and formidable as he stared the startled green Gem down unrelentingly.

“Take what back?” Peridot asked, raising a confused eyebrow.

“What you just said about Amethyst,” Stan said, his manner still quite brutal. “Take it back, greenie, or else.”

“What? I was just stating facts,” the green Gem huffed. “She might as well know that she’s a defective Off-Color instead of running around, thinking that she came out right when she didn’t.”

“And what does any of that garbage matter, huh?!” Stan exclaimed hotly, shaking Peridot up a bit. “So what if she ‘didn’t come out right’? I’ve known her for a long time, and let me tell you something about her, greenie, that even a stupid brainiac like you wouldn’t know. She’s the best one of you Gems I’ve ever met, which is why I’m not gonna stand here and listen to someone like you put her down!” With this, the conman threw the green Gem to the ground, turning his nose up at her as he walked past her, not even noticing the stunned stares he was getting from Amethyst and the kids. “I suggest shutting that constantly-running trap of yours, kid. Before you end up saying something you really regret next time.”

A beat of silence passed at this as Amethyst cast another brief glance at the frightened Peridot before hurrying on ahead after Stan. “Hey, uh… thanks…” she muttered as she walked alongside him, still rather downcast all the same.

“Don’t mention it,” Stan said, not looking over at her as he kept his stern sights set ahead. “After all, I know a thing or two about being called a ‘defective’ screw-up too. Maybe not in those exact words, but still.”

“Heh,” Amethyst finally cracked a small, bitter smile at this. “Then I guess us defective screw-ups gotta stick together, huh?”

“Yeah,” the conman grinned himself, though there wasn’t much joy in it. “I guess we do.”
As this exchange happened just out of earshot, Peridot slowly picked herself up off the ground, still largely baffled as to exactly what had just happened. “I don’t get it. That was the incorrect response. None of you laughed, even though what I just said was ‘funny’. Why aren’t you laughing? Why isn’t she laughing!”

“Maybe its because you’re actually not as funny as you think you are,” Dipper remarked coldly.

“…What?”

“Peridot, you really hurt Amethyst’s feelings just now,” Steven clarified. “And Mr. Pines is Amethyst’s really good friend, so in a way, you sort of hurt his feelings too.”

“How’d I do that?” Peridot asked. “Like I said, I was just saying what any certified Kindergartener worth their gem would clearly be able to see.”

“But it was mean, Peri,” Mabel frowned. “You don’t just go around telling people they’re short. Believe me, I learned that the hard way…” she muttered, exchanging a bit of a knowing glance with her brother.

“No way,” the green Gem shook her head. “I was being… ‘cool’. Amethyst loved it, obviously. Isn’t that right, Amethyst?!” she called over to the purple Gem, who simply glared over her shoulder at her before quickly, crossly looking away. “She… she won’t even speak to me… Its making me feel… smaller.”

“You feel bad!” Steven said firmly, wanting to make sure Peridot saw the error of her ways. “That’s how you made her feel.”

“W-well… who cares about how she feels!?” Peridot snapped forcefully, pretending as though it didn’t matter to her. “Who cares about any of you!? You’re all just rocks! Ruddy, muddy clumps beneath my gravity connectors!” With this, the green Gem let out a loud, vexed shout before she ultimately ended up tripping over a small rock on the ground, falling face first onto the ground. Her fit of anger continued in the form of muffled, frustrated screams into the ground as the kids all stood around her, waiting for her to calm down.

“Could you maybe wrap this little… temper tantrum up so you can tell us about the Cluster already?” Dipper asked dryly, trying to get things back on track. “Unless I was right and you really did bring us here for a trap-”

“I did not!” Peridot darted up sharply, still immensely irritated. “I brought us here to reveal the Cluster’s secrets to you, and that’s exactly what I’m gonna do, regardless of what Amethyst thinks! Now come on!” she began to march on ahead bitterly. “Let’s just hurry to the control room already and get all this over with…”

“I couldn’t agree more…” Dipper sighed tiredly, quite exhausted with the green Gem’s antics by now. Steven and Mabel both hung back for just a brief moment, exchanging a concerned glance over many things: the unknown secrets Peridot was about to divulge to them, the green Gem’s own lack of tact in interacting with just about everyone, and what the fallout could potentially be from it all in the end. Even so, they said nothing of their worries as they simply continued onward, hoping that their dread would be allayed somehow, when in reality… it would only grow in the moments to follow.

“So, are you sure this is safe?” Steven asked Peridot after an apprehensive silence. “The last time we were here, there were a bunch of fusion monsters…”
“Yes,” the green Gem nodded. “I was checking their progress.”

“Progress?” Mabel tilted her head on confusion. “What’s that mean?”

“They were unfinished examples,” Peridot said as the group finally arrived at the entrance of the Kindergarten’s underground control room, not wasting any time in descending down into it. “When it became clear that the Earth was no longer a viable colony, Homeworld decided to use it for something else. A series of experiments—a Gem geo-weapon.”

“Oh, did you help?” Steven asked, curious.

“Negative, I wasn’t lucky enough to be around for that,” Peridot said before cracking a bit of a proud grin. “But I read over a few hundred years of reports!”

“Ugh, can you just quit the nerd talk and tell us what this dumb thing is already, kid?” Stan asked impatiently as they finally made it to the prime control room, still as busted and broken as it had been before. “The sooner we get outta here, the better.”

“…Very well…” Peridot said somewhat sharply, heading over to the nearby wall so she could fiddle with some of the wiring within it. “Just have to put this over here and…. There!” Slowly, the control room buzzed back to light and life, even if its pallor was still somewhat dull due to the longstanding damage done to it. “It’s not perfect, but it’ll do for now.” With this, the green Gem walked over to the hand-shaped pedestal resting in the center of the room, though she soon let out a frustrated groan upon realizing she was too short to reach it. “Ugh! Come on!”

“What’s up, ‘dot?” Mabel asked, rather playfully as the others joined her.

“I can’t quite reach the-” Peridot was cut off as Steven easily hoisted her up onto his shoulders, giving her just the boost she needed to reach the pedestal.

“It’s ok to ask for help, you know,” the young Gem said with a soft smile.

“I had it,” the green Gem said stiffly.

“Pfft, who’s the ‘small’ one now?” Stan remarked to Amethyst, eliciting a small snort of cathartic laughter out of her.

All the same, Peridot largely ignored them as she activated the control panel, reducing the height of the pedestal down to her level. From there, she tapped around a bit, before finally locating the logs she was looking for. The walls of the control room were soon aglow with hundreds, if not thousands of images of combined gem shards, much like the kind the fusion mutants themselves were composed of.

“These are the early attempts at artificial fusion,” Peridot began to explain, her eyes trained on the files before her though everyone else was largely awestruck by what they were seeing.

“T-that’s… a lot of Gem shards…” Steven muttered, suddenly nervous.

“No wonder we’ve had to fight so many of those fusion monsters…” Dipper said, just as unnerved. “There must be hundreds of them!”

“Oh, there’s been far many than that,” Peridot informed succinctly. “We were growing them here at this very site, but these were just prototypes for the final product.”

“W-which is…?” Mabel trailed off, not entirely sure if she wanted to know.
The walls shifted to the image of the Earth itself, a large, amorphous marker hovering over land that couldn’t have been too far away from Gravity Falls. “A singular, giant, artificial fusion, comprised of millions of Gem shards: the Cluster.”

“What… the hell…?” Amethyst whispered almost inaudibly, her eyes huge with the implications of what Peridot had just said.

“P-Peridot… are you saying… there’s a giant, mutant Gem the size of the Earth buried under us right now?” Steven asked, shaken.

“Oh, no, when it forms it’ll be much bigger than the Earth,” Peridot said, moving the screen through the inevitable, destructive process that would soon unfold. “Right now, it lies dormant, incubating in the Earth’s core, but when it emerges and takes its physical form, it will destroy the planet.” With this, the model of the Cluster grew and grew inside the Earth, until, in almost no time at all, it burst forth from it, blasting the entire planet to pieces and leaving nothing behind in its horrific wake. A mere example of what would ultimately become of the planet itself if this monstrous mutant fusion was left unchecked.

The reaction to such alarming news was immediate and stark. Mabel covered her mouth to stifle a frightened gasp while Stan, Amethyst, and Steven all started at what little pieces were left of the destroyed model Earth on the screen, completely dumbstruck with shock over the immense danger that rested just beneath their feet. Dipper, however, only felt that shock for a mere moment before it quickly changed to rage towards the green Gem who had just revealed this unbearable truth to them.

“Are you serious?!” he asked harshly, quickly turning on Peridot with his hand practically resting on the hilt of his sword. “All this time, you knew that this… thing was just there in the center of the Earth, ready to destroy it at basically any moment and you weren’t going to tell us about it?!”

“Well, what did I care?” Peridot shrugged. “It’s not like this is my planet.”

“Well, you’re sure as heck standing on this planet right now, you idiot!” Stan snapped, joining his nephew in righteous fury about the green Gem withholding such important intel. “Which means that you’ll be just as dead as the rest of us when this thing blows it up from the inside out!”

“I’ve… gathered that,” the green Gem surmised tightly. “And I completely understand the severity of the situation. The prototypes are already emerging. The Cluster is next. If we can’t get off this planet, then we’ve got to stop the Cluster instead.”

“Uh, and how are we gonna do that?” Mabel asked fretfully, as they all hurried after the upbeat green Gem.
“Well, you both have all the information that we need about the Earth and its erratic behavior,” Peridot explained. “I suppose we could even garnish some assistance from those three,” she cast a brief glare over her shoulder at Dipper, Stan, and Amethyst. “But ideally, your intel will be the most instrumental by far. Put that together with my expansive knowledge of the Cluster, and we just might be able to stop it!”

“N-no, Peridot, I don’t think you get it!” Steven interjected, grabbing the green Gem’s hand to stop her as they made it back to the surface. “Just because me and Mabel know how clouds work doesn’t mean we know how to stop a giant mutant in the center of the Earth! Besides, the only reason why I know anything about clouds and rain is because my dad told me.”

“Yeah, and I know about it cause me and Dipper learned about it in school a super long time ago!” Mabel added just as intently.

“What are you talking about?” Peridot asked, now quite baffled herself.

“Look, I used to be really scared of thunderstorms,” Steven began. “Just like you. Then Dad explained how rain and all that stuff works, then I wasn’t scared anymore. I didn’t just know all about it right off the bat.”

“Well, I’m sure you have other knowledge about how this planet works,” the green Gem scoffed, annoyed with the kids’ hesitance to take up her plan.

“I mean, sure, we do, but none of that’s gonna help us against a big ol’ fusion monster like this!” Mabel insisted.

“If we really want to stop this Cluster thing, then the five of us won’t be enough to do it,” Dipper interestedly knowingly. “We’ll need someone who can actually help us do something about it. We need Great Uncle Ford, Pearl, and Garnet!”

“I really hate to say it, but the kid’s got a point,” Stan said, his hands on his hips. “Garnet, Pearl, and Ford may all be annoying know-it-alls, but that’s just it: they’re know-it-alls who would know how to deal with something crazy like this way better than I would.”

“I said I don’t need them!” Peridot snapped, resistant. “I didn’t even want to tell any of you about this because I knew that’s exactly what you’d say! Let’s just warp me back to the ‘bathroom’ or whatever you call it and we’ll take care of this! If it looks really bad, then we can just as this ‘dad’ or this ‘school’ for help, right?”

“Ugh, no, we can’t!” Amethyst exclaimed, thoroughly frustrated with the green Gem’s stubbornness. “We gotta stop this stupid thing the right way, which means we gotta—” The purple Gem was cut off by a sudden clamor not too far away from them, as rocks began to shift to give way to the fact that they weren’t as alone as they thought they were.

“Oh no! Gem mutants!” Steven gasped as a small group of various misshapen and mis-colored artificial fusions lumbered towards them. “Everyone, get behind me!” Stan and the twins were quick to do just that as the young Gem formed a sturdy bubble to protect them, though Peridot had been just a few seconds too late to rush over and join them. Amethyst, however, took the initiative, summoning her whip as she lashed out against the aggressive, mindless creatures, even though it was clear she was outnumbered as several of the mutants began to push their way past her. The purple Gem let out a startled gasp upon seeing this, quickly glancing behind her to see that a few of them had already begun pounding on Steven’s bubble violently. And yet, as distracted as she was, Amethyst didn’t even see one of the larger mutants rear up in front of her, ready to land a heavy, damaging blow.
Fortunately, however, Peridot did.

“Amethyst, look out!” the green Gem cried, garnishing the purple Gem’s attention just in time. But she didn’t stop there; for right before the large mutant could slam itself down onto Amethyst, Peridot leapt for her, pushing her clean out of its destructive path. The pair of Gems rolled a bit away from the action, though when they inevitably came to a stop, Peridot found herself resting right on top of Amethyst. Neither of them said anything for a tense, somewhat awkward, instead staring at each other in disbelief and what almost seemed like gratitude until Steven and the others hurriedly rolled the bubble over to them.

“Quick, get in!” Steven warned, dispelling the bubble for the briefest of moments to allow the Gems inside.

“Are you guys ok?” Mabel asked as Peridot quickly, frantically stood.

“I-it was an accident, I swear!” the green Gem exclaimed, her cheeks lighting up in a bright green blush.

“Uh… what was?” Dipper asked, confused.

“N-nothing!” Peridot huffed, even more flustered as she stole another brief glance over at Amethyst. “J-just… do something about these experiments!”

“We are doing something!” Steven protested, pressing against his bubble as the mutants began to converge on it again.

“Something useful!” the green Gem snapped. “Can’t you just destroy them?”

“N-not when there’s this many of them at once!” Dipper countered, gripping his sword tightly just in case the bubble did end up breaking. Which seemed like a very real possibility given how much pressure was being put upon it.

“I-its like we told you!” Steven implored anxiously, trying his hardest to protect them all when it was clearly a losing battle. “This is all we can do on our own!”

“T-then this is it!” Peridot gasped fearfully. “We’re finished!”

“Not yet you aren’t!”

A collective gasp of surprise and relief filled the bubble as Garnet’s steadfast voice echoed from a distance. And soon enough, the Gem leader made her appearance, slamming down onto a handful of mutants with her strong gauntlets, completely unphased. Pearl was close behind, swinging her spear at any creature in her path, dispelling their disjointed forms in graceful succession. Ford rounded off the trio as he came running after the white Gem, a futuristic blaster of his own design in hand as he opened fire on the mutants pressing against the bubble directly, clearing them out swiftly and easily.

“Pfft, what a bunch of showoffs,” Stan remarked, rolling his eyes at their rather dramatic entrance.

“For reals,” Amethyst added, hands on her hips. “Still… they… kinda couldn’t have shown up at a better time…”

“Peridot,” Steven turned to the green Gem as the battle outside the bubble began wrapping itself up. “There’s no way we can stop this Cluster thing on our own. We need the help of Mr. Ford and all three of the Crystal Gems.”
Peridot said nothing in response to this, instead opting to dubiously look past the young Gem and to the trio rescuing them and wondering, for the first time, if maybe, just maybe, he had a point after all.

“Steven! Dipper! Mabel!” Pearl exclaimed, immensely worried after the last of the mutants had been poofed. “Are you three alright?”

Before the kids had so much as a chance to respond, Ford stepped forward, his manner quite fierce as he sent his brother a disapproving glare. “Stanley, what in the world were you and Amethyst thinking letting the children come here, of all places, with her?!” he asked harshly, pointing down at Peridot.

“Hey! Don’t pin this on us!” Stan protested crossly. “She’s the little freak who insisted we all come out to this creep show!”

“Yes, I was,” Peridot said, genuinely accepting the blame.

“Oh no, you don’t, greenie, you’re not about to weasel your way outta—” the conman stopped short, looking down at the green Gem in genuine surprise. “Wait, what?”

“Peridot?” Amethyst asked quietly, also dumbfounded as Peridot boldly stepped up to the front of the group.

“What are you all even doing here?” Pearl asked, baffled.

“Kids, I thought I told you to watch her,” Garnet said, the slightest bit of disappointment in her tone.

“We know, but—” Steven cut himself off as Peridot held up a hand to stop him.

“…They did what they were told,” she began, her manner stiff and somewhat hesitant. “All of them did. I…” She paused, briefly looking back to the kids behind her before letting out a begrudging sigh and continuing on ahead. “Alright, listen up you clo—ugh… Crystal Gems… I’ve made up my mind. I have something to tell you about the Cluster.”

Needless to say that everyone was rather surprised by the green Gem’s relent as Ford and Pearl exchanged a silent, yet stunned gaze. Garnet, on the other hand, kept her usual calm composure, simply stepping out of the way to allow Peridot to lead the way back to the warp pad. “Then by all means,” she said simply, surprising everyone all the more.

“Y-you… can go on ahead,” the green Gem muttered anxiously as she stole a small glance over at Amethyst. “I have some… unfinished business to take care of.”

Garnet nodded in acceptance at this, moving on ahead as Pearl and Ford trailed behind her, muttering curiously to themselves as they wondered if Peridot really did intend on being sincere with her supposed revelations. Stan let out a bit of an annoyed sigh as he joined them, and while the kids and Amethyst began to follow, Peridot hesitantly spoke up to stop them.

“A-Amethyst, listen…” she began, not making eye contact with the purple Gem as she slowly turned to face her. “I… uh…”

“Just spit it out, ok?” Amethyst rolled her eyes, still making her aggravation with the green Gem’s earlier remarks about her quite clear.

“Ugh! Why are you Earth ones so difficult!” Peridot groaned in severe frustration before she
spoke her piece. “This entire planet is backwards! There hasn’t been even one instance of correct behavior exhibited by any one of you Crystal Gems! As far as I know, you’re all defective, every last one of you! But…” the green Gem sighed in shameful defeat, glancing down to the barren, rocky ground before her. “I am no better. I failed my mission, engaged in a taboo fusion with an insane being that wasn’t even a Gem, and now I suppose I’m working with the enemy! And I can’t even get that right! I have apparently ‘hurt’ your feelings, which was not my intention.”

Amethyst’s glare towards the green Gem softened up somewhat at this, but even so, she said nothing to interrupt Peridot as she continued in a much more solemn, respectful tone this time. “If I’ve damaged my standing with the best Gem here, then I’ve made a serious mistake,” Peridot closed her eyes thoughtfully, remorsefully even. “I… I’m still learning. I hope you understand. I’m trying to understand. I’m… I’m sorry… so-”

“Aw, Peri!” Mabel interrupted with a huge, delighted smile. “That was so sweet of you!”

“You really are learning!” Steven added, just as impressed.

“Ugh… that’s what I said, isn’t it?!” Peridot snapped, embarrassed.

“Hmph, yeah for a second or two, I almost thought you were actually being sincere about it all,” Dipper deadpanned with a wry smirk as he left to join the others, setting the already irked green Gem off even more.

“I was being sincere!” she exclaimed hotly, though she did back down as Amethyst spoke up.

“Peridot…” she began, her expression unreadable at first until she finally cracked a small, genuine smile. “Thanks.” A small, awkward smile spread across Peridot’s face as relief filled her, knowing that she had somehow managed to repair things between herself and Amethyst after all. Not that the purple Gem would ever let her settle in such a prideful thought for too long. “But you’re still a nerd,” she joked as she turned to walk away, though she did stop briefly to smile over her shoulder at the green Gem once more. “But… uh… you know… when we get back, maybe I’ll talk Stan into brewing you another pot of coffee. My treat.”

“YES!” Peridot gasped, stars of excitement in her eyes. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“Pfft, calm down, man, its just coffee,” Amethyst chuckled. “Remind me to never let you try expresso. You’d probably explode or something.”

The purple Gem continued to laugh to herself as she went to go catch up with the others, leaving only Peridot, Steven, and Mabel behind in wake of the green Gem’s earnest apology. The silence between them didn’t last long however as Mabel suddenly caught Peridot up in an elated hug, not even bothering to hide her excitement whatsoever. “Seriously, Peri, that was so nice of you! I guess you really do like us after all, huh?”

“Ugh, I do not,” Peridot huffed as she pushed the girl away and crossed her arms. “I-I simply found it to be tactful if I made peace with Amethyst. F-for… strategic purposes!”

“Yeah, sure strategic,” Mabel grinned, not believing her for a moment. “If that strategy was making friends, then you’re doing a great job at it! You’ve already come so far today alone with telling us about the whole Cluster thing and everything! Who knows? Maybe someday you’ll end up being a Crystal Gem too!”

“Oh,” the green Gem scoffed in disgust. “Its bad enough I have to associate myself with those clods. The thought of actually joining them is… augh, its too much to even bear!”
“Well, hey, you never know,” Steven said with a small, proud smile. “So… after all that, how do you feel now?”

Peridot paused, glancing up towards Amethyst afar in the distance before looking down to herself once more. The green Gem didn’t know how to explain it based on anything she had experienced before, but she knew. Something was beginning here. Something that would change her life more than she ever thought possible in ways she could have never even imagined. Which was why her voice was soft and subdued as she offered her answer, wondering exactly where this new tenuous alliance between herself and her now-former enemies would end up taking her next. “…Big.”
Chapter 63: Bot Battle

Chapter Summary

In which Ford and McGucket reunite, Peridot is a racist (basically), and giant robots punch each other

Chapter Notes

Ah boy this one took a while, mostly since I've spent about the past month in Kingdom Hearts hell. Anyway, this one was fun and tbh I don't have a lot to say about it other than ENJOY! (keyword is ROBOT)

R GQWKZH PT TEUFF TER DCFGSUWMZCO
QTE RFFTZZ BB BDDPFMRBU ABJGJCG
TCMR YIWFBJVJD VRB BUTZB CS PRFN
WG RB JBOVBUWGX PBHMCPS PT KFPPH LKCSA

“Ahem,” Peridot loudly cleared her throat, garnishing the attention of the group gathered before her. After leaving the Kindergarten, the green Gem had made sure that Garnet, Pearl, and Ford, the only three who were uninformed about the Cluster after their latest misadventure, were all congregated together in the temple, Amethyst and the kids along with them to help in her explanation if need be. “As it seems I have no other options, I have conceded to reveal some important information to you about the Cluster.”

The Gems and the author said nothing to this, instead simply exchanging a dubious glance as they wondered whether or not Peridot had any intention of actually telling them the truth or not. Amethyst assured them that she was, however, by offering them a small nod, her expression gravely serious, even if the green Gem’s method of demonstrating exactly what the Cluster was to them was… less than serious.

With a snap of Peridot’s fingers, Steven shuffled forward, his entire body covered by a large cardboard box with a crudely-drawn Earth upon it. Dipper and Mabel walked alongside the young Gem largely to guide him along, since his vision was obscured by the box entirely.

“Behold!” Mabel exclaimed with a dramatic flourish, tossing a handful of glitter over the box as an added touch. “The Earth!”

“Hey!” Peridot snapped, glaring at the girl. “I was supposed to say that! Now… Behold, the Earth!” she began again, slapping the box with the flyswatter she was using as a baton and causing Steven to stumble back a bit as a result. “At the very center of this planet lies… the Cluster! Rotate,” she ordered, and with a little help from Dipper, Steven managed to turn himself and the box around to show another drawing, this time of the Cluster buried far beneath the Earth’s surface. “This is the Cluster. It’s a massive, artificial fusion composed of millions of Gem shards. It has laid dormant for thousands of years within this planet’s crust. When this Gem activates and takes its form, the result will be catastrophic. Now!”
Peridot hit the box once more, cuing Steven to begin shaking the box to build up suspense. Garnet, Pearl, and Ford all leaned forward in quiet dread, all three of them quite alarmed by what they’d already just heard about this Cluster. However, their worst fears were confirmed, albeit in a bit of an overexaggerated way when a rather silly, snake-like sock puppet burst through the drawing of the Earth on the box abruptly.

“BWAAAAA!” Steven growled loudly, thrashing the sock puppet around in faux violence, much to Peridot’s annoyance.

“What is that?” she asked with a scoff.

“It’s the Cluster!” Steven said through the puppet.

“I made it myself!” Mabel chimed in brightly. “I’ve been a bit of a sock puppet expert ever since I tried putting together this whole musical with them a few weeks back. It didn’t really turn out being exactly like I hoped it would, but… at least I was still able to make a good Cluster puppet with what I had left! Do you like it?”

“No!” Peridot huffed, swatting the puppet and Steven’s hand away. “The won’t look anything like that! B-but it is real,” she turned back towards the others. “And it can activate at any moment, destroying this planet and everything on it in the process! Including all of us!”

“No!” Peridot huffed, swatting the puppet and Steven’s hand away. “The won’t look anything like that! B-but it is real,” she turned back towards the others. “And it can activate at any moment, destroying this planet and everything on it in the process! Including all of us!”

“And there was probably a much easier way to explain all of that that didn’t involve using a box and a sock puppet,” Dipper remarked somewhat dryly, sending the green Gem a critical glance.

“They’re called visual aids,” Peridot countered coldly. “And yes, they were necessary in getting the point of the Cluster across to these clods! They certainly never would have understood it without them, I can assure you.”

“Believe me,” Garnet spoke up, her tone and expression both grim after everything they’d just learned. “We would have.”

“What a Cluster, huh?” Amethyst asked, somewhat sarcastically, though there was still a hint of dread in her tone.

“And I thought Bill’s intentions for the Earth were bad…” Ford muttered to himself, his eyes wide with concern. “But this is arguably even worse. Who could have ever guessed that Homeworld could be so… vindictive over losing this planet all those years ago?”

“We should have…” Pearl whispered so quietly that none of the others heard her as her hands quickly slipped up to cover her mouth.

“This abomination must be stopped,” Garnet said, standing with firm resolve. “Before its too late.”

“But how?” Pearl asked, regathering her bearings. “We’d need to build some sort of machine to take us to the center of the Earth! It’ll have to-”

“Hey!” Peridot snapped impatiently, lashing her flyswatter out at the white Gem. “I wasn’t finished speaking yet! What we need is to build some sort of machine to take us to the center of the Earth.”

“Um, that’s literally what Pearl just said,” Dipper pointed out, crossing his arms.

“Furthermore,” Peridot continued, staunchly ignoring both him and the pointed glare Pearl was sending her way. “It’ll need to withstand up to 360 gigapascals of pressure and temperatures up to 9800 degrees.”
“And,” Ford cut in, adding his vast knowledge onto the discussion. “It’ll likely need to be outfitted with an advanced hyperflux engine in order to-”

“In order to cut through the Earth’s crust and get us down to the Cluster in a reasonable amount of time, yes of course,” Peridot rolled her eyes. “Anybody who has any inkling of intelligence at all would know that. Which is why I’m surprised that such a primitive creature like you would be able to figure it out.”

“Oh, I’ll show her ‘primitive’…” Ford growled, rolling up his coat sleeves a bit to give the green Gem a piece of his mind. At least until Pearl put up an arm to stop him just in time.

“Well, we mustn’t waste any time,” the white Gem concluded. “We need to start finding parts for this machine immediately.”

“Yes, obviously,” Peridot huffed, still irritated. “You all certainly do have a knack for stating what’s very plain to see, don’t you? Either way, we can start by dismantling all devices inside of this dwelling.”

Before anyone could object, Peridot hurried over to the kitchen, jumping up onto the counter and grabbing the microwave so she could pry it off of the cabinet it was connected to. “This simplistic radiation concentrator should come in handy!” she exclaimed, yanking it down with a heavy shout before it ultimately fell past her and onto the floor, breaking instantly.

“Whoa, wait!” Steven exclaimed, shaking the box off of him as he watched the green Gem with newfound alarm as she grabbed the phone lying on the nearby coffee table.

“This baseline vibration transmitter could possibly serve a function!” she cried before smashing the phone itself down onto the table to open it up and reveal its inner components. From there, she ran up to the loft, hoisting up Steven’s television, despite how heavy it was for her. “T-there’s a remote chance something useful could be inside this primitive image cube!”

Everyone down below flinched as the TV came crashing down to the ground, though fortunately, Steven was quick to finally put an end to Peridot’s frenzy before she could go on to break any more of his possessions. “Wait!” he exclaimed before evening things out. “I have a better idea that doesn’t involve destroying the house!”

While most of the others were still largely wrapped up in their concern over the Cluster, Amethyst couldn’t help but crack a smile over this, knowing that even when the rest of them were at a loss over what to do, the young Gem usually wasn’t. “Classic Steven.”

The so-called “Universe Family Barn” had been largely untouched ever since the last ill-fated engineering project took place there. Despite the fact that Pearl’s space ship had been an abject failure, fortunately, there was still a large abundance of leftover junk and scrap materials to be found within its spacious wooden haul. Which was why, upon Steven’s suggestion, the others were all quick to agree that it would be the best place to build their planned drill, hoping that with the space and materials allotted to them, they’d be able to construct what they needed to in whatever amount of time they had left. Which, for all any of them knew, might not be very much time at all.

“Hm… well its no Helusian-9 hyperdronics scrap yard,” Ford remarked as he looked over what they had to work with alongside the kids. “But I suppose it’ll have to do. After all, I’ve made do with much less than this before.”
“It should be adequate enough for us to get started, at least,” Pearl noted thoughtfully. “First, I recommend we organize the component types available to us.”

“And while you’re working on that, I can assemble a rough schematic based on what we have!” Ford finished, adjusting his glasses.

“Wow, it seems like you guys already have this whole drill thing fully figured out,” Dipper said, thoroughly impressed by their smooth organization.

“Well, my boy, I’ve always found it wise to plan ahead, especially when dealing with a massive mutant geoweapon,” the author concluded with a knowing grin.

“Oh, I completely agree, Stanford!” Pearl exclaimed, clasping her hands together. “You know, in a way, this will be a bit nostalgic considering our days working together on that portal way back when.”

“Yes, but unlike that disaster,” Ford frowned, though he quickly perked up upon realizing he was righting a wrong with this project. “This is going to save the Earth rather than nearly destroy it.”

“It certainly is a much more noble cause, I’ll say that much,” Pearl chuckled warmly. Her smile quickly fell, however, upon noticing the rather cutesy, simplistic drawing of the drill that Steven and Mabel had collaborated on on the chalkboard just outside of the barn. “Um… sorry, kids, it’s a lovely drawing, but it won’t look much like this at all…”

“Aw…” Mabel pouted as Steven stopped spinning around on his stool, frowning. “And I thought we hit the nail on the head with it too!”

“Hm…” Peridot finally spoke up, her ongoing silent musing coming to an end as she nodded complacently. “Good. Yes, this is adequate. Thank you, you can go now,” she said to Pearl in particular.

“Uh… what?” Pearl raised an eyebrow, exchanging a confused glance with Ford.

“Hm?” the green Gem paused, confused herself until she clapped lightly, waving the white Gem off. “Um, that will be all!” Pearl let out a small, incredulous scoff at this, realizing exactly what Peridot was playing at with her dismissive attitude, and deciding she was going to have none of it. Still, Peridot persisted as she leaned over to Steven and whispered to him rather obviously. “How do I get her to leave?”

“Excuse me, I’m not leaving,” Pearl said, her hands on her hips as she looked down to the green Gem critically.

“Ugh… very well then,” Peridot rolled her eyes. “I suppose you can stand here and hand me supplies as I call for them, even if that’s not what you’re supposed to do… Same goes for you, you… oddly appendaged human,” she said to Ford, barely sparing him a second glance.

“Pardon me?” Ford remarked somewhat harshly, crossing his arms as he scowled down at the green Gem. “Neither of us are simply going to stand around passively while you do all the work on the drill, Peridot. If we want to get this project done right, then we all need to—”

“Oh, no, I have it covered,” Peridot assured succinctly. “After all, I don’t want a Pearl and some basic human getting in my way. Really, you’d both only slow me down.”

Needless to say that both Pearl and Ford were quite offended by the green Gem’s haughty remarks, yet before they could say anything to challenge them, Steven interjected instead. “Peridot, that’s
not fair,” the young Gem shook his head earnestly. “Pearl and Mr. Ford are two of the smartest people I know! They just gotta help us build this drill thingy; they’ll do a great job on it, I’m sure!”

Peridot only let out a small, snide snicker at this, not taking Steven seriously whatsoever. “No, no, you must be confused. A Pearl can’t build a thing like this. And a human certainly couldn’t.”

“And why is that?” Dipper asked rather caustically, starting to take offense to what the green Gem was saying himself as Steven and Mabel were too.

“Well, isn’t it obvious?” Peridot asked plainly. “You humans are simple. Your society and your very understanding of the physical properties of the world around you is lightyears behind, at best. And don’t even get me started on your painfully primitive technology. If your engineering skills can’t even match up to the most basic of Homeworld’s tech,” she said, turning back to Ford and offering him a smug, satisfied grin. “Then how in the stars could you possibly expect to design and construct a machine this advanced and complex?”

“Oh, I have a feeling you’d be very surprised by what I know when it comes to engineering…” Ford muttered quite angrily, knowing he had much to draw on thanks to his 30-year stint traveling the many diverse, often futuristic landscapes of the multiverse. “In fact, I’d almost be willing to wager that I have even more knowledge on that front than you do.”

“Ha! Don’t make me laugh,” Peridot chuckled coldly. “As if your weak organic mind could even compare to the lowliest of Gems! Speaking of lowly Gems…” Her teasing smile only widened as she turned to Pearl, who was already quite incensed herself. “You should know better than anyone that you Pearls aren’t even for this sort of thing! You’re for standing around, and looking nice, and holding stuff for higher ranking Gems! Right?”

“Ugh! That’s enough!” Pearl snapped fiercely, refusing to hear any more, even though she knew it was true. By Homeworld’s standards, at least. “If we’re going to work together, Peridot, then you’re going to have to listen to us. Both of us.”

“Listen… to you?!” At this, Peridot broke down into another heavy gale of laughter, one that only served to irritate Pearl and Ford even more. “Did you teach her to talk like this?” Peridot asked Steven with an incredulous smirk. “Because that’s just rich!”

“Uh… what are you talking about?” the young Gem asked, still not following.

“Uh, duh,” the green Gem said, as though it was obvious. “She’s a Pearl. She’s a made-to-order servant, just like the hundreds of other Pearls being flaunted around back on Homeworld!”

“Wait…” Steven mused, his eyes wide as Mabel let out an awed gasp beside him. “There are… hundreds of Pearls?!”

“W-well, yes,” Pearl admitted with an embarrassed blush. “But-”

“And she looks like she’s a fancy one too…” Peridot remarked, examining Pearl’s sash before the white Gem snatched it away from her with an appalled gasp.

“Hundreds of Pearls…” Steven repeated, still dumbfounded by such a fact.

“I wanna meet every single last one of them!” Mabel quipped, jumping up and down excitedly. “Especially if they’re anywhere near as cool as our Pearl!”

Despite her ongoing mortification, Pearl couldn’t help but let out a small chuckle at this, touched
by the sentiment despite the green Gem’s cynicism. “Well…”

“So,” Peridot interrupted once more, looking over the white Gem expectantly. “Who do you belong to anyway?”

“NOBODY!” Pearl shouted harshly, refusing to allow herself to ever return to the simplistic, servantile mindset she was created with again.

“Then… what are you for?” the green Gem asked, baffled. Pearl gave her no response, instead swiftly turning away in the hopes that it would curtail this uncomfortable conversation, but of course, it didn’t. “Well… you can belong to me for now,” Peridot concluded. “And so can the human,” she nodded over at Ford, who was rather shocked by the implication. “After all, I’ve always wanted a pet of my own. Ha! A Peridot with a Pearl and a pet human! What would they say back home?”

“Oh, absolutely not!” Ford exclaimed hotly, his hands clenched into tight fists. “I am nobody’s pet! Especially not yours, you… you egotistical, impudent little brat!”

“Yeah, that’s right!” Pearl spoke up before Peridot could even try to get a word in edgewise. “Listen here, you tiny twerp! In case you’ve forgotten, you’re on our turf now! And I didn’t fight a thousand-year war for this planet’s independence to take orders from the likes if you!”

“Excuse me?!” Peridot gasped, appalled by their brashness. “I’m a natural technician, and a certified Kindergartener.”

“Well she sure does act like one…” Dipper remarked to Mabel with a small, amused grin as his sister chuckled to herself.

“I was made for this!” the green Gem continued insistently. “You were made to wallow around in the dirt your planet is made of,” she said, shooting a hard glare up at Ford. “And you were made to take orders, not give them!” she finished, snapping at Pearl relentlessly. “Which is why you’re both going to stop your incessant, rebellious behavior and listen to the Gem in charge here, at once!”

“Oh really?” Pearl countered as both her and Ford leaned in forward towards Peridot amidst the palpable growing tension. “We’ll just see about that…”

“Whoa, whoa! Hang on, guys!” Steven cut in, jumping in between the pair and the green Gem before any sort of violence could break out. “Now, we can all agree that all three of you are good at building things, so… why can’t you try listening to each other?”

“NO!” Pearl, Ford, and Peridot all exclaimed in staunch, harsh unison, each of them refusing to reconcile over their incredibly vast differences.

“Ford and I are just as good at building things as you!” Pearl hissed down at the green Gem angrily. “Better even!”

“Together, we could easily prove everything you said about us completely wrong,” Ford added just as intently.

“Ha!” Peridot scoffed, still not taking either of them seriously, despite their adamance. “Name one thing you two can engineer better than I can. Go on!”

“Advanced lighter-than-air spacecraft!” Pearl asserted boldly.
“Trans-universal, interdimensional portals!” Ford added with just as much passion.

“Robots.”

“Huh?” the trio all turned to Steven as he let out a softly whispered suggestion.

“You should build robots,” the young Gem continued, stars in his wide eyes as he stepped forward, an excited smile growing on his face. “Giant robots! I see a race. A giant robo-race! With prizes! Giant robo-prizes!”

“Oh! Oh! And cheerleaders! Giant robo-cheerleaders!” Mabel added enthusiastically.

“Uh, that might be going a bit too far, Mabel.” Dipper pointed out, though even he wasn’t able to avoid the building excitement for too long. “Still, a huge robot battle sounds like it’d be so cool!”

“You mean like a competition?” Pearl frowned, confused.

“Yeah!” Steven nodded. “To see who’s better at building things. It could be you and Mr. Ford vs. Peridot in the ‘Robot Rumble of the Ages!’ I came up with the name myself!”

“What are these ‘robots’ you speak of?” Peridot asked, not following.

“Oh, they’re sorta like those cute lil’ marble guys you were sending here,” Mabel grinned. “Only these are gonna be way bigger! With lasers! And huge grabby hands!” To prove her point, she playfully imitated a robot, making fake beeping noises as she waved her arms around Peridot until the green Gem waved her away in annoyance.

“Ha! Give me an actual challenge here,” Peridot remarked haughtily. “Building one of these ‘robots’ will be easy!”

“W-well, we can build one faster!” Pearl proclaimed with daring zeal.

“I’d like to see you try!” the green Gem shot back, not wasting anymore time in rummaging through the parts the barn had to offer. Pearl was just about to leap in and do the same, yet before she could, Ford unexpectedly stopped her.

“Pearl, wait,” the author began evenly. “As much as I really hate to admit it… Peridot could be right after all. Even our shared mechanical knowledge might not be enough to counter the experience she’s had with all that advanced Homeworld technology… It pains me to say this, but… I think we might just be out of our league here…”

“Oh, what?” Pearl scoffed, rolling her eyes. “Come on, Stanford, don’t tell me you, of all people, is admitting defeat to a cocky little… for lack of a better word, clod, like her?”

“Oh, believe me, Pearl, I’m as far as humanly possibly from admitting defeat,” Ford smirked, his hands behind his back. “But I do think we’d do well with a little extra help on our side. And fortunately for us, I just so happen to know someone with a rare and brilliant knack for robotics in particular.”

“Um… and who might that-” Pearl gasped, her eyes widening with alarm as she realized exactly who the author was thinking of. “Oh, Stanford, please don’t tell me you’re talking about-”

“That’s right,” Ford nodded, his smile finally fading into slight apprehension as he briefly thought back on the past. “We need Fiddleford. H-he… wouldn’t happen to still be living here in Gravity Falls after all these years… would he?”
“Uh… I guess you could say that…” Mabel spoke up with a small frown.

“Um… Mr. Ford?” Steven said with a sympathetic frown. “Mr. McGucket, well… he’s…”

“He’s… not exactly like you remember him anymore…” Pearl said softly, looking down with remorse. “Let’s just say that…”

“B-but… he’s still… around, isn’t he?” Ford asked, growing steadily more concerned with the unknown fate of his old friend.

“Yeah, he is,” Dipper nodded. “But… its been a few weeks since we’ve seen him. I wonder what he’s been up to since that whole Blind Eye thing…”

“Blind Eye?!” Ford exclaimed, aptly alarmed. “Those robe-wearing freaks are still around?! They only just started popping up around here right after our portal went wrong, what could they-”

“They were still around,” Pearl interjected, crossing her arms. “Until we took care of them once and for all.”

“W-well then… what of Fiddleford?” the author pressed anxiously. “Is he alright? Where can we find him?”

Pearl and the kids exchanged something of a worried glance, knowing that Ford would certainly revile the truth once he learned it. Not that they intended to keep it from him anyway, since his desire to reunite with his old partner seemed to run deeper than just wanting another hand in helping them beat Peridot at her own game.

Which was why Pearl stepped forward, carrying plenty of regret of her own as she decided to take the author to exactly who he wanted to see, no matter what might happen as a result. “You’re not going to like this, but…”

“I-I… I can’t believe it…” Ford shook his head, the shame in his tone unmistakable as they all stood before the entrance to Gravity Falls’ dump. Pearl and the kids had spent the entire trip there explaining McGucket’s rather disheartening story to the author, who could only really react to it with shock and guilt that he was far too ashamed to hide. “I… I knew that Fiddleford had taken his… horrific experience with the portal harshly, but I could have never imagined he would have used that infernal memory gun to…” Ford trailed off, letting out a sad sigh as he shook his head and looked back to the ramshackle shack Pearl and the kids had told him McGucket now called home. “If what you all have told me really is true… then this is all my fault…”

“Oh, Stanford…” Pearl frowned, placing a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. “This isn’t your fault. There’s no way you could have known; there’s no way any of us could have known… Because believe me, if Rose and Garnet and Amethyst and myself had known, then we certainly would have done everything in our power to help him…”

The most Ford could offer in response to such a solemn sentiment was a small, but weary smile. However, upon noticing the palpable remorse between the pair, Steven was quick to step in to try and alleviate it. “Maybe you guys weren’t able to help Mr. McGucket back then…” he began with a frown that soon turned into a reassuring smile. “But the good news is you can still help him now! Heck, we already have by helping him get back his memories!”

“Yeah!” Mabel chimed in enthusiastically. “Which is why I’m sure he’ll totally down to help you
guys out with building your super-cool giant robot!”

“Wait, that’s why you clods dragged us all the way out here to this disastrous waste depository?” Peridot asked, baffled as she finally tuned into the conversation. Since the green Gem still needed to be watched carefully lest she run off on her own again, Ford and Pearl agreed that they had to bring her along with them to the junkyard so they could keep an eye on her. Of course, the green Gem had protested, especially when they more or less forced a leash on her to keep her from escaping. Still, she ultimately had no choice in coming along, and was clearly appalled upon learning exactly what the point of this outing really was. “I can’t believe you’re wasting my valuable time that I could be using to build my machine that will no doubt pummel yours into the ground just so you can find this ‘McGucket’ creature! This is completely asinine!”

“Well, its not any more ‘asinine’ than you thinking you can actually take Pearl and Great Uncle Ford on in an inventing battle and win,” Dipper remarked with a rather sarcastic smirk that succeeded in eliciting a frustrated growl from Peridot.

“Well… I suppose we should head inside…” Pearl said with a hint of apprehension in her tone. Without any further deliberation, the group approached the hillbilly’s shack as Mabel went on ahead to knock on the door.

“Old Man McGucket! You in there?” she called. “We have something we need to…. Ask you…?” she trailed off as the brittle wooden door slowly creaked open on its own accord, allowing everyone to peak in to see the rather ruinous state the shack had been left in.

McGucket’s home wasn’t usually the cleanest, given its spot right in the heart of the junkyard, but now it certainly seemed to even more of a wreck than it usually was. What few actual possessions the hillbilly had were strewn and scattered all over the tiny shack in a chaotic, disorganized mess. And even more mysterious than the hectic state before them was the fact that McGucket himself was seemingly nowhere to be found within it.

“Whoa, it like a hurricane blew through here…” Dipper noted with a worried frown. “I wonder what could have happened?”

“Its strange…” Pearl nodded fretfully. “It almost seems like the place has been entirely abandoned, and in quite a frantic rush at that… But if Fiddleford isn’t here, then were could he-”

The white Gem cut herself off as a sudden clamor sounded from the small window on the far side of the shack. Startled, everyone tucked away behind a rather large pile of garbage to see exactly who was apparently breaking into the shack for some unknown reason. Though, ironically enough, said perpetrator just so happened to be the very hillbilly that called it home.

McGucket let out a loud cry of alarm as he haphazardly slipped in through the open window, landing hard on the other side of it into a pile of miscellaneous scraps. “Aw, conswarnit!” the hillbilly huffed, clearly exasperated as he picked himself up off the ground and began hurriedly picking through his scattered possessions. “Now where’d I put those darn things? They’ve gotta be around here somewhere! I can’t spend all day ‘round here lookin’ for ‘em! I gotta skedaddle outta here again before that confounded portal blows this whole town sky high!”

“The portal?” Ford whispered with a concerned gasp as he leaned out from behind their hiding spot a bit. However, in doing so, he accidentally happened to knock over a stray empty can from the pile, which of course, garnished McGucket’s attention the instant it hit the ground.

“Whazzit?! Who’s there?!” the hillbilly exclaimed fearfully, swiping up a nearby frying pan off the ground and brandishing it as threateningly as he could. “I got me a cast iron skillet here, and I
“Ain’t ‘fraid to use it! I’m warnin’ ya!”

“Whoa, hey, its ok!” Steven assured as him, Dipper, Mabel, and Pearl stepped out first. Ford nearly joined them, but decided to hang back at the last second, both to make sure Peridot was restrained and out of fear as to how McGucket might react to him after so many years. “Its just us! L-long time no see, huh, Mr. McGucket?”

“Oh!” McGucket gasped with apt relief as he lowered his pan. “W-well howdy, kids! A-and howdy to you too, Miss Pearl…” he said, inclining his head in respect for the white Gem.

“H-hello again, Fiddleford,” Pearl greeted somewhat awkwardly, mostly since she know fully remembered the rapport herself and the other Gems used to have with him. “How have you been since… well, since your memories were returned to you?”

“I… gotta admit I’ve seen better days…” McGucket frowned, scratching the back of his neck as he looked down fretfully. “B-but I’m afraid I don’t got time to stand around here and catch up. I only came back here to get my handy dandy whittlin’ spoon,” he said, holding said very old, very bent up spoon up. “I gotta hightail it back to the bunker in the woods, and I reckon ya’ll do the same! It’s the only place where any of us has a chance at bein’ safe once that darn portal opens up and—”

“Uh… actually… the portal sort of… already opened,” Dipper pointed out.

“…W-what?” McGucket asked, his eyes wide with growing fear. “B-but… but that’s impossible! If that confangled portal opened up, t-then none of us would even be standin’ here right now! It would have blown us, this town, maybe even the whole entire world to smithereens! It would have started the end times, the apocalypse! And worst of all, it would have let that… darn, dastardly demon out to terrorize us all!”

“Well, then, we certainly were lucky. It didn’t destroy everything and it didn’t let him out, thank goodness,” Pearl clarified with a sigh of relief. “But… it did bring someone else back instead…”

At this, the white Gem glanced over at Ford, who still really had no idea how exactly he intended on facing his old partner, much less what to even say to him. Still, the author knew that it was either now or never, which was why he took in a deep breath to steady himself before finally stepping out of hiding to face his former friend for the first time in over 30 years.

“H-hello… Fiddleford,” Ford said with a small, bittersweet smile as he took in just how hard the passage of time had apparently been on the once youthful inventor before him. “It… certainly has been a long time… hasn’t it?”

The very moment McGucket saw Ford, his spoon and his pan instantly fell to the floor in a crash that seemed to rattle the entire shack before things quickly fell into a heavy silence. For what seemed like ages, the hillbilly simple stared at the author, his jaw dropped in apparent stunned shock and also hints of confusion, as if he was still trying to process exactly who his old friend was. None of the others really thought to interject, not even Peridot, who simply stood by the kids, completely uninvested in the ongoing situation entirely. Even so, the atmosphere between the author and the inventor was tense, yet unreadable, neither of them really knowing what to say or do next. That is, until McGucket slowly, cautiously, decided to break that silence and his own shock.

“S-Stanford…” the inventor whispered, his voice barely audible as he placed a ginger hand against his head. “I… It… it’s all comin’ back to me now… T-there were still a few gaps left in my memory b-but now… seein’ you… I… reckon they’re startin’ to fill in again…”

“Oh, w-well, then that’s good!” Ford said with something of a forced smile, one racked with hidden guilt over the fact that McGucket had lost those memories in the first place. “I… I’ve
heard… Pearl and the children told me everything. A-and I’m…” The author trailed off, glancing down as if a sudden conflict had filled him before he shook his head, almost as if to clear it. “It’s… a shame what happened to you, Fiddleford, truly it is. B-but I am glad to know that you’re on the steady road to recovering from it all.”

McGucket flinched upon hearing this, his surprise filling in with something else. Something that seemed akin to hurt rather than shock. “Is… is that all?” he asked, arcing an eyebrow.

“I… yes?” Ford frowned, confused. “I suppose it is. Why do you ask?”

The inventor simply let out a small, almost harsh chuckle as he shook his head sardonically. “You haven’t changed a bit, have ya, Stanford?” he asked. “Looks like you’re still ridin’ on that high horse of yours’, just like you were all them years ago.”

“Wha—high horse?” the author repeated with a baffled scoff. “And what, exactly, is that supposed to mean?”

“It means, you’re still just as full of pride as you ever were, Stanford,” McGucket remarked, his tone turning a bit sourer. “Even after all these years and everythin’ that happened, you still won’t admit that you were wrong about that gosh-darn portal of yours! You still won’t admit that you made a mistake!”

“Now, that’s where you’re wrong, Fiddleford,” Ford countered evenly. “I will admit that the portal was a complete and utter disaster in retrospect. It was something we never should have built which is why I fixed it by dismantling it altogether. At the very least I did my best to right the wrongs I had caused, unlike someone else I happen to know.”

“W-who, me?” McGucket asked, caught off guard by this accusation.

“Yes, you,” the author clarified, crossing his arms. “After our mishap with the portal, you were the first to rush out without even sparing a second thought towards helping me stop the damage it could have potentially caused! Even Rose came back to lend a hand after she quit, but you never did, Fiddleford! From what I heard, you were far too busy essentially burying your head in the sand by using that awful invention of yours to wipe your own memories than to help fix a problem that you were just as responsible for as I was!”

“I would’ve never had to do that if your cockamamie plans hadn’t gone as far off the rails as they did!” McGucket shot back just as harshly. “I tried warnin’ ya that portal was gonna end in disaster, Stanford, we all did! But the only ones you ever listened to were yourself and that confounded ‘muse’ of yours! You were as stubborn as a springtime mule back then, and you’re every bit as stubborn now since you still can’t see just how wrong you really were!”

“I’m stubborn?” Ford gasped, appalled by such a claim. “You’re the one who’s stubborn, Fiddleford! You had so much talent, so much potential to make a name for yourself, but you always held yourself back, even as far back as when we were in college! You could never see beyond just yourself, you never dreamed of anything greater, and that’s where you always fell short! You were content to spend the rest of your days toiling away in mediocrity, and look where that’s gotten you? Even lower than that! You may blame me for the sorry state you’re in now, but as far as I can see, you did this to yourself.”

“Alright, that’s quite enough from both of you!” Pearl suddenly interjected, quickly placing herself in the middle of this brutal confrontation. Likewise, the kids also stepped forward, none of them wanting to see such an intense fight between such close former friends, even if none of them really knew how to intervene in a situation none of them really had any parts in. “Believe me, I know just
how upset both of you are over this… mess. We were all very upset over it too but… its over now… Like Stanford said, the portal is gone now. M-most of our worries from all those years ago are over. We need to move on. We have to move on. After all… we have much bigger things to worry about now.”

“Yeah, like the Cluster!” Mabel exclaimed boldly.

“And the drill,” Dipper added, a bit more seriously.

“And finding out who’s going to be in charge of building said drill,” Peridot spoke up haughtily. “Which, just in case you all forgot, is going to be me!”

None of the others bothered to argue with the green Gem at this point, knowing that they had more important matters to attend to at the moment than trying to deflate her obviously massive ego. Instead, Ford collected himself, letting out a long sigh as he calmed down to address McGucket evenly. “Ah yes, that’s right. Fiddleford, the real reason why we came here was-

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“We need your help,” Pearl cut in, deciding that this would likely turn out better if she was the one to ask McGucket for his aid as opposed to Ford. “We have to construct a robot for this… competition, so to speak, and Ford and I thought we would ask you for your help on it. After all, Fiddleford, if I recall correctly, you do have quite a knack for engineering projects of this scale, and certainly your vast skill and talents would be invaluable in helping us-“

“I’m sorry, Miss Pearl, but I’m gonna have to stop ya right there,” McGucket shook his head, holding a hand up to interrupt. “I love buildin’ me a giant, rampaging robot as much as the next feller, and if it was just for you, well, I reckon I’d be more than happy to help. But I just don’t think I’m willin’ to work on another lil ‘project’ with Stanford again, ‘specially after how the last one turned out.”

“Oh, why am I not surprised?” Ford huffed crossly. “There you go, limiting yourself all over again. So much inventing and mechanical talent, and for what? For it to all go to waste while you hunker down here in the middle of a literal dump? We’re offering you a chance to assist us with what would most likely be the first worthwhile thing you’ve done in years and you’re just turning it down out of spite?”

“Believe me, Stanford, you’d know if this was outta spite,” McGucket rolled his eyes as he walked past the baffled author. “I’m turnin’ ya’ll down ‘cause I think I’ve wasted enough time puttin’ my inventing skills towards your hairbrained schemes. I reckon my so-called ‘talents’ would be better used elsewhere.”

“Elsewhere, hm…?” Peridot muttered to herself, having become gradually more intrigued by this conversation as it went along. While the green Gem still didn’t put much stock in humans and their technical abilities, she couldn’t help but think that perhaps this McGucket human could be some use to her after all, even if it was for nothing more than the sake of leveling the playing field in her favor. “In that case, I might just have an interested proposition for you, you… McHuman or whatever your name was,” she began with a knowing smirk.

“Huh? Peridot, what are you-” Steven was cut off as the green Gem suddenly shoved him back by his face so she could approach McGucket herself.

“Well, golly, take a gander at you!” the hillbilly exclaimed in amazement upon spotting the green Gem. “And who’re you supposed’ta be? Some sorta lil’ green space alien?”

“Ugh, why do all of you simple-minded humans insist on calling me that!?” Peridot huffed,
annoyed.

“Probably because you actually are one,” Dipper remarked with a bit of a wry smirk.

“Ugh, Fiddleford, this,” Pearl interjected, nodding over at the miffed green Gem. “Is Peridot. She’s supposed to be helping us with this drill project, but she’s so hung up over who’s going to lead the project that she insists that we compete in some sort of… ridiculous robot battle!”

“But I thought the robot battle was your idea, Steven,” Mabel whispered over to the young Gem aside.

“Huh, you know, I thought it was too…” Steven frowned, confused.

“W-which is why,” Pearl interjected evenly. “We came to came to ask for your-”

“Which is why I’m asking for your… assistance in helping me build my own ‘robot’ device, y-you… human,” Peridot interjected quite awkwardly and completely unexpectedly at that.

“What?!” just about everyone else in the shack asked in completely baffled unison as they all turned to the green Gem with wide eyes.

“W-what do you mean you want his assistance?” Pearl asked, looking down to Peridot with apt shock. “Just awhile ago, you were claiming that human technological skills were ‘inferior’ to your own. So why would you suddenly want to team up with one now?”

“I recall saying no such thing!” Peridot huffed, putting on a front of appalled innocence really only for McGucket. “And besides, according to you two, this one is quite adept at building one of these robots, so why not have him on my side?”

“Huh, you know, she does kind of have a point…” Steven noted. “After all, 2 vs 2 is much more fair than 1 vs 3 when it comes to just about anything, from fun little minigames, to huge, intense robot battles!”

“Y-yes,” Peridot agreed staunchly as she turned back towards Ford and Pearl. “And besides, he’s already made it very clear that he has no intentions of working with you, isn’t that right…. You?” she asked, glancing back over at McGucket.

However, before the hillbilly really had a chance to say anything for himself, the author was quick to intervene. “Please, don’t be ridiculous,” Ford scoffed, crossing his arms. “Even if he doesn’t want to work with us, there’s not a single, solitary chance in the multiverse that Fiddleford would ever team with the likes of you. Why, the very thought of it is-”

“Isn’t as plum-crazy as ya’ll might think it is…” McGucket spoke up, his tone surprisingly thoughtful, though rigid determination filled it as he turned to address Peridot. “Ya want yourself a robust buildin’ partner, greenie, well, ya got one.”

“YES!” Peridot cheered, completely ignoring the hand McGucket was holding out for her to shake as she heralded her victory over Pearl and Ford. “Ha! In your soon-to-be-very-upset-because-you’re-about-to-lose faces!”

“What? Fiddleford, tell me you’re not serious about this,” Ford said, pressing his way past the green Gem to address the inventor, who simply turned away from him crossly. “You can’t work with Peridot, she’s not-”

“‘Not to be trusted’?” McGucket finished, giving the author a critical glance over his shoulder.
“Well, golly, Stanford, ain’t that the pot callin’ the kettle black. Still, just ‘cause I lost just about most of my memories doesn’t mean I lost all of my senses. I know what I’m doin’ here. Do ya think I’d go around dressin’ like this if I didn’t?” he asked, adjusting his large, hole-ridden hat.

“Does he really want us to answer that?” Pearl muttered to the kids, cringing somewhat.

“Augh! Enough talking!” Peridot interrupted with an impatient groan as she broke her way into the conversation. “The sooner we get these robots built, the sooner we can decide which one of them is the better one! Which will of course be mine.”

“I think ya mean ours,” McGucket corrected firmly before sending Ford a rather knowing look as he passed by him. “Unless you’re thinkin’ you can actually keep up, Stanford. Iffin’ I recall correctly, which I’m hopin’ I do what with the whole memory erasin’ tomfoolery I went through, ya never really did have a knack for robuts like I did…”

“O-oh yeah?” Ford retorted challengingly as he followed after them, flustered. “Well we’ll just see if your so-called ‘inventing prowess’ are really just as sharp as you think they are, McGucket! Come along Pearl, children. We have a robot to build…”

“Oh my…” Pearl sighed to herself, sending a concerned glance over at Ford and McGucket in particular as they left along with everyone else. “I have a feeling this is going to be a bit of a-”

“BOT BATTLE!” Steven and Mabel cheered in excited unison, already running on ahead so they could prepare themselves for the aforementioned, no-doubt spectacular bot battle that was about to take place.

For the next several hours, the barn was alive with the sounds of buzzing saws, pounding hammers, and whirling drills. Both of the stalwart teams had plenty of materials to work with amongst the various scraps and scroungings the barn had to offer and Pearl and Ford and Peridot and McGucket alike made sure to utilize just about every piece they could get their hands on to their respective advantages. Pearl and Ford were already more than used to working together on projects such as this, though their usual team rapport was somewhat shaken by the author’s intensive drive to beat his former partner at his own game. As a result, Pearl was quick to pick up on the hectic, almost frantic pace Ford seemed to be working it, disregarding any sort of careful planning in order to complete their bot as soon as possible, a sentiment that the white Gem adopted herself whenever she so much as entertained the thought of Peridot goading her possible victory over their heads.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Peridot and McGucket were a rather scatterbrained team themselves. The concept of “teamwork” was all but lost on the pair as they each carried out their own respective tasks in their own respective ways. The green Gem was methodical in her approach, her expertise in Homeworld tech giving her an advantage as she adapted to what she had at her disposal to build with. The hillbilly’s approach, however, seemed much more random and all over the place, to the point that it frustrated his Gem partner several times over. Needless to say that several small arguments broke out between the pair throughout the construction of their robot, yet even despite those skirmishes, progress on it carried on steadily, even if the technical vision behind it was rather mixed at best.

All the while, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel hung out around the entrance of the barn, all three of them eagerly watching the dazzling array of inventing at work before them. The kids were all unanimously excited to see what the outcome of this contest would be, even if they were largely rooting for Pearl and Ford to win. Still, they knew they were going to have to be the impartial
judges of the competition to come, and together they had already thought up several challenges to put both bots through to see which team would come out on top.

“This robot contest is gonna be so cool!” Mabel exclaimed, gripping the side of the barn tightly. “Oh my gosh, you guys, you know what would be even cooler? If we built a giant robot just for us!”

“Oh, come on, Mabel,” Dipper rolled his eyes. “That’s… huh… you know what, that actually sounds like it would be pretty amazing, not gonna lie.”

“Yeah!” Steven exclaimed, enthused. “We could suit it up with all kinds of lasers and lights and we could paint it any color we want, and we could put a ton of stickers on it to make it look nice!”

“Yeah, like the one I gave Pearl and Grunkle Ford for their robot!” Mabel grinned, motioning over to the pair who was, ironically enough, fixing said colorful shooting star sticker to the side of their bot.

“Heya, kids,” Stan greeted as he, Garnet, and Amethyst made their way over to the barn. “I can’t believe you three and the ‘wonder nerds’ are still out here. What are you even doing anyway, working on building another rocket? Cause you better not be, if Pearl and Ford know what’s good for ‘em.”

“They’re not building a rocket,” Garnet clarified. “They should be working on the drill so we can stop the Cluster.”

“Well actually… we’re building robots now,” Steven shrugged with a small smile.

“Oh… why?” Amethyst asked, not following.

“We’re gonna have this huge robot contest so we can decide who’s gonna be in charge of building the drill!” Mabel informed brightly. “It’s Pearl and Grunkle Ford vs. Peridot and Old Man McGucket in the Robot Rumble of the Ages! You guys gotta stick around and watch it with us!”

“Wait, what?” the purple Gem asked, still confused as she peeked into the barn. “McGucket? What’s he doing here and what’s he doin’ working with… Peridot? He used to be part of the Nerd Squad with Pearl and Ford way back when, what happened?”

“Um, it’s… kind of a long story…” Dipper said apprehensively. “Let’s just say McGucket and Great Uncle Ford didn’t really have the… smoothest reunion after what happened between them all those years ago.”

“Dang, I bet,” Amethyst crossed her arms. “Dude must be pretty miffed over that whole portal mess if he’s willing to pair up with Peri just to get back at Ford for it.”

“Aw, that can’t be why Mr. McGucket decided to work with Peridot,” Steven shook his head. “Can it?”

“I dunno, if I were ol’ whackjob and had a chance to take Sixer down a peg or two, I know I’d definitely take it,” Stan concluded, shrugging.

“We’ve all seen just how much McGucket went through because of Ford’s mistake with the portal,” Garnet added rationally. “In a way, I can see why he’d want to see some sort of justice for it, even if it’s in a small way like this.”

“Well that’s… kind of sad when you think about it…” Steven frowned as he looked back towards
the barn. “If Mr. Ford and Mr. McGucket used to be such good friends, then they should be working together instead of fighting each other…”

“Don’t worry,” Garnet assured, placing a comforting hand on the young Gem’s head. “I’m sure they’ll patch things up sooner or later.”

Steven smiled halfheartedly at this, though before he could offer his thanks to the Gem leader, the sound of roaring engines rattled the entire barn. Everyone was quick to step out of the way as the first of the two robots, piloted by Pearl and Ford, gracefully rushed out of the barn and onto the lawn. The bot was sleek and elegant in its design, with thin, long metallic appendages, wheeled legs and six-pointed grips, and a small, repurposed, two seated cockpit forming its base. Overall, the machine seemed to be built for speed and mobility as it swept a quick lap around the barnyard, with both the author and the white Gem controlling it in tandem before it made its swift stop before the amazed group still gathered near the barn.

“So, children,” Ford said as he stood within the cockpit, Pearl doing the same to show off her familiar blue spacesuit. “What do you think of our highly advanced automaton here?”

“Whoa…” Dipper gasped, awestruck as he stared up at the robot alongside Steven and Mabel. “So cool…”

“GIANT ROBOT!” Mabel squealed in delight. “And I love how the sticker looks on it! I told you guys it would be a nice touch!”

“Yes,” Pearl chuckled. “It certainly does pull the whole thing together, doesn’t it?”

“Ha! You think that’s a ‘robot’?” Peridot’s loud taunt sounded all the way from inside the barn as the ground began to rumble with uproarious footsteps. “Pathetic. Now… behold! My vision of ultimate power!”

With a thunderous crash, Peridot and McGucket’s bot stormed out of the barn, instantly showing just how much more bulky and sturdy it was. Its overall color scheme, dictated by Peridot, was green, and its appendages were stout yet strong, with massive pinching claws and a sharply pointed cockpit where the pair sat side-by-side to control it. Both the hillbilly and the green Gem let out their own rowdy, wild gales of laughter as they paraded their hulking machine around freely.

“Now this is what I call a robut!” McGucket proclaimed proudly as he leaned out of the cockpit a bit. “What do ya’ll think about our lil’… whazzit?”

“Hey!” Peridot shouted, equally as baffled as she realized just how much Pearl and Ford’s bot towered over their own.

“Ours is taller!” Pearl quickly exclaimed, raising the robot’s hand. “We win!”

“Ladies and gentle-Gems!” Steven announced, stepping up onto a small box beside the chalkboard where a scoreboard was already set up for the oncoming contest. “Welcome to the first annual Robolymics!”

“Woo!” Amethyst cheered as her, Garnet, and Stan sat along on the sidelines to watch the competition unfold.

“Psst, Garnet,” Stan whispered over to the Gem leader. “You wanna place a bet on which one of these nerd teams is gonna take home the prize? The smart money’s on the munchkin and the hillbilly over there.”
“Hmph,” Garnet smirked, adjusting her shades before shaking the conman’s hand. “You’re on.”

“This competition will test our robo-engineers’ skills of robo-construction and robo-piloting.”

Steven continued on in explaining the rules.

“There are several rounds you all will have to go through,” Dipper added. “And whoever wins the most of them gets to be in charge of building the drill. Understood?”

All four of the competitors nodded firmly, even if they were more focused on seizing up the competition rather than really listening to the rules. “Great!” Mabel exclaimed, holding up a checkered flag before throwing it down dramatically. “Then let the robo-games begin!”

And with that, the competition kicked off without any further delay. The kids made sure to spell out the rules of each successive round to the teams, each of which was conceived to prove which group was better at designing and building the more functional machine. The first several rounds were largely standard fare, testing various aspects of the robots including balance, jumping capabilities, weapon capacity, speed, and strength. However, in order to fully prove which robot was better and which team was more up to the engineering task, the kids had devised a few non-sequitur categories to see which bot was the more well-rounded of the two. The robots had a chance to test out their artistic sides when it came to the dance and painting categories (the latter of which Amethyst gladly volunteered to be a model for and the result of which ended up being subjective overall). Other rounds were a bit more random, from jumping jacks, to yoga, to tug of war, to a game of ‘robo chess’, yet each game was indeed completely designed to prove who was the best of the best when it came to engineering and inventing. However, by the time just about every category had been decided, it seemed as though the contest overall would be destined to end in a tie, even up to the final, supposedly deciding category.

“Alright, everyone, this is the final event!” Steven announced, still stationed beside the chalkboard with the twins as the robots approached the pair of trucks there were supposed to toss to test their strength even further.

“You got this, P!” Amethyst cheered, shoving a handful of popcorn into her mouth.

“Get it, girl!” Garnet added just as supportively.

“Uh, y-yeah, but try not to win too much out there, ya nerds!” Stan taunted, remembering the bet he had made with Garnet.

“Ok, ready…. Set… CHUCK!” Steven shouted, and on that command, both teams’ bots tossed their respective trucks forward as hard as they possibly could. The vehicles sailed swiftly through the air, soaring high and far before they both disappeared over the mountain ridge countless miles away. All of the spectators were aptly stunned by such a powerful, incredible display, even if it really gave them no indication as two who might have won this final challenge.

“Um… well, looks like you both get a point on that one!” Mabel decided, marking a tally down on the chalkboard for both teams.

“Hm,..,” Steven mused, looking over the final results as both teams waited eagerly to hear the outcome. “Well, it looks like our final score is… a tie! That settles it; everyone gets to lead the project together!”

“Ahh, man, well that’s anticlimactic…” Amethyst pouted, leaning back on her seat.

“Yeah, it is!” Stan grumbled. “If the stupid contest ends in a tie, then who wins the bet?”
“Just wait,” Garnet advised, nodding back to the bots themselves.

“NO!” Peridot suddenly shouted, enraged by these unsatisfactory results. “This isn’t over! I demand that we have a tiebreaker!”

“Y-yes, so do I!” Ford exclaimed quite suddenly.

“What?” Pearl asked, completely baffled by her partner’s impulsiveness. “Ford, why—”

“We need to have a definitive winner here!” the author quickly cut her off before glaring down at McGucket in particular. “We need to decide who’s right and who’s wrong…”

“Aw, conswarnit, Ford!” McGucket snapped in apt frustration. “It’s a dog-gone tie! Just let it go already!”

“Oh of course you would tell me to simply ‘let it go’, Fiddleford,” Ford scoffed coldly. “Just like how you let go of all your own memories just because you couldn’t find a better way to cope with them!”

“But I got ‘em back, ya stubborn ol’ fool!” McGucket countered every bit as harshly. “And I’m tryin’ to move on, which is what you oughta be doin’ instead of clingin’ onto the past just cause ya think there’s somethin’ back in it that’ll prove you didn’t build a machine that could’ve destroyed the world even though that’s exactly what ya diddy darn did.”

“Ugh, enough of this!” Pearl interrupted sternly, tired of being stuck in the middle of this constant conflict. “Let’s all just give it a rest already! We don’t need any other final competition to decide anything. This is it, we tied. We’re the same, we’re all equals here. Let’s finally just move on already.”

“No!” Peridot cut in fiercely, gripping her robot’s controls tightly. The bot lurched forward and before McGucket could even make a move to counter the green Gem, its claws latched onto one of the other robot’s tall legs tightly, holding it in place. “You’re just a Pearl and a human! You both are beneath me! I’ll always be better than you, and nothing I’ve seen today will ever change that!”

“Oh, for crying out loud, not this again…” Ford groaned, exasperated.

“Well, have you ever seen a Pearl do this?!” Pearl exclaimed, suddenly taking full control of the bot as she swung it’s leg around to kick the other robot back hard. Peridot and McGucket’s bot landed hard and flat on its back as the others all gasped in shock, all of them quite intrigued and somewhat alarmed by the rather violent twist this contest had taken.

“Ohoh, so you wanna fight, huh?” Peridot asked challengingly as McGucket maneuvered the robot back up. “Good! We should have done this from the beginning!”

At this, their robot slammed into the taller bot, tackling it with an immense amount of force. Pearl and Ford managed to hold their own as they pressed it back, neither side making much edgeway as they struggled against each other.

“Oh, looks like things just got a heck of a whole lot more interesting!” Stan grinned, perking up in his seat as he watched all of the action unfold.

“Whoa, looks like things just got a heck of a whole lot more interesting!” Stan grinned, perking up in his seat as he watched all of the action unfold.

“STOP!” Steven cried fretfully as Ford and Pearl’s bot landed a brutal punch on Peridot and McGucket’s. “Giant robots shouldn’t fight!”

“Yeah! Not unless its in some sort of cool action movie or cartoon or something!” Mabel added
just as worriedly.

“Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!” Stan and Amethyst cheered in delighted encouragement, thoroughly invested in the ongoing battle. Of course, their cheers soon stopped as Peridot and McGucket’s bot suddenly hoisted Ford and Pearl’s up and tossed it towards the spectating crowd, forcing them all to scatter away from the brutal crash landing.

“Pearl!” Steven cried upon spotting the damage done to the bot and the pair within it.

“Great Uncle Ford!” Dipper exclaimed, also quite alarmed.

“It’s alright, everyone!” Pearl assured as they pulled the robot back up. “We’ve got this!”

“Be careful!” Mabel urged fretfully.

“Kick ‘em in the butt!” Amethyst quipped daringly.

“O-or ya know, don’t do that!” Stan countered. “Especially since I’ve got good money on the line here…”

The moment Pearl and Ford’s bot was back on its feet, Peridot and McGucket wasted no time slamming their robot’s claws into it once more. Several more brutal blows were passed back and forth between the two bots, sustaining damage to both, but taking neither of them down in the process. Needless to say that tensions were high between both teams, especially as they locked hands once more, though it was clear that the brute strength of Peridot and McGucket’s bot was starting to win out against Pearl and Ford’s much more lanky, feeble one.

“Stanford, this is a bunch of cockamamie nonsense and ya know it is!” McGucket exclaimed over the din of battle. “Why can’t ya just admit that you were wrong and be done with it!?”

“Because I’m not wrong!” Ford argued, pushing the robot’s controls harder. “At least not anymore! I already told you, I fixed my mistakes! I’m still fixing my mistakes and I’m not going to stop until I’ve fixed them all!”

“Well, then I reckon, you’ll likely never stop then,” McGucket said with a bitter, hurt scowl. “Cause there’s still one mistake of yours that you ain’t even started tryin’ to fix yet!”

“W-what are you-” Before Ford could even finish, McGucket pushed hard against the controls of his and Peridot’s bot out of sheer anger alone, shoving Pearl and Ford’s back hard. In the back seat of the cockpit as he was, Ford in particular reeled back, his loose grip on the controls costing him as he ended up falling backwards out of his seat entirely.

“Stanford!” both Pearl and McGucket gasped in sudden alarm as the author fell out of the rather tall bot towards the ground below. Unfortunately, the white Gem wasn’t quick enough to maneuver her bot to catch him in time, and as a result, Ford landed hard, the blow easily sending him into a daze and greatly startling just about everyone present. Though, surprisingly enough, the one who seemed the most fearfully concerned was none other than McGucket himself.

“Ford!” the inventor cried, not even hesitating to leap out of the robot, leaving Peridot to control it alone and all but abandoning the battle entirely to rush over to the fallen author’s side. Still, the green Gem was hardly upset by this as she instead gained full control over the robot, ripping Pearl’s attention away from Ford as the robot’s clawed hands landed a brutal punch against hers.

“Good,” Peridot sneered challengingly. “I’m glad we finally got those pesky humans out of the way. This is between you and me anyway, you Pearl!”
Before Pearl could even say anything, the green Gem shoved her back again, keeping her from seeing if Ford was alright or not. Fortunately, McGucket was already on that case as he ran over to Ford and wasted no time in checking him over for any sort of serious injuries. “S-Stanford!” the hillbilly exclaimed, his tone rife with concern. “Ford, a-are you alright? W-wake up! Say somethin’ to me!”

Fortunately, the author wasn’t out of it for too long as he let out a small groan at this, placing a hand against the side of his head as he slowly opened his eyes to meet the hillbilly’s worried gaze. “Mm? F-Fiddleford?” Ford asked in rather bleary confusion as he struggled to sit up on his own. “W-what are you doing? What about the robots… and the contest? I thought you-”

“Aw, forget about that silly ol’ contest,” McGucket shook his head. “I needed to come over ‘n make sure ya didn’t knock that big ol’ genius brain of yours too hard after I… ya know, knocked ya outta your robut and all…”

“W-what…?” Ford frowned, still bewildered, especially as McGucket offered a hand to help steady him. “I… I don’t understand. You only teamed up with Peridot b-because… because of what I…” The author paused, trying his hardest to collect his thoughts and how he wanted to say them, only to fail completely. “I… I just… I didn’t think you still-”

“Cared?” McGucket finished with a small, but knowing smile. “Aw, hornswaggle, Stanford. I may have forgotten ya for almost 30 years, but deep down in my gut, I don’t think I could have ever stopped carin’ about ya.”

For a moment, Ford simply stared at his old partner in complete and utter baffled silence, unsure of how to even react to such a warm, kind sentiment after just how much he had wronged McGucket in the past. So, instead of saying anything, he simply let out a small chuckle of acceptance as he finally accepted the hillbilly’s hand to help him up and lead him to somewhere safer away from the bot battle still raging on behind them just as violently as ever.

“This is pointless!” Peridot shouted as she pressed her bot roughly against Pearl’s once more. “There’s no way you’re gonna beat me! You’re an accessory! Somebody’s shiny toy! Where do you get off acting like you’re your own Gem?!” At this the green Gem’s bot finally managed to get the upper hand over the white Gem’s, as its clawed hand completely pride one of the thin arms off of the lankier bot in a single, swift yank. “You’re just a PEARL!”

Pearl winced back at this, this singular reminder of exactly the kind of Gem she was made to be much harsher and more painful than she knew it should have been. The white Gem knew, and she had always known, that her lot, at least according to Homeworld’s standards, was to stand by and serve and little else. Her caste wasn’t meant to think or to act or to do anything for anyone other than whatever Gem they were given to. There had indeed been a time when Pearl herself had been exactly that; just another piece of empty, thoughtless property in Homeworld’s rigid, unfulfilling system. And yet… the Earth, humans, her fellow Crystal Gems, they had all shown her she could be so much more than that. She could go beyond what she was made for, she could be her own person, her own Gem. She could think and feel for herself and she could take pride in who she was and what she did and she had. And so, that’s exactly what she planned on showing.

“That’s right!” Pearl proclaimed, rising up a bit out of her seat as she faced Peridot fiercely. “I am a PEARL!” With that, the white Gem swung her first hard, striking Peridot squarely in the jaw and catching her completely off guard.

“WHOO-HOO!” Amethyst cheered loudly on the sidelines as everyone else gasped in amazement at such boldness on the Pearl’s part.
“Whoa, who knew Pearl could pack a punch like that?” Stan remarked, unable to hide the fact that even he was genuinely impressed with the white Gem.

“I think we did…” Ford remarked, exchanging a small smirk with McGucket as they both silently recalled just how resilient Pearl could be when she needed to be.

As a result of the white Gem’s blow, Peridot’s bot stumbled back a bit, allowing Pearl time to pick hers’ up off the ground to pick the fight right back up where it had left off. “What you’re saying may be true,” the white Gem said as her robot sprang high into the air above Peridot’s before it began coming down in what would certainly be a hard and heavy kick. “But it doesn’t matter! I’m still gonna kick your butt!”

By this point, just about everyone was cheering Pearl on as she came in for what would possibly be her final blow against the green Gem. Or at least it would have been if Peridot’s bot hadn’t managed to catch one of the long legs of Pearl’s bot at the very last second.

“…Uh oh,” the white Gem muttered, though she had no time to break free from the hold. Immediately, Peridot’s robot slammed Pearl’s hard into the ground, repeating the action several times over until she finally plowed the taller robot down hard, more or less completely breaking it beyond repair as its pieces went flying.

“Pearl!” the others all exclaimed in apt concern as they collectively hurried over to check on the fallen white Gem. Despite the harsh, defeating blow she had suffered, Pearl was only mildly stunned by it, even if she did look much worse for wear as she lay against the wrecked remains of her robot.

Peridot hardly paid them any mind however as she leapt out of her robot, her face still bruised from the punch Pearl had landed on her, though her expression was bright with the satisfaction of her triumph. “Victory is mine!” she proclaimed proudly. “Now I’m the one in charge! Praise me! Praise me!”

“Pearl, are you ok?”

“Huh?” Peridot blinked, caught off guard by the fact that the others were all surrounding the white Gem rather than her.

“A-ah yes… I’m alright…” Pearl smiled as she allowed Steven to help her up.

“Yeah, P!” Amethyst exclaimed, giving the white Gem a sudden congratulatory hug. “Aw, that was awesome! You were so hardcore!”

“Oh really?” Pearl chuckled, rubbing her arm with a flustered smile.

“Oh yeah,” Garnet readily agreed.

“Yeah, Pearl, you were the best!” Mabel exclaimed excitedly.

“Seriously, you were,” Dipper added firmly. “And you punching Peridot in the face like that has to be one of the coolest things I’ve ever seen.”

“It was indeed a very impressive display,” Ford nodded with a smirk.

“We couldn’t’ve done it any better ourselves, Miss Pearl,” McGucket said, tipping his hat in respect for the white Gem.
“Eh, it was passable,” Stan shrugged, unconcerned as he leaned over to Garnet. “So uh… you gonna pay up or what, shades? Cause it looks like greenie just won our bet for me.”

“Did she?” Garnet countered, her arms crossed as she smiled somewhat mysteriously.

“Uh… yeah?” the conman frowned, confused. “Pretty sure she did, right?”

“Y-yes, I did win!” Peridot spoke up, frustrated. “So why aren’t any of you listening to me!? I’m the natural leader here! She’s just a common Pearl! A-and those two!” she snapped, pointing at Ford and McGucket. “They’re just simple humans! I’m the one in charge here, not any of them!”

“You’re wrong!” Steven argued readily. “If Pearls are really like you say they are, then Pearl isn’t common at all! She trained herself to fight! She learned how to build things! And she works hard every day to be greater than she already is!”

“And while we’re at it, you’re pretty much completely wrong when it comes to humans too, especially when it comes to McGucket and Great Uncle Ford,” Dipper said knowingly.

“Yeah! Both of them are like total geniuses!” Mabel agreed earnestly. “They’ve built all sorts of crazy neat stuff like big huge futurey portals or mind-erasing laser guns, and yeah, maybe those things weren’t always used for good reasons, but they’re still pretty amazing on their own and so are the guys who built them!”

“Seriously, how do you not get it by now, Peridot?” Dipper finished as he smiled back towards the white Gem, the author, and the inventor. “There isn’t anything ‘common’ or ‘simple’ about anyone here.”

Needless to say that Peridot was just about completely baffled by such a thought, to the point that, for perhaps the first time ever, she was completely speechless.

“Come on, everyone,” Garnet said, turning towards the nearby wreckage. “Let’s clean this mess up.”

“Yo, Pearl, you should come wrestling with me some time,” Amethyst joked as they all began to walk away.

“Mm… I dunno…” Pearl frowned, rubbing the sore spot on her arm as they began to pick up the scattered robotic wreckage.

“You know, I bet if we combined the sturdy base of the robot you and Peridot built,” Ford began, speaking to McGucket. “With the speed and agility of our robot, then we could certainly build a force to be reckoned with!”

“Now you’re talkin’!” McGucket exclaimed, enthused by the idea.

“B-but I won!” Peridot argued hotly, not moving from her spot. “What about the rules?!?”

None of the others so much as even acknowledged the green Gem, save for Garnet, who simply turned towards her and shrugged simply. “Welcome to Earth.”

Peridot was once again stunned into silence at this, the harsh realization hitting her that even though she technically “won”, she really had no victory to claim at all. After all, the possibility that she could have ever been wrong was something the green Gem couldn’t have ever anticipated and yet… her experiences during her brief time on Earth so far had already proved her wrong about more than she could have ever thought possible. So… perhaps, as ludicrous as it might seem, there
was a chance she could have been wrong about Pearls and humans alike as well.

Though it took some doing, eventually everyone had managed to gather up all of the scattered pieces of Pearl and Ford’s robot and organize them back in the barn with the rest of the parts they were likely to use for the drill. Despite his best arguments against the Gem leader, Stan never did end up getting his money from his bet with Garnet, though considering the circumstances, he didn’t really mind as much as him and Amethyst were invested in asking Pearl about her defining blow against Peridot, something that still greatly amused them both. By the time the work was all finished however, the conman returned to the shack for the evening, leaving Ford and the twins behind to help the Gems out with the drill in whatever way they could in the following days of its construction. And though McGucket knew he wasn’t really obligated to stay either, he did hang back for a bit before heading back to his home at the dump, supposedly for the sake of analyzing the robot him and Peridot had made for any possible further invention ideas. Ford, however, had a feeling the inventor was sticking around for some other reason, and, picking up on that reason, he decided that now was as good a time as any to speak his piece to his former partner.

“Fiddleford?” the author began as he stepped up beside the hillbilly.

“Yes, Stanford?” McGucket asked with a bit of an amicable smile as he looked up towards his old friend.

It was a smile that Ford was hard pressed to return as he awkwardly averted the inventor’s gaze, taking in a deep breath as he tried to figure out exactly what it was he wanted to say. “I… um… well, you see I… erm… you know what? Here,” Ford took pause as he reached into his coat and pulled out a small, colorful square, which he handed off to McGucket, who took it with wide eyes of wonder.

“I-is… is this…?”

“Y-yes, that’s right, it’s a Cubic’s Cube,” Ford nodded. “I… remembered how much you used to enjoy working on them years ago, and… I just so happened to find one of your old ones lying around the old lab so… I figured I’d give it back to you as something of a-” The author cut himself off as McGucket presented the cube back to him, all of its scrambled colors perfectly lined up again in almost no time at all. “Well then,” Ford remarked, impressed as he looked over the cube. “Seems as though you really are just as sharp as I remember you being, Fiddleford.”

“Eh, its all that newfangled muscle memory or whatever it is the kids are callin’ it these days,” McGucket shrugged humbly. The pair shared a brief laugh before the author let out something of a small, sad sigh as he looked away from the inventor yet again.

“Fiddleford, I… I should have said this earlier but… I’m sorry,” he finally relented, hanging his head a bit in genuine shame. “I truly am. You were right back then and you’re still right now; I was wrong the entire time and I was far too blinded by my own pride and my dreams of grandure to see that. Honestly, if anything I should have apologized to you 30 years ago. Maybe if I had it would have spared you from… well, you know…”

“Aw, shucks,” McGucket shook his head. “Y’know, Stanford, I thought all I wanted to hear outta ya was an apology, but now that I’m actually getting’ it, I can’t help but feel as though you were actually right.”

“A-about what?”
“About how I up and did all this to myself,” the hillbilly said, sighing himself this time. “You weren’t the one who made me erase all my memories, I did that all on my own. I’ve spent so long forgettin’… Maybe I should try forgivin’ instead… C’mere, old friend.” With this, McGucket opened his arms out wide to offer the author a hug, and though Ford wasn’t often physical when it came to showing affection, it was an offer he couldn’t possibly turn down.

“Well, golly, Stanford,” McGucket smirked knowingly. “I think I’d be downright honored to work with ya’ll again, especially on somethin’ like this that’s gonna help people instead of hurtin’ ‘em for a change.”

“So it’s a deal then?” Ford grinned, holding out his hand to his former, now-returned partner.

“It’s a deal,” McGucket gladly agreed, shaking the author’s hand to solidify his desire to help.

As this touching exchange went on, Pearl couldn’t help but smile softly to herself as she watched it from afar. In truth, she had always enjoyed building and inventing alongside both Ford and McGucket back in the day, and the thought of getting the change to do so again brought genuine excitement and delight to the white Gem. But even more than that, she was glad to see that peace had finally returned between the author and the inventor, and with that peace came the chance to let go of the painful memories of the past and creature better, happier memories in the future.

“Ahem,” Pearl’s train of thought was interrupted, surprisingly enough, by none other than Peridot. The green Gem had come to stand alongside her, an upside down drill in hand as she averted the taller Gem’s gaze sheepishly. “I-I have to admit, its… remarkable that a Pearl such as yourself could become such a… knowledgeable technician. Mm…” Peridot hesitated, still clearly swallowing her pride as she presented the white Gem the drill she was holding. “Why don’t we get started?”

Pearl couldn’t help but smile in slight amusement as she knelt down and took the drill from Peridot and turned it around. “You’re holding it upside down,” she informed before handing the tool back to the green Gem.

“Y-yes, of course,” Peridot remarked, flustered. “You know… those round appendages on your machine could be useful for something.”

“They’re called wheels,” Pearl said, still smirking. With this, the white Gem stood and led Peridot over to Ford and McGucket so the four of them could begin planning out their ideas for the drill together. Though the green Gem was still somewhat uncertain about the thought of working with a Pearl and a pair of humans, she decided that it was something she was just going to have to get used to for the sake of the greater good. After all, just about everything on Earth was strange to her, so how was the prospect of working with unlikely allies such as these any stranger than anything else she had already seen thus far?

As the four technicians met up and began throwing drill ideas back and forth, they were all largely unaware of the kids watching them from afar at their spot near the barn. Needless to say that all three of them were more than glad to see that peace and acceptance had won the day, even despite how intense the preceding bot battle had been. “Well, you guys,” Steven began, offering a smile to Dipper and Mabel. “It looks like we’re well on our way to stopping the Cluster.”
“It’s about time too,” Dipper said with a bit of a grin as he crossed his arms. “The sooner we stop the Earth from literally imploding from the inside out, the better. And who knows? With Pearl, and Ford, and McGucket all working together, maybe building this whole drill thing could be kinda fun.”

“‘Grrrr, fun for me you mean!’” Mabel roared playfully, taking on a gruff tone as she held the Cluster sock puppet up.

“Oh no!” Steven cried in faux dramatics. “It’s the Cluster!”

Mabel kept playing along as she growled once more, this time pouncing on both boys and easily knocking them both to the ground, all three of them laughing all the while. “‘You think you can stop meeeeee?!’” she taunted, more or less tickling both Steven and Dipper with the puppet by this point as a way of ‘attacking’ them.

“Aw, c-come on, Mabel!” Dipper laughed, struggling to get away. “Cut it out!”

Mabel simply roared through the puppet once more as the impromptu game continued, though needless to say all three of the kids were having a great time through it. “Ah! We’re doomed!” Steven chuckled breathlessly, even though they really weren’t.

And yet… if they failed to finish the drill and truly stop the Cluster on time, then there was no telling just how true that statement just might turn out to be.
Chapter 64: Three's a Crowd

Chapter Summary

In which Stepper is the light of my life, everyone gets really hype about fusions, and singing solves all your problems.

Chapter Notes

AHHHHH YES IM SO EXCITED FOR THIS ONE! Seriously, I've been looking forward to this chapter for SUCH a long time and I'm so glad its finally done! In fact, I'm so excited that I won't keep you from it. Here it is for you to enjoy! (Keyword is DIPEVEBEL)

With the question of leadership on the project answered, construction on the drill was now underway. Even after the robot rumble the day prior, the barn still had plenty of suitable materials that Pearl, Ford, and Peridot were able to scrounge up to use on the machine. For the time being, McGucket had taken his leave back to his humble shack to draw up a proper blueprint for everyone to work off of, but for now, laying the proper foundations on the project would certainly prove to be a good first step forward in their efforts to stopping the Cluster once and for all.

“Hm… yes, this should all work nicely…” Pearl mused to herself, looking over the list she had created before checking over the pile of scraps and supplies resting in the yard before her.

“Yo, P! Brought ya more junk like you wanted me to,” Amethyst reported before dropping her load of various items.

“Now, now, Amethyst, this ‘junk’ might just end up contributing to the drill that will hopefully save the entire planet from impending doom,” Pearl concluded with a thoughtful smile.

“Oh yeah?” the purple Gem asked with a smirk as she briefly rummaged through the pile. “So uh… how exactly do you think this is gonna help us save the world?” she asked playfully as she held up a deflated whoopie cushion.

Pearl rolled her eyes as she snatched the cushion away from the chuckling purple Gem and tossed it back into the pile. “Well, you never know,” she said, her amused smile fading as she looked back to the mess before her. “Still… we’re going to need to clear some space out so we’ll actually have someplace to build the drill… To be honest, we… probably should have done that before moving all of these supplies out here…”

“Ugh, so you mean we gotta move all this stuff again?” Amethyst asked, already exasperated by
the mere thought alone.

“No need,” Garnet interjected as she stepped up to the pair. “All we need to clear some space is a little muscle.”

“Oh, Garnet…” Pearl took in a bit of an anxious breath. “You don’t mean-”

“I do,” Garnet nodded firmly before offering the purple Gem beside her a small, cordial grin. “Amethyst?”

Upon realizing what the Gem leader’s intention was, Amethyst was unable to hold back a huge gasp of excitement, stars in her eyes as she eagerly showed her agreement with this plan. “Yes, yes, YES! Let’s mash it up, G!”

Garnet simply let out a small laugh at this as she took Amethyst’s hand so they could prepare their dance. Though still slightly apprehensive, Pearl took a step back to allow them the space they needed, hoping that they’d reign themselves in this time when compared to before. All the same, Garnet and Amethyst moved smoothly and fluidly as they strutted towards each other, their usual dance bringing them together in a burst of bold, bright light. And out of that light emerged bombastically large, familiar figure: Sugilite.

“Awwwwww yeah, baby!” the rowdy fusion proclaimed, towering high over the entire barnyard. “Ya girl is back and ready to bust it up! Now… lets drill out a space for this drill…”

“C-can we possibly do so in a way that doesn’t raise half the barn?” Pearl asked rather nervously.

“Too late!” Sugilite exclaimed, swiftly summoning her flail and giving it a mighty swing. Pearl let out a small squeak of fear as she quickly ran for cover as the supplies for the drill went flying at random. The rowdy fusion let out a wild laugh as she entertained herself with her thoughtless “land development”, largely unaware to the fact that the white Gem wasn’t the only one watching her reckless display.

“Whoa…” Dipper mused in amazement as him and Ford stood near the barn, observing Sugilite’s strength from afar. “They make it look so easy…”

“They certainly do, don’t they?” Ford agreed with an enthused smile. “Fusion is by far one of the most incredible abilities I’ve witnessed from Gemkind. The fact that they can merge their light-based bodies and gem-based minds completely together to create larger, stronger beings is simply astounding! It’s always been one of my favorite topics to study when it comes to Gems and its an absolute treat to see it again for myself.” The author paused briefly as Sugilite tossed her flail once more, rattling the entire area as a result and nearly knocking Ford and Dipper to the ground entirely. “E-even if Sugilite is… quite a bit to handle…”

“So, is that why you wrote so many notes about fusion in your journals?” Dipper asked, as curious as ever to hear perspective from the author himself.

“Oh, yes, absolutely,” Ford nodded before letting out something of a wistful sigh. “After all, its about the most I could do to document my research on such an amazing phenomenon, even if that research is somewhat… inadequate…”

“Inadequate?” Dipper frowned, confused. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you see, Dipper. I’ve always believed that the best kind of scientific research is born from firsthand experience,” Ford informed astutely. “Its for that reason that I accompanied the Gems on so many of their missions back in the day—so I could see their mysterious powers at work for
myself. But fusion is… something on an entirely different level. Its complexities, its true nature, the sheer experience of fusion in and of itself is something that is unfortunately beyond human’s capacity to understand due to one single, simple, unfortunate fact alone: humans cannot fuse.”

“Well… I don’t know if that’s completely true…” Dipper muttered without really thinking.

“What was that?” Ford asked, looking down to his nephew inquisitively.

Dipper flinched, suddenly anxious as he realized that he’d now have to explain exactly what he had just implied. An explanation that likely wouldn’t be the smoothest to provide given how he was still occasionally baffled by it himself. “Um… w-well… I know this might sound… kinda crazy but… I’ve sort of—ok, well not really sort of as much as I’ve actually fused before… So… yeah.”

At first, such an admission was only met by a look of complete confusion from the author, though he soon broke out into a small bout of bemused laughter that only flustered his nephew even more. “Oh, that’s a good one, Dipper!” Ford chuckled, warmly patting the boy on the back. “You nearly had me going there for a second, but I know better. Like I said before, fusion between humans and Gems is a complete and utter scientific impossibility.”

“N-not for Steven it isn’t!” Dipper protested earnestly. “I… I mean, Steven’s half Gem and half human, so I guess that means he can fuse with both? A-anyway, he has fused before, with Connie, and with Mabel a-and… and with me.” He finished quickly, only barely noticing how warm his cheeks were with the recollection of his own fusion with the young Gem.

“…Really?” Ford asked, now quite intrigued as he realized that his nephew was completely serious. “W-well, that’s… that’s incredible! By all accounts something like that should be impossible, but then again the fact that someone like Steven, who’s simultaneously both Gem and human even exists at all is a miraculous impossibility in and of itself! Still, Gem and human cross fusion… it’s a scientific marvel! I’d simply love to know more, that is, if you don’t mind filling me in with all of the details, Dipper.”

“Oh, of course!” Dipper readily agreed, more than eager to aid in his uncle’s important research. “Well, first we—wait…” he paused briefly, a smile spreading across his face as he came up with a plan that would no doubt impress the author even more than the knowledge of human-Gem fusion had. “You know what? I have a better idea. Instead of just telling you about it, why don’t we just show you instead?”

“Show me?” Ford asked, raising a confused eyebrow.

“Wait right here,” Dipper advised quickly, already glancing around to see if Steven was anywhere around in the immediate area, which he wasn’t. So instead, he began hurrying off to go find the young Gem for himself, refusing to pass off the opportunity to amaze the author in more ways than one. “I’ll be right back!”

“Oh, w-well, alright then,” Ford smirked, waving his nephew off, even if he really didn’t understand whatever he could possibly be planning. At least not yet. “In that case, I suppose I’ll be right here until you return!” A mere second later, however, a large piece of upturned earth crashed down right next to the author, courtesy of Sugilite’s recklessness, prompting him to step into the barn for his own safety. “O-on second thought… maybe I won’t…”

“The hat feels… redundant…” Peridot scowled as she glanced up at the colorful party hat Mabel
had perched atop her triangular hair mere moments ago.

“Aw, come on!” Mabel exclaimed brightly as her and Steven stood before the green Gem. “I think it looks pretty on you, Peri!”

“Yeah! And besides,” Steven added with a smile. “It’s to celebrate your first time eating Earth food! I mean… technically coffee was kind of your first food, but then again, coffee is a drink so… I don’t think it really counts.”

“Then… what’s the chair for?” Peridot asked, glancing down at the high chair the pair had set her up in.

“Safety!” Mabel and Steven chimed in pointed unison.

“…So… how does this work exactly?” Peridot raised an eyebrow as she looked down dubiously at the plate of macaroni and cheese before her.

“Oh, its really easy,” Mabel informed. “First, you take this fork, then you grab some food with it and bam!” She acted the movements out, shoving a forkful of mac and cheese into her mouth to demonstrate. “Ya get yourself a yummy meal!”

“How dignified…” the green Gem remarked sarcastically. “So… what is the point of this whole ‘eating’ thing anyway?”

“Oh, well, the point is that food tastes really good!” Steven shrugged with a small laugh. “And you eat it so you can enjoy how great it tastes! And… so you won’t starve to death, but then again, I guess that’s not really a problem for Gems so… for you, it’d probably be more about the taste thing.”

“Hm…” Peridot’s expression was still rather critical as she looked down at the food in front of her yet again as she picked up her fork experimentally. “Very well then, I shall try this so-called ‘eating’, but only for the sake of gaining further intel on this planet and its bizarre customs…” Steven and Mabel both stood by, watching expectantly as the green Gem clumsily used her fork to pick up a single piece of macaroni and lift it to her mouth. However, right before she could actually eat it, their unofficial ‘experiment’ was suddenly and unexpectedly interrupted.

“Steven!” Dipper shouted as he rounded the corner of the barn. However, in his excitable haste, he accidentally ended up tripping himself up as he did so, resulting in him face-planting hard onto the ground. The racket was more than enough to startle everyone, especially Peridot as she jolted forward in her high chair, ultimately knocking it, and herself over in the process and spilling what was supposed to be her first meal all over her.

“Dipper!” Steven exclaimed, concerned as he hurried over to help his friend up while Mabel moved to assist Peridot. “Are you ok?”

“Steven,” Dipper repeated, his tone very earnest and intentful as he tightly gripped the hand the young Gem offered to help him up. “We have to fuse. Right now.”

“WHOAA!” Mabel gasped in shock as she overheard this, accidentally letting Peridot fall back down to the ground. Ultimately, the green Gem picked herself up and stormed off, too perturbed to continue her first attempt at eating now, especially since Steven and Mabel were distracted. “What did you say, bro-bro?”

“I said,” Dipper began a bit breathlessly. “Steven and I need to-"
“Yes!” Steven interrupted, his expression an elated smile as he swiftly helped Dipper up and pulled him into a tight, excited hug. “Yes, yes, of course I’ll fuse with you, Dipper! It’s been such a long time since we’ve formed Stepper, and I’ve really been wanting to give him another go since we had so much fun together last time, so of course I’m up for fusing, especially if you are!”

“W-well, that’s great!” Dipper smiled just as excitedly as their embrace disbanded. “Then let’s do it!”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Mabel interrupted, casting a suspicious glance at her brother. “Not that I’m not super hype to see my favorite four-armed Ste-bro again, because oh my gosh I am, but… what’s the catch here, Dipper? Why do just wanna suddenly fuse with Steven outta the blue like this?”

“Oh, well, y’see…” Dipper began somewhat apprehensively as he glanced away. “I was… sorta telling Great Uncle Ford about how Steven can fuse with other humans and he was really interested in hearing more about it so I figured we could maybe… show him an example of a Gem/human fusion? Just so he could see what that looks like for himself and all.”

“Aha! I knew it!” Mabel remarked with a knowing grin as she placed her hands on her hips. “I had a feeling this had something to do with you bein’ a huge nerd and wanting to impress Grunkle Ford!”

“Oh, come on, that’s not what this is about,” Dipper rolled his eyes. “I just wanna help him with his research! He’s always studying all these incredible things, and what’s more incredible than someone like Stepper?”

“I can’t think of too many things that are!” Steven chimed in brightly as he took Dipper’s hand again. “I think this is a great idea, Dipper. Mr. Ford is just gonna love Stepper, I know it! So come on!” The young Gem didn’t hesitate to pull Dipper after him as Mabel hurried not too far behind. “Let’s go introduce him!”

Despite Dipper’s instance on forming Stepper as soon as possible to keep Ford from waiting in suspense for too long, Steven and Mabel had a bit of a different idea in mind. With ample space to build the drill cleared out, Garnet and Amethyst had unfused, and not long afterward, Mabel quickly gathered the two of them and Pearl to congregate in front of the barn for unknown reasons. Meanwhile, Steven also made sure to round up Ford and even Peridot, still not explaining the reason why they were all being brought together, save for the fact that it was to “watch something”. And needless to say that upon realizing the pair had gathered an audience to bear witness to their fusion, Dipper was less than pleased.

“Are you guys serious?” he asked Steven and Mabel in a harsh whisper as everyone settled in front of the barn. “Do we really need everyone to watch us fuse?”

“Well, yeah!” Steven exclaimed with a grin. “Last time we fused, the only one who got to see it was Mabel. But now that the Gems and Mr. Ford are here, they should get the chance to see us form Stepper too, shouldn’t they?”

“Uh… I don’t know about that…” Dipper frowned, rubbing his arm uncomfortably.

“Oh come on,” Mabel reassured. “All you guys need to do is dance and just pretend like nobody’s watching you. Or that everybody’s in their underwear. Your choice.”

“Hey, are you guys actually gonna do something over there?” Amethyst called as she leaned
against the side of the barn. “Or did you just get us all together to watch a whole bunch of nothin’?”

“Oh, its not nothing,” Steven said brightly. “Me and Dipper are gonna fuse!”

A round of surprised murmurs arose from the group near the barn, though Ford in particular stepped forward out of immense interest as to what was about to take place. “T-they’re actually going to do it!” he exclaimed, rushing to pull his journal out of his coat so he could take notes. “If they manage to actually pull this off, then this will be a true breakthrough in my research! An absolute wonder of science and magic!”

“And… rather unprecedented…” Pearl frowned, a bit less enthused. “Steven and Dipper don’t really have much of a logistical reason to fuse right now, so why are they-”

“Because they want to,” Garnet concluded with a hint of a smile on her face. “That’s why.”

“Ha! As if those two clods could even pull something like fusion off,” Peridot scoffed, crossing her arms. “And even if they could, said fusion would likely be barely even functional given that a Gem and a human are hardly compatible and shouldn’t even be together in the first place!”

“Uh, Peridot?” Amethyst spoke up with a bemused grin at the irony of the green Gem’s doubtfulness. “I hate to break it to you, but-”

“Alright, boys!” Mabel interjected loudly, grinning over at Steven and Dipper as she pressed play on the nearby boom box to give them some music to dance to. “Get fusing!”

“Oh, come on, seriously?” Dipper asked in immediate embarrassment upon realizing the song playing in the background was none other than BABBA’s “Disco Girl”. “Do we really have to fuse to this song?”

“Well, it is the song that we fused to the first time around,” Steven pointed out with a small laugh as he already began moving to the pop beat. “And besides, its starting to grow on me a little too. I can see why you like it so much. You… do still like it, don’t you?”

Dipper paused, not really paying too much mind to the question as much as he did the hand Steven had extended out to him so they could properly begin their dance. “Heh, yeah,” he said with a warm, genuine smile as he accepted the young Gem’s invitation. “I still do.”

Without any further hesitation, Steven readily pulled Dipper into a fast, free spin, both of them twirling together, their hands joined as they moved about in wide open circles. With this immediate momentum, it was easy for both of them to forget the spectators watching them as they spun each other out, only to immediately pull each other back in. There wasn’t too much grace or elegance to their dance, but their hardly needed it as their shared elated laughter spoke volumes about just how much this dance was truly bringing them together.

However, their laughter wasn’t the only show of excitement between the boys. For as their dance continued, everyone watching it soon let out a shared gasp of amazement as Steven’s feet slowly began to rise off the ground first, followed by Dipper’s as a result of his tight grip on the young Gem’s hands. The others were all awestruck as they watched the boys rise a good bit into the air together, somehow still spinning in jubilant circles with their eyes closed and their laughter unending. The Gems exchanged a stunned gasp, all three of them silently and collectively realizing that Steven had just very well unlocked his mother’s renowned floating abilities. And yet, they didn’t bother to point that out right then and there, lest they interrupt what was, by all accounts one of the most astonishing fusion dances any of them had ever seen.
Of course, eventually Dipper did open his eyes only to realize that him and Steven were in fact, more or less dancing in mid-air. He let out a sharp, fearful gasp as he gripped the young Gem’s arms tightly, trying his hardest not to look down at the ground several feet below them and doing little else. “S-Steven!” he squeaked anxiously, his grip on the young Gem tightening ever so slightly as they continued spinning winding circles in the air. “W-we’re-”

“I know!” Steven laughed warmly as he looked to Dipper, apparently not even noticing their lifted elevation at all. “I’m having a great time too!”

For a moment, the most Dipper could do was state at Steven with apt disbelief, especially as the young Gem let out another jovial, liberating laugh. And, upon realizing that he’d stay safe and in the air so long as his hands were intertwined with Steven’s, it was a laugh that he was ultimately helpless to join back in on once more. Everyone was still completely awestruck as they watched the gently floating pair, but their amazement only grew as a warm, pale pink light began to flush out from Steven’s gemstone, enveloping both boys as their separate gales of laughter soon became one.

In fact, Stepper didn’t stop laughing, even as he did stop spinning, both sets of his four arms wrapped around himself tightly in an elated, affectionate hug. The newly-returned fusion was more or less hanging in midair, that is, until he happened to notice his precarious perch several feet above the ground. “Uh oh…” he muttered, his laughter quickly dying out, especially as gravity decided to kick in for him yet again. Stepper let out a fearful cry as he quickly plummeted the thankfully small distance to the ground, face-planting onto the grass with a very audible thud.

“I-I’m ok!” the fusion announced, using both sets of arms to pull himself up into a sitting position. He let out a gasp, however, upon noticing the very fact that he did indeed have four arms in the first place, stars filling his eyes as he burst into a delighted smile. “No, I’m even better than ok! I-I’m back! We did it!” Stepper broke into another round of cheerful chuckling as his upper arms pulled himself into an excited embrace once more. “And it feels better than ever before!”

“STEPPER!” Mabel’s ecstatic shout caught the fusion off guard, especially as she plowed right into him, knocking him flat onto his back as she locked him into a heavy hug. “Oh my gosh, its so great to see you again! It feels like its super long since the last time you were around!”

“Aw, come on, Mabel,” Stepper chuckled, sitting up as he returned her hug. “You technically see ‘me’ all the time. Ok well, maybe not me me, but Steven and Dipper me… Oy, this is getting kind of confusing… But still, it is pretty great to be back together like this!”

“Ooo, I am lovin’ those super harmonious vibes you guys got goin’ on there!” Mabel exclaimed as she effortlessly climbed up to sit atop the fusion’s shoulders as he stood. “That’s it! Operation ‘Find the Harmony’ is officially a success! Now we just need to come up with a new mission for you! Now let’s see… hm…”

“I know,” Stepper spoke up with a bit of a wry grin. “How about Operation “Who Said You Could Sit On My Shoulders”?!” He asked playfully as he used both sets of arms to hoist her off his shoulders and hold her out in front of him.

“Hey! Its not my fault that you make such a good lookout post!” Mabel protested, sticking her tongue out at the fusion.

“Oh, so you’re finally admitting that I’m taller than you then?” Stepper asked with a knowing smirk.

“Ha! Not a chance!” Mabel shook her head triumphantly. “I’ll never admit defeat! Never!
“NEVER!”

“Mabel, I’m literally double your height right now,” Stepper pointed out, still grinning.

“And your point is?”

“Heeeeyo!” Amethyst called as her and the other Gems began to venture over to the pair. “There he is! Our four-armed main man Stedip!”

“Uh… actually, Amethyst, its Stepper,” the fusion pointed out with a bit of an amused chuckle.


“Heh… right…” Stepper said a bit sardonically before Pearl spoke up.

“Well, it certainly is a treat to see you again, Stepper,” the white Gem said, gently pushing the chuckling purple Gem aside. “You know, while you’re here, we might just have to fit in some combat training if at all possible. I’d love to see what you’d be able to pull off with Steven’s shield, Dipper’s sword, and that special journal of yours all at the same time…”

“Oh my gosh, that’d be so much FUN!” Stepper exclaimed with an amazed gasp. “I’d be unstoppable with all three of them! Plus, I got plenty of hands to hold them all in,” he grinned, waving three of four of his hands before raising the final one enthusiastically. “And one to spare!”

The others all shared a warm laugh over the fusion’s humorous quip, though it gradually died out as Garnet approached Stepper next. However, the fusion simply took in a deep breath and straightened his posture, offering the Gem leader a solid expression as he allowed her to silently inspect him. “So, Garnet? What do you think?”

It took a rather expectant moment of apparent scrutinization from the Gem leader, she finally broke out into a small, pleased smile accompanied by a nod of certain approval. “I think you’re looking pretty stable, Stepper,” she confirmed warmly.

“YES!” the fusion cheered loudly, only to quickly catch himself and reign his excitement back in. “O-oh, I mean, uh… that’s cool. Ya know… just like I am. Cool and stable all the way!”

“DORK!” Mabel shouted teasingly, letting out a rowdy laugh as Stepper spun around to face her in faux offence.

“Hey!” he snapped, grinning himself as he geared up to chase after her as she ran off. However, before he could, his attention was quickly diverted by a very loud, very angry yell from a very perturbed green Gem.

“YOU!” Peridot shouted, her tone and expression both burning with fury as she stormed up to the somewhat startled fusion. “You’re that four-armed abomination that destroyed my attack robinoids with your information log-based projectiles!”

For a moment, Stepper simply regarded the green Gem with a bit of confusion before he realized exactly what she was talking about. “Ohhhh right, the… dumb robot things,” he said, boredom filling his expression briefly. “Well… I’m sorry about breaking them, Peridot, but—actually, wait, no, we’re not sorry because you tried to use those things to destroy the Gems and Mabel!”

“Well, it’s your fault that I even came to this doomed planet in the first place, you malformed pebble!” Peridot retorted harshly. “I would have never requested an envoy to Earth if not for your destructive actions against my beautiful machines!”
“Ugh, whatever, Peridot,” Stepper scoffed, rolling his eyes as he scowled down at the green Gem. “What matters is that you’re here now, so you might as well try to make the most of it by helping us build that drill.”

“I will not take orders from the likes of YOU!” the green Gem ranted, furious. “I should have figured all along that you were merely the despicable fusion between the Steven and that irksome Dipper given that they’re both just smaller clods coming together to make one bigger one!”

“Alright, that’s enough,” Garnet interjected just as it seemed as though Peridot was reeling back her first to strike the fusion’s legs since she couldn’t really reach the rest of him. So instead, the Gem leader easily lifted the green Gem into the air, even despite her angry struggling as she tried her best to even so much as land a hit on Stepper. “I think its time for you to go cool down… again.”

“Honestly, that’s like the third tempura tantrum she’s thrown today alone!” Pearl remarked as her and the other Gems began to take their leave, with Peridot sending hostile, though ultimately empty threats Stepper’s way all the while.

“I’m not finished with you yet, you four-armed… whatever it is you are!” she yelled fiercely as she pounded against Garnet’s secure hold on her. “You’ll pay for ruining my precious robinoids, you hear me? PAY!”

“Pfft, yeah, sure,” Stepper remarked with a small smirk as he crossed his upper arms. “I’d like to see you try.” The fusion’s calm demeanor was soon broken, however, as he noticed the only member of the group he hadn’t spoken to yet slowly make his way over to him with wide eyes of awestruck amazement.

“O-oh! Hi, Mr. Grunkle Ford!” Stepper greeted excitably, only to quickly cover his mouth out of embarrassment over his accidental slip up. “I-mean, h-how’s it going, Great Mr. Ford! N-no, I… what I meant to say was, i-its great to finally meet you—ok, well not really meet you since we both already know you, b-but you’ve never met us like this even though you have met us when we’re apart and—you know what? I’m getting confused again, I think I’m just gonna stop talking before I make this any worse than it already is.”

“Again I say…” Mabel grinned as she leaned over towards the scatterbrained fusion. “DORK!”

“Mabel!” Stepper exclaimed hotly, his already red cheeks burning with even more embarrassment than before. However, Ford hardly seemed to take any notice of how flustered Stepper as he instead continued staring at him, absolutely captivated by the supposedly impossible fusion standing before him.

“I-incredible…” the author murmured, astonished. “You boys actually did it! You’re a… a fusion! A true, genuine, Gem-human hybrid fusion!”

“Yes! I sure am!” Stepper grinned excitedly. “T-though according to Pearl, I’m actually like… 75% human and only 25% Gem or something? So, there’s not a ton of Gem in me, but I still have this,” he pointed down to the exposed pink gemstone on his navel. “So, I guess that still counts for something, right?”

“Fascinating…” Ford said, circling the fusion to get a better look at him. “And you appear to be so stable as well… ‘Stepper’, was it?”

“Heh, yeah,” Stepper confirmed with a bit of an awkward laugh. “Though to be fair, it… did kind of take us a while to get this stable…”
“A while?” Mabel spoke up. “Psh, come on, be honest, Ste-bro! The first time you guys fused, you were an absolute mess! In fact, you were so scatterbrained and all over the place, that you almost-”

“O-OK, Mabel, that’s enough!” Stepper quickly interjected as one of his lower hands hurriedly covered her mouth. “I-I’m sure Mr. Uncle Ford isn’t interested in any boring old recaps of things that don’t really matter anymore! R-right?”

“Hm…” the author mused, tapping his pen against his journal as he looked between it and the fusion. “You know what I would be interested in? Being the first scientist in history to document accurate, fully-researched notes on a Gem-human cross fusion! W-with your permission, of course.”

“…You… you wanna put me in your journals?” Stepper asked, his eyes wide and his expression absolutely stunned. Ultimately, he failed to provide a proper answer, instead opting to stare at the journal in the author’s hands in disbelief, even as Mabel lightly elbowed his leg.

“Uh… Grunkle Ford?” she frowned back at the author. “I think you might have broken him…”

“YES!” Stepper suddenly shouted, stars in his eyes as he bounced on the balls of his feet in obvious elation. “Yes, yes, YES! Oh my gosh, YES!” Even despite his boundless excitement, the fusion was quick to notice the bewildered look Ford was giving him, and as a result, he forced himself to calm down by putting a rather forced aloof front on. “I-I mean… yeah, I… t-that sounds cool. I’d… I’m totally down for that i-if you are.”

“Excellent!” Ford exclaimed brightly. “Then come along, boys—or I suppose I should say, boy. There’s much important research to be done!”

“R-right behind you!” Stepper called after the author as he began to head towards the barn. Even so, the fusion lingered behind for a moment, breaking down into a bout of delighted, outright ecstatic laughter the moment Ford was out of earshot. “I-I can’t believe it! I’m gonna be in THE journal! This is seriously one of the coolest things that’s ever happened to me! Y’know, aside from fusing, which is also totally awesome since I wouldn’t even be in the journal at all if not for that!”

“Only you would get so excited about showing up in some nerd book, Dipper,” Mabel pointed out with a playful wink.

“H-hey, no fair!” the fusion said defensively. “We’re both excited! I mean, its not every day that we get to fuse, and now we get to be in the journal too! Its like a two-for-one deal, just like me!”

Mabel was unable to hold back an amused chuckle at this, one that Stepper gladly joined her in, given his already quite upbeat demeanor. “Wow, you guys are so much more fun together this time around than you were the first time!” Mabel pointed out with a bright grin. “We gotta hang out for some real fusion fun while you’re still fused! Just the two of us! Wait, no… three of us. Two of us? Eh, you know what I mean.”

“Oh, yeah, of course we can hang out later, Mabel,” Stepper readily nodded in agreement with this plan. “Just let Great Mr. Ford get in a few notes in the journal about me, and then I’m all yours for the rest of the afternoon, I promise.”

“I’m holding to that promise, Ste-bro!” Mabel quipped cheerfully as Stepper began to head off to join the author. “Don’t you go and have too much nerd fun without me, k?”

“Well, I can’t make you any promises on that,” the fusion called back with a chuckle as he glanced over his shoulder. “But I’ll try!”
Mabel easily returned Stepper’s send-off smile, confident in the fact that she’d get to have some quality time with the fusion of her best friend and brother later on. Of course, what she didn’t know was that quality time would come in a way that none of them, not even either half of Stepper himself, could have ever expected.

While the Gems continued going through and organizing their supplies for the drill, Ford and Stepper had taken to the far side of the barn so the author could get a chance to properly study the fusion with few distractions to stop them. And needless to say that Ford had already filled up several pages of notes on Stepper alone as the fusion eagerly and readily answered any and all questions the ever curious author asked him.

“So, you can control each of them simultaneously and individually then?” Ford asked, referring to Stepper’s extra set of arms.

“Yeah, pretty much,” the fusion said, holding both one of his upper and lower arms out to demonstrate. ‘I’m never really sure who’s controlling which arm exactly, and… sometimes they can be kinda awkward, like-’” Stepper cut himself off as he accidentally bumped his lower arm against his upper one. “Like that. But they are nice for things like multitasking or carrying a whole lot of things at once, so I guess you could say they’re pretty handy. Ha! Handy!” he chuckled to himself as he waved his hands a bit. “Good one! Thanks!”

“Hm…” Ford mused, tapping his pen against the journal in his hands as he looked down at it. “You know, one thing I can’t help but wonder is whether or not the extensive fraction of you that’s solely organic inhibits any Gem abilities you may have had…”

“Uh… what do you mean?” Stepper frowned, confused.

“What I mean is that the fact that the two of you have fused is already incredible enough on its own,” the author explained. “But imagine how much more incredible it would be if you could shapeshift, or heal, or summon a weapon-”

“Oh! I can summon a weapon!” the fusion exclaimed excitedly before he reeled himself back in as he remembered exactly what that weapon was. “Uh, w-well, I mean… its… kind of a weapon, but not really. I-I’m sure you wouldn’t be interested in seeing it-”

“Actually, I’d be very interested!” Ford exclaimed, his pen already at the ready to document notes about it. “Fusion-specific weaponry has always been quite a point of fascination to me, after all.”

“Actually, I’d be very interested!” Ford exclaimed, his pen already at the ready to document notes about it. “Fusion-specific weaponry has always been quite a point of fascination to me, after all.”

“Ah… right…” Stepper sighed though he was quick to perk up once more. “Ok then! Here goes nothing!” At this, the fusion closed his eyes and took in a deep breath, his four hands surrounding his Gem as it began to glow brightly. Stepper couldn’t help but smile warmly to himself as he glanced down to see the telltale orb of light emerge from the stone as he guided it upwards with his lower hands, watching with anticipation as it flashed and transformed into the shimmering pink book he was familiar with.

“Is… is that…?” Ford trailed off, amazed as he looked over the book as Stepper held it up.

“Its… a journal, yeah…” the fusion blushed in embarrassment. “I think its kind of based on your journals? I’m not really sure why that is but… yeah… sorry…”

“Oh, don’t be sorry, my boy,” Ford said with a wave of his hand. “Honestly, I find it to be quite flattering. Do you mind if I take a closer look at it?”
“Oh, sure, go ahead,” Stepper agreed, handing the journal off to the author to allow him to leaf through it. “So, um… for some reason, half of it is full of notes about Dipper while the other half is all about Steven. Again, I have no idea what the deal with that is, though I kinda like Mabel’s theory about the journal being 50% about each of them, which makes it 100% about me since I am them.”

“That’s certainly a novel theory,” Ford noted with a grin as he continued skimming through the book. “And by all accounts, this journal is a very special one indeed. Though… I fail to really see how it can be considered a genuine ‘weapon’…”

“Oh, well that’s ‘cause it can do this,” Stepper smiled as the author handed the journal back to him. The fusion opened it flat, and as a reaction to him, it began to hover slightly above his upturned lower hands. The book glowed with a pale pink light, Stepper’s Gem and unique birthmark doing the same as his smile widened ever so slightly. And then, in a swift, solid movement, the fusion summoned a glistening, projectile shield from the book’s center, quickly flattening it out before sending it flying far off into the distance until it disappeared from sight.

“Absolutely astounding…” Ford whispered, awestruck as he adjusted his glasses and turned back to the fusion with a wide grin. “Can it do anything else?”

“Uh… well…” Stepper trailed off, uncertain. However, the shield journal itself seemed to provide an answer to this question as another shield materialized over its pages, this one featuring clearly sharp, serrated edges. Intrigued, the fusion tossed it, watching with amazement as it soared through the air much like a buzz saw would. In its place, the journal replenished itself with several smaller, almost miniature shields, which Stepper sent off all at once, allowing them to fly through the air like tiny, yet deadly seeker missiles. Still, it seemed as though the journal wasn’t done showing off what it could do yet as it flashed brightly, garnishing Stepper’s attention as it flipped several pages back towards what was no doubt Dipper’s half of the journal. It stopped on a page depicting a detailed drawing of the Sword of Seasons, and when the curious fusion skimmed his hand against it, a pink, ethereal rendition of the blade itself rose from the pages, allowing Stepper to grab it and give it a wide, experimental swing. While it was bereft of its usual elemental powers, the sword was still physical and material so long as the fusion held onto it, and the moment he released his grip on it, it disappeared into thin air as though it had never existed at all.

“Wow…” Stepper gasped, stunned as the journal finally snapped closed and fell back into his hands. “I have no idea what just happened but… just… wow. I thought this thing was cool before but now its gotten even better somehow! I didn’t even know it could do half that stuff!”

“That was quite an impressive display!” Ford agreed, just as amazed. “I take back what I said before; that journal isn’t just special… it’s… its phenomenal! I’d love to be able to study it even further to learn all of its no-doubt incredibly intricate secrets!”

“Yeah, considering what we just saw, I’d kinda like to know what’s up with it too…” Stepper said, still rather bewildered as he held the book up at examined the star and constellation emblazoned together on its cover.

However, before either of them could begin investigating the matter further, they were suddenly interrupted altogether as the fusion let out a startled gasp as he suddenly fell forward, his journal disappearing as he looked back to the sudden weight sitting on his back. “W-what the—Mabel!” he exclaimed as he attempted to shrug her off of him.

“Ha! Gotcha!” Mabel exclaimed teasingly. “That makes it Mabel – 1, Stepper – 0!”

“Who’s counting?” Stepper quipped with a smirk as he picked her up and sat her back down on the
ground before standing himself.

“I am!” Mabel proclaimed proudly. “So what are you guys up to anyway? Still doin’ all that nerdy fusion research stuff?”

“Well, actually,” Ford began to eloquently explain. “We’re-

“Oh man, Mabel, you just missed it!” Stepper cut in, stars of excitement in his eyes. “I just found out my shield journal can do all these amazing things like make these cute little tiny shields or even summon my sword, it was so cool!”

“Oh my gosh, I wanna see!” Mabel exclaimed, jumping up and down. “Can ya show me?”

“Uh… well, maybe in a little while…” Stepper admitted, his smile falling a bit. “We’re still sort of in the middle of the whole research thing and we’re on the verge of uncovering something huge, isn’t that right, Mr. Uncle Ford?”

“It absolutely is,” Ford nodded. “For all we know, Stepper, uncovering the secrets behind that ‘shield journal’ of yours could very well unlock untold secrets about the very nature of Gemkind and humankind themselves! Its an opportunity we simple cannot pass up!”

“Yeah, so ya see, its… pretty important,” the fusion said as he glanced down at Mabel, immediately noticing that her smile was all but completely gone by now. “B-but don’t worry! I promised you that we’d get the chance to hang out later, Mabel, and I meant it. Its just… gonna be a little later than I thought. You understand, right?”

Mabel didn’t respond right away, though when she did, it was with a relenting sigh as she realized she couldn’t very well bring the fusion down from his palpable excitement now. “Y-yeah…” she said, hiding her dejection well. “I understand…”

“Great!” Stepper replied, sending her four thumbs up as he began to hurry on after Ford once more. “See ya then!”

“Y-yeah…” Mabel forced a smile as she watched the fusion leave her behind yet again. “S-see ya…” As soon as Stepper had fully turned away, she was unable to hold back another sad sigh, wishing that they didn’t have to keep putting off their sought-after time together like this. In truth, she did understand exactly why the fusion wanted to spend this time with Ford; after all, the very reason why Steven and Dipper had fused in the first place was largely for the sake of assisting in the author’s research. But even still, Mabel couldn’t help but feel somewhat lost in the shuffle of it all, knowing that it was a rare event to get to see the fusion at all, much less in the newly found harmonious state he was now in. Even just a few minutes of free, boundless fun with him would be more than enough to suffice, but at this rate, it didn’t seem like Mabel would ever even get those moments as distracted and distanced as he seemed to be.

However, as she stood alone and upset as she was, Mabel largely failed to notice a certain green Gem approach her until she spoke up dryly. “What are you doing just standing here doing nothing?” Peridot asked, her hands on her hips as she raised an eyebrow at the girl.

“Oh! Peri!” Mabel exclaimed, startled out of her thoughts. “I was just… uh… waiting for Stepper… as usual…”

“Ugh, the Stepper,” the green Gem groaned with disdain, rolling her eyes. “What’s the big deal about him anyway? As far as I can see, he’s nothing more than a four-armed, impetuous, robinoids-destroying clod.”
“Aw, he’s not a clod, Peri!” Mabel chuckled slightly. “Stepper’s really great once ya get to know him! Heh, it’s probably cause he’s made up of two of the people I care about the most… even though I don’t really feel like he’s caring that much about me right now…”

“Well, why do you care if he cares about you at all?” Peridot asked, not following the concept.

“Well, its just… he promised me that we’d get the chance to hang out and have some good old fashioned fusion fun…” Mabel explained. “But he’s been so busy with Grunkle Ford that he just… keeps putting me off. He keeps saying he’ll have time for me ‘later’ but who knows when later is gonna be!”

“Hm… so you’re upset with that bothersome fusion too then?” Peridot asked somewhat leadingly.

“Well, I don’t know if I’d say I’m ‘upset’ with him, but-”

“Then, I have the perfect idea!” the green Gem interrupted with a vindictive smile. “Revenge!”

“Revenge?” Mabel asked, confused. “Revenge for what?”

“For him destroying my machines, of course!” Peridot snapped hotly. “Alone, there’s not much I can do against him and those projectile shields of his, but if I recruit you to my cause, then together can get even with that nuisance of a Stepper once and for all!”

“Uh… I don’t really wanna get even with him for anything…” Mabel noted with a frown. “I guess… all I really want is to get his attention somehow… Maybe if I could just get on his level or somethi—OH! That’s it!”

“What’s it?” Peridot asked.

“I just got the perfect ideal!” Mabel exclaimed with a daring grin. “What’s the one, sure fire way to get the attention of a fusion like Stepper?”

“I don’t know and I don’t ca-”

“Fusion!” Mabel interrupted brightly. “Which means… Peri, you and me are gonna fuse!”

For a moment, Peridot said nothing, instead opting to send the girl a look of complete and utter bafflement above all else. “We’re going to what?”

“No time to explain,” Mabel said quickly, grabbing the green Gem’s arm and pulling her after her so they could spring her newfound plan into motion. “We gotta find ourselves one of Grunkle Ford’s spare lab coats pronto. I have a feeling this is gonna work great!”

“Well, its certainly composed largely of Gem magic,” Ford concluded as him and Stepper stood over the shield journal as it rested on the small table before them inside the barn. “That much is obvious. But I’ve never seen a Gem weapon… ‘behave’ like this one does, so to speak.”

“Maybe its because I’m a fusion?” Stepper guessed. “Though even then, it is sorta weird that my weapon is a journal which… isn’t the first thing that comes to mind when you think about weapons…”

“It is rather peculiar…” Ford agreed thoughtfully. “Which is why I believe this warrants a full-on scientific investigation. Allow me to go fetch my camera. We’ll begin by taking several expository
photographs for later use. Just you wait, Stepper; I have a feeling this research is going to wield some of our most integral and exciting research yet!”

“Sounds great!” Stepper called after the author enthusiastically. Once he was gone, the fusion let out a contented sigh as he placed a fond hand against the cover of his shield journal. There was no telling what sort of secrets its sparkling, mysterious pages might hold, and he was quite excited to uncover them all alongside the author himself.

“You know, I gotta say,” Stepper said to himself as one of his lower hands gently skimmed one of his upper ones. “This has seriously been one of the best days I’ve ever had. Yeah! I’m having a great time too! Makes me wonder why we haven’t done this sooner… I don’t know, but… I think I’d like to try doing it more often from here on out. Really?! Yeah, why not?” he chuckled as his upper arms embraced himself excitedly. “It feels… really nice.”

“Oh, Steeeeeepper!” The fusion jolted in surprise at this call as he glanced over his shoulder, only to be met with a sight that baffled him instantly.

“Mabel?” Stepper frowned in confusion as he turned to face the oddly tall figure before him. Mabel had apparently commandeered one of Ford’s tan lab coats, draping it over herself and Peridot, who she was clearly sitting on the shoulders of if the obviously triangular shape under the folds of the coat was anything to go off of. The fusion watched curiously as the pair awkwardly shuffled over to them, clearly struggling to so much as balance at all, much less move coordinately at all.

“Wrong-o, Ste-bro!” Mabel quipped pointedly, grinning excitedly as she realized she was about on the same eye level as the fusion. “I’m not Mabel, I’m… Mabeldot! Or Peribel. I haven’t decided which one I like more yet.”

“Uh… ok?” Stepper raised an eyebrow. “So… what are you guys doing exactly?”

“Isn’t it totally obvious?” Mabel asked with a wide grin. “We fused! Just like you guys did! Isn’t that right, Peri?”

“Ouch!” Peridot shouted underneath the lab coat. “Will you just sit still up there already?!”

“Um… I hate to break it to you guys, but… you guys didn’t fuse,” Stepper pointed out with a frown.

“Whaaaaaat?” Mabel asked in faux appalled shock. “Of course we did! Would we be as tall as you if we hadn’t?”

“Mabel, that’s only because you’re sitting on Peridot’s shoulders,” the fusion noted. “Wait, don’t tell me you’re actually upset about the whole thing about me being taller than you know, ’cause if you are, then that was just a joke-”

“No! That’s not what I’m upset about!” Mabel huffed, forgetting her fusion façade.

“Uh… then what’s… this whole thing about?” Stepper asked, motioning to the false “fusion” before him.

“It isn’t about anything!” Mabel snapped, frustrated. “M-maybe I just wanted to fuse with my new best friend Peridot because having only one Gem and human fusion around here wasn’t enough.”

“Oh, ok, but just one problem with that,” Stepper crossed his lower arms. “You and Peridot can’t even fuse in the first place.”
“See!” Peridot spoke up as she suddenly shrugged Mabel off her shoulders, prompting them both to fall to the ground with a resounding thud. “I told you! This so-called ‘plan’ of yours was complete and utter foolish waste of time! We wouldn’t have fooled anyone! Now, if you’ll need me, I’ll be plotting out an actual revenge scheme instead of some ridiculous, implausible masquerade!” And with this, Peridot stormed off, Ford’s lab coat still hanging onto her as she made no attempts to shrug it off as she took her heated retreated, leaving Stepper and Mabel alone.

“Mabel, come on,” Stepper said evenly, his expression sincere, concerned even. “I can tell something’s up with you. What’s really going on here?”

“I already told you, nothing’s going on!” Mabel retorted crossly. “I’m fine, everything’s fine, especially you! You’re just off, having a great time together and with Grunkle Ford doing your ‘super important fusion research’, and I get it, ok?”

“Get what?” Stepper asked, still not following.

“That you’re so busy that you don’t have any time to hang out with me!” Mabel exclaimed pointedly. “Even though you promised that you would, but I guess you guys would rather spend your time doing way more important things than having fun with me!”

At first, Stepper had no idea what to really say in response to such an intense, emotional outburst, though he quickly made a move to correct it the moment he noticed tears starting to well up in Mabel’s eyes. “Aw, Mabel…” he began gently as he knelt down to her level. “You know I didn’t mean to blow you off. I really do wanna hang out with you, its just…”

“Its just I gotta wait till you’re done with Grunkle Ford, huh?” Mabel finished, her hands on her hips.

“Um, yeah? That’s pretty much it,” Stepper said, standing. “I won’t be that much longer. You can wait a few hours, can’t you?”

“That’s not the point!” Mabel refuted, stomping her foot down. “The point is that you guys are finally stable together! You’re finally fun, or at least I thought you were until you decided you wanted to bury your head in all that boring research again!”

“W-well, why do you have such a problem with that?” Stepper asked somewhat defensively. “We’re just trying to find answers to questions that deserve to be answered! We could learn so much about fusion, and Gems and-”

“Ugh, who cares?!” Mabel interupted impatiently. “You guys could always just study all that stuff when you’re not fused! Why do you gotta waste your time with it now when you are fused?”

“Well, why does it matter to you so much that we hang out with you while we’re fused in the first place?” Stepper argued back, growing readily more annoyed. “You spend time with Steven and Dipper every day, so why are things so different when I’m around? I am them, for crying out loud!”

“It matters because you’re-” Mabel sharply cut herself off with a frustrated sob, not wanting to give the fusion any sort of high ground in this fight.

“I’m what, Mabel?” Stepper asked a bit harsher than he had meant to as the girl quickly turned around to wipe her tears. While half of the fusion did feel rather guilty about being the cause of those tears in the first place, the other half was far too incensed with what he believed to be justified frustration to let her win this fight. “I think I get it now,” he said, his tone cold as he
pulled himself to his full height. “You’re just being selfish.”

Mabel was unable to let back a sharp, bitter laugh upon hearing this as she turned back around to face the fusion. “Yeah, ok, I’m being selfish,” she remarked with a rare sense of biting sarcasm. “Says the fusion who broke his promise and doesn’t seem to even care!”

“I didn’t break my promise!” Stepper snapped fiercely. “You just too impatient to wait for me to finish with Great Mr. Ford! Face it, Mabel, you’re are being selfish, just like you always are!”

A heavy, shocked gasp escaped Mabel at this, her offense to such a burning remark immediately clear. Stepper himself took in a suddenly anxious breath as soon as he said it, knowing that he had crossed a line and wanting to take it back, though at the same time, he forced himself to let it be, still refusing to back down now. “I’m not selfish,” Mabel finally spoke up as she glared up at the fusion squarely.

“Yes, you are,” Stepper countered with a bit of a tired sigh.

“No, I’m not!” Mabel argued, this time much more intently.

“Yes, you are!” the fusion exclaimed. He knew this entire argument was somewhat futile, but even so, a large part of him was far too angry and far too stubborn to simply let it go.

“No, I’m not!”

“Yes, you are!”

“No, I’m NOT!”

“Yes, you—STOP!” Surprisingly enough, Stepper cut himself off, his lower hands clenched in tight fists as he continued almost desperately. “Stop fighting! Please, I don’t wanna-” The fusion interrupted himself again, this time with a sudden gasp as his Gem and birthmark flashed brightly. “B-but… but we shouldn’t…” he trailed off, closing his eyes tightly as he placed a hand against his head. “We shouldn’t say things like that, she’s your sister—yeah, she is and she’s wrong! But being angry like this isn’t gonna—I don’t care! She needs to realize she can’t always have her way! B-but we—Ugh, forget it! I’ll handle this!” The fusion finally managed to steady himself as he took in a deep breath, meeting Mabel’s somewhat startled gaze with a stern, serious glare. “Mabel, I’m sorry, but… we didn’t fuse just so we could hang out with you. And… if you’re going to be so jealous and clingy and selfish then… then maybe I just won’t hang out with you at all!”

Mabel let out another harsh gasp at this, recoiling back a bit as if Stepper’s words had physically hurt her. And for as much pain as they brought her, they might as well have. “Oh yeah?” she asked challengingly, aggressively fighting against her pressing tears as she returned the fusion’s glare relentlessly. “Well… m-maybe I don’t wanna hang out with you either if you’re gonna be so boring and stubborn!”

“Fine!” Stepper snapped, swiftly spinning around to face away from her, his upper arms crossed tightly.

“Yes!” Mabel repeated just as angrily as she did the same.

And for the next several minutes, that was it. Neither of them said another single word to each other, their argument ending on a sour, stated stalemate. However, as seconds passed on into minutes, Stepper couldn’t help but glance over his shoulder back at Mabel, even if half of him clearly didn’t want to. All the same, his expression softened quite a bit as he noticed her shoulders hitching ever so slightly in what was clearly a mournful sob. With a small sigh, he turned to face
her once again, his expression rather neutral as a result of the disagreement between both of both of his halves over the matter. A part of him was clearly angry with her, there was no question about that, seeing her behavior and lashing out as nothing more than immature and foolish. He believed that the best way to handle such an attitude was to simply let her stew in her frustration with him, knowing that she’d get over it eventually and maybe even learn a lesson in patience and acceptance in the process. And yet… while his other half did understand those sentiments, and even did agree with them to some extent, he still couldn’t help but feel rather guilty all the same. True, Mabel’s outburst against him had been harsh and demanding and even possessive to a point, but the only reason she was so upset in the first place was because of his failure to keep his promise to her. He had gotten distracted, and in his distraction he kept putting her off until later, always saying that they’d have time to spend together, but never actually following through. He couldn’t really say that if he was in her shoes, he wouldn’t feel at least a little left out and forgotten as she likely was. And maybe… that’s exactly what the problem here was in the first place. Though Mabel hadn’t said so in those exact words, the more sympathetic half of Stepper was quickly starting to suspect that was what this conflict was actually about. With Dipper and Steven as fused as they were, it stood to reason that Mabel might have felt as though she was being left out on all of the fun they were having together, and in turn, those feelings of loneliness soon turned into those of bitterness. It all made sense, but even so, it was a problem that he really had no idea how to fix. What they needed was a way for all three of them to work this out without devolving into another hostile shouting match. A way for them to work out their differences on common ground. A way for them all to see things eye to eye.

Or better yet… a way for them to see things through the same eyes.

Stepper moved carefully and intentfully, keeping all thoughts of his newfound plan out of his mind, lest his other half pick up on them and stop him altogether amidst his own frustration. Still, he could feel that half’s palpable confusion as he stepped forward towards Mabel, who couldn’t help but glance over her shoulder at him in equal bewilderment, especially as she noticed one of his lower hands was extended out to her in offering. The fusion’s expression was mingled with both that same almost disgruntled confusion as well as what almost appeared to be a sense of sad sincerity as he nodded at her, silently asking her to take his hand. And, even despite her own currently mixed feelings about the fusion at the moment, Mabel did so, curious to see exactly what he was planning on doing.

However, the last thing she could have ever expected was for Stepper to do was grasp her other hand before pulling her into a slow, first initial spin, one that soon turned into what was clearly an impromptu dance. The fusion himself seemed ever bit as surprised as she was as he met her bewildered gaze evenly, yet even so, they continued on in easy, almost waltz-like twirls gradually leading them out of the barn and into the yard. Neither of them said anything as they tried to piece together exactly what was going on, which was something only one half of the fusion knew while leaving both his other half and the girl completely in the blind. In truth, he had no idea if this would actually work or not, but for the sake of restoring the peace and bonds between them all, it was at least worth a shot.

Unable to hold her immense curiosity in any longer, Mabel was about to speak up to finally ask Stepper why they were apparently dancing in the first place. However, before she could get a chance, she was suddenly blindsided by the bright burst of light from the fusion’s gemstone, one that seemed to flood and fill in over both of them. And, in that brief moment, both of them, or rather, all three of them finally realized exactly what was happening.

Their eyes opened swiftly, all three of them wide and easily depicting their shared shock. Their breath caught in a sharp gasp, their uneven trio of hands trembling as they caught sight of them, as
well as the rest of their newly amalgamated form. Even so, they were clearly struggling to take it all in as one single thought ran through their now shared mind: against all odds and all impossibilities, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel were all fused together at the exact same time, resulting in neither Stepper nor Maven even, but in someone entirely different altogether.

“W-wha…” the new fusion whispered, their voice just about completely neutral when it came to gender. They slowly shook their head, still completely baffled as they noticed that their only extra arm rested underneath their left one, while their only additional eye rested evenly above their right. They weren’t able to make much else about their appearance, aside from their attire which was clearly a mix of that of all three of their components. And yet, that hardly mattered to the fusion as much as the fact that they even managed to exist at all, especially as they managed to realize that only a third of them had hoped for this to happen in the first place. “W-what… what did you do?!” they asked, their voice suddenly rising in both fear and fury. “I-I’m sorry! I just thought-”

The fusion gasped again, their shoulders jolting as they suddenly became aware of the several sets of eyes watching them from afar. Despite their new, rather-tall legs, they quickly spun around, only to find Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl, Ford, and even Peridot all standing near the barn, all of them staring at the new fusion, completely dumbfounded.

The fusion’s breathing began to pick up under the sudden scrutiny, a wave of unbridled anxiety washing over them. All three of their components felt it rush through them almost painfully, but it was clear it hit one of them much harder than the others. They let out a startled cry as their form flashed briefly, turning amorphous and unclear as one of their components began to fall out of the fusion entirely. Dipper didn’t even have time to let out a fearful gasp as, before he could even fully split apart from the fusion, a hand suddenly grasped his tightly. He glanced back up to find Maven, still somehow left over from their fusion and still clinging onto him, their expression morose and pleading, almost as if they were silently begging him to not let go just yet. And, despite the countless emotions running through him at that moment and the stunned audience that they had just a few feet away, he found that was a plea that for some reason, he couldn’t refuse.

Light silhouetted the kids once again as their three-way fusion reformed, still clearly in a state of shock as they glanced down at themselves briefly, before looking to everyone watching them again. To say that they were overwhelmed would be an understatement, and with so many thoughts and so many feelings pouring through their shared mind at once, the one thing they did know was that this was something they had to figure out on their own. Which was why, before anyone could so much as say a single word to them, the fusion turned on their heel and bolted, running off towards the distant fields and hills of open farmland before them, not bothering to look back even once.

“W-wait!” Ford called after them as soon as he shook himself out of his shock, more than curious to learn about something as incredible as the fusion he had just seen. However, before he could attempt to run after them, Garnet stopped him, shaking her head calmly.

“Let them be,” the Gem leader said, watching as the fusion disappeared off into the distance.

“After all, this is between the three of them and no one else.”

In their ongoing state of emotional frenzy, the fusion had no idea how long they had been running or even where they were really going. The late afternoon landscapes sped by them as they maintained a steady pace, tears welling up in all three of their eyes the entire time though none of them ever fell. When they finally did come to a stop, it was out of exhaustion more than anything else as they gradually came to a breathless halt against a tall, wide tree standing alone out in the
midst of the otherwise empty fields. Their trio of hands were still shaking as they took the time to stare down at them in disbelief, their own existence bewildering them more than anything else at that moment possibly could.

They had fused. By all accounts, something like this should have been impossible, and up until now, each of their components would have readily believed that it was impossible. True, three or more Gems could fuse at a time, but the fact that Steven could fuse with more than one human at a time was something no one had ever anticipated or thought of before. But sure enough, it had happened, and despite how baffled the fusion was by how they had come to be, all too soon their thoughts began to turn to why they had come to be.

“W-we… you… I… I don’t understand,” they began, their voice soft and diffident as they conversed to themselves. “Neither do I… You… you just… pulled all three of us together like this and… and now we’re…” They took in a deep breath, all three of their eyes closing as they tried their best to compose themselves amidst their countless mixed emotions. “Why? What’s the point? Why would you—b-because I thought this would help!”

They stopped briefly, sighing almost sadly as they leaned back against the side of the tree and rubbed their spare arm gently. “I… I thought… you were both so upset with each other… I could see it, heck, I could even feel it… I just thought that… maybe if you could get inside each other’s heads for just for a second, t-then… then it might help you—help us what?” They cut themselves off sharply, a sudden burst of familiar, bitter anger running through them. “See just how wrong she is? What?! I’m not wrong! You’re the one who’s wrong! I am not!” They stamped their foot down harshly. “Everything was going just fine until you came along being all impatient and jealous! Guys, wait, we shouldn’t—I wasn’t jealous! I just wanted to have some fun with you guys, which is something you clearly weren’t interested in. We were having fun! But every time I have fun, you always have to have a problem with it! Come on, you guys, we have to try to get alo—I never said I have a problem with that! Then what is your problem, huh?! M-maybe… No, come on, don’t say it, you don’t mean—maybe my problem’s with you!”

The fusion let out a loud, appalled scoff at this, one that quickly turned into an exasperated groan as their least angry third realized exactly where this was going, as hard as they were trying to diffuse it. “S-seriously, we shouldn’t fight, especially when we’re like this!” they urged desperately. “I don’t see why we shouldn’t! After all, I’d love to know more about this so-called ‘problem’ you have with me! N-no, we don’t—Oh, you wanna hear more?” They asked themselves challengingly, set to deliver this bitingly honest opinion in a unique, yet heavy-handed way they wouldn’t soon forget. “Fine! I’ll be more than happy to tell you!”

The fusion took a bold step forward, two of their arms crossed and their other hand clenched into a tight fist as their other two components finally realized that they were all about to burst into song, whether they wanted to or not. “My problem with you,” they began, their melody upbeat yet carrying a certain catty, unapologetic swing to it. “Who me?” they interrupted themselves, confused. “No, you,” they clarified, eliciting a sarcastic eye-roll from only one of their eyes. “Is that you always have to be better. Says who?!” they asked with another doubtful scoff. “You do! And if you asked me twice, well wouldn’t it be nice, if you were just WRONG for once! Ohhhh…”

Incensed by these accusations, the fusion turned their nose up, initially wanting no parts of such a petty argument before they ultimately decided not to simply let these callous claims hang as they were. And so, ignoring how flustered they already were, they decided to play themselves at their own game and offer their side of the story in the exact same musical way. “Well, MY problem with YOU—wait, me? Yeah, you!—is that you always have to always have to be selfish—not true!” they protested before part of them finally spoke up rather timidly to these claims, only to be drowned out once again. “But you—You always get your way, but no, not today, until you did anyway!
Ahhh…

They sighed, partially to let a bit of their frustration out and partially out of sadness as they continued walking, almost dancing forward. After all, they had hoped that their newfound, unique existence as a fusion would bring them together; but ultimately, it was only pulling them apart even more than before. “You guys, the problem with us,” they began rather solemnly, only to angrily interrupt themselves once again. “No, him! There’s no us! I-is that we have to try to—stop complaining! Don’t fuss!”

The fusion cringed in spite of themselves, realizing that even though their voice was steady and strong, they still seemed so out of harmony, in more ways than one. “How can we get along? It’ll take more than a song—just admit that you’re wrong!” they snapped bitingly, pressing a hand against their head as they tried to make sense of all of the conflicting emotions and opinions running through it. “Wrong,” they stomped forward once again, their eyes shut tightly as their tone grew progressively more intense. “Wrong, wrong, wrongwrongwrongwrongwrongWRONG—”

The fusion ultimately cut themselves off with a sudden gasp of surprise as they tripped, their foot catching on a rock as they fell forward into a small stream running through the field that they hadn’t even noticed as caught up in their song as they had been. They quickly sat up, shaking themselves off and letting out a disgruntled sigh as they still dripped with quite a bit of water. Their song was all but forgotten as they began, trying to dry themselves off, more than ready to get back into their bout of heated arguing. Until…

They paused, froze practically as they happened to glance down at the crystal clear waters of the stream before them. Or rather, at their own reflection staring back at them from within it. Until now, the fusion hadn’t put much thought into what they might have looked like, as caught up in their own internal conflict as they had been. But now, all thoughts of that seemed to fade away as their own appearance practically captivated them. They were tall, much taller than even Stepper or Maven were, and indeed, they had an extra arm on the left and an extra eye above the right, yet somehow, neither appendage looked out of place or unsightly. In a way, they almost seemed to balance each other out, contributing to the unique, completely new being they now were together. Their hair was a medium length and shade of brown, loose, and free and recklessly curly as it spilled out from the unmistakable pine tree hat atop their head. The rest of their attire was clearly a testament to who they were made of as well, from Steven and Mabel’s shirt and sweater respectively combined into a bright pink top underneath Dipper’s usual vest. Likewise, their pair of loose jean capris rested underneath a purple skirt, their shoes mismatched yet comfortable all the same. In fact, despite how seemingly mismatched and at ends they seemed to be in general, their appearance somehow still made sense. Their fusion made sense, oddities, imperfections and all.

And perhaps… that fact spoke to more than just their fusion too.

Throughout the entire summer so far, one thing had always seemed to be a constant; no matter what danger or threat or trial they faced, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel faced them all together. Through thick and thin, Dipper and Mabel were stalwart siblings; they always had been and they always would be, no matter what, and in the midst of that close sibling bond stood Steven, an endlessly loyal and ever-supportive friend to them both. Regardless of minor spats and petty arguments, the three of them belonged together; the fact that they had even been able to fuse at all was proof of that. And perhaps, they all realized at the exact same moment, it was time to stop letting themselves, of all people, get in the way of the bond of family and friendship they all cherished so very much.

“T-the problem with us…” they began their song again, this time softer and gentler as they kept
their sights on their own reflection. “No wait… not ‘us’… Is that I’m not just one or the other…” Slowly, they stood, still looking down towards the stream first, before their gaze gradually drifted to their trio of hands stretched out before them. “I’m not one or two… but something just brand new, so what do I do? Oooo….”

“Maybe…” they trailed off with a sigh, a bit of shame filling them as they thought about just how foolish their conflict had been in the first place, and just how much it could have damaged between them as a result. Which meant that regardless of what was said in the past, it was finally time to put an end to it once and for all.

“It wasn’t me…” they admitted, wrapping all three of their arms around each other in a bit of a lose hug as they slowly passed by the creek. “It wasn’t you… You know, they say it takes two…” They finally cracked a small smile at this joke, though it didn’t last long as remorse entered their melody, though hints of forgiveness and empathy were mingled in there just as much. “I couldn’t see… I wanted to be… part of this too…”

Their pace picked up just the slightest bit as they looked ahead towards the horizon, the sun just starting to sink over it and casting everything in a deep, rich glow of twilight. It was a rejuvenating glow, one that filled the fusion with hope and warmth as they smiled once more, finally, finally ready to declare exactly who—and what—they were. “But now that we’re three,” they began, their smile gradually widening as they walk soon started to turn into a job before evolving into an energized run. “Both us and we,” A small, bright laugh escaped them, one filled with building joy and ecstasy that they knew they would soon be absolutely powerless to contain. “And that makes you… ME!”

At this, the fusion acted on sheer impulse, leaping into the air in the blazing light of the setting sun. For a brief, breathless, blissful moment, they felt almost weightless until gravity began to pull them back down, yet surprisingly enough, it wasn’t enough to ground them completely. For instead of their feet hitting the grass below, they seemed to hover above it ever so slightly, floating gently above the earth as they started down at it in amazed disbelief. And yet, for as elated and excited as they were, they decided not to question it, instead opting to make the most out of such a bizarre yet brilliant opportunity for all it was worth.

“And there’s NO problem with me!” they sang, their melody triumphant as they hovered forward with grace and agility. “Cause as far as I can see, we’re singing in perfect harmony!” The fusion preformed a deft spin at this, more or less practically ice skating on thin air and loving every single second it, knowing that this was what they should have been doing from the moment they first fused. “A sister—a brother—friends caring for each other, like its supposed to be!” Once again, they pulled themselves into a fond, tight embrace as they leaned back a bit, still keeping their mid-air momentum going all the while. “Like it was meant to be!” they proclaimed, proud of who they were and what their fusion represented and glad for this experience, despite its less than ideal beginnings. After all, it had indeed done its part in not only bringing peace between them all, but bringing them all together, in a way that got them closer than they had ever thought possible. Which was why, with a warm smile on their face and a contented song in their heart, they gradually began to glide their way back towards the barn, ready to face anything so long as they faced it together. “Like it will always be…”

An air of confusion had hung over the barn ever since the fusion’s unexpected formation and subsequent flight. Ford, Pearl, Amethyst, and even Peridot each had their own respective abundance of questions, to which Garnet simply assured them to wait for eventual answers to them
upon the fusion’s return. Still, as minutes turned into hours with no sign of the fusion or any of the kids who composed them in sight, worry was starting to fill the air, mingling with that same confusion as the sun soon began to set.

“I hope the kids are alright…” Pearl frowned, staring off into the distance the fusion had disappeared into. “Its getting awfully late for them to be out there alone…”

“They’re not alone,” Garnet reminded, casually leaning against the side of the barn. “They have each other.”

“Heh, yeah, cause they fused,” Amethyst interjected with a grin. “Which is totally nuts when you think about it. Like its already crazy that Steven can fuse with Dipper and Mabel each on their own, but all three of them mashin’ it up? This is like… a whole new level of awesome!”

“It certainly is an absolutely phenomenal discovery.” Ford commented as he enthusiastically continued taking what notes he could of the new fusion down in his journal. “Just think of the implications here! A human-Gem hybrid, not only fusing with one organic human but two at the same exact time! I wouldn’t believe it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes! I have so much to ask them when they return, like what the balance between the three of them sharing the same headspace is like, what possible weapons and abilities they might have at their disposal, what they might possibly refer to themselves as—”

“Dipevebel.”

Everyone jolted in surprise as they all turned to see none other than the fusion themselves, strolling over to meet them from around the corner of the barn. Their expression was relaxed and bright as they smiled at the stunned group, barely even seeming to take notice in just how shocked they all were at their sudden, unexpected return.

“W-what?” Ford spoke up, his eyes wide as he looked the fusion up and down.

“Well, I dunno how to really answer those first two questions,” they began, two of their hands in their pockets while their spare rested casually behind their head. “But I do have an idea for what I’d like to be called and that’s it: Dipevebel. I know its not exactly the easiest name to roll off the tongue, but its kinda the best you can expect when you have to combine Dipper, Steven, and Mabel together, like I do. Still… I think it fits. Don’t you guys agree?”

While Ford, Pearl, and Amethyst were still much to baffled to really even say anything, Garnet stepped forward, demonstrating that even she was a bit shorter than the newly-named Dipevebel. “I do,” the Gem leader nodded with a clearly proud grin as she extended out a hand for the fusion to shake. “Its nice to finally meet you, Dipevebel.”

“Heh, honestly, it was nice for me to meet myself,” Dipevebel chuckled warmly. “Wait… that doesn’t make any sense. Or maybe it does in some deep poetic sort of way? …Eh, forget it. Guess what I’m trying to say is… its good to be here! Even if I… sorta ran away at first—ok, you know what, I should probably just stop rambling.”

“Oh, I like this one!” Amethyst laughed, amused. “They’re like all of Maven’s fun and all of Stepper’s funny awkwardness wrapped up into one rad, three-eyed, three-armed package!”

“Huh… a fusion of Maven and Stepper…” Dipevebel mused. “You know, I haven’t thought of us like that before, but in a way, I guess that’s exactly what I am. Neat!”

“Well, you three certainly are impressive together,” Pearl said with a good-natured grin. “And I’m
not just saying that because your mere existence is an incredible feat in and of itself—wait! T-that’s not what I—"

“Nah, its ok, Pearl,” Dipevebel laughed, setting the white Gem’s belief that she had offended them at ease. “Even I gotta admit that it is kind of crazy that I can even be here at all, but just for the record, I’m really glad that I am.”

“And we’re glad that you are too,” Garnet nodded supportively.

“Indeed we are!” Ford chimed in with renewed enthusiasm, his pen ready to take down as many notes as he could about this incredible new fusion. “Now, you kids wouldn’t mind if I asked you one, or two, or several questions about your physiology and abilities as a fusion, would you?”

“Ah, w-well…” Dipevebel trailed off, glancing down with a bit of an awkward smile. “I’d love to, but if its all the same to you Mr. Grunkle Ford, we’d—or, I’d… kind of like to have a bit of time just to ourselves, if that’s ok.”

The author took pause at this, surprised, and though disappointment briefly flashed across his expression, he ultimately smiled in acceptance, knowing that there’d certainly be time to investigate this miraculous, newly-formed fusion again some other day. “O-of course it is,” he nodded humbly as him and the Gems stepped out of the fusion’s way. Dipevebel offered them all another cordial grin as they left, only to be stopped by a certain green Gem as she happened to venture out of the barn at that exact moment.

“Hey!” Peridot snapped as she accidentally ran right into the much-taller fusion. “What’s the big ide—oh, great…” she groaned, glaring up at Dipevebel, unimpressed. “Its all three of you clods, fused and formed into one giant clod, just what we need around here…”

Instead of taking offense at the green Gems disparaging remarks, the fusion simply smiled in amusement at them, playfully patting Peridot on the head as they stepped passed her. “Its nice to see you too, Peridot,” they said, bidding her off with a friendly wave before heading off on their own.

“Ugh, fusion…” the green Gem groaned in disgust as she stood alongside the others and watched Dipevebel head past the edge of the barn. “What’s it even good for anyway?”

“More than you could ever know,” Garnet replied, her pride in the trio still apparent as she glanced slightly upwards, to the roof of the barn where their fusion took up their perch. “They’re proof enough of that.”

The summer sunset was peaceful and warm, accented by a light, easy breeze and early crickets chirping in the early evening. Dipevebel sat alone and silent on top of the barn, taking it all in and not needing any words to convey just how harmonious and happy they felt at that moment.

They had been told before that fusion represented relationships, bonds formed between Gems (or in their case, between humans and Gems), brought to life in entirely new, but familiar beings. Dipevebel themselves had already realized that, in a way, they represented not just one relationship, but several: the dedicated, devoted sibling bond between Dipper and Mabel, the unlikely, but undeniably close connection between Steven and Dipper, the warm, playful friendship between Mabel and Steven. All of these things were what created Dipevebel, what tied them together and kept them close. The fusion themselves cherished those connections and the feelings
they brought them deeply, knowing that for as long as they or any of the individual parts that composed them existed, they’d never let any of them go.

As the sun finally disappeared beyond the distant hills and the sky settled into the cool shade of night, Dipevebel finally slowly came undone on their own accord. The act of unfusing was smooth and mutual, but even as they came apart, they were still together, enveloping each other in a loose yet fond three-way hug. None of them said anything as they kept up their contented smiles and upheld this comforting embrace, wanting to hold onto it and the simple happiness it brought them for as long as possible, and even after that.
Chapter 65: The Answer

Chapter Summary

In which Steven has an existential crisis (again), Connie is the MVP, Ruby and Sapphire realize they're hella gay, and the GF characters don't do fucking anything.

Chapter Notes

Welp its been awhile huh? Sorry about that, and sorry for the sorta lackluster chapter we got here but ehhhhh it was kinda one of those "gotta get through it to get to the end of it" sorta deals, so I hope you'll forgive me imo anyway with that outta the way, might as well get to it (Keyword is LOVE)

HVZVP KDPW HCIJ UJ
ASOO ATZG XSST HZ
HJKPHCIC HCIJ'FZ WZAZXSWIK
PBOMCSGC YSR

The barn was always its most serene at night; under the cover of darkness and stars, the wide open farmland rested comfortably, fireflies gleaming across the barnyard as cicadas and crickets chirped out their moonlit songs. It was a sort of peacefulness that was easy to fall asleep to, and that’s exactly what Steven had done in the bed of the old pickup truck parked inside the barn. Normally, the young Gem would have camped out on the barn’s loft alongside Dipper and Mabel, however, the twins, as well as Ford had returned to the shack for the night to prepare for the festivities the following day. Festivities that Steven in particular was quite excited about, though even still, he wanted to make sure he was well-rested for them, which was why he had intentionally headed for bed earlier than usual that evening. Still, the young Gem soon found his comfortable snoozing interrupted all the same as he happened to sense a sudden shadow falling over him.

“Mm…?” Steven groaned tiredly as he opened his eyes ever so slightly. As sleepy as he was, he was more than prepared to close them again and head back to sleep. And he probably would have, if not for the enthusiastic call of the Gem leader who had woken him up in the first place.

“Steven!” Garnet exclaimed, bereft of her visor as she looked down to her sleepy young ward with an elated grin.

“Steven?” the young Gem awakened fully, letting out a surprised gasp as he did. “Oh! Is it morning already?”

“It’s midnight!” Garnet clarified brightly. “Happy birthday, Steven!”

Steven chuckled warmly as he sat up fully, pressing his hands against the Gem leader’s cheeks in jest. “Oh man! Are you finally gonna tell me that you’re a fusion of the Gems Ruby and Sapphire like you promised?”
“Eh, you already know about all that, Steven,” Garnet shrugged simply.

“Aw…” Steven sighed as he flopped back into bed, disappointed that Garnet’s purposed birthday surprise for him had already been ruined quite some time ago now. “It’s true…”

“But…” the Gem leader interjected, her smile widening. “What you don’t know is how Ruby and Sapphire first met.”

The young Gem readily sat back up at this, stars in his eyes as he looked to Garnet with unbridled excitement. “Omg! I don’t! I hadn’t even thought of that before! I bet it’s a great story!”

“It is,” Garnet nodded with a soft chuckle as she prepared to detail the dramatic, romantic tale. “And it all began right here, on Earth, 5,750 years ago…”

While the barn had recently been designated as a “drill work zone”, an air of clear festivity hung over it today as the Gems busied themselves decorating for the upcoming party. Balloons had been blown, streamers streamed, and even a banner hung, all to celebrate their youngest member’s birthday. It was a party that had been in the planning stages for weeks now, and even though everyone had taken up shop at the barn to work on the drill, it was a party that they had no intentions of canceling or rescheduling despite its newfound off venue.

“I can’t believe its finally my birthday,” Steven noted to the Gems as he helped Amethyst tie up a handful of balloons. “You’re sure its ok that we’re taking a break from the drill like this?”

“It’s fine,” Pearl assured as she tied a colorful ribbon to the barn’s entrance. “Peridot will keep us on schedule.”

“Yo, Peri!” Amethyst called over to the green Gem as she passed by, clipboard in hand. “You sure you don’t wanna get in on all this?” At this, the purple Gem inflated a green, triangular balloon, only to fill it with too much air to the point of it inevitably popping. Peridot simply sent her an unamused scowl before she headed back into the barn to continue working on the drill.

“We should celebrate our progress,” Garnet said as she placed an affirming hand on Steven’s shoulder. “We should celebrate your progress. You’ve grown a lot this year.”

“He certainly has,” Pearl agreed with a proud grin.

“Yeah…” Steven said, initially not completely convinced until he realized just how much had happened over the past several months alone. Both good and bad, everything he’d been through over the course of the summer seemed to be a growing experience in some way, shape or form, and that indeed, was something to be proud of. “Yeah, I guess so!”

This exchange was soon interrupted, however, but the sound of an incoming car horn. Sure enough, a familiar red car pulled onto the scene, one that Steven didn’t hesitate to run over to as soon as it came to a stop near the barn. “Dipper! Mabel!” the young Gem exclaimed happily, pulling both twins into a tight hug the moment they stepped out of the car. “I’m so glad you guys could make it!”

“Well, of course, we made it, Steven,” Dipper laughed as their embrace disbanded. “We already told you yesterday that there was no way we were gonna miss out on your birthday party.”

“Speaking of which…” Mabel’s already abundant smile widened as both her and Dipper presented
what they were each holding behind their backs to the young Gem.

“Happy birthday, Steven!” the twins exclaimed in bright unison as they offered up their gifts.

“Aww, you guys!” Steven gushed, stars in his eyes as he took Mabel’s wrapped present first. “You shouldn’t have! And—OH MY GOSH THIS IS AMAZING!” The young Gem’s jaw dropped as he pulled an unmistakably pink stuffed lion out of the box. It was small, yet soft and plus, carefully knitted with almost fuzzy pastel yarn meant to mimic Lion’s own fur.

“Yes! I knew you’d love it!” Mabel exclaimed excitedly. “I knitted that baby up myself. It was my first time sewing up an actual plushie, and it was kinda tricky, but it was more than worth it for you, Steven.”

“Then I’ll treasure it always,” Steven smiled, hugging the plushie close. “Just as much as the real Lion!”

The trio got a good mutual chuckle out of this before the young Gem opened up Dipper’s present next, one that delighted him every bit as Mabel’s. “No way…” Steven gasped, awestruck as he flipped through the small, yet expertly-bound notebook. “Dipper, is… is this?”

“Yeah, its… kind of a guidebook to all things Gem-related?” Dipper shrugged with a bit of a flustered grin. “All of the Gem stuff you have to deal with all the time can get… kind of confusing sometimes, I get that, so I just took all of the notes about Gems and everything even remotely related to them from the journal and summed it all up for you in there. Maybe it might end up coming in handy for you someday. Who knows?”

“Are you kidding? Of course this will come in handy!” Steven grinned. “And did you draw all these pictures in here yourself?” Though still somewhat embarrassed by his rather humble present overall, Dipper nodded. “Then that makes it even more special!” the young Gem said readily.

“Thanks so much, both of you! These are some of the best birthday presents I’ve ever gotten, hands down!”

“Pfft, seriously, kid?” Stan interupted as he lightly shoved his nibblings aside. “What these two pipsqueaks got you is small-time birthday material. Get a load of this!” The conman presented the young Gem with a rather haphazardly-made card, one that he took and looked over with apt curiosity. “Now, don’t say I never got ya anything, ok?”

“Oh my gosh!” Steven exclaimed as he pulled out the small, crumpled piece of paper stashed away inside of the card. “Is this what I think it is?”

“You better believe it is,” Stan smirked knowingly. “That’s a 100% official coupon for 5% off anything in the Mystery Shack. And by anything I mean anything in the clearance section. And by clearance section I mean that dusty old box that sits in the corner full of busted-up merch that I can’t seem to give away to most folks.”

“Whoa, a whole 5% off!” the young Gem said, duly impressed with the rather unimpressive gift. “I’ve had my eye on that cracked snow globe in the clearance section for a super long time, so this is just perfect! Thanks, Mr. Pines!”

“Heh, don’t mention it,” Stan crossed his arms, proud of his measly present.

“Oh, honestly, Stanley, you couldn’t have even bothered to get the boy an actual gift?” Ford asked with a huff as he joined the group. “Well, I suppose my present will just have to make up for your lousy one. Happy birthday, Steven,” the author’s scowl turned to a smile as he presented the young
Gem another wrapped box. Steven was absolutely stunned by the small, yet beautiful spyglass contained within, one that was simple, yet classic in design, and absolutely pristine in every way. “I must admit that I’m not… particularly well-versed in what the ‘youths’ are into nowadays, but Pearl did tell me that you enjoy stargazing every now and then, so I figured one of my own prized spyglasses from back in the day would be suitable enough of a gift.”

“Oh, its more than suitable, Mr. Ford,” Steven quipped as he already began to put the spyglass into use by glancing around with it. “Its amazing! I can use this thing to look at so many stars even from so far away! Its like tiny telescope, I love it!”

“Hm, well, thank you, my boy,” Ford grinned warmly before sending his brother a brief triumphant grin. “It certainly tops a mere coupon after all.”

Stan merely rolled his eyes at the author’s wry dig, though by then, the next set of party guests happened to pull up in Soos’ truck. The handyman was accompanied by Wendy, Grenda, and Candy, all of whom were more than eager to join in on celebrating the young Gem’s birthday as per his open invitation to them.

“Hey, everyone!” Steven greeted brightly as he rushed over to the group, the twins following not too far behind. “Its great to see you all! Y’know, it really does feel like its been a super long time since we’re gotten to hang out with any of you.”

“Well, that might have something to do with us camping out here at the barn for the past week or so,” Dipper noted with a sardonic grin.

“Yeah, and I can totally see why you dudes have been staying out here,” Soos said, nodding towards the barn. “This place is amazing! Its like its straight outta that one book, y’know, the one with the pig and the spider?”

“I love that book!” Grenda shouted as loudly as ever. “It’s an-all time classic!”

“C’mon, you guys, its just a barn,” Wendy chuckled amused. “Still, it is a pretty rad place to have a birthday party. Totally worth the super-long drive out here where we had to listen to Soos blast anime theme songs the whole way.”

“I liked the anime theme songs…” Candy muttered, raising her hand shyly.

“Wait a sec,” Grenda interjected, looking around. “Are we missing someone here or is it just me?”

“Oh my gosh, its not just you!” Mabel gasped in alarm as she also realized that a rather obvious guest for this party was clearly missing. “We can’t get this party started until all four of the Mystery Kids are here! So, where’s-”

Mabel was timely interrupted by the arrival of a third vehicle, an unmistakably colorful van to be exact, one that all of the kids in particular were more than glad to see especially as its passenger eagerly hopped out to greet them all.

“Connie!” Steven called, running over to meet the girl first.

“Steven!” Connie waved back, only to be met with an unexpected embrace from the young Gem. It was enough to make her drop the suitcase she had brought along, though even so, she laughingly accepted it, more than happy to see him after missing him for the past several days. “Happy birthday!”

“Thanks!” Steven blushed as they parted. “Welcome to the party! And to the barn. I’m surprised
“Heh, it wasn’t easy,” Connie grinned knowingly. “They’d only let me come after equipping me with every piece of safety gear on the planet.”

“What should I do with this defibrillator?!” Greg called as he attempted unloading the heavy machine out of the van.

“Um, we can just leave it in the car for now!” Connie answered back, knowing she’d have no use for the device like her parents suspected she would.

“Well, I’m glad you could make it,” Steven chuckled warmly.

“Me too,” Connie nodded, quickly perking up even more upon seeing the twins approach. “Dipper! Mabel! Long time no see!”

“Well, it sure feels like its been a long time at least," Dipper remarked with a grin.

“Connie, you’ve been missing out on so much!” Mabel exclaimed. “We have a ton to tell you about Peridot and this drill we’re building and robots and fusing and-”

“Hey now, they’ll be plenty of time for you kids to catch up later,” Greg interupted with a good-natured smile as he stepped up to the group. “For now, step aside, you three, I was Steven’s best friend first.” The other three kids gladly made some room to allow the former rock star to wrap his son into a tight, fond embrace. “Happy birthday, kiddo! Lemme get a good look at you, shtoo-ball.”

“Daaad…” Steven huffed in faux embarrassment.

“Sorry, I just can’t believe my little boy is growing up so quickly,” Greg said proudly. “Seems like just yesterday you were a baby, and now you’re turning 14 years old.”

The reaction to this news from the other three kids was sharp and instant, especially since it completely caught each of them off guard just by how bizarrely unexpected it was alone.

“Whaaaaaaa?” Mabel trailed off, completely baffled.

“Hey now, they’ll be plenty of time for you kids to catch up later,” Greg interrupted with a good-natured smile as he stepped up to the group. “For now, step aside, you three, I was Steven’s best friend first.” The other three kids gladly made some room to allow the former rock star to wrap his son into a tight, fond embrace. “Happy birthday, kiddo! Lemme get a good look at you, shtoo-ball.”

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“Whaaaaaaa?” Mabel trailed off, completely baffled.

“There’s no way!” Dipper exclaimed, looking to the young Gem in apt disbelief.

“Steven!” Connie gasped, just as startled. “You’re 14?!”

“Um… yeah?” Steven shrugged, failing to see what the big deal was.

“B-But I’m only 12 and three quarters!” Connie shook her head incredulously.

“And we don’t turn 13 till the end of the summer!” Mabel added, pointing to herself and her brother.

“Steven, that makes you the oldest one out of all of us!” Dipper exclaimed, dumbfounded. “I don’t… how is that even possible? It makes, like no sense!”

“Aww, sure it does,” Greg cut in with a knowing grin. The former rock star proceeded to pull out a special scrapbook he kept up dedicated entirely to his son and his birthdays gone by. “Let’s see… we have infant… baby… toddler… what’s it called? Adolescent… adolescent…” Greg flipped from a picture of Steven at age 9 to a picture from his 10th birthday, in which he barely looked any different at all. The same could be said of his 13th birthday, featuring a picture that was nearly
identical to the prior two. “Adolescent… huh. Looks like you stagnated there a little bit, buddy.”

“I… I have?” Steven asked with a frown, not noticing the obviously confused expressions his friends shared as they looked through the same pictures he was. Likewise, he also missed the rather concerned glance the trio shared, all of them largely thinking and feeling the exact same thing on the matter, though they didn’t dare voice those thoughts in front of the young Gem himself.

Which was why Connie was quick to create a diversion instead. “H-hey, um, Mr. Universe, c-could I show you how the defibrillator works?”

“Oh, uh, sure,” Greg agreed, though he was somewhat caught off guard by the odd request.

“Uh, h-hold up, I wanna see how it works too!” Dipper added hastily.

“I don’t.” Mabel stuck her tongue out until a succinct elbowing from her brother quickly got her to change her tune. “I-I mean, me too!”

“Oh, yeah, let me come—oh, aaaand… you guys are already leaving…” Steven noted as the others hurriedly walked off towards the van without him. The young Gem raised a curious eyebrow, feeling as though their intentions with this impromptu meeting went beyond any simple defibrillator. And while he normally wasn’t one to eavesdrop, he couldn’t help but quietly skirt around to the other side of the van while no one was looking, pressing up against the back of it to listen in on a conversation that was centered around, of all things, him.

“Oh, seriously,” Dipper began in a discreet whisper. “How is Steven over a year older than all of us? And how are we only just finding out about this now?”

“Ooo, this means that Steven’s not just “technically” a teen, he is a teen!” Mabel exclaimed with a playful smile. “How… mature…”

“Well… he doesn’t seem that mature…” Connie frowned. “I always thought he was the same age as the three of us. Based on those pictures, it’s like he just… stopped growing after a certain point.”

“Eh, I guess that is kinda what happened…” Greg scratched the back of his neck. “Can’t believe I didn’t really notice that until now, but I guess its part of that whole “dad” thing of not wanting your kid to grow up too fast.”

“So… will he be able to grow up… at all??” Connie asked, a hint of worry in her tone.

“Well, its hard to say…” Greg mused. “He’s a Gem, and… Gems don’t really ‘grow up’. I mean, I’ve known the Gems since I was 22 and they haven’t changed since! They just are what they are. But Steven’s not like other Gem’s; he’s half human. So… I’m not really sure how he’s gonna age. We’re just gonna have to wait and see.”

Upon hearing this, Steven drew back slightly, the implications of what his father had just said hitting him in a way he hadn’t been expecting. If he was perfectly honest with himself, he had never really put much stock into how he was growing. Or, apparently in his case, not growing. The young Gem had never seen himself as small or underdeveloped for his age, mostly since he had so few actual frames of reference to compare himself to. True, he had always known on some level that Connie, Dipper, and Mabel were all a bit younger than him, but he had never thought that fact mattered much at all. Until now, at least.

“Huh. You know, sometimes it really is easy to forget that Steven is technically half-alien…” Dipper noted thoughtfully after a moment of stated silence among the group. “It… really does kind
of make him stand out when you think about it.”

“B-but that’s not a bad thing!” Mabel readily interjected. “It just means he’s special! And magical, literally!”

“Well, no one can argue with that logic,” Greg chuckled, amused. The twins joined in, though Connie noticeably didn’t, still largely lost in thought until the former rock star noticed her quiet manner. “H-hey, Connie. You ok?”

“Hm?” she blinked, looking over to the others. “Uh, y-yeah, yeah. Its just… eh, forget it, its nothing.”

Greg almost pressed her more on the matter, though he refrained, knowing that this conversation was likely uneasy enough for all three of the kids, all things considered. So instead, he decided to offer each of them a brief, but much-needed form of reassurance instead. “Human beings?” he asked, smiling slightly as he held up a hand.

“Human beings,” the kids all solidly agreed as they joined in the four-way high five. It was enough to bring things to an end and prompt them all to return to the barely-begun party, though said party was bereft of its guest of honor who decided to linger in his hiding spot for a moment longer. Steven’s already prevalent frown deepened as he lifted his shirt slightly to take a peek at the gem on his navel. Every now and again, it did serve to remind him that he was rather different from other humans, but for most of his life, he never really saw that as a bad thing. Though perhaps, that was because the implications of being half-Gem and half-human at the same time had only just began to strike him recently. It wasn’t a new thought, not at all, but it was an intrusive, rather worrying one, especially as he happened to recall a certain ominous speech from a certain spiteful demon that still hit him hard in all the wrong ways.

“**The way I see it, you’ve got the worst of both worlds and the best of none!**” Bill had said in the dream, or rather nightmare he had invaded. A nightmare that still haunted Steven through and through, even long after the fact. “You can’t do even half of what Fuse Box, Bird Brain, and Half Baked can do.” But he was trying, working hard every day to reach the Gems’ level and be a valuable part of the team and yet… no matter what he did, it still never seemed to be enough in the end. “**But at the same time, you aren’t exactly ‘normal’ like Pine Tree, Shooting Star, and Sword Swinger are.**” No, he certainly wasn’t, especially if he couldn’t even really do something as simple and human as age like they did. It seemed as though his different halves contradicted each other constantly, his Gem inhibiting his ability to be fully human, and his humanity limiting his potential as a Gem. He really was half of both and all of none. A stranger to both ends of the spectrum. Which meant that, if he couldn’t be fully Gem and he couldn’t be fully human, the dream demon had been right in proclaiming the only thing that he could be instead: “**Basically what I’m trying to say here, Rosebud… is that you’re a freak!**”

A freak. An outlier, always on the outside looking into two parts of himself, neither of which he could ever fully embrace. He wanted to be a Crystal Gem, he always had been; they were his family after all. But he couldn’t pretend like he hadn’t heard the worried whispers, that he hadn’t caught their doubtful glances before. He knew, just as much as each of them did, that he was nowhere close to living up to their expectations for him, much less rising up to take his mother’s place someday. His friends, on the other hand, were an entirely different matter altogether. The time he spent with them was precious, and valuable. His bonds with each of them were close and treasured. But the newfound worry that he might not get the chance to join them in something as plain and normal as growing up together simply because of his own bizarre biology filled him with a kind of dread he could barely even begin to describe. The thought of breaking his ties to any of them was unbearable. To remain stagnant, ultimately left behind by his friends as they got older
and left him on the youthful wayside was an absolutely terrifying prospect. And the idea of losing Dipper, Mabel, Connie because of something that was entirely his own fault… It was more than enough to finally drive the young Gem to the tears he had been desperately trying to hold back.

Steven choked out a small sob as he pressed back against the side of the van, completely ignoring the buzz of the party afar in the distance. He felt as though his thoughts were all crashing into each other at once, leaving him lost and confused and helpless in the twisting tide of it all. There had to be something, anything he could do to figure this mess out, to find a way to reconcile both halves of his whole in a way that actually made sense for a change. It was such an immense, massive question, one that he knew he couldn’t burden anyone but himself with. And it was a question he knew he could no longer just tuck away in the back of his mind for a later date. He had to know where, and what he was really meant to be; and as far as he was concerned, the only one who could find that answer was himself.

In the midst of his rapidly escalating internal crisis, the young Gem only spared a passing glance at the cheery festivities intended for him as he quietly, discreetly called Lion over to him instead. He had no intentions of being gone for too long, but all the same, he knew he had to go it alone. To at the very least clear his head and work everything through. And thankfully, nobody seemed to notice the pink blur swiftly rush away from the barn, carrying one lone, lonely young Gem. A young Gem who hoped to return finally find exactly where he truly belonged.

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Earth, 5,750 years ago…

It was the promising site of a new colony. A planet only recently discovered by scout ships, far, far away from Homeworld, but still abundant with plenty of viable resources for constant Gem production. And so the conquest had carried on for several hundred years, Kindergartens carved and cultivated and structures sculpted and standing at a steady, stalwart pace.

Until…

A small group of rebellious Gems arose, led by their fierce and fearless leader, Rose Quartz. A Gem made from the soil of the Earth itself, she had grown fond of the planet as it was—messy and pointless, covered in ridiculous plants and creatures growing every which way for no reason! The Earth made no sense to most other Gems, but for whatever reason, to Rose Quartz, it was precious, worth protecting, worth even going as far to stand against her own kind to keep it safe. And that’s exactly what she had done. The Gems already stationed on Earth were at a complete loss as to how to put an end to Rose Quartz and her tiny, yet persistent rebellion. Which was why Homeworld soon stepped in to intervene.

A team of diplomatic Gems had been sent from Homeworld to investigate the uprising in the hopes of putting a stop to it once and for all. The Gem to no doubt hold the answers would be a Sapphire: a rare, aristocratic Gem with the power to see into the future. Assigned to this Sapphire was a trio of Rubies: simple, common foot soldiers, all with a mission to protect her. And so it was that Sapphire and her guards had arrived on the cloud arena, hovering high above the Earth’s untamed surface below, each of them ready to fulfill their respective duties.

“Hey!” Ruby shouted up to her fellow Ruby, gusto in her tone as they escorted Sapphire to her destination. “Can’t wait for those rebels to get here!”

“Haha, yeah!” Ruby laughed zealously. “When I see those rebels, I’m gonna punch them right in their faces!”
“What are you sayin? I’m gonna punch them all over their bodies, and then it’ll be over.”

“Well, what if… I just punch you!” the guard did so, striking her fellow Ruby in the shoulder only to receive a playful punch in the jaw in return.

“Oh, come on,” the third Ruby spoke up, much more calm and rational than her rowdy companions. “We’ll punch ‘em together when we fuse. That’s why they sent, uh, three of us?”

“Three THIS!” Ruby yelled, catching Ruby off guard with a sudden punch to the gut. Ruby barely blocked it, though the force of it was still enough to knock her back. Right into Sapphire.

The other two Rubies, as well as any nearby Gems who happened to catch sight of the offense. For a lower level Gem to even so much as look at a higher-ranking Gem the wrong way was completely forbidden, much less touch them, accidentally or not. Which was why Ruby was quick to put distance between herself and Sapphire, all while checking over the precious Gem to make sure she was unharmed.

“Ah! U-um, I-I’m so sorry!” Ruby exclaimed, flustered. “I, uh, l-let me-”

“I’m fine,” Sapphire interrupted, her tone cool and calm.

“W-what?”

“It’s ok,” the blue Gem assured evenly. “It was bound to happen.”

For a moment, Ruby simply stared at her, dumbfounded until she remembered Sapphire’s mysterious ability to gaze through the sands of time to see each and every event that would transpire with crystal clear accuracy. A Gem as common as her couldn’t even begin to fathom what an incredibly ability like that must be like to possess, yet Sapphire seemed completely unphased by it. Or by anything else for that matter. “I… uh… r-right,” Ruby nodded, forcing herself back into the professionalism she was supposed to be showing.

“Now please, wait here,” Sapphire addressed her entourage as a whole as they arrived at an imposing blue palanquin. “I must attend to my duties.”

Each of the Rubies nodded dutifully, snapping into attention as the blue Gem passed by them into the palanquin. Sapphire had been called to Earth by Blue Diamond herself, all to share her vision of the future. And so the blue Gem entered confidently into her radiant Diamond’s powerful, yet elegant presence, seeking her audience as requested.

“My Diamond,” said Sapphire, respectfully approaching the Diamond and her accompanying Pearl. “I’ve arrived.”

Blue Diamond spoke, her voice soft, yet stern. “Sapphire, tell me what will happen here.”

Sapphire nodded and proceeded to provide her Diamond with her prophecy. “I foresee the rebels attacking the cloud arena. Before they are cornered, they will destroy the physical forms of seven Gems, including two of my Ruby guards and myself. Immediately after my form is destroyed, the rebels will be captured. The rebellion ends here.”

“Thank you, Sapphire,” Blue Diamond said, relieved. “That’s all I needed to know.”

“I look forward to speaking with you again once I reform back on Homeworld, my Diamond,” Sapphire curtsied to her matriarch, concluding their brief, but important meeting as she turned to reconvene with her trio of guards. Despite the danger she knew that was to arrive very soon,
Sapphire did not fear it. She knew she would be a casualty of the impending battle, but it did not phase her. With her unique power, she could see her entire existence laid out before her, and she had already accepted all of it. The rebels would be caught and punished and the colony would be completed as planned. And Sapphire would be taken back to Homeworld, where she would come to. And she’d never see the Earth or her Ruby guards ever again.

All would go exactly as she had foretold, just as it always did.

So all that was left to do now was wait. Sapphire quietly came to stand alongside her guards, taking up a spot beside Ruby in particular as they glanced over the edge of the cloud arena down to the Earth’s distant surface below. A beat of stark silence passed as Ruby kept her sights set straight ahead, lest she offend her charge any further than she had earlier. She was quite surprised, however, when said charge suddenly spoke to her specifically, seemingly out of nowhere. “What a beautiful place to build a colony,” Sapphire said with a small, thoughtful smile. “I wish I could have seen more of this planet.”

Unsure of what to say, Ruby glanced down to the unknown surface of the planet herself before offering what assurance she could. “Uh… there’s still time…”

“That’s a nice thought…” the blue Gem mused almost wistfully. “But… no.”

Ruby quickly looked away at this, her already red cheeks growing even more rosy. She couldn’t place exactly why, but something about Sapphire, be it her status, her wisdom, or something else entirely, seemed to fluster and entice her all at once. Of course, Ruby knew he place well, and knew that her confusion and her feelings in general meant nothing when compared to mission to protecting Sapphire. Which was why she fell silent, holding her peace and maintaining her resolve to keep the blue Gem safe. A resolve that she would have to act on sooner rather than later.

For almost an instant later, a loud, brazen shout rose over the cloud arena, its commanding power catching the attention of every single Gem who heard it as it echoed defiantly throughout the area. “Blue Diamond! Leave this planet! This colony will NOT be completed!”

“It’s the rebels!” one of the other Rubies shouted, already gearing up for the battle ahead.

The entire court was instantly thrown into chaos, Gems scrambling either to search for or hide from the rebels as they finally made their appearance. Rose Quartz herself had come, floating down from above, accompanied by her infamous renegade, sword-wielding Pearl. The reputation this pair of Gems alone carried was enough to strike both outrage and panic among the Homeworld forces below them, especially as they declared themselves and their rebellious status without any sort of hesitation whatsoever.

“We... are the Crystal Gems!” the duo shouted in bold unison before splitting off to launch their attack. Blue Diamond’s palanquin quickly sealed itself off from the offending Gems, its mechanical legs sprouting to escort the matriarch to safety. At the same time, a group of courageous quartzes rushed in to stop the rebels, though the Pearl swiftly intercepted them, her dual blades cutting through their forms, dismantling them easily. Acting on one accord, the trio of Rubies raced forward next, stacking on top of one another and combining their forms into a much larger, more powerful one easily. The Ruby fusion charged headlong towards Rose Quartz herself, but it was no use. In a single, almost unseen move, the rebel leader tore through them, her strike powerful enough to destroy the forms of two thirds of the fusion altogether. Ruby alone was all that was left as she fell out of the fusion, the gems of her fellow guards falling to the ground, useless, beside her. Weak from the attack, the red Gem collapsed, though she still had enough strength left to glance over her shoulder to be met with a sight that made her freeze with alarm. The Pearl had landed
directly between her and Sapphire, her pair of swords brandished and ready to attack the defenseless blue Gem. Sapphire remained still, her manner as regal and cool as ever as she simply looked past the deadly sword poised to take her down towards Ruby instead.

“Thank you, Ruby,” she said, calmly accepting her horrific fate. “You did your best.”

And it was at that single, solitary moment at Ruby suddenly realized what Sapphire had meant. She had known that Ruby would fail. Sapphire had accepted it. But Ruby... Ruby could NOT.

“NO!” the red Gem shouted, launching herself at Sapphire without thinking. She made contact with the blue Gem just before the Pearl’s sword came down in a brutal swing, effectively pushing her clean out of the way of the attack. The resounding force of the move spun the pair of Gems around wildly, both of them clinging tightly onto each other more out of surprise than anything else. And then, with a single flash of light and a simple twist of fate...

The two Gems suddenly became one.

“Wha…” the new fusion gasped, her voice soft and shaken as she stole a glance down at her form. She was tall, much taller than the pair of Gems she was composed of, a messy, haphazard mish-mash of their forms in every single way, with splotches of pinks and blues and several colors in between. There was no inkling of symmetry, of rationality, of sense to be made of her whatsoever. And the one who was perhaps the most confused by the fusion’s striking, sudden existence, was the fusion herself, especially as she spotted the nearly matching gemstones resting upon both of her palms. “W-what is this?!”

The fusion drew in a gasp, her gaze quickly snapping away from herself and to the crowd of Homeworld Gems surrounding her. Their reaction was stunned, to say the least. None of them had EVER seen a fusion of two entirely different Gems before, much less a lowly Ruby and a precious Sapphire. Such a thing was absolutely unprecedented, both on Homeworld and anywhere else.

In fact, it was so striking, that even the rebels were taken aback by such an unusual sight. Yet for as caught off guard as they were, the Pearl was quick to shake her shock away and drew her sword back for a finishing blow. Only to be stopped by Rose Quartz herself.

“Wait!” the rebel leader said, her voice intense as she stared at the fusion, awestruck. “This is-” Rose Quartz cut herself off as she noticed several of the Homeworld Gems angrily approaching them, ready to take advantage of the distraction to take them out. “…Let’s go.”

“Um… bye!” the Pearl exclaimed just before both her and Rose Quartz leapt into the clouds, making their escape. Their hasty flight went largely unnoticed by the fusion, however, who was still trying to piece together exactly how she had happened in the first place.

“I-is… is this…?!” the fusion let out a sudden gasp. Light pierced her mismatched form, her shock splitting her apart and landing both Ruby and Sapphire on the ground in a daze. Neither of them had a chance to make any sense of what just occurred, however, as a group of clearly furious Gems closed in all around them.

“Unbelievable!” one of the Gems exclaimed, appalled.

“Disgusting!” another scoffed harshly.

“This is unheard of!” a third Gem shouted in outrage.

The incensed shouts and murmurs continued as Ruby and Sapphire slowly began to pick themselves up, both of them still at a complete and utter loss. Yet soon enough, above all of the
other voices, Blue Diamond’s soon arose as she made her return, her manner fierce and bitter as she spoke down to the Gems below her.

“The rebels have fled,” the tranquil fury in her tone as clear as day. “Sapphire, this is not the scenario you described!”

“T-this is… not what I saw!” Sapphire shook her head, trying her best to catch another glimpse into the future to try to set things right. Something was wrong though. Instead of seeing the single, constant path she had always known, she now saw several, like countless rivers cutting through the land instead of one single stream. And it terrified her. “I-I don’t know what happened! I-”

“No! It was me!” Ruby quickly interrupted, rising to stand and take the blame for her hasty actions.

“Clearly,” Blue Diamond scowled. “How dare you fuse with a member of my court!?”

“F-forgive me!” the red Gem pleaded, desperate. “I-

“I will hear NO excuses from such a lowly Gem!” the matriarch snapped impatiently. “You will be SHATTERED for this!”

Ruby seized up with fear upon being issued what was essentially a death sentence. And sure enough, it was a sentence Blue Diamond’s court intended on acting upon as they prepared to reach for the red Gem and put an end to her existence entirely. And… it was in that moment, as Sapphire looked to Ruby once more, to the Gem who had defied the future itself to rescue her, that she found herself doing the exact same thing. For the first time ever, Sapphire didn’t think. She simply grabbed Ruby’s wrist… and ran.

“W-wait!” Ruby shouted, alarmed as they sped past the crowd, past Blue Diamond herself, towards the edge of the cloud arena. “What are you doing?!” The red Gem’s eyes were wide with fear as Sapphire leapt clean off of the arena, with her in tow. “Noooooo!” Ruby cried as they both plunged down through the clouds, out of Homeworld’s reach and down towards a world completely unknown to them both.

The surface of the Earth.

With just about everyone having pitched in to help the Gems finish decorating, the party was just about ready to go into full swing. The snacks and treats that had been laid out had already been picked over, largely by Amethyst, though Stan, Soos, and Grenda all had a hand in clearing them out too. The party as a whole was rather casual, with no real games or activities planned out aside from some impromptu dancing, which several of the guests gladly did to the plentiful collection of records Greg had brought with him. And yet, even though it seemed as though everyone was enjoying themselves quite a bit, only one among them really seemed to notice that the very reason why they were all there to celebrate in the first place was apparently missing.

“Where’s Steven at?” Connie finally voiced the question to Dipper and Mabel first after what felt like ages of silent wondering. The twins didn’t offer an answer right away, instead exchanging a curious glance before sharing a shrug.

“I haven’t seen him since earlier,” Dipper said as Mabel nodded in agreement. “But I just thought he was with the Gems or something.”

“Thought who was with us?” Pearl asked as her, Garnet, and Amethyst rounded the corner to step
out of the barn.

“Steven,” Mabel said. “But… from the looks of it, guess he’s not. Maybe he’s hanging out with Peri instead?”

“Not unless he’s cramped up in that puny excuse for a cockpit P-girl’s teching up for the drill,” Amethyst remarked, pointing back to the barn where Peridot was indeed hard at work on the drill’s cockpit, though still, Steven was nowhere to be found.

“Steven’s not here,” Garnet spoke up, instantly catching the attention of just about all the other guests as they overheard her.

“W-what?” Connie asked with a worried frown.

“He’s not here,” the Gem leader repeated, adjusting her shades. “He left.”

A mummer of confusion rippled through the others, all of them wondering amongst themselves why the party’s very guest of honor would leave it so mysteriously and so suddenly. “What do you mean the kid’s not here?” Stan asked, raising a caustic eyebrow. “This is his party for cryin’ out loud! What, did he have some other shindig to get to across town?”

“It’s not like Steven to just run off without telling anyone…” Greg noted, aptly concerned. “You have any idea where he might be and why he left, Garnet?”

“…That second question is better off answered by Steven himself,” the Gem leader said vaguely. “As for where he is…. I believe he took Lion and rode off to the forest just south of here.”

“Thanks,” Greg sighed in relief at this confirmation as he turned to head to his van. “Welp, guess I better go see what our birthday boy is up to-”

“W-wait!” Connie suddenly interrupted, prompted by impulse alone before she awkwardly clarified. “I… I mean, I’ll go find him, Mr. Universe. I-it that’s ok with you, of course.”

“Oh, uh… well, yeah, I’d be fine with that,” Greg nodded, somewhat confused. “But are you sure you’re up for going all that way on foot? It… looks like it’s kind of a hike.”

“I don’t mind it, really,” Connie assured. “Besides, I’ll just be able to ride back on Lion with Steven. If I can find him, that is…” She muttered her last statement apprehensively, though all the same, the twins happened to hear it, and were both eager to join in on her resolve to find the young Gem.

“We’ll go with you!” Mabel offered with a bright smile that was still tinged with a hint of worry all the same.

“Yeah, it’ll be way easier to find him between the three of us,” Dipper agreed with a nod.

“Thanks, guys,” Connie said with sincere gratitude. And yet, their offer, for as kind as it was, was one she knew she couldn’t take, especially if Steven’s sudden disappearance had anything to do with what she suspected the reason behind it was. “But… I think I’ll be fine on my own. Just… just cause,” she finished rather vaguely, finding it hard to explain the exact reason why she felt as though she had to go seek the young Gem out alone.

Clearly disappointed and perhaps even a bit bewildered by her rejection, the twins shared a fretful frown, but both of them nodded, respecting her choice all the same. “Well… good luck, then,” Dipper said with a diffident smile.
“Yeah, and when you find him, get him to hurry on back here!” Mabel added. “He’s missing out on all the fun!”

“Right,” Connie chuckled with something of a halfhearted grin. The Gems and Greg all offered her nods of confidence as she began to set out, armed with only her sword and a backpack, all to find the missing young Gem. While something like this wouldn’t have usually been too much of a cause for alarm—after all, Steven had every right to go wherever he pleased, with or without anyone accompanying him—but given the circumstances, Connie didn’t want to put this search off. Especially after the somewhat troubling conversation her, Greg, and the twins had concerning the young Gem earlier. She wasn’t entirely sure, but she had a firm belief that discussions of Steven’s age, magically stagnant as it might have been, had something to do with his abrupt departure. Admittedly, it was a strange revelation for the all, though, perhaps rather shortsightedly, they had all failed to anticipate just how the young Gem might have reacted to their own reactions to the newfound disparity between them. Which, in turn, could have very well led to Steven going out to process his feelings on his own, away from anything or anyone that might have distracted him otherwise. Connie understood that, sympathized with it, but even so, she knew she had to go find him all the same.

After all, if there was anyone who knew what it was like to feel different and alone, then it was her.

Even from a first glance, the Earth was nothing like Homeworld.

Its surface sprawled, vast and unkept and wild in every direction, with fields and mountains scattered wildly about, recklessly covered by the mysterious “plants” the planet was known for. Even stranger, drops of water poured heavily from the darkened skies above as Ruby and Sapphire plummeted down through them, eventually making a solid landing on the ground itself. The immediate aftermath of their flight from the cloud arena was hectic for them both, especially Ruby as she frantically looked between where they had come from and where they were now.

“W-why'd you do that?!” she exclaimed breathlessly, turning back around to face Sapphire. The blue Gem looked every bit as shocked as she was, though whether that was from the rush of their retreat or the still-remaining aftermath of their fusion, was unclear. “I have to get you back up there!”

“B-but… they were… they were gonna break you!” Sapphire protested earnestly, perhaps even worriedly.

“Who cares?!” Ruby asked hotly, knowing her own worth was nothing when compared to Sapphire’s. “There’s TONS of me!”

The blue Gem flinched at the harshness of her tone but said nothing, even as the rain continued to soak them both. Ruby, on the other hand, began to pace frenetically, looking for some way, any way she could get Sapphire back to the court where she belonged, even if she knew what would happen to herself if they were to return. But it would be a price worth paying if she could carry out her duty to keep the blue Gem safe. A duty that, as far as the red Gem was concerned, she had all but failed at completely. She was supposed to protect Sapphire, not strand her on a wild alien planet! How could she even begin to call herself a Ruby for doing something like that?

“AUGH!” Ruby shouted in frustration, unable to come up with any ideas. “What do we do now?” she asked Sapphire, hoping that her foresight might provide them both with some much-needed
answers. However...

Up until then, Sapphire had known every moment of her life. How it would happen and when. But because of Ruby’s impulsive gesture, she had suddenly jumped the track of fate. Everything from that instant on was wrong, and new. How could she even begin to call herself a Sapphire as in the blind as she was? She couldn’t see, she couldn’t move. She was… frozen.

Both literally and figuratively. Shards of ice had clustered around the blue Gem’s feet, trapping her even more than she already felt like she was. Ruby gasped at the sight, not hesitating to rush over to pull Sapphire free from the ice by sweeping her off her feet into a protective bridal carry. “Uh… w-we… we have to get you out of here!” the red Gem resolved, not really knowing what else to do.

And so, she did exactly that, keeping her tight grip on the blue Gem as she rushed over the nearby hills, hurrying through the rain until she happened upon a place for them to take shelter to the night. It was a small cave, cut into one of the surrounding mountains, quaint and dirty, but empty and sizable enough of a space to wait out the storm. And so, after a quick cursory peek, Ruby gently sat Sapphire down before preforming another quick search of the perimeter. “O-ok…” Ruby took in a sigh of relief. “This should be good for now.”

“Thank you…” Sapphire finally spoke up, her voice soft and shaken. Ruby turned to look back at her, only to see something that left her stunned speechless. The blue Gem had pulled back her bangs a bit, revealing her large, singular blue eye, sparkling in the dull pouring into the cave as it stared solely at her. It was a beautiful sight, one that filled Ruby with a rush of warmth she hadn’t been expecting. Warmth that decided to manifest itself in the form of fledgling flames around her feet. The red Gem gasped and stepped out of the embers, though she did manage to make use of them to build a proper fire for them both to warm up with. Or rather, for Sapphire to warm up with as Ruby anxiously continued pacing around the cave, still trying to make sense of the past several hours alone.

“What kind of a Ruby am I supposed to be?” she asked with a frustrated huff. “Look at this! Its my fault you’re stranded here. How am I gonna save you?”

“You already did,” Sapphire spoke up, her tone more even this time.

“W-what?”

“You already saved me,” the blue Gem clarified, glancing up at her.

Ruby let out a short, exasperated sigh, wanting to argue with this point, though she couldn’t think of anything else to really say. So instead, she promptly plopped down on the other side of the fire, still clearly perturbed. Silence rose between the pair, but it wasn’t an empty one. Instead, it was filled with thoughts of a Gem with both pink and blue hair, a Gem with a tall yet sturdy statue, a Gem with three eyes, each of a different color, a Gem with two gemstones, one resting on each of her palms. A Gem who should have never even come into existence at all, but still had, all the same.

A Gem that had been created by the two of them, and the two of them alone.

“I… I’ve seen Gems fuse before,” Sapphire said slowly, thoughtfully as she stared into the fire. “But I had no idea that’s what it felt like. I always thought… I never realized that fusion… that you just… disappear like that…”

“It’s never like that!” Ruby interjected readily. “Whenever I’ve fused, its always been just me, but… bigger. I… I’ve never had a third eye before…”
I’ve never had more than one!” Sapphire said, smiling. “It was… nice…”

Ruby couldn’t hide the deep blush that filled her cheeks at this, nor did she try to as she instead let out a small, genuinely happy chuckle. “Heh… yeah…” she looked away before looking right back to the blue Gem again, wondering what it would be like to experience that feeling, so unlike any fusion she had never been apart of before in all of the right ways, at least one more time.

And… as the sun rose over the hills the next morning, both Gems’ thoughts stayed on the impossible new Gem they had created as they began to explore the strange new world they now found themselves on together.

Though the day had started off bright and sunny, dark clouds heralding an oncoming summer storm soon began to roll in as the afternoon carried on. Connie paid these clouds no mind, however, as she kept up her steady pace towards the forest. The grassy fields leading towards them were rather sparse, giving her not too much scenery to look at along the way, though as lonesome as her short journey was, she was far more preoccupied with her thoughts instead.

While she wasn’t really that concerned about Steven’s wellbeing (the young Gem could take care of himself and as long as Lion was accompanying, he’d be doubly fine), Connie couldn’t deny that she was worried for him for other reasons. Garnet had been rather vague in offering a reason for the young Gem’s sudden disappearance, stating that it was a question only he could really provide the answer to. And to Connie, that fact alone made her feel as though this wasn’t a mere case of Steven simply wandering off on his own for some “alone time”, not that he was really the type to usually need that sort of thing in the first place. The young Gem was known for his sociability, and on his birthday besides, his unexplained absence was so strange, and so troublesome that it pushed Connie onwards, even to the edge of the small thicket of trees Garnet had directed her to in the first place.

The leafy canopy overhead obscured even more sunlight than the clouds did as Connie began to venture into the spacious woods. And, considering just how much the familiar pastel pink stuck out amidst the surrounding greenery, it didn’t take too long for her to spot Lion within the. She was careful and cautious as she approached the pink beast, who let out a soft purr as she patted his side. She was about to ask him where Steven himself was, but she soon got her answer as she peeked past the shrubs right next to where Lion was resting. The young Gem was pacing around a small clearing, the small Gem guidebook Dipper had gifted him in hand as he leafed through it furtively, looking for something, though for what exactly, Connie had no idea.

“Gem monsters… warp pads… fusion, ugh, come on…” Steven muttered to himself somewhat impatiently as he continued flipping through the book. “There’s gotta be something in here about-”

“Steven?” Connie spoke up, finally stepping into the clearing herself. “What are you doing out here?”

“C-Connie!” Steven exclaimed, startled as he rushed to hide the book behind his back. “I-I was just… uh… g-getting some light reading done?”

“Out here in the woods, all by yourself?” Connie raised an eyebrow. “And without telling anyone you were planning on leaving your own birthday party? Everyone was really worried when you just… disappeared like that, you know.”

“Oh, that’s right, the party!” the young Gem gasped, having genuinely forgotten about it amidst...
his much more pressing thoughts. “W-well… you can head back and tell everyone that I’ll be back for some more, uh… birthday fun soon! Ok?”

Connie frowned, noting Steven’s very obvious fake smile. “And what about you?” she asked. “Aren’t you coming back with me?”

“Uh, y-yeah!” Steven reassured quickly. “I just need to… um… I’ve gotta… uh…”

“Its ok,” Connie interjected with a small, bemused chuckle. “You don’t have to come up with an excuse… just as long as you tell me what you’re actually doing out here.”

Though he was half tempted to play the innocent card once again, Steven quickly realized that wouldn’t work with Connie, of all people. After all, she was far too smart for that, especially when it came to him. “I-it’s nothing,” he attempted a rebuff instead. “I’m fine, really. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Well, its kind of already too late for that,” Connie said, stepping a bit closer to him. “Feel free to correct me if I’m wrong but… does this have anything to do with that whole… you know… ‘age’ thing?”

“That’s part of it…” Steven muttered, rubbing his arm as he glanced downward.

“Part of it?” Connie asked, curious. “Then… what’s the rest of it?”

For a moment, it seemed as though Steven was actually going to tell her, though he was quick to backpedal, instead letting out a small, almost bitter laugh as he shook his head. “Eh, forget it. It’s silly.”

“Silly…” Connie repeated almost thoughtfully before she smiled sadly. “You know, its funny. Whenever someone else is feeling down or upset, you’re usually the first one to do everything you can to make them feel better. But… when you’re the one who’s upset, you just… act like your own feelings don’t matter.” She paused, letting her words hang in the air for a moment as Steven guiltily averted her gaze even more. That is, until he heard what she said next. “But they do matter… to me.”

Steven was admittedly caught quite off guard by this, and even moreso as Connie suddenly took a seat on the ground beside him. She said nothing at first, instead patting the space in front of her with the silent instruction for him to join her. The young Gem hesitated at first, though upon meeting her insistent gaze again, he finally folded and promptly sat down directly across from her before she began to speak.

“So, since its your birthday, I’ve decided that I’m going to be your own personal ‘Steven’ for a change,” Connie said intently.

“…Huh?” Steven frowned, not following.

“What I mean is, I want you to tell me what’s wrong; what’s really wrong,” Connie explained. “And I don’t care how ‘silly’ you might think it is; I want to—no, I’m going to help you deal with it. Ok?”

For what felt like ages, Steven simply stared at Connie in awed silence, unsure of even how to respond to such a kind offer coming from a place of genuine concern. But when he did respond, such response came in the form of the floodgates finally opening, unleashing the flow of tears he hadn’t even realized he had been holding in. “I-I… I feel like I-I shouldn’t be with you, o-or Dipper, or Mabel, o-or even the Crystal Gems,” he muttered, despondent as his tears flowed softly
and silently. “L-like I don’t fit in with any of you… like I don’t belong… anywhere…”

“Who made you think that?” Connie asked, her tone quiet and sympathetic.

Steven shook his head as he let out a small, sad sniffle. “I overheard you guys talking earlier a-and… it reminded me of something… s-someone said once… Something that I haven’t really had a chance to think about until now but… looking back, i-it does kind of make sense…”

“Oh yeah? And what did this ‘someone’ have to say?” Connie asked suspiciously, already having a heavy speculation as to who the young Gem was talking about based on just how fearful his tone seemed to be alone.

“It doesn’t matter what he said,” Steven huffed fretfully as he flopped back to lie on the ground. “What matters is that he’s right. I… I really am a freak…”

“No, you’re not!” Connie protested admantly, startling Steven as she suddenly grabbed him by the arms and pulled him to sit upright once again. The young Gem was taken aback by just how intense her expression was, which only grew more stern as she repeated herself. “Steven, listen to me: you are not a freak.”

 “…I wish I could believe you, but…” Steven sighed, wiping a few of his tears away. “I’m a Gem and a human, all at the same time, and I can’t get being either of them right! There’s still so many Gem things I can’t do yet and even more Gem things I don’t know yet! And just when I thought I had the whole human thing down pat, it turns out I can’t even grow up right! I-I just… I don’t know why… I’m…” the young Gem trailed off into another frustrated sigh. “I-is… is it me? Is it just that there’s something wrong with me as a whole?”

“…Steven…” Connie began, reaching out a hand to console him. “Nothing’s wrong with you…"

“W-well… even if that’s true,” he began, not fully believing her reassurance. “What am I supposed to do then?”

Connie frowned, glancing away sadly. In truth, this was a complicated problem, one that she had no real idea how to solve. After all, she had no idea what it was like to be in his shoes, to deal with the duality of two halves of oneself, never being able to reconcile either of them together peacefully. It was a difficult question with no clear-cut answers. So instead of trying to offer one, Connie went with a different route entirely. “Before I met you,” she began, her tone gentle as she took one of the young Gem’s hands. “I didn’t tell like there was any place I really belonged. We always moved around so much when I was younger, and… I never really felt like I ever made any real friends. But all that changed the day you got us both stuck inside your bubble. You were my first true friend, my first actual best friend for sure. You looked at me and you didn’t just see some shy, wallflower bookworm like everyone else. Instead, you looked at me and saw someone… special, even though you’re already so special on your own. Your life is amazing, Steven, and you make me feel amazing just by letting me be a part of it. I may seem like I’m just… rambling here, but the point is that you do belong, every part of you, both Gem and human; you belong with the Gems, with Dipper and Mabel, with me. And… if you ever feel like you don’t, then just remember that I’ll always be here to remind you that you do, just like you did for me.”

At this, Connie smiled warmly, opening up her arms to the stunned young Gem before her just as the clouds above began to pour a light, sprinkling rain upon them both. While there was so much Steven could have said and wanted to say in that moment, instead, he simply accepted the shoulder she was offering up to him, melting away into her embrace as he let his feelings out in the only way he really could. She kept a loose, yet comforting hold on him, letting silence fill the space between as the light rain fell down upon them while they both simply sat there alone together.
“Where did we go, what did we do?”

The Earth was a vast, wild planet, with much to see and much to explore. And, since they nothing but time on their hands now, that’s exactly what Ruby and Sapphire set out to do. The thought that they could never return to Homeworld lingered at the back of their minds, but the more they discovered about their strange, spectacular new surroundings, the more distant that thought became. Earth was a planet filled with life, with trees and grass and flowers and bugs and reptiles and birds and fish and animals unlike anything either of them had ever seen. Nothing ever seemed to sit still on this bizarre world, from its wildlife to its weather and each new shift and chance frightened and fascinated the pair of Gems more and more each day. And of course, that wasn’t all that fascinated them in light of their new circumstances.

“I think we made something entirely new.”

While Steven normally would have erected his shield or his bubble to protect them from the rain, he didn’t bother this time, not that either of them minded the refreshing shower much. Connie would have gladly let him pour his emotions out for as long as he needed to, but soon enough his tears gradually came to a stop. Instead, the young Gem opted to rest his head on her lap, his expression morose and fretful as he stared up at the rainy clouds above while Connie stared down at him intently, listening carefully to whatever he had to say.

“We’re… pretty different,” he began, closing his eyes. “You know that, right?”

“I do,” Connie nodded, not arguing with the truth. “But I like that we’re different. It’d be boring if we were exactly the same.”

Steven paused, seemingly mulling this fact over before he posed his question in a different way. “Do you… do you ever wish I was just… another ordinary human, no Gem stuff attached?”

“Do you ever wish you were?” Connie turned the question back around.

“I… I dunno… sometimes?” Steven answered honestly. “It’d sure make things easier for all of us if I was…”

“Maybe it would,” Connie shrugged. “But just think on all the things we’d miss out on, all the adventures we wouldn’t have. We’ve gotten to experience so many things together, both good and bad, but through it all… I don’t think I’d have it any other way…”

“…You know what?” Steven asked with the smallest hint of a smile as he looked up to Connie, his thoughts slowly turning away from his own dread and anxiety and towards her and the support she was offering him instead. “I don’t think I’d have it any other way either…”

“And it wasn’t quite me and it wasn’t quite you…”

Sapphire had never fused, she was never meant to! She was never meant to remain singular, her powers in foresight meant to be shared only in the confidence of her Diamond and her Diamond alone. She was never meant to join her form with that of another Gem, not even another Sapphire and especially not a Gem as lowly as a Ruby, of all things! And yet...

She was also never supposed to see the dusk or dawn on Earth, or find cold drops of water on young plants in the morning. She was never meant to hear Ruby’s laugh, sweet and rich and invigorating as it was. Nor was she ever meant to watch her charge ahead, leading the way through this strange new world as if they weren’t entirely lost upon it!

So many things that Sapphire wasn’t supposed to see or supposed to do, but here she was, seeing
and doing them all the same…

Could the unthinkable courage of a single Ruby really override reality like this?

Ruby, on the other hand, had always fused! It was almost all she had ever known. She was always supposed to fuse with other Rubies into bigger Rubies! Never with anyone else, and of course not with a Sapphire! How could Ruby have ever hoped to combine with a Gem so valuable, so precious, so powerful, that she could see beyond space and time?

She was never meant to see Sapphire look at her like this—fascinated, bewildered, impressed—as if Ruby were the most important Gem in the universe! What on Earth?

But neither of them could deny that these things that were never supposed to happen were definitely happening!

And they started to wonder… if what they were supposed to be and everything they were supposed to do… might have just been one of an infinite number of possibilities…

“I think we made something entirely new…”

For the first time in what felt like a long time, Steven and Connie shared a genuine smile, one that only grew as the young Gem sat up to lean against the girl. Together, they remained like that for quite some time, taking in the gentle pitter-patter of the rain against the leaves of the trees surrounding them as they let it wash their worries away,

Perhaps every now and again, Steven had envied the simplicity of the kind of life that Connie led compared to his. She had both of her parents, alive and well and with her, lived in a normal house, went to a normal school, was, by all accounts, a normal kid. And yet, he knew that was only from the outside looking in. Because the Connie he knew was anything but ordinary. Rather, she was extraordinary, with skill and intelligence and bravery and kindness abundant. She spoke of him and his life as if it were a grand adventure beyond compare but he knew that it wouldn’t be an adventure worth going on unless she was by his side throughout it all.

At the same time, Connie had always known that Steven was destined for greatness. With his kind of abilities and his own drive to protect the planet they called home, there was no doubt of that. She had known from the very day they met that he was someone special, someone who was unlike anyone she had ever met, but not solely because of his Gem or his powers. Rather because of his heart, his cheerfulness, his determination, his compassion. She cared little about what he was—Gem, human, or whatever mix in between—but for who he was. And to think that someone as incredible as him could look at her like he was at that very moment, as if she were the most important person in his entire universe…

It brought on a feeling so wonderful she couldn’t begin to comprehend it.

“Oh… um…” Ruby began one night as they sat, gazing up at the vast starry skies above together. “Well I just can’t stop thinking…”

“So… um…” Sapphire continued along the same train of curious thought. “Did you say I was different?”

Ruby nodded, knowing that this was the first time in quite a while that they had discussed their impossible fusion. “And you hadn’t before…?”

“Of course not!” Sapphire smiled as she turned her sights away from the stars and to Ruby instead. “When would I have ever?”
“…I’m so sorry…” Ruby muttered, knowing that she didn’t deserve the honor of fusing with a Gem has important as Sapphire to begin with.

“No, no, don’t be!” Sapphire assured quickly, though Ruby still wasn’t allayed,

“And now you’re here forever!”

“What about you?”

“What about me?

“Well, you’re here too,” Sapphire sat up, placing her hand on top of Ruby’s as she offered the red Gem a warm, affectionate smile, “We’re here together.”

Both Steven and Connie were dripping wet as they slowly rose to stand, sparing a brief glance over at Lion as he hunkered down under the nearby shrubbery to stay dry. The pair both had shared the thought of returning to the barn, even though the party had likely been washed out by now. And yet… as they looked to each other once again, they both got another idea entirely.

Who was to say that any Gem back on Homeworld, from the lowliest of Pearls to the highest of Diamonds, actually knew what it meant to be a Ruby or a Sapphire, if a Ruby could be special and a Sapphire could be wrong?

Who was to say that someone who was half Gem and half human couldn’t exist as both at the same time, and that such a unique and special being couldn’t fully love both halves of his life and the people and Gems connected to each?

Who was to say that Gems couldn’t come to care for a planet as odd and backwards and pointless as Earth, that they couldn’t a place like this, where everything always changed but still remained exactly the same, home?

Who was to say that a human couldn’t be a part of something so much grander than herself, that she couldn’t fight for what she loved or even simply anchor a mournful friend back when he drifted too far away into fearful, fretful thoughts?

Who was to say for sure that anything was actually meant to be anything, and that anyone was supposed to figure it all out in real time…

Or NOT!?

Maybe it was just this planet, with all its ridiculous plants and creatures growing every which way for no reason, that made certainty seem like foolishness, and confusion start to make sense!

Maybe it was the drizzling rain or the shadows of the forest or even their hands still intertwined as they were as they began to spin about the clearing, their faces close and their movements in sync as they waited for the inevitable to happen.

Ruby and Sapphire wondered if they’d get an even clearer view of this incredible planet… if they tried looking at it through the eyes of the Gem they’d made together!

And why not, when no one was watching?

“Hmm hmm hmm hmm...”

Sapphire had led Ruby to a beautiful glade, sparkling with fireflies and the light of the moon. They
stood apace from each other, their gemstoned hands drawing close but never touching out of fear and excitement and a million other emotions all at once.

“Hmmm hmm hmm hmm hmm…”

Their dance had never been this slow before in the past two times they had done this, but at the same time, this was the first time they were doing this on purpose. Connie led, eventually playfully dipping Steven, eliciting a laugh out of them both before she pulled him back up and continued.

“Hmmm hmm hmm hmm hmm…”

They moved in a waltz, slow and gentle and easy as they stared at each other with wide eyes full of wonder and adoration. Some small part of them both knew what they were doing was forbidden, taboo, but despite all that it still seemed so good... so right all the same.

“Hmmm hmm hmm hmm hmm…”

Whatever had led them out here hardly seemed to matter to either of them anymore as they drew in closer. All that mattered now was that they were together, that they had each other. And nothing in the world, that anyone else said or did, was ever going to change that fact.

“Hmmm hmm hmm hmm hmm…”

Their forms overflowed with light as they began to combine, uniting just as they had that day on the cloud arena, but this time, in a completely different way.

A familiar pink glow enshrouded them both, pulling them together and piecing both of their curious, wondering hearts together perfectly.

“Hmmm…”

And just like that, they had fused.

She was back. She was someone, and she didn’t know who. But at the very least, she had a chance to finally take her existence in as opposed to being at a complete loss because of it. The fusion was somewhat unsteady in her strange new form, and yet coordinating it was actually something she found she was getting the hang of rather quickly as she stumbled around the glen just as dawn began to break.

Until… she fell.

The rain finally began to subside as Stevonnie fell back into the grass, letting out a sigh of contentment as they splashed onto the muddy ground below them. Their arms were wrapped in a loose embrace around each other as they happily let the last few raindrops splash down upon them, setting their sights on the clouds as they began to give way to the starry nightscape above.

“I bet this isn’t exactly how you imagined your birthday would go, huh?…” they asked themselves with a soft, distant smile. “No, its not. Its even better than I could have hoped for.”

The fusion had stumbled over a rock and rolled down a short hill, eventually landing somewhat haphazardly at the bottom. She groaned, rather out of sorts and disoriented at first, though she was quick to catch her bearings again as she glanced up, only to find the sharp end of a sword pointed directly at her face.

“Ah!” she gasped, pressing back up against the hill fearfully. “D-don’t hurt her! D-don’t hurt…
me?”

Confused, the fusion glanced up at her attacker, only to find none other than the terrifying renegade Pearl who had nearly struck Sapphire down weeks ago. “It’s you!” the Pearl exclaimed, quite surprised herself as she pulled her sword away somewhat. “The fusion…”

“W-we didn’t mean to fuse!” she countered defensively, knowing well what the punishment for something like this could be. “Well… well, we did this time. B-but we’ll unfuse! We’ll… we…” The fusion trailed off as another figure stepped into the clearing. The Pearl stepped aside to make way for the pink Gem, whose eyes were wide with curiosity and amazement as she regarded the stunned fusion before her.

It was the leader of the rebellion herself: Rose Quartz.

“No, no, please…” Rose Quartz spoke, her tone gentle and awestruck at this discovery. “I’m glad to see you again…”

“I’m sorry for running off like I did…” Stevonnie continued their quiet conversation with themselves. “It’s ok… I know why you did it…” The fusion paused, holding their hands up in front of them for a moment as they looked over them thoughtfully. “You know… if for some reason we really did ever end up going our separate ways… I think this would be what I’d miss the most… yeah, same here… But, I have a feeling that’s not going to happen. After all, you said so yourself: we belong together.”

Stevonnie felt a mutual rush of warmth fill their cheeks at this but they laughed all the same, the simple joy of existing together like this filling both of their halves up to the brim with peaceful bliss. “Yeah, you’re right… we do…”

The fusion stilled, still frightened, though somewhat less so as the Pearl fully retracted her sword and Rose Quartz showed no apparent signs of malice. “I-I don’t… upset you?” she asked, bewildered.

“Who cares about how I feel?” Rose Quartz asked with a smile as she leaned down towards the fusion. “How you feel is bound to be much more interesting!”

“How I feel?” the fusion asked uneasily, though she answered honestly all the same. “I-I feel… lost… and scared… and… and happy. W-why am I so sure that I’d rather be this than everything I was supposed to be, and that I’d rather do this than everything I was supposed to do?”

Rose Quartz simply chuckled brightly at this, her Pearl even offering a bemused smile, as if they both knew something the fusion did not. “Welcome to Earth!” Rose exclaimed warmly, confusing the fusion even more.

“C-can you tell me?” she began, desperate to know what had really led her to this moment. “How was Ruby able to alter fate? Why was Sapphire willing to give up everything? W-what am I??”

“No more questions,” Rose interjected firmly as she took both of the fusion’s hands, silently solidifying that she would be welcomed to their side if she so chose to join it. “Don’t ever question this. You already are the answer.”

Stevonnie let out a soft gasp as they continued gazing up at the emerging stars above. Because at that point, something finally, finally clicked, at least for one half of them. The message of the story Garnet had told him the previous night had been clear from the moment she had finished it, but until now, it hadn’t fully sunken it. But now, every single piece of it all finally made perfect sense.
Why would a Gem turn against her Homeworld to protect the messy, pointless planet Earth?

What would make an aristocratic Gem risk everything for a common guard?

How could a humble soldier alter the track of fate forever?

What would make these Gems defy everything they were supposed to do and be so they could stay together on such a curious planet like Earth?

How could a half Gem, half human even exist in the first place?

What would give a normal, average human enough courage and drive to fight and act in ways she had never thought possible before?

And what was it that brought that half Gem, half human and that seemingly normal human together to the point that they never wanted to be apart?

The answer… was love.
Chapter 66: Peridot and Pacifica

Chapter Summary

In which Peridot is a noisy dweeb, Dipifica is in bloom, and a bunch of Jersey dwarves are running rampant.

Chapter Notes

Oy so I nearly didn't get this chapter done in time before going on vacation but boy am I glad I did because I would have gone crazy had I not. Anyway, not a ton to say about this one other than its cute. Enjoy! : ) (Keyword is Titan's Ore)

“Special delivery!”

Caustically, Peridot glanced up from the drill’s blueprints she was looking over to find Steven standing before her, a small, wrapped box in his hands. Mabel stood alongside him, practically beaming with excitement as they both presented the green Gem with this unknown item.

“What are you doing?” the green Gem asked, raising an eyebrow as she looked between the pair.

“Wheeelll…” Mabel began, eagerly. “We were feeling kinda bad about throwing your lemon hancers-”

“Limb enhancers,” Peridot corrected pointedly.

“Weeellllll…” Mabel began, eagerly. “We were feeling kinda bad about throwing your lemon hancers-”

“Limb enhancers,” Peridot corrected pointedly.

“Yeah, those,” Mabel nodded. “Into the ocean when we poofed ya. Soooo…”

“So we thought we’d get you a little something to make up for it!” Steven finished, holding the box up to her. “We hope you like it!”

The green Gem still largely had no idea what they were offering her, but she took the box all the same, opening it to find a small, black, keyboarded device inside. “Its… a rectangle.”

“And a cell phone!” Steven quipped. “I found it all busted up in Amethyst’s room awhile back. Its kind of old, but we had Soos fix it up for you, so it should work just fine!”

“Ooooo…” Peridot’s formerly bored manner quickly dissolved as she accidentally turned the phone on, its bright, pixelated screen instantly catching her interest.

“You can work it by using those tiny keys,” Mabel informed, peeking over the green Gem’s shoulder. “You can call people, send texts, even play a few fun little games! It’s it great?”
“Plus, it even has wi-fi on it!” Steven added. “Which means you have the whole worldwide web to hang out on!”

“Worldwide?” Peridot scoffed. “Ha! With my finger screens, I had the ability to search and retrieve data across multiple star systems.”

“Hm… impressive…” Steven mused. “But I think we can do you one better… with TubeTube!”

The young Gem navigated to the video app on the phone, pulling up a popular cat video that baffled the green Gem as she squinted to properly watch it on the tiny screen. “Why was this documented…?”

“And even cooler than that, you can share whatever you’re thinking with the entire world!” Mabel exclaimed brightly. “Just as long as you keep it under 140 characters.”

“That’s so many people!” Peridot gasped, stars of amazement in her eyes as she continued tapping away on the phone. “I really, really like this. But it’s a shame it doesn’t come attached to your body like—oh wait!”

Without missing a beat, the green Gem rushed inside the barn, rummaging through what scraps were left inside it before hurrying back with a strap of velcro in hand. “Behold! My innovation!” Peridot proclaimed, fashioning the tape to the back of the phone before doing the same to her wrist. She quickly connected the two before pulling off a dramatic pose to show off her handiwork to the impressed pair. “I’ve harnessed the power of your interlocking fabric strips!”

“Um, not that that isn’t cool, Peridot,” Steven said with a small, bemused grin. “But it would be way easier to just put the phone in your pocket when you’re not using it.”

“…What’s a pocket?”

“Wow, you guys really just gave someone who doesn’t even know what pockets are a fully-functional, web-enabled cell phone,” Dipper spoke up from his spot nearby as he continued leafing through the first journal, his tone absolutely deadpan. “Nice one.”

“Hmph, like I need to know what ‘pockets’ are,” Peridot scowled back at him. “What matters is I finally have cutting-edge tech again! Everything is finally all at my fingertips once more… What a wonderful feeling.”

“Yeah, a refurbished phone from five years ago,” Dipper said, still just as dour as he closed the journal. “That’s real ‘cutting-edge’ tech right there. Super advanced stuff.”

“Aw, c’mon, Dipper, let her have her fun,” Mabel interjected, grinning. “She’s been really good lately. She deserves a reward!”

“A reward?” Dipper scoffed incredulously, more or less ignoring the green Gem as Steven continued showing her how to use her new phone. “For the Gem who tried to kill us on multiple occasions? Who only came here to check on a ticking-time bomb of a Gem mutant buried under the crust of the Earth? Who fused with Bill Cipher? Are you and Steven actually insane?”

“No, we’re just being nice,” Mabel huffed, hands on her hips. “Maybe you should try it sometime, bro-bro.”

“I don’t have anything against being nice,” Dipper countered, crossing his arms. “But I do have a problem with being nice to Peridot. In case you haven’t noticed, Mabel, she’s not our friend. She’s barely even our ally. And its about time you guys realized that before you have to learn it the hard way.”
“Oh yeah?” Mabel countered. “Well, have you ever stopped to think that maybe Peri’s not as bad as you think she is? If you just gave her a chance, then maybe you’d see that, yeah, she might be sorta rude and loud and mean and cocky and-”

“And this is supposed to prove me wrong… how, exactly?”

“Point is,” Mabel cut in succinctly. “She’s still learning about Earth and about all of us. She wants to help us stop that Cluster thing. So why can’t you meet her halfway and help her learn like me and Steven are?”

Dipper didn’t offer an answer to this as he instead glanced past his sister and over to the green Gem instead. Peridot noticed his stare and returned it with a sour glare of her own, one that more or less reaffirmed the mutual disdain they both had for each other. Disdain that, for the most part, neither of them were willing to give up so easily and so soon.

As enthralled by her new phone as Peridot was, she didn’t really get too much of a chance to explore all of its features before Pearl and Ford came rounding the side of the barn, Garnet and Amethyst following not too far behind.

“Children—and Peridot,” Ford began, his manner stiff and fretful. “I’m afraid we have some rather… unfortunate news. It seems as though our progress on the drill has been forced to come to something of a… grinding halt.”

“What?!” the kids all asked in apt, unified alarm upon hearing such disheartening news.

“What do you mean?” Steven asked with a worried frown. “Aren’t we supposed to be getting it done as soon as possible so we can stop the Cluster before it… y’know, destroys everything?”

“Well, that was the plan…” Pearl said, looking over to the unfinished drill. “Until we realized that we’ve overlooked one quintessential material needed to allow the drill to safely penetrate the earth’s molten layers.”

“Oh really?” Peridot asked, crossing her arms as she looked up at the white Gem and the author with a critical glance for this oversight. “And what exactly what might that material be?”

The pair looked to each other briefly, neither of them too fond of the green Gem’s caustic tone, though Ford provided a terse answer all the same. “Titan’s ore.”

“Titan’s ore?” Peridot interjected again, rolling her eyes. “Please. Where’s the issue here? All you have to do is dig some up out of the ground and apply a steady sheet coating onto the drill’s injector. Its so easy, that any basic clod around here could do it!”

“It would be easy,” Pearl countered, crossing her arms. “If we were on Homeworld, where raw titan’s ore is lying around practically everywhere. But here on Earth, its ridiculously rare.”

“Oh yeah, isn’t titan’s ore that one metal that’s crazy durable but stupidly expensive?” Dipper asked.

“‘Stupidly expensive’ is an understatement, my boy,” Ford shook his head. “I once looked into acquiring just a small sample of it to use on the portal, but even just that tiny amount was more than ten times the cost of the already hefty research grant I had received to come all the way out here. Suffice to say that I was forced to find more… cheaper alternatives for just about all of my inventions moving forward.”
“We’d only need a few meager concentrated ounces of titan’s ore for the drill,” Pearl continued. “But given just how naturally rare it is, we’d be hard pressed to find even just a fraction of what we need on our own, regardless of where we looked.”

“Pfft, so what?” Amethyst cut in, casually. “We’ll just buy some then. Tap into that endless cash stash of yours, P.”

“For the last time, Amethyst, my so-called ‘cash-stash’ is not endless!” Pearl huffed, summoning a rather large wad of dollars from her gem. “True, I have managed to wisely save up quite a bit of money over the years, but its still nowhere near enough to get us the amount of titan’s ore that we’d need.”

“And without that titan’s ore, then the chances of the drill, or anyone aboard it, surviving its maiden voyage to put an end to the Cluster are nigh non-existent,” Ford concluded grimly.

“So… what you guys are saying is… there’s nothing we can do?” Mabel asked, aptly apprehensive.

Of course, neither the author, nor the white Gem wanted to provide the frightening, truthful answer to this question, though their mutually anxious expressions did more than enough to give it away anyway. A pensive, solemn silence fell over the entire group as the realization set in, the idea that the drill they had all been working so very hard on, the very thing that they hoped would save the entire planet as a whole from sheer destruction, might be all for not, all because of one small, but still incredibly important factor. One tiny piece that, so long as it remained missing, made their entire mission a fool’s errand, a complete and utter waste of time, an absolute impossibility, one that could, and very well would, cost them everything.

Unless…

“Actually…” Dipper spoke up, somewhat hesitantly. “I might just have an idea.” Needless to say that this instantly caught everyone’s attention, as they all turned towards him, curious to hear what he had in mind. “Oof, ok, so no pressure,” he muttered to himself before squaring up to speak his piece. “A-anyway, I think I might know someone… rich enough to maybe hook us up with some titan’s ore.”

“Someone rich enough, huh?” Mabel asked, already beaming knowingly as she playfully leaned up against Dipper playfully. “Dear brother, could you perhaps be talking about a certain super wealthy local girl who I just so happened to spot you sharing an adorably romantic dance with at a certain party just a few weeks ago?”

“I-it wasn’t romantic!” Dipper quickly exclaimed, immediately flustered by the implication. “We were just having some fun! I know that look, Mabel-” he said, referring to the wide, ecstatic smirk on his sister’s face. “And whatever it is you might be thinking, stop thinking it. There is nothing going on between me and her!”

“You and who?” Steven asked, just as confused as everyone else was.

“Ugh…” Dipper groaned, ignoring Mabel as she stifled a teasing chuckle beside him. “Pacifica Northwest.”

“Northwest?” Ford interjected, letting out a harsh scoff filled with distain for the wealthy family. “Are those pompous bunch of plutocrats still parading around as if they own the entire town? I would have thought they’d been ran out of here years ago for being so arrogant and rude.”
“Unfortunately, they’re still around…” Pearl huffed just as crossly.

“And still as lame and stuffy as ever,” Amethyst added, sticking her tongue out.

“N-not all of them!” Dipper readily interjected. “It might sound crazy, but I got to spend some time with Pacifica, and she’s really not as you think. Nowhere near as bad as her horrible parents, at least.”

“Yeah, and you would know, Dipper,” Mabel goaded once again. “Since you’re TOTALLY in love with her!”

“For the last time, I am not ‘in love’ with her!” Dipper argued sharply. “We’re just… we’re just friends. A-and I think that we’re on good enough terms that, maybe if I went and asked her, she might be willing to help us out with the whole titan’s ore thing. I know it might be kind of a longshot, but-”

“It’s a good plan,” Garnet said, her tone as even as ever as she smiled a bit. “I say we give it a try.”

“Hm… I’m not entirely sure it’d even be worth the effort…” Ford mused dubiously. “But if you really think you’ll be able to convince this Northwest girl into supplying us with the necessary funds, then by all means, Dipper, go right on ahead.”

“Great,” Dipper smiled, allayed that there was some form of confidence in his idea. “Then I’ll head back to town now so I can-”

“Yes, and I’ll be accompanying you,” Peridot suddenly interjected, catching everyone off guard, especially Dipper.

“Excuse me? You’ll what?” he asked, instantly baffled.

“You’re going to see this ‘Northwest’ supplier of titan’s ore, are you not?” the green Gem asked dryly. “Well, given my incredibly significant role on the drill project and my overall familiarity with the material we require, it’s only fitting that I come along to make sure you actually get what we need.”

“Wha—I know what we need, Peridot,” Dipper countered crossly. “And I can get it, easily. Which is why the last thing I need is for you to come along and mess everything up!”

“I will NOT ‘mess everything up’!” Peridot shot back just as fiercely. “If anyone’s bound to mess something up, its you with your unnecessary augmented elemental sword and your refusal to acknowledge an intellect superior to your own, namely mine!”

“Whoa, hold up, you are not smarter than me,” Dipper refuted coldly. “Need I bring up the whole ‘pockets’ thing again?”

“Pockets-smockets! I’m going to lead out on this imitative, as I rightfully should, and that’s final! Understood?”

“Oh, I understand… that you’re not going with me!”

“Yes I am!”

“No, you’re not!”

“Yes, I am!”
“No, you’re not!”

“Yes, I.”

“Ok, ok, you guys!” Steven finally interjected, rushing to stand between the quarrelling pair. “Look, I know you two… don’t exactly get along the best…”

“Tch, that’s an understatement if there ever was one,” Dipper deadpanned, rolling his eyes.

“B-but I really think you could if you just… gave each other a chance!”

“Yeah, like I said!” Mabel nodded in solid agreement. “Which is why maybe the two of you going to see Pacifica together could end up being just the bonding experience you two sour-sacks need to learn how to finally be sweet to each other!”

“Ha!” Peridot grinned smugly at Dipper. “See? Both Mabel and Steven agree that I deserve to lead this mission much more than you do.”

“We’re not talking about leading it,” Steven frowned. “We’re talking about trying to get along, you know… work together? As friends?”

“As if,” Dipper huffed. However, as he looked towards the somewhat pleading glances both Mabel and Steven were sending his way, he found that his argument would ultimately end up being a futile one, much to his chagrin. “But… if it’ll get you guys off my back, then fine. I guess Peridot can come. But only because she can cut the trip back to town in half by just warping us there instead of walking.”

“Hmph, that just does to show you just how much more useful I am compared to you,” Peridot remarked haughtily, already passing Dipper to make her way over to the nearby warp pad. “Now, come along, you ‘Dipper’, I won’t have you slowing us down with your idle human conversings. Oh!” the green Gem exclaimed as her phone buzzed on her wrist. “Speaking of which, I just received a transmission on my new communication device! …What’s a ‘student loan’?”

“Oh boy…” Dipper sighed, quite exasperated. “I can already tell this is gonna be the longest, most annoying day of my life…”

“Well, I hope you have fun!” Steven smiled as he waved Dipper off.

“Yeah, fun with your girlfriend: Pacifica!” Mabel called after her brother teasingly.

“Ugh, Mabel!” Dipper snapped, glaring back at her as he begrudgingly trudged off after Peridot, far from enthused about whatever lie ahead.

The relatively short hike over to Northwest Manor might as well have been a lengthy journey for Dipper, a fact that he attributed entirely to Peridot alone. From the moment they left the barn, the green Gem’s mouth hadn’t stopped as she went on rants, rambles, and more than a few derogatory remarks. For the most part, Dipper tried his best to simply ignore her for the sake of getting this task done as quickly as possible, but the longer Peridot continued on unfettered, the more and more aggravated with her antics he became.

“And I’ve also discovered that it can send and receive what I’ve decided to call ‘electronic mail’,“ Peridot continued on the seemingly endless tangent she had been on concerning her new cell phone
for quite some time now. “And yes, I know, that is an incredibly original and brilliant name. Of course, this archaic tech is leagues behind the ease of communication we have back on Homeworld—which only makes sense seeing as how it was made by humans—but I suppose it’ll have to do to—”

“Ok, can you just stop talking for like… two seconds maybe?” Dipper interrupted, finally deciding that enough was enough.

“Hmph, why should I?” Peridot asked, coldly.

“Because it’ll make this whole thing waaay less painful for both of us. Or at least for me.”

“Ha! Like I care about whether or not you’re in pain!” the green Gem scoffed. “Might I remind you of who stabbed who with an electrically-charged sword not so long ago?”

“Peridot, did that honestly hurt you?” Dipper asked, his tone absolutely dry and deadpan.

“W-well… no, not really,” Peridot scowled. “B-but it was enough to destabilize my form!”

“Which we only did because you were fused with Bill!” Dipper snapped back before letting out a long, tired sigh. “Look, we could keep this up forever, but I’d really rather not do that. What matters now is getting that tian’s ore, and as soon as we do, we can go back to the barn and get back to trying to ignore each other as much as humanly possible, ok?”

“Perfectly fine with me,” the green Gem huffed, though she did stop short upon noticing the grandiose building they were coming up on. “This is it?” she asked, eyeing the mansion critically as they approached its elegant gates. “This is the so-called “Northwest” tian’s ore depository you kept going on about?”

“No,” Dipper rolled his eyes. “This is Northwest Manor. And we’re only here to talk to Pacifica about the whole tian’s ore thing.”

“Oh, I knew that,” Peridot said staunchly. “…But just for the sake of reference… what’s a Pacifica again?”

Dipper didn’t bother to answer, instead letting out an irritated groan as he hit the buzzer bell on the mansion’s gate. In truth, he was a bit nervous about his chances of even getting to talk to Pacifica at all, especially considering just how clear her parents had made their incredibly low opinion of him during the party weeks ago. Fortunately though, neither answered the call from inside of the mansion as a rather stuffy-sounding butler responded instead.

“Welcome to Northwest Manor, please briefly state your business here, and if deemed appropriate, then your inquiry will be placed on a waiting list, and you’ll hear back within the next six months, at least.”

“Uh… yeah…” Dipper frowned upon hearing this. “We… kinda don’t have six months to wait? We’re just here to see Pacifica, so if you could maybe just patch her through or something, that’d be—”

“Terribly sorry, but I’m afraid Miss Northwest is unable to come to the-” The feed suddenly cut out as a much more familiar voice spoke up, quite impatiently at that.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“M-Miss Northwest! I was simply-”
“I already told you like, a thousand times, that when Mom and Dad aren’t home, I’m perfectly capable of answering the door myself. So get back to your actual job and go polish a doorknob or something. I’ve got this covered.”

“Y-yes, Miss Northwest! Right away!”

“Ugh... butlers... Anyway, who’s there? What do you want?”

“Um… Pacifica?” Dipper ventured, ignoring Peridot’s ignored groan behind him. “It’s Dipper. I was just wondering if you could-”

“Dipper?!” Pacifica loud exclamation practically elicited a spark of static in the feed. Inside the mansion itself, the heiress all but abandoned the buzzer, even as Dipper called out for her in confusion on the other end. Instead, Pacifica made a beeline straight for the mansion’s door, though she did take the time to stop by a mirror of the way out to make sure her hair and makeup were all up to point. That is, until she happened to catch herself and realize exactly what she was doing.

“Ugh, Pacifica, get a grip, he’s a nerd,” she scoffed to herself, rolling her eyes as she prepared to move on, though not without taking the briefest finishing glance at her reflection all the same.

Meanwhile, back outside, Dipper had all but given up on receiving a response from Pacifica as he let go of the buzzer button, duly confused. “Huh... weird...” he mused to himself before Peridot readily cut in.

“Well, it certainly appears as though this Northwest human is an absolute bust,” the green Gem goaded smugly. “I should have figured as much, given that consulting her was one of your ideas.”

Dipper was more than prepared to argue back, though fortunately he didn’t have to as the mansion’s large gates suddenly swung open before them. Leaning casually up against the side of the entryway was none other than Pacifica herself, her arms crossed as she maintained a cool, uncaring expression.

“Hey, Dipper,” the heiress greeted, her tone demure and aloof as she looked over at him. “What’s up?”

“Oh, hi, Pacifica,” Dipper replied with a much more natural smile. It was more than enough to make Pacifica’s icy front melt entirely though, as her solid confidence broken into a warm, happy grin of her own.

“Heh, y-yeah, hi…” she repeated lightly, not even noticing the briefest rush of warmth filling her cheeks.

“Uh... you... already said that,” Dipper pointed out with a small, amused chuckle.

At this, the heiress flinched, realizing that her behavior was rather ridiculous as she forced herself out of it and back into her usual haughty ways. “Tch, yeah, I know,” she lied, crossing her arms. “I meant to do that.”

“Uh... ok...” Dipper raised an eyebrow, admittedly confused. “So, um... how have things been since the party?”

“Ugh, completely lame,” Pacifica groaned crossly. “My stupid parents grounded me for ‘ruining’ their party, even though I totally saved it, and them, and the mansion! I haven’t been able to use any of my credit cards in weeks; I’m even missing out on our annual trip to our private island in
Bermuda while my parents are down there living it up, even as we speak. It’s the worst.”

“Oh, man, w-well… even though I can’t really relate to being left out on some extravagant tropical vacation,” Dipper began, scratching the back of his neck apologetically. “I… kinda can’t help but feel bad for sort of being behind you getting in trouble with your parents. Even if they are… you know…”

“Terrible?” Pacifica finished with a small, wry smirk. “Eh, don’t feel bad. It’s not your fault. If I could do it again, I’d gladly pull that lever a hundred times over, just to rub it in their stupid faces.”

The pair shared a bright, though somewhat vindictive laugh over this, though it was all too soon interrupted by a certain green Gem who had grown quite tired of waiting for their conversation to end on the sidelines. “Enough wasting time!” Peridot snapped, roughly shoving Dipper aside as she addressed Pacifica. “You! Human! I demand that you hand over what we came here for immediately. The entirety of your meager planet is at stake and I will not tolerate anything getting in the way of my selfless, valiant efforts to save it!”

Needless to say that Pacifica was quite taken aback by Peridot and her blatantly harsh manner, and she had no qualms about showing it either. “Uh, and what exactly are you supposed to be?” she asked, hands on her hips. “Some sort of radioactive, off-brand nacho that somehow grew legs and a motor-mouth to match?”

“N-no!” Peridot exclaimed, even though she didn’t exactly understand most of what the heiress had said. “I already told you; I’m the all-important head of a project that’s going to save the Earth from sheer destruction, and as such I demand the respect that’s due to me, you cl-”

“Peridot! Cut it out already!” Dipper quickly interrupted before the green Gem’s favorite insult could slip out and offend the heiress even further.

“You know this neon nightmare?” Pacifica asked Dipper somewhat critically.

“Unfortunately…” he sighed, exasperated. “Pacifica, this is Peridot. She’s a Gem that we apparently have to work with on… uh… well, she wasn’t really exaggerating when she said it was on something that… hopefully will keep the entire planet from imploding from the inside out?”

Upon hearing such high stakes, Pacifica said nothing for a moment as she stared between the pair with wide, bewildered eyes before setting her focus on Dipper once again. “Why is your life so WEIRD?!”

“Hey, I don’t know!” Dipper exclaimed, defensively. “But what I do know is that the only thing that has a chance at saving everything is the drill we’re building. Which is also kind of why we came here to see you.”

“Me?” Pacifica asked incredulously. “Uh, no offense, but I’m not exactly the ‘world saving’ type like you are.”

“Oh, please tell me this is one of those ‘jokes’ Amethyst told me about,” Peridot cut in with a scowl. “Does she seriously not even know what we came all the way out here to get?”

“Well maybe I would if you’d stop beating around the bush and just tell me already,” the heiress huffed, raising a cold eyebrow at the green Gem.

“I’m not beating any of your bushes!” Peridot shot back. “We’re here for titan’s ore! He-” she pointed accusingly at Dipper. “Said you have access to the Earth’s apparently minute supply of it, so if you value your insignificant live and the pathetic planet you live on, then you’ll take us to it
“Can you just… stop already?” Dipper asked harshly as he pushed Peridot aside to present their request to Pacifica much more calmly. “What she’s trying to say is that we need titan’s ore to finish the drill. And, since its super expensive, I was hoping that… m-maybe you might be able to help us out in getting some? I-if you want to, of course.”

“Tch, it doesn’t matter what she wants,” Peridot cut in bitterly. “What matters is that we NEED it and-”

“Like I said, STOP,” Dipper succinctly cut her off before finishing his appeal heiress. “So… what do you think? Any way you could hook us up?”

“Well, of course,” Pacifica said quite bluntly. “My parents own an entire titan’s ore mine on the far side of town, but…”

“But what?” Dipper asked, concerned as he noticed a hint of dread fill the heiress’s expression.

“I’m grounded, remember? If my parents found out that I not only took off but Ialso just gave away some of their uber-valuable titan’s ore, they’d freak.”

“And that’s a problem… how, exactly?”

“Because I’m already in enough trouble with them as it is, you dork!” Pacifica exclaimed, somewhat frustrated. A beat of silence passed in which their heiress glared away, though when she did glance back over at Dipper, she was met with his clearly disappointed expression. Disappointment that immediately struck her to the core in a way that instantly made her want to do whatever she could to get rid of it as quickly as possible. “B-but…” she began, relentlessly. “I… guess it wouldn’t be too much of a problem… just as long as they didn’t find out…”

“Are you sure?” Dipper asked earnestly. “Because the last thing I’d want is for you to get in trouble because of me again.”

“Getting in trouble because of you?” Pacifica scoffed, hardening her confidence and resolve. “Please, Pines, I think you’ve got it backwards. I’m not getting into trouble because of you; I’m getting into trouble with you.”

Dipper couldn’t hold back a bright, allayed laugh at this, one that practically made Pacifica’s heart race with newfound joy and excitement and a million other things at once. “Well then, by all means,” he smirked, motioning for her to lead the way to the mine. “Let’s get into as much ‘trouble’ as possible.”

Of course, despite the genuine laugh they both shared over this bout of humor, Peridot was quick to cut through it once again, ever mindful of the importance of their mission. “Excuse me,” she scowled, stepping in between them. “But if you two are quite finished cavorting over nothing, then I’d very much appreciate it if we could be on our way already.” And with that, the green Gem continued onward, grouchily grumbling to herself all the while. “ Pesky humans, always going around wasting so much time being a bunch of clods…”

“Ugh, don’t tell me we’re gonna have to put up with her the entire time…” Pacifica sent a sour glare after the green Gem.

“Believe me, I don’t like it anymore than you do,” Dipper crossed his arms. “But apparently, me and Peridot need to learn to ‘get along’, at least according to Steven and Mabel.”
“What are they, insane?” the heiress asked caustically as they began to move onward after the green Gem.

“That’s what I said!” Dipper said, completely on the same page as her. “You know, maybe if we get lucky, she’ll end up falling down a shaft or something when we’re in the mine and just get stuck in there forever.”

“Hmph, you wish you could be that lucky,” Pacifica chuckled, elbowing him playfully. The pair laughed once more, enjoying the jabs they were taking at the green Gem behind her back, however small they might be. Of course, it didn’t do much to alleviate the aggravation they’d no doubt face by bringing her along on their trek to the mines, but still, it was something to help with it all the same.

Sure enough, the sizable walk over to where the Northwest’s titan’s ore mine rested in the town’s foothills was mutually irritating for just about everyone involved. Even though Pacifica was really the only one among them who actually knew where the mine was, Peridot still insisted on “leading out” in the mission, stubbornly ignoring all of Dipper’s many attempts at diffusing her. Needless to say that by the time they all finally made it to their destination, patience had thoroughly been worn thin, especially for Dipper and Pacifica, who both wanted to put an end to this endeavor as quickly as possible simply for the sake of ridding themselves of the major annoyance that was the green Gem.

“Welp, here we are,” Pacifica remarked rather boredly as they arrived at the mine. From the outside though, it barely even looked like much of a mine at all, as it simply seemed to be a heavy steel door, leading underground, cut into a sizable quarry out near the lake. Despite all of the pomp and circumstance the Northwests usually seemed to parade around for anything that belonged to them, this seemed to be quite the opposite, to the point that someone could have easily missed it if they weren’t really looking for it. Almost as if they didn’t want it to be found.

“Uh… any reason why its so… fortified?” Dipper asked, casually knocking on the mine’s seemingly impenetrable door.

“Because the super rare metal kept down there is more expensive than the net worth of everyone who lives in this entire town put together, duh,” the heiress rolled her eyes.

“Hm…” Peridot mused as she stepped up to the heavy door herself. “It seems as though access to this titan’s ore depository is closed off. But don’t worry,” the green Gem grinned as she began tapping away at the cell phone still strapped to her wrist. “I’ll simply use the power of my communication device and the so-called ‘web’ that apparently stretches over the entire world to find us a way insi-”

Peridot was cut off as the door suddenly creaked open, courtesy of Pacifica, who had just finished a retinal scan that unlocked it almost instantly. “Or we could get in the easy way,” the heiress said, largely ignoring the annoyed glare the green Gem sent her way. “My family owns this mine, remember? That means we’re basically the only ones who can get in here.”

“Hmph! I knew that!” Peridot refuted staunchly.

“No, you didn’t,” Dipper countered bluntly as he passed by her to join Pacifica in entering the mine itself. “So, have you ever actually been in here before, Pacifica?”
“Ew, are you kidding? Of course I haven’t!” the heiress cringed. “Mines are like, totally gross. Why would someone like me ever have any reason to step foot in a place like this?”

“Well, it sure looks like you’ve just stepped foot in here now,” Dipper pointed out with a bit of an amused grin.

And indeed, Pacifica stopped short just after she absently walked into the threshold of the mine, taking the briefest moment to glance around its stony, darkened interior before letting out a flippant scoff. “Y-yeah, well, that’s… that’s only cause this is one of those whole ‘fate of the world depends on it’ sort of things, so don’t get used to it. Seriously though,” the heiress practically gagged as she accidentally stepped in a small puddle of oil. “This place is disgusting.”

“Eh, I’ve seen worse,” Dipper shrugged easily. However, at that very moment, the mine’s door suddenly slammed shut behind them, throwing the trio into complete darkness and panic until Dipper managed to find his flashlight and switch it on. “Peridot!” he exclaimed, glaring over at the green Gem as he noticed her standing right next to the shut door. “What did you do?!”

“I didn’t do anything!” the green Gem huffed defensively. “This archaic containment door closed itself! Must be defective, just like everything else on this ruddy planet.”

“Calm down,” Pacifica interjected. “Its probably set to close automatically so lowlifes can’t get in here and rob us blind. O-or at least I hope it is, cause if it did just close on its own, that would only add to the major creepy factor this place has going on for it.”

As if to confirm the heiress’ worries, a sudden rattling crash echoed from deeper inside the mine, instantly setting all three of them on edge even more than they already were. “W-what was that?!” Peridot asked, fearfully cowering behind Dipper.

While much less frightened than either Pacifica or Peridot were, Dipper still quickly swung his flashlight to shine towards where the noise had come from. The trio unanimously stiffened upon spotting a pair of large, almost reflective eyes staring back at them, though they only caught sight of them for a second before whatever creature they may have belonged to scurried away into the darkness.

“Who’s there?!” Dipper demanded, his free hand already resting on the hilt of the Sword of Seasons securely strapped to his back. “Show yourself!”

“Y-yeah, and after you do,” Pacifica added, not even realizing that she was gripping Dipper’s shoulder tightly both protectively and for protection herself. “Get the heck out of here! In case you didn’t know, this is the Northwest titan’s ore mine, which means no one except for Northwests are supposed to be able to get in here!”

“Oi! Believe me, little lady,” a thick, city accented voice called out from the darker depths of the mine. “We already know full well who’s stupid ol’ mine we be in…”

At this, the group who had previously been hiding in the shadows finally stepped out of it, though based on the gruff tone of the one who had spoken out first, the trio was quite caught off guard by who actually came to meet them. There were seven of them, each of them stocky, bearded and short, shorter than even Peridot, and that was saying something. Despite their equally diminutive sizes, their attire was quite befitting of miners; old and tattered and quite filthy and as rough and rugged as their mutually cross expressions were as they regarded the taller trio before them.

“What the-?”
“EEK!” Peridot instantly cut Pacifica off, frantically pressing up against Dipper for protection, considering his sword. “G-get me out of here! I had no idea this place would be crawling with those irksome, far-too-forward for their own good gnomes!”

“Whoa, hold up there, missy!” one of the tiny men exclaimed angrily at such an accusation. “We ain’t none of them prissy lil’ forest-prancin’ gnomes!”

“Yeah! We’re ten times the tiny magical men those lady-lovin’ wimps are!” another one chimed in just harshly.

“Uh, so if you guys aren’t gnomes,” Dipper interjected curious. “Then what exactly are you?”

“Ain’t it obvious, kid?” the apparent leader of the pack crossed his arms staunchly. “We’re dwarves!”

“Dwarves?” Pacifica asked incredulously. “What, you mean like from the fairy tales?”

“Oi, we wish we had it as good as those guys,” one of the dwarves huffed coldly. “Our lives be anythin’ but fairy tales, and its all thanks to you!” he shouted, pointed at the heiress accusingly.

“Me?” Pacifica retorted, aptly confused by the seven glares all aimed at her. “What are you little punks talking about? I’ve literally never stepped foot in this dump until now and I know I’ve never seen any of you before, so what gives?”

“Yeah, ya sure haven’t seen any of us ‘round before,” the leading dwarf spit off to the side. “In fact, just ‘bout no one has for the past odd 20 years. Not since that slime ball Preston Northwest came ‘n conned us into stayin’ down here for the rest of our days!”

“Conned?” Dipper asked, kneeling down to the dwarves’ level. “What do you mean?”

“That shmendrick told us we could have all the titan’s ore we wanted as part of a ‘mine it yourself’ sorta deal,” another dwarf explained sourly. “It was enough to trick me ‘n all my brothers here into comin’ down in here to get it, only for Northwest to slam the door behind us and lock away the key!”

“Now we either gotta mine that precious titan’s ore for him, or we go without eatin’,” one of the dwarves cut in coldly. “And unfortunately, a dwarf’s gotta eat if ya know what I’m sayin!”

“I haven’t seen the sun in years!” another dwarf chimed in morosely.

“I miss the fresh air!”

“I miss the fresh air!”

“Wait, so you’re saying my dad trapped you all in here?” Pacifica interjected. “You know, I’d like to say that comes as a shock, but given his track record with just about every other awful thing he’s done… yeah, it really doesn’t.”

“Oi! Well you’re just as bad as he is, far as we’re concerned, missy!” a dwarf shot back harshly. “All you Northweets are the same! Bunch of money-grubbing, greedy schmucks who don’t give a single flip bout anyone but themselves!”

“Hey!” Pacifica exclaimed hotly, offended at being lumped into the same cruel category as her parents. “Listen up, you pint-sized, filthy freaks, I am not anything like-”
“W-whoa, ok!” Dipper quickly cut in as the conflict steadily began to ramp up. “Look, I get why you guys might be… a bit upset over what the Northwests did to you.”

“A bit?” the lead dwarf growled. “Kid, a bit upset don’t even begin to sum how we feel ‘bout them rich nods.”

“I even put a picture of Northwest’s face on a dartboard!” another dwarf held said dartboard up, complete with a rather tattered photo of Preston Northwest tacked onto it. “Its not much, but it helps to vent out some of the pent-up infuriation, ya know?”

“…Could I maybe have that dartboard?” Pacifica asked after a beat of awkward silence. Dipper sent her a rather concerned look at this, but all the same she shrugged, not taking it back. “What? I have my reasons.”

“Ok, whatever,” Dipper shook his head before continuing. “But maybe we could all just calm down and-”

“AUGH! Enough standing around talking about nothing!” Peridot suddenly interupted impatiently. “Gnomes or no gnomes, you insignificant pebbles are going to hand over the titan’s ore we came here for, or else!”

“Pfft, get real, greenie,” a dwarf scoffed, not taking her angry threats seriously. “Ya can’t just make us fork over our precious titan’s ore that we worked so very hard to mine up outta the ground. It just don’t work like that.”

“Uh, first of all, it’s not your titan’s ore, its technically mine since my family owns this stupid mine,” Pacifica corrected haughtily.

“S-second of all,” Dipper quickly interjected before either Peridot or Pacifica could callously make the situation even worse than it already was. “Not to sound overdramatic here, but if we don’t get that titan’s ore, the entire world could possibly be doomed, so…. Yeah, we really need it.”

“And how is that ‘posed to be our problem?’” the lead dwarf crossed his arms. “Sorry kid, but we ain’t here to give hand-outs, ‘specially not to any low-good, rotten Northwest!”

“ Seriously?” Pacifica asked harshly. “You guys won’t give up your dumb grudge against my family even when the actual fate of the world is at stake?”

“NO!” the dwarves all exclaimed in outraged unison.

“Well, fine!” Peridot snapped back at them. “If you clods won’t give us any titan’s ore, we’ll just have to take it instead!” The green Gem moved to continue onward into the mine, though her attempt was quickly stopped by the seven sharp pickaxes that were all pointed at her all at once. “O-or not…” she recanted, backing away from the bitter dwarves.

“Come on, you guys, isn’t there any way we could work something out here?” Dipper suggested. “Like… oh, I know! If you give us the titan’s ore we need, then we’ll let you all out of here!”

“We’ll do what now?” Pacifica asked, her eyes wide at the prospect of this idea, which would no doubt get her in untold amounts of trouble with her parents if they were to find out. All the same, she was quick to change her tune upon catching the somewhat pleading glance Dipper sent her way. “O-oh, uh… yeah, I guess we will?”

“Tch, good luck tryin’ that,” one of the dwarfs scoffed coldly. “Getting’ in here is a cakewalk, but getting out? Its been all but impossible ever since that monster showed up and started wreckin’
“Oh, a monster problem, huh? Well, that shouldn’t be anything I can’t handle,” Dipper grinned, nodding back to the sword on his back.

“Suuuuure, kid,” the leading dwarf deadpanned. “We’ll believe that when we see it. But if ya lot really are serious ‘bout this whole lettin’ us go free thing then… well, c’mon, I guess. We’ll get ya fixed up with that titan’s ore you’re after.”

“Ha! That’s right you will!” Peridot quipped, smugly satisfied by their compliance. However, she still let out a frightened squeak as the lead dwarf pointed his pickax at her warningly once again.

“But ya best believe we got our eyes on ya, ‘especially you, Northwest,” he glared up at Pacifica distrustfully.

“Ugh, whatever…” the heiress glowered as they began to trudge on ahead into the mine. “Let’s just get this over with…”

“So, uh… do you guys go by any silly little names?” Dipper asked as they made their way through the mine, making an attempt at small talk to break the otherwise thick tension. “You know, like Happy, Grumpy, Bashful?”

“Oi, what kinda dunce names are those?” the lead dwarf asked caustically before he began to go down the line, introducing the others. “The name’s Tony, then ya got Tonio, Antony, Antonio, Antoine, Anto, and… the other Tony.”

“They call me Tony Two!” the final dwarf chimed in.

“Wow, real creative names you guys got there,” Pacifica deadpanned.

“Yeah, we know,” Tony said with a proud grin. “Our Ma was a true visionary when it came to names. May she rest in peace.”

The other dwarves shared this sentiment, all of them bowing their heads in respect as they continued on in leading the way to the mine’s inner sanctums. All the while, Peridot hung towards the back of the group, rapidly typing on her phone as a way of venting out her frustrations with the current situation.

“Log update,” the green Gem read aloud as she typed out her post. “Stuck in underground tunnel with a bunch of clods, not sure why we can’t just ditch the noisy tiny ones, get titan’s ore and… leave.”

“Because that’s not the deal,” Dipper spoke up, having overheard Peridot’s bitter tirade. “We promised them we’d help them take care of that monster and get them out of here, and in exchange, they’ll give us the titan’s ore. Really, its not that hard to understand.”

“Pfft, like I care about whatever foolish, pointless ‘promises’ you made to those not-gnomes,” Peridot scoffed, unconcerned. “That’s your problem. The only thing that matters to me is getting the titan’s ore so we can finally leave, finish the drill, and put an end to this endlessly aggravating alliance I’ve been forced to make with you, those other humans, and those Crystal Clods once and for all!”

“You still don’t get it, do you?” Dipper asked, glaring back at her. “We could have totally kept you bubbled, you know. Or even better, we could have unbubbled you, got the information about the Cluster that we needed, and then put you right back into one without any second thoughts. Heck,
that’s honestly what I wanted to do.”

“Oh yeah?” Peridot asked challengingly. “Then why didn’t you.”

“Because,” Dipper retorted coldly. “While I don’t trust you like, at all, I do trust Steven and Mabel. And for some reason or another, they’ve seen something actually good in you. Something that makes it worth our time and effort to keep you around. Problem is… I still haven’t seen that something for myself. And based on how you keep acting, I’m starting to doubt that I actually ever will.”

Peridot started at this, frustrated for reasons that she wasn’t entirely sure she understood. It had been so easy for her to come to civil terms with Steven and Mabel, and even eventually with Amethyst, and Pearl, and even Ford. And yet Dipper seemed to consistently be the only one amongst her group of tentative allies that she had made no progress with whatsoever. Not that she cared, or at least she liked to think that she didn’t. Because for whatever reason, his clear disdain towards her bothered her on some level, even though she largely had no idea why. Not that she’d ever actually admit that to him though, of course. “W-well who says that I need to prove anything to you anyway?!” Peridot snapped angrily, pridefully. “I don’t care about what you, or any of those other clods thinks of me! I’m clearly superior to any of you, I-I mean, just look at how many ‘followers’ I have on the ‘web’!”

Dipper said nothing as Peridot presented her phone to him, showing off her rather impressively low number of followers, raking in at about 5 altogether. Not bothering to waste anymore energy on the ridiculously stubborn green Gem, he simply turned his attention forward, stepping on ahead to catch up with Pacifica instead.

“Yeesh, is she for real?” the heiress asked in a whisper, having overheard the entire conversation. “Ugh, and I thought I had a massive ego.”

“What?” Dipper looked over at her, surprised to hear her admit this. “Pacifica, what are you talking about? You don’t-”

“Yeah, I do,” Pacifica looked away, slightly ashamed. “Come on, Dipper, you and your sister and your friends should know probably better than anyone else just how terrible I can be. Its why I can’t really blame these guys for hating my guts right out of the gate like they do.”

“They don’t hate you,” Dipper corrected sternly. “They hate your parents, which, all things considered, is… pretty understandable.”

“Well they might as well hate me too since I’m just like my parents!” Pacifica snapped, suddenly quite upset.

“N-no,” Dipper shook his head, almost reaching a hand out to place on her shoulder, though for some reason or another, he retracted it. “No, Pacifica, you’re not like them. Remember what you did at the party, and how you-”

“That was ONE time, Dipper, one time where I decided to actually be better than what they raised me to be!” the heiress argued, trying her best to fight back the warmth of oncoming tears building up behind her eyes. “And ever since then, I’ve been trying to tell myself that I can be better, that I want to be better—a-and I do! But I feel like I still keep slipping back into how I used to be, no matter how hard I try to be different! I-I just… its… it feels like I’m doing it all for nothing…” she sighed, her tears finally starting to fall. “It all feels so hopeless…”

She barely even had time to let out a bitter sob before a pair of arms suddenly folded around her
tightly. She froze, her eyes growing wide and her cheeks flooding warm as tried to process exactly what was happening here. He was hugging her, openly and comforting hugging her. Out of all the ways he could have reassured her, he had instead decided to do this and it shocked the heiress so much that she couldn’t move, she couldn’t think, she could barely even breathe. There would have been a time, not so long ago, that she would have readily, coldly shoved him away if he ever dared to get this close to her. After all, he was what her parents referred to as the “common folk”; an incredibly average boy like him wasn’t worth her valuable time and attention, certainly. And yet...

Pacifica knew that Dipper wasn’t average. If anything, he was probably one of the most extraordinary boys she had ever had the good fortune to meet. He was excitable and adventurous and goodhearted and genuine and free. And simply being around him again reminded her of why she wanted to improve her once cruel and callous demeanor so much in the first place. Because the truth of it was, at least as far as she was concerned, it wasn’t that he wasn’t “good” enough for her. It was that she was nowhere near good enough for him.

But she wanted to be; she wanted to do everything in her power to make herself become someone who was worthy in his eyes. He had inspired her, empowered her to change from the very moment she had confided in him within the mansion weeks ago. And, with his arms wrapped around her as warmly and gently as they were, it was enough to make her realize that maybe she was strong enough to make that change after all.

But even so, he wasn’t finished yet.

“It’s not hopeless,” he said, his voice soft and grounding. Peridot and the dwarves had all but moved on past them by now, but neither of them cared. As far as they were concerned, the titan’s ore could wait. “You may not see it yet, but I have. You have changed, Pacifica, even if you don’t feel like you have. Because the girl I saw on the night of that party, the girl I’m looking at right now? She’s so much different from the girl I met at the beginning of the summer. And you can trust me when I say that’s not nothing.”

And then she caught it, a glimpse of the bright, genuinely proud smile he was sending her way. A smile that made her heart race and soar and sing all at the same time. She didn’t know why, couldn’t even begin to understand why, but she knew that she’d rather have that simple, sweet, admittedly stupid smile in her life than all of the adulation her parents could offer her, all of the riches they could toss her way. Because to her, that smile, his smile was well worth its weight in gold and then some.

“Y-you’re such a dork, Pines,” she whispered tearfully, in spite of herself as she realized her own arms finally returned the embrace. “But thanks.” She stopped, sighing again, though this time it was a happy one, especially as she absently her lead lean against his shoulder. “Thank you…” she said again, her tone more sincere this time. “For giving me a chance…”

Now it was Dipper’s turn to be caught off guard, especially as they parted. A certain warmth was building behind his own cheeks as Pacifica pressed on ahead, though not before glancing back at him with something of a demure, almost flirtatious smile. He couldn’t deny that the method he had used to comfort her was rather… unorthodox, especially given that he wasn’t particularly one for physical affection—despite Steven and Mabel’s frequent attempts at accustoming him to it. And yet, for whatever reason, embracing the heiress at that moment had felt like the best thing he could have done, and based on her allayed reaction, his instincts had been right. Yet in the aftermath, he still couldn’t help but feel… something, stirring deep inside him that felt alien and familiar all at once. He would have liked to think that he didn’t know how to describe the feeling, but a part of him knew that was a lie. For it was indeed something he had experienced before, albeit differently,
more wistfully as he pined after something he always knew he’d never really get to have. And yet now, with this… with her…

He quickly shook his head to clear it. Now wasn’t the time to be lost in such abstract, aimless thoughts. They still had a mission to complete and titan’s ore to find.

Even so, as the rather odd group ventured ever deeper into the darkened mine, Dipper let his thoughts wander back to the last part of what Pacifica had just said: “Thank you, for giving me a chance…” Those words still echoed in his head even as he spared a brief glance over at Peridot, just as she happened to cast a brief glare over her shoulder at him as well. Immediately, he was reminded of the advice Steven and Mabel had given him before this mission had even began. The hope that, if perhaps they learned to get along, if he tried to “give her a chance”, then maybe the two of them could finally reach, at the very least, amicable terms with one another. While Dipper still wasn’t quite keen on the idea of making nice with their former foe, he still couldn’t help but feel the slightest built guilty for how shrewdly he had treated the green Gem earlier. True, he still didn’t feel as though he had any grounds to trust her, much less befriend her, perhaps at least part of that was due to his own unwillingness to look for the apparent good that Steven and Mabel had already found in her. There was no denying that Peridot had done much to cause them all so much harm, from her invasion leading to Malachite’s formation and Lapis’ self-imposed imprisonment, to the twisted formation of Pyrite who had nearly killed them all. And yet despite all that, she was still here, still working with them to save a planet that wasn’t even her own. That at very least, had to account for something, right? He had given Pacifica a chance once before; so who was to say that maybe, with a bit of effort and an attempt at swallowing his own pride, he couldn’t give Peridot that same sort of chance too?

“Well, here we are!” Tony exclaimed, cutting through the mine’s echoing silence as they all finally reached the tail end of the cavern. “The biggest motherload of titan’s ore you’re gonna find this side of the states.”

And indeed it was. The entire cave glistened with scattered pieces of the precious, practically glowing metal, chunks of all sizes resting in the dark stone walls, floors, ceiling, and everything in between. It was a truly beautiful sight, though its radiance was completely lost on Peridot as she simply stepped forward and plucked a small piece of the valuable metal right out of the wall. “Hm… yes, this should be just enough to finish the drill,” she mused simply, not really giving the rest of the metal a second thought. “Which means we finally get out of here and-”

The green Gem was abruptly cut off as a sudden shrill screech echoed from one on the nearby tunnels, instantly catching everyone’s attention, particularly the dwarves’ as they all scrambled for cover. “T-there it is!” Antonio shrieked fearfully. “The monster!”

Pacifica and Peridot both gasped in alarm, both of them taking behind Dipper for cover as he swiftly drew the Sword of Seasons and shined his flashlight in the direction of the rising clamor. For a brief, heart-stopping moment, no signs of any sort of monster was apparent, until slowly, languidly, the creature shuffled into the light, allowing everyone to see exactly what it was. “I-it’s a… a fusion experiment!” Peridot squeaked tightly, trembling in terror at the sight of the malformed mutant. Compared to all of the others, this one was by far the biggest and by far the most grotesque. It barely even fit in the narrow corridor it had emerged from, its practically countless limbs thrashing about as it unleashed another mindless scream from its several disjointed, fanged mouths.

“I-it’s a… a fusion experiment!” Pacifica asked, remembering the same terrifying sort of creatures who had invaded the halls of her manor weeks ago.
“N-no, this one’s… different,” Dipper noted tensely, his grip on his sword tightening as the mutant continued stomping forward. “I’ve never seen one this… this huge before!”

“I-it must be one of the earliest experiments made,” Peridot theorized anxiously. “Its had more than enough time to incubate and take form! Who knows how many Gem shards that thing is made of?!”

“Ugh, who cares?!” Pacifica groaned, not having the faintest idea about what the green Gem was on about. “We have to get rid of this thing and get out of here!”

“Right,” Dipper readily agreed, setting the Sword of Seasons to its electrified setting. The Gem mutant panicked at the sudden light and lumbered in to attack, though fortunately its main muscled arm missed them all in its broad, slow swing. “Pacifica, Peridot! You and the dwarves need to find somewhere to hide! I’ll handle this!”

“You don’t have to tell me twice!” Peridot exclaimed, hurrying over to join the dwarves behind their tentative hiding spot of an adjacent cave entrance.

“But Dipper!” Pacifica started worriedly. True, she had seen him fight creatures like this before, but the monster creeping towards him now was at least ten times his size, easily. Even with his apparent skill with a blade, he’d no doubt have trouble taking a mutant like this one by himself.

“Don’t worry!” Dipper assured, sending her a confident smile over his shoulder. “I’ve been up against way worse than this thing, trust me.”

Admittedly, Pacifica was still anxious about his chances, but all the same, she took his word for it for now. She nodded, letting out a tight breath as she begrudgingly joined Peridot and the dwarves in hiding, spectating on the beginning of the fight from a safe distance.

“Oi! That thing’s just plain nasty, eh?” Tonio remarked fearfully.

“A right plain eyesore if ya ask me!” Antoine agreed, trembling in terror.

“We’ve been hidin’ from that blighter for weeks now!” Tony shook his head, angrily. “If that kid doesn’t take that thing out… I don’t even wanna think about what’ll happen.”

Pacifica didn’t offer a response to their worries as she instead looked back to the fray, biting her lip as she watched Dipper carefully. For the most part, he seemed to be holding his own, his sword and overall movements much faster than those of the massive mutant he was squaring off against. He managed to get a few good hits in here and there, but even the electricity his blade was emitting wasn’t enough to destabilizer the monster’s bulky form. All the same, Dipper was nothing if not consistent in his maunders, always keeping himself just out of the creature’s range as it recklessly thrashed about. Its wild movements sometimes crashed into the cavern’s walls, knocking chunks of titan’s ore free and creating something of a rather aggravating avalanche Dipper tried his best to avoid. It was only after he realized he was getting nowhere with electricity that he set his blade to ice, hoping that he could, at the very least, stop the creature in its thunderous tracks. And so he went in low, drawing his blade back in an attempt to freeze a few of the mutant’s many legs. It was a tactic that likely would have worked too, if a certain green Gem’s phone hadn’t happened to loudly go off at the exact wrong moment.

“Eek!” Peridot cried, startled at the buzzing, blaring device on her wrist. “What is this?! What’s happening?!”

“Calm down!” Pacifica snapped, sparing a brief glance over at Dipper, who was just as alarmed as
the others all were by the sudden noise. “It’s just ringing! Shut it off, quick!”

Needless to say, the green Gem hadn’t the faintest idea as to how to do that as she instead frantically fumbled with the phone. The mutant was quick to react to the loud, grating noise as it shrieked, slamming its larger fists down on the floor violently. The resounding quake was more than enough to dislodge even more of the titan’s ore lining the ceiling loose, forcing Dipper to use his sword to deflect several of the pieces that fell his way. From her distant vantage point, however, Pacifica was more easily able to notice a rather large chunk that was quickly coming loose thanks to the monster’s rampage, a piece that Dipper certainly wouldn’t be able to cut away with his sword alone.

“Look out!” she cried, ignoring the mutant as she rushed forward into the fray. Her rescue came just in time too, for right as she managed to push both herself and Dipper out of the way, the titan’s ore came crashing to the ground, its strength making sure that the metal itself remained completely intact as it landed.

By now, Peridot had (largely on accident) finally figured out how to answer her phone, only to hear a familiar chipper voice ring out from the other end. “Hi, Peridot!” Steven greeted as brightly as ever, completely unaware of the danger the others were in. “Mabel’s here too-

“Hiya, Peri!” Mabel exclaimed, also quite cheerful on the other end of the line.

“We just wanted to check in and see how things are going for you guys,” the young Gem informed obliviously. “Did you meet up with Pacifica yet? Have you found any titan’s ore? Are you and Dipper getting along better?”

“And most importantly!” Mabel added. “Have Dipper and Pacifica said anything really cute and flirty to each other? Cause if they have, then I’ve GOT to know about it!”

“U-uh, first off all, I have no idea how you two ended up inside this tiny communication device,” Peridot began, eyeing the phone incredulously and not understanding how the call really worked. “Second of all, YOU BOTH NEED TO STOP TALKING RIGHT NOW!” The green Gem’s voice rose into a frantic shout as the Gem mutant set its sights on her and the noisy phone strapped to her wrist.


“Are you guys in a doctor’s office lobby or in an airplane or in some other place where cell phones aren’t allowed?” Mabel chimed in, curious.

“Ugh, really?” Pacifica asked as she helped Dipper up on the far side of the room. “She seriously doesn’t know how to just hang up a cell phone?”

“You’d be surprised at how few things Peridot actually knows,” Dipper remarked with something of a sardonic smirk.

“Tell me about it,” the heiress rolled her eyes. “I’ll go take care of that if you can take care of this,” she nodded over to the still belligerent Gem mutant.

“Sounds like a plan,” Dipper nodded solidly, repositioning his sword before rushing back into the fight. At the same time, Pacifica skirted around the edge of the cavern, making it back over to Peridot and the thoroughly annoyed dwarves without being seen.

“Oi! Get her to shut that noisebox up, will ya!” Tony Two groaned, his hands pressed against his years.
“Yeh! I can’t hear myself think over here!” Anto added, just as perturbed.

“Give me that!” Pacifica snatched the phone away from Peridot. “Honestly, who was stupid enough to even give you something like this?”

“Oh! Is that Pacifica?!” Mabel exclaimed from the other end of the line. “Hi, Pacifica! How are things going between you and Dipper? Have you guys gotten up to any adorable shenanigans I should know about?”

“W-wha-?! I-I have no idea what you’re talking about!” Pacifica snapped, thoroughly flustered by the implications. “Goodbye, Mabel!”

“Aw, but come o-” Mabel was instantly cut off as Pacifica abruptly hung the phone up before shoving it back into Peridot’s hands and ignoring the confused look the green Gem was giving her.

No more than a second later, however, the entire hiding group received quite a shock when suddenly, Dipper flew right past all of them, thrown clean back into the tunnel they were hiding in by the mutant itself. He landed hard against the stony wall, the breath knocked clean out of him and his vision spinning, even as both Pacifica and Peridot rushed over to him.

“D-Dipper!” the heiress called fretfully, looking him over. Aside from a few scratches and bruises, he didn’t look all that torn up, but he was clearly injured in other way as he struggled fiercely to so much as pull himself up into a sitting position. “Are you ok? Can you get up?”

“Y-yeah,” he assured, though he didn’t object to the helping hand she extended out to aid him in sitting up. “I… I’ll be fine…” He groaned, knowing that was something of a lie. His ribs panged with a sort of sharp ache he had grown accustomed to at least twice before, once thanks to one certain brute of a Homeworld Gem and again thanks to a certain sadistic demon taking his body for a joyride. He briefly thought that it probably wasn’t good that he had gotten so used to the feeling of such acute physical damage, but largely for Pacifica’s sake more than anyone else’s he quickly put that thought away. “I-I… I need my sword,” he stammered, glancing up to realize that it had fallen somewhere behind the mutant in the cavern before them.

“I-I… I’ll get it!” Pacifica volunteered, even though she instantly knew she’d be out of her league in doing so. The fusion mutant was massive and aggressive, and she had nothing even remotely close to the sort of skill and speed Dipper had on his side when standing up to it. But for his sake, for all of their sakes, she knew it had to be done.

“I-I… I’ll get it!” Pacifica volunteered, even though she instantly knew she’d be out of her league in doing so. The fusion mutant was massive and aggressive, and she had nothing even remotely close to the sort of skill and speed Dipper had on his side when standing up to it. But for his sake, for all of their sakes, she knew it had to be done.

“I-I don’t think that’s a good idea…” Dipper winced, clearly in quite a bit of pain. “I-its too dangerous to go up against that thing alone and—w-wait! Peridot, you need to go with her.”

“I-I’m not going out there with that… thing,” Peridot quickly refuted, flinching as she stole a frightened glance back at the nearby mutant.

“Peridot, for once would you just listen,” Dipper said firmly, his tone so stern and so intense that it immediately made the green Gem’s protests fall silent. “You have to go out there and distract the mutant while Pacifica grabs my sword. It’s the only hope we have at stopping this thing, so either you finally think about someone other than yourself for a change, or that thing ends up killing us all! Your choice.”

Peridot stilled at this, genuinely taken aback by just how genuinely angry Dipper seemed to be. True, she had known him to throw harsh words her way many a time before now, but this was different. This was serious.
And for whatever reason, Peridot absolutely did not like it. She was more than willing to tolerate his usual jabs and bitterness, but the way he was staring her down now, with such sheer, honest outrage was more than enough to rattle the green Gem to her core. And while she usually would have readily opposed him, would have argued back at him with every bit of the ire he sent her way, this time she did quite the opposite. She only nodded tersely, her expression still awash in surprise as she turned to follow Pacifica out of the tunnel, though not before casting one brief, bewildered glance back at Dipper. His expression softened somewhat as he returned it, though whether that was from his own pain or something else altogether, Peridot couldn’t tell.

“Ok, on three,” Pacifica whispered to the green Gem as they peered out at the patrolling mutant, knowing that Dipper’s plan would probably suit them best. “One, two-”

“Hey, ugly!” Peridot rushed out prematurely, shouting as loudly as she could (which was of course, quietly loudly) to get the monster’s attention. “I bet your oversized touch stumps can’t land a single hit against me!”

The mutant made an attempt nonetheless, seemingly incensed by her taunting as it swung a heavy fist down at her. Frantically, the green Gem leapt to avoid it, casting the briefest of nods over at Pacifica for her to go ahead and make her move.

“Whoo, looks like I was right,” the heiress remarked, shaking her head incredulously. “She really is crazy.”

All the same, Pacifica hurried out from the tunnel, taking care not to attract the mutant’s attention, though it was clear Peridot had already captivated it entirely as she continued flailing about, tossing random insults at it. Acting quickly, the heiress wrapped her hand around the hilt of the fallen sword lying on the ground, realizing that it was a bit heavy as she heaved it up. For a moment, she wondered exactly how Dipper was able to wield the weapon with such easy, especially considering his rather glaring lack of any muscles to speak of. But even so she was quick to remind herself that the goal here was to get that sword back to him as quickly as possible. Not that she was convinced that he was in any sort of state to actually fight, but still.

The plan seemed to be working well, or at least, it had been until Pacifica accidently managed to activate the swords’ elemental abilities. The metal of the blade ignited into bright flames instantly, aptly frightening the heiress and forcing her to drop the sword altogether, lest its fire-tipped edge burn her. The panicked cry she let out as she did so was more than enough to divert the mutant’s focus away from Peridot and onto her instead as it swung around, letting out a fierce, moaning roar as its multiple maws prepared to attack.

“W-what do we do now?” Peridot asked tightly as she reconvened beside Pacifica.

“Uh… I… I don’t…” the heiress glanced around frantically for a moment, knowing that they needed some way to push the aggressive creature back more than anything else. And conveniently enough, she happened to find that way the moment she spotted the phone still strapped to Peridot’s wrist. “Wait! I know! Your phone!”

Suddenly distraught, the green Gem glanced down at the device before looking back to Pacifica pleadingly. “A-are you sure?”

“Um… yeah?” Pacifica frowned, not knowing where Peridot’s worry was really coming from.

“…Ugh, fine…” Peridot groaned, looking down at the phone sadly as she took it off her wrist. “I suppose sometimes sacrifices must be made for the sake of avoiding certain doom… But never forget,” she whispered to the phone itself before kissing it affectionately. “For the short but sweet
time we had together, I loved you so much!”

“Wha-?” Pacifica didn’t get a chance to finish her baffled question before, completely out of nowhere, the green Gem chucked her phone straight at the Gem mutant as hard as she possibly could. “W-what are you doing?!” the heiress asked, baffled.

“What you said!” Peridot snapped back.

“I never told you to throw it! I was just gonna suggest you turn an alarm on or something to scare it!”

“…Oh, I guess that would have been much easier…”

Pacifica let out a loud groan of annoyance as she facepalmed, only to glance up to find that, against all odds, one of the mutant’s many hands had happened to catch the phone in midair. The pair both let out a stunned gasp at this, both of them freezing in place as the mutant turned its attention away from them and onto the phone instead. It seemed fascinated by the bright device for a moment, or at until the phone began ringing loudly once more. The creature let out a frightened hiss, dropping the device before it inevitably shattered to pieces on the ground, much to Peridot’s horror. All the same, the mutant itself was blindsided as it stumbled back in such a way that its large body ended up more or less covering the entrance to the tunnel where Dipper and the dwarves were all hiding within.

“Tch, we’re never gonna be able to get this sword to Dipper like this…” Pacifica muttered, shaking her head as she tried to look for some other option. However, she found the only option now was the blade itself, still resting on the ground at her feet. “C-can you cover me?” she asked Peridot tensely.

“Cover you with what?” the green Gem asked, not following.

“Ugh, listen,” the heiress rolled her eyes as she grabbed the Sword of Seasons as much as she could. “I’m about to do something really dumb and really dangerous and I’d rather not go on all by myself. So since you seem to be all about doing dumb and dangerous stuff, I figure you’d make the perfect backup.”

Peridot gave her a rather incredulous look for a moment before letting out a relenting sigh. “Well since my beautiful communication device is no more, I guess I have nothing else to lose at this point…” she deadpanned, though not before casting a longing look towards the remains of her cell phone.

“Ok seriously, that’s just a lame outdated phone,” Pacifica retorted dryly. “You’ll get over it. Now… come on!”

Knowing they had not a moment to lose, the heiress began rushing forward as fast at she could, the sword’s tip dragging into the ground as she began. However, as her momentum increased alongside her adrenaline, she gradually found the strength to lift the blade itself, eventually holding it back in preparation of what she hoped would be a decisive strike. As disoriented as the mutant was, it seemed to see her coming as it let out a vicious screech, reeling its hand back to knock her away. Or at least it would have if not for Peridot providing a timely distraction yet again.

“Crawl back into the ill-dug exit hole you came out of, you malformed CLOD!” the green Gem shouted fiercely as she tossed chunk after chunk of fallen titan’s ore its way.

“What she said!” Pacifica added just as brazenly as she pounced on the monster, sword raised
above her head before she brought it down as hard as she could. While somewhat sloppy, the slice was clear and strong, the tip of the blade cutting its way straight through the mutant’s body to the point that it could no longer maintain its form. And so, in a burst of practically blinding smoke, the mutant was defeated, its mangled body leaving nothing behind but a single clump of conjoined Gem shards that fell to the stony ground with a resounding clank.

In the wake of the monster’s defeat, the dwarves all happily rushed out of hiding, all of them quick to gather around their pair of saviors in elated relief. Even so, Dipper took pause as he slowly picked himself up to stand, an arm still wrapped tightly around his injured torso as he happened to meet Pacifica’s gaze. In the aftermath of the fray, the heiress had a fierce, formidable air about her, her golden hair tousled and loose, her expensive clothes tattered and frayed, her skin marred by oil and scratches as she continued to cling onto his sword as she caught her breath. Briefly, their eyes met, their expressions both awash in mutual surprise over what had just happened. Yet even despite the countless thoughts and feelings rushing through both of their heads, the most either of them could really do was share a small, genuine smile, relieved to know that the worst was over.

Peridot, on the other hand, while usually the first to revel in any sort of praise, completely ignored the adulation the dwarves were sending her way as she did her best to gather up the disjointed pieces of her phone, lamenting over its loss all the while. “And just when I was getting used to having tech again…” she sighed sadly. “What a shame…”

“Hm…” Pacifica mused as she approached the green Gem, Dipper following not too far behind. “You know… I think I might just have something you’d like even better than that dumb old dinosaur of a phone. But first…” she frowned worriedly as she glanced over at Dipper. “We should probably get you to a hospital or something.”

“Eh, no need,” Dipper shrugged, relatively unconcerned. “Steven can just heal me up when we get back to the barn. He, uh… sorta has healing spit? Its… kind of hard to explain…”

A beat of silence passed at this, in which Pacifica looked to him with absolute bewilderment before ultimately shaking her head. “Again, I ask WHY IS YOUR LIFE SO WEIRD?!”

All the same, the pair shared a bright laugh over this, the levity of which continued as Dipper addressed both the heiress and the green Gem. “You know, I gotta hand it to both of you guys,” he said with a genuinely impressed grin. “You were both pretty awesome out there. And Pacifica, who could have guessed that you actually have some skill with a sword??”

“Heh… I don’t really…” Pacifica blushed as she handed the Sword of Seasons back to its rightful owner. “I was just copying what I saw you do. But I have to admit… it was pretty fun.”

“Well, if you liked it, then maybe I’ll have to show you some moves sometime,” Dipper offered, still grinning playfully. “That is, if you’re up for it.”

“Yes, absolutely,” Pacifica nodded insistently, placing her hands over his on the hilt of the sword without even thinking. She was quick to retract them as she caught herself, though she was unable to suppress the lingering red in her cheeks as she glanced away, flustered. “I-I… I mean… y-yeah, that’d be cool…” She smiled absentely as she tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear, fully knowing that she had little interest in learning anything about swordplay. Her interest was fully reserved for the one who had offered to teach her such things instead.

“And Peridot,” Dipper sighed as he turned to the green Gem, though his smile didn’t go away completely. “I… kinda hate to admit this, but… I think I sort of owe you one for rushing out there to help Pacifica like you did. It was… pretty cool, all things considered.”
“Y-yes!” Peridot finally perked up upon hearing this. “That’s what everyone keeps telling me! I’m ‘cool’.”

“Ok, don’t get a big head about it,” Dipper remarked, raising a sardonic eyebrow at her. “Well, bigger than it already is.”

Pacifica let out a small, amused snicker at this, one that Dipper readily joined in on, though Peridot, as usual, was left completely in the dark. “What’s so funny?”

With the mutant no longer impeding their path, the dwarves were more than elated when the trio made good on their promise to let them out of the mine. Since another retinal scan from a Northwest was the only thing that could reopen the mine’s steel door, Pacifica herself was the one to open the door to their escape. An escape that, as far as the dwarves were concerned, was a long time coming.

In fact, their were all so stunned by their first glimpse at the outside world in years that several of the rather rowdy dwarves broke down into full tears simply upon seeing the sun again. “It’s so beautiful!” Antonio cried happily, rushing out into freedom first as several of the others followed suit.

“The grass is so soft!” Anto giggled as he rolled about on said grass. “I wanna lie in it forever.”

“Ah look!” Tony Two proclaimed, pointing at a duck as it happened to wander by. “Its one of them ducks we always heard ‘bout in those stories we used to pass ‘round by the fire! I’m gonna hug it!” He did so, only for the duck to struggle against his hold and inevitably peck at him until he let go. “Oi! What an amazin’ work of nature!”

“Well, missy, I guess we oughta thank ya,” Tony said, nodding cordially to Pacifica as he passed by her. “Looks like we pegged ya all wrong. You ain’t nothin’ like your scumbag of a pa. No offense.”

“None taken, believe me,” Pacifica chuckled. All the same, she couldn’t deny a small burst of pride ran through her as she heard this. To hear someone, anyone really, say she was better than the heritage of lies and deceit and cruelty she came from was an immense relief. A reminder that, if she truly tried to rise above it all, then maybe, just maybe, she actually could.

“So… what are you guys gonna do now that you’re free?” Dipper asked the dwarf leader curiously.

“Huh, ya know we hadn’t thought that far ahead…” Tony mused. “I always liked the idea of buyin’ a nice lil cottage out in the woods n’ fixin it up, maybe rentin’ it out to some sorta princess or something someday before knockin’ an evil witch off a cliff where she falls to her cathartic doom and her remains are devoured by a bunch of vultuers.”

“Ooh, I like that plan!” Antoine exclaimed enthusiastically.

“Yeh! Me too!” Tonio nodded vigorously as the other dwarves followed suit.

“Well then, fells, what are we standin’ round here waitin’ for?” Tony grinned daringly, ready to lead the pack off. “The world is our calm or… scallop, or some other sorta seafood. I-I… I dunno. Anyway, let’s move out!”

And with that, the dwarves were off, marching towards the forest in a single file line and whistling
together all the while as the trio saw them off. “Uh… are you sure just letting them go off and do that whole cottage and witch plan is a good idea?” Pacifica asked, somewhat concerned.

“Eh, the witch will probably have it coming,” Dipper shrugged easily as they also began to leave the mine behind. The trip back to Northwest Manor was much more lighthearted and enjoyable for all three of them than the trip to the mine had been, as Peridot proudly paraded the piece of titan’s ore she had claimed for the drill, much to Dipper and Pacifica’s shared amusement. Despite everything they had been through, it truly seemed as though a genuine sense of camaraderie had formed between them, camaraderie that continued all the way to the moment they stopped to drop the heiress off back at her home.

“Well, I’m pretty sure my parents are gonna kill me when they come home from their trip and find that their free labor in the mine has flown the coop,” Pacifica remarked as she leaned up against the mansion gate. “But for now… that was… a lot of fun.”

“Speak for yourself,” Peridot glowered morosely. “I still lost my precious communication device in there and there’s nothing on this planet that could ever replace it!”

“Oh yeah, that reminds me,” Pacifica said, buzzing into the mansion. A moment later, a rather stoic butler stepped out, delivering a small box to the heiress before heading back inside without a word. “Here ya go, Peridot,” Pacifica smirked as she presented it to the green Gem. “You may be a total pain in the neck, but I probably would have died back there if it wasn’t for you distracting that mutant thing so… consider this my way of saying thanks.”

Not knowing what to expect, Peridot opened the box to find a sight that instantly garnished stars of amazement in her eyes as she pulled it out. “It’s an even bigger communication device!”

“Oh… it’s called a tablet,” Pacifica noted. “We have like, a ton of those just sitting around the mansion. My parents pretty much ditch anything that isn’t the newest model, so I figured why not clear some space by giving one to you since you seem to be into that sorta thing.”

“Ha! Into it doesn’t even begin to cover it!” Peridot beamed joyously as she began tapping away at the larger, more advanced screen. “My ‘followers’ will be so glad to have me back on the ‘web’! Finally, I feel connected to everything again! It’s a miracle!”

As distracted with the new tech as she was, the green Gem barely even noticed as Dipper and Pacifica let out another warm chuckle of amusement at her expense before they turned to each other to bid their proper farewells. “You know, that was really nice of you to just give her that tablet,” Dipper noted with a wry grin. “Of course, this means she’s never gonna shut up about it now, but still, it was thoughtful.”

“Heh, yeah, well…” Pacifica trailed off, rubbing her arm before she glanced up at him again, though this time a bit more hesitantly. “Uh… actually, Dipper, I was… well, I was wondering if… if maybe… w-whenver you have some free time, that is, m-maybe you wanted to… oh, what’s that thing poor people do when they’re not busy being poor again? Oh yeah! H-hang out? With… me?”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Dipper agreed much more casually than Pacifica had asked. “I still have to teach you all those sword moves like I promised after all.”

“G-great!” Pacifica exclaimed, perhaps a bit too brightly. “So, w-when would be a good time for-”

“Uh, well, actually…” Dipper interrupted as he looked away somewhat fretfully. “I don’t really have a whole lot of time on my hands right now. We’re all super busy at the barn building this drill,
you know, the whole ‘saving the world thing’ can’t really wait. But after that’s all said and done, then as far as I know I pretty much have the entire rest of the summer free. Unless any more Earth-shattering disasters come our way, which… is more likely that I’d kind of like to admit.”

“Well then, I’ll be sure to take a raincheck on your free time,” Pacifica joked before her manner turned a bit more serious, though still quite warm. “S-still… I’ll… be looking forward to it.”

“Yeah,” Dipper nodded with a solid smile. “So will I—”

He cut himself off with a startled gasp as Pacifica suddenly embraced him without any sort of warning whatsoever. Despite the hug he had given her not too long ago, he honestly had no idea how to react to it, especially as they broke apart and she began to walk away with a soft, yet satisfied smile. “Uh… a-are you sure you don’t wanna bribe me into pretending that never happened?” he asked, half joking and half not.

“Nope,” she shook her head, stopping just shy of entering the mansion gates to offer him one final smile. “That one’s for free.”

And with that, she disappeared into her lofty home, leaving Dipper behind with a flush of warmth in his cheeks and a million questions and absolutely no answers rushing into his head all at once. Briefly, he felt that small, stirring feeling once again, though this time it felt so much stronger, so much more concrete. And even though he had no idea what it really meant, he couldn’t help but long to hold onto that feeling, as well as that last sweet smile she had sent his way, for as long as he was able.

“Uh, are we finally ready to get back to the drill already?” Peridot asked with a small, impatient huff as she came to stand beside him, cutting through his train of thought instantly.

“Yes, please,” Dipper sighed, somewhat exhausted from the day’s harrowing escapades. “You know, Peridot, I… I think I finally get it.”

“Get what?” Peridot asked, confused as she glanced up from her tablet briefly.

“Why Steven and Mabel decided to let you stick around,” he said with something of an incredulous smile, as if he couldn’t believe that he was admitting this himself. And by all accounts, he largely couldn’t. “Because when push comes to shove, you do anything you can to make sure things turn out ok in the end. Honestly, I’m… kind of the same way. Guess we have more in common than I thought. Ugh, and I really hate to admit that.”

“Hmph,” Peridot grinned in smug satisfaction at this. “So it seems as though your initial uninformed assumptions about me were factually incorrect after all. I knew you’d realize that eventually.”

“I don’t know if I’d go that far,” Dipper rolled his eyes. “I mean, you’re still just as pompous and arrogant and loudmouthed as I thought you were from the very start.”

“Hey!” the green Gem snapped, offended.

“But…” Dipper interjected rationally. “While I’m not really ready to get all buddy-buddy with you like Steven and Mabel have… I think I am finally ready to give you a chance. So… what do you say,” he extended a hand out in offering to her. “Think we can try to tolerate each other, at least until the drill is finished?”

For a moment, Peridot simply looked between him and the hand held out to her somewhat distrustfully. Though all it really took was meeting his sincere expression to know that he was
genuine about this. And while the green Gem was eternally set in her ways, she prided herself on her newfound sense of compromise. Compromise, that she figured, might as well extend to him as well. “Very well,” the green Gem nodded evenly, returning his solidifying handshake. “We’ll ‘tolerate’ each other. For now, at least.”

“Oh, definitely just for now,” Dipper readily agreed with a small smirk. “After all, I couldn’t even imagine being as friendly with you as Mabel and Steven are. I mean, its no secret that you’re pretty much the worst.”

“I-I am not!” Peridot exclaimed, appalled. “You’re the worst, you CLOD!”

Dipper simply shrugged at this, hardly offended by the green Gem’s go-to insult by now as he took it in stride. “Takes one to know one,” he said simply, easily accepting the strange, yet oddly welcome sense of newfound rapport he now carried with Peridot. Even if it had come about in the least likely of ways. True, some part of him still harbored quite a few misgivings about the green Gem, and rightfully so. She was still a Homeworld Gem who had still tried to harm and kill them countless times. But perhaps Steven and Mabel had a point when they said she was changing. She was learning and she was trying. And if she was indeed making the genuine effort to try to be someone better than she used to be, then much like Pacifica before her, he knew that attempt was something he simply couldn’t coldly ignore.

Which was why he let out a genuine chuckle as Peridot hurried after him, seemingly frustrated, though he could tell she was simply hamming it up as she so often did. On some level, the green Gem was genuinely amusing, her curiosity about the earth and her willingness to help save it aptly endearing. While Dipper didn’t think they’d ever really get anywhere close to being friends, at the very least they could now safely call each other allies. And considering where the two of them had started from, that was more than enough for him.
Chapter 67: Message Received

Chapter Summary

In which Peridot does some sneaky shenanigans, everyone feels pretty betrayed, and Yellow Diamond is a glorious hottie (or at least to me she is just sayin)

Chapter Notes

Ah boy, time for this bad boy. Honestly, I really like how this chapter turned out, especially towards the end (you'll see why ahahah). Anyway, I won't keep you from it all! Enjoy my combo of It Could have Been Great and Message Received! (Keyword is MOON BASE)

AFRRS, LGKUQ, FRBSGR, MBR TSAUI
GDCA B RWKMKZ HUSOFI UB GCBCW
WTS KNJTK YBCB GIE WEDHV'F EEEMES
HB DUL LQFGRMF XVAA DNJNXXY HWRT

It was an absolutely perfect summer evening. The low-arching sun splashed its warm, dying light across the vast grassy fields, casting long yet lofty shadows that almost seemed to dance across the barn’s weathered surface. A light, gentle breeze skimmed over the acres of farmland, as cricket songs began to echo throughout the hills, even as far as the open, forested valley where Gravity Falls sat far below. And this picturesque view was what the Gems were silently, contentedly enjoying, happy to have a much-earned moment’s rest after a long day at work on the drill. Though Ford had kept to the barn to work on a few odds and ends during this evening break, the kids readily joined in on it as they reclined up against Lion, easily relaxing as Steven strummed a pleasant tune on his ukulele. The trio would have been more than happy to let this peaceful scene continue for as long as possible, but of course, it all too quickly came to an end thanks to the interruption from a certain miffed green Gem.

“Ahem…” Peridot huffed as she stood over the kids. Her hands were positioned on her hips, a power drill clenched tightly in her grip from the work she was clearly intent on continuing.

“Oh, hi, Peridot!” Steven greeted her blithely.

“Welp, I knew this was too good to be true,” Dipper sighed sardonically as he sat up a bit. “What do you want, Peridot?”

“I want to know why we stopped working on the drill!” the green Gem scowled impatiently, nodding over to the Gems still watching the sunset several feet away. “Why are they just sitting there looking at nothing!?”

“Aw, Peri, we’re all just taking a nice little break,” Mabel grinned brightly.

“…A what?”
“We’ve all been working hard and we deserve to take it easy for a bit,” Steven explained. “I mean, just look at that view. It’s beautiful!”

“It’s going to be blown to oblivion by the Cluster if we don’t get back to work!” Peridot countered crossly.

“Yeesh, tell us something we don’t know for a change,” Dipper remarked with something of a wry, knowing smirk.

“Working hard is important,” Steven added, still smiling calmly. “But feeling good is important too!”

“Yes,” Mabel soundly agreed. “Looks like you still need to learn about one more super important Earth concept, Peri. It’s called… ‘treat yo self’!”

“What are you talking about?!” Peridot fussed, thoroughly annoyed as she accidentally turned the power drill on.

“Hey!” Steven perked up upon hearing the buzzing drill. “What is that, a C?” The young Gem copied the noise on his ukulele, strumming a simple C chord that did, in fact, mimic the buzzing of the drill itself.

“The drill?” Peridot raised a confused eyebrow, looking to the tool in her hand.

“Yeah!” Steven nodded, rising to his feet as Peridot pressed the drill up to an even faster speed. Or rather, an even higher note. “Oh my gosh! Now its music!”

“Whoa! It sorta is!” Mabel gasped, amazed.

“Only Steven could hear music in something like a power drill,” Dipper chuckled, amused.

“Music’?” Peridot asked. “What’s that?”

“Whaaaaa?! You don’t know what music is?!” Mabel exclaimed, aptly baffled. “Oh, girl, you are missing out!”

“Look, its like this,” Steven positioned his ukulele before strumming out a simple scale and singing along. “Do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do!”

“Do, mi, so, do…?” Peridot repeated, clearly not following.

“Isn’t it pretty?” the young Gem sang, still singing along.

“That’s exceedingly simple,” the green Gem snarked, though she still mused on the beguiling process all the same. “Do, mi, so, it…”

“We’re making music.”

“What’s the point?” Peridot said, crossing her arms.

“The point, is… its fun!” Mabel chimed in, singing a bright note of her own in tune with Steven’s strumming.

“But why even bother?” the green Gem shook her head. “You’re not even making anything!”

“Well, if it isn’t anything, then why does it sound so good?” Steven asked with a good-natured
“I suppose its just interest, do, mi, so, do,” Peridot theorized as the young Gem kept his lighthearted tune going. “Devoid of substance or purpose, a hypothetical pattern… do, mi, so, ti… For the satisfaction of bringing it to completion!”

“…Sure,” Steven agreed, even if he didn’t really know what she was talking about.

“Should we tell her music isn’t usually that deep?” Dipper asked Mabel, aside.

“Eh, let her have her sciencey fun,” Mabel shrugged.

“Do, mi, so, it… Interest without meaning?” Peridot posed, surprised by such an odd train of thought. One that largely went against everything she had ever known back on Homeworld, much like everything else on Earth as a whole. “Solutions without problems…?”

“And then you just add words,” Steven said, gearing up for a proper song. “Here’s what I’ve been working on. Life and death and love and birth and peace and war on the planet Earth.” The melody was light and bouncy, carrying a message of the immense complexities and contradictions of the planet it was about, a theme that was not lost on Mabel, Dipper, or even Peridot as they all listened intently. “Is there anything that’s worth more than peace and love on the planet Earth, oh-whoooo, come on and sing it with me!”

“Sing?” Peridot repeated, still completely lost.

“The words relate to the key!”

“Key?!” the green Gem asked, even more baffled as she held a small key she had found in the barn up.

“If it’s a pattern, if it’s a pattern, than just repeat after me,” Steven encouraged, nodding over to the twins in the hopes that they’d do the same. Mabel was quick to jump on the offer first as she joined the young Gem in a brief duet. “Life and death and love and birth-”

“L-Life and death and love and birth,” Peridot attempted, albeit a bit shakily. After all, she had never really sung before, and until now, she had never had a reason to.

“C’mon, bro-bro, join in!” Mabel urged her brother in an excitable whisper. “Our plan is working!”

“First of all, you guys didn’t start this whole music thing off with any sort of ‘plan’,” Dipper retorted before finally breaking down into a small, if not somewhat flustered smile. “B-but, fine, just this once.”

“Now, you sing mi, fa, mi, mi, fa, mi, ti, la!” Steven instructed Peridot, who followed along easy enough as all four of them finished the chorus on a high, harmonious note.

“And peace and war on the planet Earth!”

“Ahhh! That sounded so good!” Mabel cheered happily. “Looks like its time to bring Love Patrol Alpha outta retirement with its brand new member, Peri!”

“I have no idea what that’s supposed to mean,” Peridot remarked dryly. “But what I do know is that was so easy,” she finished, as if suspicious by that fact.
“Yeah, but that’s what’s so fun about it!” Steven nodded, still strumming. “You should write something—you should write a song!”

“About what?”

“Whatever you’re thinking!”

While Peridot still didn’t largely understand the functional purpose of music or songs, she decided to take the young Gem up on this challenge and do exactly that. Making use of the rhyming patterns and lyrical progression similar to Steven’s song, the green Gem spent the rest of the evening crafting out her tune. A tune that, once it reached what she believed to be a satisfactory standard, she decided to present to not just the kids, but the other Gems and Ford as well that night around the fire.

“I guess we’re already here,” she began, standing before the collective group as they all listened in, intrigued and also slightly confused by the green Gem, of all people, suddenly bursting into song. “I guess we already know. We’ve all got something to fear, we’ve all got nowhere to go—”

Admittedly, the message of her melody was a bit disconcerting, or at least it was to the Gems as it reminded them of the dire straits they were up against when it came to the Cluster. Still, Steven, Mabel, and even Dipper nodded Peridot their silent encouragement as she carried on with the rest of her undoubtably passionate performance.

“I think you’re all INSANE!” she accused truthfully. For certainly, a group of Gems and humans so dedicated to preserving a planet as bizarre and outlandish as Earth had to be out of their right minds. But then again, Peridot couldn’t claim to be much better, given the same goal they were all working towards together. “But I guess I am too… Anybody would be if they were stuck on Earth with you!”

A round of genuinely amused chuckles from the others followed suit, one that Peridot couldn’t help but take pride over, especially as Mabel and Steven both cheered her on even further. On Homeworld, such a display of pointless, aimless expression would have been scoffed off at best, punishable for at worst. But here, on Earth, this sort of thing was welcome, accepted, commonplace even. It was so strange, so unlike anything the green Gem had ever known that she couldn’t help but appreciate it all in some odd way. Because here, there were no expectations or set standards about what a Gem, or a human for that matter, could do or be. Here, anyone could do or say or think anything they wanted. Here, anyone and, at least as far as she’d seen, everyone was free.

“Life and death and love and birth and—”

Peridot remained slightly mystified by this newfound revelation as the next several days carried on, progress on the drill going sound and steady. The large number of hands on the project certainly made the work much lighter for everyone, as they all had their assigned tasks to carry out in inching towards its completion.

“Life and death and love and birth and—”

Over the course of the drill’s construction, Peridot had largely formed a steady rapport with all of the members of her once-tentative alliance. Amethyst was likely the first among these new bonds she had formed among the Crystal Gems at least. The purple Gem was, at least in her opinion, crass and loud and far too outspoken and brazen for her own good, especially considering the solid soldier status she had originally been created for. But gradually the green Gem had found herself growing used to Amethyst’s playful jabs and ridiculous quips, to the point that she could easily say
that she respected her for the Gem she was rather than the Gem she had been made to be.

“Life and death and love and birth and peace and war on the planet earth.”

Peridot couldn’t deny that she had been forced to more or less swallow her pride when it came to her dealings with Pearl and Ford. The fact that each of them had an acute, impressive intellect that clearly rivaled her own was a bitter pill to swallow, but one that the green Gem largely had all the same. And in wake of her former bitterness towards the pair, she had found they actually had quite a bit in common, particularly when it came to their shared affinity for technology and science. Over just a few weeks, Peridot had gone from coldly shunning any tips or advice they had to offer on these fronts, to eagerly joining in the exchange of knowledge alongside the author and the white Gem, her former prejudices against them all but forgotten.

“Is there anything that’s worth more?”

It had largely taken Peridot the most time to grow accustomed to Garnet out of anyone else. On Homeworld, fusion between two entirely different types of Gems was a massive taboo, so the Gem leader’s very existence had originally offended the green Gem for reasons she found she wasn’t able to explain. It had taken her quite a bit of time to look past that singular fact, but once she had, she was actually able to see that Garnet was more than just the fusion that composed her existence. The Gem leader was brave, stable, sensible, and most of all patient, even with Peridot and all of her harsh words and sneers and insults she had once had for her and her teammates. And, when push came to shove, that was something Peridot wasn’t about to ignore, even despite however the rest of Homeworld would think of a Gem such as her.

“Is there anything that’s worth more?”

Limited as they were when it came to more of the heavy lifting, the kids still pitched in as much as they could. Since Dipper was largely able to keep up with Pearl and Ford and even Peridot when it came to the scientific side of the drill’s construction, that’s where most of his contributions were found. Steven and Mabel were less versed in the technicalities of the machine, but what they lacked in knowledge, they made up for in helpful enthusiasm. While Peridot had initially callously rebuffed their meager assistance, over time she had gradually come to accept it, perhaps even welcome it when it came to tasks that were too much for her to handle on her own. Overall, the concept of ‘friendship’ was still a new one to her, one that she only really had the information provided to her by Steven and Mabel to go off of. But if what she’d heard of it truly was correct, then it was safe to say that, like it or not, she had come to make friends of just about all of them, as odd and impossible as that might have once seemed.

“Is there anything that’s worth more than peace and love on the planet earth?”

It had taken quite a bit of time and a tremendous amount of work, but after weeks of plentiful effort from everyone involved, the drill was finally complete. The entire group stood admiring their handiwork, which was admittedly quite impressive. Despite its notably small cockpit, the drill’s point was sharp and formidable, fortified by titan’s ore to the point that there was no doubt it’d be able to penetrate the surface of the earth easily and safely. And hopefully, this machine, the product of their teamwork and determination, would be enough to end the threat that the Cluster posed to the planet Earth once and for all.

“Nice work,” Garnet congratulated Peridot in particular, giving the green Gem a friendly pat on the back for her hard work. It was enough to startle Peridot though, to the point that she flinched and
took up a brief defensive stance, eliciting a collective amused laugh from the others.

“W-we really did it, huh?” Peridot asked, turning towards the drill with something of a small, proud smile.

“We?!” Steven gasped with sudden delight over the ongoing comradery.

“Heck yeah we did!” Mabel cheered, pulling out her camera. “C’mon, everyone get in close! My scrapbook just won’t be complete without a picture of our awesome drill!”

The others all gladly obliged as they bunched in together in front of the drill, all of them smiling (save for Peridot, who was rather confused as to what was going on in general) while Mabel snapped the photo. A memento that would be sure to memorialize their success long after the Cluster was gone and the drill had fulfilled its purpose.

“It is quite impressive, isn’t it?” Ford mused with a grin, looking back at the drill. “And with such a quick turn-around time too! Then again, I suppose we had no choice but to be quick with this, given the circumstances…”

“Oh wait!” Peridot interjected. “That reminds me, I need to check something!” The green Gem hurried over to the drill, rummaging around inside its cockpit as the others stood by, their spirits still collectively high over the machine’s completion.

“She’s come so far…” Steven noted happily, looking over towards Peridot from afar. “It feels like just yesterday that she was fusing with Bill and trying to kill us…”

“No, no,” Pearl shook her head. “That was several week ago.”

“Still, it really doesn’t feel like it was that long ago…” Dipper said just as thoughtfully. “Its kinda crazy to think that Peridot used to be this Peridot,” he grinned as he nodded over to the green Gem, who clumsily face-planted after falling off of the drill before frantically running back over to the group.

“Coordinates!” Peridot shouted starkly. “We still need the Cluster’s exact coordinates in order to drill to it!”

“Uh, don’t we already know where it is?” Mabel asked with a confused frown. “It’s buried suuuuper deep underground, right? Which means we could just bam!” She punched her fist dramatically, making a brief drilling noise as she did. “Drill right on down there and kiss that big bad Cluster goodbye!”

“Theoretically, yes, but I understand Peridot’s concern,” Ford agreed. “Regardless of how massive the Cluster might be, we’ll still need to know just how far down past the surface of the Earth it is. But who knows how we’d even access that information in the first place?”

“A-actually…” Pearl spoke up, apparently apprehensive as she averted eye contact with the others. “There’s a Diamond Base that may have those coordinates, but…. Getting there is going to be difficult.”

“How come?” Steven asked.

“Because its not accessible by warp pad. And it’s on….” The white Gem trailed off, directing her gaze, as well as everyone else’s to the bright nightly orb far above them all.

“The moon?!” Steven, Mabel, and even Dipper asked in awestruck unison.
“Yes, the moon,” Pearl replied rather flatly.

“Uh, how are supposed to get all the way up there?” Amethyst asked, hands on her hips. “I mean, we can jump pretty high, but I don’t think any of us can jump that high.”

“Hm, I suppose we have no choice but to construct a lighter-than-air spacecraft,” Ford concluded staunchly. “I’ve never really dabbled too much in advanced interstellar aeronautics before, but as far as I’m concerned, there’s never a bad time to learn!”

“Uh, actually, we’ve sorta been there, done that with the whole build-your-own-rocket thing, Great Uncle Ford…” Dipper pointed out. “It… didn’t really go all that well…”

“Wait, I know!” Steven exclaimed, turning to his pink feline companion as he snoozed peacefully in the grass nearby. “Lion! Can you make us a super special warp to the moon?”

Despite the young Gem’s enthusiasm, Lion responded dully, letting out a long yawn before rolling over to continue his nap. “Come on, Lion, we gotta do this to stop the Cluster!” Steven urged, flopping down on top of his still-sleeping pet. “If we don’t there’s gonna be no more Earth! No more fun times with your pal Waddles… no more Lion Lickers… no more naps-”

Apparently, this plea was somehow enough to call the pink beast to action, for he instantly perked up, rising from his nap as his eyes took on a pale white glow. While the others looked to Lion at absolute amazement at this shift, Steven simply stood by with a satisfied grin over his pet’s eventual compliance. “Guess it was naps.”

“Um, not that this moon trip doesn’t sound cool and all,” Dipper spoke up, aptly hesitant. “But how exactly are we supposed to breathe up there? I mean, I know its not a big deal to you guys,” he said to the Gems. “But its sort of important for the rest of us…”

“Oh, there’s no need to worry about that, Dipper,” Pearl assured. “The Moon Base has its own self-contained adaptable internal atmosphere that should be perfectly livable for any human.”

“Wow, Pearl, you sure do know a lot about this Moon Base place,” Mabel remarked with a curious grin. “Have you ever been there before?”

The white Gem let out a rather sharp, forced laugh at this, tension rising in her shoulders as she quickly rebuffed the question. “W-who me? D-don’t be silly, of course not! I-I’ve only ever… heard about it! T-that’s why I know so much about it!” The others all gave her something of a confused look at this haphazard outburst, but once again, Pearl deflected them all before any further questions could be posed. “N-now come on! We haven’t a moment to waste! Let’s get those coordinates!”

Since no one could really argue with such a vigorous command, the group was quick to follow after the white Gem to do exactly that. It took some doing, planning, and careful squeezing to fit everyone onto Lion (or in several cases, into his mane) all at the same time, but eventually they managed to figure it out. The pink beast hardly seemed labored by his many passengers as he instantly broke into a rapid sprint. His speed only seemed to pick up with each quick step he made across the wide fields until, suddenly, he let out an immense, mighty roar. The pounding sound was enough to pierce a hole into the very fabric of space itself, creating a large, glowing portal that he barreled into at top speeds. Lion’s large group of riders all held on for dear life, with only Steven and Mabel really enjoying the breakneck, wild trip as the pink beast roared another portal into existence. He continued this is steady succession, somehow increasing his speed each time as he ripped through each and every portal like a bolt of lighting across a stormy sky. Eventually, the collection of continuous portals became so radiantly bright that it practically blinded all of them,
especially as they neared their destination. And once they did, everything seemed to finally stop all at once.

The space they landed in was large and dark, though none of them had a chance to take it in as Lion crashed out of his final portal, sliding across the floor before slamming into a far wall and knocking the Gems and Ford clean off his back. “Lion! Are you ok, bud?” Steven gasped, immediately alarmed to see that the impact had knocked the wind out of his pink pet. Fortunately though, Lion seemed no worse for wear as he took a much-needed moment to rest in light of all of the power he had just exerted.

“Aw, you poor baby!” Mabel gushed, generously rubbing the pink beast’s mane. “Who’s a good magical portal-maker? You are! You are!”

“I-incredible…” Ford mused, adjusting his glasses as he picked himself up off the ground. “I knew that lion was unusual, but I could have never guessed it was capable of something like this. Clearly, I’ll have to do more research on him in order to-” The author was quick to retract the hand he had extended out to Lion as the pink beast growled in warning protest. “O-on second thought, I suppose that could always wait for… some other time.”

“We made it,” Pearl spoke up, her tone serious as her gemstone emitted a bright light for them all to see by. Sure enough, the peaceful nighttime landscape of the farmlands were gone, replaced by cold sterile walls and floors that clearly hadn’t been touched in ages. Each of the rounded walls were adorned with what looked to be large murals, though without direct light upon them, it was hard to make out exactly what they were supposed to be of.

“Huh, weird…” Dipper mused, glancing around curiously. “You know, I sort of expected the moon to look more like… I dunno, the moon?”

“Well it sure is bouncy like the moon is supposed to be!” Mabel chimed in, taking advantage of the lack of gravity to take a high, unfettered leap into the air. “Come on, bro-bro, you’ve got to try this!”

“Mabel, I don’t know if that’s such a good—w-whoa!” Dipper gasped in alarm as Mabel suddenly yanked him up into the air along with her before sending him spinning freely high above the ground, despite his best attempts to anchor himself back to the ground.

“Hah! Look at me!” Steven chimed in, joining in on the anti-gravity antics as he let himself float freely. “I’m a moon boy!”

“Yeah! Alright, moon boy!” Amethyst cheered him on, leaping to join the kids up in the air, only to end up falling right back to the ground instead. “Hey! Why can’t I be a moon boy?!”

“We’re Gems,” Peridot pointed out with a scoff. “We’re a space-faring race designed to conquer other worlds. Our physical forms adjust automatically to the gravity of any planetoid.”

“Awww… lame,” the purple Gem groaned, sticking her tongue out in disappointment. Right behind her, Dipper and Mabel softly landed on the floor in a jumbled heap of limbs as Ford hurried over to help them up, all while trying to stay grounded himself.

“You know, it just occurred to me that I probably should have told Stanley we were going to the moon…” the author noted as he carefully pulled his nibblings up to stand. “…Ah well, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.”

“Uh… yeah…” Dipper said, exchanging an uneasy glance with Mabel as they remembered just
how harshly the conman had reacted to their last attempt at a trip to the stars. “We… probably shouldn’t tell him about this, just… just ‘cause.”

“I was bouncin’ on the moon one day!” Steven sang brightly as he continued free-floating, only to end up smacking into one of the walls and hitting the ground a moment later. He let out a small groan as he picked himself up off the floor, only to spot the large mural of what looked like a tall, elegant woman on the wall beside him. “Huh? Hey, Peridot! Who’s this supposed to be?”

The green Gem gasped as she shined the light of her own gemstone up at the mural, recognizing the blue, cloaked, graceful figure well. “It’s Blue Diamond!” she exclaimed, taking on an air of immediate reverence before the massive mural. “W-wait! Are they all here? Ah, yes!” Peridot rushed over to the far side of the chamber, where another similar depiction of a different, but still just as regal figure, awaited. “There she is!”

“There who is?” Mabel inquired curiously as her and Dipper joined the pair before mural.

“Behold!” Peridot proclaimed dramatically as she threw an arm out at the stern, stately woman on the wall before her. “Yellow Diamond! Isn’t she magnificent?”

“Uh… sure…” Dipper deadpanned, not particularly impressed.

“Whoa…” Mabel mused, much more fascinated. “She has a really long neck. Like a giraffe!”

“W-wha—you can’t just say something like that about the Yellow Diamond!” Peridot chastised, offended. “Whatever a so-called ‘giraffe’ is…”

“So, who are the Diamonds anyway?” Steven asked. “They seem like a pretty big deal.”

“Are you joking me?!” Peridot scoffed. “The Diamonds are the Gem matriarchs! Together, they make up the Great Diamond Authority that governs Homeworld and all the outlying colonies. We live to serve them!”

The green Gem’s explanation was cut short from a disgruntled hum from Garnet. The Gem leader stood over them, her expression cold and disapproving, a look that both Pearl and Amethyst shared. Even Ford seemed to be bitterly averting his gaze away from the Diamond murals for some reason, making it quite apparent that not everyone seemed to share Peridot’s high opinion of them. “I-I mean…” she recanted with a bit of an anxious laugh. “We were all made to serve them, even if some of us… don’t anymore.” A beat of awkward silence passed at this, though Peridot was quick to fill it by hastily changing the topic altogether. “H-hey! I think that’s a control service over there! Let’s take a look!”

Steven and Mabel readily hurried after the green Gem, curious to see more of the mysterious Moon Base. Dipper, however, did stop short to steal just another somewhat distrustful glance at the visage of Yellow Diamond on the wall before him before moving on with the others. Likewise, Garnet and Pearl in particular exchanged something of an uneasy glance before turning away, both of them knowing all too well exactly who the Diamonds were and what they were capable of.

“I think this is right…” Peridot muttered, examining a nearby panel on the floor. “The material is different from the surrounding stone. If I just do this…” She trailed off, pressing the panel, which in turn, emerged from the ground, alongside several others to create something of a floating staircase all around the edges of the base’s central chamber. The green Gem let out a bright giggle at her discovery, beside herself with excitement over getting to see a space that so few other Gems would ever have the chance to visit.
“This is so incredible!” Peridot gushed as they began making their way up the long, winding staircase. “Only the most elite of the elite can enter these sanctums. We are literally walking in the footsteps of the Diamonds!”

“They must really like stairs,” Steven pointed up as he bounded up them.

“Ooo, what’s this cool gloowy orb room?” Mabel asked as they passed through to a higher part of the tower. Sure enough, the room was engulfed in darkness, its only notable feature being the large, rotating spherical light floating in the center of it, its purpose more or less completely unknown.

“It’s not what we came here for,” Garnet said sternly, pressing on ahead.

“Can we hurry it up?” Amethyst asked with a huff of impatience. “This place gives me the creeps.”

Since they had all gotten there, they’d come here for in the first place, no one protested as they finished scaling the lengthy floating stairway, only to finally emerge at the tower’s top. Compared to the base they had arrived in, this deck’s walls were composed almost entirely of clear glass windows, giving an open, grand view of the lunar landscape surrounding the structure. The pale, cratered surface of the moon stretched far and wide in every direction, the dark, star-speckled expanses of space itself hanging high above. It was an incredible view, to put it simply, one that the kids all took in with apt awe as they took a moment to pause and take it all in.

“W-we really are on the moon…” Steven practically whispered, completely stunned.

“I can’t believe it…” Dipper shook his head, just as amazed. “I mean, talking about it is one thing, but… we’re actually here, like its nothing. This is totally insane and honestly? I love it!”

“So do I!” Steven quipped, sharing Dipper’s bright smile.

“Ah, I wish I could join in on the excitement you boys are feeling,” Ford said wistfully as he put a hand on each of their shoulders. “But after traversing countless dimensions far beyond the realms of plausible imagination, the surface of the moon is… relatively underwhelming by comparison.”

“Oh my goodness!” Peridot suddenly squeaked, catching everyone’s attention. The others all joined her near the large white throne at the center of the room, coupled by a pristine table surface resting before it. “This looks like it could be brand new!” the green Gem exclaimed, running her hands over the table. “I mean, it’s a relic by today’s standards, but golly! Its so elegant! So simple! So perfect!”

“Ooo! And it makes a great whiteboard too!” Mabel quipped as she drew a smiley face onto the otherwise spotless surface with a marker she had happened to bring, much to Peridot’s horror.

“Stop that this instant!” the green Gem huffed, snatching the pen away from her. “You’re desecrating an important tool of the Diamonds themselves! Do you have any idea how disrespectful that is?!”

“…Huh. Well, disrespectful or not, it does brighten things up a little in here,” Mabel said, taking on a wide grin to match the smile she had drawn on the table. “See?”

“No,” Peridot deadpanned sullenly.

“Hey! Its got one of those gloowy hand dealies!” Steven pointed out from his spot on the throne behind them.

“Y-you can’t sit there!” Peridot chastised hotly.
“Why not? It’s really cool.”

“That chair is only for the most elite Gems,” the green Gem explained, exasperated. “You can’t just go around sitting where an elite would sit!”

“Well, they aren’t here now, right?” Steven grinned, patting on the ample space next to him on the throne. Peridot hesitated in taking him up on his offer before finally folding, climbing up to join him and laughing in spite of herself over the forbidden pleasure of the act.

“So, uh, what’s this thing supposed to be?” Dipper asked, casually plucking a pale, crystal-like object embedded on the chair’s armrest.

“Put that back!” Peridot fussed before turning her attention to the other controls the throne had to offer. “Hm, ok… let’s see here…” The green Gem experimentally pressed a button, which brought the throne much closer to the control panel, allowing her to properly activate it and begin searching through its holographically projected screens for the data they needed. “Ugh, this is a really old system…” she noted to the others as she began picking through what the panel had to offer. “Just gotta find the right file and… aha!” The projection filled with various graphs, maps, and other information, all of which clearly regarded the Cluster, which Peridot readily translated out for all the others. “There’s the insertion point. Looks like the Beta Kindergarten in Facet Nine. It’s the smaller of the two, not nearly as impressive as yours, Amethyst.”

“Uh… thanks?” the purple Gem shrugged dully.

“But where is the Cluster now?” Pearl asked, a hint of urgency in her tone.

“Hang on… oh! There it is!” A diorama popped up, depicting the vague shape of the Cluster itself, buried deep under the surface of the Earth. Where it would hopefully remain until their drill finally put an end to it. “It’s embedded deep into the mantle. Relative to the barn is roughly two thousand, five hundred units down. All we need to do is feed this data to the drill and we should be all set.”

“T-that’s it then!” Pearl said, pleasantly surprised. “Mission accomplished!”

“Go team!” Steven cheered brightly over their success.

“Huh, its not often that something like this goes this smoothly,” Dipper noted. “Weird.”

“Weird or not, let’s get the heck outta here,” Amethyst remarked, already leading the way back towards the stairs. “The moon is way more boring than I thought it’d be.”

“Wait! Maybe it doesn’t have to be!” Mabel chimed in, glancing back over the control panel. “Hey, Peri, does this thing have any games on it? Or movies?”

“Pfft, no,” Peridot scoffed. “This wasn’t used for ‘games’ or ‘movies’. It was used for planning the colony. Here, look.” The green Gem activated another file, which just so happened to catch the dwindling attention of the others as they looked over the projection of the planet Earth before them. “So here’s a map of all structures that were originally built on Earth,” Peridot scrolled through a list of the blueprints for structures that included the Galaxy Warp, the Kindergarten, and several others. “All told, this probably only accounts for maybe five percent of what was originally planned.”

“What was the plan?” Steven asked, somewhat apprehensive to find out.

“Well, let’s take a look.” With a single press of a button, the holographic Earth rapidly deteriorated, massive gaps cutting through its surface, its landmasses ruined and its oceans drained,
replaced by an inhospitable mess of a planet conquered by Gems and Gems alone. A horrific sight to everyone present, given its implications. All except for, unsurprisingly, Peridot. “Ta da! A finished Earth colony!” she exclaimed proudly. “Just look at this! 89 Kindergartens, 67 spires, a Galaxy Warp in each facet, efficient use of all available materials! What were you thinking shutting this operation down? It could have been great!”

“No!” Garnet exclaimed suddenly, sharply. “You’re wrong!”

“What are you talking about?” Peridot sneered, baffled. “It’s perfect! Look at it!”

“We are looking at it,” Pearl said coldly.

“Yeah! This plan stinks!” Amethyst huffed, properly angry.

“Completing this colony would have meant the extinction of all life on Earth!” Garnet said, just as upset by indeed, what could have been.

“And I thought Cipher’s intentions for the Earth were bad…” Ford muttered to himself, shaking his head. “This is… well, I don’t know if I’d say its worse, but I’d certainly say its arguably just as terrible.”

“Seriously…” Dipper shuddered in fearful disgust. “I mean, we knew Homeworld was awful, but this… this is on a whole other level…”

“Well, it could have been on a whole other level,” Peridot remarked rather callously. “If it had actually been allowed to reach its full potential. Think of the good it could have done! The Gems that would’ve been made, our empire expanded!”

“And all that would have been lost along with it…” Pearl continued bitterly, shamefully. “Rose Quartz believed all life was precious and worth protecting. That’s why she risked everything to stop this colony from happening!”

“Well, if she wanted to protect it, she did a lousy job!” Peridot argued back haughtily. “There’d be no Cluster if the Earth had stayed a colony. Now there’s no colony, and there’s gonna be no Earth. So thank you, Rose Quartz! You doomed the planet!”

A thick cloud of hostile tension pierced the air at this, outraged silence remaining in light of the green Gem’s snide, thoughtless remarks. Wishing for the completion of Homeworld’s twisted, destructive plans for Earth were one thing; but mocking Rose and her bravery and sacrifice was something that Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl, and even Ford, all of whom had known her personally while Peridot had not, could not simply ignore. Their sharp, furious glares were focused entirely on the green Gem alone, something that the kids instantly noticed more than Peridot did herself. And while Dipper couldn’t really find that much of a reason to rush to the green Gem’s defense after everything she’d just said, Steven and Mabel tried to all the same.

“Heh, aw, y-you guys know Peri!” Mabel shrugged, laughing nervously. “Always sayin’ wacky stuff she totally doesn’t really mean… right?”

“What?” Peridot countered, confused and clearly not about to recant her stance.

“Y-yeah!” Steven rushed to chime in and quell the swelling anger from his guardians in particular. “A-after all, don’t forget: I-is there anything that’s worth more tha-”

The young Gem instantly went silent the moment Garnet snatched Peridot up from her seat by the front of her uniform, keeping a tight grip as she stared down at her with unseen, untold amounts of
ferocity. “You,” she began, her voice edged with tranquil rage as the green Gem’s frightened image reflected back at her through the Gem leader’s visor. “Listen to me. Now. You are talking about things that you do not understand.”

Steven gasped the moment he saw a gauntlet materialize around the Gem leader’s free hand, and even though he didn’t agree with the green Gem’s poor choice of words and actions, he knew he couldn’t allow this hostility to continue any further. “Garnet, stop!” he pleaded fearfully. “P-please, its… its not worth it. We’re done here; we got what we came for. L-let’s just… go home…”

Acting upon the young Gem’s nearly tearful request and nothing else, Garnet did as he said, loosening her grip on Peridot and allowing her to clumsily fall to the floor. And then, in a single swift, powerful swing, the Gem leader brought her gauntlet down upon the control panel before her, smashing it—as well as the last remnants of the fortunately failed colony it contained—beyond all hope of repair. Without a word, the Gems turned to leave the same way they’d came, Ford joining them as they all turned their back on the green Gem, on the moon base, on everything they knew Rose had fought so hard to stop in its tracks.

“Tch, figures you still haven’t really learned anything,” Dipper was the first to speak up as he also prepared to leave, though not before sending one final, clearly disappointed remark Peridot’s way. “Even still, after all this time. Honestly, I can’t even say I’m surprised, knowing you.”

“Aw, come on, Dipper,” Mabel hurried after him as he turned on his heel and walked off. “That’s not fair and you know it!”

“What’d I say?” Peridot asked as the twins left. “I was just stating a fact. The rebellion didn’t really ‘save’ Earth, it just delayed the inevitable.”

Steven sighed upon hearing this, partially taking up Dipper’s line of reasoning that, even after all this time and everything that had happened, Peridot was still just as stuck in her stubborn ways as ever. “That’s not the way they see it,” he nodded after his guardians sadly. “They’ve spent thousands of years trying to protect the Earth. I thought… maybe… you finally understood why… But I guess… I guess I was wrong…” The young Gem sighed once more, shaking his head forlornly. He had thought Peridot had come so far, from the hand ship, from her time on the run, from Pyrite. He had thought she had grown and learned and come to appreciate the Earth and all it had to offer from her extended stay there. He had thought… that they all were finally, finally friends.

But in the end, none of that had mattered as much to Peridot as it had to him, clearly.

Steven only paused briefly at the foot of the platform the throne rested on, noticing that the green Gem hadn’t come down along with him. He knew they couldn’t very well leave her there, especially given they still had a mission to complete, and despite his rather mixed feelings about her at the moment, he still called up to her all the same. “Peridot!”

“What? I’m coming!” Peridot retorted, hurrying town the steps. Steven watched her silently as though he froze in sudden confusion upon catching the briefest flash of something in the green Gem’s hand as she passed him by. Something she hadn’t had when they arrived there, and something he knew, she clearly wasn’t supposed to have.

“Let’s go, you two,” Garnet called from the larger staircase and Peridot didn’t hesitate to hurry on ahead. Steven hesitated for another brief moment however, keeping his sights on the green Gem alone as he wondered with a sense of newfound worry and fledgling distrust exactly what it was she planned to do.
The trip back from the moon to the barn was silent and awkward, to say the least. After Peridot’s haughty remarks concerning the rebellion and Rose Quartz, neither the Gems nor Ford were too keen on carrying on any sort of conversation with the green Gem, despite the kids’ best efforts to break the thick tension. All the same, the collective group made it back to Earth aboard Lion safe and sound, carrying with them the final piece needed to complete their extensive work on the drill. A victory that, by all accounts, should have felt much more triumphant than it actually did.

“So how much longer ‘till we can use the drill?” Amethyst asked with a huff of impatience as they all gathered around said drill once more.

“Well, with the new coordinates we got from the Moon Base,” Pearl began. “It should be ready to go. But we really should preform some tests first…”

“Still, it stands to reason that we should be able to take it down to the Cluster itself within the next few days, at least,” Ford theorized, glancing up at the drill. “That is… if we even have that much time left.”

Despite the pertinence and importance of the ongoing discussion, Steven, Dipper, and Mabel were all only barely listening in on it. All three of them were preoccupied by a number of contrasting thoughts and feelings, from muted frustration on Dipper’s part, to fretful worry on Mabel’s, to growing suspicion on Steven’s. Suspicion that was entirely focused on one certain green Gem and the unknown device the young Gem had seen her secretly snatch away from the Moon Base.

In fact, in the last hour or so alone, Steven’s suspicion and apprehension had grown so much that he found he couldn’t really keep it to himself any longer. For all he knew, it could have very well been nothing, which was why he had decided against voicing his concerns to the Gems. So instead, he chose to confide in someone who was sure to both believe him and help him get to the bottom of things: the twins.

“Hey, can I talk to you guys for a second?” Steven whispered to Dipper and Mabel while everyone was still distracted with the drill. “A-alone?”

While neither of them knew where the clear dread in the young Gem’s tone was coming from, neither Dipper nor Mabel denied his request as they all slipped away to gather just shy of the barn’s entrance. As soon as they were out of the Gems’ earshot, Steven turned to them with a clear sense of urgency, one that caught them both off guard, even as he spoke his piece.

“I didn’t wanna worry the Gems or Mr. Ford, especially since we’re so close to being done with the drill,” he began, glancing down. “But… I-I think Peridot might be up to something.”

“What, you mean aside from offending everyone by wishing that the Earth had been hallowed from the inside out?” Dipper retorted somewhat sardonically.

Mabel, on the other hand, was much more genuine in her response. “W-what do you mean she’s up to something?” she asked, the slightest hint of fear in her tone. Fear that the green Gem could very well be slipping out of the progress she had made and back into her old, sinister ways.

“I saw her take something from the Moon Base while we were leaving,” Steven explained. “I’m not sure what it is, but… I just… I have a bad feeling about it.”

“Well, who can blame you?” Dipper said, crossing his arms. “Peridot pretty much just proved that she hasn’t changed a bit. Heck, for all we know, her trying to ‘get along’ with us could of just been
one giant act this whole time. A way to trick us into thinking she’s ok before she comes in with another hairbrained attempt at destroying us so she can get back to Homeworld or something.”

“B-but then why would she work so hard to help us with the drill?” Mabel cut in, anxiously, earnestly. “Dipper, I know you’ve never really trusted Peridot, and I know Grunkle Ford and the Gems are all super miffed with her right now, b-but I don’t think she wants to hurt us or the Earth anymore! You even said so yourself: the Peridot we know now isn’t the same Peridot that first came to Earth or fused with Bill! She’s different than that; she’s better than that. I—isn’t that right, Steven?”

The young Gem was initially silent upon being met with this question, his indecisiveness being conveyed through his expression alone. “I—I… I really wanna believe that, Mabel…” he said sadly, averting both of the twins’ pressing gazes. “But… I just… I’m not…” He sighed, his mounting conflicting feelings towards the green Gem and her incriminating words and actions all becoming far too much to bear. “I… I just don’t know,” he finally answered truthfully. “Not anymore. I thought I did, but… I think we need to find out exactly what that thing she took from the Moon Base really was and why she grabbed it. J-just to make sure.”

Mabel let out a small, worried sigh at this, but all the same, she nodded her quiet agreement, even if she still dreaded what they might possibly find out. Dipper, on the other hand, was much more forward when it came to taking action concerning the green Gem where his sister was not. “Fair enough,” he consented evenly, though his cold expression softened as he glanced over at Mabel. “But… just in case we find something that… you—we may not like… I just… you guys know that we’ll… have to do something about it… right?”

Steven and Mabel exchanged a brief, equally despondent glance, both of them knowing this was absolutely true. If on the unthinkable chance that Peridot really was planning some underhanded scheme, it was their responsibility to put a stop to it, or at the very least inform the Gems about it. For all of the good will and camaraderie they had formed with the green Gem over the past several weeks, the thought that it could all fall apart in an instant had never really occurred to them. Until now, when it seemed as though there was a very high likelihood of that very thing happening.

On another nod of tight, terse agreement between the trio, they decided to make their move. Peridot hadn’t joined the others out near the drill, instead opting to carry on with her own, unknown devices inside the barn. It was there that the kids found her, her back turned to them as she apparently fiddled around with something, no doubt whatever she had taken from the Moon Base. She was quick to slip it away, however, the moment Steven spoke up to garner her attention.

“Uh… Peridot?” he began, aptly apprehensive.

“Oh! Steven, Dipper, Mabel!” the green Gem gasped, startled as she spun around. “W-what are you three doing here?”

“We, uh… sorta need to talk to you, i-if that’s ok,” Mabel ventured, not making to much of an effort to hide her constant worry.

“Uh… s-sure!” Peridot agreed stiffly as she followed the kids inside of the cabin of the old, run-down truck parked inside of the barn. “Why are we in this broken-down vehicle?” the green Gem asked, genuinely confused.

“I don’t know,” Dipper said, sending her a cold, suspicious glare. “Why don’t you tell us?”

“…What?”
“Uh, a-actually,” Steven interjected as he glanced towards the hand Peridot was holding behind her back. The hand that held whatever secret she was trying her hardest to conceal from them all. “We wanted to ask you about… the Diamonds?”

“Oh!” the green Gem perked up instantly, excitement sparking in her eyes. “Well, I don’t know what the others have told you, but there’s a reason they’re in charge.”

“Oh yeah?” Dipper asked flatly, clearly not caring about this means to an end. “And why’s that?”

“Because they’re objectively better than us!” Peridot grinned brightly. “Every Gem has their own strengths and weaknesses, but not them. They’re absolutely, totally, completely flawless beings. Especially my Diamond: Yellow Diamond, the most perfect, the most reasonable, rational, efficient decider to ever exist in the universe!”

None of the kids really knew what to say concerning this, all of them knowing that Peridot’s incredibly high view of her matriarch was likely very biased. All the same, if her testimony concerning Yellow Diamond was anything, it was proof that the green Gem’s admiration for both her Homeworld and her Diamond still very much stood. “Y-you’re really loyal to her, aren’t you?” Steven asked, not masking his fledgling disappointment at this fact.

“How could I not be?” Peridot rebuffed. “We may have our little truce, but I’ll never forsake the Gem I was made for! And why would I? I mean, she’s an impeccable, impossibly wise powerhouse of a leader! E-even if she does actually happen to be in league with…”

“In league with who?” Mabel pressed, a newfound burst of hope filling her as she caught onto the smallest hint of doubt towards the Diamond filling the green Gem’s tone. But whatever that doubt might have been, Peridot was quick to shake it away in favor of her former adulation.

“O-oih, never mind, its nothing,” she scoffed with a wave of her hand. “J-just some ridiculous rumor I once heard from someone who is absolutely not a reliable source for anything. A rumor that certainly does not bear repeating, especially at the risk of my Diamond catching wind of it!”

“W-well then you better keep it down,” Steven said leadingly, seeing an opportunity and deciding to take it. “Because she’s right behind you!”

“What?!” Peridot gasped, spinning around in alarm and finally giving the young Gem a chance to swipe the crystal she was holding onto away from her. The green Gem barely even had time to react to the theft as the kids rushed out of the truck, slamming the door right in her face as she tried to scramble after them.

“Hey! What do you three think you’re doing!?” she shouted, banging on the window fiercely.

“What’s it look like?” Dipper countered just as harshly. “We’re shutting down whatever it is you had planned!”

“I-I didn’t have anything planned!” Peridot protested, though her bristling posture told otherwise. “Now let me out of here!”

“Save your strength,” Steven shook his head, holding the stolen crystal tight and close. “You’re up against one of Earth’s greatest trapping technologies: the child safety lock.”

“No!” Peridot wailed, sinking back into her seat dramatically. “How could you do this to me? The great and loveable Peridot!? I thought we were finally friends like you wanted!”

“We thought that too, Peridot…” Mabel frowned, genuinely upset. “But then…”

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“We thought that too, Peridot…” Mabel frowned, genuinely upset. “But then…”
“But then I saw you sneak this off the Moon Base while nobody else was looking!” Steven filled in, his tone much more intense and angry than it usually was as he held the crystal up. “What is it? Tell us!”

“Hmph, its nothing special,” Peridot scowled at the trio from inside the truck. “And definitely not important at all.”

“Oh really?” Dipper asked challengingly, grabbing a hammer lying discarded on the floor as Steven readily held the crystal up to him in shared defiance towards the green Gem. “Well, if its not important, then I’m sure you wouldn’t mind if we just smash it, huh?!?”

“NO!” Peridot practically shrieked before finally, sullenly relenting. “Ugh, all right, look. I have a plan. Allow me to explain. That’s a… communicator. Meant for the express purpose of contacting the Diamonds back on Homeworld.”

“What?!” Dipper asked sharply, so outraged and alarmed that he nearly brought the hammer down on the communicator right then and there until Steven pulled it away at just the right time.

“Y-you’re still trying to contact Homeworld?” the young Gem asked, horrified.

“Yes, of course I am!”

“B-but… but we thought you were finally starting to like it here on Earth!” Mabel exclaimed, desperate for proper answers where they really were none.

“Oh, you don’t get it,” Peridot countered evenly. “I’m not trying to leave, not anymore! Instead, I’ve got it all figured out. You simple clods keep trying to protect the Earth, but you can’t do anything right! I’ll admit I let myself get carried away too… laughing, singing, building our little machine… but don’t you see? None of that matters! What matters is that I can be of use to Yellow Diamond! This planet can be of use to Yellow Diamond! I must contact her, to reveal what I’ve discovered!”

“Are you actually serious right now!?” Dipper exclaimed in appalled disgust. “You said so yourself that the Diamonds were the ones who put the Cluster in the Earth in the first place! They’re the ones who want to see it destroyed now, just like they did with that whole colony plan we saw on the moon! You really think they’re gonna stop any of that now?”

“Oh, of course they will!” Peridot said, thoroughly confident in her plan. “If I could just have a chance to talk to Yellow Diamond, then I’m sure I can get her—as fair and reasonable as she’s known to be—to see that this planet could still be a viable asset to Homeworld’s empire. And what’s better is that once she sees things my way, the Cluster will certainly be shut down and the Earth saved. Isn’t that what all of you want?”

“Not like this we don’t!” Steven protested admantly. “Ugh… why do we keep sticking our necks out for you? You’re never gonna be on our side! Garnet! Amethyst! Pearl!” Upon calling out for his guardians, Steven raced off, Dipper trailing right after him so they could reveal Peridot’s heinous plan for what it truly was.

“No! Steven! Don’t get them!” Peridot shouted after them, pulling hard against the locked truck door until she happened to spot Mabel, still lingering beside it. “Mabel! You believe me, don’t you!? Then release me! Now!”

“P-Peri…” Mabel began quietly, tears of clear betrayal finally starting to well up in her eyes as she looked back at the green Gem. A Gem that, up until now, she really, truly had seen as a friend,
regardless of everything she had said and done in the past. Even if that friendship had clearly meant nothing Peridot, despite her best, yet futile hopes otherwise. “Peridot,” she said firmer, wiping away her tears to regard her sternly, yet still so sadly. “I… I’m sorry…” she said as she finally turned away, even though she was the one who had nothing to apologize for.

A round of shocked gasps rose from the Gems the instant Steven and Dipper presented the communicator to them. Even Ford balked at it, apparently familiar with the device somehow, even as Pearl took it and frantically reaffirmed what it was.

“S-she took a direct line to the Diamonds?!” the white Gem exclaimed in horrified disbelief. “From the Moon Base?! What was she thinking?!”

“She was ‘thinking’ that she was gonna use it to call Yellow Diamond so Homeworld could just come here and pick up right where they left off with that colony plan of this!” Dipper informed hotly. “And she almost got away with it if we hadn’t stopped her just in time.”

“And its certainly a good thing that you kids did,” Ford agreed, casting a bitter glance towards the barn. “To think that we spent so much time with her, but we never saw this sort of underlying treachery coming. Honestly, I thought that I’d at the very least be used to betrayals of this scale by now. In a way, its almost disappointing that I’m not.”

“Ugh, for reals, after everything we’ve gone through, she’s still out to get us!” Amethyst growled sharply. “That’s it! I’m takin’ back all my cool nicknames for her! So long P-dot and P-diddy, hello… AUGH! I’m too mad! I’ll think of something later!”

The round of incensed reactions to Peridot’s deception continued, even as the green Gem honked the truck’s horn almost constantly from her “prison” inside of the barn. Only Steven and Mabel paid any attention to it though, their expressions awash between disappointment, morose, and frustration all at the same time. “I see she knows what a horn is now…” the young Gem noted sourly.

“I’d been meaning to teach her that one…” Mabel sighed, turning away, forlorn.

“You two offered her a lot of your trust,” Garnet noted to the pair, her hands on her hips.

“We did!” Steven huffed. “And it blew up in our faces!”

“I just… maybe we thought that… if we could be her friends then maybe she’d finally stop trying to do all of the bad things she came here to do…” Mabel said, burring the bottom of her face inside of the collar of her sweater. “But I guess she was never really our friend after all, huh?”

“No, she wasn’t…” Steven concluded, shaking his head as he looked back to Garnet. “You guys have been protecting the Earth for thousands of years. She could’ve destroyed all that. I… I don’t know why we thought we could change her mind…”

“Oh, come on, you guys, none of this is your fault and you know that,” Dipper attempted to console the pair as he stepped between them, placing a hand on each of their shoulders. “You both always try to see the best in people, and I’ll admit, sometimes I just don’t get it. But then again, maybe its because I’m not able to see things the way you two do. You both tried your best to change Peridot for the better, and in the end it just… didn’t work, but that had nothing to do with either of you. Its just… sometimes you can’t really change what people think, no matter how hard you try.”
“But that’s just it,” Steven countered with a frown. “We don’t want to tell her what to do or what to think. She should just… know, shouldn’t she?”

“Steven…” Garnet began, her tone as steady as ever, though sympathy was clearly there as well. “You always believe in everyone. Like your mother, you seem to have a little more patience than the rest of us. That’s a trait you share too, Mabel. But on the same hand, Dipper’s also right. The truth is, not everyone deserves that patience.”

“Well, look on the bright side,” Pearl cut in with as much of an encouraging smile as she could muster. “At least you got this thing away from her before she could do any real damage.”

“Yeah…” Steven and Mabel both smiled at this, glad to know that, despite Peridot’s burning betrayal, in the grand scheme of things, the Earth would stay safe. Until…

A sudden explosion rattled the entire area, its center being the barn itself as one of its sides was effectively blown clean off. Everyone turned with apt alarm to see a familiar green robot bursting out of the building, leaving a trail of clear destruction in its wake as it stormed towards them, piloted by a manically laughing green Gem all the while. “Free! Freetedom!” Peridot proclaimed, making an obvious beeline towards them. Or more specifically, towards the communicator they now possessed instead of her.

“What?!” Ford exclaimed, quite surprised to see that Peridot and McGucket’s robot was still functional at all.

“H-how did she escape?!” Steven asked with newfound fear over the bot bounding their way. He quickly got an answer, however, as the green Gem’s bot chucked one of the truck’s doors towards them, only barely missing the kids as it landed hard in front of them.

“Fools!” Peridot shouted triumphantly. “Your invisible rotary shield was no match for me once I applied logic!”

“Yeah! Whatever little bit of logic you actually have!” Dipper taunted back, only for Ford to narrowly pull both him and Mabel out of the way of the rest of the truck Peridot launched at them in turn.

“Now, I’m going to do this right…” Peridot grinned, prepping her bot to take on the Gems as they rushed towards her, their weapons drawn for the fray. The green Gem lashed out, wasting no time on her opponents as she quickly knocked Garnet aside. The communicator passed hands between Pearl and Amethyst a number of times, but in the midst of their frantic tossing, Peridot managed to intervene, snatching the device away just before the white Gem could nab it. “See!?” the green Gem exclaimed, hitting both of the other Gems away just as they tried to steal it back. “None of you know what you’re doing!”

With the communicator finally in her grasp again, Peridot wasted no time in making a hasty retreat in order to get it out of everyone else’s range. However, none of the others were willing to let the green Gem go through with her alarming plans so easily.

“Ohhh, ok! I’ve been ready for this!” Amethyst exclaimed angrily, quickly shapeshifting her form into a sizable, functional helicopter. “Get in!” she shouted to the others, her tone fierce enough to curb any and all comments as they all piled into her surprisingly roomy cockpit.

“Oh, of all the times for me to leave my hyper-sonic magnetic propulsion gun at home,” Ford shook his head as he made sure the twins were secure in their seats. “That would have been more than enough to take Peridot and her robot out in a single shot. Then again, Fiddleford worked on
that robot and he *usually* built his inventions to withstand mine on purpose, so… maybe not.”

“Wait, where’s Steven?” Pearl interjected, noticing that the young Gem was the only one not seated in Amethyst’s cockpit.

“Stupid Peridot, stupid robot!” the young Gem fussed to himself from just a few feet away, still caught up in his earlier woes. “Why did I always have to go and encourage her in the first place?!”

“There’s no time for feeling horrible,” Garnet called as she shapeshifted her arm to reach Steven and pull him onto her lap. “We have to catch Peridot before she contacts Yellow Diamond.”

“That’s right,” Pearl nodded, patting Steven’s head. “You can feel horrible all you want back at the temple.”

With all of her passengers finally ready to go, Amethyst took off, her propeller speeding her onward across the farmland Peridot had already gotten a head start on. All the same, it didn’t take long for the purple Gem to catch up to the rampaging bot, which was in the midst of struggling to twist the communicator the proper way and failing completely, much to Peridot’s growing frustration.

“Grr, come on…” the green Gem growled to herself as her robot’s stubby claws fumbled with the communicator. “Work already, you insipid little-”

“Hey, Perisnot!” Amethyst taunted as she suddenly flew right by the green Gem. Peridot gasped in alarm as the purple Gem overtook her, Garnet and Pearl each launching their own attacks from her cockpit. The white Gem’s spear clipped the robot’s hull first, though the Gem leader’s launched gauntlets were what ended up actually taking the bot down. The blast was enough to knock the machine into a nearby power line, giving it enough of a zap to disable it entirely. As battered and broken as the robot was, it tumbled down the hill before its scattered pieces came to rest in the wide field below, including Peridot and the communicator she had been holding onto.

It took the green Gem a moment to pick herself up and regather her bearings after the crash, but as soon as she spotted the communicator lying in the grass just a few feet away, she didn’t hesitate to spring towards it. Right before she could reach it however, a sudden blast from above derailed her, knocking her back as she briefly glared up at its source.

“Well, I may *not* have hyper-sonic magnetic propulsion gun,” Ford remarked with a smirk as he spun a much smaller, simpler blaster in his grip. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t go out unprepared.”

For once, Peridot didn’t send any sort of snide remark back as she instead refocused her efforts on the communicator. At the same time, Amethyst went in low as everyone unboarded her, allowing her to resume her usual form as everyone rushed to stop the green Gem before it was too late. They all pounced on her more or less at the same time, creating an essential dogpile as they all scrambled to secure the communicator first while further destroying the robot in the process. Peridot herself only barely managed to sneak out of the wreckage, though she wasn’t as unseen as she had hoped, for only seconds later, Steven was upon her, with Mabel and Dipper following suit right after. The four of them all leapt for the fallen communicator at once, creating an uproarious struggle with no clear winners in sight.

“You’re not gonna get away with this!” Steven shouted as he tried his best to yank the communicator out of Peridot’s hands.

“Yeah!” Dipper added just as fiercely. “If you think you’re actually going to let you get in touch
with Homeworld, then you’ve got another thing coming.”

“And you’ve got another thing coming if you think you can stop me, you pesky, persistent pebbles!” Peridot snapped, trying her best to kick the kids away to no avail.

“Augh! You don’t get it, do you?!?” Mabel cried as she pulled hard against Peridot, finally letting her grief and frustration with the situation as a whole pour out. “We trusted you! We all trusted you! We all wanted you to change and be better than this, but you’re not!”

“We spent all that time bonding and hoping and caring about you!” Steven added amidst the ongoing struggle. “But it was all for nothing!”

“And that’s exactly your problem!” Peridot bristled as she finally pulled the communicator out of the kids’ reach. “Your emotions rule out reason! You waste all your time ‘caring’ and ‘trusting’ when you could be spending it actually doing important things like saving this pathetic planet! Which is why if none of you will, then I’ll make sure to do what must be done!”

None of the kids had a chance to counter this as the green Gem suddenly snapped the communicator on. The device’s surface instantly enveloped itself in a radiant yellow glow as it rose into the air, far out of anyone’s reach as Peridot laughed excitedly over her victory. “She’ll sort this out…” she grinned, more than ready to detail everything she had planned to her Diamond.

At the same time, the Gems rushed in, grabbing all three of the kids as the communicator continued to brighten. Everyone save for Peridot herself was quick to take cover out of sight behind the fallen robot as the communicator opened up, creating a holographic screen that flashed with the visage of four different colored diamonds. Peridot’s growing excitement grew practically manic as the telltale insignia faded away to what she hoped would be Yellow Diamond herself.

“This is the Yellow Diamond control room.” Instead of the Gem matriarch, another Gem entirely appeared on the other end of the line. Her coloration was unquestionably and appropriately yellow and her attire simple yet elegant all the same. However, what was most telling was her appearance, which was far too familiar for the kids in particular to not immediately pick up on, even from their hiding spot from afar.

“Is that… another Pearl?” Dipper asked, aptly dumbfounded.

“Ooo… she’s really fancy…” Mabel noted, somewhat impressed by her style.

“Who is she?” Steven asked Pearl herself, though the white Gem simply let out a harsh scoff at the question.

“Not all Pearls know each other, Steven,” she remarked rather curtly as the Yellow Pearl addressed Peridot.

“Who authorized you to make this call?” she asked, sending the green Gem a cold look of clear disapproval.

“N-no one,” Peridot answered stiffly, but truthfully. “B-but its an emergency!”

“That’s NO excuse to use the direct Diamond communication channel!” Yellow Pearl snapped harshly, only for another voice to cut into the conversation entirely.

“Pearl.”

Yellow Pearl flinched at this deeper, calmer tone, one that she instantly perked towards as she
turned to its off-screen source. “Y-yes, my Diamond?”

“Why is there someone on the Diamond Line?”

“I-I don’t know!” Yellow Pearl exclaimed. “I was just about to tell her that—”

“I’ll take it from here.” The hologram suddenly shifted position, revealing exactly who Peridot had been hoping to speak to in the first place: Yellow Diamond.

Yellow Diamond was, simply put, absolutely radiant. Her poise and posture alone told of a figure with unspoken authority and power. Her figure was astute, elegant, yet firm and lithe, clad in a simple, stately uniform that was telling of a military leader. Her hair was short and angular, her features lovely, yet sharp and dark. In fact, just about everything about her could be summed up as sharp, from her large, pointed shoulder pads, to the shimmering stone resting on the center of her chest, to even her pupils: clear perfect diamonds resting amidst bright, vibrant golden yellow. She sat casually upon a crystalline throne, the vast expanses of space stretching out through the large windows behind her as she typed away on the countless number of holographic screens before her, sparing not even a passing glance at the Peridot who had been so bold as to contact her personally.

“Y-Yellow Diamond…” Pearl whispered fearfully, her trembling hands skimming her mouth as she tucked away behind the robot’s wreckage.

“Yellow Diamond…” Garnet echoed much more coldly, glaring towards the Gem matriarch from their unseen spot.

“Yellow Diamond…” Ford finished just as bitterly, though more to himself than anyone else as he set the depicted Diamond a personal scowl of ire all his own.

Meanwhile, Steven and Mabel exchanged a stunned, yet fearful glance, not really knowing what else to expect from the Gem matriarch based on her stern, severe appearance alone. At the same time, Dipper simply stared her down unflinchingly, knowing that despite Peridot’s foolish conviction, Yellow Diamond would likely still have every ill intent against the Earth. She was still a foe, no matter what she said or what she did and that was something that no attempt at pleading or appealing would likely ever change.

But that didn’t mean Peridot wasn’t going to try all the same. “M-My Diamond!” the green Gem saluted her leader respectfully. “Peridot, reporting in.”

“Which Peridot?” Yellow Diamond asked, her tone bored as she continued on with the work in front of her.

Peridot flinched at this, suddenly remembering something she’d largely forgotten about during her time on Earth. That she wasn’t really anything special; she was just one out of countless other Peridots, a fact that had seemed to fade into the back of her mind when she was on a planet where she was apparently one of a kind. “F-Facet 2-F-5-L, Cut 5-X-G,” she reported her designation dutifully all the same. “I’m sorry to contact you this way, but all other forms of communication have been destroyed, and—”

The green Gem starkly cut herself off as Yellow Diamond simply raised a hand to silence her, her attention turned away on one of her many data screens instead. “This says you’re behind schedule on your mission to…” She trailed off before finally turning to face her underling with a cold, calculated gaze. “How is… the Earth?”

“I-it’s… full of life,” Peridot said, with a hopeful shrug.
“Organic life…” the matriarch sneered in disgust. “And where is the Jasper I assigned you? And why aren’t you calling from the ship?”

“T-the ship was… destroyed…” Peridot admitted rather sheepishly.

“By whom?” Yellow Diamond asked, her eyes narrowing.

“I-it was destroyed by…” the green Gem trailed off, sparing a brief glance at the group hiding behind her. Her eyes briefly met Steven’s first, then Mabel’s, their expressions awash with equal fear that Peridot would rat them out to her Diamond. But instead, of all things, she didn’t. “N-no one!” she vouched, electing surprise from just about everyone in the concealed group. “There was an accident… while we were landing.”

Yellow Diamond sent a brief, disgruntled glare to her underling upon hearing this, but all the same, she was quick to return her attention back to work just as before. “I’ll inform your manager of your incompetence,” she scoffed dourly. “And what is the status of the Cluster?”

“The Cluster… w-will emerge shortly…” Peridot reported halfheartedly.

“Good,” the matriarch finally smiled in clear vindication over this fact. “We’ll finally have some use out of that miserable planet. Thank you for your report, Peridot. There will be a ship heading to your location to take you to your next assignment.”

“W-wait!” Peridot interjected hastily, anxiously. “I wouldn’t have called to waste your time with a report.”

“You already have…” Yellow Diamond scowled, though she still let the green Gem continue all the same.

“No, I-I mean… I… I wanted to…” Peridot trailed off, glancing down apprehensively. She was more than ready to divulge her ideas for preserving the Earth while also making the most efficient use of its resources for Homeworld’s benefit. And yet, just before she could, she was overwhelmed by a rather unsavory rumor she couldn’t shake, especially now as she stood before the Diamond it concerned herself. Which was why, despite the thin ice she already knew she was treading on, Peridot went off on an entirely different tangent instead. “I-I wanted to ask if…” she began, making sure to pose this question as carefully as she could. “I-if you’ve ever heard of a being who goes by the name of… Bill Cipher?”

The reaction to the demon’s name alone from both the Diamond and her Pearl was instant and telling. Yellow Pearl let out a sharp, fearful gasp as she cowered back in alarm. Yellow Diamond herself turned to fully face the green Gem, her previously icy expression instead filled with an undeniably angry sense of curiosity. Likewise, the group gathered behind the robot all carried their own startled reactions to Peridot bringing Bill up at a time like this especially, but even so, they listened carefully for whatever the Diamond might have to say about him.

“Where did you hear that name?” she asked, her burning gaze practically piercing Peridot cleanly through.

“I-I…” the green Gem hesitated, fear too afraid to fully divulge her dealings with the demon to her Diamond, so she went with a much simply explanation instead. “H-here, on Earth, m-my Diamond.”

“Hm,” the matriarch mused, her manner still largely unreadable. “And what gives you the impression that I would know of such a… ‘being’, as you put it?”
“H-he... he said you... t-that the two of you... had an... alliance?”

“What?!?” Ford asked in a harsh whisper upon hearing this, the kids and the Gems all echoing his shock with startled gasps of their own.

“I-It can’t be true...” Pearl shook her head, trembling in apt terror at the very thought. “Please say it’s not...”

“Oh, did he now?” Yellow Diamond rolled her eyes, seemingly unconcerned by the green Gem possessing such knowledge. “How... amusing. Though I thought I made it quite clear to that... irksome demon that I did NOT want word of our partnership spreading to the lower ranks. But then again, listening has never been his strong suit...”

“So its true then?” Peridot asked, looking to her Diamond with immense, almost pleading dismay to hear the opposite. “Y-you really are working with him?”

“I fail to see how that information is of ANY concern to you,” Yellow Diamond countered as coldly as ever as she prepared to end the call right there and then. “Now, if that will be all then-”

“O-one more thing!” Peridot interrupted anxiously. Despite the effective confirmation of her Diamond working hand in hand with someone as dastardly and deceitful as Bill Cipher, the green Gem still believed she could make her matriarch see reason. Both in regards to the planet Earth and perhaps even in regards to what would no doubt be an ill-fated alliance with the dream demon unless someone helped her see the truth.

“What could it possibly be now?” Yellow Diamond asked, clearly exasperated.

“T-the reason I called...” the green Gem began, still quite nervous as she began to make her genuine appeal. “The real reason, wasn’t to give a report or to talk about Cipher. Instead, I... I believe we should terminate the Cluster!”

“...Why?” the matriarch asked, her quiet, yet icy voice and gaze sending shivers throughout the green Gem’s entire form.

“T-the organic geosystem creates resources unique to this world,” Peridot explained with rising hope that her Diamond would listen, even despite the matriarch’s clearly sullen expression. “We can’t sacrifice all that potential for one geo-weapon! I’d like to tell you some plans I came up with to utilize the planet without disrupting the local-”

“That’s enough,” Yellow Diamond cut her off swiftly and sternly. “I don’t care about ‘potential’ and ‘resources’.”

“W-what?” Peridot asked, taken aback by such a harsh rejection.

“I want my Cluster,” the matriarch said simply, succinctly. “And I want that planet to die. Just make that happen.”

“No!” Peridot protested, speaking before she could even think of what she was saying.

Now it was apparently Yellow Diamond’s turn to be taken aback, her sharp gaze focusing on the green Gem before her in a bitter, hostile glare. Her Pearl let out an appalled gasp at such a rebellion, but even so, the matriarch remained steady when dealing with it. “Are you questioning my authority?”

“I-I’m questioning your objectivity, m-my Diamond!” Peridot countered, offering her leader a
quick, respectful salute. One that did nothing to quell the matriarch’s rising anger.

“Well!” Yellow Pearl huffed, shocked at such brashness. Her alarm grew even more when Yellow Diamond suddenly rose from her throne, standing at her full, massive, imposing height that towered well above the green Gem who had brazenly chosen to oppose her.

“You are out of line.”

“I-I just think-”

“I am not interested in the puny thoughts of a Peridot,” Yellow Diamond continued, ignoring Peridot’s best attempts at breaking through to her.

“But I-”

“You have disrespected this channel, and my time with your presence and you would do well to-”

“But-”

“Shut your mouth!” the matriarch snapped, finally silencing the already fearful green Gem as she continued in her outraged tirade. “You have failed at every step of your mission. Your only chance to redeem yourself is to obey this simple order: you are to leave the Cluster to grow. It will tear apart the Earth, and I will take immense satisfaction in erasing that hideous rock off of our star maps once and for all! Is that CLEAR?!"

“I won’t do it!” Peridot shouted back with every ounce of courage she had in her. She had her worries before, from the moment she learned about the matriarch’s apparent alliance with Cipher himself that her judgement was questionable. But now, after everything she’d just heard, she had no doubt; Yellow Diamond didn’t want or care about what was best for the Earth like she did. The only thing she wanted was to see it destroyed, a plan that, after all the time she had spent there, all she had come to experience and see and learn there, all of the friends she had met there, Peridot refused to let come to fruition. “I can tell you with certainty that there are things on this planet worth protecting!”

Upon hearing this, Steven and Mabel couldn’t stifle a shared smile, even while all of the others continued to watch the ongoing exchange with rising alarm. Regardless of her earlier slip-up, it seemed as though Peridot really had learned something during her time on Earth after all. Many things, in fact, and she was proudly displaying all that she had learned right here and right now for her Diamond, and for everyone else, to plainly see.

Yellow Diamond, however, was far from impressed by this callous defiance. “What do YOU know about the Earth?!” she shouted viciously, but this time, Peridot did not back down. Instead, the green Gem went in with everything she had and then some as she staked her claim and solidified what side she stood on once and for all.

“Apparently more than YOU, you… CLOD!”

As poised and calm as she had been before, Yellow Diamond’s regal manner instantly broke in raw, uncontained fury upon having such a disrespectful insult hurled at her. Her palpable outrage was more than enough to shake blind terror right back into Peridot as she quickly saluted out of habit more than anything else before hanging up the call. “P-Peridot out!” she exclaimed, grabbing the communicator and instantly ending the feed. Yellow Diamond and her Pearl disappeared from sight, though there was no question that on the other end of the line, the matriarch, wherever she was, was still absolutely fuming over the measly Peridot who had somehow worked up enough
nerve to call her a clod, of all things, right to her face.

With the call over and the danger diminished, the others didn’t hesitate to emerge from hiding and head over to the green Gem’s side. Mabel and Steven were the first to embrace her in a tight, triumphant hug, both of them elated by her bravery and by the choice she had made, by all accounts, entirely on her own.

“Peridot, that was amazing!” Steven exclaimed with a delighted smile.

“Seriously, that was one of the coolest things EVER!” Mabel added, just as enthused.

“I can’t believe I just did that…” Peridot said, rather stunned by her own actions as she stared straight ahead, baffled.

“We were so wrong about being so wrong about you!” the young Gem said, more than glad to be wrong in this instance.

“I can’t believe I just did that…” Peridot repeated, still largely in a panicked daze.

“You thought you could change her mind,” Garnet said with the smallest of proud smiles.

“But Yellow D got torn down by the ‘Peri-dactyl!’” Amethyst quipped with a bright cheer.

“Uh, I know we’re all really excited about this, but don’t you guys think we should talk about the whole Bill Cipher and Yellow Diamond working together thing?” Dipper interjected with tight, anxious worry. “Because I really think we should talk about that.”

“I agree,” Ford nodded admantly, gravely. “On their own, the threat that each of them poses already can’t be understated but with Bill’s powers and Yellow Diamond’s resources combined, I don’t even want to think about what that could mean for the planet—no, the very multiverse itself!”

“Then let’s not,” Garnet said succinctly.

“W-what?” Pearl balked, confused as she shared Ford and Dipper’s understandable concern. “But Garnet, we have no idea what this heinous ‘alliance’ of theirs could mean for the Earth or for us or for-”

“There’ll be plenty of time to worry about all that later,” the Gem leader shook her head before turning back to the rather distraught green Gem. “For now, we have something to celebrate, so let’s enjoy it while it lasts.”

“Not yet we don’t…” Peridot sighed as she handed the communicator off to Pearl. “Can one of you take this?”

“Why?” Pearl asked as she took the device.

“Because it can be remotely detonated.”

A ripple of newfound alarm spread through the group at this, especially as the communicator began flashing a bright shade of yellow. “W-why didn’t you tell us that earlier?!” Dipper asked Peridot, who had simply resigned herself to lying on the ground, forlorn.

“How do we stop it?!” Pearl asked, holding the device as far away from her as possible.

“Just get rid of it!” Garnet ordered hastily.
“Amethyst, here!” the white Gem tossed it down to the purple Gem beside her.

“What am I supposed to do with it?!” she shouted frantically before Steven quickly grabbed it and securely bubbled it. Still, Garnet didn’t take any chances with it as she took said bubble and sent it flying far and high into the dawn sky with as much force as she could muster. Sure enough, the communicator exploded safely, creating nothing more than a quickly-dying firework that left nothing behind in its wake.

“Woo!” Mabel cheered excitedly. “Well, that’s one way to start a Saturday morning!”

“I’ll say…” Pearl agreed, letting out an anxious breath.

“I thought I could reason with her…” Peridot spoke up from her spot on the ground, still shaken over what she’d just done.

“Yeah, you made her really mad,” Amethyst chuckled, amused.

“And then you insulted her to her face,” Pearl added with a small smile.

“Which… was pretty amazing,” Dipper added, forcing a bit of a much-needed laugh, even despite the extenuating circumstances. “And honestly kind of hilarious. Even for you.”

"Do you know what this means, Peri?” Mabel asked with a wide, delighted smile. “We’re all best friends again! I knew you wouldn’t let us down when it really mattered and you didn’t! I’m so proud of you!”

“We all are!” Steven chimed in warmly. “And you know what else this means?”

“And I’m a traitor to my Homeworld?” Peridot asked morosely.

“Nope!” Steven’s grin widened as he embraced the green Gem once more. “You’re a Crystal Gem!”

“Whether you like it or not,” Garnet added with a wry smirk. The others all got a good laugh out of this, though Peridot herself simply let out a loud, long, mortified groan. Of all the things that could have happened, the green Gem had never once expected herself to actually become a part of the team of rouges and rebels who had stranded her on Earth to begin with. And yet, here she was, a Crystal Gem all the same, just as Garnet had said, whether she liked it or not.

And if Peridot was perfectly honest with herself, deep down, she truly did like it after all.

The receiving end of the Diamond Line shattered into thousands of iridescent pieces as it struck the far wall of the opulent chamber. Yellow Pearl squeaked out a gasp, trembling in fear of her Diamond’s infamous temper as she clung close to the massive throne beside her, watching as the matriarch vetted her immense fury without a single beat of hesitation.

“How DARE that insignificant little traitor try to make a fool out of ME?!” Yellow Diamond shouted hotly, her gloved hands clenched into tight fists as she paced around her spacious chamber. “Why, I haven’t seen such blatant, despicable disrespect and defiance from such a lowly Gem in thousands of years!”

“M-My Diamond?” Yellow Pearl spoke up with an unsteady, wavering smile. “I-if it’s any
Her attempt at a consolation was, however, completely ignored as Yellow Diamond continued her uproarious monologue. "If I didn’t have much better things to do with my time, I’d go down to that disgusting speck of a world and shatter that insolent whelp myself! Fortunately though…” the matriarch finally broke into a small, dark grin, even though it was clear she was still quite unhinged in her remaining fury. “The Cluster will take care of that minor aggravation for me…”

“I-it most certainly will, my Diamond!” Yellow Pearl piped up, only to be largely looked over by her matriarch once more.

“But even so, the audacity of that pathetic Peridot is absolutely appalling!” she scoffed bitterly. “To even claim that the Earth bears us any sort of use now, after everything it cost us! Its completely absurd! I don’t even want to think of what Blue would say if she heard such a ludicrous idea! Or even worse, what White would say…”

Yellow Pearl choked out a small, frightened whimper at this, though her fear only grew tenfold as a sudden, instantly recognizable voice let out a callous chuckle right beside her. “Ha! Yellow sure is HILARIOUS when she’s ticked off, huh, Canary?”

“AH!” Yellow Pearl cried, flinching away from the dream demon floating alongside her the moment she spotted him. Her surprise was quickly replaced with aggravated frustration, however, to the point that she didn’t even notice color swiftly drain out of the throne room altogether. “Augh! You again…”

“Great to see you too, Canary!” Bill quipped as brightly as ever, patting the Pearl on her pointed hair condescendingly. “It’s been WAY too long since I’ve caught up with you and Yellow!”

“Not nearly long enough, if you ask me…” Yellow Pearl grumbled sourly, though she did breathe a small sigh of relief as the demon turned his attention away from her and to her angry matriarch instead.

“Y-ellow, Yellow!” Bill greeted cheerfully as he suddenly appeared right in front of the incensed Diamond’s face. “How’s it goin’? I’m not interrupting anything important, am I?”

“YOU!” Yellow Diamond scowled, glaring the demon down harshly. “What in the stars do you think you’re doing, going around and haphazardly divulging confidential plans and classified arrangements to the most commonplace members of my court?!”

“Yeesh, Yellow! Better simmer down over there, otherwise ya might just end up SHATTERING yourself on accident!” Bill joked with a rather mocking chuckle. “Remind you of anyone you used to know?”

Yellow Diamond let out a disgusted, appalled scoff at this, her rage growing even more as she tried to swat the demon clean out of the air on her fury alone. “How dare you even mention what happened to her in such a way, you despicable-”

“ANYWAY,” Bill interjected quickly, hovering high and calm out of the furious Diamond’s range. “I wouldn’t worry about ol’ Greenie if I we you. In case you haven’t noticed, she’s really not the
brightest Gem in the case.

“You mean the Peridot?” Yellow Diamond calmed somewhat, raising an eyebrow up at the demon. “Well, I certainly can’t argue with that, given her foolish choice to rebel against me.”

“Speaking of rebels…” Bill began leadingly. “You really don’t think Greenie came up with that whole ‘let’s save the Earth’ idea on her own, do you? Especially since you sent her there to check up on the very thing that’s supposed to blow it all to oblivion in the first place? Sorta makes you think that maybe… just maybe… someone might have… inspired her to act up like that, don’t ya think?”

“…What are you saying?” Yellow Diamond asked, narrowing her eyes at the demon curiously.

“I’m saying…” Bill continued, shrinking himself down so he could take a seat on the matriarch’s shoulder pad. “That all those pesky rebels you, Blue, and White thought you got rid of way back when… aren’t as ‘gone’ as you’d like to think.”

“WHAT?!” the matriarch’s stark, stunned shout echoed throughout the chamber. “Show me! Now!”

“If you say so, Yellow…” Bill almost cheerfully complied, gliding before the Diamond and using his flat form to present images of Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl alike to her. “Not a ton of those Crystal Chumps are still kicking, but the ones that are sure are a pain in the equilateral sides, if ya know what I mean. Plus, they’ve even picked up a handful of human pals to help them out from time to time,” Bill continued, showing off each of the Pines as well. “As if they couldn’t get any MORE annoying, huh?”

“Hmph,” Yellow Diamond scoffed, seemingly unconcerned by the lot she had just seen. “A few mere straggling Off-Colors and their pathetic human pets are nothing. The Cluster will wipe them and everything else on that miserable rock out soon enough.”

“Yeah, suuuure it will,” Bill remarked with a flippant wave of his hand. “But here’s the kicker, Yellow. Take a look at who ELSE is still down there, having a GRAND old time spending the past several centuries celebrating ‘her’ victory over you-know-who…”

The matriarch gasped, her eyes wide as she noticed the image of a lone pink gemstone hovering over the demon’s open palm. A gemstone, that for all its infamy across all of Homeworld, she would have recognized anywhere. “Rose Quartz…”

“You got it!” Bill quipped, snapping the gemstone away. “Everybody’s FAVORITE Quartz is still alive and well, unlike a certain… ‘little sis’ of yours she went and wiped out of existence just to save some dumb old planet and a bunch of dumb old humans. Seems like a pretty raw deal that she got to survive when poor little Pinky didn’t… huh, Yellow?”

Yellow Diamond’s former fury was nothing compared to the absolute raw, wrath she was showing now. Her fists were so tight they were shaking, sparks of bright electricity bursting all over her form as her anger consumed her from the inside out. “A mercifully short end brought about by the Cluster is far too good for that… that shatterer…” she seethed, her voice quiet, but the fury in it as clear as day. “Cipher! I have another request for you!”

“Oh, do you now?” Bill asked, almost gleefully curious. “Well, lay it on me, Yellow! I’m sure I’d LOVE to hear it!”

“Bring me Rose Quartz before the Cluster destroys the Earth,” Yellow Diamond ordered coldly,
viciously. “I want to be the one to shatter her *myself*, just like she shattered—” The matriarch cut herself off, her expression filling with pain that she couldn’t even bear to speak to, though she was quick to shake it away. “J-just… just bring her to me. Whatever it takes…”

“You know, normally I’d be all for that kind of hellbent revenge, Yellow,” Bill remarked calmly, casually almost. “But I think I’ve got an even *better* idea for ya. Me and my pals have a *little* bit of… unfinished business to take care of down there on Earth in the not-too-far-off future. What do you say to the idea of joining us when we get down there—heck, make a whole trip of it if ya want, complete with your snazzy armada and everything!? That way, you can grind Quartzy up into a bunch of pink stardust the moment you see her, right in front of what’s left of her little army on her own doomed planet, just like ya want! What do you think? Sounds like a winner, just like *ALL* of my plans do, right?”

“Hm…” A small, vindictive smile filled the Diamond’s features at this. “Yes… The crushing defeat she deserves on the very planet she *thought* she won from us…. I *do* like the sound of that quite a bit…”

“So… *I take it you’re in then*?” Bill asked knowingly, stretching a blue, flaming hand out to seal the deal.

Yellow Diamond’s sadistic smile deepened at this, more than ready to exact the vengeance she had been craving for over 5,000 years now. “Yes, I am,” she firmly, readily agreed, returning the demon’s handshake to solidify their latest treacherous plan. “Rose Quartz’s years of running and hiding are over. Now, it’s *her* turn to face the very same fate she brought upon Pink…”

“Oh, Yellow…” Bill laughed more to himself that to the matriarch, knowing the truth that she didn’t and *exactly* how he could use it all to his advantage in his long, ongoing game. A game that was, by all accounts, *very* close to reaching its ultimate end. “You have NO idea…”
Chapter 68: Log Date 7 15 2

Chapter Summary

In which Peridot is a lovable dork. And that's it that's the whole chapter.

Chapter Notes

Dang this took way too long for a chapter this short. Either way its a lot of fun and very cute. So I hope that'll make up for it! Enjoy! (keyword is CAMP PINING HEARTS)

VHQ TPZGP’F G ZYRGKAIIZV ETNKR ZV FE
JH EWCT ID LB, AB SBGH KH KGE
MCS VBE VZZ LODX LQ PQGXLB
EKNERUEWUS AU XN FPR RPOEJ BL QR ZDI

“Log date 7 15 2… I can’t believe I just did that!” Peridot’s calm report instantly turn to hysterics as she gripped her tablet tightly, her recording app taking in her every word all the while. Everyone had only just arrived back at the barn, still somewhat shaken by what they had just learned during the green Gem’s surprising conversation with her Diamond. But no one was more shaken than Peridot herself as she expressed her shock over her own open rebellion against her now former matriarch in the only way she knew how. “I disobeyed my orders and went against Yellow Diamond’s wishes! I’m a traitorous clod! I never want to think about what I’ve done again!”

Despite this proclamation, Peridot frantically tapped away at the tablet until it began playing back her most recent recording on a constant loop. “I’m a traitorous clod! I’m a traitorous clod!”

Oddly enough, this elicited a rather unhinged chuckle from the green Gem, one that only grew louder and more excited as she recalled exactly what she had done. “A-and I called Yellow Diamond a clod right to her face!” No more than a single beat later, Peridot collapsed to her knees, letting out a devastated whimper as she shook her head remorsefully. “I called Yellow Diamond a clod… right to her face…”

Though the green Gem had hardly paid them any mind, Steven and Mabel had been standing on the sidelines, watching Peridot’s entire breakdown as it unfolded before them. As frantic as the green Gem currently was, neither of them really knew much they could say or do to try and calm her down. Then again, that same sort of frenzy seemed to hover over everyone else’s heads at the moment like a shroud as well. Ford and the Gems were all congregated right outside the barn, discussing in hushed, fearful whispers the frightening fact they now faced: that Bill and Yellow Diamond really did have some sort of sinister alliance. An alliance that, by all accounts, none of them knew anything of other than the fact that it did indeed exist, though for what purpose, they were all still completely in the dark about. Certainly, it was a gravely worried thought, one that they’d all likely have to confront sooner or later. But for now, while everyone else fretted over the future, Steven and Mabel opted to fret over the present—or more specifically, over Peridot—
“Uh, Peridot?” Steven finally spoke up as the green Gem continued hunching over her tablet. “Are you gonna be ok?”

“…No!” Peridot quipped, looking back at the pair with a blatantly deranged smile.

“Aw, don’t worry, Peri,” Mabel soothed, pulling the blubbering green Gem into a tight embrace. “Everything’s gonna work out, you’ll see! Especially since you’re part of the best squad ever now!”

“The Despicable Traitors Against Their Homeworld Squad?” Peridot asked, her lip quivering all the while.

“No, silly!” Mabel chuckled before quickly recanting. “Well, actually, you’re not totally wrong. But anyway, you’re part of the Crystal Gems plus Pines Squad! Name’s still pending, but either way, your family now! Isn’t that exciting?”

“More like terrifying!” the green Gem countered, lightly shoving Mabel away. “You don’t understand! I’m protecting a planet I was once trying to destroy! I used to follow every order, every rule. Now, I’m a traitor. A rebel! A Crystal Gem!”

“…Yeah, that’s kinda what I just said…” Mabel noted as she exchanged a glance with Steven.

“Yeesh, and I thought we were all freaking out,” Dipper cut in as he stepped into the barn from outside. For the most part, he had largely just been listening in on the anxious discussion ongoing outside, though even despite his own immense concern over the matter, he had still decided to spare a moment to check in on the others amidst it. “I can’t say I know a ton about existential crises, but it sure does look like you’re having one, Peridot.”

“Hey! I am not having a so-called ‘existential crisis’!” Peridot huffed, offended. “I’m merely questioning my suddenly changed overall purpose in the grand scheme of reality!” At this, the green Gem set her recording app to repeat itself again, creating a chorus of ‘clod!’ that showed real signs of stopping as Peridot paraded it around manically.

“Uh… well, at least your tablet seems to be helping,” Steven noted.

“No, its not! It’s a chronicle of my descent into madness!” Peridot snapped, tossing the tablet away from her. Fortunately, instead of hitting the ground, Garnet happened to catch it as she stepped into the barn right on time.

“You dropped this,” the Gem leader said, offering the device back to its owner.

“G-get it away from me!” Peridot quickly deflected, cowering behind Garnet. “Give it to them!” she pointed to the trio of kids. “Return madness to its source!”

“Uh, technically Pacifica was the one who gave you that tablet, not us,” Dipper pointed out, crossing his arms.

“Uh, technically Pacifica was the one who gave you that tablet, not us,” Dipper pointed out, crossing his arms.

“It doesn’t matter!” the green Gem argued. “I don’t want anything more to do with it!”

“Are you sure, Peridot?” Steven asked as Garnet handed the tablet off to him. “I mean, you really, really like this thing.”

“Whatever! It’s yours now!” the green Gem refuted wildly. “Yours, not mine, not mine! Yours!
“Oof, Peri, you really gotta take a chill pill,” Mabel mused, hands on her hips. “You know what always calms me down when I’m feeling stressed? Knitting!” She smiled brightly as she held up her rather complicated sewing kit, complete with countless balls of yarn and a vast collection of knitting needles.

“Good idea, Mabel, but I think I might just have a better one,” Garnet said as she gently hoisted the green Gem into the air to halt her frenzy. “Let’s calm down.”

“O-Okay…” Peridot finally stilled as she let the Gem leader carry her out of the barn for a moment of peace. “So am I gonna have to wear a star? Where am I gonna put the star?!?”

“Well, there’s the newest Crystal Gem for you,” Dipper said with a bit of a sardonic smirk. “Hopefully Garnet will actually be able to get her to mellow out, I don’t know how much more ‘Peri-Panicking’ I can take.”

“Eh, I’m sure she’ll be fine eventually,” Steven mused, glancing outside, where Peridot sat alongside Garnet in some sort of unknown conversation. “Weird… they seem to be getting along well. I wonder when that happened…”

“Why don’t we find out?” Mabel grinned down at the tablet in Steven’s hands. “Peri’s been using that app she downloaded to record all of her log thingies. Its like a diary we can listen to!”

“Uh, you know reading—or I guess in this case, listening to other people’s diaries isn’t exactly… a good thing to do, right, Mabel?” Dipper asked knowingly.

“Yeah, we probably shouldn’t violate Peridot’s privacy like that…” Steven frowned before sparing another glance back at the tablet. All three of the kids took a brief pause, each of them contemplating the matter silently before the young Gem voiced what they were all thinking. “Then again… she did give this to us, so…”

“So what are we waiting for!?” Mabel cut in with an eager grin. Likewise, Dipper leaned in, admittedly quite curious about these unheard logs himself. “Steven, press that play button!”

The young Gem did exactly that, all three of the kids poising to listen in on the green Gem’s own telling of her time on Earth. A tale that would no doubt reveal just how far she’d come, from Homeworld to here, and everything in between.

The story of how Peridot became a Crystal Gem.

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“Log Date 7 11 2.”

“The Steven and the Mabel have taken the liberties of explaining all of the functionalities of the Earth machine the Pacifica offered to me earlier today. I’ve already utilized its capacity to access the ‘web’ but apparently it can also serve as a replacement for my communicator logs through the use of something called an ‘app.’”

“Oh, here’s a good one!” Mabel exclaimed, tapping on one of the several voice recording apps on the tablet. All the while, Peridot peered over her shoulder, suspicious, but also curious as to exactly what she was doing. “So we’ll just download this real quick and then you should be all set up.”
“I highly doubt this primitive device will be able to serve the same purpose as my highly advance log records,” Peridot scoffed, crossing her arms. “But I suppose I appreciate the intel you have to offer, the Mabel.”

“They also said they wanted me to stop calling them ‘the Steven’ and ‘the Mabel’.”

“Um, Peridot?” Steven interjected, somewhat bemused. “You don’t have to keep putting a ‘the’ in front of our names like that. I’m just ‘Steven’, and Mabel’s just ‘Mabel, ok?’

“I said I’ll call them whatever I want.”

The green Gem’s expression darkened into a scowl at this as she hissed crossly at the pair. “I’ll call you whatever I want!”

“He told me that was rude.”

“Rude!” Steven countered her outburst with a disapproving wave of his finger.

Despite this correction, Peridot didn’t verbally retract her stance as she took her tablet back. Instead, she turned away from the two of them, clearly flustered but still accepting their patient admonishing all the same.

“I guess I’ll call them… Steven and Mabel.”

“The organic life forms of Earth have fascinating traits despite their poor choice of residence.”

Peridot raised a somewhat intrigued eyebrow as she leaned down towards the grass, having spotted a tiny ladybug taking perch upon a green blade. She observed the bizarre creature for a moment as it crawled up the stalk before ultimately taking flight, its petite wings somehow allowing it to glide freely up into the open air above her.

“I wonder if all of them have flight capabilities…”

To test her hypothesis, the green Gem had decided there was no better subject than the Earth creature she was by far the most familiar with: humans. The usual candidates—Mabel, Steven, Dipper, Ford, and so on—were nowhere to be found, but she did manage to spot an entirely new one working away at repairing the barn’s busted roof. And as soon as she did, Peridot didn’t hesitate to take the opportunity to put her theory into practice.

Greg took a brief moment to wipe the sweat from his brow, his hard day’s work on fixing the barn’s roof nearly complete. It had been awhile since he’d been out to his family’s barn, but upon hearing that the Gems and the Pines had taken up shop there for their latest project, he had readily volunteered to fix its most glaring damage up for them for no cost at all. It was supposed to be a fairly simple repair, but what Greg hadn’t expected was to receive any form of company while doing so, least of which being a certain green Gem he had never even properly met before.

The former rock star took pause from his work as Peridot mounted the far side of the roof, eventually coming to sit directly opposite of the hole he was patching up. “Oh, you must be Peridot,” Greg greeted with a small, friendly smile. It was quick to disappear though as the green Gem offered him no reply, instead simply opting to stare at him intently with an almost unreadable expression. Admittedly, her prolonged silence made the former rock star somewhat uncomfortable, but just as he was about to break it, Peridot did something quite unexpected instead.
She shoved him off the roof.

Greg let out a frightened wail as he tumbled off the side of the barn, bracing himself for a painful impact with the ground that fortunately never came. Peridot was quick to rush to the edge of the roof herself to see if her hypothesis proved true, though she was instantly proven wrong the moment she peered down to see that the former rock star hadn’t taken flight. Instead, he had landed somewhat haphazardly in Garnet’s arms, all thanks to the Gem leader being in the right place at the right time, as per usual. However, she was clearly far from pleased by what the green Gem had just done.

“Peridot!” she scolded, glaring up at the roof.

“What do you want?” Peridot asked sourly from her higher perch.

“You can’t just shove someone off a roof!” the Gem leader said, her tone properly harsh.

“Why not?”

“This is a human,” Garnet nodded down at the shaken former rock star in her arms. “He isn’t like us. He’s fragile and soft.”

“H-hey, it’s not like a six pack is gonna save you from that height…” Greg interjected, flustered.

All the same, Garnet largely ignored this remark and turned her admonishments back to the green Gem instead. “You could have seriously hurt him!”

“Well, how was I supposed to know that?!” Peridot snapped, quite cross with being corrected in such a way.

“Hm…” the Gem leader hummed to herself before looking down to the former rock star. “Greg, you’ll have to excuse Peridot. She’s far from Homeworld and she still has a lot to learn about our planet.”

“No, I don’t!”

“Yes, you do,” Garnet responded to Peridot’s heated protest evenly.

“Uh… hey, yeah!” Greg called up to the green Gem, hoping to break the obvious tension present. “Don’t worry about it! Wouldn’t be the first time my life was put in mortal danger after all.”

Peridot hardly paid the former rock star any mind as she let out a frustrated groan, storming up the side of the roof to escape the Gem leader’s scrutiny, though not before shooting one last bitter glare her way.

“In conclusion, not all organic beings can fly. Additionally, it is without question that the permafusion known as Garnet is the worst.”

“Today, I have been assigned a ‘chore’—cleaning duty. Like I’m the Pearl! These clumps don’t know how lucky they are to have me…”

It was, at least as far as Peridot assumed, a simple task. Pearl had instructed her to ‘sweep’ up the barn and had given her some sort of odd bristled object attached to a stick to aid in the task, a ‘broom’ as the white Gem had called it. While it was far from the green Gem to listen to the orders
of a Gem as lowly as a Pearl of all things, she had begrudgingly agreed, largely to avoid any further aggravating whining from her captors. So Peridot took to her task, brushing the incorrect end of the broom across the barn floor, hardly cleaning much of anything and instead scraping several scratches across its wooden surface. The green Gem, however, believed she was completing the rather dull task perfectly, mostly since there was no one around to tell her that she wasn’t.

“Although while doing ‘chore’, I did happen upon a container containing many... ‘shirts’...”

Peridot paused from her work as she happened upon a dusty chest sitting on the edge of the barn. Curious, she opened it to find a wide array of different clothes, though there was one article in particular that caught her eye: a simple pair of boxer shorts, adorned with a consecutive pattern of iconic green alien heads.

“Imagine—appearance modifiers that aren’t melded to your body! How ridiculous! How superfluous! How... fascinating...”

Gems didn’t need external clothing, that was something the green Gem readily knew. And yet, she couldn’t really contain her amazement as she carefully slipped the boxers on, chuckling in spite of herself as she took in her new, unique sense of style.

“Nice shorts.”

Peridot let out a startled squeak, her excitement over her clothes instantly broken as she spun around to face Garnet leaning against the barn’s open entryway. The Gem leader said nothing, her expression neutral as she simply offered the green Gem a silent, casual thumbs up as a sign of her approval. Approval that, as far as Peridot was concerned, she wanted no parts of.

“Ah! H-how did these get here!?” the green Gem panicked, swiftly tearing the shorts clean off her body. Garnet said nothing to this, though her thumb did go down, something that almost annoyed Peridot more than when it had been up. And the worst part was, she hadn’t the faintest idea of why that might be.

“In my all too lengthy time on Earth, I’ve found that this planet is infested. Infested with humans. And unfortunately for me, they seem to frequently swarm around those Crystal Clods like a small, flight-enabled insect to... some sort of blindly bright light source.”

Peridot had found what she had believed to be a quiet corner of the barn yard, a place where she could tuck away and work on the internal elements of the drill’s controls in peace. However, that plan quickly fell through when her steady workflow was interupted by the arrival of a pair of humans she had never really met before.

“Whoa! Check it out, Wendy!” Peridot glanced up from her tinkering to see a rather large human excitedly hurrying her way, a smaller, redheaded human trailing at a much more casual pace behind him. “Its that new Gem I was telling you about. I think her name’s... Peridude or somethin’ like that.”

“Close,” Wendy remarked, crossing her arms with a wry smirk. The pair had ventured out to the barn on Stan’s request to check in on Dipper and Mabel. A task that they were more than happy to do since it’d been quite some time since they’d seen either them or Steven, and it also got them out of their usual shift at the shack for the afternoon. “The kids told us her name’s Peridot, remember?”

“Oh right, right, Peridot,” Soos corrected himself with a nod. “But you gotta admit, Peridude would
be a pretty cool name, dude.”

“Um, do I know either of you?” Peridot interjected, sending a glower to both of them.

“Oh, its me, Soos, dude!” Soos offered the green Gem a friendly grin. “We sorta met that one time Mr. Pines used you as the shack’s newest exhibit. Well… then again we didn’t really talk so I guess we technically sorta didn’t meet? Or maybe we did since Mr. Pines had me make t-shirts with your face on it? Or maybe we didn’t since-“

“Oooooook, Soos, don’t try to overthink it,” Wendy interjected before turning back to Peridot. “So, Dipper, Mabel, and Steven told us you’re the new Gem on earth. How are you digging it so far?”

“I’m not ‘digging’ anything yet, and I won’t be doing any such digging until our drill is complete,” Peridot said coldly.

“Uh… that’s not what I-”

“Oh yeah, that’s right! You guys are building that drill thing!” Soos exclaimed, thoroughly fascinated. “Mind showing us a quick peek of it, dude? I bet it’s totally futuristic and sciencey and rad!”

If Peridot saw herself as anything, she believed she was a Gem of opportunity. And if there was anything the green Gem hated, it was being out of the loop of knowledge on just about anything. Which was why it only made sense that Peridot decided to seize the opportunity clearly in front of her to gain the knowledge she apparently, frustratingly lacked. Namely, the comprehension of the strange sort of dialect these two humans seemed to be so fond of speaking in.

“Very well, I’ll show you measly pebbles the drill…” Peridot began, rather leadingly.

“Wait… ‘pebbles’?” Wendy repeated, confused and slightly offended.

“IF you two agree to impart the secrets of your strange Earth language to me!” the green Gem finished with her usual brand of boldness.

“Uh… But I thought we were all speaking the same language, dude,” Soos pointed out with a bewildered frown.

“N-no!” Peridot hastily countered. “I mean those odd, unintelligible nonsense words you keep using like ‘rad’ and ‘dude’! What do they mean? What kind of strange human code doers it stand for? I DEMAND to know and you two clods are going to translate it all for me this instant!”

Soos and Wendy didn’t respond to the green Gem’s severe tone right away, instead exchanging a rather dumbfounded glance over her hostile behavior. “Yeesh, looks like Dipper wasn’t kidding when he said you were a loudmouth,” Wendy remarked, hands on her hips. “Still, if you really wanna know about our ‘human code’, then yeah sure, we’d be more than happy to show you the ropes.”

“We will?” Soos asked, somewhat surprised.

“Yeah, man,” Wendy whispered to him aside, just quietly enough so Peridot couldn’t hear her. “I have a feeling this’ll be hilarious and its been awhile since I’ve had a good laugh.”

“Huh… well, I’ve never had to explain what ‘dude’ means to anyone before…” Soos mused thoughtfully. “But I’ve always wanted to give it a try!”
“Ah, yes, the mysterious ‘dude’,” Peridot cut in. “Let’s start with that one! What does it stand for? Is it a formal title used to regard superiors? Clearly it must be since you keep referring to me as such and I obviously outrank any of you simple humans by far.”

“Oh, uh…. Nah, dude’s really not that deep, dude,” Soos shrugged. “I just use it whenever I’m talking to my friends. Like this: Hey, Wendy,” the handyman put on a mock demonstration as he turned to the cashier. “What’s up, dude?”

“Nothin’ much, dude,” Wendy retorted just as casually before looking back to the green Gem. “Think you got the hang of it. Cause if not—”

“No!” Peridot cut in, flustered. “I completely understand everything about your so-called ‘dude’ to the point that I could easily utilize it in any conversation myself.”

“Great!” Soos grinned amicably. “Then why don’t you give it a try, dude?”

“Er…. Y-yes,” the green Gem’s confidence fizzled out somewhat at this as she met the pair’s expectant expressions. “This… is an… ideal example of the use of the word ‘dude’… dude.”

“Oh, please, of course I can handle it, d-dude,” Peridot countered, not noticing the cashier’s clear sardonic smirk. “I will not let a simple human term of endearment become my undoing, dude! In fact, you might as well consider me to be the master of the dudes, DUDE!”

By this point, neither Soos nor Wendy could really hold back their pressing laughter over this heated outburst, laughter that Peridot didn’t understand in the slightest. Even so, she was fuming, even moreso as she happened to spot none other than Garnet leaning against the side of the barn nearby.

“Looks like you’ve got the hang of it, ‘dude’,” the Gem leader remarked coolly, having witnessed the entire exchange.

“Oh would you get out of here!?” Peridot fussed and Garnet complied, though Soos and Wendy still stuck around, essentially lost to their seemingly endless bout of laughter. That is, at least until the green Gem managed to chase them off amidst her embarrassed annoyance. “And the same goes for you two, dudes!”

“Log date 7 12 2. Today makes the 14th earth rotation since my… capture.”

“Happy two-week canniversary!” Steven interrupted Peridot’s welding with a bright proclamation, coupled with the pair of paint cans he was presenting to her. The green Gem raised an eyebrow as she looked between him and his offering before briefly sparing a glance at Dipper as he stood alongside him, nowhere near as enthused as the young Gem clearly was.

“Cylinders?” Peridot asked, referring to the small cans in Steven’s arms.

Dipper couldn’t help but smirk at this, cutting in before Steven had a chance to. “Actually, Peridot, I don’t know if you’ve heard this, but around here, they’re called pyramids.”
“Ha! Nice try,” the green Gem retorted, hands on her hips. “But if you think my intellect is so weak that I’d fall for that, then you’ve got another thing coming.” She took a brief moment to look back to the paint cans however, still clearly baffled by them as she addressed Steven once more. “But seriously, what are they?”

“They’re stilts,” Steven smiled. “You tie them on your feet and they make you taller. I tried to spruce them up a bit. I dunno what it is about flames, but they just make everything cooler.”

“Why are you giving me these?” Peridot asked, still confused.

“Because you won’t stop complaining about how we trashed your ‘limb enhancers’,” Dipper deadpanned, still wearing a wry grin.

“And because we want you to feel nice!” Steven added much more sincerely. “That’s what gifts are for. You give them to your friends to show them you care. And they go ‘wow, thanks’. Like this.” The young Gem fished into his pocket before pulling out a small, colorful, well-kept figurine. “Here you go, Dipper; one of my favorite G.U.Y.S of all time: Ninja Guy! He’s a gift, just for you!”

Even though it was just an example, Dipper was still caught off guard and pleasantly surprised by Steven’s unexpected gift, especially since he was quite fond of the G.U.Y.S figurines himself. “Wow… Thanks, Steven!” he accepted the present warmly, Steven returning his excited smile.

“You’re welcome!” the young Gem chimed before glancing back at Peridot. “See what we mean?”

“Hmph!” the green Gem huffed, far from impressed by the shmaltzy exchange. “As if I’d stoop so low as to tie Earth trash to my body!” Peridot growled, swiping the paint cans away from Steven. “Leave me! And take your ‘G.U.Y.S’ with you! Go! Go! Go!”

Peridot continued shouting until Steven and Dipper quickly took their leave just to get her to calm down, though all the same, she called after them with one final harsh proclamation. “And wow, THANKS!”

“Why, yes, Pearl, I did get taller! How correct of you to notice!” Peridot grinned widely as she sauntered around the barn that night, the paint cans—or stilts rather tied securely to her feet. Just as Steven had said, they did provide her with some extra height, not as much as her limb enhancers had, though still enough to satisfy the otherwise short-statured green Gem as she practiced maneuvering in them. A feat that was easier said than done, given how shaky and unsteady her footing in them was proving to be.

“Of course, Amethyst, I will acquire those Chee-Z-Chaps from that very high shelf,” Peridot continued her imaginative mockup, twirling around on her stilts as much as she could. “Ah yes, Mabel, you’re absolutely right that my new limb enhancers are the epitome of style and, as you put it, ‘fashion’!”

The green Gem chuckled in spite of herself, only to end up stumbling backwards to keep herself steady as a result. “Haha! They even function in reverse!” Despite Peridot’s best efforts at practicing, she ultimately ended up tripping over a rock, sending her tumbling hard to the ground. Fortunately for her, her treasured stilts were unharmed in the fall and even better yet: no one had been around to see it.
Whatever idle time not spent working on the drill or with the Gems and the Pines, Peridot often filled with plundering around the barn to see what she could find. Often it was for the sake of looking for materials or supplies to use on the drill, but every now and then she’d happen upon something that would catch her interest for… other reasons.

Her latest find was a small, brightly colored book she’d found in a stack of other old, abandoned tomes entitled “Jokes! How to Make People Laugh Around You Instead of Feel Bad.”

“Jokes, huh?” Peridot muttered to herself as she cracked the book open. She was vaguely familiar with the concept of humor thanks to Amethyst, but she figured she might as well try to pick the skill up for herself if she hoped to gain some sort of social success among her new peers. Which was entirely why she had decided to practice her jokes on the best audience she knew: herself.

“‘Why did the chicken cross the road?’” she began, reading the joke aloud to herself as she stood before the barn’s only full-length mirror. “‘The chicken wanted to get to the other side of the road!'”

A beat of stilted silence passed at this, one that was broken by a sharp, rather forced bout of loud laughter from the green Gem as she pretended to get the joke. “Ha! Ahahahah! …What’s a chicken?”

“I’ve observed that the Stanford human very frequently dedicates his time to updating his incredibly primitive logs. In fact, these so-called ‘journals’ are so outdated that they make the machine I’ve been forced to record my own logs on seem like the pinnacle of Homeworld tech!”

Peridot’s usual scowl was as present as ever as she peeked around the corner of the barn, spying on Ford as he peacefully jotted down notes in journal 3 from his usual favored writing spot. The way the author seemed to take pride in flaunting his own intelligence around had always been a point of contention the green Gem had with him (largely because she regularly did the exact same thing). She could hardly care less about his apparent research, and yet…

“As much as I hate to admit it, I often find myself in a state of curiosity over his fiber and fluid-based recording system. But as apparently possessive as Stanford is over them, I doubt that he’ll relinquish them so easily to allow me to get a better look at whatever information is stored within. Which is why I’ve devised a brilliant plan to claim one of them as my own!”

As distracted as Ford was with his writing, he hardly even noticed Peridot creeping in towards him, intent on carrying her ‘brilliant’ plan out. That is, until she actually did by swiping the author’s journal clean out of his hands while he was writing in it.

“W-what in the—Peridot!” Ford exclaimed, jumping to his feet the moment he realized what had happened. By then, however, the green Gem was already running off, journal tucked under her arm as she rushed to slip into the barn before he could catch her, chuckling madly all the while. Ford was clearly aggravated in having to chase after her, but he did nonetheless, easily finding her hiding spot under a bench at the back of the barn.

“May I ask what in the name of the Ellistis 5 Nebula you think you’re doing?” Ford asked, hands on his hips as he stood over her.

“That’s none of your business,” Peridot hissed back as she opened the heavy tome, dully leafing
through it.

“T’d certainly say it is my business since that’s my journal you happened to abscond with.”

“Well, if you must know,” the green Gem glared up at him. “I’m researching your research, if that’s quite alright with you.”

“It isn’t,” Ford said flatly, holding out his hand. “Now, if you’d please kindly give it back, I’d greatly appreciate it.”

“Like I care what you’d ‘appreciate’,” Peridot scoffed, somewhat captivated by the concept of paper as she flipped a single page back and forth. “Ooo… are the logs contained in this collection… removable?”

“No, they are NOT!” Ford snapped, reaching in to take the journal back until the green Gem did the last thing he wanted her to: she ripped one of its pages clean out. “…Really? You really just did that?”

“Did what?” Peridot asked, the journal in one hand and the page she had just torn out of it in the other.

“Peridot…” Ford sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose in apt annoyance. “Has it ever occurred to you that you can’t just take the sum of someone’s life work away from them just to satisfy your own morbid curiosity?”

“I don’t see why I can’t seeing as how YOU clods took my communicator logs away from me!” Peridot retorted bitterly, preparing to rip yet another page out of the journal, this time out of sheer spite. “Now back off, or lose even more of yours!”

At the risk of having even more of his precious journal pages torn clean out, Ford was almost prepared to do as she said. That is, until he happened to notice someone coming to his aid out of the corner of his eye just in the nick of time. “Actually… I don’t think that’s much of a problem I’ll have to worry about.”

“Oh really?” Peridot raised an eyebrow at his suddenly smug grin. “And why is that?”

“Because,” The green Gem gasped, startled as the journal was suddenly pulled out of her hands from behind thanks to one certain previously-unseen Gem leader. “Those pages aren’t yours to rip out.”

“Hey!” Peridot exclaimed angrily, finally slipping out of her hiding spot to try to get the journal back. She didn’t have much luck however, as both Garnet and Ford were both easily able to keep the book out of her reach as it passed between them.

“Ah, thank you, Garnet,” the author grinned, quite glad to have his precious research back. “Fortunately, it seems as though she didn’t do too much damage. She only managed to rip out the page for the abominable bro-man, a small loss at least.”

Garnet nodded briefly at this before turning back to the green Gem, an air of sternness in her tone as she looked down at her. “Peridot. Remember what we told you about taking things without asking for them.”

“Pfft, no,” Peridot scoffed, crossing her arms. “And I don’t care either.”

“Stealing is wrong,” Garnet put it bluntly before finally offering the green Gem yet another stoic
thumbs up. “Just keep that in mind and you’ll be golden.”

“Why would I want to be golden?” Peridot asked, confused. “I’m already Peridot!”

Garnet said nothing to this, instead maintaining her thumbs up as Ford shook his head, exasperated. “Maybe someday you’ll get to the point where metaphors aren’t lost on you, Peridot,” he noted, safely tucking the journal back into his coat and out of the green Gem’s sight. “But that day certainly isn’t today.”

“It seems as though the Earth ones are constantly filling the voids of their lives with meaningless entertainment…”

“You’re totally gonna love this, Peri!” Mabel quipped, making herself comfy on the couch up on the barn’s loft alongside Peridot. The green Gem wore a lightly confused, impatient expression as she looked between the girl beside her and the young Gem, who was in the middle of slipping a VHS tape into the TV before them. “If you thought coffee was good, then you haven’t seen anything yet!”

“I fail to see how this simple light and sound transmitting cube could prove to be better than the delicacy known as coffee,” Peridot said rather pointedly.

“Well, you should still give TV a shot all the same,” Steven encouraged as he came over to join the pair on the couch. “Besides, I have a feeling this’ll be right up your alley.”

“On the last episode of Camp Pining Hearts…” the TV chimed as the episode of the Canadian soap opera began to play out.

“I don’t care if you’re on the yellow team, Percy! We can make this work!”

“It’s a colour war, Paulette. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“Ah! So romantic! And tragic!” Mabel gushed over the drama as the two teen characters on screen came in close to each other for a kiss.

“What is this strange ritual?” Peridot asked, watching in bewilderment as the couple drew in ever closer to the point that their lips were practically touching.

“Um… w-well,” Steven began, rather uncomfortable. He glanced over at Mabel, hoping to get her help in explaining this, though she seemed far too captivated by the emotional saga that was Camp Pining Hearts to really be of much assistance. “T-that’s-”

“Are they attempting fusion?” the green Gem cut in, even more confused as Percy and Paulette finally kissed, which they of course drew out as long as possible, much to Mabel’s elated delight.

“N-no,” the young Gem said, deeply flustered. “W-well, my dad told me… uh, during… certain stages of your life-”

“How could anyone indulge in this?!?” Peridot interrupted once more, apparently disgusted by this shameless display. “Baseless drivel! I’ll have no part in it!”
“Hour 78 of Camp Pining Hearts…”

“It’s a colour war, Paulette. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?” Peridot repeated along with Percy, having memorized the entire script from beginning to end. For what seemed like ages, the green Gem had been sitting, her face only a few mere inches away from the TV screen, completely engrossed in the unfolding drama before her. Drama that, even despite her initial distain towards it, she couldn’t resist, no matter how hard she tried.

“Uh… you’ve been up here for a few days…” Steven called as him, Dipper, and Mabel climbed up onto the loft to check on the green Gem, who had, by all accounts, been oddly missing all that time. “Is everything ok?”

“I’ve just been…” Peridot trailed off, looking between the kids and the TV briefly. “Watching your previously recorded entertainment.”

“For three days straight?” Dipper asked, rather incredulous.

“Aw, see, Peri? I told you you’d love CPH!” Mabel exclaimed happily. “It’s a classic.”

“Wait…” Steven interjected upon stealing another glance back at the TV. “Is that… the same episode from the other day?”

“…There’s more than one?”

“Oh, Peri, you have no idea!” Mabel quickly took a seat next to the baffled green Gem. “CPH is a several season saga of love, competition, and gorgeous Canadian teens, like Pierre! He’s just dreamy…”

“Yes, I’m well aware of how… adept Pierre is,” Peridot huffed, swiping up a piece of paper sitting next to her. “That’s exactly why I made this!”

“Is that… a picture?” Steven asked, having a hard time making out the detailed graph.

“Picture?” Peridot countered. “This is no mere picture, Steven! It’s a complex chart cataloguing the compatible characteristics between campers.”

“Wait…” Dipper cut in before letting out a small snicker of realization. “No way. Peridot, did you seriously make-”

“A shipping chart?!” Mabel gasped in awe as she looked over the chart for herself. “Oh, Peri, you really are a superfan! Quick! Tell me who your OTP is!”

“…I have no idea what any of that means,” Peridot concluded stanchly before she took her chart back. “But what I do know is that somehow the rejects at Camp Clod fail to realize the superior pair that is Pierre and Percy.”

“Well, that’s because Paulette likes Percy,” Steven pointed out.

“Paulette?” the green Gem scoffed harshly. “Ha! Paulette has no place in the camp’s hierarchy! Now, Pierre, Pierre is a brute! He laid waste to the three legged races! Pierre and Percy present the strongest battle formations! They’d destroy the entire camp!”

“Ooo! And now that you’d mention it, they’d make a super cute couple too!” Mabel said with a bright smile. “How did I never see it before? You’re a real ‘Pining Hearts Pioneer’, Peri!”
“Yes, I absolutely am!” Peridot proclaimed with a proud smile. “It’s about time somebody noted my mastery of your feebly-constructed human media!”

“You’ve literally only watched one episode out of one show, calm down,” Dipper remarked, deadpan.

“And… you got all of that out of one episode?” Steven asked, somewhat impressed by that fact.

“It’s… subtext, Steven,” the green Gem shrugged. “Allow me to explain.”

“Please, don’t,” Dipper said dryly, though of course, Peridot did anyway.

“Percy and Pierre are on the yellow team, and also-”

“Ugh…” Steven groaned, exasperated as the tablet’s recording began playing out Peridot’s infamously lengthy rant on the show. “I remember this part…”

“Yeesh, me too,” Dipper remarked sourly. “Only Peridot could go on for something that not a single person could ever care about for so long?”

“Hey, I cared about it!” Mabel protested, reaching for the tablet. “Let’s listen carefully to it! She makes some really good points in here!”

“NO!” Steven and Dipper quickly protested, rushing to fast forward past the green Gem’s diatribe entirely.

And what a diatribe it was. In deep, dramatic detail, Peridot went over her intricately crafted thesis on all things Camp Pining Hearts to her lukewarm audience. The kids made themselves comfy on the couch as the green Gem explain everything she had heard and seen from the single episode of the show she had watched countless times over. Her immense knowledge of the half hour segment had given her a strong opinion that Percy and Pierre were the ideal team out of all of the campers based on all the evidence she had gathered. And as passionate as she was on the subject, it took her several hours to divulge that evidence, to the point that Steven and Dipper quickly lost interest, though Mabel was thoroughly engrossed in the discussion of the show that she was rather fond of herself. But even then, her enjoyment of it seemed to pale in comparison to Peridot’s, who refused to even really let her get a word or question in edgewise amidst her seemingly endless, several hour long rant. At some point, Garnet joined the kids in listening in on it, though even so, Peridot hardly paid her or the kids (who had all long since fallen asleep as she went on and on) any mind as she brought her explanation to its bold conclusion.

“And that is why Percy and Pierre are objectively the best for each other!” she finished, clearly on an excited high from her intense explanation.

The green Gem’s verve was hardly shared however, since all three of the kids were still completely asleep, essentially piled on top of each other on their spots on the couch. Garnet on the other hand, also offered no reaction, that is, outside of her usual, simple, silent thumbs up. A thumbs up that was more than enough to annoy Peridot to the point that she ripped up her shipping chart entirely in a heated rage.
“Out of all of the humans I’ve been forced to contend with, the Ma—or just Mabel is by far the most agreeable out of all of them. And also the most well-versed in the more significant elements of this planet’s culture and social practices, such as today’s lesson in the adhesive item commonly known as ‘stickers’.”

“What are you doing?” Peridot asked, watching impatiently as Mabel flipped through some sort of colorful book.

“Oh, hiya, Peri!” Mabel greeted the green Gem as brightly as she always did. “I’m just sorting out my Sticktionary, see?” She held up the surprisingly thick book with a cover reading “Big Book of Stickers” in bold, bright letters.

“Stickers?” Peridot questioned dully.

“Whaaaa?!” Mabel gasped, dumbfounded as she looked up at the green Gem. “You don’t know what stickers are?! What the heck is even going on on Homeworld for you not to know about stickers?! Well, don’t worry.” She patted the spot on the ground next to her. “Mabel’s got you covered with everything you need to know, as usual.”

While normally, Peridot would have declined the invitation, she really didn’t have anything better to do at the moment, which was why she begrudging took a seat next to the girl to listen to her lesson. “Throughout history, stickers have been the backbone of many great civilizations,” Mabel began dramatically as she flipped through her own collection.

“No, they haven’t,” Dipper called from his spot on the other side of the barn, having overheard the conversation amidst his casual reading.

“The ancient Greeks used leeches for stickers!” Mabel continued, largely ignoring her brother. “The more stickers you had, the cooler you were!”

“Nope, not true.”

“The ancient Aztecs’ chest skull was the modern equivalent to today’s ‘orange you happy, mon?’” Mabel grinned, holding up said orange sticker.

“Yes,” Dipper interjected once more, exasperated. “Aztec war paint was exactly like a rasta orange. Mabel, have you ever read a history book?”

“Oh, will you be quiet already?!” Peridot huffed before Mabel could make any sort of counters herself. “Don’t you know an in-progress orientation on what’s apparently one of Earth’s most significant status symbols when you see one? I’m trying to listen to it!”

“…You know, on second thought, this ‘sticker’ lesson is probably exactly on your level, Peridot,” Dipper noted dryly as he took his book and left the pair in peace.

“So anyway, where were we before we were so rudely interrupted?” Mabel asked, glancing down to her book once more. “Oh yeah! My Stictionary! So stickers fall into several distinct categories: puffy stickers… googly eye stickers… bumper stickers, scratch and sniff stickers, sniff and touch, touch and taste, and last but not least, price stickers! You can get these free at the store!”

“This is all very… fascinating,” Peridot deadpanned. “But what exactly is the point of these… ‘stickers’?”
“What’s the point?” Mabel frowned, baffled by such a question. “Peri, the ‘point’ is that they’re amazing! Wearing a sticker shows that you’ve got personality, that you’re special and unique. Here, I’ll show you what I mean.” It didn’t take long for Mabel to search through her collection to find the perfect sticker for the green Gem, which she gladly positioned over the diamond on Peridot’s uniform. “There ya go! It’s a turtle; he’s green, just like you are, Peri!”

“Ooooo…” Peridot mused, genuinely amazed by the simple sticker. “I understand everything now; these ‘stickers’ are some sort of Earth status symbol! The more you have, the more important you are, just like you said!”

“Uh… well, I don’t know if that’s-”

“Which is why I must have more of them!” Peridot took the sticker book into her own hands, eagerly flipping through it. “I need to demonstrate to all I encounter my elevated significance when compared to everyone else! And based on what you told me, these stickers are the best way to do that!”

“Whoa, hold the phone, Peri,” Mabel interjected, taking her book back. “I’m more than happy to let you share in on all of the sticker fun, but you can’t just take them from me. If you really want more, all you gotta do is ask nicely! You remember that super-special magic word I taught you?”

“Uh… yes…” Peridot groaned, annoyed as she complied. “Please?”

“Yep, you got it!” Mabel grinned as she brightly offered the green Gem a sunshine sticker. “And here you go, another sticker to show everyone-”

“To show everyone that I’m the absolute best of the best!” Peridot exclaimed proudly.

“No,” Mabel shook her head. “To show that you think manners are number one!” To prove her point, she gave the green Gem yet another sticker, this time in the shape of a #1. This was only the beginning, however, as the next hour or so turned into a seemingly endless sticker exchanges. For every time Peridot remembered to say please in response to just about anything, Mabel readily awarded her with yet another sticker, each of them completely colorful and unique. The green Gem was more than excited to earn them to, placing each of them, dispensing them all over her body to the point that she was more or less covered in them in almost no time at all, much to her immense satisfaction.

“And here’s a special glittery sticker,” Mabel handed the green Gem what had to have been her 3-th sticker. “It’s a pirate ship!”

“Ah yes, a ship,” the green Gem smirked as she slapped the sticker over her shoulder. “Certainly this one will signify my skill when it comes to piloting all manner of interplanetary vessels.”

“Uh, sure,” Mabel shrugged, amused. She perked up even more, however, upon spotting Garnet enter the barn a moment later. “Oh! Hi, Garnet! I’m glad you’re here; I’ve been saving up this super special, color-it-yourself sticker for you! Bam!” She held up a heart sticker, half colored red and half colored blue. “It’s supposed to represent Ruby and Sapphire. Pretty neat, huh?”

“Very,” Garnet smiled, taking the sticker and proudly displaying it on her chest. “Thank you, Mabel.”

“You’re welcome!”

“Wha-hey!” Peridot squeaked angrily after watching this exchange. “What in the name of the Diamonds is this?! I have to go through an endless round of pleasantries to get even just one
sticker, but you’re willing to hand them off to the fusion for just walking in? How is that fair?!”

“Aw, Peri,” Mabel tried to reason. “That’s not-”

“It certainly can’t be because she’s of a higher rank than I am,” Peridot continued her rant. “After all, the very thought of that is just absurd.”

“No, Peri, I just-”

“It couldn’t—NO,” Peridot gasped, suddenly mortified. “D-don’t tell me… its because you like her more than me?!”

“W-what?”

“And after everything we’ve been through,” the green Gem lamented. “I’ve never in my entire existence felt so betrayed. And after I finally allowed myself to become your new ‘fiend’ after weeks of you begging for it and everything!”

“You mean ‘friend’, ” Garnet corrected.

“Yeah, that too!”

“Oh, Peri, I don’t think you understand,” Mabel said with a good-natured smile. “I like both you and Garnet!”

“Then why did she get a special sticker?”

“Well… uh… just… because, I guess?” Mabel shrugged. “There really isn’t that much more to it. Sorry?”

“Ugh!” Peridot groaned loudly, quickly tearing every single sticker off of her body. “Then all of these are meaningless!” And with that, the green Gem stormed off, though before even Garnet or Mabel could react to her frustration, she hurried back, though only for the purpose of scooping up her discarded stickers off the floor. “I’m still keeping these though. Especially the turtle. Don’t ask why.”

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“Log Date 7 13 2. Progress on the drill is going optimal. Surprisingly though, I have a few complaints on the work ethic of-”

“Heeeeeeey!” Peridot jumped, startled to the point that she interrupted her own log, She was quick to send an annoyed glance over at Amethyst, or rather, at Amethyst who was currently shapeshifted into Lion beside her.

“Amethyst, really,” Pearl huffed, looking over from her and Ford’s welding work on the drill. “This is no time to be fooling around.”

“Aw, c’mon, P,” Amethyst teased, still taking on the form of the pink beast. “I’m just trying to lion the mood.” She paused for a beat to let her joke sink in, seeing that it had been apparently lost on both Pearl and Ford before she continued it. “Lion around.”

While Pearl merely grumbled at the rather lousy pun, Ford shook his head over it, hardly amused. “Good to see Amethyst’s… unique sense of humor hasn’t changed over the past 30 years,” he noted dryly before getting back to work.
“Do you always use shapeshifting like this?” Peridot asked Amethyst, her tone clearly critical.

“You mean to be really cool?” Amethyst smirked, changing her form from Lion’s to the green Gem’s. “Pretty much.”

“But its such a-

“-Significant use of energy when compared to the output!” Amethyst and Peridot both said in near unison as the result of the purple Gem’s playful mocking.

“…What was that?” the green Gem asked, confused and slightly irritated.

“I’ve been practicing my ‘Peri’-phrasing,” Amethyst grinned proudly. “Pretty impressive in my opinion, but its hard to beat the original.”

By this point, Peridot was clearly flustered by the purple Gem’s teasing, though she managed to play it off with a small, light chuckle all the same. “So… can you shapeshift into anything?”

“Sure,” Amethyst reverted back into her original form with a daring smile. “Got a request?”

Peridot, in fact, did have a request, one that, Amethyst immediately agreed to the moment she heard it.

“Bawk! Bawk! I’m a chicken!” the purple Gem laughed rowdily, running around the barnyard in the form of, of course, a wild chicken. The others watched on as she scrambled about, all of them mildly amused, though none more than Peridot as she cackled loudly from the realization.

“Ha! I get the joke now!”

“Yes, well, at least she isn’t lion around anymore,” Pearl joked, laughing lightly as she did.

“…Hm. Seems as though Pearl’s sense of humor hasn’t changed in 30 years either…” Ford noted to himself as he continued tinkering away at the drill.

Peridot, on the other hand, did her best to acknowledge the white Gem’s quip with something of a forced chuckle, even if she didn’t really find it that funny. Still, as she had come to learn during her time on Earth, it was often the thought that counted more than anything else.

“Pearl really tries for some reason and I can appreciate that. Stanford is… tolerable, for a human at least. Amethyst’s company is entertaining as well. But the fused one…”

The green Gem’s fake laughter quickly died down as she stole a brief glance over at Garnet. The Gem leader said nothing, keeping her relaxed stance against the barn as she simply sent her yet another silent, solitary thumbs up.

“Eludes me…”

Sure enough, the drill was just about done. In fact, the only thing that really needed to be done on it from a general standpoint was to attach the drill itself, something that both Pearl and Amethyst were aware of as they looked over the sizable injector head before them.

“Ok, we can add more support as we go,” Pearl noted thoughtfully. “But for now, we just have to pick it up and put it on top.”
“No sweat,” Amethyst smirked, shapeshifting into the muscle-bound Purple Puma. “Let’s do this!”

“You’ve got the right idea, but we might want to be a bit more careful.”

“Gotta,” the purple Gem obliged, shifting back as she extended a cordial hand out to Pearl. “Shall we?”

The white Gem warmly agreed, allowing Amethyst to pull her into a brief, yet surprisingly graceful dance. And that dance was more than enough to bring the two Gems together into Opal without a single hitch whatsoever.

Peridot could do little more than gawk when she saw the familiar fusion, appalled that two incredibly dissimilar Gems could just combine so easily over something so small. She was even more dumbfounded as she watched the fusion swiftly scoop up the drill head and position it correctly for the finishing touches to be made on it.

“That looks great,” Garnet called over to Opal from her spot near the barn. “Let’s take a break.”

As if Peridot couldn’t get even more baffled by the fusion’s ongoing presence, she was even more confused when Opal stuck around even after the Gem leader’s call for said break. In fact, she was so frustrated with just how backwards everything seemed to be here that she found she couldn’t contain that frustration any longer.

“Alright, I’m at my limit!” Peridot growled as she stormed over to Garnet petulantly.

“Evening, Peridot,” the Gem leader greeted as coolly as ever.

“Explain to me, fusion!” the green Gem shouted back. “Explain to me how you Crystal Clods can just go around fusing all willy-nilly like this! The ‘Stepper’ was bad enough, but then there was the ‘Maven’ and the ‘Dipevebel’, not to mention that… thing,” she sneered over at Opal afar in the distance, still happily, harmoniously fused despite the fact that her work was over. “And don’t even get me started on you. I can at least make sense of your existence if it’s for a functional purpose. But you’re not using your combined size and strength to do anything!”

“I’m doing something.”

“And what’s that?”

“Stargazing,” Garnet smiled, the glimmering stars above reflecting against her visor.

Peridot let out a disgusted, disgruntled groan. “You can do that alone.”

“Don’t want to.”

The green Gem scoffed once more, still completely baffled by just how callous and carefree the Gem leader was about something as touchy and taboo as fusion. Oddly enough, however, Garnet didn’t seem to mind her bitter manner, instead silently tapping the empty spot on the bale of hay beside her with the unspoken invitation for her to sit down. Peridot was more than ready to turn her offer down, but ultimately, she relented, sighing as she slipped up onto the hay alongside the Gem leader.

“You can see Homeworld’s galaxy from here,” Garnet began, nodding towards the night sky.

“…You’re right…” Peridot’s eyes widened as she spotted the distant cluster of twinkling stars, so seemingly close, yet so painfully far.
“We’re very different,” the Gem leader noted, smiling over at the green Gem softly, kindly. “I appreciate that.”

“R-really?” Peridot asked, confused. “Even after… what I just said about you and fusion?”

“Peridot,” Garnet’s tone remained calm and even as her smile faded somewhat. “I think a big part of why fusion frustrates you so much is because you don’t understand it. Or rather, Homeworld wouldn’t let you understand what it could _really_ be.”

“Pfft, like I’d even _want_ to understand it,” the green Gem glanced away, coldly. “I think I’ve _gotten_ more than my fair share when it comes to fusion thanks to…” She trailed off, almost not finishing her thought entirely before she shuddered visibly, still completely averting the Gem leader’s gaze. “Pyrite…”

“Pyrite _wasn’t_ a fusion,” Garnet countered, her expression darkening somewhat.

“Uh… y-yes they were?” Peridot frowned. “They were also a complete _disaster_, one I still can’t believe I let myself be a part of! Every time I so much as close my eyes its like I can still hear _his_ sickening laughter rattling around inside my gem as he ripped away control of _my_ form right out from under me! And the worst part of it all was I _let_ him do it! I let him in and _I_ let that… that _abomination_ Pyrite exist in the first place!”

“Even if you did, its still not your fault,” Garnet suddenly interrupted the green Gem’s bout of immense regret. “You’re definitely not the first to be tricked by Bill. Pearl, Amethyst, and even Ford and I can all attest to that. He has a way of making you think that his way is best, when in reality… everything he does is for his own twisted gain and no one else’s.”

“… _Now_ you’re telling me…” Peridot muttered, pulling her legs tightly against her chest.

Garnet paused for a moment, easily telling that the green Gem was still hardly comforted by the haunted look in her eyes alone. Which was why she decided to take an entirely different route in reassuring her instead. “Your first ‘fusion’ may not have been what a fusion _should_ have been,” she mused thoughtfully, empathetically. “But that doesn’t mean you can’t still see what it’s supposed to be like. If you _really_ want to understand what _real_ fusion is, I could show you.”

“…What do you mean?” Peridot asked, unable to deny her own intrigued curiosity.

“Let’s fuse.”

“Oh my stars!” the green Gem gasped, falling off the hay bale entirely upon hearing this.

“Heh, I get it,” Garnet grinned, extending a hand to help her up off the ground. “You’re not ready. That’s fair. I can’t blame you, especially after what Bill put you through. Another time then.”

“N-no!” Peridot shook her head fervently, determined to prove that she could do this. That whatever lingering terror and dread Pyrite had caused for her didn’t define her even still. “No, just… just give me a sec!”

Garnet complied, creating a space for them to dance in as Peridot rushed back into the barn to get ready. When she emerged, she stumbled out on the ‘stilts’ Steven had given her, hoping that the extra height would help her measure up to the Gem leader’s taller stature. Even still, she was rather nervous, all things conserved, as she teetered over to take Garnet’s hand so their dance could truly begin.

“Get ready,” the Gem leader encouraged, easily pulling her in close. For the briefest of moments,
Peridot thought that, as Garnet began to spin her out, that she could do this. That she could fuse and become something more, something better than Pyrite could have ever hoped to be.

But then, in that split second, the fear and doubt all rushed right back in. What if it didn’t work? What if it did? What if fusion, regardless of who it was with, was still just as bad for her as it had been with Bill? What if, with Garnet or anyone else for that matter, it was better than she could have ever imagined? Those, and about a million other ‘what ifs’ dashed through her mind faster than she could keep up with them. And, as overwhelmed by both the countless risks and possibilities as she was, it was no wonder that Peridot ultimately ended up breaking apart from Garnet altogether, far before they even had a chance to fuse.

“N-no, no, no, no, no!” the green Gem stumbled back, clearly anxious and upset. “I-I… I can’t do it…”

Despite the bitter disappointment Peridot was feeling, Garnet merely answered it with a warm, supportive smile. “That’s fine! Peridot, I’m proud of you.”

“Why?!” Peridot huffed, more confused than ever at just how accepting the Gem leader seemed to be of her blatant failure.

“Because you made an effort to understand me,” Garnet said. “Even when it was difficult for you to do so.”

“But I still don’t understand you!” the green Gem groaned, exasperated. “Why are you fused all the time?!”

Garnet took a brief moment to think that this, before offering her answer in a way that Peridot would be sure to understand. “I’m Percy and Pierre.”

Just like that, every missing piece for Peridot clicked right into place. And at long, long last she finally understood exactly what Garnet was and why. Just as she had said of Percy and Pierre, they were, as bizarre as it might be by Homeworld’s standards, the perfect match. “Ohhh….”

“Ok… go!”

“Log date… seven fourteen two.”

Steven, Dipper, and Mabel all gasped, mutually surprised to hear Garnet’s voice joining in on Peridot’s usually singular recordings. Still, even despite the Gem leader’s attempt to start the log, the green Gem was quick to jump in to correct her.

“No, you say it seven one four two! Ugh… Log date, 7 14 2. I have attempted a fusion with the fusion Garnet. I had hoped to gain a better understanding of fusion; Instead, I got a better understanding of Garnet.”

The kids couldn’t help but share a small smile upon hearing this, knowing that this near-final log, just like all the rest they had heard, was by and large a testament to just how far the green Gem had come. For certainly, there had been a time when the only reaction she had towards Garnet, towards any of them really, was scorn and disdain and little else. But now, where there had once been callous cruelty, there now stood genuine respect, respect that Peridot had gained towards each of them all on her own. And that, along with her bold stand against her former Diamond, was something the young trio couldn’t help but be proud of.
“Wait, keep it on a moment,” Garnet suddenly spoke up before the most recent recording could end. “Steven, Dipper, Mabel, you probably shouldn’t have listened to Peridot’s logs, but I know your shared curiosity comes from a place of caring. Either way, you should give her tablet back to her now. She’s going to want to keep it.”

“Wait… what?”

Surprised as they were by the Gem leader’s very accurate foretelling, the kids were even more surprised to see Peridot and Garnet returned to the barn. The green Gem’s former frenzy had finally been quelled, replaced with a calm sort of resignation over her new lot as a Crystal Gem, a calm that had come about in no small part thanks to the Gem leader’s easy reassurances.

“Here, Peridot,” Steven handed the tablet back over to the green Gem with a smile. “You can take this back.”

“Yeah, consider it as a ‘welcome to the family’ gift!” Mabel chimed in happily.

“Mabel, it was already hers to begin with,” Dipper pointed out, amused. “Still, we probably should apologize for listening to all of your logs and everything, so… yeah.”

“Wow, thanks,” Peridot deadpanned as she reclaimed her tablet. She paused, however, noticing as Steven, Mabel, and even Dipper followed suit after Garnet, all four of them offering her cheery smiles and encouraging thumbs up. And, even despite whatever lingered of her dread in turning away and breaking free from everything she had used to know to embrace a life, believes, and teammates she had once stood against but now couldn’t imagine living without, it was a thumbs up that she finally not only accepted, but returned.
Chapter 69: Crash Site Omega

Chapter Summary

In which Ford, McGucket, and the Gems go on an adventure, Rose is secretive (what else is new), and Ford is way too curious for his own damn good.

Chapter Notes

Heyo another late update! Ah well, this one's still pretty fun (as most original chapters are, though this is based on some stuff from journal 3 so that's exciting). Either way, I hope you like it! (keyword is OMEGA)

KTIT GSYW GRFUZKD GA PUNU MKU
TVQC RETF E YHWB FKHWZH HEZAA
G SSOVKT YQTZ FCD CKAFE ST EBP
YTCCHIXER NC ONHDIVIR RVOEBPW

With the drill finally finished as it was, no one saw too much of a reason to put off using it for too much longer. Especially considering they were on something of a tight time constraint when it came to dealing with the problem it was created to subdue. Still, before sending the machine on its maiden voyage through the surface of the Earth, pretty much everyone had mutually agreed on preforming a few final tests on it first. Given their close involvement with the technical side of the drill, this was a task that Peridot, Pearl, and Ford in particular had volunteered to undertake. To further ensure the drill’s soundness and stability was up to par, the trio had invited McGucket to come over to the barn to help them with their checks, given that he was largely responsible for creating the machine’s blueprints in the first place. For the most part, their tests all went off without any hitches, and save for a few minor quick tweaks and fixes here and there, the group soon enough decided that the drill was finally ready to plunge through the depths of the Earth to rid it of the threat the Cluster posed once and for all.

But that was a feat for tomorrow. For tonight, everyone had decided to take the rare opportunity to relax and rest up for the daunting task ahead of them instead. The Gems, kids, and scientists alike had all gathered around a strong, roaring campfire, the drill proudly reflecting the flames as it sat positioned nearby. True, they all had plenty to fret and worry about, from their no doubt dangerous trek down to the Cluster in just a few hours, to the dreadful alliance between a certain demon and a certain Diamond they still knew so very little about. But for just one night, they had all mutually agreed to let those fearful thoughts go and simply take some time to revel in their successful project and enjoy each other’s company, in the hopes that they’d have even more time to do so once the Cluster was no more.

A round of amused laughter arose from the group around the fire, largely as a result of Peridot’s first attempt at trying to roast a marshmallow over the open flames. Of course, no one had warned the green Gem to not shove the treat into her mouth while it was still on fire, resulting in a panic that was more than entertaining for everyone watching on.
“Gah…” Peridot let out a sigh of relief as she finally managed to cool down. “Why is it that every edible object on Earth is so… scalding hot?”

“Aw, Peri, clearly you’ve never had ice cream before,” Mabel remarked, still chuckling. “It’ll change everything you thought you knew about Earth food, trust me.”

“…But that doesn’t make any sense,” the green Gem frowned, confused. “Ice is a solid object. It can’t be ‘creamed’!”

Of course, this observation only elicited another bout of laughter from the rest of the group, much to Peridot’s continued bafflement. Even so, the subject was soon changed by Steven as he glanced over at the drill with a small, content smile.

“We actually did it,” he said, looking to the others warmly. “We built a drill, all on our own!”

“Well, we couldn’t have done it without my technological expertise,” Peridot proclaimed somewhat haughtily. She recanted somewhat, however, upon noticing some of the rather critical glances being sent her way. “And without Pearl’s surprisingly invaluable assistance.”

“And without Ford’s immense knowledge of advanced machinery,” Pearl added pointedly.

“Or without Fiddleford’s impressive engineering experience,” Ford finished, sending his old partner a knowing smile.

“Aw shucks,” McGucket scratched at his beard humbly. “We all pitched in to get this here dohicky up n’ runnin’. Its something every one of ya’ll should be plumb proud of.”

“You’re darn right I’m proud,” Amethyst smirked, reclining back in her seat. “I helped lift a ton of old junk around to help get that sucker built. Better be worth it.”

“We’ll find out tomorrow,” Garnet remarked, vague as ever.

“W-well, even if it doesn’t work-”

“Which it needs to, otherwise we’re all DOOMED!” Peridot interrupted Steven dramatically.

“Thanks for the reminder, Peridot,” Dipper deadpanned lightly. “Its not like that thought hasn’t been looming over our heads for the past several days now.”

“Hmph, well if its not then it certainly should be,” the green Gem retorted, not following his clear sarcasm. “Otherwise, what was the point of any of this?”

“…Even if it doesn’t work, which hopefully, it does,” Steven picked up where he had left off. “It was still a lot of fun to work together to build it. Even if we did run into a few… bumps along the way.”

“Yeah, like when you guys beat the snot out of each other in giant robots to decide who’s in charge,” Amethyst grinned, putting her fists up playfully.

“Or when Dipper had to go ask his girlfriend for help to get that shiny titan’s ore stuff,” Mabel teased, elbowing her brother wryly.

“Mabel, for the last time, Pacifica is not my girlfriend!” Dipper huffed defensively.

“Not yet anyway…” Garnet muttered with a small grin, though no one really heard her.
“Well, regardless of a few setbacks, at least this time, we didn’t have to resort to getting parts for
the drill from Crash Site O-” Pearl cut herself off before she could continue, particularly upon
seeing the wide eyed glances her teammates, Ford, and McGucket were sending her way. Glances
that were more than enough to get her to change her tune entirely. “O-oh nothing! Never mind! Did
someone say something about a crash site? Please, there’s nothing like that anywhere near here, I
can assure you!”

“Niiiice, P,” Amethyst scoffed, amused. “Real subtle, just like always.”

“Crash site?” Dipper asked, instantly curious. “What kind of crash site? And what did you mean
about getting parts from it?”

“Is it a car crash?” Mabel asked, equally intrigued. “A bus crash? A blimp crash?! Oh, maybe it’s a
big boat crash, just like in that movie where the boats hits an ice burg and the dreamy guy dies at
the end. Augh! I can never get through that one without crying!”

“Neither can I!” Steven added just as emotionally.

“Ok, so can we get back to this whole crash site thing?” Dipper interjected, still intent to know
more. “Please?”

The adults among the group all exchanged something of an apprehensive glance, as if they were all
in on a secret they weren’t entirely sure they wanted to divulge. Which, by most accounts, was
actually quite close to the truth of the matter. However, when they finally did make the unspoken
decision to break the seal on this secret, Ford was ultimately the one to do it, albeit not in the way
any of the kids were hoping for.

“The ‘crash site’ Pearl was referring to is… properly known as Crash Site Omega,” the author
began, treading the topic carefully. “Or at least, that’s what I personally decided to call it years
ago. And as for what it is…. Well… that’s… confidential.”

A unified groan of disappointment arose from all three of the kids, and even Peridot, who had
gotten rather invested in the mysterious matter herself. “Oh, come on!” the green Gem whined
petulantly. “You can’t just bring up something with a self-important name like ‘Crash Site Omega’
and then not tell any of us what it is! That just isn’t fair!”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’m totally with Peridot on this one,” Dipper agreed, crossing
his arms. “I thought there weren’t supposed to be anymore secrets between any of us, so why are
you guys still keeping this one?”

“That’s simple,” Garnet spoke up calmly. “If you kids actually knew what and where Crash Site
Omega really was, then there’s no doubt you’d all try to go there yourselves. And believe me when
I say its far too dangerous for any of you to try to go alone.”

“Whoa, so its gotta be something really cool then!” Mabel gasped, fascinated. “All of the super-
dangerous places we end up going to usually are!”

“Yeah, its pretty cool,” Amethyst remarked casually.

“Amethyst!” Pearl hissed at the purple Gem through her teeth.

“What? It is.”

“W-well, even if it is cool, I’m afraid you kids don’t need to know anything more about it,” Ford
concluded succinctly. “At least not right now.”
Once again, the kids all unanimously deflated at this, clearly dejected by this barring of such potentially interesting information. Even so, Ford and the Gems were firm in their resolve to keep the knowledge of Crash Site Omega and anything pertaining to it to themselves. McGucket, on the other hand, clearly had quite a bit more sympathy towards the kids’ shared sense of disappointment, even if he did understand just as much as the others did that withholding the truth was for their own wellbeing and safety. Which was why he was the first to make a concentrated effort in trying to make up for it somehow.

“Well, gee…” the inventor frowned knowingly. “I sure do hate to see you kids wearin’ such sour faces. Y’know, maybe we can’t tell ya’ll much about Crash Site Omega itself… but I don’t see why we can’t tell ya about the rip-roarin’ adventure all of us had the first time Stanford and the others all dragged me out there.”

“Oh! Yes, I… suppose there’s no harm in telling you kids about that,” Pearl said thoughtfully. “Just as long as we don’t divulge… too many details.”

“Yeah, sure I mean, it’s a pretty fun story anyway,” Amethyst shrugged. “Ya know, outside of the several times where we almost died!”

“Oh, come now!” Ford exclaimed, disgruntled. “We didn’t inch close to death that many times on that expedition. Especially when compared to some of our… other endeavors back then.”

“Hey, hey!” Mabel interrupted, raising her hand enthusiastically. “We wanna know about how you guys almost died! Right, guys?”

“Yeah!” Steven chimed in excitedly. “Well, ok, maybe less about the whole dying part and more about your adventure. It sounds like it was a lot of fun!”

“Yeah, sure I guess that works,” Dipper added somewhat halfheartedly before muttering the rest of his statement. “Though telling us what Crash Site Omega really is would be way better…”

“Well, for now, this will just have to suffice,” the author said, taking in a deep, leveling breath before beginning the harrowing tale. “It was over thirty years ago. The Gems and I were just starting to conceptualize our plans for the portal, and Fiddleford had only arrived just a few days prior to lend us a helping hand on the project…”

1981

Ford could scarcely remember a time in his life when he had been more excited about the future than he was now. His research of Gravity Falls and its countless unique anomalies had already proven to be a massive success and then some, thanks to the invaluable help provided by the Crystal Gems over the past few years. But the bold endeavor he was setting out to undertake now was bound to completely blow all of that entirely out of the water. With this machine, he was certain that they’d be able to uncover untold secrets about both the known and unknown universe, opening the door to scientific marvels unlike any ever seen before. But before such a grand dimensional leap could be taken, said machine had to be built first.

That was where the help of his friends came in. Already, Rose and the other Gems had readily agreed to help on the project in any way they could, help that Ford knew he’d never be able to thank them enough for. But what was even more exciting was the fact that his treasured old colleague Fiddleford had heeded his call to join the cause as well, journeying all the way from
California to Oregon. From the moment the inventor arrived a few short days ago, the author had already been enjoying his friend’s welcome company and amusing quirks immensely, from his knack for solving Cubic’s Cubes in record time, to surprising skill on the banjo. Even if Fiddleford carried a few habits that Ford wasn’t particularly fond of, such as chewing tobacco and his overly-superstitious nature, he couldn’t deny that the brilliant calculations the inventor was contributing to the portal project had already made it more than worth the author’s time to ask him to lend his aid.

In fact, it was through one of those very calculations that Fiddleford had managed to pinpoint a critical flaw in Ford’s plans for the machine thus far. Apparently, the purposed portal’s highly advanced technical caliber would require an equally advanced power source to keep it running. A Temporal Displacement Hyperdrive, to be exact.

“Which means we might as well pull the reigns on this project here n’ now,” Fiddleford shook his head mournfully as he slapped his notebook shut. “On account of the fact that humanity is ten thousand years away from even comin’ anywhere close to even tryin’ to invent one!”

Despite how distraught his partner was over this insurmountable setback, Ford merely grinned confidently, as if he wasn’t even bothered by it at all. Which, by and large, he absolutely wasn’t. “Well then, aren’t we incredibly luck that I just so happen to have a handful of friends who know exactly where we can find such a device.”

 Needless to say that Fiddleford was beyond baffled by such a bold claim. Even so, Ford wasn’t entirely keen on spoiling such a monumental surprise so easily, which was why he implored the inventor to return early the next morning, and, more importantly, come ready for a grand expedition that would span two days at least, if not more.

Confused as he was by such an odd request, Fiddleford complied, arriving at the author’s home at dawn the next day. The inventor was still rather sleepy as he stepped into the den, camping pack slung over his shoulder as he readily accepting the piping hot cup of coffee Ford offered him. “So are we settin’ out on whatever skullduggerin’ misadventure you have planned for us any time soon, Stanford?” Fiddleford grumbled upon noticing that the author was making no clear steps towards leaving. “Cause if not, then I might as well just mosey on back to bed.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Fiddleford,” Ford assured with a knowing smirk. “We’ll be leaving very shortly. Just as soon as my… mm…. friends arrive.”

“The same ‘friends’ you mentioned yesterday, I’m guessin’?” Fiddleford raised an eyebrow.

“The very ones,” the author nodded. “They’ve been gone on a lengthy mission across the globe since before you arrived a few days ago. I… had planned on introducing you all under slightly different circumstances, but this works every bit as well.”

“…Do I even want to know what you originally planned for us meeting?”

“Oh, through a group outing to study Gravity Falls’ invasive barf fairy population, of course.”

“…Charmin’,” Fiddleford deadpanned. “Real charmin’.”

At that moment, an enthusiastic knock on the front door resounded throughout the house, one that Ford didn’t hesitate to hurry to answer. “Ah, perfect timing! They’re here!” The author stopped short just shy of the door to turn to his partner one more time. “Fiddleford, I’d like for you meet none other than… the Crystal Gems!”

With that, he boldly opened the door to reveal a quartet of women that Fiddleford had to do a
double take on just to make sure they were really real. Their ethereal, frankly magical appearances were truly something to behold, and yet there they stood, crowded in the doorframe, the largest and pinkest among them also bearing the widest, brightest smile as she greeted the author warmly. “Ford!” she exclaimed, happily sweeping him up into a tight, friendly hug.

“Heh, y-yes, its great to see you again too, Rose!” Ford laughed tightly, clearly caught off guard by the sudden, almost choking embrace. Fortunately, Rose was quick to release it to set the author back down on the ground. “So, how was Greenland?”

“Oh, you know,” Pearl spoke off with an offhanded smirk. “Nowhere near as green as its neighbor right across the sea, Iceland, usually is. But tolerable, all the same.”

“But its waaaaaaaay better to be back home,” Amethyst said, leaping up onto one of her favorite perches: Ford’s shoulders. “Ya got anything for me this time, science man?”

“Well…” the author rummaged through is camping pack for a moment. “I do have these jelly beans, but they’re for me to take on the-” Without any warning, the purple Gem snatched the bag of snacks out of his hand, tossing it into her mouth and swallowing it whole. “Well, they were for the trip… Ah well, either way, there’s someone here I’d really like you to meet.” Ford stepped aside so that the Gems could finally see the clearly awestruck Fiddleford, who honestly had no idea how to really react to them at all. “Rose, Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl, this is my former college classmate and close personal friend, Fiddleford McGucket. Fiddleford, this is Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl, and of course, Rose Quartz. Otherwise known as the Crystal Gems.”

Fiddleford took in a deep breath at this, adjusting his glasses to properly greet these bizarre women. “I-I’m much obliged to meet ya-”

“Oh, wow!” Rose interupted, stars in her eyes as she regarded the inventor. “There’s another Ford!”

“W-what?!” Ford and Fiddleford both exclaimed in confused unison.

“Well, you said so yourself,” the pink Gem pointed out innocently. “You’re Stanford,” she nodded to the author before pointing at the inventor. “And you’re Fiddleford. Which means now there’s two Fords! How exciting!”

“Oh! Can we call this one Fiddle?” Amethyst suggested, tugging on Fiddleford’s jacket sleeve before doing the same to Ford’s lab coat. “And we can call science man Stan!”

“You most certainly cannot!” Ford snapped, his tone surprisingly harsh as he pulled his coat away from the purple Gem. The other Gems and even Fiddleford all looked to him in apt surprise, all of them clearly wondering where such sudden severity had come from, though before the author was pressed to explain it, he was quick to change the subject altogether. “Anyway… Rose, I’m glad you’re here. Fiddleford has brought an important matter concerning our newest pet project to our attention, a matter I’m more than fairly confident you’ll be able to help out with.”

“Oh really?” Rose asked, naturally curious as she looked to the inventor. “And what’s that?”

“Well, to even get this machine ya’ll wanna build started, you’re gonna need to get yourselves a Temporal Displacement Hyperdrive,” Fiddleford explained with a frown. “But I don’t know where in the world we’re ever gonna-”

“A Temporal Displacement Drive?” Pearl spoke up, crossing her arms with a scoff. “Please, give us an actual challenge here. Why, Stanford, I’m surprised you don’t already have one seeing as
how they’re incredibly archaic by today’s standards.”

“Well, perhaps on your mysterious ‘Homeworld’ they are,” Ford retorted with just as teasing of a grin as the one the white Gem was sending him. “But here on Earth, technology like that is a bit… harder to come by.”

“Wha—Homeworld?” Fiddleford grabbed the author by the arm, lowering his voice somewhat. “Stanford, what in the name of Sweet Sally Sue are you on about right now?”

“Oh, did I not tell you?” Ford looked back to his bewildered partner before nodding back to the eager group of Gems before him. “Despite their near human-like appearances, the Crystal Gems aren’t from Earth. In fact, you might even say they’re—”

“ALIENS?!” Fiddleford gasped, shocked by this revelation as he stared at each of the Gems with huge eyes.

“There’s that word again,” Garnet remarked, crossing her arms.

“I wonder what it means…” Rose mused, fascinated.

“Yes,” the author said, still sending the inventor a satisfied, almost goading grin over the fact that he had managed to befriend such a special extraterrestrial group all on his own. “Aliens. But completely friendly aliens, I can assure you.”

“Boy howdy, are they ever!” Fiddleford exclaimed, slapping his knee in newfound excitement as he rushed up to each of the Gems to readily shake their hands. “Ya know, from the time I was a youngin’ I’ve always wondered about you space folks, ever since my cousin Thistlebelt said his Grammy Louise was quote-on-quote ‘taken by them saucer people’. Everyone else in the family said it was a bunch of hogwash, but I never stopped believin’ that life in other worlds outside our own existed, and you ladies are livin’, breathin’ proof of that!”

“Oh, uh, well, thank you,” Rose laughed, amused. “But…”

“We don’t breathe,” Garnet said, stoically and succinctly.

“It’s true,” Ford added, noting Fiddleford’s continued dumbfounded expression. “They don’t. Or at least they don’t need to. Same goes with sleeping and eating. Why, if I was anywhere near as infallible as the Gems here are, then I’d have enough energy to solve every unexplained phenomenon in the universe and then some!”

“And then you’d complain about bein’ bored the second that you did,” Fiddleford remarked with a wry grin. “Just like ya did when you breezed through all of the coursework in your second semester of Applied Quantum Phase Theory in less than a week after the class started.”

“Clearly, a waste of a semester,” Ford scoffed. “Especially when taking Fifth Dimensional Calculus and Hyper-Advanced Engineering would have aided our cause with this portal much more…”

“Speaking of which,” Pearl interjected. “If we really do need that Hyperdrive, then, w-well…” She hesitated, as if anxious to continue. Anxiety that Rose and Garnet at least seemed to both share on some level as they all averted eye contact with one another. “Stanford, you know where to find it by now.”

“Well, yes, I do,” the author nodded. “But seeing as how this is going to be Fiddleford’s first expedition to Crash Site Omega, I figured why not commemorate it by all of us going out there
together? As a team?”

“Crash Site Omega?” Fiddleford inquired, curious. Ford provided him a brief whispered answer, one that only served to floor the inventor even more than he already was when he realized exactly what it was.

“No…”

“Yes,” the author grinned, amused.

“S-so it’s really…”

“Mm hm.”

“A-and they came in…?”

“They did.”

“…Well, I gotta admit to ya, Stanford,” Fiddleford said after a beat of amazed silence. “I didn’t come here this morning thinkin’ that my entire perception on reality would be blown wide open like its just been. S-so thank you for that, I suppose.”

“You’re very welcome!” the author chimed before turning back to the Gems. “So the way I see it, it’ll take us two days to hike both out to the crash site and to get back since the its central warp hub is still down, so we should probably head out now to catch good daylight and-”

“Um… actually, Ford…” Rose spoke up apprehensively. “I’m not so sure if we should keep going out there like we have been. It really is pretty dangerous, especially for humans, and if we keep bothering it, it’ll probably only get worse. So… I think we should just…” The pink Gem trailed off upon catching sight of the disappointed, rather pleading glances both Ford and Fiddleford were sending her way, both of them clearly eager to see this intriguing crash site and claim the powerful Hyperdrive contained within. Glances that, against all odds, were able to make Rose change her tune much more easily than expected. “Ohhhh… ok…” she huffed relentingly. “You two win. We’ll go get that Hyperdrive.”

“Excellent!” Ford proclaimed as Fiddleford let out a large sigh of relief. “Then let’s not waste another minute! Our expedition begins… now!”

“Woo! Expedition! Expedition!” Amethyst cheered as her and Garnet followed the author and the inventor out the door. “Hey, Garnet, what’s a expedition?”

“Rose, are you sure this is such a good idea…?” Pearl asked, stopping the pink Gem briefly before they could head out as well. “After all, the crash site is… w-well… you know…”

“I do…” Rose frowned, placing a gentle hand on the white Gem’s shoulder before breaking out into a small smile. “But what can I say? You know I can never say no to humans, Pearl, they’re so adorable!”

“That’s what you keep saying…” Pearl muttered with an exasperated sigh as she trailed after her liege, their ‘expedition’ to the mystery that was Crash Site Omega at last underway.

The fresh Oregon morning air was more than enough to completely invigorate the small motley
crew of scientists and Gems as they set out on their quest. Since neither Ford or Fiddleford had a vehicle of their own, their trek would largely be on foot, something that only the inventor seemed to mind as they began their hike along the granite pass. While Ford was able to keep up with the tireless Gems just fine thanks to his rigorous daily physical regimen, Fiddleford was much less active in most things save for his mind and his mechanical work. As easily worn and winded as he was, the inventor wasn’t afraid to let his exhaustion show, especially as he purposed the idea of building robotic legs to let them do the work of walking for him.

Fortunately for Fiddleford, however, their trek only lasted a few hours before they found themselves on the other side of town at Lake Gravity Falls. Seeing as the serene shore was as good a place as any to take a break, that’s exactly what the group did (after documenting a bizarre Plaidypus they happened across along the way, as well investigating as the mystery of a possible beast laying in wait under the lake’s sole island). Even so, the inventor greatly appreciated the much-needed breather as he took the time to enjoy the lunch he had packed, at least until Amethyst snuck over and began rifling through it, an attempt that Pearl tried her best to thwart as Garnet watched on, amused as ever by her teammate’s antics.

With Fiddleford and the Gems as distracted as they were, Ford took the opportunity to slip away to jot down a few offhand notes and observations in his latest journal. He was just finishing off their speculator findings on the possibly quite dangerous island head beast lurking just below the unsuspecting waters when he began casually sketching out the peaceful shoreline itself, writing down a short description to go with it.

“Despite this bone-chilling creature, I couldn’t help but enjoy the scenery. There is no other place in Gravity Falls I would rather be than the lake. It reminds me of my childhood and Glass Shard Beach…”

Of Glass Shard Beach and sticky, sandy days spent there. Of briny seas and smoggy, sunny skies. Of just the two of them, exploring the tiny world they’d always known but planning for so much more beyond it. Of working on the ambitious pet project together that would someday finally get them there: the Stan O’ War.

Ford sighed almost wistfully, glancing over across the lake again before he began sketching out a simple sailboat on the bottom half of the page. Absently, he annotated it with an amusing youthful anecdote, one that he made sure to inscribe in code, just in case. He had just about finished it too, when a sudden shadow cast over him, catching the other quite off guard out of his deep thoughts.

“What are you working on over here?” Rose asked with a warm smile as she stood over the author, curiously glancing down at the journal in his hand. While Ford normally would have been eager to share his research with the pink Gem, instead he hastily scribbled over the boat he had drawn, closing the book and with it, his reminiscing thoughts.

“O-oh, nothing,” the author hastily said. “Just… foolishly losing myself in the past, I suppose.”

“Hm…” Rose mused as she took a seat on the coarse sand alongside him. “I wouldn’t call that ‘foolish’. After all, I sometimes do that too.”

“Hopefully not too often,” Ford joked with a brief hint of levity. “If what you told me is true, then you have quite a lengthy past to get lost in.”

The pair shared a short laugh at this, though as it faded as the author’s tone turned thoughtful. “… You know, I’ve never asked you… what is it like, to have lived for so long? Existing for hundreds of thousands of years like you and the other Gems have is far beyond any sort of known human comprehension so, I can’t help but be a little curious about it.”
Rose was silent for a moment, keeping her sights set on the sparkling lake ahead of them before replying flippantly. “To be honest? It’s… boring. When a Gem is made, they’re supposed to be only one thing, have only one purpose for their entire existence. Thousands of years spending day in and day out in the exact same way without anything ever even changing. But you? Humans? You get to have an entirely different experience every single day! Your life isn’t set in stone like a Gem’s is, its constantly in motion! Its so much more exciting! And… ever since I first came here to Earth, that’s exactly what I’ve been trying to do to: to have a unique, special kind of experience each and every day. And so far, I’d say I’ve been doing a pretty good job of it thanks to people like you, Ford.”

“Hmph,” the author glanced away, aptly bashful. “I’d pin your success less on me and more on Gravity Falls. As surrounded by such fantastic anomalies as we are, there’s no way you could have a dull, uninteresting day here, even if you tried.”

“Exactly,” Rose chuckled. “Why else do you think we’ve stayed here so long?”

“Speaking of which…” Ford began a bit leadingly as he looked back down at the journal in his lap. “Where exactly were you and the other Gems… before you came to Gravity Falls?”

“Oh, I thought I already told you,” the pink Gem said. “We mostly wandered around all over the Earth, exploring different, beautiful places, meeting all sorts of amazing people-”

“Yes, yes, you did tell me about all that before,” Ford interupted, unable to push his curiosity aside. “I’m talking about before that. Before you came to Earth.”

“O-oh…” Rose faltered, her pink locks casting shadows over her eyes as her voice grew soft and almost unsteady. “W-well… before that… I was—we lived on Homeworld…”

“Ah yes, Homeworld,” Ford nodded, eager to know more about this distant planet the other Gems spoke so very little about. “And what was it like there? Quite different from the Earth, I imagine, I mean it is an entirely different planet.”

“Yes, i-it’s… very different, to say the least…” Rose muttered, almost whispered. For several long, lingering moments, she said nothing else on the matter, and for a good while it seemed like she had no intentions of doing so at all. Ford was just about ready to prompt her with more questions on the mysterious planet, but right before they could, a certain purple Gem suddenly jumped right into the space between the two of them.

“Hey, look at me! I’m Fiddle Man!” Amethyst exclaimed, showing off the inventor’s glasses that she had perched on the elongated nose she had shapeshifted to mimic his. “Howdy, howdy, howdy!”

“Hey!” The purple Gem took off the moment she noticed Fiddleford blindly chasing after her. “Give ‘em back, ya little-”

The inventor didn’t have a chance to finish his threat before he inevitably followed Amethyst into the lake, tripping and falling face-first into the shallows as the purple Gem surfaced alongside him, laughing madly all the while. “Amethyst! Give that human his vision aids back immediately!” Pearl scolded with a frustrated huff as she stormed over.

“They’re called glasses, Pearl,” Garnet remarked, coolly adjusting her own.

“Well, it looks like everyone’s starting to get restless,” Rose laughed, more than glad to change the subject. “We should probably get going. We still have a lot of ground to cover, after all.”
Ford frowned, even as Rose stood and offered a hand to help him up. Even so, despite the lack of any substantial answers to his insatiable curiosity, he complied, accepting her help as he offered his aid in gathered the others so they could continue on their way once more. And yet, the author couldn’t help but glance out at the lake one last time before they left it behind, hoping that he’d still get those answers, answers he knew the pink Gem was still hiding from him, sooner or later.

The rest of the afternoon took the group out of the midsummer heat and into a much cooler setting instead: a set of hidden tunnels secreted away behind the town’s famous waterfall. The ancient caves were a find that the Gems had first introduced Ford to a few years back, the drawings etched on the walls dating their formation back to early human history (which the Gems themselves were present for). Along the way, they happened across a rather large group of minute corrupted Gem monsters, which the author had decided to dub ‘geodites’; the tiny creatures were more than numerous and luminous enough to light their way through the rest of the tunnels. And by the time they finally emerged at the top of the falls, the sun was just starting to set, giving way to a crisp, warm, lovely evening. Which was why, with the vast view of Gravity Falls stretching out below them, the easy decision was made to set up camp for the night right then and there.

While the Gems didn’t really need to rest like Ford and Fiddleford did, they were still more than happy to help them set up their clifftop campsite. With a roaring fire built, the group gathered around it to relax and chat, all while gazing up at the countless arrays of stars and the constellations hidden therein dotting the dark, lovely night sky above them.

“Golly, what a night…” Fiddleford remarked between spoonfuls of beans out of the can he had just heated up over the fire. “We don’t get stars like these in Palo Alto, that’s for sure.”

“Palo Alto?” Rose asked, curious. “Where’s that?”

“A few states down south in California,” Fiddleford informed. “They’ve just started callin’ that part of it the ‘Silicon Valley’, as a matter o’ fact.”

“Why?” Pearl asked. “Is there a higher than usual concentration of silicon there?”

“Well, no, it’s on account of-”

“Its because it has a higher than usual concentration of ‘upstart inventors’,” Ford interrupted with a knowing smirk. “Much like Fiddleford himself here.”

“Oh, ha ha, very funny, Stanford,” Fiddleford retorted dryly. “But Palo Alto also has a lot more to it than a bunch of borin’ ol’ eggheads. It’s also where my darlin’ wife and my lil’ Tater Tot are.”

“Ooo, tater toots!” Amethyst quipped obliviously. “I just learned what those things are the other day when I snuck into the diner. They’re so good and cold and crunchy!”

“You’re supposed to eat them hot, Amethyst, not frozen,” Ford pointed out with a concerned frown.

“Whaaaat?! Oh man, that sounds even better! I’ve gotta try that! I’m totally gonna break into that diner again when we get back.”

“I’m not talkin’ about tater toots Tater Tots,” Fiddleford shook his head with a small chuckle. “I’m talkin’ about my son, Tate.” Upon noticing the somewhat blank looks all of the Gems were sending him, the inventor elaborated. “Ya know, my family? Any of you ladies got any family
“yourselves?”

“No,” Rose answered almost immediately, her tone surprisingly sharp.

“Gems don’t really do ‘family’,” Garnet added quite stoically.

“O-oh…” Fiddleford glanced away rather awkwardly. “Well, all the same, I can’t wait to get back to mine! Why, once we’re done with this here project of ours, I have plans to skedaddle back home to ‘em and finally start patenting all of the robotics projects I have in the works.”

“Robotics?” Ford asked incredulously. “What practical use could that have in a common market?”

“Outside of militaristic weapons grade training?” Pearl added, though she was met with several bewildered glances at this. “What?”

“Aw, I got plenty of ideas in mind!” Fiddleford exclaimed zealously. “Ideas that are bound to make people’s lives better all ‘round the globe! Plus... it’ll be a decent bonus to finally be makin’ enough to afford a nice place with a screen door that ain’t broken like the one we had at the ol’ McGucket family homestead back in Tennessee.”

“Your ideas sound lovely, Fiddleford,” Rose smiled, enthused by such altruistic plans. “Ford, what are you going to do once our machine is done?”

“I think you mean once my Grand Unified Theory of Weirdness is proven indisputably,” Ford corrected with a knowing grin. “After its all said and done, I’m considering returning back home to the east to publish my findings about Gravity Falls and the source of its strangeness to the world.”

“Wait... you’re... going to leave?” the pink Gem asked, her smile fading altogether at this.

“F-for a time, yes,” the author glanced away, suddenly flustered. “But I’m sure I’ll be back around these parts sooner or later. Especially since I’ll have presidents and prizewinners alike practically begging me to explain all of the oddities we’ve uncovered to them. Just think of it! Me, rubbing elbows with the most elite of the elite! Debating politics with Reagan, discussing turtleneck fashion with Carl Sagan! And better yet, seeing the looks on the faces of everyone who ever doubted me!”

“Gosh, Stanford, those sure are some big dreams,” Fiddleford remarked with a smirk. “I’d expect nothin’ less from you, but... there’s still one thing I don’t understand.”

“And what’s that?”

“Well, from what I’ve seen of them journals of yours, it already looks like you’ve discovered more than enough amazin’ things to make you famous and then some,” the inventor explained, briefly nodding over at the Gems. “These ladies right here are a testament to that if nothin’ else, I mean, shucks, they’re literal space aliens.”

“Would you both stop calling us that?” Pearl huffed, annoyed.

“I guess what I’m tryin’ to figure out is... is this ‘grand theory’ of yours even really necessary?” Fiddleford continued, frowning. “Why not just publish your findings now, profit off that, settle down right here in Gravity Falls, and start a family of your own...?” At this, the inventor inclined his head rather leadingly at Rose, something that the pink Gem didn’t really notice, though the author understood the implication loud and clear.

Which was why he was completely powerless to let out a loud, blunt laugh at the very thought.
“Oh, Fiddleford, don’t be silly!” Ford chuckled, shaking his head. “I’ll be the first to admit that romance is far more baffling to me than the greatest mysteries of the universe!” The author waited a beat until Rose was distracted by a small, side conversation with the other Gems to lower his voice to a whisper to the inventor. “Besides, you heard it yourself; Gems don’t ‘do’ family.”

“Hmph, and apparently, neither do you,” Fiddleford remarked, dissatisfied as he crossed his arms.

“So, Ford,” Rose interjected with a small, amused laugh. “Garnet wants to know… how exactly is romance ‘baffling’?”

“Because it sure isn’t to me,” Garnet said, adjusting her shades mysteriously.

“W-well, it just always seemed so… frivolous to me,” Ford shrugged, clearly embarrassed over having to explain himself on such a personal matter. “I mean, who even has time for such flights of fancy in the first place when there’s far more important matters to attend to?”

“Oh? Like what?” Pearl asked with a bit of a teasing grin. “Playing that probability-heavy dungeons game you showed me the other day?”

“No!” Ford exclaimed defensively. “W-well, at least not entirely. What I’m talking about is perusing something much grander than any mere momentary love affair: the answers to the most baffling mysteries human history has ever known! And I’m going to be the one to find those answers once and for all. Why should I settle for simplicity when I can just as easily sail to the stars!”

“There’s nothing wrong with simplicity, Ford,” Rose grinned gently. “In fact, its one of the things I love most about the Earth. Everything here works so well with everything else. It all just… fits together to create a planet that just feels… so complete and so perfect in so many different ways, I can’t even begin to list them all!”

“But it can hardly compare to all of the other incredible sights you’ve must have seen among the endless cosmos, right?” Ford pressed, curious as ever. “After all, the Earth, perhaps barring Gravity Falls as the sole exception, is so… mundane when pitted against the vast depths of space, places humans have never even dreamed of seeing before, including your very own Homeworld! You’ve been here on Earth for thousands of years now… don’t you ever miss what lies beyond it?”

Rose paused for a moment, seeming to mull over this as she gazed up at the distant, twinkling stars far above them. But when she finally did give her answer, it was with a solid, confident smile as she returned her gaze back down to the sprawling view of the town far below them. “Why would I ever miss Homeworld when I’m already home?”

Despite his best efforts, this was a question Ford couldn’t find an answer to. It was at that moment that the author began to realize, perhaps for the very first time, just how different the pink Gem’s worldview was from his own. It was undeniable that Rose was quite content with her peaceful lot on planet Earth, far removed from the mysterious, exciting grandeur of the cosmos and her former interstellar home. It was a sentiment the other Crystal Gems seemed to carry, but it was one that Ford couldn’t quite understand. For much of his life, the author had felt limited in some way; limited by the scope of his small hometown, limited by the low standards of his family around him, limited even by his own scientific knowledge (at least until his muse fortunately came around to help in that regard). In fact, he had grown so used to being limited that it was no wonder that breaking those limits wide open had long since been a high-ranking goal of his. He didn’t want to just be content to be, he wanted so much more than that. He wanted success, he wanted recognition, he wanted greatness. He would settle for nothing less.
And while Ford knew the road to reaching such lofty ambitions wouldn’t be an easy one, he still preferred the road less traveled anyway, he always had. And, as he sat around the campfire, laughing and conversing with some of the people (or more accurately Gems) he trusted most, he couldn’t help but feel immensely grateful that he wouldn’t have to travel that road alone.

The next morning saw the group meeting with a mystery right off the bat. While getting in an early morning shave, Fiddleford had spotted the briefest flash of something in the woods behind him in his tiny mirror. Superstitious and skittish as he was, the inventor didn’t hesitate to alert Ford and the Gems about the possible intruder, which had vanished just as quickly as it had appeared. A careful search of the entire area turned up empty, but no one could deny they all felt the presence of some unknown creature or being lurking about, its mysterious nature matching closely to a longstanding local lumberjack legend known as the Hide-Behind. The creature had been a point of curiosity for both Ford and the Gems for quite some time, largely since it had reportedly never been clearly seen by anyone before. The most anyone was able to find of it was they quickly packed up their camp were its strange footprints in the dirt, accompanied by its bizarre howl echoing through the trees as the trees. Needless to say it was enough to set the entire group on edge, even the usually intrepid Gems, who were all on the verge of summoning their weapons for self-defense, just in case the Hide-Behind suddenly decided to come out of hiding after all…

Fortunately though, they weren’t beset by any such danger as they finally made their way out of the woods and into more open expanses. Rose took point of the group from here, her manner oddly tense as she began leading the last leg of the journey to the crash site. Contrasting to the pink Gem, however, Ford and Fiddleford were both growing gradually more excited the closer they got to their destination. The pair engaged in enthused speculation about the vessel they were heading to all the way there, a conversation that the Gems largely refused to join in, even despite the many questions posed their way. In fact, they only seemed to grow even more dodgy as they finally reached the deep, oddly-shaped valley where their prize awaited: Crash Site Omega itself.

“We’re here,” Rose reported quietly, coming to a stop at the center of the wide grassy area.

“Wait… this is it?” Fiddleford asked, confused.

“Indeed it is,” Ford chimed in with a daring grin as he approached the field’s only notable feature, a large, inconspicuous rock. “It looks like it hasn’t been touched since the last time we were here two years ago! How lucky!”

“Very lucky,” Garnet remarked stiffly, adjusting her shades.

“Now, let’s just move this aside, and…” the author trailed off as he pushed the rock, revealing a metallic panel beneath it. Removing it was just as easy, uncovering a square opening in the ground with a long ladder leading down into the darkness far below. “There we go. This should lead us down right through… what was it again?”

“The indefinite exhaust port,” Pearl remarked, crossing her arms and scowling.

“U-unbelievable…” Fiddleford said, his eyes wide as he stared down into the mysterious tunnel. “And here I thought ya’ll were yankin’ my chain with this crash site nonsense, but… b-but here it is! Plain as day!”

“Ugh, do we really gotta go down there again?” Amethyst asked with a huff. “Its so dark and smelly and boring…”
“Don’t worry, Amethyst, we won’t be down there very long,” Rose assured the youngest Gem with a small smile. “Will we?” she asked Ford in particular.

“We’re only here for the hyperdrive this time, so I would say this shouldn’t take too terribly long,” Ford mused.

“Good,” Pearl said somewhat sharply. “The sooner we leave this place behind, the better.”

With their shared intention to get in and get out as quickly as possible, the Gems entered the passageway first. Ford and Fiddleford followed after, both of them somewhat baffled as to why their companions seemed so wary of the crash site as a whole. Even so, they eagerly followed down into the depths, scaling down into the wreckage left behind from a vessel forgotten by time.

The structure’s practically ancient chrome interior, as untouched by the elements as it was, was largely pristine, if not heavily dusted and cobwebbed. The buried vessel was essentially a maze of various vast, twisting corridors, revealing nothing to what its exterior might have once looked like. Most of its electronic components were long-since defunct and its echoing halls were just as abandoned and dark, illuminated only by the glow from Pearl and Rose’s respective gemstones lighting the way. Ford and Fiddleford also had flashlights on hand, however, to further aid them in getting a better glimpse at their amazing surroundings; surroundings that, as far as they knew, next to no other humans had ever seen before.

“Golly, just look at this place!” Fiddleford exclaimed, his voice echoing off of the hallowed-out halls. “It’s like somethin’ straight outta Cosmic Conflicts! Just imagine what it must’ve looked like back in its hayday!”

“We don’t need to imagine,” Ford said, confident as he glanced over at the Gems. “Fortunately in this instance, we can get knowledge on the subject straight from the source.”

“O-oh, well, its not like any of us got here on something exactly like this…” Rose remarked with something of an uncomfortable laugh. “After all, Amethyst was made here on Earth, and-”

“Well, still, certainly it must be close to what a few of you might be familiar with,” the author implored. “It did come from Homeworld, after all, much like yourself, right, Rose?”

“Oh, um, w-well, yes, I suppose, but-”

“So how long does it typically take for a vessel like this to be built there?” Ford inquired, innocently curious. What the author failed to see were the other Gems almost rushing on ahead, only Rose hanging behind and growing more and more anxious with each question he posed to her. “How many lightyears do you estimate it could travel in a day?”

“F-Ford…” the pink Gem attempted to interject, but nothing could really stop the author’s eager inquiries at this point.

“Does it have any sort of external weapons systems? Maybe a layered holographic force-field?”

“Ford-” Rose tried again and by now even Fiddleford was sending his partner a worried warning glance. But even still Ford continued.

“What would it take to bring a rig like this down in the first place? What was its original function meant to be?”

“Stanford, please-”
A warship? Scouting vessel? Why did it even come here to Earth in the first pla-

“Stanford! That’s enough!”

Rose’s harsh shout seemed to echo through the entire vessel, stopping the entire group dead in their tracks. Ford turned to the pink Gem, aptly started by her heavy command only to find her usually gentle expression set in a sharp, severe glare. A glare that was aimed directly at him.

“R-Rose?” he asked quite hesitantly, unsure of how to react.

“I said that’s enough,” Rose repeated just as sternly. “No more questions, let’s just get what we came here for, and go.”

And with that, the pink Gem pressed on ahead, the other Gems and even Fiddleford meekly following behind her. For all of the kindness Rose was known to show, her rare moments of rigidity were more than enough to intimidate just about anyone. Anyone save for Ford, that is.

“Why are you always like this?” Ford asked, a hint of fledgling frustration in his tone. “Every time I so much as bring up the topic of Homeworld to you, you never want to discuss it? Why? You’re always more than happy to share everything you know about every other Gem-related matter, so why not something as fundamentally simple as your own home?!”

“Because!” Rose snapped fiercely, far more angering than the author had ever seen her before. “That’s NOT our home! Not anymore…” She sighed, her fury turning to what almost seemed like remorseful resignation as she turned away once more. “And it never will be again…”

“But why not?” Ford pressed, refusing to simply let the matter go. “Why won’t you just tell me something about it?!”

“…Fine,” Rose said, her back still turned and her tone still tense. “I’ll tell you the only thing you need to know about it: we left it behind, in every way. And we want to keep it that way, which is why you should do the same, Stanford.”

This time, the pink Gem was intent on making it quite clear that she wouldn’t discuss the matter any further as she simply walked away. Once again, Ford was prepared to keep the argument going, though what ultimately ended up stopping him turned out to be none other than Fiddleford. The inventor silently barred him with an outstretched arm, shaking his head in disapproval over just how far the author had been willing to push his curiosity. Far enough to the point that it had, in turn, pushed the pink Gem away.

Even so, that wasn’t something Ford was all too willing to admit. After all, the most he saw himself as guilty of was perhaps asking one too many sensitive questions. But as far as he was concerned, it was Rose’s fault for deeming those questions as too sensitive to answer in the first place. Certainly, the author rationalized, the pink Gem was being unfairly secretive when it came to the truth behind her former home. She had already shared so much about her kind with him in the past; so what could possibly be the reason behind her keeping this information to herself? It was a question Ford knew he needed the answer to, but it was an answer he wasn’t sure he was going to get, especially not now. Especially with Rose choosing to maintain her stubborn silence on all things Homeworld-related, the other Gems intent on doing the very same.

“Here it is…” Pearl announced diffidently as they all stepped into a large, heavily-wired chamber. “One Temporal Displacement Hyperdrive, as promised.”

“Hm…” Fiddleford stepped forward, carefully inspecting the surprisingly small device. The
hyperdrive was hooked up to the ship’s now-defunct engine by a series of sturdy chords, the screen on its side still somehow functional based on the illuminated visage of four multi-colored diamonds. Silence still permeated the rest of the group as the inventor looked over it before finally breaking into a small, satisfied smile. “Yep, I’d reckon this oughta do the trick. All I gotta do is tweak around with a few of these here wires and…” He trailed off, carefully snipping through the chords with the clippers he had wisely brought along. Then, after loosening just a few bolts and screws, the inventor was able to not just release the drive, but also extract it, snugly slipping it away into his backpack for safekeeping on the way back.

“We got what we came here for,” Rose concluded, her tone and matter both starkly hallow. “Let’s go home.”

None of the others, surprisingly not even Ford, argued with the pink Gem on this. Still, Fiddleford at the very least could tell that the author wanted to, his insistence to know what Rose refused to tell him was plain enough to see in his plaintiff expression alone. And yet, for whatever reason, Ford held his peace on the matter, instead silently following behind the Gems with his head down and his hands clenched into tight fists at his sides. Fiddleford always had a knack for spotting a pot that was about to boil over, and if there was any way to describe the tension currently standing between the author and the pink Gem in particular, it was that. Which meant that he could only hope that when it inevitably did, none of them would end up getting burned in its wake.

While both Fiddleford and the other Gems all shared the unspoken hope that the mood would finally lighten when they emerged from the crash site, much to their dismay it did anything but. In fact, if anything, Rose and Ford seemed to distance themselves even further, refusing to so much as even spare a glance at each other, lest their disagreement spike up once more. While the author’s manner was hard and bitter, the pink Gem’s expression seemed sad and pensive, though as different as their emotions were, they were equally matched in terms of disappointment.

This anxious stalemate seemed as though it was going to continue for the entire journey back from the crash site, a thought that was all but unbearable to the others. While this quest had started out on such a high, bright note, it seemed so unfortunate that, even despite their relative success in getting the hyperdrive, it was going to end on such a low, dour one. Which was why, even if the Gems didn’t share his own intention, Fiddleford decided to venture an attempt to at least get the author and the pink Gem on speaking terms again. A plan that he would have very well carried out had Ford not happened upon a discovery that would change the course of their entire trip altogether.

“Everyone, stay right where you are,” the author suddenly warned, stopping dead in his tracks. Curious, the others complied, turning towards him to see what the matter might have been. “No one make a single sound…” he whispered, his posture suddenly tense and his eyes wide as he stared through the thicket of trees straight ahead of them. While Garnet and Pearl exchanged a confused, yet quite glance at this, Amethyst, however, was easily the first to disregard that command entirely.

“What? What is it?” she asked bluntly, loudly. “Are we playin’ some kinda quiet game? Cause I thought we already have been doing that for hours now and-”

“Shhh!” Ford quickly reprimanded her, suddenly frantic. “I said quiet! The last thing we want to do is wake it up!”

“Wake what up, Stanford?” Fiddleford asked, his voice soft, yet aptly baffled.
By now, Rose had happened to catch a glimpse of what Ford had already seen, a small gasp escaping her as she pointed to the clearing straight ahead. “That.”

Fast asleep in the light of the sun pouring down upon it through the canopy of trees above was a creature, a monster that was nearly beyond all description. The beast was massive to say the least, easily larger than any of the Gems, even Rose herself. It was a burly, muscular, grotesque behemoth, its constant snores more akin to hulking growls as it rested tentatively, though it was clear that it could be ready to attack with its piercing claws and protruding fangs at a moment’s notice. An outcome that none of them wanted to see, especially considering exactly what this creature really was.

“A Gremloblin…” Ford was unable to keep himself from breaking into a bewildered grin at the sight of such an exciting discovery. “One of the rarest creatures in all of Gravity Falls! I’ve only ever read about them in old local lumberjack legends, I never thought I’d actually get to see one myself!”

“W-well, ya saw it, so we should probably get a goin’ before that thing stirs,” Fiddleford urged anxiously, refusing to take his eyes off the snoozing monster, lest it pounce when he wasn’t looking.

“Yes, yes, of course,” Ford agreed as he pulled his journal out of his coat. “After I jot down just a few cursory notes on it, maybe get a quick sketch…”

“Ford, I don’t think that’s a very good idea…” Rose noted with a concerned frown.

“Yes, those creatures are notoriously dangerous,” Pearl agreed. “We’ve fortunately never had to fight one before and we certainly wouldn’t want to have a reason to now.”

“And you won’t,” Ford assured, still creeping on ahead, pen already in hand. “I’ve heard Gremloblins are incredibly heavy sleepers, especially during their hibernation season, which just so happens to be during the summer months.”

“But Stanford-” Fiddleford pleaded tightly, nervously.

“But Stanford…” Fiddleford pleaded tightly, nervously.

“Besides, I simply can’t pass up the opportunity to document such a unique find,” Ford continued, hardly listening to the others’ warnings. “I’ll make this quick, I promise.”

“Ford…” Rose admonished once more, though the author hardly listened as he continued inching forward. He had all but lost himself to sketching the monstrous Gremloblin out, engrossed in his research far more than his own safety, or the safety of his companions.

“M-Miss Quartz, can’t ya get him to give it a rest?” Fiddleford asked Rose as he cowered up against a nearby tree for cover. “If he wakes that critter up, he’ll get us all killed, for sure!”

“I don’t know about all that, but I do agree that this is far too dangerous,” the pink Gem stepped forward, ready to call upon her sword and shield, just in case, as she made another appeal to the author. “Ford, we should just leave that creature alone and move on before something bad happens.”

“I don’t know about all that, but I do agree that this is far too dangerous,” the pink Gem stepped forward, ready to call upon her sword and shield, just in case, as she made another appeal to the author. “Ford, we should just leave that creature alone and move on before something bad happens.”

“Which will happen,” Garnet predicted firmly. “Trust me.”

“Then we’ll make sure to leave before it does,” Ford only barely glanced back over his shoulder.

“But that’s just it, you don’t know when it will happen!” Rose huffed, annoyed by the author’s insistent stubbornness. “We shouldn’t risk it, we need to leave, now!”
“Well you’re more than free to go on ahead. I’ll catch up with you when I’m done.”

While the pink Gem’s patience was usually seemingly boundless, it was more than clearly being tested here and now. “Stanford, why won’t you just listen to me?” she asked incredulously. “I’m trying to help you; I just want to keep you safe!”

“Oh how?” Ford asked just as bitingly as he turned to face her. “By denying me access to simple knowledge that would be invaluable to my research? Knowledge that I have a right to know, that I deserve to know!? Is that your idea of trying to ‘keep me safe’? Because if it is, then you should know that I never asked you to. In fact, I think you’ll find that I can handle much more than you give me credit for.”

“Ford…” Rose sighed, disgruntled and despondent. “You still don’t understand! And that’s exactly why you need to stop. A-and why… why I can’t tell you about…”

“About Homeworld?”

Rose flinched at this, unsure of what to even say. All the same, the author stared her down, silently demanding the truth this time, and refusing to settle for anything less. “S-Stanford… I”

Before the pink Gem could even get another word out, the unthinkable happened. A sudden, ear-piercing alarm blared through the air, readily echoing throughout the trees with a seemingly unending shriek.

“Augh! What is that?!” Amethyst yelled over the deafening din.

“I think it’s the hyperdrive!” Pearl called, nodding over to Fiddleford’s backpack, where the device was still stowed. “The change in altitude while going down the mountain must have activated it!”

“H-how do we get it to stop?!” Fiddleford cried, ripping the bag off his back to peer in at the blaring, flashing device.

“We need to-” Garnet cut herself off with a gasp, her future vision catching an extremely important warning just in time. “Look out!” she shouted to Ford in particular. The author instantly spun around, clutching the journal close to his chest to see a massive clawed hand rushing right for him. The most Ford could really do was brace himself for a painful impact, though fortunately it never came as a certain pink Gem and her sturdy shimmering shield intercepted the devastating blow instead.

“T-the Gremloblin!” Ford exclaimed, stunned as he glanced past Rose, who still stood defensively between him and the now-rampaging creature. “It’s awake!”

“We need to get out of here!” the pink Gem urged, pressing hard against her shield try and ward the incredibly strong monster off.

“Can we turn that stupid wiperdrive off first?!” Amethyst asked with an irritated groan.

“We’re tryin to!” Fiddleford exclaimed as both him and Pearl desperately tampered with the screeching device to quiet it down. “D-darn thing won’t-”

Suddenly, the Gremloblin’s attention shifted away from Ford and Rose and to an entirely different direction instead: towards the inventor, or rather, the loudly whining device in his hands. Before any of the others could even react, the monster lashed out, swerving around the pair in front of it and reaching out to grab Fiddleford in its enormous, deadly claws in one single swipe. The hyperdrive fell out of his grasp and into Pearl’s, though the white Gem was quick to leap back,
summoning her weapon alongside her teammates to face this fell beast.

“Fiddleford!” Ford exclaimed in apt alarm over the peril his friend was in. Peril that only seemed to grow as the Gremloblin’s grip on the terrified inventor tightened, its large golden eyes baring straight into his. Despite his initial thrashing and struggling, Fiddleford more or less went completely limp as his eyes took on the same blank pallor as the monster’s, a sign that he was helplessly lost to whatever sort of trance it had somehow put him under.

“Ford, hurry and take cover somewhere!” Rose ordered, brandishing her blade in preparation for the inevitable fight ahead. “We’ll take care of-”

The pink Gem cut herself off with a startled gasp as Ford suddenly rushed past her, armed only with his full canteen of water and the intent to do whatever he could to rescue Fiddleford from the Gremloblin’s clutches. “Wait!” Garnet warned, her future vision already showing the outcome of the author’s brazenness to her. “Don’t throw water at it! It’ll only-“

The fusion’s warning was largely unheard as Ford chucked his canteen forward with as much force as he could possibly muster. It struck the Gremloblin squarely on the head, completely dousing it all over. It was enough to monetarily startle the creature, but that surprise was immediately short-lived as it unleashed a massive, outraged roar of retaliation. As if in response to the water itself, the Gremloblin seemed to double, if not triple in size before their very eyes, growing spikes and tusks and even strong and sturdy wings. The unexpected transformation left the spectating group completely baffled, especially the author as he realized that his hastiness was essentially the direct cause of it.

“It’ll only get much harder to deal with,” Garnet finally finished bluntly.

“Now you tell me…” Ford huffed, disgruntled.

“Gems, let’s go!” Rose commanded swiftly, finally rallying her teammates into action against the monster. The Gremloblin kept its tight grip on Fiddleford as it let out another vicious growl, towering over all of the Gems as they raced for it with their respective weapons drawn. Hasty as always, Amethyst leapt for it first, swinging her whip loose and wildly to latch onto one of the monster’s mighty upper fangs. The purple Gem used her taunt weapon to launch herself upward, raring to land squarely on the creature’s face to inflict a heavy kick, but before she could, the Gremloblin turned her plan against her. Instead, it swung its head upwards hard, sending both Amethyst and her whip flying fast and far off into the forest, away from the fight altogether.

In light of the purple Gem’s easy defeat, Garnet and Pearl teamed up in their successive attack. The white Gem went high, gracefully jumping up towards the treetops to land on a sturdy perch above the creature while the fusion distracted it on the ground below. The Gremloblin showed no intentions of losing its prey, despite Garnet’s best attempts at reaching the inventor while dodging the monster’s violent swings all the while. The fusion’s strength was formidable, to be sure, but when pitted against a monster of such sheer size and ferocity as the Gremloblin, even Garnet herself was no match. All it took was for the creature to suddenly catch the fusion by her gauntlet before it flung her away, sending her plowing through the trees and knocking several over in her wake until she was completely out of sight. A mere moment later, the Gremloblin also caught sight of Pearl launching herself and her spear its way, though it easily managed to stop her as well by simply making eye contact with her alone. The white Gem let out a horrified gasp, her eyes reflecting the Gremloblin’s golden ones as she collapsed flat onto the ground, instantly curling up and wrapping her arms around herself as her breaths came out in short, shallow sobs.

“Pearl!” Rose cried, almost rushing to the white Gem’s side right then and there if not for the Gremloblin attempting to attack her next.
“What’s wrong?! What did it do to her and Fiddleford?” Ford demanded, noticing that the inventor was still completely petrified in the Gremloblin’s grasp.

“I’ve heard of this happening before,” Rose said tensely, her hold on her sword tightening. “Gremloblins can make anyone see their worst nightmares just by looking into their eyes. It’ll wear off eventually, but still, we need to get Fiddleford as far away from it as possible before it can get any worse!”

“Well, then, by all means, let’s—” the author stopped short as the Gremloblin let out yet another booming roar. And then, without any warning, it outstretched its mighty wings, lifting its hulking body off the ground with but a single flap. Rose and Ford only had time to rush forward in a thwarted attempt at rescuing the inventor before the Gremloblin took off in flight, taking Fiddleford right along with it as it began its descent down the nearby mountainside.

“No!” Ford shouted, not hesitating to chase after the beast, desperate to stop it before it could make off with his friend forever. And yet, before he could really begin his panicked pursuit, a steady hand grabbed him by the arm and swiftly pulled him back instead.

“Stay here!” Rose ordered as she summoned a new shield on her arm.

“No, I’m going with you!” the author exclaimed, adamant.

“No, you’re not! Its bad enough that one of you is in danger, I’m not risking you both.”

“You won’t be ‘risking’ anything,” Ford huffed in thorough annoyance. “I can handle something like this, you know I can. So why do you insist on acting like I can’t?!”

“Because you’re only a human!” Rose snapped, and just like that, everything shifted into stark silence.

Ford stilled, his eyes widening as he looked to the pink Gem with apt disbelief. “Only human?”

“S-Stanford…” Rose immediately began to retract, instantly regretting her words. “I didn’t mean it like that, I... I just-”

“Tell me, Rose,” Ford began, his tone hard and filled with resolve as he pressed his way past the pink Gem. “Do you think a supposedly ‘simple’ human would be willing to do something like this?”

Without warning, the author suddenly sprinted off, completely unarmed and ready to take the Gremloblin on unarmed. He didn’t even bother to glance over his shoulder to see if Rose was following him, largely since he didn’t care. Regardless of whether or not she wanted him to, he was going to save Fiddleford. He was going to prove to both her and to himself that even if he was ‘only’ human, he was so much more than that as well.

Fortunately, the Gremloblin hadn’t gotten too far away as it drifted down the craggy mountain’s face. It was a rather sharp descent, but one that Ford was willing to make for Fiddleford’s sake, tearing his coat and scraping himself bloody as he half-tripped, half-ran down it. For a moment, the author dared to hope that he actually had a chance at catching up to the monster, but just before he could reach it, it turned hard, changing its course so that it was flying away from the mountain instead of simply down it. Ford skidded to a sharp stop, though only for a moment, refusing to let this be the end of the chase. Instead, he acted on impulse and adrenaline, backing up briefly before running full stop towards the nearest ledge. The author was nothing if not a man of science, so all the while, he was rushing through a number of calculations in his head, determining just how far
he’d have to jump and exactly what his odds of actually making it might be. The results on both accounts were daunting, but even so, they didn’t stop him from taking the leap all the same. With a courageous shout, Ford pushed himself off the mountainside, keeping the Gremloblin and Fiddleford both in his sights all the while as he sailed through the air towards them. For a brief moment, at least.

For soon enough, gravity inevitably enacted itself upon the author, stopping his forward momentum as he all too quickly began plummeting downward. The base of the mountain was hundreds of feet below him, and Ford didn’t even have to think twice to know the impact would be agonizing. But fortunately, it was an impact that never came as he landed softly in a pair of soft, outstretched arms instead.

The moment Rose caught him amidst his freefall, Ford’s heart practically sunk immeasurably. So much for trying to prove himself to her, for in his reckless hastiness, here she had come, once again, to rescue him from peril, just as she so often had to do. However, as she began to float gently back down towards the mountain, her expression was anything but admonishing; instead it was sad, remorseful as she averted the author’s gaze altogether and spoke softly as they touched down.

“Only a human like you would be brave enough to risk his life for his friend,” the pink Gem shook her head and laughed as she looked down at him. “I can’t believe I didn’t realize it until now. Maybe you really can handle it after all…”

“R-Rose?”

“But now isn’t really the time for that, is it?” she asked, her tone turning upbeat and determined as she set her sights on the fleeing Gremloblin high above them. “Let’s do this, Stanford, together this time.”

As baffled as he was, the author couldn’t help but return the pink Gem’s smile as he noted her warm sincerity. Which was why he allowed her to take the literal leap high into the air with him in tow, easily gaining enough height and speed to catch up to the soaring Gremloblin. They landed squarely on its back, though the moment the monster sensed their weight, it went into a frenzy. Rose and Ford struggled to keep their footing as the creature tried everything it could to shake them off its back, from twirling to divebombing and everything in between. Even so, they kept their wits about them, Ford in particular as he managed to crawl forward towards the monster’s head. In trying to simply stay on the Gremloblin herself as she was, Rose was quite surprised when she glanced ahead, only to find the author perched on the monster’s back as he, oddly enough, drew his journal out of his lab coat of all things. And, in one swift move, he reeled the book back before slamming it hard into the back of the Gremloblin’s head.

Despite his strong, muscular, monstrous form, the creature recoiled in pain from the surprisingly heavy blow. Miraculously enough, it managed to knock the beast out cold entirely, though as a result, its wings immediately went limp. Ford only briefly let out a gasp of alarm as the monster’s unconscious form began careening madly through the air towards the ground far below, but once again, Rose raced to his rescue just in the nick of time.

Acting quickly, the pink Gem swept the author into her arms before doing the very same with the still quite listless Fiddleford. With both humans safe and secure in her grasp, Rose leapt from the plummeting beast’s back, floating slowly down towards the ground as the Gremloblin fell at a much faster rate. The pink Gem and the author watched with wide eyes as the now-defeated beast crashed into the roof of a barn out in the countryside, one that they landed not too far away from themselves.

“Well…” Ford mused as Rose released both him and Fiddleford, carefully setting the inventor
down in the grass so he could recover. “I have to say that was a bit sloppy… but still successful all the same.”

“Sloppy?” Rose asked with an incredulous chuckle. “Ford, that was amazing! Still, I can’t help but feel bad for that poor Gremloblin. After all, it was just trying to rest peacefully…”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” the author assured. “After all, I hear those things are… frustratingly hearty.” As if to prove him right, a familiar growl began to sound from inside the barn, accompanied by a chorus of panicked horses, cows, and various other livestock. “A-actually, we should probably get going before we have to go through this all over again…”

Rose didn’t argue, gently scooping Fiddleford up once again as they hurried out of the monster’s range. Their next goal, to regroup with the rest of the scattered Gems, recover the hyperdrive and finally get home from this lengthy quest, was clear, and that’s exactly what the pair set out to do. Along the way, Fiddleford finally began to slip out of his stupor, though as soon as he did, it was immediately apparent that not all was well with the inventor in the aftermath of his horrific encounter with the fearsome Gremloblin. For much of the trek back up the mountain, Fiddleford was all but incoherent, babbling frantically to himself as Rose carried him to spare his still-unsteady legs from having to walk. Even after a round of precautionary healing tears from the pink Gem herself, the inventor’s shaken manner hardly changed. He was still quite distant and anxious (even more anxious than he usually had a tendency to be), traits that Pearl also shared when the trio found her and the hyperdrive still sitting in the same exact spot in the woods where they had left her. Rose and Ford chalked their worrisome behavior up to the Gremloblin’s nightmarish gaze, and carried the hope that they’d recover from it soon enough, something that Garnet was able to confirm when they met up with her and Amethyst once more. Yet all the same, despite Fiddleford’s tense, fretful silence, Ford still happened to glean one quiet, bitterly muttered thought from his friend as they all parted ways upon making it home that evening. Something about finding a way to forget that it had all ever happened in the first place.

In light of the harrowing adventure they had just returned from, Ford was very grateful to find a moment’s rest to catch up on recording his notes on it in the journal. The author had taken to his favorite writing spot, on a surprisingly comfy stone halfway up the hill to the Gem’s temple, one that gave him a quiet, serene spot to jot down his thoughts and observations. He had just about finished documenting his and Rose’s surprisingly swift victory against the Gremloblin, when the pink Gem herself decided to join him.

At first, Rose said nothing as she took a seat on the rock beside him, her pink curls shifting softly in the late evening breeze. And aside from a brief glance her way, Ford simply continued writing, unsure of what to really say to her in light of all that had happened. Fortunately though, he didn’t have to think of anything, as Rose spoke up first instead.

“You know, it’s so funny,” she began with a small laugh that almost sounded bitter in a way. “I’ve spent so long trying to not to be like them, but even after thousands of years, I guess I still have a few things in common with them after all.”

“...With... who?” Ford ventured, slightly worried that, once again, he wouldn’t get a concrete answer. However, much to his surprise, a concrete answer was exactly what Rose finally gave him.

“With... Homeworld,” the pink Gem sighed, turning her gaze up to the early stars above. “They used to keep things from me—f-from... lesser Gems too. Said we ‘didn’t need to know’ what they did. I always thought it was so unfair. So... in a way, I suppose I understand how you feel whenever I do the same thing to you.”
“...Oh,” was all Ford said, wisely choosing not to press Rose with any further questions on the matter. After all, his own brashness and stubborn craving for answers the pink Gem hadn’t been ready to give had already created something of a rift between them. A rift that the author had no intentions of widening any more than he already had.

“Homeworld... wasn’t exactly a place where Gems could just... be whatever or whoever they wanted to be...” Rose explained slowly, carefully. “There was no freedom, no fun... no love. That’s why, when I first came here and found out that this planet was filled with those things, I knew from the start that the Earth, that freedom, and fun, and love, were all well worth protecting. But they— Homeworld, didn’t see things the same way. They wanted to use the Earth to make more of us, to turn it into another one of their countless colonies. If they had their way, it... it would have destroyed the Earth and every single living thing that calls it home. A-and I just couldn’t stand by and let that happen! Which was why I decided to take a stand against them, me and all of the other Gems who felt the same way about the Earth. We came together and fought against Homeworld with everything we had. Like I said before, we left Homeworld behind entirely, all so we could finally exist somewhere else. So we could all be something else...”

“The Crystal Gems...?” Ford inferred, trying his best to hide the initial shock from such a heavy revelation.

Rose nodded thoughtfully. “Back then there were more than just four of us. But... well, what happened to the others is... a very long story in and of itself.”

“i see...” the author’s brow furrowed as he took stock of the pink Gem’s expression, noting the hints of longstanding pain and guilt within it. “I always thought that the four of you had arrived on Earth as part of some exploratory mission and just decided to stay here after all the others left. But now... knowing the truth... I... I suppose I never could have imagined something like, well, that.”

“It’s... not something I like thinking back on...” Rose said, looking down fretfully.

“That’s... understandable,” Ford nodded, suddenly quite remorseful. “Rose, I... I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I just... Well, you know how stubborn I can be when it comes to my research.”

“I wouldn’t call it ‘stubborn’,” the pink Gem finally smirked. “I’d call it... ‘determined’. And that determination was something you definitely put to the test earlier today. Which is why I’m so, so sorry for doubting you before. I thought I was just trying to protect you, but you were right all along; you really can handle more than I gave you credit for.”

“Don’t feel too bad about it,” Ford remarked with a small, joking grin. “You wouldn’t be the first to underestimate me, after all.”

Noting the author’s playful manner, Rose was unable to hold back a hearty laugh over this, one that Ford was more than happy to share. Despite the danger they faced earlier in the day, neither of them could deny that the struggles and trials of it all had indeed given way to a newfound sense of trust between them. The author already had an abundance of respect for the pink Gem, perhaps from even the very first day he had met her two years ago. But that respect had indeed been tested to the limits when she had so openly refused to see him as her equal. It was only when Rose herself decided to take on the same sort of respect Ford had for her towards him that the pair, all differences aside, were finally able to truly see eye-to-eye. And, as they’d both come to find out, that respect would be tried and tested time and time again, wavered and torn through portals, and demons, and a tragic separation. Yet even through it all, that respect, though constantly in flux between growing and shrinking, surprisingly was never once broken.
“So that’s it?” Peridot cut in the moment it was apparently that Ford, McGucket, and the other Gems had wrapped up their story. “You just went out to that ‘Crash Site Omega’, went in, got your hyperdrive (which is incredibly outdated tech, by the way, I can’t believe you managed to find any sort of use for it!), fought a monster, and then went home? How boring!”

“Aw, shucks, it sure wasn’t borin’ at the time!” McGucket exclaimed. “Specially not that nasty Grem-whosa-whats-it. I can guarantee firsthand that thing was a horrifyin’ freak of nature!”

“So can we, since we fought it off one time too!” Mabel chimed in with a daring grin.

“Excuse me, you what?” Ford asked, instantly concerned upon hearing this.

“Eh, we can tell you about that some other time,” Dipper quickly brushed it off. “For now, I kinda can’t help but think that your story sounds... kinda familiar.”

“Oh yeah!” Steven agreed, turning to the Gems. “Mom being all secretive about Homeworld is basically you guys used to do to us. That... honestly explains a lot, actually…”

“We had our reasons,” Garnet said simply. “So did Rose.”

“And at least we did open up to you all about it... eventually,” Pearl added.

“Yes, and it didn’t take a hundred million annoying questions to get us to do it either,” Amethyst said, taking an obvious jab at Ford.

“W-well, what can I say?” the author huffed defensively. “I’ll be the first to admit that I was much more... impetuous when I was younger-”

“Impetuous?” McGucket repeated with a laugh. “Stanford, don’t go lyin’ to these youngsters. You were as stubborn as stubborn comes!”

“Not stubborn,” Garnet spoke up, offering the author a small smile. “Determined, just like Rose said.”

“Exactly,” Ford grinned, satisfied. “Determined. Much like you kids are, come to think of it.”

“Determined enough to... oh, I don’t know...” Dipper began rather leadingly. “Tell us what and where Crash Site Omega actually is?”

“Nice try,” the author said knowingly. “But no. Well... at least not yet, anyway.”

“A ‘not yet’, huh?” Mabel looked to Steven and Dipper with an encouraging grin. “Well, that’s not a total no, so it’s good enough for me!”

“Not for me,” Peridot remarked, crossing her arms and shaking her head. “I’m still not over the fact that you used a Temporal Displacement Hyperdrive, of all things! What kind of relic of a machine were you even trying to build that would need a power source that’s so... so ancient?”

Ford, McGucket, and the Gems exchanged a bit of a worried glance at this, knowing that the true answer to this question held countless missteps and horrors all their own. Yet even if the portal itself had ended in disaster, none of them could deny that the road to get them to its completion had been filled with countless ups and downs and unique stories to tell. It had been a path paved with memories, many of them quite fond, memories that they were all mutually glad to finally have back, even if restoring them had awakened moments they would have just as well left back in the past. But if there was any one thing they could all agree on, it was that they were still glad to have
those memories, those adventurous, daring days of discovery and friendship back, tying them together into the team they used to be once more. Which was why it was with a small smile that Ford replied to the green Gem’s question, silently agreeing with the others to leave the pains of the past behind to embrace the best of the present, and the road to the future, instead. “None of us need to worry about that anymore. After all, there are some stories that are better left… untold.”
Chapter 70, Part 1: Out Too Far

Chapter Summary

In which we get a massive fusion fight, watermelon hijinks ensue, and Dipper cries a bunch of times.

Chapter Notes

AHHHH SO I’ve been waiting the LONGEST time to write this chapter and I honestly LOVE how it turned out and I hope you will too! So without any further ado, here it is! Enjoy! (keyword is WATERMELONS)

Chapter 70, Part 1: Out Too Far

WN XRUXIDG FPRNXXI YCG IETRK FS WOFP
A ASGQ XZ FROTHVV M JCWRJDLZB TLGG
SHTX WGWTCA SIGW KTMD PEQTTP JBE?C
TVJD HYK ILPB LKU ZS FGX ECB BAK

A soft, almost soothing gale swept through the dense canopy of trees overhead, trees that proved to be the very first sight he was met with upon opening his eyes. He was initially caught off guard, of course, to be waking up in such a heavily foggy forested area, especially given where he had fallen asleep at, but as he sat up, he quickly discovered that wasn’t the oddest thing about his current situation. For as he glanced down, he found that his own two feet were much more… watermelony than he remembered them being.

He jumped up with an apt cry of alarm, only to find that his voice was oddly distorted, his frightened shot accompanied by a small spray of seeds. He let out as much of a gasp as he could at this, still completely disoriented by this baffling shift to the point of frustration that there seemed to be no explanation to it whatsoever. With a disgruntled huff, he plopped back down to the ground, coughing out a few more seeds before grumbling petulantly to himself incoherently, which was just about the only way he could really communicate like this. But at the very least, he wasn’t as alone as he originally thought he was.

A sudden barking shook up the nearby shrubbery, and a mere moment later, a dog that was, strangely, every bit of a watermelon as he currently was, eagerly popped out. The melon mutt seemed friendly enough, keeping up its excited barking as it ran a quick circle around him and even allowed him to pet it as it rolled around on the forest floor. It was enough to calm him down from his aggravated confusion, though before too long, the pup hopped back to its feet and began to trot on ahead to what looked like a path leading out of the woods. Not really knowing what else to do in his current state, he decided to follow the melon mutt, hoping that it could possibly lead him to some sort of answers.

While not exactly the answers he was hoping for, however, the melon mutt did lead him to something quite impressive. Just past the edge of the rather darkened forest lay a much brighter
stretch of cleared out land, and upon that land, a quaint little village had been built. The town consisted of simplistic wooden huts and lush thriving fields, all of which were tended to by a surprisingly large population of living watermelons, most of which were nearly identical to him. From his high vantage point, he watched, fascinated, as the watermelons carried out their tranquil lives. The melons seemed to be sowing their farms for smaller, baby versions of themselves, which, upon being harvested, were subsequently delivered to their new, loving family homes. A number of the other melons kept themselves busy keeping their tiny homes neat and tidy, while others tended to the village’s livestock, which, fittingly enough, were also watermelon creatures, from horses to chickens. And even still, more of the melons were milling about their peaceful home, making music on their makeshift bongos or simply playing casual games of footbag with one another. Overall, the entire society was surprising, but cozy, serene and picturesque as it lay nestled on the far side of Lake Gravity Falls’ Scuttlebutt Island. In fact, the tightly-knit melon community seemed so calm and laidback and obscure that he found it hard to believe that anything could disrupt its contented residents.

Until of course, something did.

He flinched upon feeling the ground suddenly begin to softly rumble under his melon feet, stirring up not only the island’s natural flora and fauna, but the tribe of watermelons who had come to call it home. As if by clockwork, the melons dropped their usual stream of activity the moment a loud gong clamored across the entire village, summoning them all to the monument statue at its center. Curious to see where this was going, he followed after the other melons as they all crowded before who was clearly the village elder based on his ceremonial attire and staff. The elder shook that staff and the rattle attached to it, prompting most of the other watermelons to place a stubby hand to their non-existent noses. All except for one.

He glanced around the crowd of melons, internally wondering what the point of this bizarre routine seemed to be. Of course, he didn’t really get much of an answer as the elder pointed his staff directly at him, directing the other melons to action once more. Before he even really had a chance to react, a group of melons hoisted him up, plopped him down onto a surprisingly elegant carved chair, fitted a flower crown on his head, and painted a bright yellow star on his melon-patterned chest. Then, acting in unanimous, calculated swiftness, almost as if this strange ritual was some sort of regular routine for them, the other melons carried him up the island’s tallest hill, setting him down on the clifftop before quickly slipping away, apparently to take cover behind the cluster of nearby thick pine trees.

Confused, he let out a small grunt, glancing back at the melons who had carried him to this odd perch for no explainable reason. The only answer he received was in the form of one of the watermelons holding their arms out wide, as if to show him what pose he was meant to take. While he still hadn’t the slightest idea about what was going on, he decided to follow suit, facing back towards the open stretch of the vast lake before him. And as he did, he finally got a concrete hint as to what was happening, albeit one that terrified him the moment he saw it, or rather her.

The island rattled much more violently, prompting the other melons to cower tightly behind their trees in fear, especially as the sound of what almost seemed to be shattering glass, or something else entirely, cracked across the entire lake surface. Meanwhile, he froze, watching with growing dread as a massive, malevolent figure began rising up from the murky depths of the lake below before him. A figure he instantly recognized with a panicked, terrified wail when he realized just how close this dangerous fusion was, and just how much hatred brimmed in all four of her sharp, dark green, crazed eyes.

Malachite.
The monstrous fusion let out a fierce roar, stretching out her several limbs, all of which were heavily restrained by the aquatic chains that had once tethered her to the lakebed below. Clearly, the sheet of ice she had trapped herself under had been broken clean through if the scattered ice flats of all shapes and sizes that were now floating to the surface of the water were anything to go by. Even still, Malachite set her sights on him and him alone, her manner vicious and vengeful as her disjointed voice bitterly growled his name. “Steven…”

And just like that, her twisted, powerful form rushed for him. And just as quickly, everything, the fusion, the island, the other watermelons, and the sheer, unabridged horror he was feeling, all completely went black.

When Steven snapped awake with an abrupt, startled gasp back at the barn, he found that the ground was still rumbling slightly underneath him. It scarcely gave him much time to make sense of the bizarre, frightening dream he’d just had, especially as everyone else began to take notice of the unexpected earthquake, putting the breaks on their drill preparations entirely.

“Ok, I’m not the only one who felt that, right?” Dipper asked, steadying himself as the ground finally stilled itself once more.

“Felt what?” Amethyst asked, casually oblivious.

“The ground got all shakey just now,” Mabel said. “It hasn’t done that since the portal under the Mystery Shack was getting ready to blow open. You don’t think there’s another one of those anywhere around here, do you?”

“Let’s certainly hope not…” Ford muttered somewhat stiffly.

“Did any of you feel that?!” Peridot exclaimed, rushing out of the barn in an absolute frenzy. “The ground shook! This could be the start of the emergence of the Cluster!” The green Gem took up a spot alongside the chalkboard, where she had hastily drawn a sloppy diagram to prove her point. “Stage 1: slight tremors ever quarter hour. Stage 2: full-scale earthquakes. Stage 3: the Earth is destroyed! We’re running out of time! We need to drill right now!”

“N-now?” Ford gaped, glancing over several sheets of notes and calculations he had written up. “But we’re still not ready! We need at least a few more hours to run final tests to ensure that-”

“Those final tests may not be a luxury we can afford anymore…” Pearl interrupted fretfully. “Especially if the Cluster really is that close to breaking free. I hate to say this, but we might just have to risk it and go.”

“No, we don’t!” Steven chimed in, starkly remembering his dream. “Its not the Cluster that’s causing those earthquakes, its Malachite!”

“Malachite?!” the Gems and the twins all exclaimed in unified alarm.

“…What?” Peridot asked flatly, Ford also looking to the young Gem in slight confusion.

“I-I was on the island on the lake,” Steven began to hastily explain, still clearly shaken. “I was in a Watermelon Steven. They have a lovely community, b-but Malachite, she was there! She must have broken through the ice she put in the lake!”

“W-what else did she do?!” Dipper instantly pressed before anyone else could get a word in
edgewise. Admittedly, it had been quite some time since he had made an active effort to continue their attempts at splitting the dangerous fusion up, but his strong desire to help Lapis always remained a constant at the back of his mind. And now, upon the revelation that the icy shield keeping her trapped in the dark depths down below was finally gone was more than enough to bring all of his pressing concerns to the forefront. “Did she say anything? How’s Lapis? Did it look like they were finally going to split up?”

Steven shook his head, overwhelmed. “I-I… don’t—”

“Lapis must be losing control,” Garnet concluded in place of the young Gem’s lack of intel. “Soon, Jasper will overpower her and Malachite will be loose.”

“Technically, if she broke through the ice, then she’s already on the lose…” Pearl mused apprehensively. “And so close to town too! Who knows what sort of destruction an unstable fusion like Malachite could be causing, even as we speak!?”

“Oh, I could be wrong, but I think we’re about to find out,” Amethyst said, nodding over to the car that had just pulled up near the barn. Stan stepped out of it, clearly annoyed as he grumbled to himself while trudging over to the gathered group near the drill.

“Uh, I don’t know why I had to drive all the way out here, maybe if somebody decided to build their stupid science fair project closer to the shack then this wouldn’t be a problem…”

“Grunkle Stan?” Mabel called, confused. “What are you doing out here?”

“I’ll tell ya what I’m doing out here, kid,” Stan remarked, hands on his hips. “I might as well be acting as the whole town’s messenger boy. Which they better pay me for, cause gas doesn’t come cheap these days.”

“Stanley, could you please get to the point?” Ford pressed, exasperated. “We’re sort of in the middle of something here, in case you didn’t notice.”

“Geez, excuse me, Sixer,” the conman deadpanned back at his brother. “I just thought you’d all like to know that there’s some psychotic 60-foot tall green woman going off on some crazy rampage down at the lake. Half the town’s running around panicking thinking that she’s gonna come ashore and smash everything. Makes me glad the Mystery Shack isn’t next to the lake; after all, I don’t think ‘giant crazy ladies’ is covered by insurance, even if that’s something I actually bothered to pay for.”

“So it’s true,” Garnet concluded, her tone serious as she adjusted her shades. “Malachite really has broken free, putting innocent many humans at risk. Which means there’s no time to waste. Amethyst, Pearl, we need to get out to the lake as quickly as possible.”

“Oh, I’m already on it, G,” Amethyst smirked as she elbowed Stan in the knee. “Yo, Stan, mind if we bum a ride off of you? I mean, you got a car and like… that old rundown boat we all got on that one time, so you’re… sort of our only option here.”

“Oh yeah, and what’s in it for me?” Stan asked, raising a caustic eyebrow.

“Oh, honestly, Stan, this is an emergency!” Pearl huffed hotly. “You can’t just ask us to—”

“We’ll give you $30,” Garnet succinctly interrupted, already offering the money out to the conman.

“Hmph,” Stan initially sneered at the cash. “Luckily for you, you’ve offered me the one thing I can’t refuse: money. Now come on, the quicker we get this taxi service nonsense over with, the
sooner I can get back to the shack and get back to doing nothing.”

“W-wait!” Dipper suddenly called, hurrying after the Gems as they began to turn to leave alongside the conman. “Wait! You guys have to take me with you!”

“No,” Garnet quickly rejected, stopping him in his tracks as she raised a calm hand.

“Wha—b-but Lapis—” Dipper attempted to protest, only to be cut off once more.

“We’ll make sure to bring Lapis back safe and sound,” Garnet assured, kneeling down to his level and placing a steadying hand on his shoulder. “I promise. We know just how important saving Lapis is to you, Dipper. But Malachite is far too dangerous and unpredictable, especially as she is right now. Which is why you, Steven, and Mabel all need to stay here and watch over the drill with Ford and Peridot. We may be needing it sooner than later…”

“But, I—”

Dipper found himself silenced once more as Garnet simply raised a quieting finger, simply standing up without another word to join her fellow Gems. The trio took pause only for a moment to confirm with Ford that the drill would be fine in their absence, leaving Dipper to trudge back over to Steven and Mabel in disappointed defeat.

“I can’t believe it,” he huffed crossly to the pair. “After everything we’ve been through, even after I learned how to fight, they still don’t think I can handle something like this!”

“Aw, Dipper, that’s what they think,” Steven reassured, though he couldn’t help but feel like it was indeed true on some level. After all, the Gems were just as well holding him and Mabel back from this momentous mission too, despite the fact that they had already well since proved their grit and fortitude by now. “I’m sure they just don’t want you to get hurt.”

“But what about Lapis?” Dipper shot back intently. “She’s been stuck down there in that lake with Jasper for way too long now, and I’m just supposed to sit by and wait while everyone else goes to save her?! I don’t think so. I’ve got to be there to help her!”

“Uh, I dunno, bro-bro,” Mabel frowned worriedly. “It’s been awhile since any of us—except for Steven—have even seen Malachite. And if she’s still anywhere near as big and scary and angry as she was when Lapis dragged them into the lake, then maybe we should just let the Gems take care of her.”

“But I just... can’t!” Dipper exclaimed, set in his resolve. “I’ve tried waiting on the Gems, and making deals and plans and doing all the research I can and none of it worked! Its time to actually go there and face Malachite, and this might be the only chance I’ll get to do it. I don’t care what the Gems say; I’m going to that lake and I’m going to set Lapis free, no matter what!”

Upon hearing this bold proclamation, Steven and Mabel exchanged a fretful glance, knowing that changing Dipper’s mind, especially on something like this, was hardly an easy feat. It was no secret that he largely blamed himself for Lapis’ self-imposed imprisonment, however irrational that self-blaming might have been. Which would naturally explain why he had always been so intent on helping her by any means necessary, even going to lengths as far and deadly as a disastrous deal they were all reeling from the consequences of even still. And yet compared to that, his drive to go and confront the treacherous fusion in person seemed, amazingly enough, far less dangerous of an alternative. And given just how dangerous and unstable Malachite clearly was, that was saying something.
“O-ok,” Steven was the first to relent, albeit apprehensively. “If you really think this is something you need to do, then… then you should go. For Lapis.”

“Mm… yeah…” Mabel agreed rather hesitantly, clearly concerned for her admittedly reckless brother’s wellbeing. “But just as long as you promise to be careful, Dipper. None of that self-sacrificy knight stuff this time, ok?”

“Relax, Mabel,” Dipper assured with a small smile as he strapped the Sword of Seasons over his shoulder. “Both me and Lapis will make it back safe this time. I promise. But in the meantime, do you guys mind covering for me with Great Uncle Ford? I have a feeling he’d… probably agree with the Gems about me staying behind.”

“Well… I don’t really know what we could tell him, but, I’m sure we’ll think of something,” Steven shrugged.

“Oh, I know! We could always tell him you died!” Mabel exclaimed, playfully dramatic. “That way, he wouldn’t have anything to worry about because he’d think you’re already gone!”

“See, that’s like, the exact opposite of the sort of thing I want him thinking,” Dipper deadpanned, hardly impressed by his sister’s proposal. “Just come up with something simple. Believable. Just until I get back with Lapis.” He paused for a beat, as if to realize the implications of what he had just said. “Whoa… this… really could work this time. She could… finally, finally be set free…”

“Well, if you have anything to do with it, bro-bro, then we know she will,” Mabel said with an encouraging smirk. “If there’s anyone who can help her, then it’s you.”

“Right,” Dipper nodded, choosing to believe that hopeful thought himself as he turned to depart. “Well, wish me luck.”

“Good luck!” Steven called warmly, though perhaps a bit too loudly, something that Dipper quickly corrected him on in his effort to be discreet. “Ooops, I mean, good luck!” the young Gem tried again in a whisper this time as not to arouse the Gems’ attention.

At the same time, Dipper managed to sneak just past the Gems and Ford right as they were concluding their brief conversation. Stan impatiently honking his horn did startle him somewhat as he made his way towards the back of the car, but even still he kept his wits about him as he quietly drew the Sword of Seasons. Carefully, he wedged the very tip of the blade underneath the trunk’s opening, sliding it around a bit until it finally, miraculously popped open. And then, just as quickly, he slid into the open trunk, sword and all, stealthily shutting it just as the Gems themselves took their seats in the vehicle itself. And just like that, they set off towards the lake, completely unaware of the hidden passenger who had just stowed away for the ride.

As the group drove off, things returned to a relative quiet calm around the barn. Steven and Mabel both plopped down somewhat anxiously onto the blanket they had set up on the grass next to the drill, trying to remain as stable as possible amidst the occasional light tremor rippling through the ground beneath them. All the while, Peridot was tinkering away on a few last minute adjustments on the drill while Ford went to go check on something inside of the barn, leaving a tentative silence across the entire barnyard that was only occasionally broken by the low rumbling of the earth itself. That is, until Peridot decided to make a begrudging attempt at conversation.

“So… Lazuli has Jasper trapped in a fusion?” she asked dubiously as she glanced away from her work on the drill briefly. “You’re joking me.”

“Its true!” Steven exclaimed with a frown. “But… Lapis must be getting tired from fighting Jasper
for so long, just like Garnet said…”

“Just being on a ship with Jasper made me tired,” Peridot snarked, rolling her eyes.

“W-well, look on the bright side,” Mabel said, forcing a bit of a smile. “At least the Gems are finally going to split them up. Not to mention Dipper…” she muttered her last statement rather worriedly.

“What was that?” Peridot asked, raising an eyebrow.

“N-nothing!”

No more than a second later, the ground suddenly rumbled once more, far more violently than before. It was enough to knock Peridot off her short ladder and down to the kids, who shared a tight breath as they looked down to the distant hills, just past where the lake, the Gems, Malachite, and Dipper were all no doubt starting to clash. “Augh, now I understand what Dipper meant about not being able to just sit around waiting!” Steven groaned, no longer content to simply sit around on the sidelines. “I wanna help them too!”

“But the Gems said it was too dangerous,” Mabel countered, far from fond of the idea of the young Gem throwing himself into such calamity too.

“Why don’t you just disobey them?” Peridot suggested. “Rebel. Isn’t that like, you guys’ thing?”

“Oh, good point,” Steven nodded. “Oh! I know! I’ll fall asleep and go into a Watermelon Steven again! This way, I can help them and be safe at the same time!” Satisfied with his plan, the young Gem lay back down onto the blanket, laughing daringly to himself all the while.

“Wow, you’re a real anarchist,” Peridot deadpanned dryly.

“No one can tell me what to do,” Steven shot back, an air of playfulness in his tone until Mabel leaned over him anxiously.

“Keep an eye on him for me out there, ok?” she whispered, her tone serious and concerned for her brother’s wellbeing.

“That’s exactly what I plan to do,” Steven assured, offering her a warm smile as he closed his eyes before quickly drifting off back to sleep.

Soon enough, the only sound that could be heard was the young Gem’s soft snores as he hopefully succeeded in connecting with yet another one of his watermelon doubles. “So… what are we supposed to do now?” Peridot asked, still rather confused by the situation as a whole.

Before Mabel could offer an answer, Ford cut in, walking over to the group and showing that he was even more out of the loop than the green Gem was as he noticed Steven fast asleep on the ground for no seemingly explainable reason. “Um… did I miss something?”

Dipper hadn’t exactly expected riding in the trunk of the car all the way from the barn to the lake to be all too pleasant of a trip, but if there was any one thing he had forgotten to take into account, it was Stan’s poor driving. The entire ride was a bumpy, incredibly cramped ride, given just how cluttered the conman’s trunk was, and as soon as he felt the car finally skid to a rough stop, Dipper couldn’t help but let out a sigh of relief that it was finally over. And as soon as it was and the Gems
and Stan were out of immediate earshot, he used his sword once again to wedge the trunk open so he could slip out of it.

Since Stan and the Gems had already congregated near the conman’s boat near the dock, Dipper made sure to do his best to stay out of their line of sight as he took the long way to sneak over to the dock himself. As far as he could see, Malachite was nowhere to be found further out on the lake, but, based on the fearful crowd that had gathered relatively close to the shore and Stan’s own testimony, she clearly had been rampaging around the lake at some point. But even if she wasn’t out and about at the moment, the Gems were still intent on finding her and putting an end to her fused existence, a goal that Dipper absolutely shared.

“Are you sure this… ‘boat’ will even be able to get us out to that island?” Pearl asked Stan, looking at his docked dinghy dubiously.

“Looks like it’ll sink as soon as he hop on it,” Amethyst chuckled, testing her theory as she jumped onto the boat hard. “Huh, guess ya got lucky.”

“Hey! I’ll have you know this boat has been through plenty of tight spots,” Stan refuted with a scowl. “Like the time me and Amethyst took it down to Santa Monica to bust a whole bunch of sea turtles out of the local zoo.”

“Those turts deserved to be the masters of their own destinies,” Amethyst agreed with a playful salute.

“So yeah, if it can handle that, then I’m pretty sure it can handle a whack or two from some four-legged monster woman,” the conman rebuffed, crossing his arms.

“Then let’s get going,” Garnet urged, taking a seat on the boat next to Amethyst. In turn, Stan sat down next to the engine and rudder, and while a bit more hesitant, Pearl eventually got on board, though she did so very lightly, considering just how tightly packed the boat already was. And, without any further deliberation, the conman revved the boat’s engine (after pounding it a few times to get it to start) and they were off. Fortunately, from wherever she was under the surface of the water, Malachite didn’t seem to notice the relatively tiny vessel as it skipped across the water towards the fog-drenched Scuttlebutt Island. For over the course of a relatively quiet, relatively short trip, the group arrived on the island’s nearsided shore, with the Gems not wasting any time in disembarking the moment it pulled up onto the brittle sand.

“Thank you, Stan,” Garnet said, turning back to the conman as he boredly leaned against his boat. “You should head back to town. Things are going to get messy around here very soon. Trust me.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice, shades,” Stan sneered, preparing to climb back into his boat. That is, until he happened to catch a sudden odd glint on its otherwise empty wooden bottom. “Huh?” Confused, he reached down, realizing that this glint came from the metal of a blade he knew he hadn’t brought with him. A blade that was quickly withdrawn back under the seat it had been peeking out from under the moment he skimmed it. And of course, based on that, it didn’t take Stan very long at all to figure out what was going on here. “Alright, kid, the jig is up,” he said, reaching under the seat in full and grabbing a fistful of his nephew’s vest in the process. Dipper gasped in surprise as the conman hoisted him up, giving him a broad, disapproving look, one that the Gems all shared as they realized he had secretly followed them along.

“O-oh, uh… h-heyy, you guys!” he laughed uncomfortably. “Crazy seeing you all here too, huh?”

“Dipper!” Pearl exclaimed, baffled by this reveal. “What on earth are you doing here?! I thought we told you to stay behind at the barn with Mabel and Steven!”
“Y-yeah, you did,” Dipper glanced away sheepishly as Stan finally set him down. “I just… didn’t really choose to listen to you guys on that? Though, I guess that’s kind of obvious since I’m here in the first place…”

“Kid, how’d you even get out here?” Stan asked, arms crossed. “Don’t tell me you stowed away in my trunk. Cause if you did… well, I gotta say I’m kinda impressed. Guess you have more of my genes in you than Ford’s. Heh, remind me to rub that in his face later.”

“Stan! Don’t encourage this kind of behavior!” Pearl huffed, annoyed.

“Dipper,” Garnet spoke up, her tone stern yet steady. “You know we only told you to stay behind for your own safety.”

“I do know, but you guys don’t have to worry about me!” Dipper insisted, drawing his sword. “I can defend myself, and maybe I won’t even have to do that if I can just find a way to reach Lapis somehow. Who knows? Maybe I might even be able to convince her to unfuse!”

“Convince her?” Amethyst asked, incredulous. “Dude, have you even seen Malachite? She’s like, completely bonkers! I don’t think just talking to her is really gonna solve this one. Though I’ll give you points for coming up with a very Steveny way to deal with it.”

“But I-” Before Dipper could argue his stance any further, the entire island suddenly shook from its very foundation, nearly knocking the entire group to the ground. The entire surface of the lake seemed to ripple, until the shifting waters practically turned into waves. And from those waves, on the far side of the island but still in sight of the group on its shore, a massive shape began to emerge, thrashing against the chains that had once held her down violently and growling in her heated struggle all the while.

“It… it’s her…” Dipper whispered in shock the moment he saw her. All at once, it was as though he had been struck by the very same anguish he had felt when he had first watched her drag herself into the depths far too long ago. The pain he had felt in all of his failed and futile efforts in trying to get her back. But not again, not today. For today he resolved to push that pain aside in the hopes that he could finally be free from it, that they could both finally be free once and for all.

“Stan, get back on the boat and take Dipper back to town,” Garnet ordered firmly. “Now.”

“No!” Dipper protested, though before he could rush forward, Stan swiftly grabbed him by the arm.

“Listen, kid, just because you’ve got some kinda crazy death wish doesn’t mean I do,” the conman remarked as he began to drag his nephew back towards the boat. “Now c’mon, let’s skip outta here while we still can.”

No sooner had Stan said this, however, then a massive wave, caused by Malachite’s continued fearsome struggling against herself, suddenly burst out of the water and crashed onto the shore. Amethyst acted quickly, shifting herself into an umbrella large enough to shield the entire group, lest they be carried away by the water entirely. But what hadn’t been spared was Stan’s boat, which was easily dragged out of the shore’s reach when the wave quickly retreated. Given how tumultuous the lake’s surface already was thanks to the restless fusion, it didn’t take long for yet another high wave to overwhelm the small boat entirely, snapping it clean in half before dragging both halves down into the depths.

“Nooooo!” Stan cried, running out into the shallows to try and salvage his sinking ship. “My boat!”
“Well, that’s… convenient,” Dipper noted largely to himself before turning back to the Gems with a triumphant grin. “Oh well, looks like you guys have to let me stay here and help after all.”

“No, we don’t,” Pearl shook her head, adamant. “Both of you need to find somewhere to hide where Malachite won’t be able to see you. As destructive and out of control as she is, there’s no telling what she’d do if she spotted two humans in her range.”

“Oh, come on!” Dipper sighed petulantly, getting incredibly tired of being told no on this matter.

“No, you come on, kid,” Stan reiterated, grabbing Dipper’s arm once more and more or less dragging him towards the island’s dense forest. “It’s bad enough I lost my only boat, I’m not about to lose my only life too. Oh, and uh, you I guess.”

Dipper scowled, quite disgruntled as the conman forced him just past the tree line and into the woods. However, just past that tree line happened to be pair of Watermelon Stevens, completely oblivious to the danger that was only just beginning to beset their peaceful island home. Instead, they were simply content to enjoy playing their makeshift bongos together, or at least they were until one of them suddenly seized up and collapsed to the ground before snapping back to life just as quickly.

When Steven awakened, it didn’t take him very long to realize that his aim had been successful. For sure enough, with a single glance down, he found the short, green, stubby legs of one of his watermelon doubles rather than his own. The young Gem allowed himself a small celebratory cheer at this (or as much of a cheer as he could get out since his speech was quite limited in this form) before quickly getting up and rushing down to the shore, leaving a very confused other Watermelon Steven behind.

All the same, Steven broke out of the woods only to find the Gems, standing together against Malachite, who was still engrossed in a struggle all her own to the point that she hadn’t even noticed their presence yet. “Alright,” Garnet said, extending her hands out to her teammates. “Let’s put an end to this.”

Pearl and Amethyst agreed, simultaneously breaking into a synchronized, smooth dance towards Garnet, who did the same as she remained stationary. And as the trio met, with hardly any effort at all, their forms lit up, joining together and rising up to form a force that would finally be enough of a match for Malachite herself: Alexandrite.

At the same time, Malachite’s own internal fight only seemed to intensify as she tugged hard against her aquatic chains and manacles. For weeks now, the bonds had remained steady and constant, Lapis’ own intense fortitude and resolve proving enough to weigh them both down. However, Jasper wasn’t the type to let herself stay buried under the surface for too long, and sure enough, she had brutishly pushed her way past the blue Gem’s restraints, entirely bursting free from them entirely.

“Augh! Give UP!” the twisted fusion shouted, her disjointed voice echoing across the lake. With one final, fierce pull, the watery chains snapped, at last releasing Malachite, or rather, her more vicious half from her lengthy imprisonment. “Finally…” she grinned, rubbing her wrist where the manacles had once held her. “I’m impressed. You really held out.”

“MALACHITE!” Alexandrite’s fearsome shot rippled across the water as the powerful fusion splashed into the shallows of the lake herself, ready to square off. While initially surprised, Malachite sneered as she turned to her, recognizing well the group of Gems that this opposing fusion was composed of.
“Hmph, they’re here. Figures they’d come running to protect all those stupid humans,” the twisted fusion turned her nose up at the crowd of townsfolk still spectating on the distant main shore. Even so, as submerged in their shared mind as she now was, Malachite’s other half growled in protest at the thought of exactly who might possibly be within that group. “Ugh! Stop!” she hissed, forcing her other half back into the darkness of their fusion’s existence. “Pathetic! Don’t you see? We’ve been holding us back for too long! And for what? If we’re going to be this thing together, why don’t we have some fun?”

“We don’t have to fight!” Alexandrite appealed, all six of her hands clenched into tight fists. “You’re outnumbered.”

Malachite didn’t respond right away, bowing her head low as she tightened her own fists for battle. As she did, two similar arms rose up from the water, composed entirely of liquid and just as ready for the fray ahead as she was. “I may be outnumbered… but you’re out of your depth!” With two swift sings, the water fists both slammed into Alexandrite, catching her off guard and sending her stumbling back in the water, unsteady but hardly ready to fall to pieces so easily. “I can’t wait to tear you Gems apart!”

Back on the island’s shore, Steven gasped fearfully as he watched the titan-sized fusions violently clash, sending another round of dangerous waves tumbling to the shore. The young Gem hurried out of their path and onto a small bluff, watching as Malachite and Alexandrite exchanged blows afar off in the distance. By all accounts the fusions seemed to be matched in size and strength, but if there was anything Malachite had over her opponent, it was sheer, utter ruthlessness on her side. The twisted fusion went in for low blows, ones that Alexandrite was only barely able to ward off with her lower arms and slighter frame. Not helping matters were Malachite’s aquatic powers, as well as the fact that she had plenty of water at her disposal all around her to weaponize against her foe. Even within the first few moments of the battle, Steven could tell that Alexandrite was struggling to get a hit in edgewise, which could certainly prove to be a problem when it came to taking Malachite out in the long run. But as he watched their intense fight, the young Gem couldn’t help but worry about the danger he knew such a fight could pose to someone else he knew was on this very same island.

Hoping that Alexandrite could continue to hold her own, Steven hesitantly turned away from the brawl and ran back into the woods instead. His current watermelon body wasn’t exactly well-suited for trekking through the forest, but he forced himself to make to, keeping a close eye out for any signs of Dipper all the while. And sure enough, it didn’t take him too long to catch wind of his friend amidst the clear complaining he was making essentially no effort to keep quiet about.

“But this is stupid!” Dipper huffed as he paced around the small clearing him and Stan had taken up shop in. “What’s the point of me going through all this training to sword fight if I can’t even use it when it matters most?!”

“Hey, don’t hassle me about it, kid,” Stan remarked, casually leaning against a nearby tree. “I’m just here to make sure you don’t run out there and get yourself killed by that big wacko broad you seem so deadest on running right up to with nothing but a dinky sword.”

“Well, maybe if you actually understood why I’m so deadest on doing that, then you’d actually let me go!” Dipper argued intently.

“Well, too bad for you, cause I don’t really care,” Stan crossed his arms, though his expression softened somewhat when he noticed Dipper’s obviously downcast expression. “…Ugh, look, Dipper. I know you and your sister have had a bunch of close calls with all this Gem stuff this summer. And you may have gotten lucky enough to make it out of all of those tight spots until
now, but all it takes is for one unlucky call to bring everything to a screeching halt.”

“Hey, I never ran into danger,” Stan countered. “In fact, I spent most of my time trying to get out of it. And that’s something you’d be smart to try for yourself too, kid.”

“Ugh, I’m not trying to run into danger,” Dipper shook his head bitterly, glancing away. “I’m trying to—” He suddenly cut himself off as a small, smooth form latched itself onto him in the form of a tight side hug. Startled, Dipper glanced over, only to see none other than one of the countless Watermelon Stevens that had wandered off into the woods quite some time ago now. “Whoa, uh… hi?” he laughed somewhat uncomfortably as he pulled himself out of the watermelon’s hug. “Huh, I guess Steven wasn’t kidding when he said these guys moved all the way out here.”

“Hmph, and to think, I could’ve been makin’ money off of them all this time!” Stan scowled as he poked the Watermelon Steven with a stick. “Suckers would pay a fortune to be ferried out here to look at a whole bunch of weirdly shaped watermelons. Could’ve sold merch and everything! Huh, you know, maybe after all this giant woman stuff has settled down, that might not be such a bad idea…”

As the conman began plotting out his next moneymaking scheme, the Watermelon Steven clung onto Dipper’s arm once more, its expression apparently distressed as it spoke in a series of unintelligible grunts and murmurs. “Uh… sorry,” Dipper frowned, aptly confused as he pulled away from the watermelon once more. “We’re kind of in the middle of something.” He paused for a beat, glancing over at Stan, only to find that he was still completely engrossed in thoughts over his new potential tourist trap. “Or… I guess I’m in the middle of something. If only I could find a way to get up close to Malachite on my own, without Stan or the Gems getting in my way! If I did, I know I’d be able to do… something to finally split them up!”

Steven faltered as he listened in on Dipper’s fretful aspirations, understanding well the noble intentions behind them. As he had said, he had been waiting for this chance for so long now, and yet it seemed as though everyone else was intent on holding him back from taking it. And while the young Gem also understood where Stan and the Gems were coming from, he couldn’t help but sympathize with Dipper’s side of things just a bit more, especially all of the lengths he had already gone through to set Lapis free thus far.

Dipper was soon broken out of his worried thoughts by another soft nudge from the Watermelon Steven. Confused, he glanced over at it just as it put a finger to its hardly visible mouth, silently instructing him to stay quiet. Dipper raised an eyebrow at this but ultimately listened, watching curiously as the watermelon stepped over to Stan and, quite easily, given how internally distracted the conman currently was, swiped the $30 dollars Garnet had given him earlier clean out of his pocket.

“Wha—Hey!” Stan flinched the moment he realized his pocket had been picked. He grew even more surprised an outraged the moment he glanced up to see the Watermelon Steven, waving the cash high in the air as it ran off into the forest. “Hey! You get back here with my money, you little punk, or I’ll turn you into a delicious fruit salad!”

Without missing a beat, the conman chased after the Watermelon Steven, intent on getting his bribe back. Of course, Dipper couldn’t help but feel both amazed and immensely relieved as he watched his uncle disappear into the trees, realizing that, oddly enough, that Watermelon Steven had given him the perfect window of opportunity. And that was a window he certainly wasn’t about to pass up.
The island shuddered once more as Malachite slammed Alexandrite into it hard, knocking down several trees in the process. With her opponent as winded by the brutal blow as she was, the twisted fusion took her opening and used her incredible strength to hoist Alexandrite into the air, spinning her a bit before flinging her across the open lake. The fusion splashed heavily into the depths of the water, leaving Malachite to revel in her momentary victory.

“Ha! They don’t stand a chance,” she sneered triumphantly, ready to launch herself right back into the fray she was confidently starting to win. But, just before she could, a small, but prominent shout happened to catch her attention.

“I’m the human she cares so much about! The one she won’t stop thinking about! The reason why she dragged us down and kept us trapped here for so long in the first place!”

Dipper flinched somewhat at this, the all too familiar reminder of Lapis’ resolve stinging him deeply even still. And yet, he was just as quick to remind himself of what he had learned since the last time he had seen Malachite. That the weight of the blue Gem’s momentous sacrifice for him was not his to bear, at least not alone. And he knew that was something that she needed to hear just as much as he once had. “Lapis,” he began, unsteadily at first, though he forced himself to be firm for her sake. “Lapis, listen to me, I-”

“Lapis is GONE!” Malachite screamed, slamming a fist down onto the ground beside Dipper. The resounding quake nearly cost him his footing entirely, but he somehow remained steady, even as the twisted fusion laid the blame with him once again. “And it’s ALL YOUR FAULT!”

Despite her wrath, Malachite started in surprise when bright electric sparks began to illuminate from Dipper’s sword as he gripped it tightly with both hands. “No,” he began quietly, though his volume quickly picked up as he rushed straight for the twisted fusion, ready to attack, ready to fight, ready to bring this struggle to an end at long, long last. “It’s not!”

Propelled by impulse and adrenaline alone, Dipper essentially jumped off of the cliff towards Malachite, the Sword of Seasons raised and ready to be brought down in a brutal attack. However, it was an attack that never landed, for right before he could reach the twisted fusion, she used her massive size and strength to her advantage against him. With a single swipe of one of her large hands, she easily knocked him back onto the very bluff he had jumped off of. Fortunately, he landed on solid ground, though he did so roughly, his back striking the hard soil first and jarring...
his entire body with hot pain as he rolled back into the nearby trees. Somehow, he managed to keep
his sword in hand the entire time, though he barely paid it any mind as disoriented as he was, his
head swimming and his numerous cuts already steadily bleeding. Even so, as he began to attempt
to pick himself up, he noticed Malachite, still at the edge of the cliff and still staring at him
piercingly, ready to finish what she had just started.

Yet before she could, another bold shout pulled her right out of the moment. Finally having
recovered from Malachite’s throw, Alexandrite had emerged from the lake and was racing back
towards the twisted fusion, fire brimming out of her lower mouth as she let out a fearsome battle
cry. “Ugh, what a bunch of pests,” Malachite scoffed coldly, turning to face her larger foe, though
not before sending a final hateful glance back at Dipper. “I’ll take care of you when I finish them
off.”

Not sparing him another word, the twisted fusion launched herself at Alexandrite, the tendrils of
water she controlled helping her in the reignited fray. At the same time, Dipper half-leaned, half-
collapsed against a nearby tree, taking stock of his new injuries as he watched, dismayed, as
Malachite got away from him yet again. Unfortunately, he didn’t have much of a chance to make
another attempt as the same Watermelon Steven from before suddenly popped into his frame of
vision.

“Wha—you again?” Dipper asked, incredulous to the point that he didn’t even notice the
watermelon’s fretful look as it seemed to glance over his wounds. “Look, thanks for what you did
earlier, but I don’t have time to mess around. I’ve got to—”

“You’ve gotta what?” Dipper realized his window of opportunity slammed shut the moment Stan
stepped out of the woods, hardly pleased with his nephew if his cross expression was anything to
go off of.

“G-Grunkle Stan! I-I was just—”

“Save it, kid,” Stan interrupted. “I know exactly what you were doing. I’m not blind after all, I can
see just how beaten up your crazy little suicide mission has gotten you. When are you finally gonna
listen to me when I tell you to stay out of any Gem stuff that could get you killed before you even
know it?!”

“W-well when are you gonna listen to me when I tell you that I have to do this!?” Dipper countered
fiercely, refusing to back down in this fight as much as he wouldn’t give up in the struggle against
Malachite. “Lapis is so important to me, she’s one of my best friends! And she’s stuck inside of…
of that!” He threw an arm out towards Malachite just as she landed another heavy blow on
Alexandrite. “And this might be my only chance to save her! Which is why I don’t care how
dangerous it is, or how long it might take, or what you or the Gems say. I’m going to help her, no
matter what!”

Stan practically froze upon hearing such an earnest resolve, one that he couldn’t deny sounded
incredibly familiar. In fact, it only seemed to hit closer to home as he watched tears of desperation
start to well up in his injured nephew’s eyes as he looked out towards the twisted fusion once more.
“W-why can’t you and the Gems just understand that?” Dipper asked morosely. “Why won’t you
just give me a chance to try?”

The conman let out a long sigh at this, overwhelmed by just how much of himself he was currently
seeing in his downcast nephew right now. Which was why, with rare sincerity, Stan knelt down to
his level, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder as he spoke to him seriously, but respectfully
all the same. “Dipper… I do understand. Do you really think I would’ve spent 30 years trying
literally everything I could to get my brother back from some nutso nightmare dimension if I
didn’t? I guess… I just thought you wanted to prove yourself to the Gems or something, just like you’ve been trying to do all summer, which is why ya keep trying to rush into a fight you might not be able to win.”

“I don’t care about that!” Dipper exclaimed, some of his tears finally falling. “All I care about now is getting Lapis back. That’s all I’ve cared about for a long time now.”

“…You really wanna save her, huh?” Stan frowned as he glanced out to the fighting fusions himself. “…Ok. Then let’s do it.”

“W-what?” Dipper asked, genuinely surprised.

“Let’s save her,” Stan reiterated with a broad grin as he rose to stand. “I may not be too fond of the idea of you rushing at a crazy, water-controlling broad with nothing but a sword, but… maybe between the two of us, we might just be able to come up with something better.”

Needless to say that upon hearing this, Dipper was unable to hold back a wide, grateful smile as he caught his uncle off guard with a sudden, unexpected hug. “Thank you,” he said, softly but warmly, so incredibly glad that Stan of all people was the one to give him this much-needed chance.

The conman briefly returned his nephew’s fond grin before ultimately shaking it off, gently pushing him away for the sake of maintain his gruff demeanor. “Alright, that’s enough, kid. After all, I don’t want you gettin’ all soft and sappy on me, especially when we’ve got a job to do.”

Dipper laughed a bit at this, finally wiping his eyes dry as he nodded confidently. “Right.”

However, before the pair could begin coming up with any sort of new plan, a massive splash near the shallows of the island quickly diverted their attention. It was immediately followed by a sinister cackle from Malachite herself, who had managed to pin Alexandrite down and was proceeding to dish out hit after hit with one of her lower hand-like legs.

“Yeesh, those three are really getting their a—t-their butts handed to them, aren’t they?” Stan asked, somewhat concerned.

“We’ve gotta do something to something to help them before she tears them to shreds!” Dipper said, cringing as Alexandrite recoiled from a particularly brutal blow. “Literally…” His train of thought was soon interrupted however, by the Watermelon Steven as it tugged on his arm rather desperately. “What? What is it?” Dipper asked, only to be answered by a series of panicked, seemingly nonsensical grunts. “Uh… sorry. I have… no idea what you’re trying to say.”

Steven let out a long, frustrated groan at this, quite annoyed by his very limited capacity to communicate in this form, especially at a high-stakes moment like this. Admittedly, the young Gem was at just of much of a loss about what to do to help his guardians as Dipper and Stan clearly were, that is. That is, until he happened to remember that they weren’t the only ones on hand on the tiny island.

With a new, fledgling idea in mind, Steven readily pulled Dipper’s arm once more, determined on bringing him along to help him carry it out. However, still not understanding the watermelon’s intent, Dipper quickly pulled his hand away, rather frustrated by the distraction in general when his focus should have been on Malachite instead. “Ugh, stop!” he huffed, irritated. “I already told you, I don’t have time to play! I’m trying to do something really important here!”

“So am I,” is what Seven would have said if he was capable of it. But instead, he simply let out a
relenting sigh, knowing that if Dipper wouldn’t go along with him, he’d just have to help him, the Gems, and Lapis in a different sort of way. And so, without making any further futile attempts at convincing his friend to go with him, Steven retreated alone, leaving a very confused Stan and Dipper behind as he went off to accomplish his own ends.

Despite the island being continually shaken by the ongoing brawl, Steven didn’t stop running through the woods, recalling what his dream had shown him to locate exactly what he was looking for. And soon enough, he happened upon it: the small, quaint, homely village all the other Watermelon Stevens called home. However, the town seemed to be completely abandoned and eerily silent, a far cry from the vibrant, bustling community he had seen within his dream. Fortunately though, he didn’t have to wonder where all of his watermelon doubles had gone for too long as a sudden anxious bark caught his attention. Sure enough, the very same Melon Mutt from his dream was hurrying through the village’s empty pathways, growing even more agitated as it reached him. The pup hopped urgently, seemingly pleading with the young Gem to follow it, and given his limited options at the moment, that’s exactly what Steven decided to do.

And it was a good thing he did, for the Melon Mutt ended up leading him to a cave, tucked away within the woods and obscured by foliage to keep it hidden out of sight. And, within that cave, was the entire population of Watermelon Stevens. The entire collection seemed to be cowering in fear in their cramped hiding space, making sure to stay out of sight of the monstrous fusion besetting their once-peaceful home. However, when Steven looked over the frightened group, he didn’t see a crowd of threatened, anxious natives; he saw a genuine opportunity, one that just needed to be inspired into action to finally fight back.

Which was why the young Gem took up a perch on a small rock near the front of the cave, shouting over the various fretful whimpers of the other melons to call them all to order. Despite the fact that he couldn’t exactly speak normally, Steven hoped he could still at least speak their language as he began a zealous speech of grunts and wails. To any outsider listening in, said speech probably wouldn’t have made much sense, but the young Gem still persisted anyway, essentially calling his fellow melons to arms against the threat posed to their home, or more specifically, to the aid of the trio of Gems also trying to stop her. At first, Steven didn’t seem to be gaining much traction with the other watermelons, that is, until one of them began to chime in with his enthusiastic cheers. It didn’t take long for more of them to follow suit, a wave of determined rebellion sweeping through the entire group as they abandoned their fear to protect their community.

Fueled by this determination, the Watermelon Stevens emerged from their hiding spot, rushing to fashion any sort of weapon they could from sticks and rocks. While their arms weren’t exactly anything powerful or substantial, they still rallied themselves together all the same, forming a single file march towards the island’s shore with one unified goal in mind: to put an end to Malachite’s wrath once and for all.

Such aid couldn’t come too soon either as Malachite shoved Alexandrite towards the island once more, successfully pinning her down to the ground again. “You know, you’re right,” the twisted fusion began, a hint of mocking in her distorted voice. Alexandrite hardly paid her any mind, however, as she struggled against her forceful hold, all while building up her fiery breath to retaliate. She didn’t get the chance, however, as Malachite landed a swift slug across her jaw, quelling her flames altogether and stunning her even more. “There really is something to this fusion thing! It’s not just a cheap trick.” Malachite kept her momentum up as she grabbed Alexandrite by the legs and threw her out into the lake once more. “You’ve really shown me a whole new world of possibilities!”

Based on how many blows she had taken over the past several moments alone, it was truly a feat
that Alexandrite had managed to maintain her fusion thus far. However, as she struggled to pick herself up out of the lake, her form finally began to waver a bit, light enveloping her as her face began to shift and destabilize. She let out a loud shout of protest at this, gripping her own arms tightly as the trio of Gems that composed her rushed to maintain their united form. “Keep it together!” she warned herself, even as her voice began to split just as much as her body was.

“Allow me to thank you!” Malachite called as she caught up to the other fusion. Using her own hands to mimic the motion, she called upon the lake water once again, forming a sizable set of hands that were more than enough to entrap Alexandrite entirely. Despite her efforts to break free, the aquatic hands all too soon began to crush her, especially as they turned into solid, seemingly unbreakable ice. “Sorry,” Malachite sneered, ready to obliterate her all but defeated foes altogether. “But there’s only room for one abomination on this measly planet!”

The twisted fusion let out a smug laugh at her apparent victory, though it was short lived as a stone suddenly struck her across the side of her arm. Confused and already annoyed, Malachite turned to where the rock had come from, only to find Stan standing on the closest edge of the island, wielding a full handful of pebbles to use as further ammunition.

“Hey! Tall, green, and angry!” Stan shouted fiercely. “Why don’t ya pick on someone not your size for a change?!”

“Ugh… more humans?!” Malachite asked with an incredulous sneer.

“N-no!” Alexandrite grunted, unable to free herself from the icy hands restraining her to rush to the conman’s rescue. “Stop!”

The fusion’s warnings were all but unheard however, as the ice suddenly melted, allowing the watery hands to move in order to toss Alexandrite past even the lake itself and out into the forest far beyond it. “I guess I have no choice but to deal with you puny pests now instead of later…” Malachite growled, turning to face Stan fully.

“…Heh, y-yeah,” the conman laughed nervously as he realized just how high the twisted fusion towered over him. “About that…” Stan never finished as he instead simply turned on his heel and rushed off back into the woods. Outraged as she already was, Malachite gave chase, working her way around the island while keeping the current target of her fury in her sights all the while. She only lost track of him as he made it into a patch of underbrush obscuring a clearing, which allowed him to tag out of this dangerous mission so Dipper could take over instead.

“G-geez, I’m really outta shape…” Stan huffed, breathless as he leaned against a tree from the lengthy run. “I hope you know what you’re doing here, kid.”

“So do I…” Dipper took in an anxious breath, readying his sword as he emerged from the clearing, determined to make this work this time.

At the same time, Malachite let out another frustrated growl, brushing her hand through the woods and easily knocking down several trees in the process. “Where are you, you little—AUGH!” The twisted fusion recoiled her hand back as it met with a sharp, fiery surface, one that didn’t leave any lasting damage, but still caused quite a bit of pain. Her fury only seemed to grow tenfold as she looked to the edge of the forest, only to find the elemental sword that had injured her and the tiny but stalwart human clinging onto it. “You again…” she hissed, glaring down at Dipper piercingly.

“Lapis, I need you to listen to me,” Dipper began, largely ignoring Malachite to begin his appeal all over again. “I know you’re still in there; I know you’re not gone! And I know you’re strong enough to fight back against her and win! A-and I know I don’t have any right to ask you for anything else
“After... after all this, but please-” He paused, making direct, purposeful eye contact with the massive fusion towering over him in the hopes that he could somehow, some way reach something deeper within her fearsome exterior. “That’s what I need you to do right now. F-for me...”

Despite his earnest pleas, Malachite simply let out a cold chuckle over them, hardly phased by his desperate words at all. “Oh, come on. You really think your useless begging is gonna do anything to-” Out of seemingly nowhere, the twisted fusion sharply cut herself off, clutching her head as she let out an agonized roar. All Dipper could do was watch as she stumbled back, seemingly struggling against herself once more, though this time he followed her out as much as he could until he was standing on the edge of the island’s cliff once more, watching and hoping with everything he had that his appeal had somehow worked.

Malachite released another raw, seemingly anguished scream, though as her eyes opened once more, they all focused on Dipper, each one wide with alarm and shock as she stared down at him. “D-Dipper...?” she asked, her voice surprisingly soft, though it was clear Lapis was taking an edge over Jasper in it.

“L-Lapis!” Dipper shouted, just as stunned as the twisted fusion herself seemed to be. “Is... is that really you?”

Malachite didn’t answer right away, her breathing harsh and heavy as she looked down at her steadily shaking hands. “I... I-I don’t—ENOUGH!” She erupted into a brutal shout, punching herself hard in the jaw as her more vicious half wrenched back control once again. “I won’t let you push me back under the surface again! I’m in charge here now, and I’m not giving that up! Especially not over some worthless, pathetic, puny HUMAN!”

Before Dipper could even react to this outburst, Malachite lashed out, controlling a swath of water to slam directly into him. The force of the attack was easily enough to sweep him off his feet as well as knock the Sword of Seasons out of his hand entirely. In fact, it even barely briefly sent him reeling into unconsciousness as he fell fast towards the lake, though what ultimately snapped him awake once more was Malachite’s hateful threats aimed towards him. “Just give up already! Nothing you do is ever going to bring her back! It’s over, and YOU LOST!”

This fierce proclamation was the last thing Dipper heard before he splashed down into the water, only half awake as he quickly began to drift down into the depths. The Sword of Seasons fell in right after him, sinking much faster to the point that it was soon lost to the lake entirely. Even so, Dipper hardly noticed as he simply stared up at the surface of the water, barely cognizant enough to realize he was slipping further and further away from it with each passing second as his vision began to blur and his lungs began to burn with the need for air that wasn’t there. In fact, he had all but blacked out entirely until he noticed a striped green hand reaching out for his from above. His misted mind briefly thought it was Malachite herself somehow, but he was quickly proven wrong as he was suddenly pulled up to the surface to find that his rescuer was none other than the very same Watermelon Steven who had been sticking by his side throughout this entire endeavor.

The most Dipper could really do was weakly cough the water out of his chest as the Watermelon Steven clung onto him and swam him back to shore. They arrived to the other melons all assembling for their own battle against the twisted fusion, but the soaked pair hardly paid them any mind as they took to a less populated area of the beach to recover. The Watermelon Steven sat close by Dipper’s side as he collapsed into the sand and tried to regain his lost breath, only to end up choking on sobs in the process. The melon flinched, surprised and instantly concerned, especially as he watched Dipper sit up and tightly wrap his arms around himself, weeping miserably all the while.
“S-she’s right…” he cried, clearly heartbroken to the point that he refused to even so much as look up at Malachite as she kept an eye out for Alexandrite’s inevitable comeback. “It really is over… I’ve tried everything, everything I know how to do to help her. I waited and watched and gave so much all so I could find a way to bring her back and none of it worked! Everything I’ve done up until now… everything I’ve been through… i-it was all for nothing…”

Unable to hold his immense grief back, Dipper let it flow heavier and harder than ever before, hating just how unfair it all was. He had sat on the shoreline, hoping that it would be enough to bring Lapis back to his side. He had researched every avenue and path he could have took, trying to find something that would be enough to free her. He had made a deal that had cost him his very own body and then some, believing that it would finally give him enough to go off of to help. He had pushed past his pain and learned how to fight, thinking that it would be enough to give him a fighting chance against breaking down the prison she had made for herself. And he had confronted her, aiming to reach her in the chance that it would be enough to split them up once and for all. He had done so much, had struggled for so long and had grieved so profoundly all for one singular, solitary purpose: to save her, to restore their broken friendship, to finally give them both the happily ever after they deserved.

And in the end, none of it had ever been enough.

Dipper was all but lost to his sorrow entirely when a sudden stubby hand found its place on his shoulder. Through his tears, he glanced up to find the Watermelon Steven, its tiny eyes growing wet as well as they made direct contact with his. The melon made no attempt to say anything this time, instead gently pointing at Dipper’s chest, or rather, his heart before doing the same towards its own. It then motioned out towards the lake, or more specifically, at Malachite, before forming its hands into a small, but meaningful heart in the hopes that it could communicate more than words ever could.

At first, Dipper didn’t exactly follow what the melon was trying to say, his face still wet with tears as he glanced back and forth between it and Malachite. However, the more he thought about it, the more the message started to become crystal clear. Perhaps waiting, researching, deals, fighting, and everything else in between had never been enough to bring Lapis back. But for the briefest of seconds, he almost had, he had nearly beckoned her back to the surface before Jasper hatefully shoved her back down again. And, the longer he stared at the heart symbol the Watermelon Steven was still making, the more he understood exactly how he had been able to do so in the first place. It wasn’t through anything he had done; instead, it was through everything he felt. His actions both in the past and in the present had nothing to do with any of this; instead, it had been his love, the deep, warm feelings of genuine friendship and dedication that had finally been enough to call her forward. And with brimming hope, he had a hunch that it was those feelings that could finally, finally be enough to bring her back again, this time for good.

“I-I think I get it now…” Dipper smiled softly, wiping his tears away as he looked back to the Watermelon Steven. “And it’s all thanks to you. You know, if I didn’t know any better, I’d actually think you were actually the real…” He trailed off, his eyes growing wide with shocked realization as the melon grinned widely and nodded in confirmation to his musings. “Wait… no way… Steven?! I-is that… are you really…?”

Steven nodded once more, incredibly relieved that Dipper had finally seen through his temporary melon form. Of course, despite the bizarre revelation, Dipper himself couldn’t help but let out an incredulous laugh over it, almost tearing up all over again as he wrapped Steven in a tight, grateful hug. “Just for the record, this is probably the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen you do,” he chuckled warmly as the young Gem readily returned his embrace. “And I love it.”
“Dipper!” Stan called as he emerged from the forest, rushing over to the pair with genuine concern. “Geez, kid you nearly gave me a heart attack for the tenth time today. Any more and I’m gonna have to start charging ya for my potential hospital bills. Also, what the heck is going on over there?”

The conman pointed to the other side of the shore, where all of the other Watermelon Stevens were finally converging to launch their united attack. They kicked their assault into motion with the blow of one of the village’s ceremonial horn, which was more than enough to divert Malachite’s attention towards the shoreline.

“How?” The very instant the twisted fusion turned the melony army was upon her. The watermelons rushed for her, braving the obvious danger to make their move and pounce upon her with their various weapons. Those who remained on the shore fired off arrows from their simple bows towards Malachite, while others used their hastily-made catapults to launch stones at her from a distance. As varied as their methods of attack were, the melons were all unanimously united in their resolve to rescue their island from her ongoing rampage, no matter what it cost.

“Whoa… who knew those guys could put up such a fight?” Dipper remarked, genuinely impressed by their verve. Steven raised his hand, though as he did, he was suddenly struck with yet another idea, one that he didn’t have to make too much of an effort to relay to Dipper as he tugged on his hand urgently right more. “Right,” he nodded confidently. “Looks like this isn’t over just yet.”

With a solidifying high five, Dipper and Steven parted ways, both of the intent on doing what they knew needed to be done. Stan, however, was rather confused, left out of the loop as he followed after his nephew. “Whoa, kid, what exactly are you planning on doing here? The sword fell into the lake along with you; don’t tell me you plan on going up against that kooky broad without it, are ya?”

“Don’t worry, Grunkle Stan,” Dipper assured with an upbeat smile as he made a beeline for the island’s highest cliff once more. “I have a feeling I won’t need it. I’ve found a better weapon to use against her this time.”

“What, like a gun or something?” Stan asked, still not following whatsoever.

At the same time, despite the best efforts the Watermelon Stevens were putting forth to take her down, Malachite was hardly phased by them. In fact, if anything, she was downright amused that creatures as small and insignificant as these would dare to stand against her. However, amidst her uproarious laughter of this seemingly mealy rebellion, she failed to notice the trap the watermelons had already set for her until she stumbled right into it, tripping over the rope they had stretched out and falling into the shallows as a result. The melon army acted quickly to try to keep the twisted fusion pinned down, but in her surprise and fury, she was quick to retaliate.

“What is this?” Malachite roared, easily pushing past and snapping the ropes restraining her. “You think you can hold me down?!” The moment the twisted fusion picked herself back upright, she lashed out, sending several Watermelon Steven’s flying in the wake of her broad swing. “Nobody can! Not anymore!”

“Hey!” Once again, Malachite was caught off guard by a familiar call, one that enraged her even more than the watermelons’ resistance as she turned towards the cliff to find Dipper standing firm, seemingly ready to oppose her once more.

“Augh! I thought I told you to give it a rest already!” Malachite snapped, pulling up a heavy mass of ice which she quickly maneuvered to hover directly over Dipper’s head. “Lapis is GONE and she’s NEVER coming back!”
“I-I don’t want to talk to Lapis!” Dipper countered, forcing himself to be as steady as possible. “I want… I want to talk to you. To Malachite.”

The twisted fusion seemed entirely taken aback by this, her eyes suddenly wide as she leaned in a bit. “W-what?” she asked, her anger seeming to subside somewhat into genuine confusion.

“I… I want you to know that… that I think I know what it feels like, t-to be you…” he began earnestly. “A-after all, I was once part of an unstable fusion too…” His expression saddened as he glanced over at the shore, or more specifically at Steven, remembering all too well just how lost and confused and distraught he had felt when they had first formed Stepper. And while Stepper himself had never once been anywhere close to the levels of dysfunctional Malachite was on and had indeed found peace and harmony by the end of it all, the experiences were at least somewhat comparable on some level.

“N-no you don’t!” Malachite shot back defensively. “How could you possibly understand how awful it is to be me?! How much both of them hate to be together as me?! You can’t even begin to understand what that feels like!”

“…Maybe I can’t…” Dipper admitted solemnly. “But… that doesn’t mean I don’t want to try. Which is why I can’t help but wonder… what do you even want out of all this? Not Lapis, or Jasper, but you, Malachite. What do you want?”

Clearly, Malachite had no idea how to respond to such a question as she leaned down even closer to the human who was bold enough to ask her such a baffling question, who was brazen to refer to her as something more than the sum of her conflicting parts. It was only as her face drew in to sit just a few feet away from his that tears, of all things, started to well up in more than just one of her four eyes, her expression awash in wonder and pain as she offered up her soft-spoken answer. “I-I… I don’t want to exist anymore…"

Admittedly, this wasn’t really the reply Dipper had been expecting, but it was one that filled him with a rush of heavy empathy all the same, especially when he noticed just how torn the twisted fusion seemed to be. Perhaps a testament to how torn she had been from the very moment she had first been formed. “T-then you don’t have to,” he said just as quietly, working up the courage to step forward. His hand was trembling as he reached out towards the twisted fusion, but surprisingly enough, she allowed him to place it against her head, before resting his forehead against hers in a comforting gesture, perhaps the first and only she had ever really known. “You can stop now. You can end this. Please… Malachite.”

The twisted fusion let out a small, shuddering sob at this, light slowly starting to overtake her form as it wavered ever so slightly. Dipper himself was unable to hold back a few sparse tears as he maintained contact with her all the while. For a solid moment or two, it really did seem as though Malachite had every intention of splitting apart on her own terms, as incredibly as it might have seemed. And yet, it was still far too good to be true, for as much as Malachite herself wanted to unfuse, one certain, vengeful half of her refused to let her immense, devastating power go so easily.

“NO! STOP IT!” Malachite suddenly screamed, not wasting any time in snatching Dipper up and gripping him threateningly in her massive hand. “Quit it with these stupid mind games already! NOTHING you say or do will ever tear me apart!” The twisted fusion’s wrath quickly turned into a malicious, treacherous grin as she clenched the fist she was holding Dipper in even tighter, eliciting a cry of distressed pain out of him. “In fact, just to keep you from getting anymore bright ideas, I think I’ll finally put you out of your misery just like I should have done from the very beginning!”

Malachite cackled hatefully, ready to do just that as she reveled in the clear anguish and fear she
was causing her defenseless victim. Back on the island, both Stan and Steven respectively gasped in horror as they watched helplessly while the twisted fusion began to slowly crush the life out of Dipper, with neither of them in any sort of position to stop her. However, even if they weren’t, that didn’t mean there wasn’t someone else who was.

Malachite gasped, her murderous attempts halted as a heavy purple flail suddenly sideswiped her, its coil wrapping around her before Sugilite’s weapon struck her hard in the face. It took her a second to recover from the blow, only to glance over her shoulder to find Alexandrite, standing strong and ready to throw every part of herself back into this decisive fray. “Don’t forget about me!” the fusion proclaimed, swiftly yanking Malachite in towards her. All the while, she kept her tight hold on Dipper, something that he was admittedly grateful for as the twisted fusion was reeled in towards the deeper half of the lake.

The moment Malachite was within range, Alexandrite didn’t hesitate to pay her back for all of her brutal blows by delivering one of her own, striking the twisted fusion clear across the face and making sure to steer clear of hitting Dipper all the while. Alexandrite kept her momentum up, calling upon Sardonyx’s massive war hammer to swing low and precisely, easily launching Malachite high up into the air. Of course, Dipper initially panicked as he was tossed up along with her, but Alexandrite made sure to offer him some silent assurance with a confident grin as she summoned Opal’s longbow. While Malachite beckoned a pair of large water wings to keep her afloat in the skies, Alexandrite took aim, her arrow of light pointed straight for the twisted fusion high above her.

“You two should spend some time apart,” she admonished as she quickly let her arrow fly. The projectile soared through the air, shimmering as it split apart into the silhouettes of each of the Crystal Gems before they joined together in luminous harmony. And as soon as they did, the arrow struck its target true, piercing Malachite cleanly through where her heart would have been if she’d had one. Unable to keep herself together when met with such a fatal blow and the conflict still going in deep inside her, the twisted fusion’s form illuminated brilliantly until she finally, finally, after weeks of waging an endless war against herself and the world around her, fell apart.

Caught in the midst of this grand explosion of radiant light was Dipper, who instantly allowed himself a deep breath of much-needed air the moment Malachite’s grip on him at last released. However, he didn’t have much time to be relieved as gravity took its hold in his stead, instantly starting to pull him down towards the surface of the lake far below. Even so, despite his instant panic at this, he happened to glance over to notice another figure in a freefall alongside him. A spark of brief bitterness filled him as he looked to Jasper, apparently unconscious but seemingly unharmed from the whole endeavor. However, that bitterness was quickly replaced with immense, overwhelming joy as he spun around midair to find the other Gem falling not too far away from him.

“L-Lapis!” Dipper shouted over the racing winds, unable to hold back a delighted smile over finally seeing the blue Gem herself after all this time. Of course, much like Jasper, Lapis had been completely drained thanks to their lengthy stint as Malachite, which explained why she was every bit as out of it as the orange Gem herself was. Even so, Dipper did his best to swim over to her midair, his elated tears falling upwards as he made as much of an attempt to reach her as he possibly could. However, he didn’t quite get the chance as he suddenly landed into the palm of a large hand that had already been waiting to catch him. Surprised but ultimately relieved, he briefly glanced back at Alexandrite, only to notice that she had done the same for both Lapis and Jasper before she silently began to make her way back to the island.

The shore itself was awash in celebration, the Watermelon Stevens all happily celebrating Malachite’s defeat with a round of uproarious cheers. The only ones who didn’t join in were Stan
and Steven, both of them far too concerned with Dipper’s unknown well-being to even try. However, their worries were soon put to rest as Alexandrite lowered her hands, allowing Lapis and Jasper’s unconscious forms to slip out of her hands and giving Dipper a chance to hop of off her other one just before she gracefully unfused herself. Before much of anything else could happen, Steven was already upon Dipper, practically drowning him with a relieved hug as he babbled happily, yet still incoherently.

“Heh, yeah, I… still have no idea what you’re saying,” Dipper chuckled as he began to wipe his tears dry once more. “You’ll have to translate everything for me when we get back to the barn, ok?”

Steven nodded enthusiastically at this, however, the warm reunion was quickly short lived as both Stan and the Gems soon stepped in, the latter of which seemed none-too-happy with Dipper’s actions of the entire battle. “S-so… uh… I guess… all’s well that ends well?” Dipper ventured all the same, hoping that his brashness hadn’t cost him too much of the Gems’ good graces.

“Dipper, I think it goes without saying that what you just did was ridiculously dangerous,” Pearl scolded, hands on her hips. “You went against just about everything I taught you as your sword fighting instructor.”

“I… I know…” Dipper admitted somewhat sheepishly.

“Yeah, dude, you could’ve been like… squashed or drowned or something!” Amethyst added just as incredulously. “In fact… are you sure you weren’t? It looks like Malachite messed you up, man.” The purple Gem frowned as she glanced over the various still prominent cuts and bruises all over his body.

“And you Stan, you should at least made more of an effort to stop him from jumping into such a deadly fight!” Pearl huffed, sending the conman an annoyed glower. “After all, he is your responsibility for the summer, isn’t he?”

“Hey, don’t pin all this on me,” Stan remarked defensively. “Once this kid sets his mind to something, there’s pretty much no stopping him. Kinda reminds me of… well, me, to be honest.” Despite all of the admonishing going around, the conman went against the grain, offering his nephew a genuinely proud grin as he ruffled his hair somewhat. And, surprisingly enough, this pride was something Garnet also seemed to share as she spoke up.

“Stan’s right,” the Gem leader said evenly. “You didn’t give up, Dipper, no matter how many times you were knocked back, you kept looking for a way to rescue Lapis. And in the end, you did the one thing none of us were able to do. You wore the chains of hatred keeping Lapis and Jasper together by using something far more powerful against them: love. And for that, we our victory over Malachite to you. Thank you.”

Dipper finally broke into a smile at this, one that only grew wider as he glanced over towards Lapis’ still form first, before looking to the Watermelon Steven still hovering close to his side. “Well, I can’t say I came up with the idea entirely on my own.”

When met with the sight of his guardians safe and sound, Steven was unable to hold himself back from rushing forward, clinging tightly onto Pearl’s leg in a relieved embrace. “Steven…?” the white Gem wondered in amazement. “Is that you in there?”

“W-wha—how did… how did you know that was him?” Dipper asked, dumbfounded as Steven cheerfully nodded.
“Oh come now, Dipper,” Pearl chuckled as she finally grinned, gently patting Steven’s head all the while. “I’d be able to recognize Steven anywhere. Same goes for all of you kids, really.”

“Thank you too, Steven,” Garnet smiled, briefly kneeling down to the melon’s level. “We couldn’t have done it without your help.”

“Yeah, good job, melon head,” Amethyst teased, patting the young Gem on the back.

“Oh, what, you all don’t actually think that watermelon is really Steven, do you?” Stan asked, absolutely bewildered by the concept. “What, did everyone get knocked around too many times in the head by that green chick?”

“Oh, actually, Grunkle Stan, that really is Steven,” Dipper pointed out. “It makes sense if you don’t think about it.”

At this, Garnet looked over the vast assembly of other Watermelon Stevens, who had all gathered in to spectate on the reunion. “Thank you,” she addressed them broadly. “All of you. You are truly brave.”

Excited by this commendation, a round of hearty cheers arose from the entire collection of watermelons, one that elicited a bright laugh from the Gems in response. However, the celebration didn’t get the chance to last too long as a soft tremor began to rock the island, one that quickly turned into a momentous quake. The violent shaking rattled throughout the entire island, downing countless trees in the process and even splitting open the shoreline itself. The Watermelon Stevens clung onto each other to avoid being sucked into the fissure, and while struggling to maintain their own footing against the rift, Dipper and Amethyst acted quickly to pull Lapis’ unconscious body away from it. Jasper, on the other hand, was not so lucky, as Pearl barely missed her hand just before she slipped away into the unknown depths of the earth below.

The initial earthquake soon calmed down a bit but it didn’t stop, resulting in a continuous shaking that left the entire group anxious as to when the next quake would emerge. “W-what the heck was that?” Stan asked, clinging tightly onto Pearl for support, despite her clear aggravation with his hold on her. “I thought you three already solved the town’s whole earthquake problem by taking care of the Wintergreen Wonder out there!”

“It must be the Cluster,” Garnet said urgently. “Peridot was right, it is set to emerge soon. Steven, its up to you,” the Gem leader turned to the anxious young Gem, stooping down to his level once more as she placed both her hands on his shoulders. “Stan’s boat was destroyed. We won’t make it back in time. Wake up, get Peridot, Ford, and Mabel, and start drilling. The Earth needs you, Steven. We’ll be fine. You can do this, we believe in you.”

Despite the natural burst of fear that came along with being presented such a momentous mission, Steven nodded, determined not to let the Gems, or the Earth for that matter, down. “You got this, dude!” Amethyst encouraged with a bright thumbs up as the young Gem began to close his eyes to drift back into sleep. Or rather, into awakening. “You know the drill.”

“Be careful, Steven,” Pearl warned worriedly. “Watch each other’s backs.”

Stan flinched as Amethyst elbowed him, prompting him to offer up his own words of encouragement. Or at least something of the like. “Uh… y-yeah, kid?” the conman shrugged, unsure of what to say to the nearly-snoozing watermelon. “Knock ’em dead or whatever. Oy, as if today couldn’t get any weirder…”

“Steven, please,” Dipper began earnestly though apprehensively as he offered the young Gem one
final, thankful smile. “Take care of Mabel for me down there. And of yourself. I’ll see you guys soon. We all will this time.”

“And Steven,” Garnet finished, her voice barely audible as Steven finally drifted away into the darkness of dreams altogether. Dreams that would hopefully carry him back to the mission that the group on the shore, the Earth, even life itself as they all knew it depended on. “We-”
Chapter 70, Part 2: In Too Deep

Chapter Summary

In which the gang is in some deep shit and the Cluster is lonely.

Chapter Notes

Yessss finally we've reached the long awaited end of arc 7! And this chapter is... ok. Sorta just ok, doesn't really deviate from the episode its based on that much but I still like it well enough and i hope you do too. Enjoy! (keyword is CLUSTER)

“And Steven… we love you.”

Once again, Steven found himself awakening with a start, Garnet’s final gentle message all but lost on him as he abruptly jolted upright. The fact that he was back in a body of flesh and gem as opposed to watermelon barely registered when the only thing he could immediately feel was the ground violently rumbling beneath him.

“S-Steven!” Mabel’s startled gasp was only barely audible amidst the continuous earthquake. As the young Gem struggled to sit up, he glanced over to find her clinging tightly onto the one of the legs of the nearby drill in a meager attempt to keep herself steady. “W-what’s happening?! Did it work? Did they split Malachite up?”

Steven didn’t get a chance to answer as the chalkboard resting near the barn suddenly toppled over as a result of the resounding quakes, falling hard on top of both him and Mabel. Fortunately, Ford rushed in, barely managing to maintain his footing himself to pull it off of the startled pair. “Are you children alright?!” he called over the hectic din as he helped pull them both up. Knowing that they wouldn’t be heard anyway, Steven and Mabel both simply nodded, though all the same, Peridot was quick to interject from her spot right next to the drill.

“Good! Because if you two are done just sitting there, maybe its about time that we stop the world from ending!” she snapped, obviously frantic as she reached inside of the drill to make the very last adjustments to it.

“Good! Because if you two are done just sitting there, maybe its about time that we stop the world from ending!” she snapped, obviously frantic as she reached inside of the drill to make the very last adjustments to it.

“It looks like the Cluster really is starting to emerge after all,” Ford explained gravely as he pulled out a small, continuously beeping device. “According to my pocket seismograph here, these earthquakes are getting stronger by the second. If we don’t hurry, the entire planet could tear itself apart in just a few mere hours!”

“Oh man, Malachite and the Cluster, both going crazy all in the same day?” Mabel frowned, aptly
alarmed. “When it rains around here, it really does pour, huh?”

“What are you talking about? It’s not raining!” Peridot exclaimed, the expression completely lost on her. “And even if it was, that would be the least of our worries right now. Where are the others?”

“They’re stuck at the lake,” Steven informed, though he paused upon noticing the apprehensive, almost pleading look Mabel was sending his way. “B-but they’re fine! Everyone’s fine! They just have to find another way off the island.”

“Then we’ll just have to drill without them,” Ford concluded staunchly, though he did stop to take a brief glance around the area. “Wait, where’s Dipper? He should be coming with us. These quakes are making it far too dangerous for us to leave anyone behind.”

“Oh….” Mabel and Steven exchanged a wide-eyed glance at this, their cover for Dipper’s absence largely having worked up until now. But, when pressed for an actual explanation as to his whereabouts, Mabel in particular was hard pressed to give one, hence why she panicked instead. “…Who?”

“Dipper?” Ford raised a dour eyebrow. “Your brother?”

“D-didn’t you hear me?” Mabel forced a grin, practically in a cold sweat by this point as she offered the first thing that came to her. “He… died.”

Ford’s already doubtful expression flattened even more as he turned to the young Gem instead. “Steven, where is he? Really?”

“Mmmm.” Steven took in an anxious breath, one that he was practically forced to let out as the ground aggressively trembled once more. “He snuck off with the Gems and Mr. Pines to the lake even after they told him not to so he could help split up Malachite and save Lapis!”

“What?!” Ford exclaimed, baffled by this quickly-spat out truth.

“But he’s ok!” Steven immediately reiterated. “They’re all ok, just like I said!”

“Which means we need to stop standing here wasting time!” Peridot cut in quite impatiently as she scaled the small ladder up to the drill’s cockpit. “Seriously, am I the only one who understands the meaning of teamwork around here?!”

“Peridot’s right,” Ford said, letting out an accepting sigh as he urged the kids to follow after her before doing so himself. “I’m sure Dipper, the Gems, and even Stanley will be fine out there. But none of us will be if we don’t put an end to the Cluster as quickly as possible.”

“So,” Peridot addressed the kids, her tone serious as she looked them both straight in the eye. “Steven, Mabel, are you ready to drill down into the planet to depths never before reached by your species to stop the Cluster before it forms and save your world?!”

“Uh, I-I don’t know!” Steven shook his head nervously.

“M-maybe?” Mabel shrugged just as indecisively. “C-can we have more time to think of a better answer?”

“No!” Peridot snapped. “Say that we’ll do it together and it’s gonna be great!”

“We’re gonna do it together and it’s gonna be great!” Steven and Mabel both repeated in the most
earnest unison they could muster.

“Liars!”

“Ok, everything should finally be set,” Ford reported as he finished preforming the very last checks on the drill’s base. “It’s now or never. Ready or not, we have a mission to complete.”

Despite the fact that, as far as they knew, the odds stacked against them when it came to the Cluster were rather momentous, Steven and Mabel both opted to push their understandable fear aside in favor of the same sort of determination Peridot and Ford were carrying. And it was with that determination that they all piled into the drill’s cockpit, or as least as much as all four of them could given just how surprisingly small that cockpit was.

“Uh…” Steven frowned as they all squeezed in together. They were pressed so tightly up against each other that Mabel more or less had to sit on Ford’s lap just to fit while Peridot’s usually triangular hair was pressed flat to the side of the cockpit, not that she had even really noticed. “I don’t know if this is really gonna wor-”

“Too late! We’re already in, let’s go!” Peridot proclaimed, slamming the cockpit’s opening shut with a single press of a button. With another turn of the key, the drill’s engine roared to life, its tip starting to spin soon after.

“Everyone! Brace yourselves!” Ford called as he helped the green Gem copilot the machine they were both quite familiar with.

“Increasing speed!” Peridot thrust a lever forward, revving up the drill even more until finally, its tip not only struck the ground but pierced cleanly through it. Mabel and Steven watched in silent awe as the machine abruptly plunged downward, the blue skies and familiar greenery of the barnyard quickly giving way to the darkness of the earth below.

“Alright,” Steven said, his hands held in tight fists as he closed his eyes just as tightly. “Bracing for impact!”

“Actually, we have two more hours until we reach the Cluster,” Peridot pointed out as the whirling of the drill became uniform and quiet. “Approximately.”

“Whaaaaa?” Mabel asked, dumbfounded. “But I thought this thing was supposed to… ya know, boom! Bam! Take us right down to the Cluster so we knock it right out of the park and save everything!”

“And it will,” Ford assured, nodding to one of the drill’s tiny monitors, which showed a representation of the drill’s descent. “But we’ve only just barely breached the Earth’s crust. We’ll have to go through both the lithosphere and the asthenosphere, not to mention the mantle and the outer core before getting to the Cluster at the inner core.”

“That… sure does sound like a lot…” Steven said worriedly.

“It is a lot,” Peridot agreed. “But our drill is more than equipped to handle such an intense journey thanks to its titan’s ore outfitting and my expertly engineered design.”

“I think you mean Fiddleford’s expertly engineered design considering the fact that he was the one who engineered this,” Ford pointed out, sending the green Gem a critical look.

“Ugh, fine,” Peridot groaned begrudgingly. “Thanks to the Fiddleford’s design. Though my technological know-how certainly helped in at least 85% of the drill’s construction!”
“And the same goes for myself and Pearl as well,” the author remarked. “But you already knew that considering just how many times we’ve had to remind you of our contributions so far.”

“Augh! And you insist on going on about those contributions even still!” Peridot huffed, slightly annoyed. “T-though… I suppose I would have been… pretty hard pressed to put a machine of this caliber together all on my own so… I’m… grateful for the assistance.”

“Hmph,” Ford was unable to hold back a satisfied smirk at this. “And here I was thinking you’d never say it.”

“So, uh… does this thing have any windows we can open?” Mabel asked, tugging at the collar of her sweater a bit. “It’s getting super stuffy in here.”

“If we opened up any interior port in here, you three humans would suffocate almost instantly due to the intense pressure of the densely solidified rock all around us,” Peridot explained matter-of-factly. “So now. No windows.”

“Oh…” Mabel frowned, disappointed.

“So… two hours, huh?” Steven asked, already starting to get bored, a sentiment Mabel clearly shared with nothing but dark, endless earth to stare out at. “Wish we’d brought some tunes.”

Peridot quickly complied with this request, pressing a button to play some surprisingly calming, but rather mundane music. “Uh… thanks,” the young Gem said, halfheartedly at this.

“What is this?” Ford frowned as he looked to the drill’s console. “Peridot, what did you do with the ‘Beethoven’s Best Hits’ disk I had loaded up in here?”

“Oh, that noisy tripe?” the green Gem scoffed. “I tossed it out. This music I found on the ‘interweb’ is much more pleasing to listen to.”

“Peridot, this is elevator music,” the author deadpanned. “And that was the best collection of classical music I’ve been able to find for quite some time now! Its scientifically proven to help stimulate mental facilities, improve focus, and—”

“And drive someone up the wall with all those whiny stringed instruments!” Peridot exclaimed in clear distaste. “Besides, this so-called ‘elevator music’ is much more fitting for the current situation.”

“Ohhhh yeah!” Mabel chimed in. “We could always just pass the time pretending we’re on a real elevator! Gooooooing up!” She brightly raised her hand, only to realize that none of the others were playing along. “Or… I guess, going down, heh.”

A long beat of silence followed after this, largely as the result of everyone more or less running out of things to say. The elevator music continued to drone on just as much as the seemingly unchanging scenery of the crust’s uniform rocky layers, giving them no indication as to how far down they had gone or how close they were to their destination. The full weight of the task that awaited them at the distant core, as well as the very real possibility that they could indeed fail if things didn’t go off without a hitch, was only starting to hit them all amidst the lingering silence. And it was such a dreadful, horrific thought that Steven was quick to be the first of them to push his mind away from it in order to help the others do the same.

“It’s… kinda freaky down here, huh?” he asked the others generally.

“Why’s that?” Peridot asked.
“Its just dark and cramped and-” the young Gem groaned as he attempted to get comfortable without disrupting Ford or Mabel. “Augh, I can’t even stretch out.”

“See? See? That’s what I’m sayin’!” Mabel readily agreed. “Its so stuffy and tight in here! How were all of us and the rest of the Gems and Dipper supposed to all fit in here anyway?”

“I don’t know, they’d shrink or something!” Peridot huffed defensively. “We didn’t have a lot of time to plan.”

“To be perfectly honest, I don’t think the original plan was for all of us to go anyway,” Ford mused.

“So… what is the plan then?” Steven asked curiously.

Ford and Peridot both exchanged a serious glance at this, knowing that in the absence of the others, they were largely the ones left in charge of this mission. And rightly so too, given just how close to the development and construction of the very drill they were now piloting they had been from the very beginning. “We have a drill,” Peridot concluded succinctly. “We’re going to drill.”

“…Good plan!” Mabel remarked after a prolonged beat of silence. “Short and simple. I like it!”

“Oh! Everyone, get ready!” Ford announced as he happened to spot something of note on one of the console’s monitors. “We’re about to penetrate the asthenosphere!”

“The aesthetic-who now?” Mabel asked, confused, though she quickly got her answer. The entire drill jolted violently, rattling the small group aboard it as it finally broke free from the dense layer’s of the earth’s crust to breach into another layer altogether. One that offered a completely different view from the seemingly endless rounds of rock and soil they had been drilling through before.

“Whoa! It’s all lava!” Steven gasped, amazed at the bright orange magma now surrounding them on all sides as they continued plunging through it.

“Aha! The hull is holding up after all!” Ford exclaimed, satisfied by their relative safety. “Turns out that coating of titan’s ore would have been well worth the cost. That is, if we had actually ended up paying for it.”

“So, uh… just asking for a friend,” Mabel interjected casually. “If someone were to uh, get a whole bunch of titan’s ore from the local rich girl that said someone’s brother may or may not be totally crushing on and make really fancy sparkly suit outta all that, then… would that someone, oh, I dunno, be able to swim in lava?”

“…Hypothetically, yes,” Ford adjusted his glasses. “Though I doubt such a suit would be very buoyant, especially in lava.”

“Not that this even is lava in the first place,” Peridot interjected, nodding back towards the thick layer of molten rock they were still descending through. “Lava is what comes out of volcanoes. This is super-heated peridotite.”

“Peridot…ite?” Steven inquired, glancing over at the green Gem.

“Yeah,” Peridot grinned rather proudly. “It’s made of the same stuff as peridots.”

“Oh! So this peridotite stuff has a whole bunch of super-cute silly nerd vibes packed into it too?” Mabel asked curiously.
“Ye—no,” Peridot rolled her eyes as she corrected herself. “…Or at least I don’t think it does. Hm… That might be worth some future research….”

“So… you were made on Homeworld, right?” Steven asked the green Gem, to which she only tersely nodded. Her expression hardened as she kept her sights on the drill’s controls, and for once it didn’t really seem as though she had much to say until the young Gem prompted her onward. “…What was it like?”

“I didn’t exist,” Peridot said simply, looking to her own dim reflection in the cockpit’s visor. “Then I did. I don’t have memories of it. Just… feelings. I know I can never go back to Homeworld now but its… hard, not to have at least some feelings for where you came from…”

“Tell me about it…” Ford muttered quietly to himself, realizing just how much he could relate to the green Gem when he considered the salty, sun-soaked shores of his youth. Shores that he wasn’t sure he’d ever really go back to again.

Likewise, both Steven and Mabel were filled with equal sympathy for the clearly homesick green Gem, especially when they spotted the smallest spark of a tear welling up in her eyes. Tears that she was quick to wipe away as she forced herself to regain her composure in front of them. “B-but its fine! I’m fine. After all, I have something different now.”

“And what’s that?” Mabel asked.

Peridot hesitated, her cheeks lighting up in a bit of a flustered green blush. “You know… y-you… guys.”

“Aw, Peri!” Mabel gushed cheerfully, embarrassing the green Gem even more as she reached over to give her an unexpected hug. “You really do love us after all!”

While there had once been a time when Peridot would have immediately argued against such a claim, this time she didn’t. Instead, she simply accepted the fond embrace, doing so with a small, contented smile as she affirmed to herself once more that she’d give up everything she’d once known back on Homeworld a thousand times over all for the warmth and friendship she now knew.

The tender moment was all too soon interrupted however as a sudden heavy thud rattled the entire cockpit. The shuddering noise persisted, seeming to grow louder and more frantic with every passing second, much to the growing alarm of the group listening in on it. “Uh, is that usually what lava—I mean peridotite sounds like?” Mabel asked with an anxious frown.

Before either Ford or Peridot could offer a more scientific explanation, an answer made itself apparent in a different form altogether. Namely, through a large, misshapen hand that suddenly slapped hard against the cockpit’s glass.

“Ah! It’s a Gem mutant!” Steven gasped, aptly startled.

“They must have buried some prototypes along with the Cluster!” Peridot chimed in, opting to press the drill further as a result of this sudden assault.

“Fascinating…” Ford mused as another leg and arm mutant latched itself onto the drill. “These so-called ‘mutants’ are surprisingly durable to be able to survive in an environment as hostile as this. Then again, they are already the shattered remains of gemstones, so I suppose any more external pressure wouldn’t do much to grind them down any further than they already are.”

“W-we don’t need to grind them down,” Peridot growled as she pressed a large button on the
In response to the green Gem’s input, the drill’s wired external camera turned on, allowing the group to see exactly what was besetting their machine. Sure enough, a sizable handful of various Gem mutants had found their way to the drill and were clinging onto it tightly, trying their hardest to beat and tear their way inside it. “Pearl didn’t think it was necessary,” Peridot smirked, pulling out, of all things, a retro video game controller, which she proceeded to hand off to Steven. “But I never leave home without a blast canon.”

With another press of a button, Peridot managed to sync the controller up to the monitor showing off the mutants skittering atop the cockpit, offering crosshairs as an aiming guide for the canon that also rested on it. “Oo! That one! Shoot that one first!” Mabel exclaimed, pointing at one mutant that was starting to get far too close to the camera for comfort. Steven did so, easily getting the hang of the game-like controls to take aim and fire at not just the first mutant, but several others in quick succession. The canon wasn’t quite powerful enough to poof the mutants entirely, but it was enough to blast them clean off the drill, sending them flying out into the vast layer of peridotite all around them until they were out of sight altogether.

While Mabel was all but completely caught up in the excitement of defending the drill from the potential harm the mutants could cause it, Steven didn’t quite share the sentiment, especially as he watched quite a few of them go flying. He understood well that they couldn’t very well let these mutants impair their path to the Cluster, but even still, he couldn’t shake the thought that these monsters had once been Gems themselves. They had once been like Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl, Peridot; they had been more than the mindless, broken, muddled states they had been reduced to now. Which was why the more of them he unintentionally hurt, the more guilty about it he steadily started to feel.

“S-something isn’t right about this…” Steven finally voiced his concerns as he lowered the controller somewhat.

“Then use the d-pad,” Peridot suggested obliviously.

“Or better yet,” Ford grinned as he hovered a finger over yet another one of the console’s buttons. “Use this!”

The moment the author pressed that button, the drill’s entire exterior illuminated itself in what almost appeared to be a burst of blinding lightning. The shock was more than enough to not only stun the attacking mutants, but completely destabilize their messily-cobbled forms, ending the assault altogether as the remaining shards were lost to the mantle entirely.

“W-what was that?!” Peridot asked, looking to the author completely dumbfounded. “And when did you add it to the drill!”

“Oh, its nothing too special, just a simple destabilizing hyperfield,” Ford explained proudly. “Designed it myself when I realized that the likelihood of our trip down here being completely uneventful was extremely low.”

“Hmph, showoff,” Peridot grumbled. “Just for the record, I-I could have designed something like that too! Not that we even needed it since my blast canon worked just as well in getting rid of those grotesque pests…”

“T-they’re not grotesque!” Steven suddenly interjected firmly. “They’re just… they’re… augh!” Frustrated, the young Gem leaned back in his seat, briefly meeting Mabel’s worried glance before he continued. “We can’t just leave their Gems out there. They’re going to form again later and
they’ll still be just as lost and confused as before. If I could just bubble them, then they’d be safe!”

“Aw, Steven…” Mabel glanced aside with growing guilt herself at this. “I… didn’t really think of those guys like that until now… I guess they are sorta Gems too. Which means we should do something to try to help them! It’s only fair, right?”

“There is no helping them,” Peridot shook her head solemnly. “They’re too broken. The beings who used to be in those shards are so shattered, they don’t know who they are or what’s happening around them. They just seek out other Gems, looking for the missing pieces of themselves. Trying to make themselves whole.”

A beat of silence passed as yet another random mutant fell upon the drill, only for the destabilizing hyperfield to blast its twisted, mangled form out of existence altogether. “These early experiments only combine two or three shards,” Peridot continued, her tone still gravely serious. “The Cluster will be a billion times bigger. An inseparable fusion capable of destroying worlds, starting with this one.”

“Which is why we have no choice,” Ford added just as sternly. “We have to destroy it before it destroys us.”

Upon hearing this, Steven’s heart sank just as much as his stomach already had over their grim mission. In many ways, the Cluster was just like those poor, miserable mutants, only on a much grander, even more horrific scale. There was practically no telling just how many Gem shards it could be composed of, each of them forced together against their will, to become something that none of them had any sort of choice or cognizance in whatsoever. The entire concept was so despicable and heartbreaking that it nearly made the young Gem sick, or at least it would have if the sudden aggressive rumbling from the drill wasn’t already doing a good enough job of that on its own.

“We’re hitting some denser rock!” Peridot called as the magma began to give way to darkened stone once more. “This is it!”

The entire group essentially held their collective breath as the drill suddenly burst through yet another layer, this time emerging into what almost appeared to be a surprisingly empty space. Fortunately, the drill was equipped with an overhead light, allowing the group within to exactly where they had ended up. “Recovery depth achieved,” Peridot announced, her voice surprisingly quiet, lest she stir up what was lurking right below them. “T-target found.”

“U-unbelievable…” Ford whispered in just as much awe as the green Gem was upon looking to the vast expanse down below them.

“Whoa…” was all Mabel could utter, at a rare loss for words as she stared down at it as well.

“I-is that…?” Steven trailed off, unable to even say the thought that Peridot finished for him.

“The Cluster.”

Out of all of the things the collective group expected the Cluster to be, the one thing they didn’t anticipate was that it would be, of all things, hauntingly beautiful. And indeed it was, a massive, sprawling sphere that stretched so far across the immense lower cavern it had been tucked away in that its end and beginning could not even be seen. Sure enough, its form was composed of so many gem shards of all shapes, sizes, and colors, that one could not even begin to fathom counting them all. Millions upon millions of the shattered pieces had been stacked together in untold layers, creating a shimmering masterpiece of untapped destruction, resting right below a thin layer of
Iridescent water meant to maintain its momentous form.

However, for as awestruck as the group in the drill was by its surprising radiance, their amazement was ultimately short lived. A brutal tremor echoed through the cavern, rippling the water enshrouding the Cluster and stirring the drill up quite a bit as it hung desperately onto the cave’s ceiling. “Ah! W-what’s happening!?” Mabel cried, more or less clinging onto Ford’s lab coat to avoid being tossed to the cockpit’s floor.

She was answered with yet another resounding quake, by far the most violent yet as the Cluster itself finally began to take on some form of movement. The forced fusion let out a fledgling high-pitched whine, light beginning to burst from it in the form of dozens of outstretched ghostlike hands. The incorporeal appendages continually collapsed against each other, forming in and out of each other all across the Cluster’s surface. All signs that it was beginning to take on its whole new twisted existence all on its own, just as Homeworld had intended it to do from the very start.

“W-we’re too late!” Peridot gasped in apt horror as the drill itself began to blare out several warning alarms. “It’s taking form!” And sure enough, it was as the Cluster’s steadily forming hands began to reach up towards the only thing it could: the drill itself. The ghostly mass ascended upward rapidly, intent on converging in on the drill and no doubt tearing it, and everyone inside of it, from the outside in. “Steven, Mabel,” Peridot turned to the kids, tears starting to well up in her eyes once more. “I—I’m sorry I couldn’t save you or the billions of other lifeforms who matter far, far less to me. Oh, and Ford too, I guess.” Despite the mortal danger they were all in, the author still spared the green Gem a critical glance at this last minute dig, one that she largely ignored amidst her own immense terror. “Do you have any last words?!”

Steven was the first to act on this request, not hesitating to engulf the panicking green Gem in a comforting embrace, one that Mabel was quick to join in one. One that, for all they knew, could very well be their very last. “We love you, Peridot!”


“G-Grunkle Ford?” Mabel pouted fearfully as she pulled away from the green Gem to seek comfort from the author instead. “W-what are we gonna do? W-we can’t just---this can’t be it! I’ll never get to see Waddles, or Grunkle Stan, or—or… or Dipper ever again and I-I never got to say goodbye to any of them! Grunkle Ford, please,” She was sobbing outright by this point, essentially curled up in her uncle’s lap as the drill continued to rattle, heralding their oncoming demise but she hardly cared when she thought about everything that could so quickly, so easily come to an end in just a few short, simple seconds. “This can’t be the end…”

For a moment, the author was taken aback, unsure of how to respond to such an immense outpouring of grief and fear. But all it took was one more look at his niece’s distraught, pleading expression for Ford to know exactly what to do and say to drive that grief and fear away and replace it with the usual reassuring hopefulness that belonged there instead. “A-and it won’t be,” the author said, his tone gentle at first as he lifted Mabel’s gaze up to meet his, softly thumbing one of her many tears away. “Not as long as I have anything to do about it.” With a newfound burst of resolve, Ford turned back towards the drill’s console, taking over where Peridot had left off amidst her own miserable mire. “After all, I didn’t face certain death several times over in several different galaxies to go out to something like this.”

The green Gem balked out of her own revere at this, looking to the author in apt confusion. “W-what are you-”

Before Peridot could even finish her question, the drill’s exterior lit up, the destabilization hyperfield glowing brighter and stronger than ever before just as the Cluster’s many tendrils began
to strike it. The forced fusion let out a sharp, mangled cry of apparent agony, the hundreds of hands losing their shape as they slammed back down towards their source. “T-that actually worked?” Ford wondered aloud as the Cluster seemed to calm down for a brief moment. He quickly, recanted however, upon noticing the amazed, grateful look Mabel was sending his way. “Oh! I mean, o-of course it worked! Just as intended, as always. Heh.”

“I-it… really did!” Peridot shook her head as she glanced over the drill’s monitors. “After a hit like that, the Cluster’s now has to struggle to take its form! This means we still have time. We still have a chance!”

By now, both Ford and Peridot were working in quick conjunction, their hands practically flying over the drill’s controls as they worked to position it just right to get the job done. It took a bit of doing, but soon enough, they had managed to position the drill high above the Cluster’s center, its tip already whirling and ready to rip its target apart. “Now,” Ford began, moving his hand toward the button that would release the drill down onto its intended target. “It’s time to end this once and for-“

“Wait!” Steven’s sudden cry brought the entire cockpit to a complete standstill. The young Gem’s expression was fraught with dread and what almost appeared to be stressed exhaustion if the thin layer of sweat starting to bead across his forehead was anything to go off of. “P-Peridot, Mr. Ford, I… I don’t think we should hurt the Cluster! I don’t think it knows what it’s doing!”

“W-wha—no,” Ford shook his head sharply, refusing to listen to such a complaint with stakes as high as they were. “Steven, I’m sorry, but what would you have us do? Let this thing simply emerge and tear the Earth and everything on it apart from the inside out?!”

“W-wha—no,” Ford shook his head sharply, refusing to listen to such a complaint with stakes as high as they were. “Steven, I’m sorry, but what would you have us do? Let this thing simply emerge and tear the Earth and everything on it apart from the inside out?!”

“N-no… but-“

“It doesn’t matter if the Cluster ‘knows’ what it’s doing,” Peridot agreed just as irresolutely. “It’s still going to do it.”

Without taking the time to hear any further deliberation on the matter, Ford and Peridot worked together to push the drill onward, sending its spinning tip plummeting fast down towards the Cluster itself. Once again, the massive fusion made another unsteady attempt at taking on its unknown form, its miasmic hands raising up towards the drill making a beeline towards it. Even despite the destabilization hyperfield, they didn’t retract this time either, instead persisting onward until they easily swallowed the drill entirely. The Cluster itself let out what seemed to be a pained wail as soon as they touched the electric field, but it was only drowned out by the unified cries of terror coming from inside the drill itself. From the moment it made contact with the Cluster, the entire machine had begun shaking so rapidly and aggressively that it felt as though it was going to fall apart at the seams, a terrifying sensation that only seemed to grow as the massive fusion’s fledgling form continued to eclipse them completely.

“T-the destabilizer!” Peridot gasped, realizing that the shield was doing relatively little to ward the Cluster off. “It’s not working anymore!”

“We won’t need it to work,” Ford hissed through gritted teeth as he pressed the drill further down, despite the heavy resistance from the Cluster itself. “N-not once we make it down… here!” With one final push, the drill’s tip finally made contact with the gem shards that composed the Cluster itself. The immediate impact elicited another intense, unearthly scream from the massive fusion, one that only continued as the drill began to bear down upon it, grinding up several of the shards that composed its surface into nothing at all.

Amidst the initial chaos of the drill’s touchdown, Mabel was the first to glance away from the very
meager starting progress they were making and instead glance over at Steven upon hearing him let 
or a sudden low groan of apparent pain. “S-Steven?!” she gasped, her eyes wide as she took in the 
sight of the young Gem huddled over in his seat, his face pressed tightly into his hands as he 
continued moaning softly. “W-what’s wrong?! What is it??”

“Is the increased vibration causing damage to your head holes?” Peridot asked, equally as 
concerned upon noticing Steven’s obviously poor condition.

“Are you having trouble breathing?” Ford pressed, joining in on the shared sense of alarm. 
“Because I added drop down oxygen masks for just such an occasion!”

“N-no…” Steven countered, weakly pushing his oxygen mask away as it fell from overhead. “I-I 
don’t know, I just-”

“We’re not even piercing the crust yet!” Peridot interrupted urgently. “We need to increase power, 
b-but there’s no doubt it’ll take a toll on the drill, and by extension, us. Are you going to be ok?”

“Y-yeah,” Steven stammered, forcing out a deep breath as Mabel helped him sit up properly. “Yes. 
I think its just the noise. K-keep going.”

The green Gem sent him another worried look, but ultimately nodded in acceptance. “Affirmative. 
Activating triple tip penetration mode!”

At thus, sure enough, the singular drill split up and out into three different injector heads, each of 
them working equally as hard against the Cluster in the hopes of breaking past its surface to destroy 
what lay deeper within. Paired with the still quite prevalent destabilization hyperfield, the Cluster’s 
formation was all but forced back, its ghostly arms retreating as its unintelligible cries began to die 
out. Still, its overall suffering was far from over, a fact that only Steven was really clued into 
amidst his own continuing duress. For as he kept his somewhat blurry gaze trained on the cockpit’s 
dark floor, he gasped in quiet shock when it suddenly seemed to blink out of existence entirely. In 
its place, an endless glowing void stretched out beneath him, thousands upon thousands of 
agonized, ghoulish faces rising up from the ether through it. They all wailed in unified anguish, 
almost as if they were in some sort of twisted harmony with the Cluster itself as they surrounded 
him, converged upon him, overwhelmed him in just about every way possible until—

A sudden sharp snap brought him back to reality. The drill took a violent swing to the right, 
slamming its passenger’s hard against one another as they looked out to see exactly what had 
happened. One of the drill’s three heads had broken off, unable to withstand the immense amounts 
of pressure being pushed upon it. It quickly spiraled easily out of control as it whirled away from 
the drill, threatening to smash back into it as it twisted and turned about in every direction.

“Ah! Runaway drill!” Mabel cried in alarm, especially as the cockpit shifted its position once 
again.

“N-not a problem!” Peridot assured, struggling to maintain the drill’s controls to evade the broken 
head. “Just… gotta… keep balance!”

Just as the missing drill head lost its momentum and collapsed, the main cockpit finally steadied 
itself as its two remaining tips spread out wide to keep it standing. While Mabel clung tightly onto 
her seat just to stay upright amidst the drill’s unsteady rocking and tilting, Steven was once again 
preoccupied with indistinguishable ghostly faces swirling all around him, to the point that they 
obscured Peridot, Mabel, and Ford entirely. As the Cluster’s already voluminous groaning 
heightened into another full on scream, one of those many faces turned directly to the frightened 
young Gem, rushing for him at full, horrifying speed.
And though it never hit him, Steven flinched back with a fearful cry as though it had, accidentally striking both Mabel and Peridot in the process. “Steven?!” Mabel gripped his shoulder, aptly concerned, especially when she noticed just how heavily he was breathing. “A-are you ok?”

“N-no!” the young Gem shook his head truthfully, looking to her as he gripped her arms desperately for some much-needed support. “There’s so many of them… a-and it’s so much, a-and I don’t know-”

“Don’t know what?” Mabel asked, not even noticing just how red her cheeks were flushing as a result of Steven’s tight hold on her. “What are you talking about?”

The young Gem’s brow furrowed at this, baffled as he watched her flicker in and out of his vision, replaced by the endless barrage of unknowable, agonized faces over and over and over again. “Y-you… you don’t see them…?”

Before Mabel could ask him for any further clarification, the drill jolted once more, practically throwing everyone inside it forward as the result of yet another one of its heads snapping off. Without any additional support, the sole remaining drill was completely unbalanced as it wobbled to and fro, barely able to remain standing on its own, much less continue wearing down the Cluster, a mission that it had barely made any headway on to begin with.

“N-no!” Ford shouted, gripping the drill’s wavering controls tighter than ever before. “Without the auxiliary drills, it won’t be able to hold out much longer! We need to-” The author was sharply cut off as the drill abruptly spun about, whipping the entire group back into their seats and into each other hard. The hard blow was enough to elicit yet another pained cry out of Steven as he gripped both his head and his stomach, both of which felt as though they had been pierced by some sort of unknown blinding, burning force that he could barely even begin to comprehend.

“Augh!” the young Gem finally shouted, unable to bear it anymore. “I-I don’t understand what’s happening!”

“What’s wrong?” Peridot asked, deeply worried by this point, a worry that Mabel and Ford also shared.

“I-I don’t know!” Steven shook his head. By this point, the pain had grown so intense that it had practically driven him to tears, his breathing short and shallow as his mind and heart both raced at what felt like a mile a second. As opposed to any sort of external pain, the young Gem knew this was solely internal, but he hadn’t the faintest idea as to where any of it was coming from. In fact, the only things he were aware of at that moment were the trio of voices all fearfully shouting his name, his own gemstone dully glowing underneath his shirt, and the still persistent rising rain of faces, all of which were all too quickly dragging him into the very same emptiness they were falling into.

“…st…m… nee… to… want… orm…”

Steven flinched as he opened his eyes once again, only to find that the drill itself seemed to have been swallowed up that same blank darkness he had steadily been drifting away into. And even more concerning, was the fact that his fellow passengers seemed to be just as gone as the drill itself was.

“P-Peridot?” Steven called, dumbfounded as he realized even the seat had disappeared from underneath him, essentially leaving him floating freely in the darkness. “Mr. Ford? Mabel?!”

The young Gem received no response from any of them. Instead, he was met with a few small
specks of light popping up within the darkness around him. And with those specks, came voices so soft and so small that they were barely even distinguishable as they echoed through the now starry void. Yet each of them, as distant and wavering as they were, all seemed to faintly be whispering the same unified, yet broken chain of thought together.

“Must... have to... want to... need to... have to...”

Steven stilled, poising himself to better hear these strange mutterings, until he noticed one of the specks of light starting to slowly drift towards him. Upon a closer look at the sparkling speck, he quickly realized exactly what it was: a Gem shard, completely broken and jagged, yet a spark of light and life, however small, still seemed to persist within it as its tiny voice joined in the chorus of countless others.

“Want to... need to... want to...”

“You... want to?” Steven frowned, carefully cupping his hands underneath the floating shard. “Want to... what?”

Suddenly, the once-whispering voices boomed, their voices blasting a blinding light through the void as they all cried out the only thought, the only desire they were all forced to share.

“FORM!”

Practically defended by this brutal proclamation, Steven let out a pained cry as he rushed to cover his ears from the now rushing, frantic crowd of voices and flickering shards all around him. Shards that were all clearly struggling to escape in some way, shape, or namely, form.

“I-it’s the Cluster...” Steven gasped, his eyes widening in realization as he looked throughout the broken void. “I’m talking to the Cluster?! But... how did I get inside your brain? ...Brains?”

“Have to... Want to... Need to... Must!” The Cluster’s unified chants began to grow more frantic as light pulsed through their singular, yet shattered mindscape once more. Steven gasped as its entire being rumbled, clearly a sign that the massive fusion was on the verge of breaking free from itself, and from the Earth, once and for all.

“Wait!” he pleaded, desperate and afraid. “Please, don’t take form!”

Even so, the Cluster hardly heeded him, desperate and afraid itself as it persisted in its one sole yet separate instinct. “Form... form. Form! FORM! WANT FORM! WANT FORM! FORM!”

Unbeknownst to the young Gem, outside of the Cluster’s immense hive mind, the massive fusion was indeed acting upon that instinct as its entire being rippled and illuminated once more. The drill had all but collapsed against it, no longer to maintain its position, not that it would have helped much anyway if it could. Even so, Ford and Peridot desperately worked to bring it back online, all while Mabel tended to Steven, who had abruptly, horrifyingly slipped into unconsciousness quite some time ago.

“Steven!” she shook him once more, practically pleading with the listless young Gem at this point. “C’mon, you gotta snap out of it! We need you! I-I...” she hesitated, slowly taking his hand and gripping it tight as she pulled it close to her. “I need you, please. You gotta come back to us!”

“W-what’s wrong with him!” Peridot asked, peering past the drill’s controls for the briefest of moments. “Why isn’t he waking up?!”
“His vitals all seem to be just fine!” Ford shook his head, recalling the brief check he had just taken on the young Gem moments ago. “It doesn’t make any sense!”

“M-maybe its some sorta Gem thing!” Mabel vouched, even though she really had no idea herself. “H-he said he was… I dunno, seeing something, something none of the rest of us could. I don’t know what that means, but… but…” She trailed off, breaking out into a small, sharp gasp as she noticed his gemstone glowing ever so slightly under his shirt. “W-what if he’s doing something to help!?”

“Help what?” Peridot asked, not following.

“Us! The Earth! Everything!” Mabel exclaimed. “He has all these weird sorta dreamy powers, like how he talked to Lapis that one time or how he got into one of those watermelon guys to help the Gems and Dipper just a little while ago! M-maybe he’s using those now to do something to stop the Cluster!”

“Or more likely, the severe stress of the situation at hand got the better of him and overwhelmed him,” Ford said, looking to his niece sympathetically. “Mabel, I’m sorry, but there’s simply no way to know-”

“No,” Mabel cut him off sharply, her tone and manner quite serious as she looked between the doubtful pair. “In case you guys haven’t noticed, we’re kinda stuck down here without any other choices to get us out. Which is why I choose to trust Steven. After all,” she smiled briefly down at the unconscious young Gem beside her, squeezing his hand just a bit tighter at this. “He’s never steered me wrong before.”

Though Ford and Peridot both still had their reservations about such a risky course of action, ultimately, they had no choice but to go along with it. Largely since, no matter what the tried, the drill simply refused to pick itself back up again. Fortunately though, the Cluster seemed to retreat back into itself for yet another brief spell, though if its continuous pulsating and nearly endless shrieks were anything to go off of, it wasn’t about to stay dormant for too much longer. A fearful fact that Steven knew all too well as he continued to try and make his own case from within it.

“Um, m-maybe instead of forming you could do something else?” he asked, hopeful, though the suggestion was quickly shot down.

“FORM!” the Cluster cried, practically demanding it of both the young Gem and of itself.

“B-boy,” Steven breathed out a forced laugh, knowing that it was really the most he could do, given the circumstances. “You’ve sure got the one-trackiest mind I’ve ever met…”

“Need form!” the Cluster yelled once more, though their tune soon began to calm into something else. Something… sadder, much to Steven’s surprise. “…To be whole…”

 “…Whole?” Steven asked softly, remembering what Peridot had said earlier. These countless pieces of Gems were like missing pieces, pieces that had lost themselves in the process. It was understandable, for them to feel so lost, to need some sort of way to bring the pieces of themselves back together again, even if the pieces they were now connected to weren’t even their own.

“Have to…” the Cluster’s many voices wavered almost miserably, its shimmering shards flickering low and mournful at what they knew they could never really attain, even if they did successfully form. That wholeness, the sense of being something once more, that they had all lost so very long ago.
“I… think I get it…” Steven nodded calmly. “You just wanna find the rest of your gems… B-but forming won’t help you find the rest of yourselves! You’ll just destroy the Earth!”

A ripple of newfound panic seemed to wash over the Cluster at this, frantic over the thought of the destruction they’d all be unwittingly forced to cause to the planet that almost all of their pieces, when they had been together, had once stood to fight for. “No! No! No! No!”

“B-but if you wanna find other Gems,” Steven thought and acted quickly, finding a much-needed solution simply by looking across the vast collection of shards all around him. “There’s so many of you right here! Look!” Carefully, the young Gem guided one nearby shard to float next to another, both of them igniting in a soft glow as they came to hover close to each other. “Shard, meet shard!”

“Have to…” one of the shards whispered weakly, though surprisingly enough, its partner offered an equally gentle response.

“Want to…”

“See?” Steven smiled, allayed at such a simple, yet surprisingly sweet interaction. “You already have so much to talk about!”

At this, the various shards of the Cluster lit up once more, though in a much different sort of way this time. For instead of desperately, violently seeking to gain their elusive form, they instead took a different approach, coming together and greeting each other in short, simple conversations. The most any of them could really offer each other was a brief hello, but it was more than enough to create the connections that these once broken, abandoned shards needed to feel like they were part of something, to feel like they were finally whole once more.

“This is great!” Steven laughed happily, engulfed in the warm glow of newly-formed bonds the Cluster was now made up of. “You don’t even need to form! You can just stay here.”

The Cluster let out a unified contented hum at this, it’s quiet, yet cordial conversations continuing all the while. “Want to stay…” With this shared desire rising up amongst the fusion’s countless shards, links of soft, golden light began to connect them to each other, forming the network that was indeed steadily working to bring them all together. And for a moment, it seemed as though, just as the Cluster was fully starting to accept this network of support and love and fulfillment, it was ready and willing to leave its anxious attempts to take its form by the wayside. To fade into the darkness and keep to themselves, spending the rest of time getting to know each other.

Or at least, that’s what they would have done if they had actually been able.

The dimming void suddenly flashed starkly back to life, completely rattled by the absolute scream of anguish the Cluster collectively let out. “Can’t stop! Going to form! Can’t stop! Going to form! Help! Help! HELP!”

“Oh!” Steven gasped, just as frantic as the Cluster was as he realized it couldn’t help itself. Like all Gems, it was in the fusion’s nature to form, whether it wanted to or not. Unless… “W-wait! It’s ok! If I just bubble you, you won’t have to come out. It’ll keep you safe! Here, look, like this!” Acting quickly, the young Gem formed a sturdy pink bubble around the nearest gem shard, safely securing it before moving onto several others in rapid, hectic succession. “I can bubble you! And I can bubble you! And I can bubble you! A-and that makes five out of… oh geez…” Steven’s hopeful smile quickly faded as realized just how many shards he’d have to bubble and just how little time he had to do so as the Cluster continued crying out in shared fear over its very-near formation. “I’m sorry! I can’t do it alone!”
The Cluster didn’t answer as its uproarious cries continued, the force of its violent, unwanted formation practically pushing the young Gem out of its shared mindscape altogether. The last thing Steven saw or heard from it were its flashing shards and its terrified screams, all of them desperately trying to do everything they could to keep themselves from destroying the Earth and failing fast.

And just like that, the next thing Steven knew, he was back suddenly back within the darkness of the drill’s cockpit, though still far from being anywhere close to out of danger yet. He darted upright with a sharp gasp, startling Mabel, Ford, and Peridot alike in the process as he all but ignored them to glance out the nearby window. Sure enough, the Cluster’s ghostly hands were taking shape, becoming much more tangible than ever before as its form drew ever closer to materializing, despite its best efforts and struggles to repress itself.

“S–Steven!” Mabel exclaimed in apt surprise at the young Gem’s quick recovery. “Are you o–”

“It doesn’t wanna form!” Steven instantly interrupted, turning to the trio urgently.

“What?” all three of them asked in absolutely confused unison.

“The Cluster! It doesn’t want to destroy the Earth!” the young Gem reiterated. “It wants to stay here! B-but it can’t stop itself! We gotta put it in a bubble!”

“Bubble it?” Ford asked, absolutely baffled by the thought.

“As if!” Peridot scoffed. “Just look at it! There’s no way!”

“W-well, what if you and Peri work together to do it, Steven?” Mabel suggested, even if her tone lacked any real conviction behind the idea. “Maybe that’ll be enough to–”

“Enough to do basically nothing!” Peridot countered, shaking her head. “We’d need the power of at least a hundred Gems, if not more, to even begin to–”

“Wait,” Ford interjected, his eyes wide as he glanced out the nearby window to the Cluster once more. “Look.”

The harsh glow enveloping the massive fusion had dulled somewhat, replaced by a handful of small, colorful bubbles popping up across its entire surface. Their emergence seemed to be random, but steady, with more and more shards joining in on sealing themselves away, all with the same exact mission in mind: to keep themselves from forming.

“T-they’re bubbling each other!” Steven exclaimed with a growing, amazed smile.

“Whoa!” Mabel gasped, equally as impressed as they all watched more and more bubbles appear. “Talk about teamwork!”

Steven didn’t hesitate to join in on this teamwork, reaching down to the floor of the cockpit as he closed his eyes in resolved concentration. “I’ve got you,” he reassured the Cluster firmly as he added his power onto theirs’. “You’ve got this! We’ve all got… each other!”

While the individual shards of the Cluster weren’t quite strong enough to bubble their entire mass on their own, the help and support Steven was offering them was more than enough to help them bridge that gap. In conjunction with the young Gem, the various bubbles of the scattered shards joined together, adding up to create one large, all-encompassing bubble that succeeded in covering the Cluster entirely. And, with this protective barrier in place, the massive fusion went still and silent, its suffering finally over and the planet finally, finally safe.
Considering the immense damage the drill had sustained, it took it quite a while to scale up through the various layers of the earth it had plunged through before. Still, the trip back to the surface was by far a jovial one, filled with immense relief and celebration as the group left the now-dormant Cluster behind. And, the moment the drill breached the ground and made it back to the barnyard, it collapsed, with its exhausted, yet happy passengers piling out of it not too soon after.

“You did it!” Peridot proclaimed brightly, immediately engulfing Steven in a tight hug the moment he regained his footing.

“We did it together,” Steven corrected with a warm laugh as he returned the green Gem’s hug.

“And it was great!” Mabel chimed in, adding herself onto the cheerful pile.

“Hm…” Ford mused to himself, glancing back down into the hole the drill had just emerged from. “And it was surprisingly… easy at that. I’m not used to situations like this going so… relatively smoothly. Are we positive that bubble is really going to be enough to contain the Cluster on a long-term basis?”

“Hmph, if you’re asking a question like that, then clearly you don’t know the first thing about Gems,” Peridot remarked with a hint of a wry, teasing grin. “Our bubbles are made to last. It would take a positively titanic amount of force to pop it, especially one that massive.”

“So… we’re safe?” Mabel asked, hopeful.

“Yes,” Peridot nodded confidently. “We’re safe.”

“And so is the Cluster…” Steven said, smiling down at the ground beneath him. Or rather, at the now peacefully resting fusion buried far, far below him.

The ongoing round of levity was soon interrupted, however, by the loud honk from the approaching car driving up the nearby hill. Stan and the Gems emerged from the car first, a little weary, but clearly no worse for wear after the arduous battle they had just taken part in. Dipper stepped out of the vehicle a bit more slowly, all the while trying to tote the still-unconscious Lapis out along with him, though he wasn’t quite well-suited to carry her, especially given his still-prevalent injuries. Which was why Garnet readily stepped in, much more easily taking a careful hold of the blue Gem instead.

“Don’t worry,” she said, offering Dipper a kind smile. “I’ve got her.”

“Thanks,” Dipper returned her grin, allowing himself yet another small sigh of relief as he kept his sights on Lapis all the while. In many ways, he was still in a sense of disbelief that she was back, but sure enough, he had lingered close to her the entire drive home, a sentiment he intended to continue until the moment the blue Gem finally awakened.

“Guys!” Steven exclaimed, excitedly running up to the group with Mabel rushing not too far behind after him. “You’re back! A-and you have Lapis!” The young Gem’s smile widened even more upon seeing the listless blue Gem resting in Garnet’s arms. “Is she ok?”

“She’ll be fine,” the Gem leader assured, having already offered the same promise to Dipper several times over since they had left the island.
“See, bro-bro?” Mabel smirked, elbowing her brother lightly. “I told ya that if there was anybody who’d be able to save her, it’d be you! And I was right, just like I always am!”

“Yeah,” Dipper chuckled warmly. “I guess you were. And you, Steven,” he turned to the young Gem, absolutely amazed. “I still can’t believe what you pulled off back on the island with that watermelon you. Seriously, that was so bizarre and so cool!”

“Not as cool as what you did to help Lapis!” Steven chimed in just as enthusiastically. “Oh, by the way, that reminds me.” The young Gem suddenly stepped forward, focusing in on the quite-noticeable bruise Dipper had sustained on his cheek one of the several times Malachite had violently knocked him back. Without any warning, Steven landed a small, brief healing kiss upon it, clearing the injury completely. “That’s been bugging me ever since we were back on the island. Remind me to heal up the rest later, ok?”

For a moment, the most Dipper could do was stare at the young Gem in shock at this, unable to hide the rush of red filling his how healed face in light of what he’d just done. “Y-yeah… o-ok…”

“Y-you all look happy,” Pearl interjected somewhat anxiously as she looked to both Steven and Mabel, as well as Peridot and Ford as they came over to join the group. “Did you destroy the Cluster?!”

“Er… not exactly,” Peridot said, hands held behind her back.

“I talked to it,” Steven said simply.

“…What?”

“It doesn’t wanna destroy the Earth,” Steven explained. “It just wants company. And now it’s got like, a bajillion people! They’ll have lots of time to get to know each other now that they’re in a bubble!”

“Whoa, you bubbled it?” Amethyst asked, amazed. “How are you sure something like that’s even gonna hold against something that big?”

“That’s exactly what I’m still wondering…” Ford mused with a small frown. “But, if Steven is confident that this will be a permanent fix to this problem, then, I suppose I see no reason why the rest of us shouldn’t as well.”

“Well, I think its gonna work,” Mabel added with apt confidence. “After all, the Cluster is a total team player!”

“But I’m still confused,” Pearl shook her head incredulously. “How did you even manage to bubble that whole thing in the first place?”

“Let’s just say we had a little help…” Steven smiled, looking down to the ground once more. Far below which he knew the Cluster rested, where it remained, still buried and obscured, but existing in a much more mutual, contented state. Enveloped peacefully in a large bubble that would keep it contained, would keep its shards secured and the Earth safe. That would allow its once-lost, scattered, shattered pieces to find new parts of themselves. To bind new bonds that would never break and never leave them broken or alone ever again.

That would finally allow each and every one of them to become whole, together.
Chapter 71: Same Old World

Chapter Summary

In which Dipper and Lapis FINALLY reunite for reals, Peridot is Big Gay for Lapis, and I cry because we're finally in arc 8 finally.

Chapter Notes

Ahhhh! I'm so excited that we're finally here in arc 8! And I really like how this chapter (that I wrote in a pretty short amount of time) kicks it off! So enjoy my mixup of Same Old World and Barn Mates! :) (keyword is BARNMATES)

With both Malachite and the Cluster finally subdued in different, albeit satisfying ways, the Gems and the Pines finally took the much-needed opportunity to relax and regroup. No longer needing to work toward a strict deadline to get the drill done, they all gathered out on the barn’s yard, casually sitting around and intently listening to Peridot zealously recount her, Steven, Ford, and Mabel’s recent, daring, underground adventure to the others.

"It was so intense down there. We were already a few layers into the Earth’s crust when suddenly—WA-PAMO! KA-POWIE!" the green Gem recounted with extensive dramatic flair. "All these gross Cluster limbs started clawing at the drill! So I whipped out my old photon blaster and PEW PEW! CHOW CHOW! Take that Cluster!"

"The sound effects are totally spot on by the way," Mabel whispered to the others, completely enthralled by Peridot’s tale. "I should know, I was there!"

"A-and I guess the destabilizing hyperfield Ford added onto the drill also… ‘helped’,” Peridot remarked rather dryly. Even so, the author paid her no mind, only barely listening in as he instead casted very frequent glances towards the nearby barn. And he wasn’t the only one doing so either.

"B-but anyway, then Steven was all ‘my feelings’ and then up and passes out on us! And then Mabel starts getting all bossy and serious—"

"Hey!" Mabel protested with a pout. "I was just doing what I had to. Besides, you know something’s not a big deal until I have to break Serious Mabel out. Which I don’t like doing; she’s scary."

While this elicited an amused chuckle from the other Gems, Peridot simply looked to her, confused. "She’s you," the green Gem pointed out, raising an eyebrow. "But you’re not wrong about the scary part. Speaking of scary, after that, everything started glowing and… well… wait." Peridot took pause, unfamiliar with the specifics of what happened after that. Specifics that only
Steven had really been apart of, given that herself, Mabel, and Ford had only really been spectators on the final leg of their mission at best. “I’m sure Steven can fill you in on the rest since he’s the one who saved us. You should’ve seen it, right Steven? Tell ‘em what happened here!”

Oddly however, the young Gem didn’t comply, his focused instead on the barn and his expression awash with muted concern. Mabel was quick to adopt that concern as she also looked over in that direction, knowing just as well as Steven did who had split off from the group quite some time ago to take up shop inside the barn with a very obvious reason as to why. A reason that, by all accounts, they both genuinely shared.

“Steven?” Peridot pressed again, urging him to pick up where she had left off.

“Huh?” Steven blinked, finally brought out of his distracted train of thought. “Oh, uh, sorry, Peridot. Hold on just a sec, I’ll be right back.”

At this, the young Gem excused himself, making a clear beeline for the barn, only to be stopped just shy of entering it by none other than Mabel. “Steven,” she whispered, grabbing his hand and pulling him back just a bit. “Do you… do you think he’s ok? That they’re both ok?”

Steven frowned at this, sparing another glance back at the barn. By all accounts, shortly after arriving back to the barn with Lapis in tow, Dipper had seemed to be in immensely high spirits, absolutely relieved to finally have his close friend back from the grasp of the toxic prison of a fusion she had trapped herself within. However, it wasn’t very long after the young Gem had healed his battle wounds, that he had quietly retreated to the barn, no doubt intent on staying by the still-unconscious blue Gem until the moment she awakened. And it was a vigil he maintained even hours still, one that rung far too familiar with both Steven and Mabel to another, much more miring attempt Dipper had made only hours after Lapis had first locked herself away in the lake in the first place.

However, things were different now. Lapis was free, returned to them once more from the unforgiving depths of her and Jasper’s once-shared mind. The thought alone that the blue Gem was finally back was incredible enough for Steven and Mabel, but they could only imagine just how much more momentous it all must have been for someone as close to Lapis as Dipper was.

“Well,” Steven said somewhat diffidently, taking the initiative towards the barn once more. “I guess there’s only one way to find out.”

Mabel nodded, opting to remain quiet as her and Steven slowly peered into the barn. They largely lingered in the door frame, taking in the silent, yet surprisingly calming scene that lay before them. Lapis was still completely out of it, softly resting on a pile of hay the kids had prepared for her as she continued seemingly sleeping. Dipper, however, was wide awake and alert, his back turned to the barn entrance as he sat just a few feet away from the blue Gem, carefully watching and waiting and most of all thinking, though about what was really anyone’s guess. Unsure of what to say or do, Steven and Mabel exchanged a brief glance, though ultimately, the latter was the one who worked up the most nerve to finally speak up first.

“Uh… h-hey, bro-bro,” she called with a gentle smile. “How are you and uh, Lapis, doing in here?”

Dipper flinched, letting out a small, startled gasp as he glanced over his shoulder at them. The briefest hint of a tear was in the middle of rolling down his cheek, though he quickly wiped it away in the hopes that neither of them would notice. Even though they both easily had. “Oh! Uh, I—w-we’re fine,” he said, looking back towards Lapis once more. “We’re fine,” he said once more, this time a bit distantly, not really addressing the pair at all as he repeated himself a third time. “She’s fine…”
The small, frail sob he let out at this was more than enough to prompt both Steven and Mabel into action. Without a second thought, they both rushed over to his side, comforting hands on his shoulders as they prepared themselves to console him, only to find an absolutely elated smile on his face instead, even amidst the still steadily-flowing tears.

“D-Dipper?” Steven asked, equally concerned and confused.

“She’s back, you guys…” Dipper said, unable to hold back a small, joyous chuckle. “After all this time, after everything that’s happened, I-I finally—we finally have her back. It’s kind of hard to believe it, but this is real. It’s not just some dream or wish or something; it’s actually happening. Somehow, through some crazy twist of fate or something, I-I guess I really did keep my promise to her after all…”

“Are… are you gonna be ok, bro-bro?” Mabel asked softly, still gripping her brother’s shoulder supportively.

“Are you kidding? Of course I’m ok,” Dipper shook his head with yet another incredulous laugh. “I mean, this is all I’ve wanted for so long now and I finally got it. It’s just…” His smile finally faded as he trained his sights on Lapis’ listless form once more. “I’m worried that Lapis might not be so ok once she wakes up.”

“What do you mean?” Steven asked.

Dipper sighed, shaking his head sadly. “Lapis was trapped down there with Jasper for so long… I may not know everything about fusions, but that’s gotta have some kind of an impact on a Gem, and probably not a very good one at that. Especially since Malachite wasn’t the most… stable fusion in the world…”

Mabel and Steven exchanged a fretful glance at this, both of them taking on the same sort of concerns for Lapis’ wellbeing in light of this fact. While the blue Gem seemed fine physically, there was essentially no telling what her mental or emotional state would be like upon awakening. What she had gone through as Malachite truly was traumatic, and chances were the mere act of freeing her from that twisted fusion in and of itself wouldn’t completely heal all the anguish she had been through. After all, that was a fact the kids knew far too well when it came to the varied trauma they had been through all their own.

“I see you’re all worried about your friend.” The kids all turned, surprised, to see Garnet, standing in the barn’s entryway and surveying the anxious group calmly.

“Y-yeah…” Steven nodded truthfully. “When I saw her in my dreams, it looked like she was fighting so hard to keep Malachite from escaping.”

“And even back on the island, Jasper just kept pushing her back down into Malachite’s mind over and over again,” Dipper added, his tone making his disdain for the orange Gem quite clear. “It was like she was trapped, unable to even control her own body at all. I know way too well just what that’s like…”

“Its true; Lapis spent an unbearable amount of time fused with Jasper,” Garnet said, adjusting her shades. “The emotional and physical strain of that type of fusion… I can’t even imagine. She’s gonna need a lot of time to recover. So it’s a good thing she has friends like you to help her do just that.”

Upon this reassurance, Steven and Mabel were both quick to perk up in the hopes that they really could help Lapis heal in some way, even if it was only a small one. “Right,” they both nodded,
determined to do whatever they could for the blue Gem once she awakened.

“Now, come on,” Garnet encouraged with a small grin as she beckoned them out of the barn. “I’m dying to hear more about what happened underground.”

While Mabel and Steven easily complied at this request and began to follow after the Gem leader, Dipper opted to stay behind instead, something that the young Gem in particular noticed as he stopped short briefly. “Uh… Dipper? Are you coming?”

“No, I think I’ll hang out here,” Dipper said, waving the young Gem off as he turned back to face Lapis. “Just in case she wakes up anytime soon, you know?”

“…Yeah,” Steven nodded, completely understanding Dipper’s reasons for doing so. After all, he had been so long without the blue Gem that it only made sense that he’d want to linger by her side as much as he was able now that she had returned.

“But just a heads up, you’re gonna be missing out on one pretty epic story!” Mabel called as her and Steven left the barn, followed by Garnet soon after. The Gem leader did stop short, however, upon noticing another figure standing just shy of the barn’s entrance, largely remaining scarce so the kids wouldn’t notice he had been eavesdropping the entire time. Yet even so, Garnet, of course, hard.

“Ford,” she spoke up, only briefly glancing over her shoulder at the author.

“G-Garnet!” Ford exclaimed, startled and flustered and quite hard-pressed to explain himself. “I was just-”

“You don’t worry,” Garnet assured with a small, knowing smile. “I have a feeling she’ll be glad to see you again.”

The author said nothing to this, his eyes wide with alarm as he glanced between the barn door and the Gem leader before accepting her foresight with a terse nod and heading off. After all, his reunion with the blue Gem would come soon enough; far be it from him to take that first, much more important reunion with her from his much more deserving nephew instead.

True to his word, Dipper never left Lapis’ side, even as the hours wore on into the early evening and the blue Gem still showed no signs of waking any time soon. While he easily accepted the sandwich Mabel brought him for dinner as well as her and Steven’s company in watching over Lapis for awhile, he still remained in his spot, largely afraid that if he so much as even looked away, she might wake up without him knowing. In fact, he was fully prepared to stay up all night if he had to, a resolve that quickly fell through when the exhaustion caused by the immense physical strain and heavy flow of emotions he had been under largely all day finally hit him in full force. He wasn’t sure exactly when he had ended up laying back on the barn floor and eventually nodding off, but he had, largely content to have his first truly good night’s rest since the day Malachite had first been formed. Yet, soon enough a quiet sort of shuffling sound slowly roused him from his slumber. And as soon as he opened his eyes to see exactly where that sound was coming from, he was instantly wide awake.

“…L-Lapis?” he whispered, his voice barely even audible as he sat up, but she’d heard him all the same. From her spot near the hole in the barn’s side, she spun around, her wings summoned and her eyes wide as she looked to him, her own amazement seeming to equal his.
“Dipper…” she said, her shoulders dropping with what almost sounded like a sigh of relief. For what felt like ages, neither of them said anything, the nighttime silence echoing through the barn speaking volumes enough already. After all, what was there to really say anyway, when both of them had been waiting, dreaming of this moment that had always seemed so out of reach for so very long now?

In the end though, Dipper was the first to respond, saying nothing as he instead rushed towards the blue Gem, tears welling up in his eyes as he caught her off guard with a sudden tight, almost desperate hug. Lapis jolted, looking down at him with surprise, especially as he glanced up at her with a wide, tearful smile.

“I-I missed you,” he said, letting out a small, sobbing laugh in spite of himself. “So, so much. I just—s-sorry.” Embarrassed, he rushed to wipe his tears away as he maintained his embrace, one that the blue Gem herself never returned. “I’ve imagined how this moment would go so many times in my head, but now that its actually happening, I…I don’t even know what to really say. I-I’m just so glad you’re finally back.”

Upon hearing this, Lapis sighed once more, her expression sad as she finally, gently placed a comforting hand on top of the boy’s head. “Dipper…” she began, her voice still quiet as she subtly glanced away from him. “I-I…”

“You won’t believe all of the things I have to tell you!” Dipper continued brightly, hardly catching onto the blue Gem’s apparent melancholy. “So much has happened since you’ve been gone, b-but its ok if you need more time to recover and don’t wanna hear it all now. Either way, I-I just want you to know that I…I understand just how much you’ve been through, a-and I’m going to be here for you in any way I can, no matter what, I promise—”

“Dipper,” Lapis said again, much more firmly this time as she finally pulled out of his embrace to take a step back. Her aquatic wings still hovered behind her, glistening in the dull light of the moon outside just behind her. “T-thank you, but… I don’t think that’s a promise you’ll really be able to keep.”

“What are you talking about?” Dipper asked, aptly confused. “Of course, I-” He stopped short, finally taking stock of the blue Gem’s wings for himself, especially as she cast a small, longing glance out at the night sky instead of keeping her focus on him. “Y-you… you still want to leave… don’t you?” he asked, the bitter realization hitting him hard. All at once, the same sort of grief he had felt when she had nearly made this very same attempt before filled just about every inch of him, practically driving him to tears once more, though hardly ones of joy this time.

“I-I’m sorry…” Lapis muttered, rubbing her arm and averting his glance all the while. “But I can’t stay, you know why I can’t…”

“Y-yeah…” Dipper nodded and it was true. He did know exactly why the blue Gem wouldn’t want to stay on Earth any longer, especially after the torturous ordeal she had just been released from, all of which had taken place upon it. Yet even though he understood it, that didn’t mean he was anywhere near remotely ok with it. “B-but… I thought…”

A loud, tired yawn of all things, suddenly interrupted the conversation, preceding Steven as he peered into the barn, wiping the sleep out of his eyes all the while. “I heard voices in here; is everything oka-” The young Gem stopped short, letting out a soft gasp as he fully opened his eyes to take in the sight before him. “Lapis! You’re ok!”

“S-Steven!” Lapis exclaimed, even more startled to be caught by the young Gem than she had with Dipper.
“Don’t get too excited, Steven,” Dipper said, his tone hardly bitter. If anything, it was forlorn as he finally looked away from the blue Gem. “She was just leaving…”

“What?” Steven looked to Lapis, bewildered. “Leaving?”

“It’s like I told Dipper, Steven…” Lapis shook her head, turning away from both boys. “I don’t belong on Earth, not with the Crystal Gems. I never have…”

“It’s ok,” Steven assured gently. “I understand. I just… wish we would have hung out more. I feel like we only get to see you when something horrible’s going on.”

Despite catching a critical look from Dipper over this remark, Lapis simply smirked at it, both amused and relieved to hear it. “That’s just how it is with me.” At this, the blue Gem stepped forward, readying her wings for takeoff though not before Dipper anxiously spoke up to forestall her flight. “Lapis, wait, I-” he stopped short as she turned to him, hints of guilt and fear both clear in her expression. Both reasons why Dipper ended up hesitating, even letting go of what he wanted to tell her altogether. After all, she had already been trapped for so long in so many different ways; how could he possibly try to trap her here again just because it was what he wanted? By all accounts, this was something he should have expected all along, but in the end, had never seen coming after months of toiling towards freeing her: the idea, or rather, the fact that he’d ultimately have to let her leave. “N-never mind.”

“Dipper?” Lapis asked, frowning.

“I-I just… wanted to say…” he trailed off, knowing that this was likely his last chance to say much of anything to her really. And yet, as much as he wanted to say to her in that moment, what he actually ended up saying was practically nothing at all. “I-I hope you find what you’re looking for out there.”

“…Thank you,” the blue Gem nodded with a small, sad smile. “Both of you.” And just like that, she was off, her wide wings sending her skyward into the vast dark expanse of stars above as she flew away, not looking back even once. Both boys watched her graceful ascent with shared amazement and sadness, stepping a bit out of the barn so they could keep an eye on her as she inevitably disappeared into the night. Never to be seen by either of them every again.

“Bye…” Steven whispered after her solemnly, though Dipper offered no such farewell. Instead, he continued watching Lapis, tears brimming in his eyes but never falling, until she was nothing more than another countless, distant, sparkling spec in the sky. Finally herself and finally free… and finally leaving him behind all over again.

“…H-hey,” the young Gem spoke up quietly, placing a gentle hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Are… are you ok?”

“Y-yeah…” Dipper muttered, even if he really wasn’t. But for Lapis’ sake, for his own sake, he resolved himself to be, no matter how much it really hurt. “I… I just need a minute…”

Steven nodded, offering him a small, comforting smile as he quietly departed to let him grieve in his own way. By all accounts, his grief was silent, awash in longing for all the time he thought they would have spent together, time that he had fought so hard and worked so steadily towards achieving, but now would never get to see it. Which was why, as a few of his sparse tears finally did start to fall, he pulled something small out of his vest, the one and only picture of himself and Lapis he had been able to fully piece back together after weeks of patient work. And, with a sense of mourning acceptance, he released it, letting it fly off into the open breeze of the night to wherever it might land next, just as the blue Gem herself had.
He let it go… and in the same way, he let her go.

With no reason left for any of them to linger at the barn anymore, both Pines and Gems alike packed their things up the following morning to make their return to the shack and the temple respectively. Much like the boys, Mabel was also quite upset to hear that Lapis had left, especially without bidding her any sort of goodbye, though her disappointment quickly changed tune when Peridot informed the group about her intentions to stay at the barn instead of returning to town with them.

“Oh, Peri!” Mabel gushed, eagerly climbing up onto the tractor parked inside the barn alongside the green Gem. “That’s so cool! Just think, you could start your own little farm out here! You could grow potatoes, and, uh… apples, and corn-”

“No thanks,” Peridot interrupted. “I’ve had more than my fair share of dealing with corns since I’ve been on this planet. I don’t think I need to see anymore, especially not the uni- or -lepre- varieties.”

“…Huh?”

“Are you sure you wanna stay?” Steven asked the green Gem. “You could always head back with us and live in the shack’s bathroom again.”

“Again, no thanks,” Peridot crossed her arms. “I’ve seen what goes on in there, and simply put, I’m not interested. Besides, I’ve grown accustomed to this place. And… I should probably fix the hole I made with my giant robot.”

“Oh! Then lemme help you, Peri!” Mabel readily volunteered. “I’m the queen of redecorating; between you ‘n me, we’ll have this dusty ol’ barn looking spiffier than spiffy in no time!”

“Hm… yes, I like ‘spiffy’,” Peridot grinned, nodding in agreement with this plan. “Oh, can we utilize some of those ‘stickers’ you were telling me about? They’d add an undeniable layer of class to the place. Please?”

“Well, since you asked so nicely… sure!” Mabel quipped, already pulling her sticker book out so they could begin picking some out.

Steven couldn’t help but let out a small chuckle at this as he turned to leave the pair to their work. “Well, have fun you two!” he called, grabbing his things before heading back over to his father’s van to join everyone else.

“Well, that’s everything,” Greg announced after the young Gem handed his luggage off to him. “And then some. Steven, you ready to go home?”

“All seat belts are fastened,” Garnet added, poking her head out of the van.

“Peridot said she’s staying,” Steven pointed out to the Gems. “And Mabel’s gonna hang out with her for awhile.”

“Aw, yeesh, her too?” Stan asked, pulling his car around with Amethyst riding shotgun. “That’s it! If both of those kids wanna hang around here so badly, then they can just find their own rides home. I’m officially done being everyone’s taxi! Unless someone wants to pay me for it, that is.”

“Heh, yeah, I’ll pay ya!” Amethyst goaded playfully. “Pay ya my respects for your speakers I’m
about to blast to bits!”

“Hey!” Stan protested as the purple Gem suddenly turned his car’s stereo up all the way to a booming rock station. “Amethyst! Turn that racket down! Think about my hearing aid!”

As the conman recklessly drove off with the laughing purple Gem in tow, Ford briefly peeked his head out of Greg’s van, shaking it disapprovingly all the while. “Am I ever glad I decided not to ride with them…”

“You comin’, kiddo?” Greg asked Steven with a smile. “I’m pretty sure there’s a little room for at least… one more in here… maybe…”

“You guys go on ahead,” Steven assured, largely out of curiosity to see why Dipper had also apparently decided to hang back as well. “I’ll catch up with you on Lion later.”

“Whatever you say,” the former rock star nodded as he strapped himself in. “See you in a bit!”

Steven stood by, waving the group off with a smile that faded not long after they were gone. He was prepared to search the barn up and down for Dipper, still concerned with how he might be faring after Lapis’ unexpected departure the previous night. Fortunately, however, he didn’t have to look far before spotting him leaning up against the barn just a few feet behind him, apparently distracted by keeping his sights set on the sky.

“Dipper!” Steven called, hurrying over to him. “Are you… i-is everything all right?”

“Huh?” Dipper blinked, apparently caught off guard as he looked to the young Gem. “Um… yeah, I just… didn’t feel like heading back to the shack yet.”

“Oh,” Steven said shortly. “Are you… feeling ok after… what happened last night?”

“Yeah,” Dipper retorted just as tersely, crossing his arms tighter as he looked away.

“Do you… wanna talk about it?”

“Not really…”

“Oh, well, uh… do you wanna… help me look for Lion instead?” the young Gem offered with a small smile.

Of course, it took Dipper practically no time at all to see what Steven was trying to do here, and despite his rather low spirits, he couldn’t turn the young Gem’s kind, genuine attempts at cheering him up down so easily. “Sure,” he chuckled somewhat. “Why not?”

Steven’s grin widened at this, glad to accept his help in exchange for providing Dipper with what would no doubt be a welcome distraction. And so the pair began their search for the pink beast, scoping out the vast rolling hills of farmland stretching out before them for any signs of the telltale pastel mane. “Lion! Hey, Liiiiiiiiion!” Steven called as loudly as he could. “Leeee-on! I have a big juicy steak right here in my hand for you! Whoops!” the young Gem exclaimed dramatically. “I dropped it and it fell out of existence!”

“Hm…” Dipper mused much more quietly as he looked around. “Maybe he’s out near the silo… oh my gosh! Steven, look!”

The young Gem did so, instantly letting out a shocked gasp upon noticing the very familiar figure sitting high atop the barn’s silo. “No way…. Lapis?” Steven stopped, staring up at the distant blue
Gem to the point that he didn’t even realize Dipper had already started running on ahead without him. When he did, though, it didn’t take him long to follow suit right along after him to catch up with her.

Once again, Dipper found himself having to fight back tears as he quickly scaled the ladder leading up to the top of the silo. Though unlike the tears he’d shed last night, these were filled with joy just as much as his elated smile was as he finally made it to the top to find that, sure enough, Lapis herself was there. The blue Gem sat, her legs pulled to her chest as she stared out at the open land before her, expression downcast, even as Dipper hurried over to join her.

“I-I can’t believe it,” he began, genuinely incredulous. “You… you actually stayed? I thought… all you wanted to do was leave…”

“I was leaving…” Lapis muttered dejectedly. “Then I realized, I’ve got nowhere to go. Who knows what they’d do to me back home after what I did to Jasper? I guess its finally time to stop kidding myself; I can’t go back to Homeworld… and I can’t stay here.”

“Sure you can!” Steven chimed in, finally making it to the top of the silo himself.

“What?” Lapis looked to him, confused. Dipper was more than prepared to protest the young Gem’s earnest, but innocent attempts at convincing the blue Gem to stay, attempts that he had made himself on more than one occasion. But even so, he didn’t get much of a chance as Steven continued.

“You can totally stay here,” the young Gem said, sitting down next to the blue Gem with a smile. “It doesn’t have to be here here. You can live anywhere! You don’t have to stay here in Gravity Falls if you don’t want to.”

“Steven…” Dipper cut in with something of an anxious whisper, knowing that he was largely wasting his time. And yet, oddly enough, Lapis herself seemed to be listening to him intently as he went on.

“You could live in Relativity Creek, or Lake Trajectory, Acceleration Heights, Momentum Point, and that’s just the places I know of off the top of my head! Maybe me and Dipper could show you around so you could find a place that’s right for you!”

“Steven,” Dipper shook his head, doubtful of this plan. “I-I don’t think that’s-”

“Really?” Lapis suddenly interjected, intrigued as she looked between the boys. “You both would do that for me?”

“W-well, of course!” Dipper quickly changed his tune, amazed that the young Gem’s suggestion actually seemed to be working where his hadn’t before. “B-but I thought… didn’t you want to-”

“Yeah!” Steven chimed in preemptively. “It’ll be fun! We could find you an all-new place to live here on Earth! Somewhere where we’d be able to come visit you anytime we wanted!”

“Well… that part sounds… nice…” Lapis admitted, offering both of them a small, genuine smile as she stood.

“You… you mean you really might stay this time?” Dipper asked, trying his best to hide just how much he wanted to hear her say that she would.

“…Maybe…” the blue Gem, rubbed her arm, somewhat apprehensive about being so certain on the matter so soon. “Let’s just… go look first and we’ll go from there.”
Despite his previous reservations, Dipper couldn’t help but smile brightly upon hearing this, knowing that Lapis being the least bit open to the very idea of staying on Earth was more than enough to allay him. “Right. Then let’s get looking.”

“Ready Freddy?” Steven asked just as warmly.

“My name’s Lapis,” the blue Gem pointed out with a small smirk as she bent down to offer both boys a spot on her back.

“Um… Lapis? Are you sure we’ll both be able to fit?” Dipper asked, somewhat concerned.

“I don’t see why you wouldn’t,” Lapis shrugged, more than prepared to carry them both. “Hop on.”

After exchanging a brief glance, both Steven and Dipper did so, the latter mounting first before the young Gem pressed up close behind him. “You both ok like this?” Lapis asked, adjusting their shared weight a bit to make things more comfortable. While it was a bit of a tight fit, the boys both nodded all the same, and no sooner after they did than the blue Gem took off into the skies with both of them in tow.

Her rapid ascent caught Steven off guard in particular, to the point that he clung tightly onto Dipper just so he wouldn’t fall off. Dipper, on the other hand, was helpless to hold back a bright laugh as they took off, one that Lapis soon joined in on not long after she heard it.

“This is pretty familiar,” the blue Gem called up to him with a warm grin, perhaps the first genuine one she’d shown since being freed. “Isn’t it, Dipper?”

“Yeah,” Dipper said, still laughing as he glanced down at her, reveling in the treasured memory of that sweet, starry night that finally felt like it hadn’t been so long ago anymore. “It is.”

“Whoo!” Steven cheered, replacing his initial fear with excitement as they soared high above radiant acres of lush farmland. “Hey, Lapis! How about this? You could live out here in the country. There’s no noise, no rules, it’d just be you becoming one with nature.”

“Why would I wanna do that?” Lapis asked, curious as she flew a bit lower into the small forest ahead.

“It’s fun!” Steven grinned as the blue Gem continued navigating just under the canopy of the woods. “If you live with these trees, you could have a giant bird nest and have squirrels for pets. You guys could eat acorn pies every night!”

“Oh, a bit more realistically,” Dipper interjected. “If you lived here, you’d only be a short flight away from me—I mean, from us. Plus, whenever it gets hot or rains, you’d have a pretty decent cover under all these leaves.”

Intrigued, Lapis looked across the far stretch of trees they were practically lost among, or rather, their leaves, watching curiously as each of them seemed to rustle on their own accord in response to the gentle breeze swaying them along. “Leaves…” she repeated quietly, having never seen anything quite like them before.

Wanting to get a higher view, Lapis glided above the tree line once more, leaving both boys on her back a bit disheveled from the leaves they had just broken through. Steven gasped as he plucked one such leaf he spotted out of Dipper’s hair, handing it over to him so he could present it to the blue Gem herself. “Lapis, look at this!” Steven exclaimed. “This leaf turned orange! This means the seasons are starting to change from summer to fall; soon, its gonna happen to all the leaves on
“…Wow…” Lapis said, genuinely impressed that these simple ‘leaves’ could accomplish such a special feat.

“Oh man, summer really is winding down fast, isn’t it?” Dipper said, baffled by the realization. “It’s hard to believe that in just a few weeks, me and Mabel will have to be heading back to Piedmont…”

“Piedmont?” Lapis asked. “What’s that?”

“It’s where we’re from,” Dipper explained. “Mabel and I are only visiting Gravity Falls for the summer. Once it’s over, we’ll have to go back home. But don’t worry! It’s only a few hours away, probably even less for you since you can fly, Lapis.”

“Hm, well, in that case… why don’t I just live there with you?” the blue Gem suggested with a small, if not somewhat innocent smile.

“W-what?!” Dipper balked, caught off guard by the idea.

“Oh, yeah!” Steven exclaimed, all for it. “I’ve never been to Piedmont before, but I bet it’s really nice! And you’d get to be roommates with both Dipper and Mabel! I wish I could do that! How much more lucky could you get?”

“Oh, yeah sounds great,” Dipper said, with a rather awkward chuckle. “Though I’m not sure our parents would feel the same way. I mean, Mabel already promised them she wasn’t gonna bring any new pets home, so what would they say if I brought an entire person, or Gem, I guess, home with me?”

“Oh yeah…” Steven deflated at this while Lapis raised a confused eyebrow, clearly not understanding Dipper’s concerns. “Oh, well we’ll chalk it down as a ‘plan b’. But for now, there’s plenty of places we haven’t been yet. C’mon!”

The young Gem pointed Lapis’ way to the north, prompting her to fly onward and upward, out of the borders of Gravity Falls altogether just as night began to fall. Their higher elevation made their travel time much shorter, and soon enough, they’d broken out of the dense Oregonian forests Gravity Falls was nestled within, exchanging them for much more urban sprawls until they happened across one of the state’s most well-known.

“Hey, what’s that shadowy place over there?” Lapis asked, nodding to the smoggy city they were flying above.

“Ugh… that’s gotta be Portland…” Dipper remarked with something if a begrudging sneer.

“Is it populated by all those tiny machines?” the blue Gem asked as she stopped so they could hover over the city.

“No, but it is populated by hipsters and way too many coffee shops for comfort,” Dipper deadpanned, his tone still quite dry.

“Those are bikes, Lapis,” Steven explained, pointing down to the many cyclists below. “They’re a really fun way of getting around and if you lived here, you could ride one just about everywhere!”

“But why would I do that when I could just fly?”
“…Good question,” Steven noted. “Anyway, you’d like Portland; the people here seem to hate authority figures too.”

“Hey! Get out of our skies, ya right-wings!” someone called from the ground, tossing a shoe up at the trio in anger. They retaliated however, with a teasing, unified raspberry, an all-too appropriate and unified callback to the blue Gem’s camaraderie she had formed with the kids while still in the mirror. Their shared laughter over this continued as they took off once more, seeing no reason to linger in a place like Portland any longer.

Their next stop however, was yet another city, though one that was much more impressive than the last. This one rested near the sea, pristine and glistening in the night as the trio glided in towards it.

“What’s that?” Lapis asked, intrigued.

“That’s Emerald City!” Steven grinned. “Isn’t it cool?”

“So its controlled by Emeralds then?” the blue Gem wondered, a hint of dread in her tone.

“Uh, no, Lapis, that’s just what it’s called,” Dipper corrected. “Still, I was never sure why they called this place that, I mean, its not like its even green or anything.”

“Its very bright,” Lapis pointed out.

“Yeah, that’s why they say ‘what happens in Emerald City never sleeps’,,” Steven said boldly.

“I’m pretty sure no one says that, Steven,” Dipper remarked dryly.

“So what does happen in Emerald City then?” Lapis inquired.

“Well, let’s see…” the young Gem mused. “If you lived here, you could get a cool apartment, and be a single Gem taking on the big city. You could be a freelance artist with your own studio, and come home to a wacky roommate-”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Lapis cut in flatly.

“Uh… why don’t we try something else, then?” Dipper suggested.

“Heh, I’m up for it if you guys are,” the blue Gem said, smirking back at her passengers.

“Of course we are!” Steven exclaimed cheerfully.

“Anything for you, Lapis,” Dipper said with an equally confident nod.

“Alright then,” Lapis’ smile widened a bit at this as she flew the boys up higher. “Then let’s go!” Both Steven and Dipper were surprised at the blue Gem’s sudden take off, but they knew well to hold on tight as she took up past the clouds, out into the starry open skies above them. The night air was crisp and rich up here, the dark colors of late nighttime creating a beautiful sense of serenity that captivated both boys alike as they took it all in.

“Wow! Lapis, its so beautiful up here!” Steven exclaimed, stars in his eyes as he looked over the ones surrounding them.

“Eh, its alright,” Lapis remarked with a coy, wry smile. “I guess I can see why you like it. Hey, speaking of which, can you still spot the Big Dipper, Dipper?”

“Are you kidding?” Dipper chuckled, immediately pointing out the constellation he was nicknamed for. “After the front row seat you gave me of it last time, how could I not?”
Lapis herself let out a bright laugh at this, one that grew daring as her wings drooped low in anticipation. “Speaking of last time… hold on tight!” With this warning alone, the blue Gem sped forward, darting across the skies with incredible grace and ease. Both of her passengers heeded her instructions and held onto her as she confidently soared upward, her wings wide and her laughter free and easy as she sailed towards the starts. The boys both joined in on her levity, even as she preformed a daring loop, essentially tossing both of them off her back in the process. This was intentional, however, as she caught them both, one with each hand, joining in on their exhilarated cheers as she let them dangle, lose, yet secure in her grip as she carried them high above the clouds, all three of them reveling in what felt like another world entirely, even if it was still very much the same.

That was a fact that Lapis in particular was reminded of all too soon as the clouds began to part somewhat underneath them, revealing the vast dark sea below it. “Whoa, when did we get out over the ocean?” Dipper asked, amazed as he stared down below.

“We must be out super far!” Steven exclaimed, pointing out the only sole feature that could be seen amongst the seemingly endless water for miles. “Oh, cool! The Galaxy Warp!”

“Huh, so that’s where it is,” Dipper noted, impressed. “Now I can see why we always warp out here. It’s way faster than flying, though I gotta admit, nowhere near as exciting.”

Both boys shared a small laugh over this bout of humor, though it was one Lapis didn’t join in on. Instead, her gaze was fixated on the Galaxy Warp far below as they slowly flew over it, everything else seeming to fade away entirely, even the pair of boys she was holding onto. In fact, she was so distracted that her once-tight grip on them soon began to loosen, something that they both notice almost as soon as it did.

“Um… Lapis?” Steven asked, glancing up at the blue Gem, concerned. “W-we’re sorta slipping a little here…”

“L-Lapis?” Dipper tried again when he noticed she wasn’t responding, essentially gripping onto Lapis’ wrist to avoid falling. “We’re slipping! We’re gonna-”

“Sorry!” Lapis gasped, tightening her grip on both of them immediately just before the boys could fall out of it entirely. “I-I… I’m sorry…”

The blue Gem looked away, ashamed as she took them all in low. It was clear she was shaken, even as they landed on the silent, glistening warp hub, allowing Lapis to approach the broken warp at its center. “Lapis…?” Dipper ventured, worried when he noticed the distance the blue Gem was putting between them. A sort of distance that, for him in particular, was far too familiar.

“This is where I was abandoned…” Lapis wrapped her arms tightly around herself, the sea winds lightly tussling her hair as she kept her back to the boys. Steven and Dipper exchanged a wondering glance at this, but ultimately approached her, curious to know more.

“W-what happened?” Steven asked gently, not wanting to push the blue Gem into such bitter memories if she didn’t want to revisit them.

And yet, she did so anyway, raising her arm as the ocean itself surrounded them, creating an all too fitting backdrop upon which Lapis could finally tell her woeful story. “It was thousands of years ago,” she began, the aquatic screen depicting the blue Gem arriving on a lush, beautiful spot of Earth. One that was all too quickly ruined by devastation and war.

“I was only meant to visit for a short time, but I got caught up in the middle of the war. I-it was
awful! I tried to run, but…” She trailed off as an unknown Gem struck her from behind amidst the unfolding chaos, the heavy blow destroying her form almost instantly, leaving only her gemstone behind. “I was picked up by a Homeworld soldier and confused for a Crystal Gem and used as a tool.” From there, the blue Gem’s stone was carefully placed into the back of a familiar mirror, the very one she had been trapped in when the boys first met her. “They’d ask me, ‘show us your base!’, ‘where is your leader’? I didn’t know, and I couldn’t say I wasn’t one of them!”

“It soon became clear there was no hope of stopping the rebellion…” A mass exodus of fearful Gems unfolded at this, all of them racing for the warp that would take them away from the war-torn Earth and back to the safety of Homeworld, one of them dropping the mirror Lapis was stuck within in the process. “All of the Homeworld Gems fled, and in all of the panic of escaping Earth… I was left behind.” Just as the last rush of Gems hurried by, one of them thoughtlessly, carelessly happened to step squarely on Lapis’ gemstone, creating a deep, marring crack in its mirror-bound surface.

And just as Homeworld’s forces left, a bright, blinding flash lit up the sky, leaving a stark, empty silence behind in its place. “And there I stayed… Freedom in my sight, but out of reach for ages, until I was found…” By none other than Pearl first, who picked up the mirror from its longtime spot on the Galaxy Warp. Eventually however, the mirror exchanged hands, though apparently Lapis had never gotten a good look as to who she had been passed along to, for eventually, she ended up buried at the bottom of a dark, lonely box. That is, until the day she had at long last been found once again just a few short months ago… by Dipper.

At this, Lapis’ literal flood of memories finally came to an end, exhaustion weighing upon her as she collapsed against the Homeworld warp, the waves she had raised up crashing down along with her. While Steven instantly rushed to her side, Dipper hesitated, completely floored by everything he’d just witnessed and just how much insight it finally gave him concerning the blue Gem’s history. “L-Lapis, I…” he trailed off, wanting to say so much more than what he ultimately ended up asking her. “A-are you ok?”

“I-I’ll be fine,” the blue Gem shook her head to clear it, offering both boys a small, reassuring smile. “Let me take you both back.”

“You sure you don’t wanna take a minute?” Steven asked, concerned.

“It’s fine,” Lapis said, standing. “I just… wanna get out of here.”

Understanding the blue Gem’s reasoning behind this perfectly, both boys agreed, letting her carry them both away as they took off into the night sky once again. Things were quiet between all three of them for quite some time as Lapis flew back towards the direction of Gravity Falls, their shared manner solemn as none of them could really think of anything to really say. However, when this silence finally was broken, surprisingly enough, Lapis herself was the one to do it.

“For a moment,” she began, hope conflicting with grief in her tone as she kept her sights straight ahead. “I really felt like things could be different this time. I-I… I guess I started to think that even when I came back here the last time too, thanks to you, Dipper…”

Needless to say, Dipper was quite surprised to hear this, largely because he knew that his several earnest attempts at convincing Lapis that she could have a future on Earth never really amounted to much. And yet now, hearing Lapis admit that he had at least brought her to consider the idea made him realize. Perhaps all of the time and effort he had put towards the blue Gem in so many different ways really had mattered in the grand scheme of things after all.

“But things aren’t different,” Lapis inevitably crashed his hopes yet again, however as her tone
“No,” Dipper found himself interjecting largely without thinking, his tone firm and resolved as he refused to let the blue Gem drown herself in such suffocating thoughts any longer. “No, you’re not. You’re not in a mirror anymore, or in some lake, you’re finally free! You can do whatever you want now, no matter what.” He stopped short, his resolve faltering a bit as he looked down in shame. “No matter what anyone else might want you to do…”

“B-but I’m still on Earth!” Lapis protested tensely.

“Yeah, but nothing is still on Earth,” Steven cut in with a thoughtful smile. “Everything’s always changing: leaves, cities, even Portland changes; my dad said the coffee shops used to be pretty boring, but now they serve really good donuts!”

“The point is,” Dipper said, getting things back on track as he looked to the blue Gem, earnest. “Neither of us are trying to get you to stay here if you don’t want to. That’s your choice to make, Lapis. But what you should know is that… this isn’t the same world that held you prisoner, not anymore. A-and… even if it doesn’t feel like home for you now, well… if you give it a chance, maybe that could change too.”

Lapis didn’t respond to this as they finally landed right outside the barn just as dawn was beginning to break over the distant hills. “We know you can’t go back to Homeworld now,” Steven continued, handing Lapis the leaf they had shown her earlier. “But this time, if you stay here, it’ll be your choice to stay here.”

“And nobody else’s,” Dipper smiled, ready to accept that choice, whatever it might be.

The blue Gem remained quiet, focusing on the leaf in her hand as if it was the most incredible thing in all the world. And for what it was worth and all it represented to her at that moment, it might as well have been. “You know, its funny… For all this time I spent on Earth, I barely saw any of it…”

“That’s not funny!” Steven frowned sympathetically. “That’s super sad.”

“But you know…” Dipper said somewhat leadingly. “If you did decide to stay, then we’d have all the time in the world to show you everything you missed out on.”

Lapis finally smiled in full upon hearing this, her warm, beaming grin setting both boys’ hearts at ease as she looked out towards the rising sun with a renewed sense of hope. Hope that maybe, just maybe, things could be better this time. “I… I wanna see it.”

“R-really?” Dipper asked, awed by disbelief upon finally, finally hearing this admission.

“Really,” Lapis confirmed with a solid nod and a fond smile. “I wanna stay here!”

Once again, Dipper found his emotions getting the better of him as he let out an elated laugh at this, one that prompted him to rush to embrace her. A hug that she finally returned this time as they both knew it would at long last go without either of them having to say goodbye. Steven readily joined in on it, all three of them more than happy to celebrate the blue Gem finally deciding on her brand new home. “So, you’re gonna stay here?” Steven asked, referring to the barn.

“Yeah,” Lapis grinned as the hug disbanded. “Here here!”

“Yes, ‘here-here’, everybody!” The levity was almost immediately, starkly interrupted by Peridot and Mabel’s arrival, the latter clearly excited to see Lapis awake as she waved to her
enthusiastically. Of course, what neither of them noticed was the absolutely baffled look Lapis was sending the green Gem all the while as they made their approach. “What are we talking about?” Peridot asked, completely oblivious.

“Y-You?!” Lapis exclaimed, aghast to see the green Gem again.

“Lazuli,” Peridot nodded cordially. “Nice to see you up and about.”

“Yeah! I’m so glad you came back, Lapis!” Mabel chimed in brightly. “Though it looks like somebody decided to go off on some sorta super-fun night flight without me.” She sent a pointed look to Steven and Dipper, though neither of them noticed as they were far too engrossed in watching the obvious tension build between the two newly-reunited Gems.

“W-what are you doing here?!” Lapis demanded, not hesitating to send Peridot a fierce, distrustful glare.

“This is my new home away from Homeworld!” Peridot proclaimed proudly.

“No, its not, its mine!” Lapis countered defiantly. “Steven, Dipper, tell her!”

Needless to say that, as caught up in the sudden awkward encounter as they were, both boys were hard pressed to say or do much of anything at all, other than exchange a terse, uncomfortable glance over the conflict they’d now no doubt have to resolve. “Oh boy…” Steven muttered, capturing just how difficult this situation would likely be to solve perfectly.

“Yeah…” Dipper admitted just as apprehensively, Mabel likewise realizing just how at odds both Lapis and Peridot would likely be with each other, given their history with one another. “We… really didn’t think this part through…”

“And then I’ll say ‘Hey, as one refugee to another, it isn’t so bad we can’t go back to Homeworld, am I right? Why don’t we watch the sun come up and figure out what we’re going to do with all this time, eh Lazuli?’” Peridot listed off the many, many points of her plan to her tablet, recording them for posterity and paying little mind to the audience she had as she did. “And then she’ll say ‘Yes, Peridot, as impressed as I was by you back on Homeworld, I am even more impressed with your new compact look and your capacity for friendship! I’m so glad we’re going to live together!’ Peridot, facet 5, out.”

Satisfied, the green Gem brought her recording to an end before she turned to face the others. “Ooo! Good plan, Peri!” Mabel chimed brightly. “You really thought this whole thing through!”

“Precisely,” Peridot smirked before addressing Lapis in particular. “So… let’s begin.”

“This isn’t going to work,” Lapis immediately stopped the green Gem in her tracks, her expression dry and bitter as she shook her head.

“Wait… what?” Peridot asked, caught of guard.

The blue Gem largely ignored her, instead anxiously turning to the trio of kids beside her instead. “I really thought I was going to be living alone here…”

“Yeah… but this is even better!” Steven professed as he came up with a sudden idea to make things work. “Oh! How about this? I saw this on an episode of a TV show once. I didn’t see how it
ended, but I’m sure it worked out all right.” The young Gem took out a marker, drawing a clean, distinct line separating the barn clean in half between Lapis and Peridot. “If we split the place in half, then you can both have your own space! High ceilings, real wood floors, convenient location in the heart of the country… It’s perfect for you two!”

“Yeah, perfect outside of the fact that they’re still gonna have to see each other every day…” Dipper muttered, already knowing that Lapis wouldn’t be fond of the idea for a number of reasons. Either way, both Peridot and Mabel were fully on board with it.

“Ohhh! Looks like everyone’s full of great ideas today!” Mabel quipped excitedly, if not a bit obliviously.

“Yes, this will work fine,” Peridot grinned. “I like the cut of your gem, Steven Quartz!”

Lapis, however, was far from pacified with such a simple, thoughtless solution. “No. No way!” she protested hotly.

“What’s the problem?” Peridot asked, confused. “You’re the one getting all the good stuff! You’ve got the propeller and the cans on your side! You can do tons with those! Ohh—actually, I want the paint cans. You wanna trade something?”

“I don’t care about paint cans,” Lapis glowered dismissively. “That’s not the problem.”

“Eh…?” the green Gem raised an eyebrow, still not getting the point.

“What’s wrong, Lapis?” Steven asked, concerned.

“It’s her,” the blue Gem hissed, glaring piercingly at the green Gem. “She’s the problem. I can’t stand the thought of looking at her every day. She’s the reason why I had to run back here to Earth!”

“Hey, that wasn’t my fault!” Peridot exclaimed defensively. “I was headed to Earth anyway and I needed an informant. It should have been a simple mission. Things didn’t exactly work out for ether of us…”

“You interrogated me!” Lapis snapped, furious. “You used me like everyone else did!”

“But its not like that now!” the green Gem countered. “It’s different now. I’m different.”

“Yeah, that’s right!” Mabel cut in earnestly. “Peridot’s not only super cute and short now—”

“Hey!” Peridot interrupted, disgruntled.

“-But she’s also really good and fun to hang around with! She doesn’t even wanna destroy us or the Earth anymore, isn’t that cool?”

“Its true, Lapis,” Steven agreed. “Peridot’s really come into her own since she’s been living on Earth.”

“Yeah, as much as I hate to admit it…” Dipper began with a small smile. “Peridot really isn’t that bad, at least not anymore.”

“I’m not bad at all now!” the green Gem assured firmly. “I sabotaged by own mission! I helped save the Earth! I even yelled at Yellow Diamond! She’s probably sending a whole fleet here to find me and shatter me right now. So as you can see, I’m kind of a big deal; a big anti-Homeworld
Despite this lengthy list of proud accomplishments, Lapis simply scoffed at them, rolling her eyes as she stepped over to the kids. “Sorry, you guys,” she said, her tone much more gentle as she addressed them. “But I really don’t think this is gonna work.”

“Aw, but, Lapis!” Mabel protested with a pout. “You and Peri would make the cutest pair of roomies ever!”

“Uh… maybe we could put up a curtain…?” Steven suggested, trying to come up with really anything at this point. Even so, Lapis simply gave the pair an apologetic smile as she shook her head, stepping out of the barn before summoning her wings to fly towards her former perch on top of the silo.

“Ohh man…” Dipper sighed, scratching the back of his neck. “Maybe I should go talk to her. I can’t make any promises, but maybe I might be able to smooth things out here?”

“Hey, no one knows Lapis better than you do, bro-bro,” Mabel grinned in support of this plan.

“Ugh, I’m up for anything if it gets her to understand…” Peridot muttered, crossing her arms. “Well then… here does nothing,” Dipper said, venturing off to follow after the blue Gem once again. At the same time, Steven let out a disappointed sigh all his own as he looked away from the equally dejected green Gem.

“Er, sorry, Peridot…” he said. “I thought this was gonna be ok. I guess we all forgot that the last time you two saw each other… wasn’t so ok…”

“That was in the past!” Peridot growled, annoyed. “Its not like that now!”

“Aw, Peri,” Mabel began sympathetically. “You’ve changed so much since you’ve been here on Earth with us! We all know that.”

“But obviously she doesn’t!” the green Gem motioned towards Lapis, still afar off atop the silo. “She’s the one who needs to know! I want her to see that I’ve changed just like all of you have!”

“Oh, Peridot! That’s really sweet!” Steven smiled, endeared by Peridot’s honesty and effort. “That’s the you you need to show her!”

“Show her my sweet…?” Peridot asked, confused.

“Yeah, sorta,” Mabel chuckled. “You just gotta show her how much you care!”

“…How am I supposed to do that?”

“Don’t worry,” Steven grinned, throwing an arm around the green Gem’s shoulder as Mabel did the same. “We got you.”

“So even though most people just naturally like me because of my magnetic personality,” Mabel explained proudly as her, Peridot, and Steven congregated on the barn floor. “I still consider myself to be something of an expert in getting people to other people to like each other, especially when it comes to getting creative!” At this, she whipped out a large bag of various craft supplies of all sorts, from crayons to paint to of course, glitter of every single color there was.
“Oh… I see…” Peridot nodded in understanding. “We’re going to decorate Lazuli, just like we did to the barn!” At this, the green Gem pointed out the small corner of the barn her and Mabel had been working on, which was laden with stickers and paint and glitter to create a colorful, eye-catching nook.

“Um… no,” Steven frowned, pulling out a large sheet of paper and folding it in half. “We’re gonna use this instead. Cards are a great way to tell someone something if you can’t be face to face with them! Or… if they don’t wanna see your face. But this is a perfect way for you to give her a taste of that sweet version of Peridot! Here, look!” The young Gem held the card up as he finished scribbling on it. “Its you and Lapis holding hands!”

“…Where are our noses?” Peridot asked, not quite taken with Steven’s unique interpretation.

“Oh, that’s kind of part of my style lately.”

“Is not having fingers also part of your style?”

“No, I-I’m just bad at drawing hands.”

“Tsk, I appreciate the effort, Steven, but I think ya might just be a bit out of your element here,” Mabel shook her head. “Move over and let a real pro take a crack at it.”

The young Gem did so, allowing Mabel to make a fresh start on a new card. Both Steven and Peridot watched her curiously as she worked rapidly, but precisely, crafting out a ‘masterpiece’ in not just markers, but also in pastels, paint, and everything in between. Then, once her work was complete, she topped it all off with a healthy dose of glitter for good measure before stepping back to appreciate it. “There! If that doesn’t get Lapis to like you, Peri, then I don’t know what will?”

“Ohh! That looks way better than my card!” Steven exclaimed, impressed. “You’re such a great artist, Mabel!”

“Aw, shucks…” Mabel grinned, blushing deeply at such a warm compliment. “I-I’m not that great…”

“Uh… why are there so many hearts surrounding me and Lazuli?” Peridot asked, bewildered.

“Oh, never mind those right now,” Mabel grinned with a knowing wink. “I have a feeling that if you two take off, you’ll get the point of them sooner than you think.”

“So here’s your part,” Steven handed off a marker to Peridot herself. “Write an apology inside to Lapis so she knows how sorry you are about before and that everything is ok now. If you write from the heart, your feelings will reach her!” This advice was completely lost on the green Gem however, as she looked to him, utterly confused until Steven clarified. “Just… try to be sincere.”

“Hm…” Peridot mused, taking a moment or two to mull such an apology over. Soon enough, though, she began writing it out, allowing herself to be as sincere as she knew how to be, all in the hopes that it would finally let Lapis get a glimpse of who she truly was. Of how she’d truly changed for the better.

Even if Lapis had gone up to sit on top of the silo to more or less get a peaceful moment alone, she absolutely didn’t protest at all when she noticed Dipper climbing up to join her. Instead, she sat up, welcoming him with a small smile as he came to sit next to her.
“Hey,” she greeted him casually, fondly.

“Hey,” he returned, a bit less warmly and a bit more worriedly as he looked over at her. “How are you feeling?”

“Ok, I guess…” the blue Gem shrugged. “I’ll feel much better once she leaves, though…”

“Lapis, I…” Dipper began apprehensively. “I don’t think Peridot’s going to leave.”

“Why not?” Lapis asked, disgruntled. “She can’t stay here with me. I won’t let her. Not after… what she did…”

“But… that’s just it,” Dipper said, still making sure to tread carefully as not to upset the blue Gem anymore. “Even if she was pretty awful back on Homeworld, she really is different now. Believe me, I used to hate her just as much as you do, but… she’s not the same Gem who interrogated you. She’s actually pretty ok once you get past her massive ego of hers.”

While Dipper let out a small chuckle at this, it was one Lapis didn’t join in on as her tone grew even more bitter. “But how do you know that’s not just some act she’s putting on?” she asked coldly. “How can you just… trust her, even after everything she’s done?”

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“Because she’s changed, Lapis,” Dipper rationalized evenly. “She may not be perfect, but she’s proved to me, Steven, and Mabel that she wants to be better.”

“So what if she has?” Lapis asked, crossing her arms. “Even if she has changed, that doesn’t change what she did. I can’t just… forgive her for that like it never even happened! And to be honest, I don’t see how you can either…”

Dipper faltered at this, wanting to explain to Lapis just how truly bitter he had once felt towards Peridot, how he had largely blamed her, almost as much as himself, for the events that had led up to her lengthy, miserable stint as Malachite. But at the same time, he wanted to explain everything that Peridot had done to shatter his original perception of her entirely, how she had evolved, grown, even gained his respect and perhaps even friendship through it all. And yet, despite all of that, it largely seemed as though Lapis had already made up her mind about the green Gem. And that there would be no changing it any time soon.

“Hey! Lazuli!” As if on cue, Peridot’s shout sounded out from the base of the silo, eliciting another aggravated groan from Lapis as she turned her nose up, ignoring her completely as she continued to call out for her. “Laaaazuli! HEY! Ugh, why isn’t she responding?” Peridot asked Steven and Mabel, frustrated.

“I’m not sure… I thought both her and Dipper were up there…” Steven frowned before making an attempt at getting the blue Gem’s attention himself. “Hey! Lapis! You up there??”

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“Huh?” Lapis turned, much more concerned with the young Gem’s call than she had been with Peridot’s. She didn’t waste a moment in gathering Dipper before she flew them both down to the ground to meet Steven and Mabel. “Yes, Steven? Mabel?” she looked between the pair curiously, still intentionally not paying Peridot any mind whatsoever.

“Well… go on…” Mabel urged the green Gem with a wide smile, pushing her forward a bit.

Peridot stepped up to Lapis, awkwardly clenching the card in her hands before stiffly presenting it to her with a tight, forced grin. “Mabel did the outside, and I did the inside!” she proclaimed, proud of their handywork. However, the moment Lapis opened up said card, a large pile of glitter sprinkled out of it, accumulating at the blue Gem’s feet.
“I also supplied the glitter!” Mabel quipped, though she retracted upon catching a disapproving glance from her brother. “N-not that it matters…”

Lapis’ expression was dour and hard as she glanced over the card, ultimately opting to read what Peridot had written inside of it aloud. “Sorry I interrogated you. You were just so full of useful information. That’s a sincere compliment. Peridot.”

The blue Gem made no further comment on the card, instead sending the green Gem a dry, critical glance over its contents. A sign that, despite her best efforts, this first attempt clearly hadn’t worked at all.

“The glitter!” Peridot huffed as she paced around the barn moments later, still quite perturbed over her recent failure. Steven and Mabel stood by, watching her worriedly as she ranted off her theories as to why the card hadn’t amounted to anything whatsoever. “One can only conclude it was the excessive amount of glitter! It seems illogical to me that it would be any of the writing elements! It took me over an hour to compose it, and I was the most sincere as per Steven’s instructions!”

“It could be… she’s just not much of a reader?” Steven ventured, uncertain.

“Oh! I got it!” Mabel raised her hand enthusiastically. “Why don’t you try giving her a gift!”?

“Another approach, yes!” Peridot exclaimed daringly. “But what…?”

“Hm… think of something that she likes?” Steven suggested with a shrug.

“Oh! I know something!” Mabel raised her hand once more. “She likes Dipper!” She pointed out to her brother, leaning up against the fence outside as he continued chatting with the blue Gem. “But it’s not like we can just wrap him up in a pretty box and give him to Lapis… can we?”

“Hm…” Peridot continued thinking. “Well, Lapis Lazulis are typically partial to water and flying, so… aha!” Both Steven and Mabel gasped in excited anticipation for whatever the green Gem was about to purpose, though in the end, she backtracked on whatever idea she’d had in mind. “No…”

“No?” Steven frowned.

“Nu-uh,” the green Gem shook her head. “But WHAT IF-”

“Yeah?” Mabel asked, curious.

“…Nah…”

“Oh, yeah, totally no.”

“Yeah, that’d probably be overdoing it…”

“Ugh…” the trio let out a unified exasperated groan, none of them able to really come up with much of anything. Until…

“Water…” Steven mused, looking outside of the barn to the large hole the drill had dug into the soil there and seeing a prime opportunity within it. “You know… I think you might just have something there.”
As soon as Steven and Mabel had finished relaying their latest plan to Dipper, he complied with his part of guiding Lapis towards it. He did so rather carefully though, since he had somehow managed to convince the blue Gem to shield her eyes with her own wings so that Peridot’s ‘gift’ would remain a surprise.

“We’re almost there,” he assured. “By the way, you can’t actually see through those, right?”

“Actually yes,” Lapis admitted with a small smile. “But it’s very blurry.”

“Good to know,” Dipper returned her grin as they both came to a stop. “Ok, here we are.”

Lapis unfolded her wings at this, though her smile was quick to disappear completely when she took in the sight before her. Mabel and Steven stood by, tossing celebratory confetti in front of Peridot, who was casually floating on an inner tube atop the newly created pool of water the trio had just filled in. “H-2-Oh my gosh!” Peridot exclaimed proudly, pulling down the sunglasses Mabel had given her. “It’s a smaller-than-average lake!”

“Uh… don’t you mean ‘pool’?” Dipper pointed out.

“…What?” Peridot asked, unfamiliar with the term.

“It’s from the hole we drilled,” Steven explained. “Peridot, Mabel, and I sealed it and filled it with water.”

“And we even found some fun pool toys in the barn you guys can use in it!” Mabel grinned as she presented a pair of floaties to Lapis. “Ta da! Water wings to go with your real water wings! They’re even blue, just like you are, so you’ll be perfectly matching and totally styling, if I do say so myself.”

“Heh,” Lapis was unable to hold back a small chuckle at this as she accepted the floaties. “Thanks, Mabel, but…” her expression turned bitter once more as she looked back to the pool. “What’s the point of this?”

“It’s a gift, for you!” Peridot quipped cheerfully. “You know, cause water’s your thing. Pretty good, right? The barn’s out here in the country, but now you can get your moisture fix whenever. So you can do… all that water stuff you do!”

The blue Gem narrowed her eyes at this, her tone incredulous as she looked over the pool once again. “…Water? Seriously?”

“Yeah!” Peridot chimed enthusiastically.

“You do realize that I spent the last few weeks trapped in a lake, right?”

“S-sure,” the green Gem’s smile turned awkward at this. “B-but I thought…”

“It was an endless, crushing darkness,” Lapis said, her voice low and dark as she relentlessly described the barrage of horrors she had been through. “Wet and bleak and suffocating. Water was the tomb I lived in for those weeks.”

Unsure of what to say to this, Peridot sunk a bit into her inner tube, embarrassed as she realized all of the many places she had gone wrong with her earnest gift for the blue Gem. “T-tomb, you say?”
“Yeah,” Lapis remarked, her tone flat and cross once more. “So I’m kind of taking a break from water right now. But thanks… for the ‘lake’.”

By now, Peridot was beyond mortified as she finally ended up flipping over in her tube, falling right into the lake to add insult to injury. At the same time, the kids exchanged a frantic glance, none of them having expected for Lapis to take their latest approach with such a harsh reception.

“Don’t worry, you three,” she quickly assured them warmly before shooting another disdainful glance back at Peridot. “It’s not your fault.”

With that, the blue Gem simply summoned her wings and flew off once more, leaving them, and especially the green Gem behind, awash what remained of yet another idea that had gotten her absolutely nowhere.

“A pool?!” Peridot huffed, recording into her tablet as Steven and Mabel sat by once again, empathetically listening to her. “What a cloddy idea! Of course she wouldn’t like that! There’s nothing, nothing, NOTHING that will get her to like me!”

“Aw, Peri, you can’t give up just yet!” Mabel urged.

“Yeah, there’s gotta be something, something, something….” Steven mused, deep in thought for any sort of other angle they could go with. Quite a challenge indeed, since it was clear they were all too quickly starting to run out of viable ideas. “Maybe… instead of something she likes… give her something you like! A piece of you!”

“Um… ok?” Peridot looked around, unsure of what that piece should be. “How about… one of my Camp Pining Hearts DVDs?”

“Which season?” Mabel asked dubiously.

“5…?”

“Trash,” both Steven and Mabel refuted, crossing their arms judgmentally.

“I know,” Peridot groaned, letting herself fall backward onto the floor as she continued groaning all the while, even as she began recording yet another log on her tablet. “Log date—whatever, facet—WHATEVER! Clearly there’s nothing important enough for me to give to Lazuli! Ugh… at least I still have you, tablet…” she sighed, patting the device affectionately. Only a beat later, however, she gasped as she looked to it once again, realizing that perhaps the perfect gift for Lapis wasn’t so far out of reach after all.

“Ta-da!” Peridot smiled as brightly as she possibly could as she presented her next gift to Lapis. Steven and Mabel had helped her carefully box and wrap it, so of course, both of them, along with Dipper, were present to watch as she delivered it, knowing that there wasn’t a chance this plan could fail, not this time.

Expectedly, Lapis said nothing, instead continuing to glower down at the green Gem, even as she took another small step closer to her, still holding her gift up in offering towards her. “See, even the ribbon is even blue,” Peridot pointed out with a coy grin. “I got yo number!”
Still, Lapis said nothing, not making any attempts at moving to accept the gift as she instead maintained her cold, monotonous manner. Peridot grew somewhat nervous at this, but, upon a pair of encouraging nodes from both Steven and Mabel, she pressed on all the same. “Uh, h-here! I’ll unwrap it for you!” the green Gem did so, explaining the meaning behind the box’s contents as she did. “When I was stuck here, Steven and Mabel a ‘cell phone’ as a gift and after that was… unfortunately broken, one of Dipper’s friends gave me this as a replacement. I didn’t really get it at first—” Peridot finally unboxed the gift to reveal her own treasured tablet, which she selflessly offered to the blue Gem once more. “But it made me feel better just to talk about the weird stuff that was happening. A-and maybe… it’ll help you too!”

Of course, while the kids were all unanimously warmed by Peridot’s kind sentiments, Lapis didn’t really react to them other than finally taking the tablet with both hands, looking down at it dubiously. “You, um… press that button at the bottom, tap the microphone app, and then just hit record a-and then you talk to it,” Peridot explained, offering the blue Gem an expectant smile. Lapis followed these instructions with surprising ease, her expression still harsh as she pressed record to leave a single icy, bitter message. “I don’t want your garbage.”

And with that, she gripped both sides of the tablet, bending it until it inevitably snapped clean in two, its glass screen shattering as it immediately powered off for the last time. Peridot, Steven, Mabel, and Dipper alike all watched in horrified shock as she dropped both halves of the ruined tablet, not even flinching as they fell to the ground at her feet, absolutely broken beyond repair. Of course, Peridot was by far the most alarmed and upset to see her heartfelt gift not just be rejected, but completely destroyed altogether without so much as a second thought at all. “Augh!” she cried in heated frustration, glaring back up at the unshaken blue Gem. “What, were you trapped in a tablet too?” Lapis finally flinched at this, clearly taken aback by such a bold remark, but even so, Peridot continued, letting out a long sigh as she tried her best to calm down. “Look, I get it, you know?” the green Gem said, her tone both sincere and frustrated. “You’re confused, you can never go back to Homeworld! This place doesn’t exactly feel like home yet. You’re alone, no one could possibly know what that feels like. Oh wait! I do! Heck, I even know what it’s like to be in a terrible fusion, just like you do, no thanks to one certain Pyrite…” Peridot shuddered at this, not catching the look of confused disbelief Lapis sent her way upon hearing this as she continued her emotional outburst. “Don’t you see? We’re the same, except… you don’t have to be alone…” The green Gem looked up to her, sad and hopeful, even as the blue Gem looked away angrily, just as she always seemed to do. “So tell me then… what you want from me! And whatever that is… I’ll do it.”

Lapis maintained her scowl, still refusing to let go of her animosity as she gave the green Gem the truth that she wanted, as hostile and hurtful as it was. “I want you… to LEAVE!”

Peridot gasped at this, as did the trio of kids behind her, but even so, the green Gem accepted this demand as graciously as anyone could have been expected to. “O-ok…” she closed her eyes, saying nothing else as she turned and walked off. Leaving the barn, the kids, her brand new home behind, all in a final, meager attempt to appease the blue Gem, one that she knew, just like all her other tries, would ultimately mean nothing in the end.

A long stretch of silence followed as the kids watched Peridot go, all of them floored by what they had just seen. Before, they had all understood, at least on some level, why Lapis had bore such ill will towards the green Gem from the start. But now, even after all the attempts Peridot had made at trying to prove to her she had changed, Lapis rebuffed and rejected her every single time without so much as budging from her bitter stance even once. And now, there was no question that in her stewing stubbornness, she had gone too far.
"Lapis… what the heck?!" Dipper, surprisingly enough, was the first to call the blue Gem out on her deplorable behavior, unable to look past it, even despite the significant trauma she had just been through. "I’m sorry, but, that… that was awful! Why would you do that?!"

"Why wouldn’t I do that?" Lapis asked with a flippant scoff. "I already told you, I don’t want her around here!"

"B-but you didn’t have to be so mean to her!" Mabel protested just as devoutly as her brother had. "She really is trying to get you to like her! And she’s serious about all of it!"

Unable to show anywhere near the same sort of hostility towards the kids as she had with Peridot, Lapis’ expression finally softened somewhat at this, taking on what almost appeared to be guilt for a moment before skepticism took its place instead. "W-why… why do you three care so much about her?" she asked, shaking her head. "Why does it matter so much to you that she sticks around? Why don’t you want her gone just as much as I do?!"

"Because we know her!" Steven scolded firmly, sharing the twins’ clear disappointment in the blue Gem. "Lapis, you’re not even giving her a single chance and that’s not fair! You should have at least gotten to know her before you decided that you didn’t like her! But now…” He sighed sadly, looking down at the broken remains of Peridot’s former tablet, something that Lapis mirrored with the slightest tinge of regret in her expression as she realized that maybe… just maybe, the kids were right about the green Gem after all. "It’s too late. And she’s never coming back again…"

"AHHH!!!!" Peridot’s terrified cry suddenly echoed over the hills she had just disappeared behind, heralding her arrival even before she scrambled over them hurriedly.

"Oh, hey! She’s coming back again!" Mabel smiled, though it quickly faded as they all noticed the green Gem’s frantic manner.

"They’re here!" she shouted warningly, rushing past the group to retreat towards the barn. Everyone was unanimously confused at this, that is, until the overcast skies above were suddenly broken by a large, ominous, crimson pod, looming menacingly as it hovered down from above. The others were startled stiff as they saw it, or rather as it saw them, casting down a stark, bright yellow ray of light on all three of them.

"W-what is that?!" Dipper asked, both dumbfounded and terrified by the sinister-looking craft.

"Who cares? Run!" Mabel cried, grabbing both Dipper and Steven by the arms as they hurried off, Lapis following not too far behind. They quickly joined Peridot in hiding out in the barn, hoping that the ship, whatever it was or whatever it had come for, wouldn’t be able to spot them there.

"P-Peridot! What’s going on?" Steven asked, out of breath from such a short, hectic dash.

"I-it’s a Roaming Eye!" Peridot explained, trying to keep her anxious voice down. "A Homeworld tracking vessel! There’s no doubt Yellow Diamond sent it here to find me! I told you, I’m public enemy #1!"

Despite the group’s best efforts to slip away from the Roaming Eye, it all too quickly found them, its golden spotlight flooding in through the barns’ wooden ceiling. Everyone collectively held their breaths as it passed overhead, and for a moment, it seemed as though they were in the clear as the vessel apparently hovered right past the barn. That is, until it flashed directly through the large hole in the building’s side, easily finding the terrified group gathered within it once more.

Panicked, they tried fleeing from it again, collectively rushing out of the barn in the hopes of
escaping from the Roaming Eye somewhere else. They didn’t get too far before the ship overtook
them, however, coming to float directly ahead of them, its sinister spotlight bearing down on them
all the while.

“N-no!” Peridot cried, cowering fearfully behind Steven, Mabel, and Dipper. The kids themselves,
however, were also quite terrified, especially as the Roaming Eye’s light took on a much harsher
pallor, turning bright red as its reticle focused in on all of them directly, no doubt in anticipation of
a deadly attack.

“T-this is it!” Peridot exclaimed mournfully as she continued to tremble in terror behind the kids.
“They’re going to wipe my precious grin off the face of this planet!”

“Not if we have anything to about it, Peri!” Mabel assured as confidently as she could.

“Just stay behind us!” Steven ordered, ready to summon his shield. “We’ll protect you!”

Ultimately, however, the young Gem didn’t need to call upon his shield, for right before he could,
Lapis, of all people or Gems, happened to step forward instead. Her manner was calm and
unshaken as she stepped towards the Roaming Eye, its crimson glow shading her red as the gale it
created rustled her hair lightly all the while. Briefly, she paused, casting a brief glance back at the
kids, or rather Peridot, her expression still cold and unyielding as she spoke not a single word.
Instead, she turned back to the vessel before her, raising her hand silently as she called upon the
water in the nearby pool to do the same, forming it into a hand to match her own. And then, in a
single, simple move, she flicked the Roaming Eye with her aquatic hand, immediately halting its
descent before she slammed it down, sending it plummeting, hard and defeated, to the ground.

As the now defunct Roaming Eye grew still and silent, the others were all left in stunned silence,
absolutely baffled as they looked back to the triumphant blue Gem as she released her control over
the water once more. “Holy smokes…” Peridot muttered to herself, beyond impressed and amazed
at just how powerful Lapis really was. But what surprised her even more was when the blue Gem
looked back to her once again, addressing her directly this time, her tone no longer bearing the
same bitterness as it had before.

“Peridot,” she began, turning to face the green Gem fully. “…You ok?”

Peridot didn’t say anything, instead opting to reply with a wide, elated, beaming grin, knowing that
even if they weren’t exactly friends or roommates or anything of the sort quite yet, this was a start.
And a start was all she had really wanted from the get-go.

Upon catching such a warm grin, Lapis quickly grew flustered, her cheeks deepening in a dark blue
blush that she quickly tried to hide away. Both Steven and Dipper laughed lightly at this, glad to
see at least some form of civility between the pair, though Mabel by far was the most excited about
it among the three.

“Yeessss!” she cheered in a starry-eyed whisper. “Looks like pretty soon I’ll have another pair to
add to my ‘Cutest Gem Couples’ list! Which is good cause so far all I have on there is Ruby and
Sapphire, I really gotta buff that list up.”

“Kids!” A loud, concerned cry from none other than Pearl sounded out as Stan’s car pulled up to
the barn, all three of the Gems, as well as the conman and the author piling out. “Are you all
alright? We saw the ship and came out as fast as we could!”

“Yeah, chalk it up to yet another drive I had to make all the way out here,” Stan remarked crossly.
“I swear, I’m starting to get really sick of this place…”
“Yeah, we’re fine,” Steven replied to Pearl’s worries. “Lapis saved us, but… it looks like Homeworld really has it out for Peridot.” He nodded over to the dormant Roaming Eye lying several feet away.

“I guess Lapis will just have to keep slam-dunking their ships until they get the message they’re not wanted here,” Dipper remarked with a small chuckle, one that Lapis returned with a bit of a laugh of her own. However, what neither of them initially noticed was the awestruck look Ford in particular was sending Lapis’ way, though the blue Gem caught onto it soon enough as she just so happened to look over towards him as well.

“N-no way…” Lapis gasped, her eyes wide with disbelief as she stepped over to meet the author. “It’s… its you! It’s really you!”

Ford started at this, every bit as shocked as the blue Gem herself was as they approached one another. “I—you… you actually remember me?”

“Are you kidding, of course I do!” Lapis exclaimed, though her incredulous smile soon faded into guilt as she looked away. “A-and… I’m sorry… for leaving you behind.”

Against all odds, the author caught the blue Gem off guard again, this time with a small, simple, accepting smirk. “If anyone should be sorry, it should be me. It was my botched plans that cost both of us a clean get away. But in the end, I suppose it all worked out; after all, we both still made it back here all the same.”

Lapis’ remorse was quickly set to ease at this as she returned his confident smile, glad to know that her own selfish escape hadn’t cost him his life after all. “Yeah. I guess we did.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Mabel suddenly interjected, absolutely confused. “What in the actual hey is goin’ on here?”

“Yeah, seriously,” Dipper added, just as bewildered. “Do you guys know each other or something?”

“Oh! Dipper!” Lapis exclaimed, her smile widening in excitement. “This is him! He’s the human I was telling you about! The one who helped me when I was locked up on Homeworld!”

“What?!” Dipper exclaimed, completely shocked to discover the answer to a question he had largely, admittedly forgotten he’d once had. “Great Uncle Ford, you’ve been to Homeworld?!”

“And yes, I… I have…” Ford glanced down apprehensively, not catching the stunned glances he was catching from the Crystal Gems in particular as he admitted this. “But that’s a story for another time. For now, it looks as though we have other, far more pressing things to worry about…”

The author nodded over at the crashed Roaming Eye, smoke starting to emit from it as soft, thumping noises began to pound from somewhere inside its interior. Clearly, something was happening with the supposedly defunct vessel, and whatever it was, everyone was instantly on edge as they watched it closely. And it was a good thing that they did, for no sooner than a moment later, its hatch burst open, and emerging from its cockpit was a single Gem, its stone resting in the place where one its eyes should have been as it glared out across its new surroundings fiercely.

And that Gem was none other… than a Ruby.
Chapter 72: Hit the Diamond

Chapter Summary

In which the gang gets up to lesbian baseball shenanigans.

Chapter Notes

Ehhh forgive me for this sorta short, sorta subpar chapter but I kinda wanted to get this one out quick for a number of reasons. Still, I hope you enjoy it all the same!
(keyword is BASEBALL)

A collective, equally startled, equally frightened gasp arose from the Gems and Pines alike as they caught the very first glimpse of the Ruby emerging from the Roaming Eye. As she coldly, quietly surveyed the surrounding area, fortunately she didn’t seem to take notice of the group right away, allowing them at least a little time to react to her absolutely unexpected arrival.

“Hey,” Mabel began with wide, curious eyes. “Isn’t that…?”

“Ruby?” Steven finished, though just as soon as he did, the young Gem was suddenly, sharply yanked aside by Garnet. Likewise, Ford did the same for Mabel, quickly following after everyone else as they rushed to momentarily hide away inside the barn just as even more Rubies began to emerge from the downed pod.

The eye Ruby hopped out of the ship with a growl, her expression still severe, even if the Ruby who came after her was the exact opposite. “Oh! What a lovely planet!” this next Ruby, whose gemstone rested upon her navel, quipped cheerfully as she slipped out of the pod to get a better look around. The next Ruby to emerge had her gem on her upper arm, and appeared much more serious as she aggressively jumped to the ground, violently plucking a flower before kicking it hard away from her.

“W-wait!” another Ruby exclaimed anxiously, her gem on her leg as she poked her head out of the ship. “So we just… get out and walk around?”

She received no answer as another Ruby, the final one and the leader of the pack with her gem on her chest, booted her out before addressing her squad sternly. “Alright! Listen up!” she exclaimed, taking a perch on top of the pod. “We’ve gotta pin down that Gem the scanners locked onto. Let’s fan out and search the area!”

The other Rubies nodded their agreement with this plan with various levels of enthusiasm as they began to split up and comb the barnyard for anything out of the ordinary. Yet even still, none of
them really seemed to pay much attention to the barn, even as the group hidden inside it tentatively glanced out to observe them from afar.

“Whoa, look at ‘em all!” Steven exclaimed, admittedly amazed to see such a collection of Gems.

“Uh, anyone wanna explain why we’re hiding out from a bunch of walking, talking squares in here?” Stan asked rather dryly.

“Uh, because they tried to kill us with their space ship,” Dipper pointed out just as deadpan.

“Aw, c’mon, they can’t be that bad,” Mabel shrugged with a smile. “I mean, just look at them! They’re adorable!”

“They are NOT adorable!” Peridot huffed, cowering behind the barn door nervously. “They’re after me! This is the end of the line!”

“You weren’t kidding…” Lapis noted, raising an eyebrow as she looked to the green Gem.

“No, I wasn’t!” she shook her head morosely. “I told you; I disobeyed a direct order from Yellow Diamond, and I called her a clod… to her face.”

“Oh, honestly, you call everyone a clod,” Pearl remarked, rolling her eyes.

“Yes,” Peridot admitted, still clearly anxious. “But not everyone has command over all the armies of Homeworld waiting for the word to shatter me!”

In a meager attempt at making herself even more scarce, the green Gem scampered off, emptying a box that had otherwise been stockpiled with baseball supplies before curling up inside it to hide. For a moment, her soft, fearful whimpers could be heard under the box, that is until Steven stepped over to lift it off of her with a small, encouraging smile.

“Peridot, we won’t let them get you.”

“Yeah! If those Rubies want you, then they’ve gotta go through all of us first!” Mabel chimed in with a daring grin.

“Haven’t I caused you enough trouble?” Peridot asked with a small groan, still curled up into a small, tight ball on the barn floor.

“Oh, you certainly have,” Ford nodded, smirking slightly. “But that doesn’t mean you deserve to face Yellow Diamond’s wrath just for being a pretty persistent annoyance.”

“…Wow, thanks,” Peridot whispered, genuinely touched despite the somewhat backhanded dig.

“Don’t worry, Peridot,” Garnet assured, hands on her hips. “It’s our sworn duty to protect anything that calls this planet home. And that includes clods like you.”

“That’s my word…” the green Gem muttered, her voice still small and feeble.

“Listen up, everyone,” the Gem leader addressed the others firmly. “I have a plan. Or should I say…” She grinned, holding up her hands to reveal her gemstones on each palm, both of them already shining brightly. “We have a plan?”

That bright light soon overtook Garnet’s entire form until it slowly, calmly split her entirely. And, as expected, the glow faded to reveal Ruby and Sapphire, both in high, confident spirits as they held hands, still connected, despite now standing apart.
“Hello, everyone,” Sapphire greeted with a small, friendly wave.

“Ruby! Sapphire!” Pearl, Amethyst, and Ford alike all exclaimed, pleasantly surprised to see the couple making an appearance.

“HUUUGS!” Steven shouted, racing to embrace the pair, something that Mabel readily joined in on.

“Oh, great, these two again,” Stan remarked, rolling his eyes.

“Good to see you again too, Stan,” Ruby countered with a wry, knowing grin.

“So what’s this plan exactly?” Dipper asked the couple, curious.

Neither Ruby nor Sapphire offered a direct answer, instead turning to each other, still lingering close and affectionately all the while. “You’ve got this,” Sapphire said to her partner with a warm smile, imparting her with a brief kiss on the cheek for luck. “Just act casual.”

“Yeah,” Ruby nodded, bolstered by the blue Gem’s loving encouragement. “Casual.”

After a brief moment of steadying her resolve, the red Gem emerged from the barn, her posture stiff and her expression even stiffer as she rather awkwardly approached the group of Rubies still outside. None of them seemed to notice her slipping in to stand among their ranks as their leader called them to order once more.

“Focus, Rubies!” she snapped, still standing atop the Roaming Eye. “This is an important mission from Yellow Diamond, so we can’t mess it up.”

“Uh, h-hey!” Ruby spoke up anxiously, trying her best to not let how nervous she really was. “W-what are we all doin’ over here?”

For a moment, Ruby briefly feared her infiltration had failed as the other Rubies all looked to her skeptically, their expressions all borderline suspicious until the leg Ruby raised her hand innocently. “Yeah, what are we all doing here?”

“Ugh, I already told you ten times now!” the lead Ruby huffed, crossing her arms. “We’re here to retrieve the leader of the Earth mission!” She paused for a moment, narrowing her eyes at the group of similar Gems gathered before her and spotting one particular oddity among them. “Hey, wait a second… It seems like there are more of us than usual!”

“There’s supposed to be five of us,” the naval Ruby pointed out with a smooth smile.

“Five Rubies!” the arm Ruby echoed gruffly.

“Hm…” the lead Ruby mused as she proceeded to take a headcount. “One, two, three, four, five…” She nodded, apparently forgetting to include herself among the group, much to Ruby’s relief. “Tch, never mind. We’re all here.”

The entire group let out a relieved sigh at this, though Ruby’s in particular rose among the others as she realized she miraculously hadn’t been found out. At least not yet. “Now, back to our mission,” the lead Ruby continued devoutly. “The leader of the Earth mission must be around here somewhere…”

“W-well, she’s definitely not in that barn!” Ruby quickly professed, pointing towards said barn in the hopes that the other Rubies would take her word and overlook it. Unfortunately, of course, they
“Whoa, I didn’t see that before,” the lead Ruby said. “We should go check it out.”

By now, Ruby was all but panicking, realizing that her attempts at acting casual were all but failing her. Even so, she maintained her calm act as best as she could as she hastily volunteered herself for the task before any of the other Rubies could. “Uh, I-I’ll go! By myself!”

Without sparing another word, Ruby ran off, hoping that none of her fellow Rubies would follow suit. And unfortunately they didn’t as she slipped back into the barn, where the others all eagerly awaited to hear the report of what she had gleaned from their unwanted visitors.

“They wanna search the barn!” the red Gem exclaimed, frantic as she pressed up against the wall.

“We heard,” Steven nodded fretfully.

“We saw…” Pearl frowned, eyeing the Ruby squad outside skeptically.

“So, it seems as thought they really are after Peridot,” Ford mused as he turned towards the green Gem. “You are the leader of this so-called ‘Earth mission’, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am!” Peridot snapped fearfully. “And they’re gonna come in here, find me, and drag me back to Homeworld where I’ll be entirely left to Yellow Diamond’s mercy. Which is really bad, since she doesn’t have any mercy!”

“Pfft, they aren’t even gonna get close, P-dot,” Amethyst assured, her manner turning aggressive as she picked up a baseball bat lying on the ground. “Mostly since we’re gonna ambush ‘em!”

“Yeah!” Stan chimed in, grabbing another bat. “Now you’re speakin’ my language!”

“Huh, you know we do outnumber them by like… a lot,” Dipper noted thoughtfully. “Man, if only I still had the Sword of Seasons! Taking care of them would be so easy with that!”

“What? You lost the Sword of Seasons?” Ford asked, raising an eyebrow as he looked to his nephew.

“Uh, I-I never said that!” Dipper quickly countered defensively, not quite ready to reveal the doomed fate of his now missing blade to the author who’d made it just yet.

“We don’t need any swords or bats,” Sapphire spoke up rationally. “No one needs to get hurt. Let’s be reasonable.”

“What should I do?” Ruby asked worriedly, lingering close to her partner for much-needed support.

Fortunately, the blue Gem managed to steady her, just as she always did by gently placing her hands over her own. “Just go out there and tell them this is a place where humans live.”

“…I don’t wanna go alone…” Ruby frowned, sighing sadly.

“Oh! We’ll come!” Steven brightly volunteered himself, Dipper, and Mabel.

“Yeah! What better way to convince those Rubies that there’s nothing but humans here than by showing them a bunch of humans?” Mabel pointed out with a smile.

“Plus, we could always give you some backup if you end up needing it,” Dipper added just as
confidently.

“And here’s some backup for your backup,” Amethyst said gruffly, handing the kids her baseball bat.

“And here’s some backup on top of that backup,” Stan chimed up, presenting his favorite pair of brass knuckles to the group. An act that caught a series of critical glances from Pearl, Ford, and Sapphire alike. “What, too much?”

All the same, Steven took the bat as him and the twins allowed Ruby to ‘escort’ them out of the barn and over to the Ruby squad as they remained on standby to hear what she had to report. “I-I check the barn and I just found a bunch of humans there!” she exclaimed, overdramatically motioning to the trio of kids she’d brought along with her.

“Yes!” Steven agreed innocently. “Nothing here but us humans!”

“Yeah, just us humans,” Mabel added much more naturally. “There totally isn’t a whole bunch of Gems hiding out in that barn, that’d just be silly, cause like we said, there’s just humans in there.”

“Yeah… just humans…” Dipper echoed dryly, sending his sister a critical look for her lack of subtlety.

“…Really?” the lead Ruby asked, clearly doubting this simple claim.

“Yep! Looks like we failed!” Ruby cut in with a wide, forced smile. “Time to go back home and never come back ever!”

“Eh, I think we’d still better double check,” the lead Ruby said, looking past the group towards the barn. “You remember what happened last time.”

“Last time?” Ruby frowned, not having the faintest idea as to what she was talking about.

The other Rubies, however, simply laughed her confusion off as if it was the funniest thing in the world, bewildering her even more. “Oh, Ruby!” the naval Ruby chuckled with a wave of her hand. “You’re so forgetful!”

“Alright,” the lead Ruby spoke up, sobering the squad up to more serious matters. “Let’s search the barn!”

“Yes, Ruby!” the others all dutifully saluted, though once again, Ruby interjected in a desperate attempt at stopping them.

“Wait!” she exclaimed nervously, glancing around for something, anything that could get them out of this tight strait. “You can’t, b-because… uh…”

“You have to play baseball!” Steven interrupted, largely without thinking as he stole the briefest of glances down at the bat in his hands.

“Baseball?” Dipper and Mabel both echoed, exchanging a baffled glance at this.

The Rubies, however, were even more lost than the twins were, looking to each other as they tried to make sense of exactly what this ‘baseball’ thing was. Fortunately though, Steven didn’t waste any time in explaining the terms that, by all accounts, he was largely making up as he went along. “Yeah! It’s a human thing. If you win, you can go inside the barn and look around, a-and if you lose, you… uh… gotta leave forever!”
Upon hearing these conditions, the twins looked to each other once more before meeting Steven’s glance back towards them, all three of them joining Ruby in desperately hoping this wildly reckless plan would somehow work. And yet, by some chance of fate or miracle or something else entirely, it actually did.

For the most Ruby and the kids could do was stare, dumbfounded, as the lead Ruby slowly nodded in agreement with this bizarre wager. “Base… ball…”

“Baseball?!” Just about everyone back inside the barn was equally confused upon hearing Steven’s impromptu plan, and understandably so. After all, between all the ways they could have possibly dealt with the Rubies, this was by far the most bewildering, something that Sapphire didn’t hesitate to point out right off the bat.

“I saw this as a possibility…” she noted thoughtfully. “Though I am surprised that this is the path we’re taking.”

“But why even bother?” Ford asked, sparing a brief glare out towards the Ruby squad. “We have more than enough manpower and resources to outdo five tiny Rubies—no offense to you personally, Ruby-” He corrected, though he still caught a rather sardonic glance from the red Gem all the same. “So why don’t we just save ourselves some time and take care of them the easy way as opposed to… the ridiculous way?”

“Because if we simply poof and bubble them, then Homeworld will just send even more in their place,” Sapphire noted simply, evenly.

“And,” Mabel interjected much more pleadingly. “We can’t just beat them up! I mean, just look at how cute and cube-y they all are! Especially Leggy.”

“Leggy?” Pearl asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, me and Mabel named each of them based on the placement of their gems,” Steven explained. “There’s Leggy, Army…”

“Navy, Eyeball,” Mabel pointed to the other Rubies outside of the barn. “And… uh…”

“Doc!” Steven finished, giving the undecided lead Ruby a name at last.

“Well… that is easier than just calling them all ‘Ruby’,” Dipper shrugged, following the pair’s rather odd logic.

“So we gonna beat these squares at baseball or nah?” Amethyst cut in, getting the group back on track.

“Yeah!” the kids cheered, ready to do just that.

“All we gotta do is go out there and pretend to be human,” Steven grinned. “Well, I mean, the Gems have to pretend. That already comes naturally for me and you guys,” he nodded over at the Pines.

“Hmph, it sure does,” Stan remarked, slowly smirking as he glanced outside of the barn with an emerging idea. “In fact… that might be exactly what’ll get those tiny twerps out of our hair…”

“What do you mean?” Dipper asked, confused.
“Look, all I’m sayin’ is that short, loud, and cranky over here didn’t know jack squat about how things work here on Earth when she was holed up in the shack’s bathroom,” Stan began, motioning over to Peridot.

“Hey!” the green Gem huffed, offended. “I know plenty about the Earth and how it functions now!”

“Suuuure, you do, now,” the conman rolled his eyes. “But those chumps out there sure don’t.” Sure enough, as everyone looked out to the Ruby squad, they were still largely meandering about, uncertain of their new surroundings. While Leggy was fascinated with the feel of the grass she was sitting on, Army was aggressively chasing down a bee that had flown by her in the hopes of obliterating it, all while Eyeball was engaged in an intense staring match with the sun itself. “So its not like any of them would know if we… oh, I don’t know… tweaked the rules of this baseball game just a bit to tip the scales in our favor?”

“Grunkle Stan!” Mabel gasped, appalled. “I can’t believe you! Are you saying we should cheat!?”

“Uh, yeah, I’m saying we should cheat,” Stan said quite flippantly. “You wanna get rid of these square simpletons without beating them senseless, right? And ya wanna use baseball to do it? Well then, cheating is bound to be our best bet for making things go nice ‘n easy.”

“Hm… I can’t believe I’m saying this, but… I actually agree with you, Stan,” Pearl frowned diffidently. “After all, if we don’t cheat, then there’s a significant chance those Rubies could win, despite not knowing much of anything about the basics of baseball…”

“And then they’ll find me and I’ll be DOOMED!” Peridot cried, hunkering down in fear.

“Not as long as you stay here in the barn and hide,” Steven pointed out, offering the green Gem a comforting smile.

“And as long as we cheat,” Stan added with a satisfied smile.

“As… absolutely morally bankrupt as that is,” Ford remarked, sending his brother a dour look that he hardly even noticed.

“So… cheating at baseball it is then?” Dipper asked tentatively glancing around.

“Yeah!” Amethyst cheered daringly. “Cheating at baseball! And if that doesn’t work, we go back to the plan where we ambush ‘em!” Her grin widened as she held up a baseball bat once more, shaking it around threateningly.

“No, we don’t,” Sapphire shook her head. “Baseball… and, well… cheating should suffice. Hopefully.”

“Great!” Steven grinned, relived to hear this coming from the clairvoyant blue Gem herself. “So, is everybody in?” The others all largely nodded with varying degrees of enthusiasm, save for one, who had largely been hanging back in the shadows of the barn the entire time, completely unengaged in the conversation until the young Gem called her out. “Lapis?”

The blue Gem looked up, her arms crossed and her expression stoic, until she ended up folding into a small, snort of a chuckle over just how bizarre this entire situation really was. “This plan sucks.”

Not wanting to keep the Ruby squad waiting any longer than they had to, the Pines and the Gems made their last minute preparations for the baseball brawl ahead of them. In an effort to be more
discreet, Pearl, Sapphire, Amethyst, and Lapis all shifted their attire to more casual wear, both for the sake of blending in and for hiding their respective gemstones in various ways. Likewise, Mabel encouraged the humans among the group to do the same as she took off her sweater and tied her hair up, relieved Dipper of his vest while turning his hat backwards, much to his annoyance, and encouraged both Stan and Ford to take off their respective overcoats to look more ‘sporty’. And once they were all set up and solidified on their plan, the collective group emerged to meet their opposing team, which Ruby made sure to slip back into without much notice at all.

“We’re the humans!” Steven announced, beginning the line-off of the supposedly ‘human’ team. “Steven!”

“Mabel!”

“Dipper!”

“Stan!”

“Ford.”

“Earl!” Pearl provided a false, rather clever name as she tipped her hat down a bit to conceal her gemstone.

“Amy!” Amethyst grinned, crossing her arms and adjusting the scarf around her neck to hide her own stone better.

“Bob,” Lapis said flatly, completely unengaged in the competitive spirit the others shared.

“And Sophie!” Sapphire finished brightly, electing a hot, flustered blush from Ruby on the other side of the line.

“Understood,” Doc nodded gruffly. “Our team is the Rubies! Consisting of… Ruby!”

“Ruby!”

“Ruby!”

“Ruby!”

“Ruby!”

“And Ruby!”

“Uh… we’re still gonna call them by their cute little nicknames, right?” Mabel whispered to Steven, aside.

“Oh, definitely.”

“Hey, hold up!” Doc interjected, eyeing the other team suspiciously. “Aren’t there more of you than there are of us…?”

“Uh…” Steven began, unsure of how to explain this very obvious disparity between the two teams. After all, they outnumbered the Rubies by three, a sight that just about anyone could see as plain as day. Fortunately though, he didn’t have to come up with a reasoning for this as Stan did so for him.

“Oh, what, you don’t know?” the conman asked, putting on a wry, knowing front. “Six to nine is how you’re supposed to play baseball. And since we’re on our turf, we’re the team that gets to
have nine.”

“Hm… that seems a little unfair…” Leggy noted with a small frown.

“Nah, its totally fair,” Dipper shrugged, completely in on Stan’s act for the sake of the greater good. “You guys just don’t know how the game works. It’ll make way more sense once we actually get started.”

The Rubies exchanged something of a dubious glance at this, briefly chatting among themselves as they tried to make sense of this odd rule before Steven went on to explain the others. “So here’s how it works. We take turns throwing the ball at each other. The batter tries to hit the ball with the bat, and then they run around the bases. Whoever gets the most runs wins. You get three tries to hit the ball, but if you miss each of those tries-”

“Then you *loose* points,” Stan cut in succinctly.

“Huh?” Mabel frowned, confused upon hearing this. “No, you don-”

“And,” the conman continued, rushing to cover his niece’s mouth before she could blab out the truth. “Ya also gotta wear these shirts.” He held up five small-sized t-shirts, each of them reading “Baby’s First Baseball Game” in large, bright, rather embarrassing letters. “And only you guys gotta wear the shits because… uh… cause I don’t have enough for our team. Yeah, that works.”

“Stanley, why on earth do you have those?” Ford asked, sending his brother an incredulous look.

“…I have my reasons…”

“Alright, everyone!” Steven called both teams to order to finally get things started as he tossed the first baseball up in the air. “Let’s… play ball!”

And that’s exactly what they did. The Rubies were up to bat first, with the ‘human’ team taking to the bases and outfield. With everyone in position, Ruby stepped up to the plate first, sending Steven a coy wink out on the pitcher’s mound that she was on the same page as he was when it came to the plan. The young Gem nodded, winding up his pitch before tossing the ball her way. And, quite intentionally, the red Gem swung just a bit too late as it passed over the home plate and landed in Amethyst’s glove instead.

“Striiiiike one!”

“What?!” Army snapped from the sidelines, the other Rubies just as outraged to see one of their own miss such a simple ball.

“Striiiiiiike two!” the purple Gem called as Ruby swung too early this time, trying her best to act casual about it as she did so once more.

“Striiiike three!”

“Oh darn!” Ruby shrugged, dropping the bat. “Guess I’m out!” At this, Sapphire let out a small chuckle from the far side of the field, playfully waving over at the red Gem, who discreetly smiled back at her.

“You swung too slow!” Army snapped her back into reality as she punched her hard in the back, prompting her to hurry back over to the other Rubies. “Do it like this.”

Steven was admittedly a bit more nervous as he pitched to Army, and with good reason. For not
only did the arm Gem swing perfectly on time, but she hit the ball with such incredible force that it went flying hard and high up into the air, soaring past the field to the point that it disappeared entirely into the distant hills. “Aaaand… that’s called a home run…” Steven sighed, disappointed as Army proudly walked the bases in full.

Still, the next several rounds of the first inning played out in steady succession. The Rubies managed to score another point thanks to a precise hit from Doc, one that Ford tossed back to home plate just seconds shy of the chest Gem running over it. Even so, Pearl managed to land a lucky catch, striking Navy out instantly. Likewise, Mabel eagerly snatched up a ball hit by Eyeball and happened to tag her out just as the eye Gem ran by her base, though she did catch quite a bit of ire from said Gem in doing so. And in the process, the Ruby squad hit their first three outs, prompting not only a switch in sides, but a switch in uniform as Stan handed off the rather embarrassing t-shirts to each one of them (including Ruby, who took it in stride, considering the circumstances).

With this change, Amethyst was the first up to bat, seemingly hardly invested in the game at all as she reeled her bat back. However, she still managed to catch Doc’s pitch squarely, hitting it completely out of the park with a single, mighty swing. Still, to make sure none of the Rubies caught it, the purple Gem jumped into a spin dash, laughing wildly as she rolled around all of the bases before making it back home in record time.

“Nice!” Pearl cheered from the sidelines.


“Wow! That purple human is really good!” Leggy exclaimed, amazed from the infield.

“Haha! Yeah!” Steven laughed nervously as he hurried up to Amethyst to push her away from the diamond. “Us humans, we’re, uh, full of surprises!” Even so, the young Gem dropped his voice down to a worried whisper to the purple Gem in particular, lest she blow their cover entirely. “Amethyst, be careful!”

Fortunately, the Rubies wouldn’t get any more possible cause for suspicious as Dipper stepped up to bat next. He was admittedly a bit shaky as he did so, not entirely experienced with the game, though he hoped his swordsmanship skills would somehow serve him well here as well. Even so, he did outright miss the first pitch, as well as the second, though he did hit the third ball successfully… right over to first base, where Eyeball easily caught it, instantly striking him out.

“Oh! Great job, Dipper!” Lapis cheered, finally breaking out of her consistently dour attitude as he walked back over to the bench, disgruntled.

“Uh… Lapis? I struck out…” Dipper pointed out with a confused frown.

“I know!” the blue Gem smiled somewhat obliviously, though clearly proudly. “I saw! And you did a amazing job of it! Congratulations!”

Dipper didn’t really know what to say to this as he exchanged a bewildered glance with Steven. Even so, the young Gem was quick to let out a leveling sigh as he took stock of their current status. “O-ok, this is fine, its just one out. We still have two more chances to catch up to them!”

“Um… you might not want to speak so soon on that…” Ford spoke up, nodding to home plate, where Sapphire had just stepped up to bat. With Ruby as umpire however, it was immediately clear from the get-go that both of them were more than distracted by each other.

“Heeeeey, Ruby,” Sapphire smirked, widely swinging as she missed Doc’s first pitch altogether.
“Nice shirt.”

“Striiiiike one!”

“Heh, you really like it?” the red Gem blushed brightly.

“Mmhm,” Sapphire swung far too early this time, far before Doc could even pitch at all, though she hardly even seemed to care as she continued conversing with her significant other. “It brings out your eyes.”

“Aw…” Ruby chuckled, warmly flustered as she put on the act that she knew she was supposed to be playing at. “Say, haven’t I seen you somewhere before?”

“I don’t know,” the blue Gem all but ignored Doc as she wound up her next throw. “I don’t get off-planet much.”

“Striiiike two!”

The pair of Gems shared an affectionate laugh over this, not noticing the confusion of both the Rubies in the field and the group watching from the sidelines.

“What’s going on?” Steven asked fretfully. “What are they doing?”

“Flirting,” Lapis said flatly.

“Uh oh…” Pearl frowned, catching the young Gem’s worry.

“Ooooooh my gosh! Those two just get cuter and cuter every time we see them together!” Mabel gushed, about the only one among the group excited by this turn of events. “Where’s my camera when I need it? I gotta capture this moment for “the Best of Ruby and Sapphire” section of my scrapbook!”

“Now’s really not the time, Mabel!” Dipper scolded, crossing his arms.

“Striiiike THREE!” Doc called as Sapphire missed her final pitch, finally breaking the couple out of their romantic revere. They exchanged a brief, anxious glance at this, both of them realizing as they met the disappointed glances of their teammates, that they had been the sole cause of their second out.

The team’s third out, however, did come after a successful series of hits that led to Stan scoring a home run, though an unfortunate catch of Ford’s first hit right after that led to another switch in sides as the first inning came to a close. Still, it didn’t take very long for the Rubies to get their first out either as Lapis narrowly managed to catch Eyeball’s high ball just by inching a bit over to the left. Wanting to ensure they didn’t fall too far behind, Stan enacted another cheating tactic as he heckled Leggy as she was up to bat with the old ‘swing batter batter’ trick, which worked far too well in the most innocent of the Rubies. However, the squad did score yet another point thanks to Ruby once again distracting herself by fixing her gaze on Sapphire in the outfield, accidentally hitting the ball in the process, eliciting an excited, if not misguided cheer from her partner. The hit allowed Doc to make it back to home, much to the other Rubies’ elation, save for the very one who had hit it in the first place as she happened to catch Steven, Pearl, Dipper, and a few others shake their head disapprovingly at her.

The next several innings all followed in what almost felt like a dizzying succession. With each changing of the bat between teams, Stan made sure to spice things up on the Rubies’ end of things, hoping that one of his attempts would finally be enough to trip them up completely. Between
encouraging them to close their eyes to catch the ball better, to telling them to hold the bat upside down, the Rubies all gullibly fell for his ‘tips’, much to the conman’s immense amusement. However, even these scams did little to prevent the squad from maintaining their surprising lead, a lead that the ‘human’ team could never seem to catch up with, despite their best efforts.

Even if Steven, Dipper, Ford, and Pearl ranged from subpar to standard when it came to the game, Amethyst, Stan, and even Mabel managed to carry the team in most degrees. However, if there was any sole factor keeping them from getting ahead, it had to be Ruby and Sapphire. Despite several scoldings and warnings to keep their cover up, the couple simply couldn’t keep away from each other as they continued stealing loving glances from each other instead of stealing bases. They continued affectionately shooting the breeze instead of striking the ball. And, even as intentional as it was, they continued focusing less on the game as they focused far too much on each other instead.

As hectic as the game was getting, Steven and Mabel still made a quick check in on Peridot inside the barn as they hurried to fetch another bat to replace the one that Eyeball had snapped clean in half. “Hey, how’s it going?” the green Gem whispered to the pair, making sure to remain as out of sight as she could as they rushed past her. “Are we winning?”

“Umm…” Steven frowned as he looked back over to the game. Of course, what he saw was none other than Ruby teaching Sapphire how to properly swing, the pair whispering sweet nothings to each other all the while as Eyeball watched them suspiciously from afar. A sign that if the couple kept their continuous barrage of flirting up, then their cover would be blown to pieces in no time at all.

“Ahah! We’re doing great, Peri!” Mabel cut in with a loud, forced laugh. “No need to worry! We got this in the bag!”

“Y-yeah,” Steven agreed much more anxiously as they began to rush back towards the game. “E-everything’s gonna be a-ok!”

“You’re lying to me!” Peridot snapped angrily.

“To make you feel better!”

“…Thank you!”

Before anyone could even see it coming, the final inning of the game had arrived, and with it, a far-too close score for comfort. The Rubies had kept their lead throughout the entire game, though the other team wasn’t that far behind, set back by only a single point. A point that could cost them more than just the game if they didn’t somehow manage to score it back.

“Oh,” Steven began as the team huddled up to discuss this issue. “It’s the bottom of the ninth. We’ve got Lapis on second, but one more out and its game over for us.”

“Uh… it might end up being game over for us anyway…” Dipper noted, nodding towards home plate as Sapphire all-too-casually approached it.

“N-not if she hits a home run!” Mabel professed, hopeful.

“Why do I feel like the chances of that happening are… highly unlikely given our track record here?” Ford asked, frowning as Ruby and Sapphire engaged each other in playful conversation once more.

“Eh, we can always just tell them that there are more than nine winnings and that we keep going
till we win,” Stan shrugged, unconcerned. “Its not like it won’t work; those Rubes fall for anything.”

“True, but do we really want to keep this going forever?” Pearl asked, voicing a sentiment that just about everyone agreed on.

“Looks like there’s only one thing to do then,” Steven took in a deep breath, determined as he looked over to the couple. “Hey! I call a timeout!” He managed to stop Doc just short of her first pitch, giving him enough time to slip up to the pair at home to give them a much-needed prep talk. “Listen, you two,” he began, his tone quite serious as he looked between the surprised couple. “I know its hard being seperated, but we have to keep them out of the barn or they’re gonna find Peridot, remember?! Ruby, stop being cute, and Sapphire, keep your eye on the ball!”

“Pun… intended?” Ruby attempted to joke, though it hardly amused Steven whatsoever.

“What did I just say?” the young Gem huffed, sending a warning glare at the pair as he headed back over to the bench.

“You really think this is gonna work?” Dipper asked, aptly nervous as Steven returned.

“We always got the ambush thing as a backup plan, so no worries,” Amethyst assured, patting a spare bat into her hands.

“Aw, c’mon, you guys, have a little more faith in them!” Mabel urged earnestly. “Garnet always comes through for us, which means Ruby and Sapphire will too! Right?”

None of the others really had much of an answer for this as they all intently looked to the game watch more, desperately hoping that the couple would do just that. However, the chances of that happening didn’t seem very good as Sapphire missed the first pitch, though not for a genuine lack of actually trying to hit it this time.

“Strike one!”

While a growing wave of worry washed over the team on the bench, the Rubies exchanged a confident collective glance, assured of their soon to come victory at hand. However, though everyone else had their doubts in the blue Gem’s ability to carry them home, her partner had no such concerns whatsoever. “Come on, I know you can do it,” she whispered to Sapphire, gently yet encouragingly. As anxious as the blue Gem herself was, Ruby’s warming words did manage to raise her spirits somewhat, though not enough for her to land a successful swing on the next ball.

“Strike two!”

“Just look at the ball,” Ruby instructed, her tone steady when everything else felt like it wasn’t.

“I’m trying…” Sapphire whispered back, gripping the bat tighter as she watched Doc wind up another pitch. “But all I want to look at is you.”

“Don’t worry,” Ruby grinned. “You can look at me when you’re running for home.”

The blue Gem took in a soft gasp at this, though ultimately a wide, loving smile filled her face, her affections for the red Gem soaring higher than ever before. In fact, this promise was just enough to provide her with the solid determination she needed to face the final pitch head on.

Confident that this would be the final ball of the game, Doc threw it fast and hard, surrounding it with burning flames as she sent it flying for home. However, unlike every single time before, this
time Sapphire struck it, swinging wide to the point that she caught the ball and held it there. The blue Gem stood her ground, letting out a fierce shout as she doused the flames entirely, coating the bat in a thick, sturdy sheet of ice. And, fueled by both her resolve to win and her feelings for Ruby, she sent that ball flying, letting it rebound in an icy blast towards the skies.

There wasn’t a chance for any of the Rubies to catch it as it disappeared into the clouds, allowing Lapis to score a casual home run all the way from second base. Sapphire, on the other hand, was by far more excited, dashing between the bases all for the sake of reuniting with her partner once more. The team on the sidelines cheered with newfound elation as the Rubies all watched in sour disappointment while the blue Gem rounded third, laughing brightly as she made the final stretch towards Ruby’s awaiting arms.

“Come to me!” she encouraged cheerfully and Sapphire happily complied, leaping for her and easily falling into her open embrace. However, amidst their affectionate excitement, both Gems failed to notice as their forms were enveloped in light until that light ended up bringing them together once more.

Garnet still shared Ruby and Sapphire’s laughter as she landed on the ground, momentarily lost to the joy of her respective halves. That is, until she realized exactly what had happened and the many sets of eyes that were now on her as she did. “…Oops.”

“Welp, forget the whole cheating thing,” Stan remarked dryly, tossing his bat aside dismissively. “Cause this whole operation just fell apart.”

“I’ll say…” Pearl muttered tightly, already starting to prepare for the no-doubt violent fallout.

“They’re GEMS!” Doc shouted in appalled realization.

“We’ve been tricked!” Army growled, absolutely outraged by the deception as Eyeball joined in with a fierce, frustrated growl.

“What a turn of events!” Navy gasped, seemingly surprised.

“Huh? What?” Leggy chimed in, completely lost as to what had just happened.

“Sorry, guys,” Garnet apologized, rising to stand as the others all rushed to join her. “Game’s over.”

“Why, I bet all of those ‘tips’ you kept giving us about how to play baseball weren’t even true either!” Doc snapped at Stan specifically, though the conman hardly seemed to care.

“Uh, no duh,” the conman deadpanned, crossing his arms. “What was your first clue? The part where I told ya that only pansies wear catcher’s mitts while playing baseball? Or was it the shirts? It was probably the shirts, though I do have to give you twerps credit for actually wearing those things the entire game.”

Upon hearing this, Doc was the first to rip her t-shirt off in a heated rage, followed not too far behind by Eyeball and Army, with Navy doing so much more casually. Leggy, on the other hand, was the only one to hold onto the article of clothing a moment longer, looking down at it with a fretful frown. “Aw… but I kinda like mine…”

“TAKE IT OFF!” Army shouted, prompting the leg Gem to do so out of fear alone.

“That’s it!” Doc exclaimed boldly, ready to put these tricky humans and Gems alike in their place. “RUBIES! COMIBINE!”
The other Rubies quickly did so, all piling on top of one other in a steady formation that very quickly led to a fusion. Said fusion was ultimately just one singular massive Ruby, sporting all five of the gemstones of its various components as it towered over the group before it, large and intimidating as it let out a mighty roar. For a moment, no one really knew quite what to do against this surprisingly substantial threat, though in yet another sudden turn of events, they found they didn’t have to.

“WAIT!” Peridot cried from the barn, not hesitating to rush out of her hiding spot before the Ruby fusion could even try to attack the others. She scampered frantically across the barnyard over to the group, outright tripping and falling over herself several times along the way, but even so, she arrived to place herself in front of the others and in harm’s way instead. “Wait! Stop! Please! I-it’s me you’re after, right? I’m not gonna stand by and let my friends fight by battles!”

“Whoa, Peridot, that’s… surprisingly heroic of you,” Dipper noted, impressed as even Lapis nodded in awestruck agreement.

“Aww, Peri loves us!” Mabel chimed in, warmed by the green Gem’s sentiment.

All the same, the Ruby fusion simply leaned in, scowling threateningly down at the much smaller Peridot all the while. “Are you the Peridot assigned to the failed Earth mission?” she asked, her voice deep, slow, and admittedly scary.

“N-not sure if ‘failed’ would be the right word to-”

“Where is Jasper?” the Ruby fusion interrupted starkly, catching just about everyone else off guard completely.

“You’re looking… for Jasper?” Peridot asked, beyond confused by this turn.

“Correct.”

“W-wait, but I’m the one who betrayed the mission!” the green Gem professed hotly. “Who called Yellow Diamond a clod! Who saved all these simple humans from sure destruction! The new leader of the Crystal Gems!”

“What?” Pearl looked to her, baffled upon hearing such a bold assumption.

“Excuse me?” Ford likewise echoed, hands on his hips as he sent the green Gem a critical glance.

“We don’t CARE!” the Ruby fusion snapped thunderously. “Tell us where Jasper is NOW!”

“Jasper, um… w-we know where Jasper is, she’s…” Peridot trailed off, looking to the others for some sort of explanation. Though of course, the only answer any of the other Gems really had to give was that she had fallen somewhere into the depths of the Earth back on the island. Something that they couldn’t very well just outright tell to the already incensed Ruby fusion standing before them now.

“WELL?!” said fusion shouted impatiently.

“Uhh…”

“Neptune!” Steven suddenly interjected, shouting out the first and most distant planet he could think of. “She’s on the planet Neptune!”

For what seemed like ages, no one said anything to this, largely since they hoped that this bizarre
ruse would be enough to convince the Rubies. And sure enough, it certainly was as the fusion backed off, smiling contentedly with this information, however false it might have been. “Well, why didn’t you just say so?”

Both Gems and Pines alike let out a shared sigh of relief as the Rubies unfused, seemingly peaceful as they prepared to take their leave to continue their search for the missing orange Gem. “We all here?” Doc asked, doing another quick headcount of her team. “One, two, three, four, and… ha! Five!” She grinned, finally including herself on that count to square off her entire squad. “To the planet Neptune!”

“Let’s move out, soldiers!” Army called, beckoning the others to head back to the ship.

“Neptune! What a lovely sounding planet!” Navy grinned, skipping blithely after the others.

“B-but we just got here!” Leggy frowned, though she did stop short to pick up her discarded ‘Baby’s First Baseball Game’ shirt. “I’m just gonna… take this…”

“Let’s go, newbie!” Doc interjected, grabbing Leggy and dragging her, as well as her shirt, back over to the ship.

Out of all the Rubies, however, Eyeball was the last to linger, looking to the group before her intensely before she showed her stiff, admittedly frightening gratitude. “Thank you.”

And with that, the squad all piled up back into their ship, which roared to life once more as it picked itself up out of the ground and lifted up into the air once again. This time, however, it showed no signs of ill-intent as it simply warped itself away, disappearing back into the vast expanse of space from whence it came and leaving a very bewildered group behind in its wake.

“Uh… y-yeah, that’s right!” Stan heckled after the group even after their ship had left. “And don’t come back either, otherwise we’ll pound ya into the ground in some other sport, like… uh… anyone good at hockey around here?”

“Aw, I’m gonna miss those guys,” Mabel frowned. “They really were adorable when they weren’t trying to kill us.”

“Am I the only one who thinks that ended way too easily?” Dipper asked, somewhat concerned.

“Nah, man,” Amethyst remarked, hands on her hips as she shook her head incredulously. “Rubies are dumb.”

Garnet, on the other hand, smirked at this, adjusting her shades as she kept her sights set on the skies the Rubies had disappeared into, half of her knowing very well that out of all their kind, one Ruby in particular always had, and always would stand apart. “Not all of them.”
Chapter 73: Mismatched Making

Chapter Summary

In which Steven and Mabel meddle for a good cause, Garnet is a romance expert, and Dipifica becomes canon thank god finally

Chapter Notes

Happy Thanksgiving everyone! Have a super adorable chapter to enjoy for it! One that I honestly really like a lot, its very cute and wholesome and sweet ^_^ Enjoy!
(Keyword is DINNER DATE)

For the past several weeks, the Crystal Temple had sat still and silent, its usual inhabitants having taken up shop at the barn out in the countryside to finish their progress on the drill. Likewise, the Mystery Shack was also rather silent, for while Stan had more or less remained there to maintain the gift shop and the museum while the rest of his family was away, for the past day or so he had been absent, a large closed sign hanging from the door all the while. However, that peaceful quiet all but came to an end as the conman’s car pulled up in front of the shack to let out the far too many passengers that had piled into it for the trip back.

“We’re home !” Steven exclaimed brightly, bursting out of the vehicle first with both Dipper and Mabel not too far behind.

“Oh, it’s been so long!” Mabel proclaimed dramatically, hopping up onto the shack’s porch to hug one of its support beams. “I almost forgot what this old place looked like!”

“Mabel, we’ve only been gone a few weeks,” Dipper chuckled, amused.

“A few weeks too many!” Steven chimed in, already running towards the hill that led up to the temple. The Gems followed after him, ready to finally settle back in themselves, something they readily started doing the moment the young Gem first burst back in through the front door. “Hello, house!” he greeted blithely, running inside.

The Gems all chuckled amongst themselves as they watched their young ward run about, refamiliarizing himself with his cozy home. “Hello, bed!” Steven grinned, flopping onto said bed as he switched his television on. “Hello, TV! We’ve got some catching up to do. Hello, kitchen!” he continued, rushing back downstairs to throw the fridge open. “Hello, food--augh!” The young Gem quickly stumbled back, rushing to cover his nose to avoid the overwhelmingly foul stench coming from the fridge.
“Uh oh, did that cake go bad?” Amethyst asked, taking a peek inside at the rotten assortment of food.

“That was a cake?!” Steven gawked in disbelief before he quickly picked himself up off the ground to head towards the door.

“Steven, where are you going?” Pearl asked curiously. “I thought you were all excited about being back home.”

“And I am!” Steven grinned. “But now that I’ve gotten ‘re-acquainted’ with home, I’ve gotta do the same with the Mystery Shack! And with Dipper and Mabel and Mr. Pines and Mr. Ford!”

“Dude, we literally just saw them like… 5 minutes ago,” Amethyst pointed out, deadpan.

“And I miss them already!” the young Gem heaved a heavy sigh, leaning against the door. “See you guys later!”

As Steven set out to head back down to the shack, the Pines family was just stepping inside, all eager to pick up their usual flow of activity where they’d left off. “Ah, finally,” Ford sighed rather contentedly as he made a beeline to the basement stairs. “Back to my real lab again. Even if we did manage to build a functional, earth-piercing drill there, working out of a barn is… less than ideal when it comes to in-depth, tactile scientific research. Also, I miss my favorite reading chair. And my favorite coffee maker, unlike the one at the barn that Peridot broke. Twice…”

“Heh, yeah, that’s right, sixer, head on back down to your ‘nerd cave’,;” Stan called as the author began to trudge down to the basement. “Meanwhile, I’ve got real work to do. Like marking up all these prices!” The conman quickly began doing just that, working his way through the gift shop to raise the tabs on just about everything. “Shack’s been closed for two days now; I’ve gotta make up for all those lost profits somehow! Though… I guess I could always cut Soos and Wendy’s pay again… hm…”

While Stan pondered over this plan, Dipper and Mabel eagerly ran past him to head back up their usual space in the attic, ready to make themselves comfortable within it once more. “Yeeeessss!” Mabel cheered as she burst through the door first. “Bed!” she happily jumped onto her bed, high fiving each of her colorful posters along the wall and ceiling as she did. “Posters!” As she flopped down onto her stomach, she didn’t hesitate to wrap her nearby pet pig up in a tight, affectionate hug, glad to see him again after all the time they’d been apart. “Waddles! Ah, it’s so great to be back! Dontcha think so, bro-bro?”

“I gotta admit, I do,” Dipper grinned as he much more calmly reclined on his bed. “Especially since we don’t really have anything to worry about for the change. The Cluster’s under control, Lapis is finally free from being Malachite and her and Peridot are ok with living together. Even that group of Rubies is out of our hair with no problems at all. For once, it looks like everything is finally gonna be ok.”

“You can say that again!” Steven chimed in as he entered the attic blithely. “We’ve been through a lot of really tough, dangerous stuff this summer. But now that it’s all over, we can spend the rest of our summer just hanging out and having fun!”

“Yeah! Like all those kids in those wacky summer comedies!” Mabel exclaimed excitedly.

“I love those kinds of movies!” the young Gem quipped brightly.

“So do I!”
“Heh, well while you guys are off having your ‘wacky summer comedy,’” Dipper chuckled as he leaned back on his bed again. “I’m gonna use this as much-needed chance to hang back and relax.”

“*You? ‘Relax’?*” Mabel scoffed. “Pfft, I don’t believe it. Just watch, Steven, it’ll be no time at all before he’s out and about with one of the journals, hunting down some monster or mystery or something, just like he *always* does.”

“Oh, come on, Mabel, I’m not *that* predictable,” Dipper protested, sitting up. “Sure I like a good mystery hunt every now and then, but after dealing with so many of them this summer, I… kinda wouldn’t mind a change of pace. Maybe I’ll try my hand at hunting down something *else* for a change.”

“Oh yeah?” Mabel asked with a challenging smirk. “Like what?”

“Like…” Dipper trailed off, admittedly unsure of what to say. After all, he’d spent so much time lately embroiled in one mystery, one fight, one disaster after another. So much time spent struggling in the loudest of moments to win the quiet moments like these. And now that they finally had these quiet moments, admittedly, he really had no idea what to do with them.

Fortunately, he didn’t have to supply an answer to his sister’s question as the shack’s doorbell abruptly rang out. “Well, right now, I guess I’m hunting down the door,” he said succinctly, slipping out of the conversation to answer it.

“Wait… how can you hunt down a door…?” Steven wondered, confused, though all the same, him and Mabel followed along after Dipper to see who had arrived. The initial speculation on all sides was that it was probably the Gems, though it was a bit odd for them to not just enter without knocking or ringing as they usually did. Though who was actually at the door was just about the very last person any of the kids could have expected, even from the moment Dipper first swung it open.

“P-Pacifica!?” Dipper exclaimed, absolutely baffled to see the heiress standing in front of him. Even more bewildering was the fact that, unlike the last time she had ventured out to the shack to seek his help, this time, Pacifica hadn’t come in any sort of heavy coat or concealing disguise. Rather, she was in her usual fashionable attire, her expression pensive and her hands held tightly behind her back before she greeted him back with a somewhat awkward wave.

“O-oh! Uh, h-hey, Dipper,” she said, smiling rather tightly. “Looks like you’re back—finally. N-not that I haven’t been hanging out around here waiting for you to get back ever since that day we spent at the mines, b-because that would be *weird*, obviously, but… um… what was I talking about again?”

“I… honestly have no idea,” Dipper frowned, confused before breaking into a small, cordial smile. “But anyway, hi, Pacifica. What brings you all the way out here—”

“Pacifica!” Mabel suddenly interrupted, pushing her brother aside to brightly greet the heiress. “Hi! How are you?! Did you come out here to invite all of us to another super glitzy, glamorous party? Because if you are, we are *so* on board, the last one was *so* fun!"

“Yeah, it was!” Steven interjected just as cheerfully. “Ya know, aside from the vengeful ghost and crazy Gem mutants. But that’s the sort of stuff we deal with all the time, so I guess it was nothing *too* out of the ordinary.”

“Oh… you guys are here too…” Pacifica’s smile fell as she looked between Steven and Mabel.
“Great…”

“Uh, so…” Dipper cut in, squeezing his way back into the conversation between the pair. “Like I was trying to ask before, what’s up, Pacifica? You need some help busting another ghost or dealing with a pack of angry, city-slick dwarves?”

The heiress couldn’t help but let out something of a small laugh at this, one that Dipper slightly joined in on, not noticing as Steven, and Mabel in particular, watched the exchange curiously. “No, nothing like that,” Pacifica smirked. “I was just… um… w-well, you remember how you said after your how drill thing was over, we’d… uh… h-hang out?”

“Yeah…?” Dipper nodded, raising an eyebrow before he realized Pacifica’s intention in coming all this way to see him. “Oh, wait, you mean right now?”

“Uh… I mean, if you wanna?” she shrugged apprehensively. “I-if you’re busy though, I-I totally get it. I can always come back some other time.”

“I mean, we did only get back from the barn for weeks on end just a few minutes ago…” Dipper noted with an earnest frown. “But…"

“But he’s totally free and he would totally love to hang out with you!” Mabel sharply interrupted, excitedly pushing her brother out the door a bit. “Wouldn’t you, Dipper?”

“Uh… well…” Dipper hesitated for a moment before meeting Pacifica’s hopeful expression. She offered him a small, almost demure smile, one that carried none of the cold haughtiness she often used to front, but instead, it was completely honest, completely genuine. And if there was something that Dipper knew well from experience, it was that Pacifica was always at her very best when she was at her most genuine. “You know what? Sure, why not. It’ll be fun.”

“R-really?” Pacifica asked, quite surprised to hear this as her cheeks flushed the slightest pink.

“Yes, really!” Mabel exclaimed as she pushed Dipper out towards Pacifica even more, urging the pair off. “Now, go on, get outta here, you crazy kids! Go out and make some memories!”

“Yeah, and have fun!” Steven called after the two as they exchanged a somewhat startled glance, though ultimately decided to head off together towards town all the same. Leaving a very satisfied and a somewhat confused Steven behind. “Huh… that’s… kinda weird,” the young Gem noted. “I wonder when Dipper and Pacifica became such good friends.”

“Friends?” Mabel scoffed. “Steven, please. Those two aren’t just friends. They’re absolutely, 100%, head over heels in love with each other!”

“Whaaaaat?!” Steven exclaimed, dumbfounded. “But… how can you tell?”

“Just look at them!” Mabel motioned towards the pair as they headed off down the forest trail. They lingered noticeably close beside each other as they casually conversed and caught up, sharing the occasional warm laugh along the way. “The rich, elegant heiress with a hidden heart of gold; the awkward, nerdy bookworm who’s looking for something more in his life. It’s like something out of a fairy tale, a true, forbidden romance, just like Romeo and Juliet! Though hopefully with a lot less dying involved…”

“Eh, I don’t know, Mabel…” Steven frowned, crossing his arms. “I’m pretty sure Dipper and Pacifica are just friends.”

“Oh sure they are now,” Mabel said with a flippant wave of her hand. “But the sparks of
something deeper are there, for sure. And if you don’t take it from me, then why don’t we just go see for ourselves.”

“What do you mean?” the young Gem asked, confused.

“I mean,” Mabel put on a wry, daring smirk as she wrapped an arm around Steven’s shoulder and nodded off to the path Dipper and Pacifica had just taken. “You and me going undercover, Steven. For the sake... of LOVE!”

Neither Dipper nor Pacifica had any particular plans in mind as they ventured into town together to spend the afternoon. After all, Gravity Falls was a rather small town with not too much to offer in the way of man-made attractions, but even so, they decided to make do with what they had. Though as they first set out on the town, Pacifica did make it a point to make herself rather scarce, doing everything she could to conceal both herself and Dipper from anyone who so much as looked like they had a camera at the ready. It was a strange, sort of anxious behavior, one that Dipper quickly picked up on, especially as the heiress pulled them both into another alley for what seemed like the fifth time in the past hour.

“Uh… Pacifica?” he asked as she peeked around the corner to make sure the coast was clear. “What are you doing?”

“Huh?” Pacifica turned back to him, startled before throwing on a forced, casual grin. “Oh, uh, nothing! Just, uh… hanging out in a dark alley, like all you middle class people do!”

“Uh, I hate to break it to you, Pacifica, but most middle class people don’t do that,” Dipper pointed out, somewhat amused until his smile faded somewhat. “You know, if you’re embarrassed to be hanging out with me, you can just admit it. At least then we won’t have to keep ducking in and out of alleyways every five minutes.”

“Embara--what? No!” the heiress quickly shook her head, flustered. “I’m not embarrassed by you. It’s just…” She hesitated, glancing away in anxious shame, almost as if she was afraid to tell him the truth. Though as she met his patient, expectant expression once more, she ultimately folded and decided to do just that. ‘I’ve never… ‘hung out’ with anyone before. Heck, I’ve never even had any real friends before, just fake ones that my parents hand picked for me, This sort of thing is all new to me and I’m just… scared, I guess, that I might mess it up. Or even worse, that my parents might find out and keep us from hanging out anymore. I mean, no offense, but… you’re not exactly their… favorite person…”

“Gee, I wonder why,” Dipper remarked with a bit of a sardonic grin, though his manner turned serious as he placed a consoling hand on Paifica’s shoulder. “But… if you really are worried about word getting back to your parents, then… I think I know somewhere we can go where nobody will be around to snitch on us.

For a moment, the most Pacifica could do was look to him, surprised and bewildered that he was willing to accommodate her so easily, all for the sake of making her feel more comfortable. But in the end, she smiled, warmly, almost daringly accepting the hand he was holding out to her to let him take her away to wherever he might lead. And that’s exactly what he did.

Though just as the pair slipped out of the alley as discreetly as they could, the lid of the dumpster tucked away within it suddenly flipped open. And out of it, both Steven and Mabel popped up, their ‘undercover’ mission steadily underway.

“Aha! See, Steven?” Mabel asked with an eager grin. “Just like I said, it’s forbidden love! And
what’s better yet is they aren’t even about to let that stop them, they’re sneaking off to go hang out together alone anyway! Augh, it’s so beautiful and so romantic I could cry! Speaking of which, you brought that box of tissues, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” Steven nodded, handing said tissues off to her. “But… I don’t know… I still think they’re hanging out just as friends, Mabel.”

“But Dipper took her hand, Steven!” Mabel protested. “He took her hand! That’s always how it starts, and then it builds and builds from there until they’re in smooch city! Believe me, I’ve read enough $5 romance novels from the grocery store to know all about these sorts of things.”

“Hm… well, you do seem like an expert when it comes to love,” Steven noted. “I mean, you’ve been in plenty of relationships yourself, right?”

“You bet I have!” Mabel grinned proudly. “Like the time I… uh, actually, let’s not count when I dated all those gnomes. Ew, or Gideon either… Mermando was nice, but… he was the one that got away… and ugh, and let’s not even bring up Gabe. And not to mention my massive crush on youuuuuuu-” She trailed off, her eyes wide as she looked to Steven, realizing what she had practically just let slip until she found a rather sloppy way to recover from it. “Y-your sandals! T-they’re so… pink and cute a-and… I love them!”

“Um… thanks?” the young Gem raised a confused eyebrow at this, though thankfully, he didn’t seem to suspect anything else of it, much to Mabel’s immense relief. “So, you think maybe we should just let Dipper and Pacifica hang out without us spying on them from afar to see if they’re in love?”

“Are you kidding? Of course, I don’t!” Mabel exclaimed, more than ready to change the subject. “We’ve barely even scratched the surface when it comes to those two adorable lovebirds! Now come on!” She boldly pointed in the direction Dipper and Pacifica had went, ever curious to see just where their unplanned day might take them next. Or ideally, how that day might end up bringing them closer together. “We’ve got ourselves a romance to watch blossom!”

True to his word, Dipper wasted no time in leading Pacifica not only out of town, but away from prying eyes that might carry word of her rather rebellious activities back to her parents. Instead, he took her back towards the forest, heading out past the temple and the shack and out into the open woods before venturing off the beaten path entirely. Pacifica was rather hesitant as she watched him do so, unsure if she should follow after him as she stared into the light-speckled shadows deep within the vast labyrinth of trees ahead.

“Uh… are you sure about this?” she asked, frowning at the untamed shrubbery he expected her to head after him into.

“What?” Dipper asked with something of a challenging grin. “You wanted to make you weren’t caught hanging out with me, right? Well, nobody’s gonna catch us all the way out here, I can guarantee that.”

“Well, yeah, but…” Pacifica paused, frowning down at her outfit, one that was quite ill-suited for traversing the wilds of the woods. “It’s like, super gross and dirty out there…” She caught herself, however, upon looking back to Dipper, who could only really raise a critical eyebrow at such a shallow concern. “A-and isn’t it also sort of dangerous too?” theheiress recanted, coming up with a much better excuse. “What if we run into a bear or a rabid chipmunk or something? Why don’t you have that weird magic sword of yours, just in case?”
“First of all, the Sword of Seasons wasn’t magic, it was technology,” Dipper pointed out before his tone turned slightly embarrassed. “And uh… I sort of… dropped it into the lake on accident. It’s a long story, but don’t worry. We won’t need it anyway.”

“Oh yeah?” Pacifica crossed her arms. “And how do you know that?”

“Because,” Dipper pulled back a few branches leading into an obscured clearing deeper into the woods. “What we’re looking for is right here.”

“It’s… a mailbox?” Pacifica frowned, absolutely confused as she joined Dipper in walking towards it. Sure enough, it was a simple, unextraordinary mailbox, resting alone and rather mismatched against the forest that surrounded it. “Ok, I’m lost,” the heiress shook her head. “You really dragged me all the way out here to the middle of nowhere to look at a boring old mailbox. Is this really what people do when they hang out? Or is this just some weird nerd thing of yours?”

“Oh, this isn’t just any ordinary, boring old mailbox,” Dipper corrected with a knowing smirk. “Its magical. I… think. To be honest, I’m still not actually sure about how it works but trust me, its weird.”

“A magical mailbox?” Pacifica chuckled incredulously. “You know, Pines, I knew you were into some strange, kinda dumb stuff, but this is a little out there, even for you.”

“No, it really works!” Dipper protested insistently as he reached into his backpack to pull out a notebook and a pen. “Watch this.”

The heiress did so, observing as he wrote a simple greeting of ‘hello’ onto a page before ripping it out of the book and slipping it inside the mailbox. For a moment, nothing really happened at all, that is until the mailbox’s flag suddenly flipped upward entirely on its own accord. “W-what?” Pacifica balked, taken aback by this, though Dipper simply offered her a coy grin as he opened the mailbox and pulled an entirely new slip of paper out of it.

“Out there, huh?” his smirk widened as he showed her the page, which unexplainably read ‘Hello, Dipper and Pacifica,” as plain as day.

“I-how did you do that?!?” Pacifica demanded, taking the page and looking over it in disbelief. She was quick to turn back to the mailbox itself, peeking inside to see if there was any hidden chamber or compartment inside. “Is this some sort of weird prank or something?!”

“No, its not,” Dipper laughed, thoroughly amused. “Amethyst and Garnet told me about this mailbox that can answer basically any question, so me and Soos came out here to see if it actually existed a few weeks back. And it turns out, it’s totally the real deal. It knows pretty much everything”

“Hmph, I don’t buy it,” the heiress scoffed.

“Then why don’t you try it out for yourself,” Dipper offered his pen and paper to her, which she readily snatched to pose the mailbox a question.

“Alright, ‘magic mailbox’,” she snarked as she scribbled her question down before tossing it into the box. “If you’re so ‘all-knowing’, then what did I have for breakfast this morning?”

The mailbox was quick to come up with a response, its flag tipping upward once more just before Pacifica quickly retrieved her answer and read it aloud. “Strawberry crepes suzette with quiche lorraine and imported no-pulp orange juice’?! How does it know that?!”
“Like I said, I have no idea,” Dipper shrugged. “You can ask it anything and it just knows somehow! Isn’t it cool?”

“...Anything, huh?” Pacifica mused thoughtfully, tapping the pen against the paper for a moment as she looked between the mailbox and Dipper. And then, she tipped the notebook up a bit, scribbling another quick question onto it and making sure to keep it out of Dipper’s sight all the while.

“What are you writing?” he asked, intrigued as he tried to peer over the top of the notebook and see.

“Nothing!” Pacifica lightly pushed him away, letting out a small, somewhat flustered laugh as she did. “I-I just wanna know something really dumb.”

“Oh yeah, like what?”

“Like nothing ,” she insisted, beating him to the mailbox as she shoved her question inside. Sure enough, it delivered another answer, one that only came in the form of a simple ‘yes’. The heiress was unable to hold back a small, delighted gasp as she read it, one that only made Dipper all the more curious to know what she had asked.

“Come on, seriously, what did you ask?” he pressed with a wry smile as he began to follow her out of the clearing.

“It doesn’t matter,” she grinned with a playful wave of her hand.

“Well you sure seem happy about it, so yeah, I think it kinda does.”

“Oh, mind your own business!” she shoved him once more, though this time, he lightly shoved her back, eliciting a shared, bright laugh from them both as they continued back into the woods from whence they came.

As soon as they’d left, however, Steven and Mabel emerged from their own hiding spot beyond the other side of the clearing, both of them still intent on spying on the pair’s adventures from afar.

“Playful pushing? Him showing her magicy stuff? Her getting all excited over a question she wouldn’t let him see?” Mabel listed, growing steadily more excited as she did. “It’s all too good to be true!”

“It is?” Steven asked. “How?”

“Don’t you see, Steven?” Mabel replied, stars practically brimming in her eyes as she hopped up and down on the balls of her feet. “Those are all classic slow burn romance tropes! The evidence just keeps stacking up. And I have a feeling that they’re nowhere close to finished yet!”

And sure enough, they weren’t. For as the next day arrived, Pacifica showed up at the Mystery Shack, this time on Dipper’s invitation for them to hang out once again. Just like the day prior, the pair set out into the forest rather than into town, and just as before, Steven and Mabel followed after them, watching from the shadows as they spent more time together.

“And then we found the Gems’ lost memories about Great Uncle Ford and the portal, but that’s a whole other long story that leads into several more long stories,” Dipper recounted as he led the way through the forest and across a small stream.

“Wait, let me see if I can get this all straight,” Pacifica interjected, holding her hands up. “So your great uncle actually has a twin brother who was trapped in another dimension for the past 30 years.
And the whole time, your uncle was trying to bring that brother back using this huge portal that was secretly under the Mystery Shack the entire time but no one knew about it?"

“Yeah, pretty much,” Dipper nodded.

“And the Gems factor into all this… how?”

“They sort of… don’t for a pretty long time. Like I said before, they lost their memories about all of this thanks to their leader, Rose, erasing them after they were possessed by…” Dipper trailed off, his expression darkening at the mere thought of the dream demon. “Y-you know what? N-never mind that right now.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Pacifica sighed, relieved. “I feel like my brain’s about to burst from everything you’ve been telling me. Your life is like some crazy movie or huge story written by a psychopath or something. Seriously, how do you deal with all these massive bombshell shake ups all the time?"

“Eh, you learn to just deal with them as they come,” Dipper shrugged, hopping up onto a nearby log to take a seat. Pacifica joined him, glad for the much needed break from their ongoing hike, though even so, she watched in curious confusion as Dipper pulled a snack out of his bag that she was entirely unfamiliar with.

“What’s that?” she asked, intrigued by the oddly shaped sandwich.

“Oh, it’s peanut butter and jelly,” Dipper grinned, offering half to her. “Mabel packed it for me before we left and for some reason she cut it into a heart shape and said it was ‘for luck’, whatever that means. Anyway, you can have some if you’re hungry.”

Pacifica didn’t immediately accept his offer, instead looking over the half-heart sandwich with a furrowed brow of confusion. “You said this is a… peanut--who and… what, exactly?”

“What, you’ve never had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich before?” Dipper asked with an incredulous chuckle before meeting the heiress’s dumbfounded expression once more. “Oh my gosh, you’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Is this some sort of… poor person snack?” Pacifica wondered, holding the sandwich up to get a better look at it. “N-not that being poor is a bad thing! It’s just… I-I’m not really allowed to anything that doesn’t cost over at least $100 per tiny gourmet plate portion, so… yeah…”

“Are you kidding?” Dipper asked in apt disbelief. “Your parents don’t even let you eat what you want?”

“Heh, welcome to the super ‘glamorous’ world of a Northwest,” the heiress laughed somewhat bitterly.

“Well, here’s your official welcome into the super average world of a Pines,” Dipper countered, placing his half of the sandwich into her open hand with a playful grin. “And unlike most of your high class gourmet meals, this one’s completely free.”

Pacifica tried her best to suppress the sudden blush that filled her cheeks as she accepted his offering, though all the same, she was still a bit hesitant to try the sandwich for herself. Until, of course, she ventured her first bite of the sandwich. “Mm! This is sooo good!” she exclaimed, her eyes alight with newfound discovery. She disregarded all the proper manners she had been taught in favor of voicing her overwhelming excitement over such a simple treat. “The bread’s so soft and it’s all so creamy, but then there’s like… little nuts in it too? I love that!”
“That’s the power of chunky peanut butter,” Dipper chuckled warmly, amused by the heiress’s elation as she scarfed down another bite.

“And this fruity taste? What is that?”

“Strawberry jam. So technically, it’s more of a peanut butter and jam sandwich, but eh, same difference.”

“Whatever it is, it’s amazing!” Pacifica grinned as she finished off the other half. “And you just eat stuff like that all the time?!”

“Eh, maybe not all the time, but PB&J is a longtime favorite for me and Mabel for a reason,” Dipper said, still laughing, especially as he noticed the small smudge of jam marring the heiress’s face. “Oh, hey, you got a little something on your cheek there.”

“Huh?” Pacifica reached up, rubbing just shy of the jam that she missed it entirely.

“Here, I got it.” Dipper slipped his vest off, not really having anything else but the corner of it to wipe the heiress’ face clean. He stopped short as soon as he did however, suddenly caught off guard by exactly what he was doing, and exactly how close their faces happened to be as he did. In the briefest, most breathless of moments, he caught sight of her eyes, wide and wondering as they practically sparkled in the low light coming in through the trees above. Eyes that were staring at nothing else in the world at that moment… other than him. “I-I… s-sorry,” he quickly recanted, backing off as he hastily threw his vest back on and slipped off the log to stand. “W-we should probably get going.”

“O-oh…” Pacifica frowned somewhat, slowly, almost sadly returning to reality as she did the same. “Yeah, you’re right… Um… thanks, by the way, for the… what was it called again? Sandy Witch?”

“Sandwich,” Dipper corrected with a smirk. “And you’re welcome. I’ll be sure to bring you another one when we hang out again tomorrow.”

“T-tomorrow…” Pacifica repeated, her former smile returning in full force upon hearing this. “Yeah, tomorrow. I can hardly wait…”

“Steven, please tell me you saw that!” Mabel whispered as she looked out of her hiding spot just behind the log the pair had been sitting on moments ago. “Because it was absolutely adorable!”

“Yeah, that was really cute,” Steven agreed with a warm grin. “Still, I can’t believe Pacifica’s never had a PB&J before… That’s like… one of the basic food groups alongside donuts and fry bits!”

“Who cares about that?” Mabel shook her head dismissively. “Did you see the way those two were looking at each other? It’s like they were hypnotized… by love!”

“Eh, I don’t know…” Steven noted with a frown. “I’m still not sure if that was really ‘love’ or not…”

“Oh, so you still need even more proof, huh?” Mabel challenged, her hands on her hips. “Well, then don’t worry, Universe. If you need proof, then I’ll give ya proof!”

At this, she let out something of a wild, almost manic laugh, one that admittedly startled Steven as he anxiously tried to reign her back down from her obvious obsession. “O-or instead of that, maybe we could just--whoa!” The young Gem didn’t get a chance to finish as Mabel suddenly grabbed his
hand and pulled him along after her once more, all for the sake of secretly eavesdropping in on Dipper and Pacifica once more. “O-or I guess we could always just keep doing this, that’s fine too!”

The next several days flowed along in a similar, surprisingly sweet succession. In light of the lack of any old or new threats or foes to face, Dipper didn’t mind spending his now very open free time with Pacifica at all. If anything, their already unexpected friendship seemed to grow closer and closer with each passing day as they shared new discoveries, snacks, and even secrets on occasion. The woods of Gravity Falls were essentially a treasure trove of adventures just waiting to be had, though fortunately none of their trips into it led to any real danger or disaster. Though one constant that neither of them were ever aware of during their days together was the fact that just about everywhere they went, Steven and Mabel followed behind at a safe distance, always unseen but always keeping tabs on the pair to look out for any signs of budding love between them. And suffice to say that, at least as far as Mabel was concerned, by the time the week was through, they’d seen more than enough signs of just that.

All the same, Dipper and Pacifica’s latest trip into the woods happened to fall under the cover of dusk, just as the sky filled in with the colors of twilight and the shadows of the trees gave way to darkness. Even so, the pair ventured into that darkness unfettered, their path only illuminated by a simple flashlight as Dipper led the way further into the forest, his hand intertwined with Pacifica’s all the while.

“Allright, Pines, I’ve had enough of your ‘mysteries’ for one week,” Pacifica remarked wryly as she eagerly followed after his swift pace. “Where are we heading this time? Some sort of creepy cave or underground tunnel to find some secret monster or something?”

“Nah, nothing like that,” Dipper chuckled, pulling the first journal out of his vest. “Its something I found in here that I’ve never had a chance to see for myself before. And I have a feeling it’ll be right up your alley.”

“Oh really?” Pacifica smirked. “So you’re saying it’s some sort of magical creature that eats terrible, over-controlling, prestige-obsessed parents?”

“Heh, if only,” Dipper replied just as playfully as they finally emerged into a small clearing entirely covered by trees from above. This served to block just about all forms of dying daylight out, to the point that the entire clearing was practically engulfed in darkness when Dipper suddenly shut his flashlight off entirely.

“D-Dipper!” Pacifica gasped, blindly reaching around until she grasped onto his shoulder tightly. “What are you doing?!”

“Don’t worry,” he assured, placing his hand over hers to steady her. “Just wait and watch…”

The heiress let out an uneasy breath as she decided to heed him, allowing the symphony of the evening to fill in for them. Crickets, cicadas, and birds alike all echoed around the darkened den of trees, frightening and fascinating Pacifica all at the same time, but amidst them, she held on tight to Dipper, almost as if he was the anchor keeping her from losing herself to it all. Until…

A sudden speck of light illuminated somewhere in the darkened space before the pair, small and sparse but persistent all the same. Another tiny light soon joined it, followed by another, then another, until the petite glowing orbs were popping up all around them, creating a warm, ambient sort of radiance that soon filled the entire clearing, making it apparent exactly what these little lights really were.
“Fireflies...?” Pacifica wondered, smiling softly as she cupped her hands under one of the glowing insects.

“Not exactly...” Dipper noted knowingly, watching expectantly until the creature’s normal yellow light suddenly, starkly turned a bright, vibrant purple.

“W-what?!” the heiress gasped, her hands flying away from the bug as she looked around to its kin, only to see similar shifts among them. The fireflies all seemed to slowly, gently change colors with each passing moment at random intervals, some glowing pink while others illuminated blue, as even more blinked orange and still more among them turned green. As they meandered about the clearing, they ultimately created a glittering rainbow of light, one that absolutely enchanted Pacifica as she simply stood there, trying to take it all in.

“They’re... beautiful...” she whispered, afraid she might scare them off if she was too loud. “What are they?”

“Iridescents,” Dipper informed, nodding to their depiction in the journal before shutting it and putting it away altogether. “Or, color-changing fireflies. They only live here in Gravity Falls, and they only come out during the summer months. I’ve been meaning to come out here to see them for myself, but everything’s been so busy lately that I haven’t gotten the chance to until now.”

“So,” Pacifica began, her wondering smile still apparent as she stood close to him and gazed out at the iridescents. “Was it worth the wait?”

Dipper paused, taking a moment to glance over at the heiress beside him. And the moment he did, it felt as though the entire world slowed to a soft, almost dreamlike crawl.

The iridescents still drifted through the clearing, colors changing as steadily as ever as they hovered across the otherwise shadowy trees behind them. And yet, despite their practically magical beauty, Dipper found himself captivated by beauty of an entirely different kind. If he was perfectly honest with himself, he’d always known Pacifica to carry an almost regal sort of elegance and grace, though as he looked to her now, those things seemed so much more natural, so much more vibrant, so much more free. The lights all around her reflected off of her skin to the point that it almost seemed to take on an otherworldly glow, her golden hair taking on a similar, constantly changing, but always appealing pallor. Yet what he noticed most, what amazed him the most, was her smile, her eyes, her soft, easy laughter as a small group of iridescents came to hover around her head, creating what looked like a sparkling, multicolored crown. A crown that somehow, in some impossible way, served to make her appear even more radiant than she already was on her own.

And suddenly, there was that feeling again, striking at his heart and bearing in deep. The very same feeling he’d first felt inklings of that night at the party when they’d first danced, that feeling he’d felt again, stronger and more realized deep within the titan’s ore mines. The same feeling he’d felt brief, crisp moments of scattered across the week he’d just spent with her each time they sat close, each time they happened to touch hands, each time their eyes happened to meet in stolen glances carried by unspoken words, unknown thoughts, and that feeling. So warm, so curious, so real and raw and rich that this time, it refused to be ignored. It demanded to be known, to be realized, to be felt. And as he slowly started to allow himself to feel it, he couldn’t help but wonder, as he looked down to her empty hand beside him, just waiting to be held, if maybe, just maybe, that feeling might just end up taking him somewhere this time after all.

And yet...

Maybe, he wondered, he feared, it wouldn’t take him anywhere, just like it hadn’t once before.
As the gravity of that fear pulled him back down to earth once again, he suddenly drew his hand away from hers before they could even skim one another. His awestruck expression fell into something much more solemn as he tore his glance away from her, almost as if so much as looking at her was like holding onto a promise that would never be guaranteed. “Y-yeah,” he finally answered her question halfheartedly. For even despite the blissfully warm array of colored lights all around them, he felt as though he was standing in a sea of cold, empty darkness instead. “I… I guess it was…”

“Ok, Steven, I think we can both agree,” Mabel began, pacing around in front of the chalkboard she’d positioned in the shack’s den. “That what we witnessed last night in the woods was pretty much THE most romantic thing ever! The color changing fireflies, the cool night air, and they way they kept smiling at each other? Augh, it was all so perfect!”

“Yeah, you know, I wasn’t really sold on the idea before, but… I think last night convinced me for sure,” Steven nodded with an excited grin. “Looks like Dipper and Pacifica really do like each other like that. So I guess that means we can be happy for them and move on with our lives now, right?”

“Wrong!” Mabel corrected succinctly. “You saw what happened last night, Steven! Dipper was this close to making a move that would have changed everything! He totally would have taken him and Pacifica out of the friend zone and into the love zone, but nooooo, he just had to back out at the last second, just like he always used to do with Wendy back when he was crushing on her too!”

“Oh yeah,” Steven nodded thoughtfully. “He almost took her hand and everything. Why do you think he didn’t?”

“Cause he’s an awkward dork who doesn’t know how to show people how he really feels!” Mabel huffed, frustrated over the fact that she knew her brother far too well. “But to be honest, I… kinda think Pacifica might be the same way. Which, I’ll admit, is gonna make this… a little tough.”

“Make what tough?”

Steven and Mabel both let out a startled gasp as they turned to find Dipper entering the room, curious to know what their ongoing conversation was about. Though that curiosity only grew as he spotted the chalkboard that Mabel had written D + P onto, surrounded by a bold, massive heart. “Uh… what’s going on in here?” he asked, confused.

“Um… good question…” Steven frowned, still somewhat lost in Mabel’s shuffle.

“N-nothing!” Mabel insisted readily. “And certainly nothing that involves you and a certain rich girl you’ve been hanging out a lot with lately, though if there’s anything you wanna discuss on that front, bro-bro, we’d be more than happy to listen!”

“Uh… no, thanks,” Dipper raised an eyebrow, looking between the pair with growing suspicion. “Wait a minute…” he glanced past his sister, narrowing his eyes at the chalkboard and the heart drawn on it until he all too quickly realized exactly who the initials within it stood for. “Mabel, please tell me you’re not doing what I think you’re doing…”

“Me? Doing what?” Mabel feigned innocence. “Dear brother, I haven’t the faintest idea of what you’re talking about!”

“Ok then,” Dipper said flatly before turning to the young Gem. “Steven, what’s Mabel holding behind her back?”
“Oh, well, it looks like a list!” Steven informed, catching the title of said list before Mabel could hastily shove it into her sweater. “I think it said ‘Dipper and Pacifica matchmaking ideas’ or something like that?”

“Steven!” Mabel hissed, flustered, especially as she looked back to her brother’s disapproving expression.

“Oh no, absolutely not, Mabel!” he quickly, adamantly exclaimed. “There is no way I’m letting you try to set me and Pacifica up. Like I’ve told you so many times before, we’re just friends!”

“Yeah, but don’t you wanna be more than friends with her?!” Mabel protested earnestly. “We’ve been secretly watching you guys all week, and we’ve seen that special spark between you guys! All you gotta do is stoke it a little, bro-bro, and it’ll turn into a full fledged, passionate romance for the ages before you know it! Right, Steven?”

“Uh… yeah,” the young Gem shrugged with an awkward smile. “Um, sorry for spying on you all week by the way, that was Mabel’s idea.”

“A great one, just like all my ideas are!”

“…Ok, first of all, never do that again,” Dipper began, hardly even surprised by his sister’s antics at this point. “Second of all, there is no spark! Pacifica and I have been hanging out a lot lately, yeah, but we don’t have feelings for each other and that’s that! So you can forget any of your little matchmaking schemes, Mabel, because they’d just be a big waste of time anyway.”

“Uh… yeah,” the young Gem shrugged with an awkward smile. “Um, sorry for spying on you all week by the way, that was Mabel’s idea.”

“A great one, just like all my ideas are!”

“…Ok, first of all, never do that again,” Dipper began, hardly even surprised by his sister’s antics at this point. “Second of all, there is no spark! Pacifica and I have been hanging out a lot lately, yeah, but we don’t have feelings for each other and that’s that! So you can forget any of your little matchmaking schemes, Mabel, because they’d just be a big waste of time anyway.”

“Uh, I dunno, are you really sure about this, Mabel?” Steven asked just as soon as Dipper had left. “Even if Dipper and Pacifica do like each other, I don’t know if its such a good idea to try to force them to be together.”

“You’re right, Steven, its not.”

“Garnet!” Steven and Mabel both gasped, startled as the Gem leader spoke up from her previously unknown spot leaning against the front entryway.

“How long have you been standing there?” the young Gem asked, startled, though not surprised, given just how often Garnet did this sort of thing.

“Long enough,” the Gem leader noted as she stepped up to the kids.

“Great! Then you’re in on the plan to get Dipper and Pacifica to be an official couple then?” Mabel asked with an eager smile. “This sort of thing is right up your alley, Garnet. After all, you are certified expert when it comes to all things love and romance!”

“How long have you been standing there?” the young Gem asked, startled, though not surprised, given just how often Garnet did this sort of thing.

“Long enough,” the Gem leader noted as she stepped up to the kids.

“Great! Then you’re in on the plan to get Dipper and Pacifica to be an official couple then?” Mabel asked with an eager smile. “This sort of thing is right up your alley, Garnet. After all, you are certified expert when it comes to all things love and romance!”

“Hm, thanks,” Garnet smirked, adjusting her shades, though her smile quickly fell into seriousness all the same. “But I can’t say I’m completely in on the plan.”

“Aaw, why not?” Mabel frowned, disappointed.

“Mabel,” Garnet began, kneeling down to the girl’s level. “I know you mean well in trying to help your brother find love. And… you’re not wrong. There definitely is something there between him and Pacifica. Believe me, I know. I’ve been watching them over the past week too.”
“You have?” Steven asked, bewildered. “Why?”

The Gem leader grinned once more at this. “Let’s just say I could see the sparks flying between those two from a mile away. Even back before either of them knew it.”

“Oh my goooosh!” Mabel gasped, excited beyond measure. “So if even your future vision saw them falling in love, then that means they must belong together! In that case, we gotta get ourselves on matchmaking patrol STAT! Break out the romantic candles and the sweeping violin music! Steven, call up a reservation at the nearest fancy restaurant as fast as you can. We’re workin’ overtime here people, this is a love emergency!”

“Hold on there, Mabel,” Garnet cautioned much more calmly, effectively stopping Mabel’s frenetic energy right in its tracks. “There’s a better way of doing this. Love isn’t something that can just be rushed out the door; it needs time to grow, and for the people who are feeling it to grow along with it. And if we really want to bring Dipper and Pacifica together, then that’s what we have to do: help them grow together.”

“So… how do we do that?” Steven asked, curious.

The Gem leader smirked. “I have a few ideas in mind…”

“Then let’s try them!” Mabel readily lept on board. “All of them! No matter how big or crazy they might be or how many illegal fireworks might be involved in any number of them!”

“There’s no illegal fireworks involved in any of them,” Garnet informed evenly.

“Oh, wait, that’s one of my ideas, sorry,” Mabel chuckled. “Still, this is a pretty big deal. I have a feeling we’re gonna need some extra help to make sure it all works out…”

“Help with what, dude?” Soos asked as him and Wendy entered the den for their break.

“Oh, you know,” Mabel said with a casual grin. “Only making sure Dipper ends up with the one true love of his life!”

“Whoa, really?” Wendy asked, both her and Soos equally intrigued upon hearing this. “Well, good for him. I knew the kid would bounce back eventually. So who’s the lucky lady?”

“Pacifica Northwest,” Steven said, somewhat obliviously.

“Whaaaaa?!” both coworkers exclaimed, exchanging a baffled glance at this.

“No way!” Soos shook his head, amazed. “I thought Pacifica like, hated all of you guys.”

“She did, until Dipper worked his way into her heart and melted it entirely!” Mabel gushed dramatically. “Seriously, they’re so cute together, and they’d be even cuter if they would just admit how they really feel about each other! So what do you guys say? Are you in?”

“Oh yeah, of course!” Soos readily agreed. “Anything for Dipper, dude.”

“Yeah, what the heck, why not?” Wendy shrugged with a smooth grin. “This whole thing honestly sounds super wholesome and sweet, and besides, it’ll be a good excuse to get us out of work for the rest of the day.”

“Hey, hey!” Stan snapped, suddenly poking his head out from the gift shop upon overhearing this remark. “What have I told you kids before? There is never any good excuse to get out of work.”
“Oh, Grunkle Stan!” Mabel greeted the conman with a bright wave. “You’re just in time to help us get Dipper a girlfriend!”

The moment he heard this, Stan was unable to hold back a heavy burst of laughter, slapping his knee as he leaned up against the doorframe. “Ha! Especially not that!” he chortled, essentially beside himself with amusement as he looked to the group in the den incredulously. “That’s a good one! I mean, we all know the words ‘Dipper’, ‘getting’, and ‘girlfriend’ don’t even belong in the same sentence together! Seriously, Mabel, you’re splittin’ my sides here!”

“I wouldn’t speak so soon if I were you, Stan,” Garnet spoke up knowingly. “The chances of Dipper and Pacifica ending up together are much higher than you might think.”

“Pfft, oh what, did you see that with your fancy future powers--wait,” the conman stopped short as he considered exactly what the Gem leader had said. “Did… you just say Pacifica? As in that bratty, spoiled rotten Northwest girl?”

“Uh huh,” Steven nodded. “Her and Dipper have been hanging out a whole lot lately.”

“Cause they’re in loooove ,” Mabel added with zealous smile.

Stan, however, completely ignored them, his eyes growing wide with dawning realization. “As in the same Northwests who are so stupidly wealthy that they have way more money than they even know what to do with? Those Northwests?”

“Oh boy,” Wendy smirked, crossing her arms. “I can already tell where this is about to go.”

“Well, then why didn’t you mention that from the get-go?!” Stan exclaimed with newfound excitement. “If Dipper really does get with that Northwest girl and they end up getting married someday, then we’ll all be RICH!”

“Does that mean you’re gonna help us out too, Mr. Pines?” Soos asked.

“Are you kidding? Of course I am!” the conman said as though it was obvious. “This is a once in a lifetime opportunity for me to make absurd amounts of money without even doing anything and I’m not about to let any of you kids mess it up, and I’m especially not about to let Dipper mess it up!”

“Actually, Dipper’s not the one you’ll have to worry about on that front,” Garnet noted, though once again, Stan largely paid her no mind as caught up in his own flights of fantasy over the matter.

“So what are we sitting around here waiting for?” the conman asked, dollar signs practically in his eyes. “Let’s get those kids hitched so I can finally buy my own private island in the Carribean, just like I’ve always dreamed of!”

“Uh, m-maybe we should just settle for getting them together for now?” Steven suggested much more rationally.

“Eh, that works too,” Stan shrugged as everyone came in close to begin properly planning. “Just as long as I walk outta the wedding with the deed to my new personal island when it’s all said and done.”

Despite the many hands involved, the first stages of planning out a starting scheme went surprisingly smoothly. And in the end, the entire group walked out of their meeting with something
that they all hoped and believed had a solid chance at working; the only thing they had to do was to make it all happen.

Securing a venue for the affair was easy enough of a task; the temple house had just enough room and would do the job nicely, especially after Steven, Mabel, Soos, and Wendy spent the better half of an afternoon stringing up lights and setting up tables. In the process, they managed to recruit Connie, Pearl, and Amethyst into their plans as well, with the former all set up to provide a romantic violin accompaniment while the latter pair would handle the food. Strangely though, neither Garnet nor Stan really participated in the preparations, save for dropping in to carry out a table here, take a few plates and utensils there, even cart off one of the flower arrangements for some unknown reason that neither of them would never explain, no matter how many times they were asked. Even so, the others managed to pull their plans together in record time, with everything and everyone set up perfectly in place just as evening began to fall. All that was left was to bring the hopefully soon-to-be couple into the mix and let nature take its course.

While, of course, not letting either of them in on that plan at all.

“Ok, seriously, you guys, what is going on?!” Dipper asked with a frustrated huff as Steven and Mabel shoved him out the Mystery Shack’s front door. Out of nowhere, the pair had pounced on him, forcing him into a clean-cut dress shirt and freshly-pressed pair of pants before they essentially held him down to run a comb through his hair. By the end of it all, even he had to admit he was dressed to impress, though for what reason, he hadn’t the faintest idea.

“Oh, you’ll see…” Mabel said with a leading grin, more or less dragging her brother up towards the temple.

“That’s what you guys have been saying for the past two hours now!” Dipper protested, thoroughly aggravated. “And it’s not good enough anymore! I need some answers now! Why are you guys acting so weird? And why did you force me to get all dressed up like this?”

“Aw, sorry, Dipper!” Steven said much more apologetically. “We’d tell you, but that’d ruin the surprise!”

“What surprise?” Dipper asked, still quite disgruntled as they all stepped up onto the temple’s porch.

“This one!” Steven and Mabel chimed in cheery unison as they threw the door open to reveal the equally bewildered heiress standing just on the other side of it.

Surprised, Pacifica spun around, showing off the simple, yet classy teal tea tress she was wearing. Her golden hair carried a slight wave to it, her face peppered with just a little bit more makeup than usual, creating an elegant, natural, appealing look. All the same, her eyes widened as she caught sight of Dipper, looking his own formal attire over for a moment before she ultimately broke into a small, impressed smile. “Hey.”

“H-hey,” he returned her greeting much more tightly, trying his best not to show just how mesmerized he actually was by how lovely she looked.

“Its working!” Mabel whispered to Steven, unable to hide the huge grin on her face. “It’s working!”

“Its starting to,” Steven agreed, chuckling before speaking up to the entranced pair with a formal bow. “Sir, madam, your table awaits.”
“Wait, what?” Pacifica blinked back into reality, confused. “Table?”

“Whoa, whoa, hold on,” Dipper cut in, sending Steven and Mabel a suspicious glare. “This better not be-”

“A date! Yep, you got it!” Mabel exclaimed, pressing past the pair into the shack.

“A-a date?!” Pacifica flinched, startled as her cheeks flushing bright red as she looked to Dipper, baffled and distressed.

“Pacifica, I swear I had no idea they were planning this!” he quickly assured, scowling at the pair. “Though in retrospect I guess I should have seen this coming considering how you guys always take these sort of things way too far…”

“What was that?” Mabel asked with a growing smirk as she stood before the curtain obscuring the rest of the house. “I couldn’t hear you over that romantic violin music.” She paused, her smile fading as she realized no such music was wafting through the building. “I said… that romantic violin music!”

“Oh! Sorry!” Connie called from the other side of the curtain. At this prompting, she began to play an elegant solo piece, one that Steven and Mabel used as their cue to pull the curtain back to finally reveal their master plan.

“Prepare yourselves… for a night of romance!” Mabel proclaimed, throwing a dramatic hand out to the setup behind her. In just a few hours alone, the rag-tag team had turned the house into a makeshift restaurant, complete with Christmas lights and candles in an attempt at creating a sense of atmosphere and ambiance, though in reality it ended up coming across as somewhat cheap, perhaps even a bit cheesy. A handful of small tables had been set up, complete with lacy tablecloths and fine plastic dining ware, and at each of those tables sat a different, romantically-involved couple, each of which had been invited for the sole purpose of filling the restaurant up.

The couple that was clearly enjoying themselves the most was Soos and Melody, the latter of whom just so happened to be visiting town at just the right time to make this impromptu date possible. They sat leaning in close, warmly conversing all the while as they absentmindedly munch on their breadstick appetizers before they happened to grab the same exact one, opting to eat it together until it led up to a brief, but very welcome kiss. Sitting at the table across from them was Robbie and Tambry, neither of whom were very invested in their date as much as they were sending each other flirtatious text messages, occasionally reacting to said messages with a coy grin across the table. Surprisingly, Lars and Sadie were also present, though quite begrudgingly so, given how flustered they were as they realized just how romantic the atmosphere around them actually was, something they were clearly uninformed of in advance. And still several other couples sat somewhat boredly as Wendy casually waited on their tables and Connie kept her gentle violin accompaniment going all the while. Even as a very audible argument began to break out between the pair of “chefs” in the very open kitchen nearby.

“Amethyst, for the last time, nachos are not considered fine dining!” Pearl huffed, clearly irritated.

“Oh yeah, and how would you know, P?” Amethyst retorted, still trying to prepare the simple snack food despite the white Gem’s protests. “You don’t even eat.”

“Maybe not, but I do know refined elegance when I see it and nachos certainly are not that!”

“Huh, and things were going so smoothly in here too…” Steven noted with a concerned frown that he was quick to chase away with a forced smile as he turned back to Dipper and Pacifica. “N-not
that there’s a problem, because there isn’t!”

“Uh, yeah, there is,” Dipper replied flatly.

“Oh, and what might that problem be, dear brother?” Mabel asked, trying to maintain an air of class despite how classless the scene behind her was.

“Well for starters, you invited half the town to... whatever this is,” Dipper huffed, waving a hand out at the restaurant. “And second of all, you guys just threw all this together without even asking either me or Pacifica! I mean, did it ever occur to you that maybe we didn’t want you guys setting us up on some big, embarrassing date? B-because we don’t. We definitely don’t…” He essentially had to hold back a disappointed sigh as he said this, and likewise, he didn’t even bother to glance back at Pacifica behind him. Though if he would have, he’d have gotten a glance at an expression that was every bit as crestfallen and fretful as his own. “Right?”

“Um, y-yeah…” the heiress forced herself to say, frowning as she wrapped her arms around herself and looked to the floor. “Right…”

“More like right idea, wrong execution.”

The kids were all quite surprised by this interruption as Garnet suddenly stepped into the house, a confident grin on her face as she looked down to the hesitant pair in front of her. “Dipper, Pacifica, your other table awaits,” she stepped aside, holding the door open to the night air outside.

“Other table?” Steven and Mabel whispered to each other, completely bewildered by this turn of events.

Likewise, Dipper and Pacifica exchanged a wondering glance, but even so, they decided to at the very least follow the Gem leader’s lead, curious to know where it might take them. At the same time, Garnet silently beckoned Steven and Mabel, as well as Connie to pick up shop and follow after her, which they all did, even despite their palpable confusion.

“Hey, wait, where you guys goin’?” Amethyst called as she noticed the group heading out the door. “What are we supposed to do with all these nachos?!”

“Not serve them to our guests, obviously,” Pearl scowled, snatching a plate away from the purple Gem before she hastily grabbed it right back.

“Ah well,” she shrugged with a smirk before scarfing down the entire plate whole in full view of their very confused patrons. “More for me!”

As initially out of the loop as Dipper and Pacifica themselves were, now it was Mabel and Steven’s turn, for as the two of them and Connie treaded after Garnet and the couple from a distance, they couldn’t help but wonder exactly what shakeup to their well thought out plans the Gem leader had in mind. Which was exactly what Steven ventured to ask her as she continued to lead the group out past the shack and into the forest instead.

“Um, Garnet?” he asked in a whisper as him, Mabel, and Connie caught up to the Gem leader. “Where are we going?”

“That’s a surprise,” Garnet said, a finger to her lips as she vaguely nodded back at the pair behind her.

“Uh, n-not to sound like Nervous Nelly here, but this... wasn’t part of the plan,” Mabel frowned
“It was,” the Gem leader countered. “It’s just a bit of a different spin on the plan. I figured those two would appreciate just a little more privacy. And I wasn’t the only one to think so either.”

“Yeah, that’s right, which means you three oughta give them that privacy!” Steven, Mabel, and Connie all gasped in surprise as Stan of all people suddenly pulled all three of them aside, away from the setup that Garnet was taking the pair still following her to.

“Grunkle Stan?” Mabel asked, bewildered. “What are you doing out here?”

“Like I said before, I ain’t about to let anyone mess this whole shebang up,” the conman said bluntly. “And that includes you kids. So sit back and watch some real romance happen. Or at least romance according to Shades over there, though since she’s pretty much in constant honeymoon mode, I’d say they’re in pretty good hands.”

“Boy, I’ll say,” Connie agreed, glancing forward and prompting Steven and Mabel to do the same. “Look!”

Garnet had finally stopped, Dipper and Pacifica pausing behind her as they looked around the dark, yet very open clearing they were now standing in with a shared sense of confusion. That is, until the Gem leader swept her hands out, somehow filling the entire area with a soft sort of gentle, multi-colored light, all of which radiated from the handful of iridescects filling the jars and lanterns strung across the clearing. Under that light sat a single table, set only for two, and every bit as warm and inviting as the rest of the serene, intimate setting very much was.

“I’ll leave you two to it,” Garnet concluded with a simple smile as she turned to the pair, pulling down her shades a bit to reveal her trio of eyes, the topmost of which offered them a brief, knowing wink. “Enjoy.”

And with that, the Gem leader stepped aside, joining Stan and the kids back in the shadows of the surrounding trees. As she did, Dipper and Pacifica looked to each other once more, both of them equally perplexed as they tried to make sense of exactly what both of them had been unwittingly dragged into.

“Well, I gotta admit,” Pacifica began diffidently. “This… wasn’t what I was expecting when Mabel texted me earlier and told me to dress up nice and come all the way out here without even explaining why.”

“Ugh, Pacifica, I’m so sorry about all of this,” Dipper sighed tiredly. “I don’t know what those two were thinking with all this. Well, actually… I know exactly what Mabel was thinking, but that doesn’t matter. A-Anyway, if you wanna call it a night and go home, I wouldn’t blame you. I mean, this is probably way more awkward than you ever could have bargained for…”

“No, its not!” Pacifica suddenly exclaimed, far more intently than she had meant to. She recanted somewhat, flustered, though she still managed a small, genuine smile all the same. “I-I mean… it’s actually really… sweet that your sister and your friends would throw all this together for us. E-even if it is sort of… out of the blue. Still, y-you… wouldn’t want all their hard work to just go to waste, would you?”

Briefly, Dipper paused, looking between heiress and the table before them, both of which were practically aglow in the low light surrounding them. And despite his staunch rejection of this so-called ‘date’ before, he found himself hard pressed to turn the offer down when Pacifica herself was the one presenting it to him. “N-no, I guess not,” he shrugged just as apprehensively,
following after her as she moved to take a seat.

Things were still somewhat stilted as they did so, however, the noises of nighttime filling in for any sort of actual conversation. That is, until they happened to lift the covers off their plates to reveal the deceptively simple, but surprisingly meaningful meal underneath.

“Oh! Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches!” Pacifica laughed brightly, absolutely charmed the once again heart-shaped snack. “How’d they know?”

“Trust me, you don’t wanna know the answer to that,” Dipper remarked, chuckling himself. “Honestly, I still can’t believe how much you liked PB&J the first time you tried it. It was pretty funny to see you get so excited over something as simple as a sandwich.”

“Oh, no, it wasn’t,” the heiress smirked, blushing. “It was embarrassing. Even if that sandwich was totally delicious.”

The pair shared another laugh over this, one that was filled with warm that didn’t slip away, even after it was over. “You know…” Pacifica began with a soft, easy smile. “Even though we can both agree that this isn’t a… ‘date’, it’s still really nice to just be here… together…”

“Yeah…” Dipper agreed with a grin that was every bit as genuine as the heiress’ own. “It is…”

As the pair continued their casual conversation, they had largely forgotten about the group spectating over them from the sidelines. While both Garnet and Stan had taken a much more discreet, wiser approach to watching in the woods, Steven, Mabel, and Connie had all scaled a nearby tree to get a better vantage point. They had perched themselves on an obscured branch, just out of the pair’s view, but still giving them a perfect spot to see and hear everything that was going on between them. And suffice to say, they were quite happy with what they were seeing.

“Oh my gosh, Garnet was right, this was way better than our old plan!” Mabel gasped, delighted as the pair leaned in a bit from their respective ends on the table, laughing softly all the while. For a moment, it seemed as though their hands were about to overlap, though just before they could, they both ended up drawing back, noticeably flustered as their conversation carried on all the same.

“But… they’re still holding back…” Mabel frowned upon seeing this. “Ugh! I can’t deal with all this ‘will they/won’t they’ tension! I need those two to finally get to Smooch City already!”

“Hmm…” Steven mused, staring down at the pair. “There’s gotta be something we can do. What did Garnet say again? We have to help them grow together?” The young Gem paused, looking around the dimly lit clearing for anything that could give him an idea. And sure enough, he found that idea in the form of the violin still resting in Connie’s arms. “That’s it! Connie, can you play us a song? Something slow and easy, but emotional and passionate? Like a love song!”

“Well,” Connie grinned, positioning her bow to play. “Let’s see what I can come up with…” After a few practice notes, she was quick to find her footing in a smooth, natural, calmly-tempoed tune, one that soon filled the entire clearing with its gentle, pleasing sound.

“Yes, that’s perfect!” Steven whispered, stars in his eyes. “Now, if only I had my-”

“I’ve got you covered,” Garnet said as she handed the young Gem’s ukelele up to him.

“Thanks!” he smiled back down at her, quickly tuning his own instrument before finding the perfect place to jump into Connie’s melody to create a sweet, soothing duet. One that wasn’t lost on the pair listening to it from down below.

“Yeesh,” Dipper shook his head, facepalming. “They just don’t know when to quit with this stuff,
“Do they? Remind me to get new friends and a new sister when all this is over.” Pacifica couldn’t hold back a small snort of a laugh at this remark, one that admittedly caught Dipper off guard from the very second he heard it. “Whoa, since when do you snort when you laugh?”

“Augh! Sorry!” the heiress flushed, covering her face in embarrassment. “It’s something my parents have tried to break me out of doing ever since I was little. They say it’s ‘not ladylike’, but sometimes I-I guess sometimes the snort just can’t help but slip through the cracks.”

“Well, I’m glad it does,” Dipper remarked, not even realizing just how red his own face was as he forced himself to maintain eye contact with her, largely speaking without thinking at this point. “Cause to be honest, i-its really… well, cute.”

By this point, Pacifica’s smile was so wide and so elated that she couldn’t help but let the bright, cherished feelings sparking within her brim over, urging her to be bold, urging her to take a chance, urging her to cross the line. Which she did in the form of something quite simple really; by doing nothing more than slowly, carefully resting her hand on top of Dipper’s own. “Say, Dipper…” she began thoughtfully, perhaps even a bit leadingly as she met his awestruck expression evenly. “You remember the night of the party, right? After the ghost was gone and we just went out there danced like a bunch of total dorks for hours and hours until we couldn’t anymore?”

“’Fun, or something’?” he countered, repeating the very words she had used the last time she’d asked him to dance. “Y-yeah, I think it would too, though… I, uh… don’t really know how to dance to something like, um… well, this.” He paused, allowing the almost waltz-like tune to fill in once again.

“Oh, it’s easy,” Pacifica assured as they stood and stepped up to each other. “All you have to do is just put this hand here, and this other hand here…” she trailed off, steadying herself as she rested one of his hands against her back before she took his other one. As apprehensive as he clearly was, his touch was light and more than welcome, especially as she met his anxious, yet adapting expression with a soft, good-natured smile of her own. “And then… you just go.”

And with that, their dance began, Pacifica leading it given her greater experience with this sort of skill. It began slow and easy, though still in time with the music as they spun in calm, cool circles near their table, their eyes never drifting away from each other all the while. And as that melody carried them on across the clearing, Steven decided to put words to it as he strummed along, creating a fitting love song for the pair that was clearly starting to fall into exactly that.

“How could it be? Now do you see? Its starting all at once…”

Prompted on by these gentle lyrics, they spun out wider, greater, with Pacifica gradually letting Dipper take the lead as he grew more and more comfortable with each and every step. True, he was still new to this, but she trusted him, she always had, from that very moment he’d helped her realize she could be so much kinder, so much stronger, so much happier than she’d ever thought possible. Happiness that she always, always felt in full form whenever he was by her side.

“You take a leap, then fall in deep. Slow at first, then all at once…”
Perhaps it was the night air or the colorful lights or the dreamlike music urging them onward, but urged by whatever it was, Dipper accepted the lead Pacifica was giving him, using it to spin her out swiftly yet carefully. When he pulled her back in, it was as though her eyes were sparkling as she looked to him, unquestionable elation and excitement filling them to the point that both were instantly infectious. For a brief moment, he could hardly believe that this moment was real, that they were here, together, like this. Certainly it had to be some sort of dream or fantasy and yet as he looked to her again, felt her hand intertwined with his own, he knew that this perhaps the realest thing in the entire world, the realest feeling he’d ever experienced in his entire life.

“Doubts disappear, there’s no more fear. And it happens all at once…”

Gradually yet naturally, their pace began to slow, their twirls becoming more lofty as the music did the same. Their hearts were both admittedly racing, both from their ongoing dance and from nerves, fear, and exhilaration all at the same time. But there was no question they treasured all of those feelings. They wanted to cling onto that moment, as blissful and sweet as it was. They wanted it, and everything it represented, to last for as long as it was able, even as the song soon came to its peaceful, promising end.

“Now that you know, your hearts can grow…. Together, all at once…”

Even as the lyrics reached their gentle conclusion, Connie and Steven continued playing their song, albeit a bit softer as the couple opted to ultimately slow dance to it down below. For awhile, neither Dipper nor Pacifica said anything as they continued, their hands still pressed together and their eyes tightly locked on nothing other than each other all the while. When this lingering silence finally was broken, however, Dipper was the one to do it, even if his voice was barely over a whisper when he did.

“A-are you ok?” he asked softly, intently.

“Y-yeah…” she nodded, just as subdued as he was. “I… I’m just a little dizzy.”

“Oh. S-should we stop?”

“No…” “Never,” she wanted to say, but she didn’t. And yet, despite this, they still stopped all the same, still holding onto each other loosely as they stared at each other, entranced and enchanted and unsure of what might happen next. That is, until, acting not on reason or logic or any sort of thought at all, slowly but surely they both began to lean in, their faces steadily drawing closer together, much to the delight of the trio watching them from the trees.

“YES!” Mabel shouted in a bright, elated whisper as she pulled out her camera to capture the moment as it happened. “This is it! Smooch City here they come!”

“I’m so happy for them!” Steven grinned joyously as tears started welling up in his eyes. “Oh man, I wish I’d brought a box of-” The young Gem stopped short as Garnet handed him off a box of tissues from down below right on time for his tears to begin to fall. “Thanks again!”

“Guys, shh!” Connie cautioned with a small, amused chuckle. “You’ll ruin their moment!”

Steven and Mabel were quick to pipe down at this, opting to instead watch in anticipation as Dipper and Pacifica only continued to move in closer and closer. For what felt like ages, nothing else seemed to matter, not the several sets of eyes they knew were on them, or the radiant colored lights all around. As if on instinct, their eyes both slipped shut, both of them breathless as they braved themselves to bound across the line and let their hearts lead the way.
Until, at the very last minute, when one of them realized exactly what was happening. And as soon as they did, they were all too quick to fearfully pull away.

Once Pacifica noticed her eager lips had been kept waiting, she hesitantly opened her eyes, only to see something that made her heart immediately plummet. For some reason, Dipper had pulled away, relinquishing his hold on her entirely as he took a small step back. His expression was rife with dread and guilt as he all but refused to make eye contact with her and instead gazed downward fretfully.

“D-Dipper?” Pacifica dared to venture, newfound hurt filling into her own expression as she reached an almost trembling hand out toward him.

“I-I...” he hesitated, finally looking up at her before shaking his head. “I-I can’t do this… I’m sorry…”

The heiress flinched, awestruck as she watched him turn to leave her behind without even explaining why at all. All of the previous warmth that had once spread throughout her was now filled in with a bitter chill, one that carried into her tone as she worked up the courage to fiercely call him out. “S-so that’s it then?” she asked in disbelief. “Y-you’re just gonna walk away like its nothing? I thought... I thought you... t-that we were…” She took in a sharp breath, forcing every ounce of willpower she had to keep herself from breaking down entirely. “I-I guess it doesn’t matter what I thought, does it? Because clearly, you weren’t thinking the same thing.”

Dipper let out a long, remorseful sigh at this, briefly glancing over his shoulder at her to meet her bitter gaze. “Pacifica, that’s not-”

“Oh, what? That’s not it?” Pacifica filled in, obviously frustrated. “Then what is it, Dipper? Is... is it me?”

“W-what?” Dipper turned fully at this, seemingly distressed.

“Look, I get it, ok?” the heiress continued, choking back a small, harsh sob. “I treated you and your sister and your friends terribly. I was awful to everyone and, a-a lot of the time, I feel like I still am except for when I’m with you. Y-you made me want to try to be someone better, to be somebody who’s actually worth all the effort but... b-but... I guess that’s not good enough, is it?” She let out a small, pained laugh at this, her tears finally falling as she shook her head. “I should have known; after all, nothing I ever do is ever good enough for anyone, right?”

She was more than ready to resign herself to such a grim thought, a thought that she had always been taught her entire life and had only recently begun to believe could be false. But all too quickly she was being reminded of just how miserably true it really was, just how hopeless and powerless she to make that change she desperately wanted.

Until, of course, he came along and, in a single moment, pulled her right out of the darkness of that despair and back into the light, just as he had before. Only this time, it was in the very last way she could have ever expected:

With a kiss.

She barely had time to react, to think as she felt it, his lips pressed against hers in perhaps the most surprising moment of her entire life. Admittedly, it was quite surprising for him too, especially as he realized exactly what his feeling had so recklessly, thoughtlessly pushed him into doing. And yet it was too late to take it back now, for they there were, standing there, kissing of all things, both of them feeling absolutely ridiculous… and absolutely wonderful all at the same time.
“YESSSSSSS!” Mabel cheered as quietly as she could as she snapped a picture from the trees. “I got it! This baby is getting an entire scrapbook page all to itself!”

“I-I’m so glad you brought these tissues along, Garnet,” Steven sniffled as he glanced down at the Gem leader. “C-cause I’m really needing them now!”

“You’re not the only one,” Garnet grinned, thumbing away a stray proud tear of her own.

“Huh,” Stan remarked, absolutely dumbfounded as he watched the scene unfold. “Who could’ve guessed the kid actually had it in him? Either way, I’ll be rollin’ in dough in no time!”

These collective, excited reactions were all but lost on Dipper and Pacifica themselves as they slowly drew away, their faces still close as they tried their best to catch their breath and regain their bearings. After all, everything had just changed in an instant; and yet neither of them could deny that it was an instant in which they could go back to and live in forever, for all it was worth.

“O-Ok…” Pacifica spoke up first, uncertain. “Now I’m really confused. A-are you like… trying to play some sort of mind game with me?”

“N-no!” Dipper quickly, anxiously replied, gripping her hand and holding onto it tightly. “I’m not, I-I’m sorry, I just… I-It's not you, please , don’t think it’s you. I love how much you’ve been trying to change and it is good enough and it’s always been good enough and I… I’m just rambling at this point, aren’t I?”

“Um… yeah, sort of?” the heiress raised an eyebrow. “What exactly are you trying to say here?”

“I-I don’t know!” he admitted earnestly, absolutely overwhelmed by all of the thoughts in his head conflicting with the feelings in his heart. “I’m just so bad at these sort of things, I always have been, e-even… even the last time I felt this way about someone…”

“L-last time?” she asked, concerned. “Wait… you mean that crush you used to have on that Wendy girl?”

“W-what? how did you know about that?!”

“Mabel told me,” she said with an understanding smile. “I didn’t really know why she did… until now, I guess.”

“Ugh, like I said earlier, remind me to get a new sister…” Dipper grumbled, letting out a long groan as he allowed himself to flop down to sit in the grass, defeated. Pacifica hesitated a moment, but ultimately joined him, sitting close, though not too close, as she waited for a long enough beat of silence to pass before speaking up.

“Uh… so if you don’t mind me asking, what happened with… that whole situation?” she asked, curious.

“It was dumb,” Dipper shook his head dejectedly. “I was dumb. She’s way older than me and I knew that, but I just had to go and fall in love with her even though some part of me always knew it was never gonna work out. So I spent so long being all anxious and scared and coming up with all these crazy plans to get her to impress her when it all just ended up being a huge waste of time in the end anyway. But then, after it did fall apart, I started to wonder if I was ever really in love with her at all? Like… maybe I just thought I was all this time? I don’t know…” he sighed, closing his eyes thoughtfully. “I know this sort of stuff is all a part of growing up, but that doesn’t keep it from being less confusing…”
“W-well, at least we have *that* in common,” Pacifica grinned slightly. “After all, I’m all new to this stuff too…”

“Wait… you are?” Dipper looked to her, amazed. “Aren’t you like, the most popular girl in town? I would have thought you’d have had a *thousand* boyfriends by now.”

“Heh, never any real ones,” the heiress chuckled. “More like stuffy suitors my parents forced me to hang out with to make their business partners or the press happy. But I never actually *cared* about any of those guys… until… until you.”

“Pacifica…” Dipper said quietly, unsure of what to follow it up with, though thankfully he didn’t have to as she continued for him.

“I… think I finally get it… why you held back at first,” she explained, slowly taking his hand once more. “It’s… hard wondering if you’ll ever really be good enough, working so hard to try to be the best you can for something that you’re not even sure is gonna work out in the end. It’s like a weight… one that’s so heavy you sometimes wonder how you can even carry it all without being crushed completely. So in a way… I guess we *both* have our own weights we need to carry, huh?”

He hesitated, though only for a moment. And in that moment, he realized that while his supposedly infatuated interactions with Wendy had always felt awkward and stilted, with Pacifica, it was like always seemed to know exactly what to say and do. A fact that, once again, proved to be completely true as he gave her the kind, easy smile he knew she deserved. “Well,” he began, prompted on by courage he didn’t know he had. Courage that was fueled by affection that he was now absolutely, *finally* certain of as he offered her hand a steady, supportive squeeze. “Maybe we can carry those weights *together*. That is… if you want to…”

Tears were welling up in the heiress’ eyes, though this time, they were filled with unquestionable joy as she nodded warmly. “Of course…” she whispered blissfully, somewhat playfully as she began to lean in closer to him. “But only if we take things slow…”

“Like I said, I’ve never done this before,” he laughed, overwhelmed once more, though by feelings of an entirely different, much better kind. “So slow is the only way I really know how to go.”

“Same here… and that’s perfectly fine with me,” she agreed, her eyes closing along with his as they drew in, this time entirely on purpose.

And on that purpose, their lips met once more. Perhaps even more than their first kiss, this second one was genuine, crisp, and warm, one guided not by fear or guilt but by instinct, by fondness, by faith that this could and *would* work out. As it continued, she lifted her hand to rest gingerly against his cheek as he absently weaved his fingers through her hair, the mere touches alone striking even more soaring emotions within them both. And by the time it was all over, it felt as though by that kiss alone they had solidified something, that they had made a promise to themselves and each other that this was the start of a bond, of a relationship that they’d cherish and protect, no matter what might come their way.

For as long and dreamlike as it all was, eventually, that kiss did eventually come to its natural end, though even as it did, they lingered close, their foreheads pressed lightly together as they shared a small, sweet laugh. However, for as tender as this moment was, it didn’t last long before it was inevitably interrupted by the flood of excitement that rushed out to meet them.

“Mazel tov to the happy, *brand new* couple!” Mabel cheered, catching the pair off guard as she tossed a handful of rice over them from behind. Steven stood alongside her, brightly applauding while Connie hurried over to try to keep them from ruining the moment any more than they already
“M-Mabel! Steven!” Dipper exclaimed as him and Pacifica pulled away, flustered. “What are you guys—”

“Oh, no need to thank us, bro-bro,” Mabel grinned proudly. “We were more than happy to make a match out of a couple as cute as you two, right, Steven?”

“Right!” the young Gem happily agreed. “Though… to be honest, I think we owe a lot of our success here to Garnet.”

“Well, my experience in the field of romance has never steered me wrong before,” the Gem leader remarked, grinning as she stepped up to the group.

“Hey! Don’t forget about me!” Stan cut in brashly. “I helped set all this up too! Speaking of which…” The conman threw on an amicable, somewhat patronizing smile as he looked to Pacifica. “Welcome to the family, kid. Does folks on your side of the tracks still do that whole dowry thing? And if so, how much are your parents willing to fork out for yours? Just asking for the sake of reference.”

“Uh…” Pacifica trailed off, exchanging a bewildered glance with Dipper over such an odd question.

“Ugh, come on, you guys…” he groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose before turning to his new girlfriend with an apologetic smile. “S-sorry. I hope you don’t mind dealing with… them.” He nodded to the group surrounding them, composed of Steven, Mabel, and even Garnet’s wide, elated smiles and Stan’s much more greedy one.

Even so, the heiress let out a bright, genuinely amused chuckle at their antics, one that did more than enough to set Dipper at ease that she’d find a way to fit in among his occasionally overbearing friends and family just fine. “I think I’ll get used to it,” she grinned, accepting his hand as he helped her up to stand. “After all, I’d much rather deal with them than my family.”

“Well then, like Grunkle Stan said, welcome to ours!” Mabel quipped, throwing an arm around both Dipper and Pacifica’s shoulders as she sandwiched herself between them. “Oh my gosh, Pacifica! Does this technically make us sisters now?!”

“Um… I’m pretty sure that’s now how any of this works,” Pacifica noted sardonically.

“Alright, everyone, it’s getting pretty late out here,” Garnet spoke up, nodding over to the jars of iridescents that were starting to dim as they fell asleep for the night. “Let’s head back to the shack; I’ll make everyone some hot chocolate.”

“Ooo yeah!” Steven exclaimed excitedly, readily following after the Gem leader as she began to head back. “And we can put on a movie too!”

“Something romantic for you two lovebirds to cuddle up to,” Mabel added, offering Dipper and Pacifica a sly wink.

Even though Dipper let out an exasperated sigh at this, Pacifica merely chuckled once more, a laugh that Dipper himself couldn’t help but join in after a moment or two. As the others all went on ahead, the newly-formed couple trailed at the back of the group, their hands inconspicuously intertwining as they set out. As their fingers laced themselves together, they shared a soft smile, realizing just how well their hands fit together, how well they fit together. It was strange, perhaps even downright bizarre just how two people, so completely different yet also so very much the
same, hand ended up together, but through fate or luck or something else entirely, they had. And as they strolled through the darkness into their fledgling future together, at long last, neither of them had any doubts left at all. Their feelings for each other were real, rich, and radiant, and there was no question in either of their hearts or minds, that together was exactly where they needed to be.

“Now that you know, your hearts can grow…”

“Together…”

“All at once…”
Chapter 74: Mr. Greg

Chapter Summary

In which the gang takes a trip, Pearl is sad and gay, Stan and Ford are way too fucking stubborn, and everyone is singing.

Chapter Notes

Merry Early Christmas everyone! Here's my gift to you, a brand new chapter of UF! Hope you like it! (Keyword is EMERALD CITY)

"From the moment the meat hits the flame, my stomach is growling without any shame!"

"And I know in my gut, it's been worth the $5.95!"

"Would you like a burger? From Pepe's Burgers?"

As the catchy, all too familiar jingle brought the commercial to an end, the TV buzzed to static once again, though that static was soon filled in by the flood of reactions to the ad itself.

"Whoa! Your song is on TV!" Steven exclaimed, looking to his father absolutely starstruck as he sat alongside the twins.

"Yeah, but is it just me or was there something sorta… different about it this time around?" Mabel wondered, curious.

"The words, Mabel, it was the words," Dipper pointed out, rather deadpan.

"Nah, that wasn't it."

"Well, I'll hand it to ya, Greg," Stan remarked, arms crossed as he leaned against the side of the van. "Looks like one of your songs finally accomplished something after all these years: it made me want a burger!"

The conman let out a joking laugh at this, one that Greg joined in on, just a bit more good-naturedly. "Ah, well, that wasn't the only thing it accomplished. You guys remember my old manager, Marty, right? Well, turns out he sold my song as a burger jingle. He sent me a letter explaining the whole thing, and included in that letter was this." The former rock star pulled a small slip of paper out his pocket, presenting it to the others. At first, none of them were really sure
what it was until Stan happened to be the first to notice the one, followed by a very lengthy string of zeros, written on it. Topped off by a dollar sign, of all things.

"No," the conman gasped, eyes wide as he took the check to look over it himself. "No way… G-Greg, i-is… is this real?"

"Sure is," Greg nodded, grinning. "I honestly didn't believe it myself at first but it's true. Guess I'm filthy stinkin' rich now! Ten million big ones for something I wrote years ago! Crazy how things work out, huh? And-uh, Mr. Pines? Are you ok?"

Everyone turned to look at Stan, who was obviously beside himself with glee based on the massive grin on his face as he held onto Greg's check as if it were the most precious thing in the world. And, based on how much money it actually was worth, it might as well have been. "Greg," he began, his tone uncharacteristically pleasant and saccharine. "Have I ever told you that you were the best employee I've ever had?"

"Uh… no?" Greg raised a confused eyebrow. "But… thanks?"

"But Grunkle Stan, what about Soos and Wendy?" Mabel asked.

"This isn't about them, pumpkin, it's about Greg and his millions-o-of great qualities, that is!" Stan quickly saved himself with a tight laugh as he waved the check around. "L-like his generosity for instance! Always so giving and selfless. In fact, I'm sure that if you found a worthwhile charity or, oh, I dunno, former boss of yours to donate a few hundred or thousand or hundred thousand to, then you wouldn't hesitate, right?"

"Gee, Mr. Pines," Greg smirked knowingly as he finally took his check back from the conman. "You wouldn't happen to have anyone in mind, would you?"

"Well…" Stan began quite leadingly.

"Oh please, Stan, can't you think about anything other than money for five minutes?" Pearl finally spoke up, sending the conman a critical glance.

"Uh, I would, Pearl, if there was anything else worth thinkin' about," Stan shot back with a smug grin.

Pearl simply ignored him, rolling her eyes as she took another look at the burger commercial playing out on the TV. "I still don't understand…" she said, confused. "What exactly is this?"

"You know when Rose came to my concert?" Greg began with a wide grin. "The night we met? I was playing this song!"

"...This is what did it?" Pearl asked, baffled. "Burgers?"

"It wasn't about burgers back then," Greg clarified. "But she probably would have liked this too, right?"

"...She would have loved it…" the white Gem sighed, defeated as she turned to walk to the far side of the van.

Likewise, Greg also let out something of a dejected sigh as he turned the TV off, though none of the others really seemed to notice. "So what are you going to do with all that money, Mr. Universe?" Dipper asked, curious.
"Oh! I know!" Mabel enthusiastically raised her hand. "You could buy a swimming pool and then buy another swimming pool to put inside it and fill that swimming pool with jelly beans! Or you could buy a pet monkey and a fancy tuxedo for him to wear! Or-or… a rocket ship piloted by your pet monkey, with a jelly bean filled swimming pool inside another swimming pool to take you to your own personal planet!"

"Geez, Mabel, reign it back a bit, will ya?" Stan remarked, crossing his arms. "Besides, I thought we already established that Greg was gonna donate most of that money to me-I mean, a charitable cause. Yeah, there we go."

"Heh, well, you guys have some pretty… interesting ideas there," Greg said with a small smile. "But to be honest… I'm not really sure what I'm gonna do with the money."

Despite the bewildered looks the others gave him at this admission, nonetheless the former rock star took a seat in the back of his van, pulling out his guitar to strum a simple, relaxing tune. One that he was more than happy to sing along with.

"Bright sunny day, don't cost nothin'. Light summer breeze, don't cost nothin'. What do I do with all this money? When the only thing I want is you?" he smiled to his son in particular, who instantly perked up to hear one of his father's classic, off the cuff songs.

"Palling around, don't cost nothin'. Singing a song, don't cost nothin'. How do I spend all this money? I'd rather just spend time with you."

"You could buy a house," Steven piped up, offering suggestions through song himself. "And a car."

"I guess that I can, but I've already got a van," Greg noted, nodding back to said van, a loyal, longtime vehicle he had no interest in replacing any time soon. "I could put you through college."

"But I'm with the Gems all the time," the young Gem pointed out with a shrug.

"...Or I could buy you all the finest courses online."

"What if we took a trip?" Steven ventured after a moment or two of thought.

"Do you think?" the former rock star inquired, intrigued by this suggestion.

The young Gem nodded. "We could go somewhere new! We could take a vacation, and you guys could come too!" he finished, smiling brightly to Stan and the twins as they listened in.

"Woo! Yeah! Vacation!" Mabel cheered, immediately excited by the prospect. "I've been dying to get away and see somewhere new!"

"Mabel, we've just spent the past several weeks on end away at the barn," Dipper pointed out, reigning his sister's zeal in with a small laugh.

"Yeah, but we were there to work," Mabel countered. "This trip is gonna be for fun! Right, Grunkle Stan?"

"Hey, if Greg's payin', I'm all for it," Stan remarked. "What do ya say, Greg? Tropical cruise to the Bahamas? Or are you more of a luxury beach house in the Keys sorta guy?"

"Hm..." Greg took a moment to think over these vacation ideas, before he came up with a suggestion all his own. "I know a place that's always exciting! The shows and the sights and the lights that are blinding!" the former rock star's tempo picked up from his previous song as he
rummaged through the back of his van for a postcard featuring his chosen destination. "Emerald City! I'm talkin' Emerald City!"

The kids exchanged an excited glance at this, immediately taken by the idea of venturing out to the famously beautiful northern city. Still, Greg sold the prospect of the trip to them even more as he jumped out of the back of the van, his upbeat tune continuing all the while. "The streets and the sounds and the buildings heightening! A place that's so bright it's like clear, white lightning! Emerald City! Let's go to Emerald City!"

This momentum continued as Greg and Steven began leading the way up to the temple so the young Gem could start packing for the trip. The twins joined in on this energy as they followed, with Mabel dragging a much more begrudging Stan along with them.

"I know a place that's always exciting," Greg began a refrain of his first verse as the group burst into the house, startling Pearl in the process as she stood near the kitchen. "The shows and the sights and the lights that are blinding!"

"We don't need money, but it could be funny," Steven harmonized under his father's melody, quickly throwing his things into his hot dog duffel bag.

"The streets and the sounds and the buildings heightening!"

"So let's go today-"

"A place that's so bright it's like clear, white lightning!"

"Just point me the way to-"

"Emerald City!" Steven and Greg finished together, with the young Gem bringing both Dipper and Mabel into this bold final lyric. Though perhaps not the final lyric as Steven tacked one more onto it at the last second. "And let's bring Pearl!"

"W-what?" Greg balked, caught off guard by the idea.

"Ugh, kid, what's wrong with you?" Stan scowled. "I thought the whole point of this trip was to skip town and have fun. And everybody knows Pearl doesn't know the meaning of the word fun."

"Hey! I do too know what 'fun' is!" Pearl protested, offended. "Why, just yesterday, I had an exceptional un time sorting and organizing every single pot, plate, and utensil in this kitchen. And if that's not fun, then I don't know what is."

"...Well then, I stand corrected," Stan said, absolutely deadpan.

"Aw, you should come with us to Emerald City, Pearl!" Mabel said, offering a bright smile to the white Gem. "I heard there's this magical wizard there, and to get there, you have to drive on this really pretty yellow brick road. Not sure how great that is for your tires, but still, it sounds really cool."

"That's a different Emerald City, Mabel," Dipper pointed out dryly.

"Wait… you mean there's more than one?!"

"Um… still, you gotta come with us, Pearl!" Steven made another attempt at convincing the white Gem. "You always work so hard, keeping the Earth safe, keeping the house clean; you deserve a vacation!"
"Er... I don't know, Steven..." Pearl frowned, clearly uncomfortably as she turned away slightly. "Past experiences have taught me that three is a crowd..."

The young Gem was rather confused by this, at least until his father interjected in an equally uncertain whisper. "Steven, me and Pearl haven't gotten along that well, since... uh, well, since I started dating your mother." Greg frowned, casting a brief, bittersweet glance back at the portrait of the aforementioned pink Gem hanging over the door. Almost as if she was still watching, even now that she was gone.

"Oh, come on," Steven pouted earnestly. "We're all one big family! So this will be a great family vacation! Featuring the Universes," he grinned as he wrapped an arm around his dad's shoulder before nodding over to the twins and Stan. "The Pines, uh... Pearl. And don't forget Mom!"

Greg and Pearl in particular flinched as Steven pulled his shirt up a bit to reveal his Gem. Or rather, what had once been Rose's Gem.

Pearl was still clearly hesitant, taking in a sharp hiss through her teeth as she exchanged a rather uneasy glance with the former rock star, neither of them really sure how to feel about this situation. Ultimately though, the white Gem folded upon taking another look at Steven's pleading expression, one that was accompanied by similar looks from both Mabel and Dipper alike. And under that sort of pressure, how could she even hope to resist? "Oh, alright..." she sighed begrudgingly. "I... I'll come..."

"Yes!" Steven and Mabel cheered in delighted unison, though as they did, Dipper happened to consider something neither of them had.

"Wait, so if this is a 'family' vacation," he began thoughtfully. "Then shouldn't Great Uncle Ford come with us too?"

"Oh yeah!" Mabel exclaimed. "It can't be a Universe/Pines family vacation without Grunkle Ford coming along! It just wouldn't be complete!"

"Uh, yeah, it would!" Stan interjected somewhat harshly. "Who says we need Ford to come with us? Heck, he'd be an even bigger killjoy than Pearl's gonna end up being on this trip."

"Stan!" Pearl huffed, annoyed, though the conman ignored her as he continued.


"But Grunkle Stan, this is a family trip," Mabel argued.

"And Great Uncle Ford is just as much a part of the family as any of us are," Dipper added much more firmly.

"Oh yeah," the conman scowled bitterly. "Well if he's really a 'part of this family' then why doesn't he ever *act* like it?"

Stan didn't give either of the younger twins a chance to respond as he gruffly turned on his heel and walked out of the house without another word. A somewhat awkward air filled the room at this, at least until Greg filled it with an apologetic frown. "Aw, sorry, kids. I guess it's just gonna be the six of us heading to Emerald City, huh?"

"Wrong," Steven spoke up, placing a reassuring hand on both of the rather dejected twins' shoulders. He offered them both a kind smile, one that was more than enough to tell them that he
was going to help them bring their entire family together on this trip, no matter what it took. "It's gonna be seven."

"No. Absolutely not."

Steven, Dipper, and Mabel barely managed to hold back a shared sigh of disappointment upon hearing Ford's outright rejection of their proposal, one that came the moment they so much as mentioned Stan would be coming along on the trip.

"But Grunkle Ford, Emerald City is gonna be great!" Mabel urged, stopping the author in his tracks as he moved about his study by grabbing onto the edge of his coat. "We'll have an adventure in self-discovery and melt a witch with a bucket of water and sing a whole bunch of songs! It's gonna be so much fun!"

"Again, Mabel, that's the wrong Emerald City you're talking about," Dipper corrected, though he interjected once more after a beat of thought. "Well, aside from the songs part, I guess. This is a musical after all."

"Well then, you children are more than welcome to go and have a marvelous time," Ford remarked dismissively as he reclaimed the edge of his coat. "But I won't be joining you. I'm afraid I have far too much to catch up on here and besides, I have no interest whatsoever in going anywhere with-"

The author stopped short, sparing a glance down at the trio of kids before he decided to cap his statement off on a seemingly different statement altogether. "I-I… I'd simply rather not go. I'm sorry."

While the twins exchanged a dejected glance at this, Steven wasn't about to give up so easily. "But Mr. Ford…" the young Gem began leadingly, grinning to the twins beside him to tip them off to his plan. His musical plan. "Wouldn't you like-a chance to escape and just break from that boring old routine?" Steven began, taking on a bright, optimistic melody, one that Mabel and Dipper were both quick to catch onto with their own additions.

"Wouldn't you like-a chance to go where you know there are things you've never seen?" Mabel sang brightly, offering the author a convincing grin.

"Wouldn't you like-to explore so much more than you ever have before?" Dipper added trying his best to match Steven and Mabel's enthusiasm.

"Cause wouldn't you like-a chance to get away?!" all three kids harmonized, capping their first verse off well and aptly confusing Ford in the process.

"Why are you three singing?" the author asked, bewildered.

"Cause like Dipper said, it's a musical!" Steven grinned, though even so, Ford was still absolutely lost.

"...What?"

"Wouldn't you like-to try something new with a few of your favorite friends?" Mabel kicked off the next verse, slipping to the still-confounded author's side as Dipper did the same.

"Wouldn't you like-to be free, to go out and about to find out what's waiting 'round the bend?" he turned in with a hopeful shrug as Steven came in to finish off another verse.

"Wouldn't you like-to go searching and find everything you're looking for?"
"Cause wouldn't you like a chance to get away?!
the trio finished off in unison once more, briefly
giving Ford another short-lived attempt at cutting through the song once again.

"Now, children, I-

"Wouldn't you like-" Mabel interrupted, as vibrantly as ever. "An adventure with friends where
excitement never ends?"

"Wouldn't you like-" Steven sang with a warm, brimming grin. "To go see what the world's all
about, see what's flashy and brand new?"

"Wouldn't you like-" Dipper chimed in, joining Steven and Mabel as they came together for the
song's grand finale. "To check out what you've missed while you gone for so long?"

"Cause wouldn't you like-" all three of the kids sang before splitting off to build up towards the
end.

"Wouldn't you like-"

"Wouldn't you like-"

"Wouldn't you like...."

"A chance to get away!?" they all finished, presenting their case to the author with matching,
earnest, almost pleading smiles. Smiles that even Ford was powerless to say no to.

So instead, he let out a long sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose before he finally gave in. "Fine.
I… suppose I can spare a night away from my research." The author cracked a small, somewhat
wry smile as Steven, Dipper, and Mabel all let out a shared, excited gasp. "But only because you
kids asked in such a… unique way."

"Well, I've learned from experience that when in doubt, nothing works better than a song," Steven
shrugged with a small laugh, one that Dipper and Mabel readily joined in on before they sang one
final, triumphant refrain of their successful song.

"Now it's time to take that chance and get away!"

It was quite a lengthy drive in Greg's relatively packed van to get all the way up to Emerald City,
though as the kids spotted the sparkling metropolis on the horizon, it soon became apparent that it
was worth the trip. Emerald City certainly lived up to its glamorous reputation, with towering
skyscrapers glittering against the deep night sky, casting an almost ethereal reflection upon the vast
lakes and rivers and bays that surrounded it. These clean-cut, futuristic buildings became even
more impressive up close as the van winded through its narrow, maze-like streets, allowing
everyone a grand tour of the town, at least until they pulled up to their destination.

According to a brief internet search, Le Hotel was the fanciest, ritziest hotel Emerald City had to
offer. And indeed, it fit the bill as it towered high as one of the city's tallest buildings, elegant and
refined from the outside in as its grand lobby carried the same radiant theme. The group entered
with various levels of amazement towards this sophisticated atmosphere, even if they did look quite
a bit out of place in that atmosphere given their relatively normal attire and attitude. Even as Greg
stepped up to the check-in counter, the clerk simply looked over him with a brief, haughty scoff.
His manner hardly changed as the former rock star confidently presented him with his new
business card, which colorfully read "Greg Universe: Bazillionaire". However, it was only as
Steven peered over the edge of the counter and plopped down one of the many large stacks of cash
his father had brought along that the mood of the entire hotel seemed to change. Staff passing by stopped dead in their tracks, the clerk eyed the money being presented to him with obvious shock, and all the while Greg stood by, grinning to the others about the upscale experience they were about to receive.

An experience that of course, kicked off with a song.

"Hey, shake a leg!" the clerk called the rest of the staff, who chimed in just as enthusiastically.

"Hey, shake a leg!"

"It's Mr. Greg!"

"It's Mr. Greg!"

"And he's here to spend his dough all over town!"

At this, the staff mobilized efficiently, quite literally sweeping the Universe, Pines, and Pearl up to carry them off to the hotel's fine, five star restaurant. Without any hesitation, they sat them all down at the finest table in the center of the banquet hall, serving up the finest (most expensive) meal they had to offer.

"He's got the bucks!" the staff sang once again as Greg blithely answered them.

"I've got the bucks!"

"It's all deluxe."

"It's all deluxe!" Greg agreed, much to the excitement of not just the kids, but Stan in particular as he greedily began to tear into the massive, steaming steak placed in front of him. "When you're dining out with me, it's the finest steak and brie." The former rock star was clearly caught up in the somewhat manic, celebratory mood as he hopped up onto the table, catching the others off guard while he began to dance. "And if I break a table, it ain't no-whoa!" Inevitably, Greg did break the table, splitting it clean in half as he fell and knocked nearly all of the food off of it, save for Stan's steak, which the conman had wisely managed to save just in the nick of time. An awkward beat of silence passed at this as the surrounding staff looked to Greg expectantly, but all the same, the former rock star simply laughed his faux pas off as he pulled yet another large bill out of his pocket and handed it to the clerk. "Just bill it to my bank."

"A hundred bucks?!" the clerk exclaimed, amazed. "Gee, thanks!"

Before anyone had a chance to finish up their meals, the staff members led them off again, this time out of the restaurant and towards the elevator, which carried them all the way up to the building's hundredth floor. Its penthouse suite.

Said suite certainly rivaled the decadence and splendor of anything any of them had seen thus far. It was a massive complex, with several rooms, enough for everyone, all connected to the grand main room, which was completed by its very own full-sized swimming pool and slide. However, the lavish accommodations weren't the only surprise the hotel staff had in store. For after a quick round of measurements, they had managed to outfit everyone, kids and adults alike, in matching fine tuxedos and top hats, garbing them all in a look befitting the wealth they were all enjoying.

As elegantly clad as they now were, Greg and the kids alike didn't waste any time in indulging in all the penthouse had to offer, namely, its massive pool. Even despite the expensive, top line suits and ties, they all jumped right in, Greg taking the slide as Steven and Mabel cannonballed into the
deep end without any second thoughts. Dipper did hesitate for just a moment, that is, until the pair ultimately hopped up out of the water and pulled him right in along with them.

Yet, despite the fun the kids and the former rock star were all clearly having as they quite literally dived right into their vacation, not everyone was joining in. While Stan clearly appreciated his new upscale suit, Ford wasn't as taken with his, particularly the top hat and bow tie and the memories he couldn't help but associate with them.

"Well, these won't be missed," the author frowned, handing both off to the nearest staff member. His brother, on the other hand, gladly touched up his own with a wide, cocky grin, clearly enjoying what was perhaps his first real taste of a life of luxury.

"I could get used to this!" the conman proclaimed, barely even noticing Ford's annoyed scowl at all.

"Of course, you'd find this exciting," he remarked, arms crossed as he glared away.

"Better than your boring old writing," Stan jabbed back, reclaiming the author's top hat and pulling it down over his eyes.

"Would you grow up!?" Ford huffed, frustrated as he tossed the hat aside again.

"You first!" Stan taunted, helping himself to the penthouse's wetbar.

"Is it just me or are they getting worse?" Dipper asked, noticing this exchange from the pool as he exchanged an apprehensive glance with Mabel. Likewise, Steven spotted the obvious tension between the brothers, though that wasn't all he saw as he happened to spot Pearl, lingering quietly near the far side of the pool. Even compared to Stan and Ford, she hadn't engaged in the festivities whatsoever, instead opting to observe alone from the sidelines, seemingly unamused. That is, until Greg and Steven decided to get involved.

While Pearl didn't often change her attire, she was quite surprised to see how nicely her own suit looked on her as the kids came together to convince her to try it on at least. And from the moment she did, she couldn't help but finally join in on the lighthearted spirit of the evening. "I must admit-" she began with a growing smile.

"You must admit," Greg and Steven echoed happily as they posed alongside her.

"It's a perfect fit!" the white Gem grinned, adjusting her top hat gracefully.

"You look great in it!"

"And those fountains I found wasteful," she nodded over to one of the several elegant fountains lining the penthouse. "Are actually quite tasteful! This city's got its charm, unlike that termite-ridden barn. And any time with Steven makes for a delightful evenin'!" She laughed, falling in step alongside the young Gem for a spirited round of tap-dancing.

"You're having fun!" Greg exclaimed, pleasantly surprised.

"More or less," Pearl shrugged, grinning. However, that grin quickly fell the moment the former rock star grabbed her hand to pull her into another dance.

"So dance with me, just say-"

"NO!"
Pearl's stark shout echoed through the lofty halls of the penthouse suite, bringing both the song and the cheery mood to an abrupt end. An air of startled, awkward silence filled in for both instead, one that seemed to grow even more awkward and heavy as all eyes turned to the crestfallen white Gem herself. Pearl flinched, unsure of what to say at first, especially as she met Greg's sad, yet earnest expression. "I-I... I mean..." Ultimately, however, she let out a bitter sigh, turning away from the entire group as she sulked off to some other part of the penthouse just to get away from it all. "Maybe later..."

"Boo!" one of the hotel employees called after her, disappointed. "You ruined the song!"

"Er, uh... sorry, guys," Greg frowned, dispensing a handful of cash out to the staff to compensate them as they took their leave. "Thanks for singing with us."

"W-well, I guess our super fun city vacation could be getting off to a bit of a better start than this, huh?" Mabel asked with a fretful frown.

"Yeah..." Steven sighed, looking off in the direction Pearl had retreated to. "It really could..."

"Aw, don't worry about it, kiddo," Greg reassured his son, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder, all while hiding his own lingering regret well. "It's always been this way..."

"Hm... perhaps I should go talk to talk to her, Greg," Ford volunteered thoughtfully. "After all, I think it's safe to say I have just as much experience as you do when it comes to Pearl and this... particular problem..."

The former rock star offered the author a grateful smile at this, catching his drift all too well. "Thanks, Mr. Ford."

"Yeah, go on, Ford, while the rest of us have fun, you and Pearl can have your sad little nerd party of two," Stan remarked with an obviously teasing smirk. "See, kids? I told ya both of them would end up being nothing but a bunch of killjoys on this trip."

"Grunkle Stan-" Dipper began, shaking his head disapprovingly over such a tactless remark. However, Ford was more than ready to intervene on his own behalf instead. "Oh, so now I'm a killjoy?" the author countered, turning back to face his brother. "Well, forgive me that I have no interest in losing my mind over a bunch of big-city frivolity."

"Tch, obviously," Stan remarked, rolling his eyes. "So if you aren't here for any of that, why'd you even come in the first place? 'Cause as far as I can tell, if ya ain't here to have a good time, then you might as well not even be here in the first place."

For a moment, Ford simply sent the conman a bitter scowl at this, much to the worry of the younger pair of twins as they watched this icy exchange unfold. However, what none of them, not even Stan himself, could have expected was what the author did next. He reached out, his expression completely unreadable as he placed a hand on his brother's shoulder... and abruptly shoved him right into the swimming pool behind him.

Ford was the first, and for a long time, only one of the group to break out into a heavy burst of laughter as Stan splashed into the deep end before floundering back up to the surface, completely flustered. "Well, I don't know about the rest of you," the author chuckled, beside himself with amusement, especially as he caught sight of the conman's dumbfounded face. "But I'm certainly having a great time now!"

At this, Dipper and Mabel finally let out a small, shared laugh themselves, one that Greg and
Steven slowly joined in on themselves. With the tension in the air finally cleared, Stan couldn't help but crack a small, subtle smirk himself as he pulled himself out of the pull and wrung his hat out in the process. "Alright, fine," he scoffed playfully. "Consider this payback for that time when we were in 6th grade and I pushed ya off the diving board at the public pool."

"Please, Stanley, I'd hardly consider this payback," Ford remarked with a flippant wave of his hand, even though he was still chuckling somewhat. "Especially since you did that right in front of Cathy Crenshaw."

"Aw, c'mon, sixer, you always knew a square like you would have never been able to land a catch like 'Cold-Stone Crenshaw'," Stan jabbed, elbowing his brother wryly.

"True, though at the very least I never struck out with her like you did with Carla McCorkle," Ford retorted just as confidently.

"Hey! I never 'struck out' with Carla!" the conman protested. "It was that stupid hippie and his stupid bellbottom jeans that stole her away from me! I can still remember the day they rocketed out of the Juke Joint without me and she left me behind…"

"Believe me, so can I, seeing as how you wouldn't stop crying about it for at least a week after," Ford said with a knowing smirk. "Who was the 'sad nerd' back then, Stanley?"

"Pfft, you, sixer, 'specially after your dumb 'ol bust of-what was that guy's name again? Tulip? Toyla?"

"Tesla," Ford corrected pointedly.

"Sure, whatever, 'Tesla', fell off the shelf and broke that one night."

"Well, of course I was upset about that, Stanley, it was a collectible!"

"Oh yeah? Well so was Carla McCorkle!"

A beat of silence passed between the brothers at such a bizarre remark, but ultimately, the humor of just how strange it was wasn't lost on either one of them. At the exact same moment, they both burst until yet another round of bombastic laughter, one that was completely warm and genuine, much to the delight of the younger twins observing. As they shared a delighted grin with Steven, the young Gem offered them a supportive thumbs up before gently shoving his father away to offer the family some much-needed privacy.

"Wow! Aren't we all having such a fun time!?" Mabel chimed in with a bright, leading smile. "It's nights like tonight that just make you wanna forget all of the bad stuff back in the past and look ahead to a bright and happy future, don't you guys agree?"

"Try not to be too on the nose there, Mabel…" Dipper warned in a worried whisper. And yet, neither Stan and Ford's bright mood was dampened by this as they instead offered each other a relenting, yet lighthearted grin instead.

"You know… perhaps it does…" Ford said with a humbling sigh, noting his brother's growing relief and excitement. "After all, what else are vacations like this for than for… getting away from it all?"

 Needless to say a line like this was more than enough to prompt another song, one that, much to Dipper and Mabel's continually elated surprise at this situation as a whole, Stan ended up starting off. "We came all this way to give us a fresh start," he began on a tune that was fittingly airy and
"And now I'm wondering how we even fell apart?"

"You know it's so strange, I can't help but agree," Ford shrugged incredulously. "Maybe it's this city air, or maybe it's just me."

"We've been fallin' out for way too long," Stan sang, picking up a hint of an upbeat swing. "So let's forget who's right."

"And forget who's wrong."

"Ok!" Dipper and Mabel chimed in brightly, so, so happy to see their uncles finally begin to repair all that had been broken between them so long ago.

"And here I thought making amends would be our last resort," Ford added, this time gladly accepting the reclaimed tophat his brother was holding out to him.

"But life's too short!" they sang together, back to back as they shared a cordial grin.

"To always feel shut out, forgotten by the brother I used to know," Stan's smile dimmed only somewhat at this, remembering those nearly 40 years of bitter separation, as well as his own countless mistakes along the way that had brought that separation about to begin with.

"Life's too short!"

"To never let the pain and regrets that defined both our pasts just go," Ford did his best to hold back a sigh here, knowing that those regrets were far too many to name. And as heavy of a weight as they were, maybe it was indeed finally time to just let them go altogether.

"Whoaohoh!"

"I never understood," the brothers sang in harmony, both in tune and in spirit as they both came to meet each other halfway for the first time in a very long time. "But now I do! Life's too short to miss out on a brother like you!"

The duet came to its apparent close with another strong laugh between the brothers, one that more or less solidified the newly-revived warm feelings between them. And as far as both Dipper and Mabel were concerned, considering the tense bitterness that they had always seen between their uncles before, this was more than a welcome change.

"So are things finally, you know, cool between you guys now?" Dipper asked, aptly hopeful.

"Well..."

"You bet they are, kid," Stan interrupted, catching Ford off guard by tossing an arm over his shoulder. "Well, at least they will be once this guy gives me the 'thank you' he's owed me ever since he got back."

"Thank you?" Ford asked, genuinely confused. "For what?"

"Uh, for busting my butt for the past 30 years so I could bring you back from wherever you were, duh," Stan remarked as though it was obvious. "Geez, and I thought you were supposed to be the smart one, sixer."

However, instead of providing the thanks the conman was expecting, the author instead looked to him incredulously, almost as if he was baffled that he'd even bothered to ask for it in the first place.
Which, by most accounts, he very much was. "Thank you?" he asked, scoffing right off the bat. "Thank you? Why would I thank you when you were the one who got me sucked into the portal in the first place?"

"Ugh, that was 30 years ago, Ford!" Stan groaned, annoyed. "You just said so yourself, it's time to finally let that go."

"How can I when you essentially ruined my life?!"

"You ruined your own life!"

This dig clearly struck an all-too painful chord with both of the older twins, calling back far to many agonizing memories from 30 years past to keep any of them straight. At the same time, their niblings exchanged a distraught, desperate glance, realizing that just as quickly as things had started to come together between their uncles, in much of the very same way, they were rapidly starting to fall apart.

"So we make up and hug? That's how your story ends?" Ford began again, his tune much more sharp and harsh than it had been before.

"Uh, yeah, it'll be just like it was," Stan countered, still somewhat hopeful that things could turn themselves around. Even though he knew the line clearly had already been crossed. "Ya know, when we were best friends?"

"So that's your big plan? To force me back in a cage?" the author accused, glaring his brother down coldly.

"Whoa, let's not freak out!" Stan countered, trying his best to ease the growing tension. "Let's get back on the same page-

"Gee, thanks for telling me that to my face!" Ford's glare turned to a false, sardonic grin as he made an attempt at shoving Stan away. "And showing off your mastery of tact and grace!"

"No way..." the younger twins sighed, realizing just how south things really were going.

"Nevermind how you spilled my secrets, gave a full report!"

"Wait-" Stan attempted to interject, but Ford clearly was having none of it.

"Cause life's too short!"

"There it is! The door you love to slam in my face!" Stan immediately shot back, his tone every bit as fierce as the author's as he spun back around to face him. "You did well there for a spell but now we're back in the same place. Tell me off if you want, but I'm the only one who wasted 30 long years on trying to save you!"

"You can waste whatever you want 'cause I don't care!" Ford huffed crossly, throwing his hands up at his equally disgruntled brother. "You're a fool who opened the portal!"

"That is SO unfair!"

"I swear!" both brothers sang in a harsh, hardened lack of harmony. "I'm through with taking your unshaking brotherly support!"

"Support!"
"Support!"

"Ha! 'Cause life's too short!"

"To let you get off it all so scott free," Stan scowled, his hands in tight, practically shaking fists at his sides. "Without thinking about thanking me!"

"Life's too short!"

"To listen to a reckless fool!" Ford argued hotly, borderline hatefully even. "Who only ever sees what he wants to see!"

"You don't know-

"You have no idea-

"What I've been through! Because of you!" they both sang together, hostile and explosive and completely unaware of their niblings' immense dread as they helplessly watched all this unfold.

"Life's too short to waste another minute!"

"Life's too short to even have you in it!"

"Life's too short!" They finished fiercely, abruptly turning on their heels before they both walked away in opposite directions, their stance on each other very clear. And as they parted ways, they left the younger pair of twins behind, awash in the echo of their angry, bitter refrain.

"W-well that… didn't go great…" Mabel frowned, disappointed. "Heck, so far almost none of this vacation has… specially not with those two… What are we supposed to do, Dipper?"

Dipper didn't answer right away, instead catching the briefest of glances between Stan and Ford right before they both slipped into their own respective rooms on the opposite side of the penthouse for the night. In the end though, he sighed dejectedly, not even sharing any of the same sparse shreds of hope Mabel was still clinging onto. "I don't know, Mabel…" he admitted quietly before he turned to walk away himself. "I don't know…"

And with that, the younger twins parted ways, if not in words than in sentiment, repeating the very same empty, hopeless verse their uncles had before them.

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Despite the upbeat excitement that had been going around as the group pulled into Emerald City earlier that evening, those celebratory feelings were in short supply by the time they all ended up turning in for bed. With the former levity drained from the penthouse in its entirety, its guests soon slipped into slumber instead, with just about everyone taking a separate room in the sizable suite, save for Greg and Steven who ended up bunking together. And it was as they lay on the luxurious king-sized bed, quietly snoozing away, that Pearl quietly entered.

After that initial song, the white Gem had made herself rather scarce, not really wanting to face anyone, the former rock star in particular. However, as she softly stepped into the room to stand alongside the bed, she couldn't help but crack a small, somewhat bittersweet smile, especially as she spotted the bouquet of roses resting on the nightstand beside it. Pearl let out an almost inaudible sigh as she plucked one of the flowers, holding onto it gently as she let her many mingled thoughts and feelings out in a soft, solemn tune.

"I was fine with the men, who would come into her life now and again." Men such as Ford and so
many others even before him, all of whom had captivated Rose in some sort of way, be it romantic or otherwise. But all of them had come, in and out of her life in a constant flux all the same, always dwarfed by just how broad and brightly the pink Gem had always shined. "I was fine, 'cause I knew that they didn't really matter... until you..."

The white Gem's smile finally fell as she looked back to Greg, unknowingly slumbering before her. Still clinging onto her rose, she slipped her top hat back on and stepped out onto the nearby balcony, all the while unaware that she had awakened a certain young Gem in the process.

"I was fine when you came and we fought like it was all some silly game." It really had seemed so silly back then, so innocent, just like so many of the others had been. Just another human who would happen to catch Rose's fancy for a while before ultimately being left behind. Another human who would never be able to stay by her side for as long as Pearl herself had. "Over her, who she'd choose. After all those years, I never thought I'd lose..."

"It's over, isn't it? Isn't it? Isn't it over?" she sang sadly, mournfully almost as the dull lights of the sparkling city seemed to float and drift around her. "It's over, isn't it? Isn't it? Isn't it over?"

"You won, and she chose you," she admitted, knowing it was the truth. But even if it was the truth and it had been the truth for several years now, that never made facing it any easier. "And she loved you and she's gone... It's over, isn't it, why can't I move on?"

At this, Pearl performed an elegant leap onto the balcony's narrow edge, balancing skillfully between it and the city streets far, far below her. All the same, she danced deftly on that fine line, all the while reveling in both her memories and the grief that came along with them. "War, and glory, reinvention." She smiled discreetly down to the rose still in her hand, knowing just how much 'reinventing' both of them had done in their hidden, yet shared past. "Fusion, freedom, her attention." All things that she adored, that she only ever got a glimpse of, that they only ever had won because of each other. "Out in daylight, my potential, bold, precise, experimental." As she swung her rose out like a blade, once again she was reminded of just how different she had become, just how much she had broken away from everything she had ever been made to do. Then again, she supposed Rose had broken away from all she had once been before too. They both had changed, and the best part of it all? They had changed together.

But that was then. And this was now. And now... Rose was gone.

"Who am I now in this world without her?" Pearl lamented as she lay against the railing, her gaze cast up to the sky as she felt that all too familiar pain ring through her once more. A pain that she never seemed to be able to shake away, no matter how hard she tried. "Petty and dull with the nerve to doubt her." To doubt her decisions, her choices, be they good or bad. To fail to understand what she had done, what she had sacrificed even now, even still, years after the fact when she should have known, she should have understood. But... she didn't. And sometimes, she wondered if she ever really would.

"What does it matter? It's already done!" And it was. Done, finished, over. And yet... in so many ways... it wasn't. At least not to her. "Now I've got to be there for her son!"

Speaking of said son, Pearl didn't even notice as Steven quietly slipped out of bed in the room behind her, listening in on her mournful melody with apt sympathy. All the same, the white Gem slipped back onto the balcony with resignation, looking back to the city as she tried, so hard, to make it past this. To finally move on and just let it go. The only problem was, how could she let go of something as precious as the love she felt for Rose? The love she still felt for her, even now that she wasn't there?
"It's over, isn't it? Isn't it? Isn't it over?" She gripped the railing tightly, shaking her head at her own stubborn foolishness. While she didn't technically have a heart, she knew that if she did, it would be aching beyond measure. And it likely would have for quite some time now. "It's over isn't it? Isn't it? Isn't it over?!"

"You won, and she chose you, and she loved you and she's GONE!" On this, she tossed the rose, hoping to release it and everything it represented. And yet, try as she might, those feelings, bitter, painful, and agonizing as they were, still remained, just as they always had. Just as they very well always would.

"It's over, isn't it? Why can't I move on?" She wondered softly, a stray tear finally streaming down her cheek.

"It's over, isn't it? Why can't I move on?"

Slowly, Pearl turned away from the balcony and back toward the bedroom, only to find that her song had an audience. Steven sat on the near edge of the bed, looking to the white Gem with a sad, sympathetic frown. However, the one Pearl was immediately more concerned and alarmed by was Greg, sitting on the far side of the bed, his back turned away from her and his expression unknown.

"G-Greg!" the white Gem exclaimed, gripping the edges of her top hat tightly. "You were… awake?"

"Nothing's gonna fix this…" Greg sighed tiredly, standing as he threw a bathrobe on over his suit. "Is it?"

Pearl faltered, unsure of how to answer this question, especially as the former rock star began to sulk out of the room. "Greg!"

"I'm sorry you had to be around me…" Greg muttered dismally as he walked out, despite both Pearl and Steven's protests.

"Dad!" the young Gem called after him worriedly, though his attention was soon turned back over to Pearl as she let out a small, guilty sigh behind him.

"I shouldn't have come along…" she said, now more forlorn than ever before, this time entirely thanks to her own doing.

"No," Steven said, his devout, serious tone catching the white Gem off guard. "This is exactly why we brought you."

Startled and confused, Pearl looked to the young Gem, bewildered, but all the same, she followed his lead as he began heading off in the same direction his father had gone. Though as they passed through the penthouse's den, they soon discovered that they weren't the only ones awake at such a late hour of the night.

"Dipper? Mabel?" Pearl frowned, noticing the pair first as they listlessly sat together on the couch. "Why are you kids up so late?"

"Why do you think?" Dipper asked, clearly exhausted as he broadly nodded over to the other side of the penthouse. Even from the den, the sound of Stan and Ford's noisy bickering could be heard, something that had been a constant for at least the past hour or so now. A constant that had, in the process, was robbing the younger pair of twins of sleep all the while.

"Admit it, Stanley! All you've ever done is hold me back!" Ford shouted furiously from somewhere
down the hall.

"Oh yeah?" Stan's challenge echoed just as loudly through the penthouse. "Well at least I've done way more for you than your old pal Rose ever did!"

"Don't you dare bring Rose into this!"

"Oh my..." Pearl muttered to herself, shaking her head. "It seems I'm not the only one having a hard time moving on..."

"They're still fighting," Mabel groaned into one of the couch's plush pillows. "Which is crazy cause it actually seemed like things were finally going to be ok between those two!"

"But who are we kidding?" Dipper shook his head in resigned defeat. "They've hated each other for this long, why did we ever think there's anything that could make them stop now?"

"You guys can!" Steven interjected earnestly, offering the hopeless twins a hopeful glance. "They love both of you more than they hate each other, I know it! Which is why if there's anyone who could get them to make up, its you two."

For a moment, neither Dipper nor Mabel said anything to this, instead simply meeting Steven's encouraging smile halfheartedly. Until they both decided to go out on a limb in the hopes that such an idea could possibly have some merit. "Well, at this point, I guess it's worth a shot?" Dipper ventured with a small shrug.

Mabel nodded in support of this plan with a reassured smile, though before she could speak to it, the sudden simultaneous slamming of two different doors thundered through the entire penthouse. Something that signaled the fight was over, but the "war" was far from done. "Uh... how about you go talk to Ford while I smooth things over with Stan?" Mabel suggested, figuring that splitting up might be able to help.

"Sounds like a plan," Dipper agreed, both him and Mabel exchanging a hopeful, solidifying nod with Steven before they parted ways. At the same time, the young Gem continued on his own mission, taking Pearl by the hand as he led her out of the suite on an equally important mission all his own.

Meanwhile, Dipper and Mabel wished each other a silent bout of luck as they turned to their respective doors and respective tasks. While initially hesitant, sure enough, Dipper did work up the nerve to finally knock on Ford's door, only to receive a very harsh reception from the other side of it.

"For the last time, Stanley, I'm through wasting my valuable time on your childish games!"

"Uh... actually, it's Dipper..."

Unsurprisingly, Ford didn't hesitate to open the previously locked door for his nephew, greeting him much more fondly than he certainly would have had it really been Stan instead. "Sorry about that, my boy," the author straightened the edges of his suit, calming himself considerably. "What can I do for you, Dipper? It's awfully late, you know."

"Yeah, I do..." Dipper frowned as Ford let him come into the room. "But do you and Grunkle Stan know that?"

"A-ah... so, you heard?" Ford said, somewhat flustered.
"Pretty sure the whole hotel heard…" Dipper said as he sat alongside the author on the edge of the bed. "Great Uncle Ford, I'm sorry, but… I just don't understand."

"Understand what?" Ford asked, confused.

"Why you and Stan won't just… let this huge grudge you guys have for each other go. I mean, I guess I get where that grudge came from in the first place but, who knows? Maybe it's time for the two of you to just bury the hatchet and… start over?"

For the longest time, Ford said nothing to this, instead letting out a long, tired sigh as he stood to face the room's large window overlooking the sleeping city outside it. When he did speak, however, his tone was surprisingly melancholy, perhaps even tinged with hits of both regret and worry alike. "We can't do that, Dipper," he said softly, simply. "And to be perfectly honest, I'm quite surprised that you don't understand why we can't."

"W-what do you mean?" Dipper asked, quite confused himself now.

"Well—and I mean absolutely no offense to Mabel in saying this, but—haven't you ever felt as though she's… weighing you down?"

"I… uh…" Dipper frowned, unsure of what to say to such an odd question.

"Uh… huh?" Mabel asked on the other side of the hall, sitting on a different bed as she watched Stan angrily pace around the room.

"Ford thinks that I need the two of us to make up and be best friends, but I don't, not anymore!" the conman huffed hotly. "I don't need him, I don't need anyone! From here on out, there's only one person I'm lookin' out for and its good ol' numero uno: me! And if you were smart, kid, you'd do the same."

"B-but Grunkle Stan," Mabel protested. "That's no way to be! Why would I only look out for myself when I have so many other people to care about, like you, and Grunkle Ford, and Dipper—"

"Ha! Good luck with that," Stan scoffed bitterly. "I really hate to break it to you, pumpkin, but just you wait. I bet good money that in 10, maybe 15 years time, Dipper will end up leaving you behind for some dumb nerd thing, just like Ford did to me. I love the kid, but let's face it, he's way too much like sixer for his own good."

"But… n-no… Dipper wouldn't…" Mabel muttered, suddenly distraught as her own mind echoed with a question she didn't dare ask aloud: would he?

"N-no, Mabel's never…" Dipper trailed off, unable to honestly finish the thought. For indeed, there had been more than a few times where Mabel's own wants and pursuits had come before his own. The all-too bitter, far too familiar memory of a certain puppet show that led to an ill-fated deal came to mind above all else. And try as he might to shake that memory so many times before, the thought of all it had nearly cost him, of what she had nearly cost him, it was a shadow he'd yet to step out of, even still.

"Dipper, you're a brilliant kid with so much potential," Ford said, turning to his nephew with absolute earnestly. "You shouldn't let anyone, not even your own family, hold you back from all you could achieve. Believe me, that's a mistake I let myself make far too many times in the past, and while it might be a bit too late for me to change that, it's not too late for you."

"Look, Mabel, I just don't want to see you get hurt," Stan sighed, placing a hand on his niece's shoulder. "Better to see it coming and be ready for it than to let it take you by surprise and knock
“You off your feet. ‘Cause take it from me, that's a road you don't wanna go down.”

“But… me ‘n Dipper aren't like…” "You guys" was what Mabel wanted to say, though she didn't quite have it in her to speak it aloud. So instead, she went off on a different tangent entirely, all the while desperately trying to convince herself, perhaps even more than Stan, that it wasn't true, that it wouldn't be true, that it couldn't be true. Because if it was… she couldn't even begin to imagine just how painful that would really be.

"But… Mabel and I don't… w-we aren't…” Dipper took in a deep breath, trying to steady both himself and the newfound rush of doubts starting to fill him.

"I-I mean… sure, Dipper isn't always on board with my ideas."

"I mean, I know sometimes Mabel can come on a little too strong…”

"And yeah, sometimes he has a bit of a problem of trying to do everything by himself instead of asking for help when he really needs it…”

"And she does sometimes go way overboard and she can be kind of selfish every now and then…”

"And… And… I guess he is just a little, tiny bit-"

"A-and… and she's just so… so-"

"Stubborn." All four Pines said at practically the same exact time, acknowledging the dark thread that seemed to taint their family in more ways than one.

Ford turned back toward the window, shaking his head sadly as another song began, jazzy, yet melancholy in tune and tempo. "He listens, but doesn't hear, he looks, but doesn't see," the author closed his eyes, blocking out the sight of his own faint reflection in the window. A reflection that always seemed to remind him of his twin in some way or another.

"I talk, but it's so clear. I'm talking to only me."

Stan scowled, crossing his arms after he finally removed his top hat, glaring briefly toward the door as he began an icy verse all his own. "He acts so smart, all of the time. I'm always wrong, he's always right!" He scoffed, knowing that's always how it had been, ever since they were kids, and even now. A common refrain that had been a constant all his life, one that he had always tried to break out of, but could never quite rise to the occasion, no matter what he did or how hard he tried. "Not worth the effort, and that's why I'm-Done, it's over. Hang up the fight."

Dipper couldn't help but let out a small, sad sigh, recognizing just how many unfortunate, almost painful parallels really did exist between him and Mabel and their uncles. And in light of seeing those parallels clearly for the first time, he was unable to avoid the practically crushing worry that their own usually close bond was just as similarly doomed as their uncles' had been before them. But if it was, then who's fault would that really be, all things considered? The answer to that, seemed so simple. After all, he knew very well whose fault it usually was whenever they ended up falling out with each other. "She acts out, for a response," he began, just a hint of knowing bitterness in his tone. "She acts out, and I don't mind. She always does just what she wants. I'm forced to act, like its just fine.” But it wasn't, it never was, because whenever she ended up getting what she wanted, he was always, always the one to lose out in the end.

By this point, Mabel was practically holding back fretful tears, overwhelmed by fear and dread. All coming from the long, singular though that, perhaps even sooner than later, her and Dipper would fall away from each other. That the close bond they both had always known between them would
be broken. That they wouldn't need or even want to be around each other anymore when they always had been. Or rather, that he wouldn't want to be around her. "Right by his side, I try to stay," she sang almost mournfully, pulling her knees to her chest as those tears finally began to well up in her eyes. "And it's ok, but it's a lie... He goes alone, on his own way, and when he does, I always cry..."

"And nothing changes," all four of them sang, sharing the same sentiment, the same sharp, yet dull ache ringing through their song and through their hearts all the while. "It's all the same. Despite the ages, it's like a game."

"It's in the family-"

"In the blood."

"It's never over."

"It's like a flood-"

"Of bitter feelings-"

"Of old regrets-"

All things running so deep in their family, so far that it was practically the foundation they were all built upon. A foundation that was crumbling, breaking until the day it would inevitably fall apart completely, taking all of them with it in the process. A day they all knew was coming, but couldn't bear to face.

"It's in the family..."

"Don't forget..."

"It's in the family..."

"We can't forget..."

While Le Hotel's grand restaurant never really closed, it was rather empty at such a late hour of the night. In fact, it's only current patron was Greg, who sat at the bar, dully, dejectedly snacking on a glass full of cherries in the hopes of easing his sorrows. That is, until his sulking was interrupted by an arrival he admittedly hadn't been expecting.

Upon hearing his son clear his throat from behind, Greg turned to find both Steven and surprisingly, Pearl standing alongside him. The white Gem offered him a pensive, awkward smile, though ultimately said nothing. Greg did the same as he stood, even as Steven offered both of them a silent nod, urging them to do what they both knew needed to be done. The only problem was, neither of them had the faintest idea as to where to start.

Which was why Steven decided to take the initiative instead. He marched dutifully over to the restaurant's grand piano, handing off a large stack of cash to the pianist to curtail his inappropriately upbeat ragtime tune. Delighted by the sizable tip, the musician hurried off, leaving the piano open for him to take over with a gentle, earnest melody of his own. One that he hoped would finally accomplish something that should have been done quite some time ago.

"Why don't you talk to each other?" Steven sang up front, catching both Greg and Pearl off guard by just how forward the question really was. "Why don't you talk to each other? Just give it a try."
Despite this soft urging, Greg and Pearl still averted each other's gaze, neither of them knowing what to say to finally break the ice that made up the frozen wall that had been built between them years ago. "Why don't you talk about what happened?" the young Gem continued with a small, yet sad smile. "I know you're trying to avoid it, but I don't know why."

"You might not believe it." The pair slowly, hesitantly turned back toward each other, sparing a brief glance over at Steven along the way as they listened to his lyrics and the warmth and care behind them. "You might not believe it. But you've got a lot in common-you really do..."

"You both love me and I love both of you."

It was true. A fact that neither of them could deny even if they wanted to: that they loved Steven, deeply and fully, just as they both had-albeit in a different way-loved his mother before him. And it was the realization of that fact that, at long last started to bring both of them together.

With tired sighs, Pearl and Greg largely ignored the rest of the restaurant, lying down on the floor as a conversation finally started to brim between the two of them. "Look, if I were you, I'd hate me too," Greg began, looking down fretfully. "I don't hate you..." Pearl assured softly, earnestly.

"But... I knew how you felt about Rose and I stayed anyway."

"That wasn't the problem..."

"Then... what was?"

"She fell in love with you..."

"Well, you know Rose," Greg sat up, finally cracking a smile. Pearl couldn't help but do the same, sharing that same sort of fondness that they both had-and still did have-towards the pink Gem. Fondness that they always had always had in common, they just hadn't been able to see it until now.

"She always did what she wanted!"

"I know you both need it." On a bout of tearful laughter, the pair stood, and as Greg extended the offer to dance once more, this time, Pearl had no qualms about taking his hand and joining in. "I know you both need it. Someone who knows what you're going through..."

"And you might not believe it." The pair took to the floor, dancing slowly yet cordially along to Steven's song and enjoying it, and the newfound, much-needed solidarity between them all the while. "You might not believe it-but you've got a lot in common, you really do."

"You both love me and I love both of you."

"You both love me and I love both... of you..."

As both the song and the dance came to a close, Pearl and Greg still exchanged a warm smile, one that only grew as the hotel employees came out to applaud their performance. Still, both of them knew there was much more worth celebrating than that. Because for perhaps the first time ever, they could finally see things eye to eye. And the flood of good feels from that alone made both Pearl and Greg never want to return to the bitterness and shame of the past again in favor of embracing a newer, kinder future instead.
This newfound camaraderie was inevitably interrupted however as one hotel staff member came up to Greg with a silver platter, offering it out to him. "Le bill, sir."

As soon as Greg took the bill, he jolted, shocked by just how much of a hefty charge their one night stay had racked up. Of course, he now had more than enough to cover it, but that didn't make the high cost of the life of a nouveau riche any less startling. "Tailor made suits, those cost somethin'," he sang, frowning as he unfolded the lengthy bill to get a glimpse at its full scope. "Room with a view, those cost somethin'."

"Dancing with you..." Pearl interjected with a knowing, playful grin.

"Don't cost nothin'," Greg chimed in gladly, especially as the white Gem let out a small chuckle.

"Why'd we even come? We could have done this at home," she pointed out, eliciting a delighted laugh from Steven as he came over to join them. In fact, that delight continued as they returned up to the penthouse to pack their things, their expensive vacation having come to an end before anymore money could be poured into it. And yet, for relieved as Steven was by the newly cleared air between Pearl and Greg, he quickly realized upon meeting up with Dipper and Mabel again that they hadn't shared the same sort of success when it came to Stan and Ford.

In fact, if anything, all four of the Pines seemed quite forlorn as they prepared to head home, expressions equally downcast and words sparse as they all made the trip back down to the lobby. And as he took stock of this, Steven's own smile couldn't help but fade as well, even if things between Pearl and Greg were still every bit as bright as he had wanted them to be.

"Singing a song, don't cost nothin'," Pearl sang as she helped the former rock star pack up the van. "O-or was it, palling around, don't cost nothin'? Getting it wrong..."

"Don't cost nothing!" Greg cut in with an amused chuckle.

"I tried," the white Gem shrugged.

"I'm surprised you remembered any of it," the former rock star pointed out, still laughing.

"What can I say? Its catchy."

With their time in Emerald City coming to a close, everyone climbed into the van, Pearl and Greg taking the front as they kept each other entertained with reminiscent conversation-most of it focusing on fond memories of Rose-as they began the long trek home. Stan and Ford sat as far apart as they possibly could behind them, arms crossed and moods sour as they both tried to go to sleep to avoid any sort of further interaction. And then, in the back, sat Steven, wedged worriedly between Dipper and Mabel, who, much like their uncles, seemed uneasy at the very thought of so much as even looking at each other, much to the young Gem's confusion.

Steven hadn't the faintest idea as to what had transpired between the twins while he was gone, and at this point, he wasn't sure if he even wanted to ask. And yet, his unspoken question soon got something of an answer in the form of a morose, quiet, yet unwitting duet between the two, one that Steven listened in on with growing concern all the while.

"Tried so hard to fix it all, to let it grow..." Mabel started, her usual cheery tune currently anything but.

"From the ground up, but it wound up that now we know..." Dipper continued with a sigh, staring out the window as the cityscape passed them by.
"Life's too short…" the twins sang together softly, almost mournfully over an agonizing truth they'd never once considered before. And in the process of discovering it, indeed they were a bit wiser, though certainly much more sadder for it.

"To see there's much more out there," Dipper kept his sights on the window as Mabel slowly, fretfully spared a discreet glance past Steven over at him.

"To see that you don't care…" she lamented, fighting back tears.

"Was it them who were wrong?" they both sang, looking toward their uncles sitting in front of them. "Or was it us all along?"

"I wish I saw things clearly," Dipper closed his eyes, shaking his head in gentle frustration.

"I guess I'm not the sort…" Mabel faltered, barely letting a small sob choke out.

"Now all we know as life's too short…"

Silence filled in between the twins at this, striking Steven the hardest as he sat in the middle of it all. While he still didn't know what had really happened, he could tell that whatever had managed to harm them both. That it had broken something between them, even if there was no real telling what.

Which was why the most the young Gem could hope to do was to repair that break before it inevitably ended up tearing two of his closest friends apart.

"But… it's… not over, isn't it?" he sang to himself, echoing Pearl's own song with the same sort of woe and regret the white Gem herself had sang it with.

"It's not over, isn't it?" he sang, even as they left Emerald City and everything that had happened there behind. Or at least, that's all he could do to hope, even as he realized it wasn't true. For as one problem had indeed been solved on this trip, it was all too clear that an entirely new one was only just beginning in its place.

"It's over… isn't it?"

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